

This is Not a Game: Alternate Reality Games as a First Year Composition Course Structure

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Abstract: Research and thinking about games in the classroom seems to be focused largely on the use of video games and computational simulations. In this paper, I will explore the theoretical educational use of alternate reality games (ARGs), a genre that relies less on computer interfaces and focuses more on “real world” spaces. Specifically, I will explore the use of ARGs as a course structure for student production of texts in the First Year Composition classroom. I will focus on two specific writing programs in which I have taught—a four year university (UW-Milwaukee) and a two-year technical college (Gateway Technical College)—and use constructivist learning principles for ARGs set forth by Whitton and Hollins (2008), composition theory, and transmedia theory. To assess potential problems with a theoretical FYC ARG, I will use Whitton’s (2009) case study of Manchester Metropolitan University’s Alternate Reality Games for Orientation, Socialisation, and Induction (ARGOSI) project.

Introduction

A great amount of research is available on the use of several types of video games for educational purposes, such as simulations, both close-ended objective-defined and open-ended “sandbox” simulations, and games designed with specific educational/physiological goals, to name a few. There is, unfortunately, far less available on the potential and impact of immersive games, such as pervasive games—those based on specific locations, such as geo-cache treasure hunts or Pac Manhattan—and, more importantly, I will argue, Alternate Reality Games (ARGs). ARGs and pervasive games share some overlap in design and characteristics of play: both use “real” world features and artifacts, such as streets, buildings, public spaces, or payphones, and publicly available media, such as billboards, posters, or media made available through mobile networked technology. ARGs tend to use multimedia clues to direct players on a narrative-driven puzzle-solving experience that takes place in the players’ “real” world, as opposed to taking place in a completely virtual, computer-mediated space, such as *World of Warcraft*.

In addition to little academic research on ARGs as educational tools, a standard definition of the genre is still elusive. This appears to be at least two-fold in reason. The infancy of the form likely contributes to a lack of definition. The educational application of video games, in general, seems to have achieved a large body of work only over the past 10-20 years, as media and technology have continued to evolve and converge, and as video games have become a topic for media, cultural and ludological studies. Over this same time period, non-game new media technologies have also begun to creep into writing pedagogy through blogs, wikis, and other digitally networked text-based tools.

ARGs, when discussed under that definition, have a history dating to 1996, with two records of ARGs before the year 2000, according to ARGology.org. Another barrier to a single definition is the large iterations of complexities and variations offered by the relatively simple structure of the ARG and the multi-modality of its narrative/gameplay environment: interactive web-based technologies, DIY publishing, remix and the co-option of popular narratives and artifacts.

For this paper, I will adopt Jane McGonigal's definition of an ARG:

an interactive drama played out online and in real world spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which dozens, hundreds, thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or problem that would seem impossible to solve alone (2004).

As this definition is expansive, allow me to propose a few translations that might help the reader see a more concrete connection to this paper—bringing an ARG into a multimodal composition classroom. First would be to think less of the “drama” (or, the fictionalized impetus for entering the game; the reason to play). As I will later argue, this narrative patina may not be an applicable internal motivator within the classroom. In McGonigal's definition, I encourage the reader to focus on the “interactive” pursuit of a community of student “players” to analyze and interpret texts collaboratively—the act of interpretation being akin to “solv[ing] a mystery or

problem,” though one with an open solution. Further linking the composition classroom to this definition is the language of the assignment sequence —language that positions interpretation as an act that may seem incapable of being achieved alone, without the reflection and multiplicity of perspectives that the composition classroom provides.

Despite the relative dearth of research and academic texts produced about ARGs by that name, it is appropriate to turn to transmedia narratives, multimodal pedagogy, and new media digital storytelling as a framework to build an ARG for classroom use. Through this approach, the work of Henry Jenkins on both video games and media convergence becomes applicable in a discussion of the aesthetics, structures, theory and history of ARGs, as well as their potential as educational collective intelligence communities.

The large question that I hope to address through this paper, then, is: how can an ARG serve as a pedagogical tool in the composition classroom? In this paper, I hope to: provide an outline of the aesthetics and structures of ARGs, what might serve as a working contextual definition for the aims of this paper; examine a case study and principles of ARGs designed for student induction and orientation; and examine this case study in terms of the educational benefits that resulted from play. Furthermore, while ARGs have been used as texts for academic study in media studies classrooms, my aim is to apply the knowledge from the above approaches to illustrate how an ARG might serve as a structure for motivating and producing student writing within the curricular goals of two specific first-year writing programs in which I have taught: Gateway Technical College (GTC) and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM).

Why ARGs

In their analysis of the use of collaborative games as educational tools in higher education, Nicola Whitton and Paul Hollins position the collaborative environment of game worlds as a pedagogical tool for constructivist—as opposed to didactic—education models (2008). Citing P. C. Honebein, constructivist collaborative learning environments should:

encourage students to take responsibility for their learning, including what and how they learn; provide multiple perspectives; create self-awareness of the learning process; make learning relevant and authentic; make learning a collaborative and interactive social experience; and use multiple modes of representation and rich media (Whitton and Hollins, 2008, p. 222).

In my discussion of ARGs in the context of the GTC and UWM programs, I will adopt these principles, as I see at least a rough translation of these philosophies in the documents the pedagogies within these programs.

While both programs share a combined focus on purpose, audience, analysis, and production, the constructivist principles are perhaps best seen in how the the programs describe themselves in terms of what they ask their students to value. For instance, GTC requires a set of nine “core abilities” be printed on the syllabus for every course. The abilities are presented under auspices of relevance and authenticity, as being necessary “to succeed in a career and life.” Included amongst these abilities are analogs to several of Honebein’s above principles: students should “value learning” and they should “work collaboratively” and “respect self and others as members of a diverse society.”

The UWM English 101 “Course Description” (2009) positions the course as a collaborative environment, as discussions are framed as “individual and collective attempts at discovering what makes reading and writing effective in particular contexts,” as well as stating that students, in this collaborative and individual work are responsible for the quality of the outcome (p.3). Additionally, the program’s emphasis on reflection encourages students to assess their own writing strategies and learning processes. Furthermore, the inclusion of texts that “look, feel, and read differently from one another” in order to contextualize and complicate notions of purpose, audience, and context, align with the multi-modal approach of these constructivist principles (p. 2). While the multi-modality of texts read by students is strictly encouraged by the construction of the *First Year Composition Reader*, which contains more traditional print essays, printed hypertexts, comics, magazine articles, and more, instructors in the program have recently used multi-modality to encourage their students to produce knowledge, as well. Course blogs, wikis and discussion boards encourage students to assemble their interpretations, reflections, and thoughts for their classroom community to see—and with the express purpose of receiving feedback in the form of comments and posts from colleagues that serve to further the discourse. Therefore, I will proceed with an adoption of Honebein’s principles—and, moreover, how they relate to the characteristics of an appropriate gaming environment—as being applicable to the principles of the UWM FYC program.

One approach to understanding the educational promise of ARGs is to look at a related study of transmedia narratives, more specifically in the way contemporary students are already employing collective intelligence communities to interact with “texts” and form individual and collective meaning through collaborative production—all outside of the University-inscribed classroom. In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins discusses the educational potential for collective intelligence communities in terms of fan cultures. Jenkins sees the reading of transmedia narratives by collaborative intelligence communities as one way in which individuals and groups can interpret and construct meaning (Jenkins, 2008, pp. 3-4). Furthermore, collective intelligence communities can be seen as troubling the boundaries and hierarchies of production and consumption—shifting the ability to make meaning from a single authority (media producer) to individual hermeneutics of the consumers. In this way—and I will briefly touch on further possibilities involving new media literacies later—we might see facilitating this type of collective interaction, one that employs various media and occasions for discourse, as a way for students to critically engage with the participatory multimodal texts that they may be encountering via their own choices: websites, television, film, video games, varieties of printed texts, and so on.

In “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies,” The New London Group (2000) makes a similar argument for the relevance—and need—for multi-modal pedagogies in the composition classroom. Their claim is tied to the changing nature of networked technology-facilitated communications that can span cultures and subcultures, nations and socio-economic categories, as well as to the collaborative structuring of the corporation in an era of fast capitalism. And while it may be an altogether different scope and focus of a project, an ARG, when understood in terms of Jenkins's transmedia narrative, could very easily be adapted to address the concerns of producing a more multimodal text. The critical engagement with this type of narrative within the FYC classroom can encourage our students to develop a more critical new media literacy: reading/writing/resisting multimodal rhetorics and representations. However, the scope of this paper chooses to remain within the goal of students producing print texts that fit within the assessment practices already existing within these two FYC programs.

To return to what is more immediately related to FYC practices, specifically the act of interpretative writing, troubling definitive authority—whether in texts or in pedagogical roles—is not new to composition theory. In “Reading” from Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux's *The Theory Toolbox* (2003), the authors approach interpretation through the lens of the death of the author. They discuss active interpretation as a reversal of “a passive consumption model (the reader consuming the author's meaning)” and a resultant “freeing up of multiple points of view—as many good readings as there are readers” (p. 21). We can see from the word “consumption” where Jenkins's later terminology intersects with these concerns. Nealon and Giroux are quick to point out the danger in a simple reversal, however: “If we're not careful, the absolute control of the author can give way very quickly to the absolute control of the reader, who then usurps the author's role in the *game of meaning*” (p. 22, emphasis added). To achieve some middle-ground between these, the authors situate interpretation as “a process of negotiation among contexts,” mediated by language, which is, in turn “a social system of meaning” (p. 23- 25). The ARG is, by definition, reliant on community participation (or, “a social system”), which makes it particularly suited to a composition classroom concerned with creating a space for multiple interpretations. In order to advance the game narrative, players must “work together to solve a mystery or problem that would seem impossible to solve alone” (McGonigal, 2004). If students must play the ARG game of interpretation in the same space, a space that is structured to encourage collaborative work, the group formation, sharing, and negotiation of interpretations can be encouraged, even required, by the game's structure. Furthermore, as players solve interpretative puzzles, their moves are incorporated into the evolution of the game, often prompting the direction of the next challenge issued. In other words, players themselves dictate the course of the game, which helps to “blur the line between player and game designer... in a way that goes beyond simply 'playing the game'” (McGonigal, 2004). Thus, the ARG structure can also help students to become—and, importantly, see themselves as—autonomous learners.

When conceptualizing an ARG in terms of an assignment sequence, I turn to David Bartholomae's “Writing Assignments: Where Writing Begins” (1982). Bartholomae engages with ideas on how to create a space for students to enter into a discourse in the composition classroom. In asking how a student might “invent the university when he sits down to write,” Bartholomae finds relevance in allowing students to form or even approximate discourse communities for the basis of discovering knowledge through repetitive and slowly expanding writing practices. The benefit of using ARGs as a platform for ludic pedagogy is that they do not require the mastery of CG-mediated virtual spaces. Many platforms can serve as the foundation for collective intelligence or collaborative communities, such as multi-user virtual environments (MUVes), like *Second Life*, massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs), like *World of Warcraft*, or commercially produced sandbox simulators, like the *Civilization* series. These games, however, often require the learning of a complex

interface to navigate these spaces. While the learning of a game's rules and structures is central to critically engaging with procedural rhetoric of the game's argument itself, the challenge of learning the interface can detract from the curricular goals of the game by forcing the player to focus on the interface and a host of other complex advanced features (Whitton and Hollins, 2008, p. 224). Though they may not be expertly literate in all or any of the multimodal forms employed in ARGs, the technologies used are more familiar to a variety of students: blogs, message boards, wikis, and geographic locations in their community. Therefore, the benefits of using games as an educational tool are less likely to be over-run with the players learning of a complex interface and set of rules by using an ARG structure.

Furthermore, facilitated by Jenkins's discussion of ARGs as a form of transmedia narrative that elicits collective intelligence and the production of meaning for players, the transmedia nature (that is, the multimodality) of ARGs also frequently encourages texts to be viewed in intertextual and hypercontextual ways (1). That is, in assembling meaning from a variety of texts or from various sections of the same text, players make interpretative “moves” to frame and juxtapose different texts, narrative threads, and contexts in terms of others. Perhaps most easily recognized in these “moves” would be the academic writing technique of framing: a player might understand one text by means of analyzing another. This intertextuality/hypercontextuality might also serve as a way into accessing the “what matters” to a writer and reader, a common way to understand a text's purpose. The intertextual interpretative move might be seen as the player searching through their database of texts that already matter to them, texts that have remained with them because they had an impression on them. By speaking in terms of something that already holds meaning for them, a player might be able to better articulate—or at least approach—this notion of what matters in a text, and why that might be important to the writing they produce.

Lessons Learned from Previous Educational ARGs

The documented use of ARGs in higher education has been exclusively limited to student induction projects — introducing students to the expectations and resources of university life, both academically and socially. Several campus libraries have used the collaborative puzzle-solving structure to encourage students to physically get into the stacks, utilize library resources (such as reference librarians and search engines), as well as create social networks—all with the over-arching goal of helping students to become more familiar with campus spaces and life, in order to increase retention rates, especially with first-semester students.

The most well-documented study of an ARG in higher education is from Manchester Metropolitan University's Alternate Reality Games for Orientation, Socialisation, and Induction (ARGOSI) project (Whitton, 2009). While this in-depth study—and the resources created for other institutions to create and disseminate ARGs for educational ends—provides several insights into the benefits and drawbacks from MMU's experience, it is also important to note some important differences in the structure and context of their project and what might be specifically incorporated in the FYC classroom. Whitton's assessment of the successes and failures of ARGOSI are largely based on participatory hurdles: creating a compelling, engaging plot for the game; reaching a “critical mass of players” whose participation is necessary to solve puzzles and move the game forward; providing multiple entrance points, so players can more easily enter or re-enter the game as it unfolds. While these issues are very legitimate to designing and executing a successful ARG, one of the benefits of bringing an ARG into the classroom, as opposed to it being used as an induction and orientation tool, is that participant numbers and engagement are far more static, due to a student's enrollment in the course and the requisite nature of a FYC program. In short, issues of engagement and participation are (or should be) always a concern for classroom instructors; this very project concerning the incorporation of an ARG into the classroom seeks to increase engagement and participation, by adopting a more specifically collaborative structure. Thus, while engagement and participation are, of course, a concern, an FYC program assumes a more inherently fixed set of variables here, as opposed to an optional first-year induction program.

Furthermore, the creation of an overarching fictional narrative that is central to traditional ARGs might not be necessary or even applicable to the composition classroom. The “narrative,” in this case, is the goal of interpreting a text within the goals of the FYC program. In this context, players advance the game in order to reach a fully-formed interpretation, not necessarily to reach a resolution in a storyline. However, the concept of an over-arching narrative might be employed to encourage students to see their learning process as a narrative: one in which they control the direction and outcome through individual discrete “moves” made in response to both the texts themselves and to the collectively produced knowledge of their classmates. Seeing their progress as a narrative may help to provide the viewpoint necessary for both reflective writing within the FYC classroom and for autonomous learning within the broader context of the university and the community.

Finally, Whitton (2009) highlights the challenge of creating sufficiently difficult, yet accessible and solvable, puzzles for ARGs in a university setting. If puzzles are not complex and challenging, they likely will not require, nor necessarily benefit from, collective intelligence communities; if they are too difficult, they can discourage involvement. While this is most definitely a concern for typical ARGs, even those used in University induction, the composition classroom has an established “puzzle” that navigates this difficult terrain: the combined move of rhetorical analysis and interpretation. This “puzzle” is already central to the structure of the my assignment sequence from having taught in both programs. While understanding this combined move as a puzzle might not seem initially clear, I turn to the Fall 2009 standard sequence for UWM’s English 101 to illuminate:

Anything you can see in the essay as a choice—individual words, the speed of a sentence, why one paragraph comes before another—ought to be something you can explain in terms of the purpose you’ve identified. *Give it a try: see if you can explain everything to yourself.* Once you’ve tried your own explanation of the whole essay (*which is challenging but not impossible*), choose the four or five strategies you think most support Dillard in achieving her purpose (emphasis added).

Considering this language from the standard sequence, the acknowledgment of both difficulty and uncertainty is clear, yet the task is presented as ultimately possible. More importantly, considering this as the type of puzzle for a FYC ARG, we can avoid the notion of a single “answer” to a puzzle. Individual students will see multiple and varying choices and purposes and each student will arrive at their own conclusion. This provides a common goal (using rhetorical analysis to interpret a text), but allows for individual answers—answers that can be achieved through a blending of individual thought and collective intelligence. These individual answers to a common problem, then, can offer a balance between individual authority in interpretation while aligning to the structure of the game and thus enabling the benefit of actively participating in a collective intelligence community. Additionally, the question of how difficult to make the “puzzle” is set by a negotiation between student responses and comments from both peers and the instructor.

As the solving of puzzles in traditional ARGs serves to advance the gameplay/narrative in a linear—if sometimes unanticipated—fashion, the allowance for multiple and varying interpretative answers to the FYC “puzzle” allows for a more complex network of progressions in the composition ARG. This openness to a variety of answers and gameplay advancements can help to students to see the unique variability in the composition process—no two approaches and textual products are the same. By making this process more visible, we may better facilitate both student reflection and student ownership of their own individual learning process.

In closing, several benefits of using an ARG structure in the classroom are evident and in-line with the ethos and structures of the two FYC program: multimodality of texts; collective intelligence communities; understanding shifting contexts; visibility of and reflection on the composition process; interpreting a text based on rhetorical analyses. An ARG, when adjusted to the interests of the composition classroom, could serve as an ideal structure for motivating and producing the types of texts that we traditionally see: text printed on paper. In the future, the multimedia/transmedia nature of the ARG might be leveraged into creating complex and critical multimodal texts, by using multimedia texts or transmedia narrative as the source for interpretation and allowing for students to leverage the web-based playing field of the ARG to house their multimodal interpretative texts.

Endnotes

- (1) Peter Lunenfeld, in “The Myths of Interactive Cinema,” describes the term in this way: “a rhizomatic and dynamic interlinked communicative community using networks to curate a series of shifting contexts” (383). Similar to intertextuality, hypercontextuality addresses a groups’ ability to create a meaning for a text based on assessing and accessing multiple contextual experiences and situations with either the same text or with similar texts. Besides serving to bring in the subject of context into the composition classroom through students’ own enacting of a hypercontextual reading, this hermeneutic strategy might also lead students to understand “what matters” about a text in terms of their own contextual experiences. Fittingly, Lunenfeld’s example of hypercontextualization is *The Blair Witch Project*, which is also one of the first recognized examples of an ARG. Furthermore, hypercontextuality might also be understood in the terms of The New London Group: available design being applied to new rhetorical and hermeneutic situations.

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