

Panel

Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) and 21st Century Literacies

Derek Hansen, Assistant Professor
College of Information Studies
University of Maryland

Kari Kraus, Assistant Professor
College of Information Studies
University of Maryland

Margeaux Johnson
Science & Technology Librarian and Instruction Coordinator
Marston Science Library
University of Florida

Georgina B. Goodlander
Interpretive Programs Manager
Smithsonian American Art Museum

Elizabeth Bonsignore, Doctoral Student
College of Information Studies
University of Maryland

Abstract

This panel will introduce Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) as a platform for engaging students in the practice of 21st century literacies. Exploratory research conducted at the University of Maryland on ARGs as design spaces in the service of education will be described and related to recent information literacy learning events, including the Humans vs. Zombies (HvZ) ARG at the University of Florida and the Ghosts of a Chance ARG at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It will also address opportunities to better equip library and information science practitioners to understand and apply ARG design techniques in information literacy seminars or sessions for students.

Background and Context: Game-Based Learning

The past 15 years have witnessed a number of technological developments that have contributed to a burgeoning interest in virtual worlds, online multi-user games, serious games, and Alternate Reality Games across multiple sectors, including industry, government, academia, museums, and libraries. The proliferation of hand-held devices, the pervasiveness of networked communication, the rise of social media, and the advancement of artificial intelligence and photorealistic 3D graphics have ushered in a formative era of gaming.

Recognizing that games are not only vehicles for entertainment, but also tools of learning, the

Obama administration announced its "Educate to Innovate" campaign in 2009, which includes a key provision for "harnessing the power of media [and] interactive games" to improve STEM education.[1] Outside the policy arena, a growing number of institutional and cultural indicators affirm the value of games: in 2003, for example, Professor James Gee published his influential book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. [2] Ostensibly a monograph about the promise of role-playing and action-adventure games in educational environments, the book is also an indictment of entrenched pedagogical practices and a manifesto for game-based learning. In 2007, the MacArthur Foundation and the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory (HASTAC) launched their inaugural Digital Media and Learning Competition, which is designed "to find and to inspire the most novel uses of new media in support of learning." [3] Within this broader socio-technical context, ARGs represent a compelling design space in which to advance information literacies.

Because librarians have a longstanding interest in participatory, creative mechanisms for the delivery and production of informational content, it's perhaps not surprising that ARGs share an obvious kinship with another, more established method for teaching information fluency: the library scavenger hunt. Jason Griffey, a contributor to the American Library Association's TechSource blog, defines an ARG as "a game that utilizes the real world as a gameboard and everyday communication mechanisms (cellphone, email, snail mail, etc.) as the controls. Think of an ARG as a form of live-action roleplaying game that doesn't necessarily involve a role...it is you, and not a character you are portraying, trying to unravel the mystery or solve the puzzle." [4] Although still a relatively new platform, ARGs have already made impressive inroads into libraries and museums. At the time of this writing, a Google search on "libraries" and "Alternate Reality Games" yields 9,910 results. As Griffey noted in 2008, "ARG's are becoming more and more popular, and libraries need to be aware of them and ready to embrace them." [4]

Approach, Outline, and Assumptions

Against this larger backdrop--and in keeping with LRS-V's governing theme--we propose to examine ARGs as a testbed for the integration of library practice and academic teaching & research. Our presentation will include the following components:

Research: Hansen, Kraus, and Bonsignore (UMD iSchool) will overview research undertaken as part of an NSF EAGER grant entitled "Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) in the Service of Education and Design." The project seeks to understand and tailor this new genre for use as a platform on which to co-design and evaluate novel collaborative tools that may be used in unanticipated ways. Drawing on interviews with game designers and an information literacy framework derived from a number of pre-existing standards (including the ALA/AASL 2007 Update of 21st Century Information Literacy Skills [5] and Henry Jenkins' New Media Literacies [6]), the authors will discuss how ARGs provide opportunities to engage with these literacies.

Game Design and Implementation: Margeaux Johnson, a Science & Technology Librarian from the University of Florida, will discuss the possibility of embedding libraries into a campus-wide ARG. In Spring 2010, the University of Florida experienced a zombie outbreak complete with squadrons of zombie hunters, scientists working towards cures, and the living dead. Approximately 1,000 students took part in the Humans vs. Zombies

(HvZ) ARG. The UF Libraries, eager to engage with campus culture, participated alongside students by developing an information literacy mission. In the time span of one hour over 200 zombie hunters swarmed the library for clues that combined physical library space with digital information. In the end, 184 students stood triumphant. Certified to navigate library e-resources remotely from safe, secure locations in the event of a zombie apocalypse. With very little planning time, the library was able to engage a large number of students in a fun learning experience. Georgina Goodlander, who oversaw Ghosts of a Chance, the first ARG played out in a museum environment, will draw upon her experience to share some of the challenges and opportunities related to its development and implementation. She will also discuss the Smithsonian's upcoming plans for a new ARG and potential collaborative opportunities with libraries.

Demonstration: The authors will incorporate a hands-on exercise to illustrate not only a prototypical ARG task, but also design techniques and challenges.

Brainstorm a Large-Scale Library ARG: Panelists will solicit input from participants on the potential for a large-scale library focused ARG. Initial ideas, goals, resources, evaluation frameworks, funding opportunities, and connections will be discussed so that those with sufficient interest can continue the conversation in more depth at a later time.

This panel and topic are an example of "practice-based" or "practice-led" research that will help practicing librarians, students, and researchers work together to design and evaluate novel approaches to mastering 21st century skills, and in so doing learn about each others' concerns and challenges.

References

- The White House, President Barack Obama, "Educate to Innovate,"
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/educate-innovate>
- James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy. Second Edition: Revised and Updated Edition*, 2nd ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- HASTAC, "Digital Media and Learning Competition,"
<http://www.dmlcompetition.net/about.php>.
- Jason Griffey, "Alternate Reality Games," ALA TechSource, 21 November 2008,
<http://www.alatechsource.org/blog/2008/11/alternate-reality-games.html>.
- ALA/AASL, "Standards for the 21st Century Learner,"
<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/aasl/guidelinesandstandards/learningstandards/standards.cfm>
- Henry Jenkins, Director, "New Media Literacies," <http://newmedialiteracies.org/>