ALTERNATE REALITY GAMES AND THE CUSP OF DIGITAL GAMEPLAY

EDITED BY
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Introduction

Antero Garcia and Greg Niemeyer

If you weren't reading this book it would still exist.

However, a game only exists when it is played. This is especially true for alternate reality games (hereafter ARGs) because they are co-created by players with every move that is made. Players augment their autonomy in the game as they push the boundaries set up by puppet masters, and deeply enmesh themselves in the network of the game. While this book sets out to define and analyze them as games and a broader genre, ARGs resist definition because their essence only exists when they are played, and there really is very little to hold on to at the end of the game, save for the transformative experiences of the players.

Over the course of this introduction, we attempt to more fully illuminate the dimensions underpinning the question *What is an ARG?* In doing so, we also question:

- How are ARGs powerful?
- Who plays ARGs and why?
- What do the origins of ARGs mean for a genre currently in flux?
- And ultimately, how do ARGs transform both players and culture at large?

Reflecting on designing and running the ARG *I Love Bees* ten years after its completion, designer Sean Stewart placed the

creation of ARGs not on any specific technology or even on a personal whim for specific kinds of interaction. Instead, he suggests that ARGs and the modes of play, learning, and communication that come along with them are simply "the way the twenty-first century wants to tell stories" (Story Forward, 2014). Considering the "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006) in which we interact today, such a claim is worth exploring. We are not telling stories via ARGs or playing games in this distributed social setting just because of technological advances, we are doing so because they are a reflection of the sociological milieu through which we interact today. With networked society shifting relationships both online and off (Castells, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2013; Rainie and Wellman, 2014), with the deluge of information pressed upon us daily increasing, and with transmedia storytelling becoming a clearer pathway for narrative development, ARGs are situated as a primary reflection of how the *real* world and imaginary narratives intersect.

Considering the work of Michel de Certeau (1984), we can identify the city as the myth, and the game as reality. De Certeau writes, "The city serves as a totalizing and almost mythical landmark for socio-economic and political strategies." Seen from physical altitudes of helicopters and satellites, or from the computational altitudes of the smart city, we encounter a fictional image of seamless optimization; the city becomes visible, logical, and readable. But, again de Certeau notes, "The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below,' below the thresholds at which visibility begins." Walking is a potentially subversive practice. "Practitioners of the city" carve out a path through the logic of the city that matches their needs, not the plan. From walking we get to graffiti, the mnemonic subversion of the practitioners' history in the ahistorical context of the anonymous city. From graffiti we get to ARG games, which are an embodied performance of a counter-narrative to the urban plan. In that performance, a community formed spontaneously by individuals becomes a real figure against the mythical backdrop of the planned city, against the cold hard urban metabolism. In that performance, players retrieve their role as citizens with a voice, and as members of a community that can hear them. Even if an ARG itself has no political content at all, the act of inscribing one's body in an alternate myth, the chord struck between game and place, reclaims players as autonomous citizens capable of forming a community of their own.
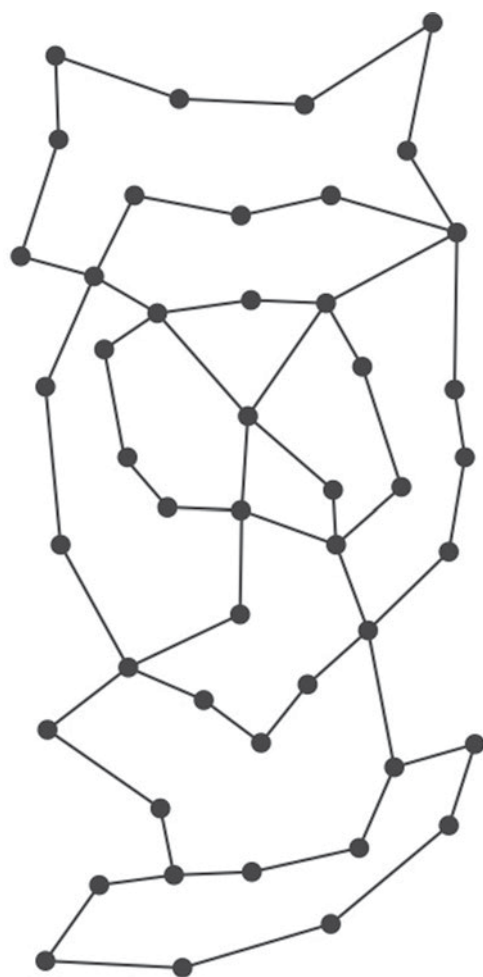
FIGURE I.1

Traveling within games both physically and virtually is about extending the narrative experience in ways that are more than simply *being* in a new location. In ARGs, the rules of the game superimpose a novel, subversive order on the grid of a city. The game city, layered on top of the multitude of existing configurations, emphasizes that there is no fixed or absolute order. Instead, each order is revealed as temporary and arbitrary, with specific strengths and weaknesses (see Appendix I). Like the cartography mapped by the fictional character Peter Stillman in Paul Auster's (1987) novel *City of Glass*, ARGs encourage communities to consider the trajectories their feet tread. Computer networking pioneer, Paul Baran (1964) understood this concept of a liquid order and based network theory on its principles. Perhaps games in general (and ARGs in particular) are cultural processes that reflect society coming to terms with the liquidity of network culture.

This does not mean that every game is a meaningful, vox populi alternative to corporate order. Corporate order is often camouflaged; what seems diverse, approachable, and horizontal, is in fact often highly centralized. *Pokemon Go* is an example of a game that simulates a very democratic and peer-to-peer oriented order, but in fact guides the flow of information back to a head corporation through the tentacles of invisible centralization.

Every ARG enacts that fundamental political power of bringing many individuals into an articulated organized community. The articulation of that power is more important than the presence of a specific goal that needs to be achieved. Once players understand the feeling of exerting agency, they can later bring that agency to a different situation. Based on affinity rather than identity, we like to describe this more spontaneous citizenship resulting from play as a digital citizenship. It is based on the flow of information, rather than on material contingencies such as location, birth, race, and caste. In that sense, ARGs are worth a close examination because we find in them a source of inspiration and a site of exploration of what it means to be a citizen in the information age.

Veiled as fun, ARGs have exploded into public consciousness in recent years because of their political charge. Though digital game studies are—by their nature—often tied to what transpires on screens and in people's homes, ARGs are inherently digital because they define community as a group of people brought together by information. Time of play, rules, location of play, roles: these are

pieces of information that configure a real crowd, thereby short-circuiting the dialectic of power of the urban metabolism, which configures cities the same way, but from the top down, without including the agency of its practitioners.

ARGs untether and embody the cultural changes provoked by increased mobile media access and social networking. Instead of keeping the political power of networking contained behind the screen, ARGs emphasize the collaborative nature of games that are mediated by the bodies of autonomous players rather than solely by flickering screens, keyboards, and controllers.

To play an ARG is to dive into a counter-narrative *en medias res*, and to co-generate story, strategy, and collaboration in real time, in real places. ARGs not only expand *where* and *how* games are played but also *who* participates and to *what* extent. Perhaps more importantly, ARGs put into question what *counts* as gameplay and what counts as agency in the twenty-first century.

This scholarly collection explores the foundational components of designing and implementing ARGs while also inciting a dialogue about how digital media, hybrid game formats, and networked societies are redefining games and the limits of where digital game play extends. Though there has been a trickling of ARG scholarship and volumes exploring a more broad *pervasive* gaming, ARGs as a specific genre are redefining key relationships between media participants and media producers. As such, the nature of play, gaming, and digital engagement is redefined vis-à-vis the experiences documented and analyzed in this volume.

The remainder of this introduction explores the main histories that formed ARGs as they are presently understood, the key terminology within the genre, and the current spaces of inquiry and dialogue that ARG scholarship is entangled with. The two sections of this book both explore how the design, analysis, and spaces of research when engaged with ARGs that exists both within and layered on top of the *real world*.

Who plays ARGs?

Participation within ARGs is largely dependent on the frame with which you are looking at a game. For the companies relying on ARGs as contemporary marketing campaigns, active participants, lurkers in

online message boards, and even individuals reading *about* ARG play during and after a game has transpired are all valuable individuals for marketing and engagement. At the same time, if looking at an ARG as a player, the community of participants with whom one can share expertise and collaborate is a more realistic understanding of who counts as "players." Further, the role of puppet masters as engaging in a prolonged narrative dialogue with participants means that they, too, are participating within ARGs and not simply designing them. These three basic demographics of engagement: readers, players, and designers, only scratches the surface.

There are several ongoing questions, when looking at ARGs: *Who* is playing?; *Who* is designing?; and *Who* is observing? Considering how ARGs are played in public and are sometimes engaged in subversion, the role of individuals in public as participants and as witnesses of play—whether they are aware of this fact or not—as well as the role of actors within a gaming ecosystem makes a clearly defined player base difficult to suss out. Though several chapters in this volume look at closed gaming systems of participants in school settings or bounded by geography, ARGs historically are an open experience (at least for those who are aware of and can access the tools for participation within them).

Marcus Montola et al. (2009) describe a "pyramid of participation" in which different kinds of participation in pervasive games can build off each other (121). Different players have unequal levels of participation within an ARG. In this sense, it is in reading across an ARG—often after most of the events have transpired—that a clearer sense of what the game *is* becomes clearest to the most number of people. Non-players are able to read about the narrative of an ARG once it has transpired as a result of the labor of a core group of ARG organizers and players. This closed community provides space for larger audiences of narrative engagement. In doing so, it is necessary for ARG studies to consider for whom ARGs enchant, enthrall, and create moments of fun.

As much of the key terminology around ARGs like "rabbit holes" and "puppet masters" derived from player communities, how these groups self-govern, and learn is particularly important. Jane McGonigal (2007) has emphasized Pierre Levy's (1999) notion of "collective intelligence" in describing the complex learning practices of ARG communities. Perhaps just as important as understanding the role of knowledge production in often crowd-sourced ARG

experiences, we must also question how we define "community" within ARGs and to what extent participation is democratized across a gaming experience.

Educational research regarding learning in today's participatory culture emphasizes a "connected learning" in which youth interests guide powerful context of engagement. As Ito et al. (2013) note:

> Connected learning looks to digital media and communications to: 1) offer engaging formats for interactivity and self-expression, 2) lower barriers to access for knowledge and information, 3) provide social supports for learning through social media and online affinity groups, and 4) link a broader and more diverse range of culture, knowledge, and expertise to educational opportunity.
>
> (6)

Connected learning experiences are shaped into self-organized "affinity groups" of shared expertise and tacit knowledge (Gee, 2004) in most ARG communities. As such, the principles of *learning* within ARG participation are guided by how groups of players cluster. As temporary "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991), ARG players establish momentary groups of shifting hierarchies that topple, reorganize, and transform as their needs are met or shift. In such a way, ARG play mirrors the anarchist notion of the "temporary autonomous zone" (TAZ; Graeber, 2004).

Quoting Andrea Phillips—a moderator for a prominent ARG group, The Cloudmakers—in her 2003 article "This Is Not A Game: Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play," McGonigal emphasizes Phillips' point that, "The game promises to become not just entertainment, but our lives." This framing of livelihood is one worth considering when looking at communities of ARG players. These players are thriving *around* games—using the narrative experience as a TAZ. By their nature, TAZs offer new social cues for participants. They are then another representation of the magic circle (a concept we will explore at length below). Circumscribing social practice around interests and expertise, ARG players redefine the society in which they are acculturated. By participating in an ARG, players are alternating their own reality. On top of investigating the fantastical narratives established by puppet masters, players of ARGs change their own social circumstances. The "alternate" of alternate reality

games is one that leads to new social connections and *real* experiences of engagement.

Treading a definition

ARGs are a lot of things to a lot of people. As such, they often elude singular definitions. Like the participation within an ARG, one's perspective of what the genre means is dependent on how you are viewing it, what kinds of disciplinary affordances your vantage offers, and whether you are understanding these games from reading and reviewing their ephemera *after* a game has concluded or if you are exploring these games *in situ* as an ARG is being played. Regardless, the journey to fully understand the ARG is one that is full of diversions, rabbit holes, and interruptions. Watch your step.

Unlike digital game experiences that are available to any player with the financial means, time, and skill to engage with the gaming text, ARGs can often be so distributed that the *noise* of play does not provide a coherent narrative until after the game has fully transpired. As such, changing the relationship between producers and consumers of games creates new challenges for designers, players, and researchers. As Sean Stewart (2012) notes, "It's hard when you're letting audiences in."

While we will look at various definitions to parse a basic understanding of ARGs to ground the rest of this volume, we begin by considering the processes of immersion (in ARGs and in forms of play more broadly). In particular, Janet Murray (1997) reminds us that when we discuss media and *immersion*, the metaphor is derived from the process of being submerged in water. Soaking in the narrative that abounds, the construction of a world, a premise, a *reality* that is alternate from our own is a process of acculturation. As much as the definitions of ARGs speak of "stumbling" upon ARGs (McGonigal, 2003) or of falling down a Lewis Carroll-like "rabbit hole" (Szulborski, 2005), Murray's reminder of the use of *immersion* when discussing digital narratives is particularly useful. The flotsam and jetsam of digital storytelling and the hidden nuggets of narrative in the *real* world—seemingly everywhere— make understanding any given ARG a process of staying afloat and treading through the gaming soup. And just like that first peak underwater, narrative *stuff* pops into vivid reality. An entire world

waves in currents beneath you. This is the experience of being immersed, seeing what was always there in crystal clear lucidity. And then—breathless and unacquainted with the less vibrant and ordinary—you come up for air and return to the world of us mundane surface dwellers.

McGonigal (2003) describes the need for a "stereoscopic vision" when playing ARGs: needing to read two different worlds at the same time is an importantly *different* means of approaching games than those that *augment* the reality of one world. As such, we must consider the proto-ARGs that have guided the creation of the genre as well as untangle ARGs from a broader form of social engagement, play, and *pervasiveness*. While much has been written about pervasive gaming such as when digital platforms create augmented visions of the world around players (von Borries et al., 2007), there are important differences between ARGs and a larger body of pervasive gaming practices.

As noted by Montola et al. (2009) pervasive games "pervade, bend, and blur the traditional boundaries of game, bleeding from the domain of the game to the domain of the ordinary" (12). Often, pervasive games augment reality and perceptions of space through digitally-mediated tools. And while such tools for re-viewing and re-mediating the world around us are often employed by ARG designers, it is important to note that this is often not at the center of what we consider the game. Instead, a digital recording, an online database, or a series of clues that are found within an ARG can augment the spaces around us both physically and virtually. However, this is where many pervasive games and ARGs often diverge. An ARG's engagement with an augmented world is often as a component to a larger, unfolding of an experiential narrative; this is what is centered in ARG design *rather* than the digital lens through which many pervasive games re-mediate the physical world. As Stenros and Montola (2009) explain, ARGs are "a subcategory of pervasive games, typically featuring collaboration rather than competition, large self-organized player communities, Internet-based gameplay, and secretive production styles" (38). While this categorization focuses on typical styles of play in ARGs, the platform of *where* the game is found is also worth considering. As noted above, pervasive games are often centered around a digital platform whereas ARGs are often centered around a search for narrative; message boards (both created by players and provided by

designers) act as both repositories of knowledge and narrative production as well as spaces for the kinds of communal engagement central to the ARG experience.

In a white paper published by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA, 2006) focused on defining and exploring ARGs, the authors and contributors, Martin et al., explain that ARGs "are not an entirely passive experience [. . .] and that they use the world around you—advertising hoardings, telephone lines, websites, fake companies, actors and actresses you can meet in real life—to deliver the game experience" (6). The white paper later adds that these ARGs "take the substance of everyday life and weave it into narratives that layer additional meaning, depth, and interaction upon the real world" (6). As always, there are prominent exceptions to this argument. *Ingress*, as explored in Oliveira's chapter in this volume, is particularly grounded in widespread use of a mobile app for continuous and competitive play that challenges notions of what ARGs may becoming.

As such, while definitions have been slippery in this nascent era of the genre, ARGs can be broadly understood as digitally-mediated games that transpire within the "real," physical world. The layered-fiction of a game's premise—an alien invasion, recruitment into a secret agency—unfolds across the physical landscape of wherever players may be. In locating ARG gameplay in specific times and places that are mediated and delineated through digital interfaces, ARGs are unique in their design, execution, and *meaning* for players. In *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fiction Worlds* (2005), Jesper Juul documents the varied definitions of games, their similarities, contradictions, and implications of these (30). While we do not provide such a matrices for ARGs, it is useful to consider how ARGs are understood differently within contexts both over time and within varied disciplinary realms. Looking at the early foundations of ARGs, for instance, Sean Stewart (Montola, Stenros, and Waern, 2009: xiii–xv) reflects on the key design principles in creating *The Beast*—largely considered the first "official" ARG (discussed below) by noting that the key design principles of the experience were for it to "Come into the players' lives in every way possible" (xiii), "make it interactive" (xiv), and "embrace community" (xiv). Such principles provide an outline of ARGs that are focused on mediating relationships between players and

alongside the narrative. In contrast, Dave Szulborski (an instrumental designer in the years following *The Beast*) relies on a description of the tools of ARGs, explaining that one "takes place on the Internet, although it's nothing at all like most Internet or video games you may have played in the past" (Szulborski, 2005: 1).

Further, researchers including authors of several of the chapters in this volume, have considered ARGs from the perspective of their role in educational spaces. Describing classroom-based instances of ARGs for a general audience in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Anastasia Salter (2014) writes:

> Alternate Reality Games (or ARGs) are built on the idea of a shared story invading the physical world, and can include scenarios of invading aliens, impending apocalypse, or mysteries waiting to be solved. While some incorporate technology or social media, many ARGs are built by transforming objects and spaces in the learners' physical environment. Players collaborate and react to those ongoing stories through the mediation of the game designer, and in so doing, build new skills towards the intended learning objectives.

Looking across these different definitions then, modern concerns with regards to the scholarship of ARGs can be understood in terms of their relationship with the digital media and platforms on which much of the play is enacted, the role of player communities and education, and the relationship between narrative and participant agency. Broader questions also emerge: Are ARGs actually *games*?; What does it actually mean to *play* an ARG?; Are ARGs actually *digital*? Answers to such questions, slippery as they may be, are found in this volume through examining the interlocking tensions between players, agency, and community. Such tensions have been present since the first inception of ARGs.

Tropes and histories

Why This Is Not A Game

In one telling of the history of ARGs, their inception began with the design work of a team headed up by Sean Stewart—when

they unveiled *The Beast* as part of a prolonged promotional campaign for Steven Spielberg's film *A.I.* A murder mystery that relied on clues found in the promotional posters and trailers for the film and leading to exploring websites that described events taking place more than a century in the future, *The Beast* set a precedent for the kinds of play and immersion that would become emblematic of many games labeled as ARGs in the years that followed.

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of *The Beast* taken up in future games was a deliberate obfuscation of the sense of *playing* an ARG. Coinciding with the creation of the first of this new genre was a grounding tenet for future design. Found in a quickly flashing sentence on the screen of *A.I.* film trailers was the phrase, "This Is Not A Game" (TINAG). Noted by Stenros and Montola (2009), when it came to actually designing *The Beast*, "The total denial of the gameness was the design principle. Everything had to look and feel as much as possible like it was real and believable" (27). The deniability of *The Beast* as a game, even when the fictive elements clearly dictate otherwise, has become an innate part of the ARG experience—one that can arguably differentiate ARGs from broader pervasive gaming. As McGonigal (2003) notes, TINAG "means to explicitly deny and purposefully obscure its nature as a game, a task that has become increasingly difficult as immersive players grown more savvy about TIN[A]G techniques." And while the role of TINAG is so significant as to incite dialogue across two chapters in this volume—Hook's and Janes's—it is also a trope within ARGs that is shifting. Games like *Reality Ends Here* (see Watson's chapter) and *Ingress* (see Oliveira's chapter) scrub away aspects of TINAG in contemporary ARG design.

Further, while instilling an ethos of TINAG into *The Beast* "served as a token of good faith to the players" (Stewart in Montola, Stenros, and Waern, 2009: xv), it also blurred the boundaries of fiction and reality in unintended ways. While this blurring is often one of the most embraced aspects of ARGs—that they are both real and not-real—McGonigal (2003) suggests that some members of the player community of *The Beast* took TINAG too literally when trying to gamify and *solve* social challenges shortly after 9/11. In this sense, she notes that a danger of TINAG is "a tendency to continue seeing games where games don't exist."

Magic communities and ordinary circles

Seeing games where they don't exist is a matter of perception and orientation. Johann Huizinga's oft-cited explanation of a magic circle and the role of ritual in gameplay is fundamental to understanding when ARGs engage with society and when they do not. Play, according to Huizinga (1955), is:

> a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player utensil and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of a social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means (13).

Solidly grounding Huizinga's work decades later, Salen and Zimmerman's expanded notion of the magic circle illustrates it as "a special place in time and space created by a game" (2003: 95). Whether cordoned off in digital or analog contexts, such a space is "enclosed and separate from the real world" (95). Pervasive games like ARGs, however, do not enclose the spaces of play quite so neatly. In fact, Montola et al. define pervasive games precisely by their diversion from traditional understanding of games within a magic circle. For them, a pervasive game is "a game that has one or more salient features that expand the contractual magic circle of play spatially, temporally, or socially" (12). This *expansion* is one that significantly challenges where and when a game emerges. Discussions of the magic circle float between concrete examinations of it and also refuting its existence in contemporary contexts of gaming (Pargman and Jakobsson, 2006).

The past decade and a half of ARG research has largely relied on this understanding of the magic circle and ARGs' ability to transcend Huizinga's model via Salen and Zimmerman's framing. However, we must return to the notion that such magic circles are primarily still part of a community perception and understanding of space. In *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Social Structure of Irrelevance* (2015), sociologist Evictor Zerubavel explains that the notion of

"relevance" is a socially grounded concept: "What we consider 'relevant' or 'irrelevant,' after all, is to a large extent merely a function of the way our attention is *socially*, and thus ultimately conventionally, delineated" (8). In this sense, our attunement to complex player communities guides how we understand what is a game, what is *real*, and how tropes or conventions are enacted. Along these lines, Juul's (2005) argument that video games "are *real"* is an important contribution to how we both understand ARGs within a larger set of social structures and to how the dialogue within digital games studies bleeds into the boundary-straddling genre of ARGs (1). He extends his discussion of reality by noting that, "when winning a game by slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon but a fictional one. To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world." The coded language of TINAG and complicit understandings of it are grounded in multiple layers of social orientation: we understand play through the lens of player communities *and* we understand play through a lens of the sociocultural grounding of our everyday lived experiences. As Zerubavel notes, as members of *attentional communities*, "we thus learn what to notice and what to ignore as part of our *attentional socialization"* (2015: 63).

While it is true that ARGs can be understood as redefining the magic circle and traversing it, they can also be understood as a discrete refocusing of player attention in ways that are *taught* and *learned* through community-based socialization. Particularly as TINAG is an attribute of ARGs that is not as fully present in recent ARGs such as *Reality Ends Here* (Watson, 2015), *Endgame: Ancient Truth* (NianticLabs, 2015), *Ripple/Kudzu* (Leibniz, 1704, 2015), and *The Black Cloud* (Niemeyer et al., 2009), we must consider how other disciplinary lenses inform the tenets of play, understanding, and strategic engagement.

Rabbit holes, puppet masters, and other problematic language

Alongside the grounding of ARG design as emphasizing TINAG, other key principles of play emerged with the debut of *The Beast*.

Key vocabulary, guided by a player community known as the "Cloudmakers," continues to be prevalent in ARG design. The developed entry points into an ARG, such as the clues on the *A.I.* film posters, became commonly known as "rabbit holes," a reference to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865) in which one seemingly innocuous moment of exploration leads to cascading into an entirely new world. Szulborski notes for ARG designers that "A good rabbit hole needs to appear realistic and intriguing, and will hopefully motivate whoever finds it to proceed further into the fictional world they have unwittingly discovered" (Szulborski, 2005: 49). However there is a contradiction in this description: "intriguing" subverts the mundanity of realism. We can extrapolate from this that a "good" rabbit hole is one that, for those not *looking* for clues, blends into the background and noise of the world. However, for ARG players keen to the tropes of ARG design—a wayward character, a misspelled word, an incorrect date—these all trigger scrutiny from a larger community's "collective focus of attention" (Zerubavel, 2015: 69).

It is important to note that the landscape of ARGs shifts, erodes, and blossoms over time. What might have been a clever rabbit hole in the early 2000s may be obtuse and obvious for players acclimated to the landscape of ARG play today. A clever rabbit hole is dependent upon whom developed it, for what audience, and to what extent. A blatant poster in Antero's English classroom, for example, was the rabbit hole that guided a class of high school students to interact with real world air quality measurements and engage in dialogue with the main character of *The Black Cloud* (Niemeyer et al., 2008):

This rabbit hole was closed off from the public's participation *and* was likely too obviously signaling a game was afoot for those looking for such clues (challenging TINAG principles for an expert ARG community). However, for a class of students unfamiliar with ARGs and not expecting to be *playing* within one (let alone on the first day of school), such a rabbit hole was what was needed within this landscape.

Similar to the shifting nature and erosion of past rabbit holes, the trope of calling the designers of ARGs "puppet masters" is also one that has seen change over the years of ARG development. Evoking a clandestine organization guiding the narrative, the idea of a group of "puppet masters" has become a continuing label of
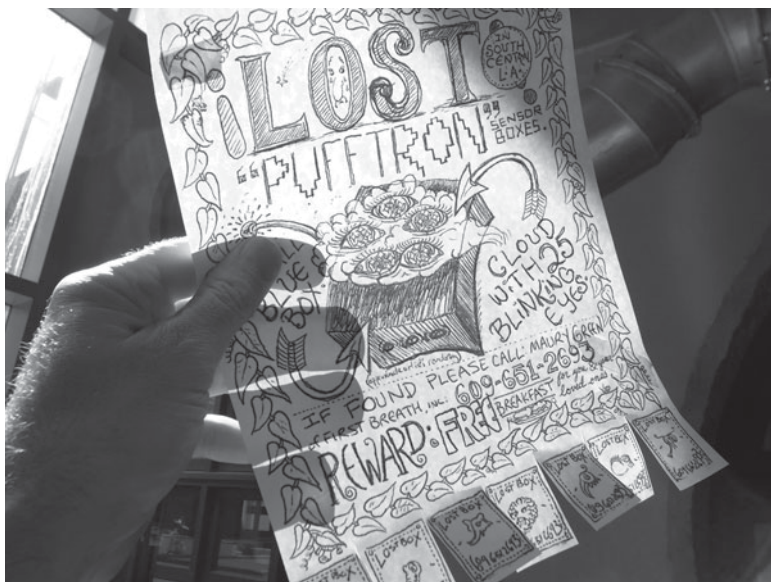
FIGURE 1.2 *A poster for a missing "pufftron" sensor acts as a rabbit hole for The Black Cloud in a high school classroom.*

ARG designers. However, with increased research, interviews, and retrospectives that break down the process of developing ARGs, the shadowy sense of who is creating ARGs and for whom can largely be discarded. As a sense of embodiment, it can contribute to the TINAG ethos, but knowledge of who engages in the labor of ARG design is not a secret. Initial ARGs contended with players trying to discover and expose the creators of the gaming experiences. Revealing who was behind the curtain for games like *The Beast* became its own form of *emergent gameplay* ancillary to larger ARG goals (Juul, 2005: 76).

Further, we should note that puppet masters are co-designers. They offer an initial piece of information that encourages wayward recipients down the proverbial rabbit hole. But they are not the sole designers of the game—despite such a label often placed on them. Instead, the *playing community* designs the game. Puppet masters provide the "What if" and engage in an ongoing dialogue of co-production. In this sense, puppet masters are enslaved by the games

they develop: they are beholden to a mutual agreement not to screw up, disappoint, or disregard the narrative promise of their creations.

However, there *are* puppet masters that players must be wary about. Though less discussed as a motive of play than other aspects of ARGs, the role of the financiers of ARGs must be scrutinized. *The Beast* was a game developed in promotion of a blockbuster film. *I Love Bees* was a game developed in promotion of a highly anticipated video game. *Art of the H3ist* (see Bakioğlu in this volume) was a game developed in promotion of a new car. As ARG enthusiasts and scholars are aware, these are genre-defining transmedia experiences that are bankrolled by companies with significant financial stakes in the marketing of the game. The list of ARGs developed primarily as marketing campaigns is extensive. If we are to truly consider the larger social ecosystem that sustains and develops the ARG experience, these profit-driven puppet masters must be understood as components of this system.

Of course, the ARG genre has led to numerous non-commercial and education-focused ARGs. This volume looks at several of these as case studies, as extensions of the ARG genre, and as spaces to challenge existing ARG research. However, if we are to look to *The Beast* as defining the initial tropes and expectations of ARGs, we must acknowledge that the in-game puppet masters are operating based on strings being pulled by a corporation with larger goals than simply providing an immersive experience. As players and researchers of ARGs, a critical media literacy is needed to *read* the aspects of power both within and around the development of these games, this genre, and the player base as both consumers and producers.

Alternate alternate reality game origins

The nature of *The Beast* and its long-casting shadow over the previously unformed genre is the widely accepted, dominant creation myth of ARGs. Though clearly a huge force in guiding ARG design as noted above, its continued placement at the center of the nascent genre is one that is perpetuated through continued scholarship not unlike the work represented in this volume. As a genre that illustrates players in search of narrative, ARGs circulate around the narrative that the genre begins, emerging fully formed vis-à-vis *The Beast*.

And yet.

Moving beyond engaging ARGs as simply a subgenre within pervasive gaming, there are additional layers that distinguish ARGs since their beginnings. Szulborski (2005), for instance, traces a lineage of ARGs that includes *Masquerade* (Williams, 1979)—a children's book that also included a real-world treasure hunt, *Ong's Hat*—a narrative story that was told across online Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) in the 1990s (Kinsella, 2011), and *Publius Enigma*—a cryptic riddle posted in a Pink Floyd newsgroup in advance of their 1994 album *The Division Bell*. Further, popular books like Neil Stephenson's *The Diamond Age: Or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* (1995) and films like David Fincher's *The Game* (1997) have illustrated ways that playful narratives interject themselves upon reality. And even these examples of alternate realities guided through new technologies do not quite capture the full story of ARG inception. There is a deeper history of ARGs. The implications of this history are two-fold:

1 We must consider how narrative and imagination have shifted in how people see, perceive, and act upon the world; and

2 We must look at how the nature of ARG play is taken up via our relationship to information and to each other.

Looking at these two needs via ARG history, let us embark down a new rabbit hole briefly. Looking at trickster narratives like that of Anansi or Br'er Rabbit (pre-Disney cooptation), we can see how folklore illustrated both cautionary tales and demonstrations of agency for enslaved Africans in the American South (Hyde, 1998; Levine, 1977; Roberts, 1990). Like most trickster narratives, the stories of Br'er Rabbit—escaping certain doom over and over—function as many things. They illustrate Br'er Rabbit as a cunning hero while also warning listeners of his foibles. These stories both *guide* how individuals interact and also allow them to imagine the *alternate* realities that they can manifest; folklore reflects one's own status as embodying a single narrative among many alternate pathways.

At the same time, an understanding of how individuals and groups interpret the various streams of information and how these help harvest understanding and action is also necessary. We

can look as far back as the grounding of empiricism through the philosophy of John Locke and René Descartes's statement "Cogito ergo sum" (I think therefore I am). Grounding knowledge in sensory experience, the ways we live, interact, and socialize can be seen as a massively complex set of choices, decisions, and discarded alternatives. Claude Shannon's *A Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1948), posits an information theory that mathematically explores the transmission of knowledge. Though largely grandfathering much of the computing and hardware advances still in use today, the abstract notions of information emerging from entropy is fundamental to understanding social interactions via ARGs. Ultimately, Shannon's work can be loosely understood as information in small "bits" moving from unclarity and uncertainty toward a received understanding. As noted by IGDA (2006), "ARGs teach us to heighten our ability to winnow patterns out of the otherwise seemingly random and meaningless data in the wide world" (10).

How we parse and understand information—both individually and collectively—is a process of our own *computing* of information. Exploring the role of narrative and information in non-ARG contexts, we must consider Salen and Zimmerman's (2003) definition of "transformative social play" as forms of gaming that "transform social relationships" (475). Looking at folklore, fairy tales, and "canonical" stories in Western society, the ways that narratives guide social interaction embody the cultural practices and decisions that are seen in ARG player communities. Likewise, being able to parse the complex data of both narrative and the real world and synthesizing across these multitudinous texts is a transformative process built upon our ability to understand and rationally interpret the world around us. The origins of ARGs are not simply grounded in singular instantiations of twentieth and twenty-first century marketing; they are built on a foundation of human development and narrative construction across history.

The cusp of digital play

For a genre that is very much woven into the physical, social world (or at least attempts to be), ARGs may not seem like an obvious choice to unpack the trends of "digital" game studies. So often,

the images of ARGs are of *people*. Answering phones, staging mock protests, doing random performative acts in public: these are the expectations of what ARGs look like. And yet, the mere distinctions between how ARGs are played, their platforms for participation, and the contexts in which digital tools are and are not included make them supremely ideal to tussle with traditional notions of performance, play, and learning.

Unlike most *video* games, ARGs are not bound to a singular medium. Further, whereas Henry Jenkins's (2006) descriptions of transmedia storytelling rely on extensions of narrative that hop from one platform to another (e.g., *The Matrix* story is delivered on films, video games, animation, etc.), ARGs tell stories through the deliberate synthesis of myriad textual products: *ARGs are not bound to a singular platform.* Despite this fact, the digital aspects of ARGs are particularly important: they are largely where strategic play, coordination, and dissemination occurs. If ARGs are often global affairs, it is the distribution of tasks via digital tools that makes such complex participation possible. In essence, ARGs are digitally mediated even if they are not entirely delivered through digital means. The game is not always digital but its administration is.

Further investigating the role of digital media and tools in ARGs, we must also look at the limitations of replayability within ARGs. Though some ARGs such as *Ingress* and *Reality Ends Here* have moved beyond this, most ARGs are largely singular events that individuals are either present to experience or that they must review after they have concluded. The window of play is finite and social obstacles such as awareness and access affect if and how players are included within the process of engagement. Digital tools can archive play, facilitate coordination for players, and offer *some* aspects of play and procedure.

In looking at the digital components of ARGs, we can see these games representing the cusp of where a contemporary digital game studies is headed. Whereas gaming used to be (and often is still) housed within a digital container, this Pandora's Box is opened in ARGs: narrative (driven by both puppet masters and players) spills into various physical and virtual spaces. At the same time, we are seeing games like *Ingress* mediating turn taking through digital spaces. Further, as ARGs continue to evolve we are seeing a regression of the use of digital gaming contexts. This is a relationship with which gaming scholarship must contend; we are seeing digital

aspects of pervasive games like Escape Rooms minimized: hints from Escape Room organizers may be offered within these games but the digital aspects are otherwise largely custodial: making reservations, keeping track of time, posting digital ephemera of one's experience after the fact. Such is the relegated role of the digital in some gaming contexts today.

In labeling "games of social experimentation," Ian Bogost (2012) describes gaming contexts in which the ratio of socialized play is emphasized in lieu of computational procedures. Perhaps this is the direction of ARG studies as we move forward: with computation procedures minimized to emphasize the play, engagement, and socialization within ARGs, the process of playing and studying shifts. Perhaps, from this lens, we can see the process of *alternating* reality as an actionable outcome that derives from gaming. As McGonigal notes about *The Beast*, "it is reasonable to argue that *nothing about this virtual play was simulated*. The computer-driven alternate reality *The Beast* created was make-believe, but every aspect of the player's experience was, phenomenologically speaking, real." Some aspects of the *alternate* reality within ARGs are delivered via digital tools and some are delivered through social interactions. The digital systems of ARGs both deliver and support socialization and player interaction.

The changing landscape of ARGs and looking ahead

The definitions and tropes of ARGs that have saddled the genre are nearly two decades old. Though premises like TINAG and the relational aspects of puppet masters are still largely in place in many current ARGs, the genre has shown the ability to grow and shift beyond these initial means of framing and *containing* ARGs. Arguably, this growth is problematic as it moves ARGs even more loosely into the broader territory of pervasive gameplay. Watson's chapter, for example, looks at how the iterative processes of play and an imbued sense of scorekeeping within *Reality Ends Here* provides a team-based competitive element to ARGs.

Though this collection contains analysis and description of several canonical ARGs, there is also a focus on how the genre is

changing and what these implications portend for the future of digital game studies.

The contents of this book are arranged over two sections:

Part One: Guiding Principles of Alternate Reality Games
Exploring the design and implementation of ARGs, the chapters in this section look at narratives, the contexts within which they are designed, and how the fundamental core aspects of ARGs are shaped an enacted. These chapters explore key aspects unique to ARGs such as TINAG and provide readers of varied experience with ARGs a grounded sense of how different designers create the layered-fiction of these games.

Part Two: New Frontiers of Alternating Reality
The second section of this volume focuses on how contemporary analysis and research of ARGs is challenging assumptions of what the genre means and how it functions. This section explores how the tropes, designs, and relationships within digital gaming literature are shifting the landscape of ARG research. The scholarship here focuses on how digital game studies is shifting in regards to the affordances of ARG design, play, and community building.

Like ARGs, these chapters do not fit comfortably as solely representative of their respective sections. Our conclusion offers some synthesized suggestions for where ARGs and research of them are headed. Taking the call of the Approaches to Digital Games Studies series editors—Voorhees, Call, and Whitlock (2012)— seriously, the chapters here are "challenging, thought provoking, contradictory, and engaging" (8). In looking across the dialogue that emerges in these chapters, we seek to define the changing landscape of ARGs.

In a retrospective reflecting (Story Forward, 2014) on *I Love Bees* a decade after its launch, designer Elan Lee noted that ARGs were defining storytelling and art in the twenty-first century:

> This is what art means in the age of Facebook, even though Facebook wasn't invented yet. This is what art means in the age of Twitter, even though Twitter wasn't invented yet. There was something about [*I Love Bees*] that is fundamentally part of the nature of what this age of the world is.

As we move beyond simple enchantment of new modes of storytelling, the chapters that follow invite you to explore the aesthetics of this new genre and its continuing and continually shifting impact on broader games studies.

An assurance and a warning

Before you begin diving into the bountiful chapters that follow, we should clarify that the volume that you are holding is *not* a game.

Really.

Your response to that statement likely falls along three different lines of gaming researchers' positions towards ARGs as a genre.

For a vast majority of you, *of course* this book isn't a game. This is a scholarly collection and you're perusing these sentences skeptical of our ability to pull off an entire volume on a subgenre of gaming that you may not be necessarily convinced should be considered part of an "Approaches to Digital Games Studies" series. Don't worry: keep reading.

For some of you, this reminder that this *really* isn't a game comes as a relief. ARGs have a slippery tendency to present a facade of truth for players to both believe and to challenge. A front of reality, claims that "This Is Not A Game" (TINAG) are suspect as they are the very foundation of ARG development. Knowing that this volume is not a rabbit hole into a larger realm and that endnotes, citations, and wayward punctuation do not need to be tediously combed over comes as a relief. Don't worry: keep reading.

And for a small group of you, this statement of not being a game is, actually, a declaration that the game is afoot. It is from this context that we can consider some readers' skepticism with the claims that this is not a game. Considering the ways some scholars have injected ARGs and emergent gameplay into the academy (see Salter, 2014), maybe this *is* a game. (Even though we keep warning you that it is not and to acknowledge otherwise would be breaking the TINAG tenet—see Blair, 1991.) You, slim demographic that you are, *know* that this book is an invitation into a larger world of play, deceit, and performance. Don't worry: keep reading.

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