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Emerging Participatory Culture Practices

Player-Created Tiers in Alternate Reality Games

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Abstract / This article introduces an emerging form of participatory culture, one that is not a modification or elaboration of a primary producer's content. Instead, this article details how the artifacts created to 'play' a primary producer's content have become the primary work for massive global audiences. This phenomenon is observed in the genre of alternate reality games (ARGs) and is illustrated through a theory of 'tiering'. Tiers provide separate content to different audiences. ARG designers tier their projects, targeting different players with different content. ARG player-production then creates another tier for non-playing audiences. To explicate this point, the features that provoke player-production – producer-tiering, ARG aesthetics and transmedia fragmentation – are interrogated, alongside the character of the subsequent player-production. Finally, I explore the aspects of the player-created tiers that attract massive audiences, and then posit what these observations may indicate about contemporary art forms and society in general.

Key Words / aesthetics / alternate reality games / audience / complexity / culture / game design / media / narrative / personalization / player types / transmedia

In *Convergence Culture* Henry Jenkins (2006: 290) defines 'participatory culture' as '[c]ulture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content'. Jenkins (2006: 257) expands: '[t]he power of participation comes not from destroying commercial culture but from writing over it, modding it, amending it, expanding it, adding greater diversity of perspective, and then recirculating it, feeding it back into the mainstream media'. This essay augments Jenkins' list by introducing an emerging participatory practice that is not distinguished by any rewriting, modifying or amending the content of a primary producer. Instead, audiences co-create, filling in gaps left intentionally and unintentionally by the primary producer. Unlike well-documented (Jenkins, 1992) fan practices of extending the original narrative of a primary producer, the gaps to be filled are integral to the primary narrative. The stand-out participatory practice to be documented in this essay, however, is the following

phenomenon: the *content created by a small audience* in reaction to primary-producer content has actually become the *main product of consumption for mass audiences*. Although observable in many forms of cultural production, this phenomenon is interrogated specifically through the genre of alternate reality games.

Alternate reality games (ARGs) are a form of what Jenkins calls 'transmedia storytelling', in that they provide unique elements in a variety of media platforms. All components are delivered through so-called real world media such as email, fax, SMS and websites. It is the task of players to collaborate to uncover clues and plot points, solve puzzles, create content, converse with and rescue characters. They do so over weeks and months, mediums and continents. ARGs have been created by independent individuals and groups, designed for educational and training purposes, commissioned as marketing campaigns and for extensions of traditional media properties. Pervasive game designer and theorist Jane McGonigal (2006: 262) approximates that between 2001 and 2006 there were 'seventeen commercial alternate reality games (ARGs), fifty-two independent ARGs, and many dozens more smaller and lesser-known ARGs'.

Commissioned ARGs are engineered to attract massive numbers of players and media attention; and they do: *The Beast* had over 3 million people actively participate (42 Entertainment, n.d.a); *I Love Bees* 3 million people (Jordan Weisman in Handy, 2005) and *The Art of the H3ist* '500,000 story participants' (McKinney-Silver, 2005).¹ Entertainment forms intended for massive audiences, such as blockbuster feature films, television series, books and massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs) tally their massive audience reach through ticket sales, 'eyeballs' on television, 'unique visits' on websites, sales or subscriptions. These statistics are gathered from the audience's direct engagement with content created by the primary producer. Unlike these examples, the statistics of ARG players do not equate to players engaging with the primary producer (so-called 'puppet-masters' or PMs in ARGs) content.

As an example, 42 Entertainment (n.d.b) – the company which has the designers of ARGs such as *The Beast* and *I Love Bees* – has divided the audiences of the ARG *I Love Bees* (2004) as follows: 'tens of thousands of enthusiasts mobilized in public for pervasive missions, three-quarters of a million active participants working online to talk about and solve the immersive mystery, and nearly two-and-a-half million casual participants tracking the experience'. The pervasive missions were answering 40,000 payphone calls in over '50 United States, and 8 foreign countries' (McGonigal, 2005). Some of the next grouping – 750,000 'active participants working online to talk about and solve the mystery' – and definitely the final grouping of 2.5 million 'casual participants tracking the experience' did not, I argue, engage with the primary producer content. The term *tier* is introduced here to explicate this phenomenon.

On Tiering

Tiering describes the various points-of-entry (POE) into a world or work. This does not refer to the internal variation our minds afford. The levels are found inside the work or across various works; they can all be materially observed. Tiering is differentiated from approaches such as 'polysemous address', which Jenkins (1992: 125) recognized in television programs that combine genres with the aim of appealing to different audiences, and children's literature that addresses both parent and child as referred to in the

narratological theories of 'dual audience', 'crosswriting' and 'crossover literature' (Beckett, 1999); 'dual implied addressee' (Sell, 2002) and 'double narratee' (Hansen, 2005). Instead, tiering is a characteristic of emerging approaches to the production and experience of 'content'. (The ambiguous term 'content' is invoked intentionally to denote all forms of production.) Tiers provide separate content to different audiences and in doing so facilitate a different experience of a work or world.

Tier Levels

Levels: World

Tiers at the *world level* address different audiences with different works. In this context, a 'world' denotes the sum of productions that are set within the same fictional universe. It is akin to a brand, storyworld, gameworld or 'verse in fan-culture parlance. This approach is most often employed by producers of franchises or contemporary transmedia forms. Fundamentally, the logic behind this approach is that producers provide works in different media platforms and art forms to address audiences with persistent and alternating preferences for, and access to, media platforms and art forms.

In the context of ARGs, world tiering is evidenced in the transmedia extensions of existing properties. For instance, *The Beast* (2001) was set in the fictional world of Steven Spielberg's *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (Warner Brothers, 2001), the Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix* universe was extended with the grassroots ARG *Metacortechs* (2003). ARG extensions of television shows include: ABC's *Push, Nevada* (2002); two commissioned ARGs for each season of Shaftesbury Films' *ReGenesis (Extended Reality Game*, Xenophile Media, 2004 and 2006); ABC ARG for *Lost (The Lost Experience*, 2006); and ABC Family Television's ARG for *Fallen (The Ocular Effect*, Xenophile Media, 2006). Microsoft Game Studio's *I Love Bees* (2004) was also set in the fictional universe of Bungie Entertainment's digital game *Halo*. These ARGs provided a one-time or different point-of-entry to the fictional world through the art form the players prefer.

Levels: Work

The *work level* refers to separate content within a single work that is designed to appeal to different audiences. ARGs provide completely different challenges and game content for different audiences. To 'play' an ARG, therefore, is not to engage in any homogenous content supplied by the producers. Indeed, due to the multi-platform expanse and plethora of content, this is an impossible task. Instead, players are targeted with different segmentations that they can engage with as an individual or sub-group. These segmentations address different audiences in the following manner.

Tier Types

Tiers address the needs and preferences of different audiences. At the world level this can be enacted through providing different media platforms and art forms. Specific skills or knowledge of audiences can also be addressed, for instance hard-core players and casual players, or people familiar with a particular genre. The interaction level desired by

an audience at a particular point in time is another example. At the work level in ARGs, designers provide different content to address the interests and skills of different players. Such interests and skills are evidenced in player streams that have puzzle, story and real-world preferences. These will be elaborated shortly in the section on producer-triggers, but first, to the tiers that players create.

Tiering Sources

It is the argument of this article that tiers can be created by primary producers *and* by audiences. As stated earlier, a tier is a point-of-entry that is either an entire work or a segment within a work. The content that players of ARGs create becomes a tier for massive audiences to experience as the work. The content ARG players create is a mix of production that is characterized by what it contributes to the fictional world of the ARG and how it enables gameplay (that which is needed to 'play' an ARG). It is the latter, gameplay resources, I argue, that forms a tier that most audiences experience. Gameplay resources are produced in a variety of media types: *forums, blogs, listservs, IRC, wikis, other website forms and podcasts*. Gameplay resource types include *puzzle-solving tools, orientations or tutorials, asset aggregation ('trail'), recaps, storyworld management resources (anachrony audits and character charts) and guides*. Examples of these will be elaborated in the next section but owing to scope and space constraints a full taxonomy has been published online.² What factors facilitate the production of these player-created resources and why do audiences attend to these creations and not that of the primary producer? The next section outlines forces (which include producer-tiering) that trigger player-production and what that production is.

Producer-Triggered Player-Production

[Alternate reality games] encourage players to create new media tools which they can use to process and communicate information. And . . . they can only be solved by people working together as teams and tapping the power of social networks to solve problems. (Jenkins in Wallis and Jenkins, 2006)

42 Entertainment (42 Entertainment, n.d.c) write that they 'customize their experiences for participants based on their level of interaction'. They define the levels of interaction as: casual, active and enthusiast. Casual players, they explain (42 Entertainment, n.d.c), represent 'the broadest audience, they have a modest level of interaction which is focused primarily online; they seek a guide to help engage in the experience'. In the *2006 Alternate Reality Games White Paper*, ARG designer Brooke Thompson (2006) describes this audience type as a 'reader': '[t]hey browse the various websites, both in-game and out-of-game, following up on the story narrative and reading what other players are doing and saying'. Readers are 'the majority of participants'. It is this massive audience that rarely experiences the PM-created primary narrative or their gameplay resources. Instead, most PM-created content successfully addresses different types of player interest and expertise. There is a tiering, that is, at the level of 'hard-core'.³

Hard-Core Player Tiering

A player with expertise in a particular genre has many names. In digital games they are called 'hard-core gamers'. Digital games consultant and author Jeannie Novak (2005: 373) describes a hard-core gamer as 'someone who plays games on a regular basis and who often enjoys competitive features and deep gameplay'. Thompson (2006: 45) describes ARG hard-core players as 'devotees'. Thompson's definition of a devotee centers on the time they spend actively involved in an ARG, creating content, participating in the community and leading gameplay. In ARGs, there are different types of hard-core players. These players have different interests and skills and are addressed accordingly with specific content. McGonigal (Terdiman, 2006) outlined at a question-and-answer session just how different players are addressed in ARGs:

First, you try to create an extremely diverse range of participatory opportunities. Some are online, text-based. Some are through vocal interaction, like phones or Skype. Some are real-world, face-to-face. Some are puzzles. Some are stunts. Some are problems. Some are literary. You just throw out a really wide range so people feel hailed by something, and something specific.

The following are tiers that hail, indeed directly address, puzzle players, story players and real world players.

Hard-Core Tiering: Puzzle Players

Ever since the first ARG *The Beast* (2001), cryptography has been utilized as a challenge in all its guises: stenography, morse code, caesar, vinegere, ROT, braille, anagrams, ASCII and more. Hard-core players are also skilled in finding text hidden in webpages or servers, finding hidden clues in text, image and sound files. An example of how such players are addressed separately is in the ARG that accompanied the Canadian television series *ReGenesis* (Shaftsbury Films, 2006). The ARG, relabeled as the *ReGenesis Extended Reality Game: ReGenesis* was created by Xenophile Media.⁴ Evan Jones, the then Creative Director of Xenophile Media, was quoted by journalist and ARG player Jonathan Waite (2006) describing their design approach:

According to Evan Jones . . . the way the game has been created is very much a 'tiered experience' . . . Jones compares this to 'funnel' where only a certain part of the player base will take the journey into the deeper levels, but at the same time, a larger audience will be able to get entertainment from other parts of the experience that don't necessarily involve immersion.

For the third mission in the *ReGenesis ERG*, all players (field agents within the fictional world) were issued with a directive to infiltrate an anarchic institution, the Ocktopods, and report back with any information about their agenda. The front page of the Ocktopods website is an almost bare screen with a logo, text box and submit button. The button takes the player to an exam. Once the exam is correctly completed, the player is rewarded with 'The Ocktopod Redux' and a video. The redux explains, conveniently, their agenda and therefore provides the information the player needs to fulfill the mission. This is one route through the game episode though. There is another that is not signaled on the surface text, literally.

If a player highlighted the text on the page and/or looked at the source code they would be privy to another challenge. Alongside the exam questions were single letters

distributed vertically. Each of these letters was placed alongside html color code. The message, once decoded, told the players to 'rescue ana from our url'. Players that removed the letters 'ana' from the url were rewarded with a webpage that invited them to join the Ocktopods. The anarchic hacker group so feared in the story was now cast, by members of the audience. The hard-core players of the ERG took on the role of an antagonist against the NorBAC characters in the series and against the field agents who are their fellow players. According to Jones (2007), '10% of all ERG players became hardcore players. This means that hardcore players represented 0.01% of all fans'. This example illustrates how the hard-core players (ARG players) with a preference for puzzles were given their own challenge, and in a manner that only they could recognize. Completing that challenge, a producer-created tier addressing them only, led to a very different experience of the work.

Hard-Core Tiering: Story Players

Story players are provided for in poetic discourse, plot and characters. Richard Sebastian and Marble Kinzie found in their survey of the players of *The Beast* that players do derive pleasure from reading the discourse. He quotes a player: 'The beast was really REALLY well-written. One time when I "quit", I told myself I'd stop playing it but just keep READING it. And it was good enough just to read' (Sebastian and Kinzie, 2006: 2355, original emphasis). Story players do more than read though. Thompson (2006: 47) describes players who 'are fascinated by the possibilities of interacting with and influencing the story and game play' as 'story hackers'.

An example of a producer tier that addresses these players specifically, and how a tier is subsequently created by the players, is best evidenced in a challenge for the ARG *Perplex City* (Mind Candy Design, 2005–2007). A character, Violet, needed access to a (fictional) library so that she could read a diary that contained vital clues. The library, however, only allowed entry to published authors. Violet called on the Earth investigators (the players), to write a book. A group of players answered that call and collaboratively wrote a book, *Tales from the Third Planet* (Terra Incognita, 2006), which was published by the in-game press, *Seaside Press*, was announced and reviewed in the in-game newspaper *Perplex City Sentinel*, and is available for sale in the 'real world'. This challenge did not appeal to all the players and, as I have illustrated, did not need to. A small subset of the players took up the challenge on behalf of the greater player community and in the process created a form of cultural production that can be experienced by other players and those outside of the gameplay.

Hard-Core Tiering: Real World Players

For players who are keen to participate in public, there are challenges that require players to go to real world locations to complete a challenge or interact with characters. Players for *I Love Bees* (2004), for instance, went to certain GPS co-ordinates on particular days and times to unlock important game information through answering a payphone and completing a challenge. This task facilitated a flurry of activity in the forums and websites to organize attending to the 1400 payphones and resulted in the production of large amount of material sharing among other things the experience of the event.

An example of the narratives players create to relate their experiences of direct character interaction is in a real world challenge created by the producers of *The Art of the Heist* (Campfire, GMD Studios and McKinney-Silver, 2005). The game characters invited players to an Audi dealership in Atlanta where it was the players task to distract the staff whilst retrieving a secure digital (SD) card from a showroom vehicle. For players who were not able to participate (the majority of players), a live stream with a webcam was set up, with a diegetic rationale. This is a form of technical tiering (like live coverage of a sporting event), but players who participated then created another tier by relaying the experience in the forums. Player 'Valkyros' (2005) employs the tropes of detective fiction in his retelling of meeting the character 'Nisha':

A quick scan of the interior revealed our Nisha, back to the wall in the corner. Amazingly dark hair framing a slightly heart shaped face. Her eyes were green, but covered with cosmetic contacts. I nodded, eyeballed the Waffle House again and moved to her table. 'Over Easy?' I intoned, trying to be suave . . . Nisha opened her book and started the brief.

It is narratives such as these that are the primary work for most audiences, and the effort the players put into these productions attests to their knowledge of the role they play in providing this.

All of these examples of producer-tiering facilitate collaboration between players because in order for the game to progress they have to share their respective experiences and findings. Beyond the explicit tiered address that ARG producers implement, there are ARG aesthetics that facilitate player-created production.

ARG Verisimilitude

ARGs are differentiated from most games by their realism aesthetic. The urge towards realism is not manifest in attempts to represent reality in the narrative (many ARGs are set in the future), instead the aesthetic is observed primarily in the modes of expression. Building on a creative heritage that includes epistolary fiction and *cinéma vérité*, ARGs facilitate verisimilitude by (among other devices) removing fiction-identifying frames and gameplay heuristics.

ARG Verisimilitude: Frame-less Content

McGonigal (2003a: 112) explains in relation to the design of websites for *The Beast*: '[a]esthetically, technologically and phenomenologically speaking, there was no difference at all between the look, function or accessibility of the in-game sites and non-game sites'. To achieve this realism, aesthetic texts created by PMs have no frames (Goffman, 1974) or no para-texts (Genette, 1997) that cue the fictional status of a work. Juxtapose this with the transmedial distribution of texts, in many art forms, fiction and non-fiction sources, across countries and time and you have an entertainment form with, from the player's perspective, no event horizon. Players, therefore, need to establish what is 'in-game' or 'out-of-game' (OOG).

Establishing what is in-game in an ARG– what is within what historian Johan Huizinga (1950) originally described as the 'magic-circle' (within the game space) – requires specific skills such as discourse-analysis; checking for in-game referrals; observing the number of links to and from other sites; whois lookups to discern the date the

website domain was registered and who the website was registered by; checking the depth in the site archives. This takes time, and so there are many sites that are not part of the game that are considered and analyzed for plot relevance. Discussion about, and lists of, sites deemed 'OOG' (out-of-game) are therefore essential for experiencing what the PMs intended, and for sanity.

The OOG listings are aggregated for all players to peruse and amend in forum threads and in 'trails'. Aggregation resources are those which collect the plethora of information produced in an ARG. Typically, they are represented in what has been termed 'The Trail'. The Trail was initially created by Cabel Sasser for *The Beast* but was developed by Daniel Hon (2001). Fellow *Cloudmakers* (*The Beast* players) Dan Fabulich and Andrea Phillips (2001) described The Trail as 'an encyclopedia, detailing every last bit of information we have learned in a comprehensive format'. Fundamentally, it is a listing of all the puzzles and sites in the game. They can be authored by a single person or collaboratively developed. The function of this player-activity is best described as minimizing noise. In the *Universal Principles of Design*, the authors (Lidwell et al., 2003: 182) describe the principle of 'signal-to-noise ratio' as maximizing *signal* ('clearly communicating information with minimal degradation') and minimizing *noise* ('removing unnecessary elements'). ARG players remove noise and subsequently enhance the 'signal' of the PMs through their fiction-identifying productions. What is also worth noting is the role ARG players play in providing fictional cues. PMs embed the fictional world shoulder to shoulder with real-life artifacts and remove cues to fictionality. With their extensive lists, ARG players put the cues back in to define the 'magic-circle', the realm of gameplay. Player-production is the frame.

ARG Verisimilitude: Gameplay Heuristics Removed

ARGs are considered by many to be accessible because no specialist devices such as joysticks or game controllers are needed. Instead, players need only use what they are highly likely to have already mastered: search engines, email programs, phones and postal services. In this regard, ARG players do not need to learn what ludologists Craig Lindley and Charlotte Sennersten (2006) describe as 'interaction mechanics' and 'interaction semantics'. The former being the 'basic motor operations required to operate (for example) a keyboard and mouse in a largely unconscious way', and the latter being the 'associative mappings' from the keyboard operations to in-game and meta-game actions (Lindley and Sennersten, 2006: 47). There are no associative mappings in ARGs as all functions operate the same in the game as they do in everyday life. However, players do need to learn what Lindley and Sennersten (2006: 47) describe as the third phase: 'game play competence', which is basically 'how to select and perform in-game actions . . . in a way that supports progress within a game'.

These competencies include solving puzzles and solving general challenges such as figuring out how to find and discern clues and learning the community nomenclature such as 'trout' and 'trailhead'. However, as ARG designer Elan Lee (McGonigal, 2003b) explains, ARGs are games with an identity crisis: 'IT doesn't know it's a game'. This realism aesthetic dictates then that ARGs 'cannot be annotated with game instructions or guidelines' (McGonigal, 2006: 353). Or, if they do include instructions, they are diegetic, as is the case with the 'walkthrough' (Mind Candy Design, n.d.c) for solving cryptograms, narrated by characters Von, Violet and Kurt in the puzzle-crazy world of *Perplex City*.

In most cases, heuristics are supplied by the players using methods employed by all types of games: they create orientations or tutorials. The first orientation service was created by players of *The Beast*, *Cloudmakers* Fabulich and Phillips (2001), with what they called 'The Journey': a resource 'designed to give you gentle clues with which to solve the game's puzzles'. Most ARG communities provide tutorials in the form of web pages such as ARG designer and player Brooke Thompson's (2004) '*I Love Bees* Quickstart Guide' but mostly informally in forums. All players are aware of this function of their textual production, and so are quite generous in their explanations and advice. As Jenkins (2006: 127) observes, ARG players 'develop an ethic based on sharing rather than hoarding knowledge'.

Because of the game's lack of awareness of its game existence, most PMs cannot provide tools for players to solve puzzles with either. Instead, it is an expression of the skill and resourcefulness of ARG players to create their own. Examples include unfiction's (n.d.) 'Online Tools' sidebar accessory for your browser with links to sites that assist with whois lookups, cryptography, morse code, payphone locations and so on. There are individual player-created tools too, like Kevin Sapough's – aka sapagoo (2004) 'Quickphone' sidebar accessory for determining the *I Love Bees* payphone co-ordinates.

The gameplay instructions and tools ARG players create situates them within what educator and game researcher James Paul Gee terms 'affinity groups'. For Gee (2003: 197), an affinity group is 'a group that is bonded primarily through shared endeavors, goals, and practices and not shared race, gender, nation, ethnicity, or culture'. Gee (2003: 193) elaborates: their knowledge is '*distributed* (spread across various members, their shared sociotechnical practices, and their tools and technologies), and *dispersed* (not all on site, but networked across different sites and institutions)'. The role of the leaders of affinity groups, Gee explains, 'is to *design* the groups, to continually *resource* them' (2003). This description correlates with the ARG player type of 'devotees' I cited earlier from Thompson (2006: 45).

Transmedia Fragmentation

Another trope of ARGs that is a device to facilitate verisimilitude (which is not, it should be noted, ARG-specific) is transmedia fragmentation.

Fragmentation: Transmedia Anachronies

Narratologist Gerard Genette (1980 [1972]) introduced the term anachrony to narratology to identify when there is a difference in temporal ordering of the story (fabula) order and the discourse (sjuzhet) order. In other words, the order of events in the storyworld can be different from the order they are delivered. Fans of storyworlds have long conducted what I term 'anachrony audits': reordering the discourse into the order events occurred within the storyworld. Edgar Governo's (2007 [1997]) listing of 385 (fictional) timelines attests to this fan production approach. I argue that such activities will only increase in the context of transmedia forms.

So too, ARG players create such storyworld management resources. Rick Bailey – aka Hair Thief – (2001a), for instance, created a plot summary 'The Plot' and a character summary 'The Characters' (2001b) for *The Beast*. Other examples include Geoff May –

The Bruce (2004) 'Plot Timeline' and Steve Peter's – aka vpistev (2004) assembling of the audio files released into storyworld order for *I Love Bees*, and Yanka's (n.d.) '*Perplex City Story Timeline*'. Such production assists the story players in their understanding of the storyworld and plot predictions, assists casual players by providing an overview of storyworld and all the characters involved and is an immersive practice: rendering the fictional world more real by applying real-world codes to it.

Fragmentation: Orphaned Kernals

Another condition that triggers the creation of content is the *extreme* transmedia fragmentation. ARGs have what I explain as a segmentation-coherence ratio here equivalent to paragraphs in a book. Each segment is not a TV episode, feature film or novel. Instead, they have a diminutive volume: an email, blog post or SMS. They are distinct from emerging micro-narratives though, because each component is not self-contained. There is an increase, therefore, of segmentation across media platforms *and* an expansion of the realm of coherence (high narrative dependency between each component). In this sense, each component is akin to what narratologist Seymour Chatman (1978: 53) terms 'kernals':

Kernels are narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events. They are nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths. . . . Kernels cannot be deleted without destroying the narrative logic.

Juxtapose this trait with the fact that many ARG components are not linked hyper- or intertextually (they are 'orphaned' in website design parlance): ARGs coincide with what narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) describes in respect of hypertext fictions: a 'complete graph' architecture. The bidirectional accessibility of the components in a complete graph architecture, Ryan (2001: 246) explains, 'makes it practically impossible to guarantee narrative coherence'. In other words, the cause-and-effect relationship between units is thwarted. Owing to increasing media coverage whilst an ARG is in play, people often join the playing or watching of an ARG long after its commencement. Rather than access all the components scattered across mediums in any order (an action impossible without some player mediation), people utilize player-created 'guides'.

On 19 April 2001, Adrian Hon (2001b) posted an announcement to the *Cloudmakers* listserv that 'The Guide' is online. Not long after, he (2001c) reflected on the reasons why he created the document: 'So that's how The Guide was born, both to help me understand exactly what was going on in the story and to make it possible for newcomers to the game to get up to speed quickly'. Fabulich and Phillips (2001) described the Guide as 'a walkthrough: step-by-step instructions detailing how to learn everything we know about the game'. Beyond a neutral walkthrough, a Guide is written as a first-person narration of a player's journey through the game. Here is an example of the narration Adrian Hon (2001d) supplies at the beginning of The Guide for the ARG *The Beast*:

So I set off by searching for 'Jeanine Salla' on Google. The first link on the list is for Bangalore World University . . . To find out more about Jeanine, I go to the A.I. Studies department page which gives a little background information about what they do. Nothing important. The page does however let you input the name of a faculty member to find their personal page, and typing in 'Salla' reveals her bio.

In this regard, it is evident how a Guide can provide narrative coherence: by providing a cause-and-effect path through the components. It is the act of narrating that renders this player-created content more than a mere 'walkthrough' or gameplay resource, it is a form of artistic production, a story in itself. Of particular importance too, is the fact that this narrative is experiential, an authentic sharing of a personal journey through the work. This last point will be elaborated in the next section on audience preferences for player-created tiers.

Audience Experience of a Tier

Why do the majority of people experience the player-created content instead of the PM-created content? The previous section outlined functions of the player-created content for the players, which also serves the same function for so-called 'lurking' audiences. There are other observations to be made however. Key to the notion of tiers is that they fulfill an audience need or preference. The needs and preferences that player-created content addresses are: the need for content that enables casual play; content that supplies a passive form of entertainment and content that provides 'personal experience narratives'.

Casual Play

The *International Game Developers Association Casual Game SIG Whitepaper* (Casual Games Special Interest Group, 2006: 9) defines casual gamers as '[g]amers who play games for enjoyment and relaxation rather than games with steep learning curves or requiring high levels of commitment or involvement'. Player-created tiers provide the resources needed to experience an ARG on a casual basis, with relatively little skill or time. An example of how they do this is seen with 'the guide' and also with 'recaps'. Short for recapitulation, recaps are devices employed in episodic forms such as television to inform new audiences of events that have occurred recently in the storyworld. In ARGs, they are called 'Story So Far'. The first 'Story So Far' gameplay resource was created by the PMs of *The Beast*. It was a webpage written by a character, Jeanine Salla, and was added to the game on or just before 12 June 2001. Interestingly, it was added after the player-created resources the 'Trail' and the 'Guide' were already in existence. The creator of the 'Guide', Adrian Hon (2001a), commented on the sudden presence of this PM resource:

Not only does it serve as a good introduction to the game for journalists who don't want to wade through the Guide (most do anyway, mind you) but it also helps us get events set straight in our minds – and that's a more difficult task than it sounds due to the avalanche of details we've been subjected to within the game.

As Hon has flagged, PM-created recaps are primarily there for non-players or those not conversant with community resources, but also provide feedback to the players. Current (at the time of writing) PM-created recaps include Mind Candy Design's (n.d.d) 'Story So Far' podcast and blog (n.d.a.) for *Perplex City*, Xenophile Media's (2006) *ReGenesis II ERG* podcast, Campfire, GMD Studios and McKinney-Silver's (2005) *Art of the Heist* blog 'Stolen A3', and 42 Entertainment's (2004) *'I Love Bees'* blog by the fictional character Dana Awbrey. This inclusion of recaps shows ARG designers are targeting casual players,

but why is it then that 'Story So Far' threads are still created by players and experienced by mass audiences? PM resources such as 'Story So Far' blogs and podcasts provide information about what is happening within the producer-created tier of the ARG. Player-created resources, on the other hand, include the producer- and player-created activities and content. It is in the combination of both that the 'work' is found, not just the producer-created tier.

Preference for Passive Entertainment

Jenkins (2006: 21) posits that an emerging issue of 'transmedia storytelling' is that it 'places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities'. Jenkins (2006: 130) continues:

They demand way too much effort for 'Joe Popcorn', for the harried mom or the working stiff who has just snuggled into the couch after a hard day at the office . . . More and more consumers are enjoying participating in online knowledge cultures and discovering what it is like to expand one's comprehension by tapping the combined expertise of these grassroots communities. Yet, sometimes, we simply want to watch.

Over 7000 *Cloudmakers* made the experience of *The Beast* possible for over 3 million people, and around 10,000 players answered payphones so that nearly two-and-a-half million people could casually track *I Love Bees*. It is because of the cultural production of grassroots communities that people are able to watch. In *Digital Storytelling*, writer and teacher Carolyn Handler Miller (2004) interviews *The Beast* writer Sean Stewart. Miller (2004: 288) asks Stewart what would happen if you 'took away the puzzles, or had players who simply didn't want to spend time solving them?' Miller paraphrases Stewart explaining that such players do exist and that they 'follow the events of the story and the puzzle-solving by reading the discussions on the *Cloudmakers* site. This way, they could enjoy the vicarious pleasure of seeing puzzles solved without having to do the work themselves'.

Preference for Personal Experience Narratives

*Whoa . . . omg, I seriously almost fell over when I read that. These people created that entire Under-score site . . . that's crazy. This does go SO much deeper than I first thought . . . there's so much on that site to explore! *get started*. (omnie in *Metaurchins*, 2006:10)*

An analysis of the rhetoric of Guides and player-production such as the forum posts reveals the employment of *orientation*, *complicating action*, *evaluative* and *coda* techniques, identifying them as 'personal experience narratives', or PENS (Labov and Waletzky, 1967). The narrative is specific to the player experience of the work. Experiential narratives in ARGs are one of the greatest lures to audiences. There are two factors to this attraction: polycentrism and eureka discourse.

PENS: Polycentrism

PENS provide different points of view of how a work is experienced. Unlike the producer-created content which really only provides the game-world perspective, PENS by many players provide a range of narrations from the point of view of players who engaged in

different content (and sometimes the same content). The desire to observe the various experiences of people shows that highly individualized experiences do not spell the death of the shared experience, but instead facilitates increased sharing due to the need to communicate the individual experience.

PENs: Eureka Discourse

EUREKA! I think I have stumbled onto something important. (subno6@. . ., 2001)

ARG player conversations narrate the aporia (the obstacles) and epiphanies (the solutions) they experienced in an ARG. Ludologist Espen Aarseth (1997: 91–2) explains these tropes in the context of ‘ergodic literature’ (which includes games):

Together, this pair of master tropes constitutes the dynamic of hypertext discourse: the dialectic between searching and finding typical of games in general. The aporia and epiphany pair is thus not a narrative structure but constitutes a more fundamental layer of human experience, from which narratives are spun.

The aporia and epiphanies experienced in games provoke narratives but also through reading the players’ posts and Guides, audiences are able to vicariously experience (derive pleasure from) the aporias and epiphanies of the players. I describe this type of writing as eureka discourse: the language of discovery. The dual nature of this discourse – as both reportage and emotion invocator – correlates with what new media literacy (‘elec-tracy’) theorist Gregory Ulmer (1994: 140) calls ‘chorographic writing’:

Chorography as a method of invention writes directly the hyperbolic intuition known as the eureka experience. It is first of all a means for simulating this experience, for transferring it from the living body to an apparatus, whether print or electronic, for ‘writing’ or artificially performing intuition ‘outside’ the organic mind and body and entrusting this process to a machine (both technological and methodological).

Irrespective of whether it is through a conscious construction in a player-created guide or an artifact of conversation in a forum, eureka discourse facilitates this experience for ARG ‘readers’.

Conclusion

[W]e should re-examine the empty space left by the author’s disappearance; we should attentively observe, along its gaps and fault lines, its new demarcations, and the reapportionment of this void; we should await the fluid functions released by this disappearance. (Michel Foucault, 1977: 121)

Alternate reality games are full of gaps and fault lines. Designers remove cues to fictionality, gameplay heuristics and, in new media literary theorist Jill Walker’s (2004) terms, disrupt dramatic unities by having a temporal (distributed over time), spatial (‘there is no single place where the whole narrative can be experienced’) and authorial (‘no single author or group has complete control of the narrative’) distribution. The production of players can be seen then to balance or fill these fragmentations and removals. Whether this process of removal and restoration indicates the conditions needed for a coherent

and complete work of art is unclear. What is clear, however, is the conditions necessary for the casual experience of a work, which characterizes a desire of the majority of ARG audiences. Designers could improve the 'accessibility' of ARGs but to do so would remove important triggers to hard-core player production and enjoyment.

Audiences are watching, and learning from, players who use their collective intelligence to solve complex puzzles and save characters, have unparalleled new-media literacies, are managing transmedia forms, are actively participating in the construction of the text and at times thwarting (for example, solving puzzles too quickly or when they discover websites before they should) or saving producer-created content by 'suturing the illusion' as McGonigal (2006) describes it.

The appeal of player-created tiers also points to the phenomenon of hypercomplexity. Internet theorist Lars Qvortrup (2003: 34) posits that the fundamental issue society is faced with now is the 'challenge of complexity'. There are, Qvortrup observes (2003: 34), 'more points of connection in the world than we are able to connect to as a society'. This complexity cannot be removed or reversed, and so society is responding with 'hypercomplexity'. Qvortrup (2003: 35) elaborates, citing Niklas Luhmann: 'We term *hypercomplex* a system that is orientated to its own complexity and seeks to grasp it as complexity'. The tier that ARG players create is a polycentric art form that poetically facilitates society observing itself.

That polycentric art form, a player-created epiwork, is an amalgamation of conventional fiction, aggregation resources, orientations and gameplay tools, anachrony audits, recaps and personal experience narratives among other artifacts. The preferred form of entertainment for massive audiences then, is not the conventional cultural production of primary producers, it is perhaps the art of participatory creation.

Media theorist Rob Cover (2004: 174) argues that participation is a 'strongly held and culturally based desire' that has 'effectively been denied by previous technology'. He elaborates (2004: 188):

[I]nteractivity in electronic gaming does not institute the possibility of democratic contention through participation in the text. Rather, it evidences the possibility of democracy as a cultural demand, drive or desire that appears through unexpected, multifarious and diverse sites in different ways, at different times.

The preference for player constructions, indeed epiworks created in response to primary producer content, is observable in many parts of society and shows that some audiences are moving away from participation with the producer's content – especially when that content requires a high level of participation. Participation comes at a cost, but when primary producers become initiators rather than sole creators of content, the effects are long reaching and manifest in unexpected, multifarious and diverse ways that seem wholly beneficial to producers, players and audiences. The tiered character of ARGs – both producer and player created – is a compelling model for participation and choice in entertainment and beyond.

Notes

- 1 It is noted that the method producers employ to calculate audiences of ARGs is unclear and inconsistent. Nevertheless, the ball-park figures and ratios of audience levels are representative.

- 2 An elaboration of 'tiering' and a taxonomy of ARG gameplay resources is online at <http://www.christydena.com/research/Convergence2008/TieringandARGs.html> (accessed September 2007).
- 3 'Hard-core' is employed here comparatively in the context of ARG players and audiences. In this article, therefore, hard-core refers to the actual ARG players and not sub-sets of ARG players.
- 4 As stated by Jones (2007), the ARG was relabeled ERG (extended reality game) to reassure the producers that the interactive addition would 'extend' the storyworld rather than conflict with it by creating what they believed to be an 'alternative' storyworld.

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