

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

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Abstract: In this paper, I will explore the theoretical educational use of alternate reality games (ARGs), a genre that relies less on computer interfaces and focuses more on “real world” spaces. Specifically, I will explore the use of ARGs as a course structure for student production of texts in the First Year Composition classroom. I will focus on two specific writing programs in which I have taught—a four-year university (UW-Milwaukee) and a two-year technical college (Gateway Technical College)—and use constructivist learning principles for ARGs set forth by Whitton and Hollins (2008), composition theory, and transmedia theory.

Introduction

A great amount of research is available on the use of several types of video games for educational purposes, but, unfortunately, far less is available on the potential and impact of Alternate Reality Games (ARGs). ARGs use “real” world features and artifacts, such as streets, buildings, public spaces, or pay phones, and publicly available media, such as billboards, posters, or media made available through mobile networked technology. ARGs tend to use multimedia clues to direct players on a narrative-driven puzzle-solving experience that takes place in the players’ “real” world. A standard definition of the genre is still elusive, at least partially due to the numerous combinations of complexities and variations offered by the relatively simple structure of the ARG and the multi-modality of its narrative/gameplay environment: interactive web-based technologies, DIY publishing, remix and the co-option of popular narratives and artifacts.

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

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

A few translations that might help the reader see a more concrete connection to this paper—bringing an ARG into a multimodal composition classroom. First would be to think less of the “drama” (or, the fictionalized impetus for entering the game; the reason to play). I encourage the reader to focus on the “interactive” pursuit of a community of student “players” to analyze and interpret texts collaboratively—the act of interpretation being akin to “solv[ing] a mystery or problem,” though one with an open solution. Further linking the composition classroom to this definition is the language of the assignment sequence —language that positions interpretation as an act that may seem incapable of being achieved alone, without the reflection and multiplicity of perspectives that the composition classroom provides.

The question I will try to address here is: how can an ARG serve as a pedagogical tool in the composition classroom? Furthermore, while ARGs have been used as texts for academic study in media studies classrooms, my aim is to apply the knowledge from the above approaches to illustrate how an ARG might serve as a structure for motivating and producing student writing within the goals of two specific first-year writing programs in which I have taught: Gateway Technical College (GTC) and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM).

Why ARGs

Nicola Whitton and Paul Hollins position the collaborative environment of game worlds for constructivist education models (2008). Citing P. C. Honebein, constructivist collaborative learning environments should:

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

In my discussion of ARGs in the context of the GTC and UWM programs, I will adopt these principles, as these philosophies are at the heart of these programs, asking students to collaborate and value their learning in and out of the classroom.

One approach to understanding the educational promise of ARGs is to look at a related study of transmedia narratives, as students are already employing collective intelligence communities to interact with “texts” and form individual and collective meaning through collaborative production outside of the classroom. In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins discusses the educational potential for collective intelligence communities in terms of fan cultures. Jenkins sees the reading of transmedia narratives by collaborative intelligence communities as one way in which individuals and groups can interpret and construct meaning (Jenkins, 2008, pp. 3-4).

In “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies,” The New London Group (2000) makes a similar argument for the relevance—and need—for multi-modal pedagogies in the composition classroom. Their claim is tied to the changing nature of networked technology-facilitated communications that can span cultures and subcultures, nations and socio-economic categories, as well as to the collaborative structuring of the corporation in an era of fast capitalism. The critical engagement with this type of narrative within the FYC classroom can encourage our students to develop a more critical new media literacy: reading/writing/resisting multimodal rhetorics and representations.

To return to what is more immediately related to FYC practices, specifically the act of interpretative writing, troubling definitive authority—whether in texts or in pedagogical roles—is not new to composition theory. In “Reading” from Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux's *The Theory Toolbox* (2003), the authors approach interpretation through the lens of the death of the author. They discuss active interpretation as a reversal of “a passive consumption model (the reader consuming the author's meaning)” and a resultant “freeing up of multiple points of view—as many good readings as there are readers” (p. 21). They are quick to point out the danger in a simple reversal, however: “If we're not careful, the absolute control of the author can give way very quickly to the absolute control of the reader, who then usurps the author's role in the *game of meaning*” (p. 22, emphasis added). To achieve some middle-ground between these, the authors situate interpretation as “a process of negotiation among contexts,” mediated by language, which is, in turn “a social system of meaning” (p. 23- 25). The ARG is, by definition, reliant on community participation (or, “a social system”), which makes it particularly suited to a composition classroom concerned with creating a space for multiple interpretations.

When conceptualizing an ARG in terms of an assignment sequence, I turn to David Bartholomae's “Writing Assignments: Where Writing Begins” (1982). Bartholomae engages with ideas on how to create a space for students to enter into a discourse in the composition classroom. In asking how a student might “invent the university when he sits down to write,” Bartholomae finds relevance in allowing students to form or even approximate discourse communities for the basis of discovering knowledge through repetitive and slowly expanding writing practices. The benefit of using ARGs as a platform for ludic pedagogy is that they do not require the mastery of CG-mediated virtual spaces.

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

References

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