An Alternate Reality for Education?
Lessons to be Learned from Online Immersive Games

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a participatory study of the Perplex City alternate reality game, this paper considers the data obtained through participation and a detailed survey of the most engaged players, in order to determine the most engaging features and suggest methods for their transfer to educational contexts. Originally presented at a conference in 2008, this paper returns to the source data in more detail, incorporating reflection on other work in this area in the intervening years, and considers four areas in detail: engagement/motivation, narrative/story, problem solving/learning skills, and community/peer support. The survey data is presented and considered in full, from which seven key features are proposed which could be applied to educational contexts to achieve higher levels of engagement amongst learners.

Keywords: Alternate Reality Game, Education, Engagement, Games Based Learning, Immersive Games, Online Games

INTRODUCTION

The world of games in education is trying too hard. The focus in recent years has been on high-end simulations, digital-real worlds or training environments: the so-called serious games. But games, by their nature, are rarely serious; and some of the most persistent games outside of education - in the playground, on the handheld console, or around the table at night - are often the simplest, with the focus on gameplay rather than graphic and interactive realism. A small but growing number of teachers and researchers are starting to look at cheaper, simpler ways to use games in secondary and higher education (explored in depth in Whitten & Moseley, 2012); and both here and in other contexts (particularly commercial circles) the use of game elements to augment or add ‘fun’ to otherwise mundane or difficult tasks is enjoying a meteoric rise in the form of gamification: which at its worst is so simple it bears no resemblance to a game at all (Robertson, 2010), yet at its most potent can enjoy no little success in making some tasks more engaging or fun (such as Chore Wars, as described by McGonigal, 2011, pp. 120-124).

Education is therefore at a prime point in its relationship with games: if we, as practitioners and researchers, can find and apply approaches...
which can be cheap and easy to produce, and yet increase engagement with – or the effectiveness of – learning, we would be likely to find a sizeable captive audience.

One genre of game which fits rather neatly into the ‘in-between’ space between high realism/simulation and simple cheap games is the Alternate Reality Game (ARG). It is a genre which has already been the focus of a few studies (McGonigal, 2008, 2011; Moseley, Whitton, Culver, & Piatt, 2009; Whitton, Jones, Whitton, & Wilson, 2008) and has been found to contain a number of elements of interest to education. This paper will both underpin, and extend, these findings: by returning in detail to a study the author made in 2008 of players in the Perplex City commercial ARG, it looks at four key areas which I believe link ARGs to education (engagement/motivation, narrative/story, problem solving/learning skills, community/peer support), and provides new insights into the motivations and activities of players in immersive online games.

Preliminary data from the study described here was delivered in a paper presented at the Association for Learning Technology conference in Leeds (Moseley, 2008), in which seven key features from the genre were proposed as useful to education. These features have been cited and applied by subsequent researchers and practitioners, and this paper reaffirms the key features identified, but adds detail and a richer backdrop thanks to a fuller treatment of the data collected during the original study. The longer analysis and reflection has also allowed these key features to be tested in practice, and this paper links them to other, more recent, research where appropriate.

Happily, the study and results discussed herein are possibly even more relevant now, in the light of education’s need for simple, effective games, than the initial results were in 2008.

**ALTERNATE REALITY GAMES**

In 2006, when I began my study into ARGs, they were a relatively new phenomenon. Used, up to that point, for the promotion of films or video games (beginning with *The Beast* to promote the film *A.I.* in 2001, and including *I Love Bees* promoting the computer game *Halo 2* in 2004); the first major non-promotional use, as a stand-alone commercial product, was *Perplex City* (2005-2007) which became the basis of my study.

Somewhat defying a short neat definition let us turn to two of the genre’s community sites to explain what an ARG involves:

“Alternate Reality Gaming (also known as... immersive fiction) is an interactive fusion of creative writing, puzzle-solving, and team-building, with a dose of role playing thrown in. It utilizes several forms of media in order to pass clues to the players, who solve puzzles in order to win pieces of the story being played out” (Unfiction, 2011).

“Instead of requiring the player to enter a fictional game world, ARG designers attempt to enmesh the game within the fabric of the player’s real world by harnessing as many media technologies and interfaces as possible. By doing so, ARGs expand the frame for the game beyond the computer monitor or television screen, effectively making the entire world the ‘game board’” (ARGology, http://www.ARGology.org).

The lead writer on the *I Love Bees* ARG, Sean Stewart, suggested that ARGs have four defining characteristics: an ongoing storyline delivered in disparate pieces; the use of different media types for delivery of the game content; an element of collaboration or co-operation; and audience participation in the game environment (allowing them to shape or change it as the game progresses) (McGonigal, 2008, pp. 203-204). McGonigal (2011, p. 125) came up with the following definition after consulting a number of current ARG designers: “ARGs are games you play to get more out of your real life, as opposed to games you play to escape it. ARG developers want us to participate as fully
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