

Royal Holloway, University of London  
PhD Media Arts

# Players and Puppetmasters

Producer/Consumer  
Relationships in Hollywood's  
Promotional Alternate  
Reality Games

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## **Declaration of Authorship**

I, Stephanie Janes hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, this thesis would not have been possible without generous scholarships provided by Department of Media Arts, Royal Holloway, University of London for which I am extremely grateful. I would also like to express my thanks to my supervisor Professor Barry Langford for his support, guidance and advice over the past four years on anything from conference papers to article drafts and teaching advice as well as advice on the thesis. The support I received from the Department as a whole was invaluable and greatly appreciated.

The project could not have been completed without the assistance of interviewees and survey respondents who took the time to talk to me about their experiences of ARGs. I would therefore like to express my immense gratitude to Adrian Hon, John Christiano and especially Sean Stewart, who took a genuine interest in the project and provided me with supportive and informative feedback throughout.

I am also grateful to all members of the ARG communities on Unfiction forums, Cloudmakers Yahoo! Group and Superherohype. They have all been extremely generous with their time and provided fascinating responses to survey questions and forum discussions. The Unfiction community in particular was very open to participating in my research, for which I am very thankful.

Finally to everyone who listened to me talk incessantly about ARGs for four years, everyone who proofread chapters, sat through rehearsals of conference papers, celebrated the highs and comforted me during the lows. This is by far the hardest project I have ever attempted and I could not have done it without the support of friends, family and loved ones.

## Abstract

ARGs exist in many formats, including standalone, grassroots, fan-produced and monetised ARGs. However, the genre's history is as rooted in advertising as narrative storytelling. This thesis focuses on promotional ARGs, the first of which is widely regarded to be *The Beast*, part of a wider marketing campaign for Steven Spielberg's *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001). Since then films including *The Dark Knight* (2008 Christopher Nolan), *Cloverfield* (2008 Matt Reeves) and *Super 8* (2011 JJ Abrams) have launched promotional ARGs.

One remarkable feature of these immersive games is the relationship which develops between player communities and game designers (known as Puppetmasters). The games play out in real-time and designers often respond to player activities as the games progress. As a result, players may affect the storyline, character behaviour or even the final narrative resolution. This close relationship challenges received notions of power relationships between fans and media producers.

This thesis uses textual analysis of three case studies to establish the role ARGs play in promotional campaigns for Hollywood films. It then takes interviews with game designers, audience surveys and close analysis of player forum discussion to examine the manner in which the games are used by players in comparison to the intentions of media companies and PM teams. This reveals more about the nature of the producer/consumer relationship which develops and the implications of that relationship on contemporary theories of fandom, including the 'mainstreaming' of fannish consumption practices or 'fanification', the potential for consumer empowerment in the contemporary media environment and understandings of fan communities' relationship with consumer capitalism. The thesis finally questions how we might rework or reconceptualise those theories in light of the example of promotional ARGs to better understand the diverse experiences available to media audiences today.

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## Introduction and Overview

In their simplest form, Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) are immersive, interactive narratives told across multiple platforms. Game designer Andrea Phillips provides a more thorough definition:

‘[...] cohesive narrative[s]... revealed through a series of websites, emails, phone calls, IM, live and in-person events. Players often earn new information to further the plot by cracking puzzles... the players of these games typically organise themselves into communities to share information and speculate on what it all means and where it’s all going’ (Phillips 2005).

The games exist in many formats, including standalone ARGs, grassroots or fan-produced ARGs and monetised ARGs. However, the genre’s history is as rooted in advertising as it is in narrative storytelling, and it is promotional ARGs which this thesis takes as its main focus.

The first ARG is widely regarded to be *The Beast*, which formed part of the wider marketing campaign for Steven Spielberg’s *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001). Since then films such as *The Dark Knight* (2008 Christopher Nolan), *Tron: Legacy* (2010 Joseph Kosinski), *Cloverfield* (2008 Matt Reeves) and *Super 8* (2011 JJ Abrams) have launched similar promotional ARGs. One of the many remarkable features of these immersive games is the relationship which develops between player communities and game designers (known to players as Puppetmasters or PMs). The games play out in real-time and PMs must often respond to player actions or inactions as the games progress. As a result, players may affect the storyline, character behaviour and even the final resolution of the narrative. This close, reciprocal relationship is not only atypical of the relationship between film marketers and their audiences, but challenges received notions of power relationships between fans and media producers. This thesis seeks to examine the role these games play in promotional campaigns for Hollywood films and the manner in which they are used by players in comparison to the intentions of producers (where producer can mean the PM team contracted to create and deliver the game or the larger media conglomerate responsible for hiring that team). This reveals more about the nature of the producer/consumer relationship which develops and allows us to consider the implications of that relationship for contemporary theories of fandom.



Given that promotional ARGs straddle the commercial and creative spheres, the review of literature looks at both areas. It is important to understand ARGs within the context of broader marketing theory, including the marketing mix and relationship marketing. The games also share certain commonalities with other contemporary online marketing strategies including viral marketing, brand communities and affective economics. All these issues are therefore considered before moving into the more specific work available on film marketing and branding. Within this area two distinctly different approaches emerge. Business and marketing studies research frequently takes a more quantitative and evaluative approach, seeking to understand how and why various film marketing strategies are effective, with success often being related to box office performance. Film studies, on the other hand, is often more concerned with the relationship between marketing materials, films aesthetics, film narrative and meaning creation from a textual standpoint, or the impact of such materials on a film's reception. This disparity is reflected in later chapters when investigating the dual functions of an ARG as marketing and immersive storytelling.

The thesis asks questions around both the production of promotional ARGs and their reception by players and fan communities. The review of literature therefore also considers previous work on the changing perceptions of fandom and fan communities. This includes definitions of 'cult' fandoms, since many ARG player practices could be described as 'cultish' as well as 'fannish'. The meaning of these terms must therefore be clarified and further interrogated. Similarly, the player/PM dynamic has implications for established theories on power relationships between media producers and consumers, focusing specifically on what Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) describe as a 'resistant/incorporated' dichotomy which has been problematized by other fan studies scholars (see Hills 2002). Closer attention is also paid to work surrounding fandom's relationship with consumerism, which players of ARGs must similarly navigate. This relationship changed dramatically when fandoms started to move online, becoming more visible to media producers than ever before. Since ARG player communities reside primarily online, this chapter also looks to specific studies of online fandoms and the impact of that newfound visibility and potential broadening of fandom memberships.

Finally, the review considers the small but growing body of literature which tackles ARGs specifically. Here, further dichotomies appear as it becomes clear that many studies focus on non-promotional ARGs or their textual, social and political implications. Few studies consider the games or the PM/player relationship in a

promotional or marketing context and their other functions are often prioritised. This thesis attempts to address that gap, while taking a more empirical approach when questioning precisely how the relationship between players and PMs functions.

Chapter 2 begins this analysis by using three case studies to demonstrate what a promotional ARG is, what it looks like and how it works. The selected case studies span 2001 – 2010, from the very first promotional ARG for a film (*The Beast*), to one of the largest and most commercially successful promotional ARGs (*WhySoSerious*), to a more recent example associated with producer/director JJ Abrams (*Super 8*). Abrams had, by this point, built up a reputation for using ARGs in his marketing campaigns, including those for *Lost* (2004 – 2010 ABC) and *Cloverfield*. The chapter outlines the context of the genre's emergence in the early 2000s and its development over the following decade. Each case study includes a summary of the game's narrative and structure, necessarily compressed due to the sprawling nature of the games. An analysis then follows of the structure, the nature of the 'alternate reality' in each case and the modes of interactivity involved. It also describes the communities involved and some of the hierarchies which are most readily apparent. The player/PM relationship is also considered and issues of agency outlined for further expansion. Finally the chapter concerns itself with the games' function within the marketing campaigns for each film. It discusses the relationship of the ARG to the wider campaign and to the film itself as an exercise in narrative expansion and world building, but also in relation to the marketing theories summarised in the literature review. Several questions arise around the reception of changes to game design and to the player/PM dynamic. This points to a lack of knowledge about player expectations of promotional ARGs and the potential disparity between their actual use of the games and the intentions of game designers. It also prompts questions around both PM and player attitudes towards an increasingly prominent sense of branding and sponsorship in promotional games.

Chapter 3 begins this work by looking at the games from a PM perspective, using personal, trade and mainstream press interviews to better understand the motivations behind using an ARG as part of a film marketing campaign. Due to data availability, this comes predominately from a PM perspective, discussing their relationship with corporate clients in building, delivering and evaluating such a project. This chapter considers the claims made for the effectiveness of ARGs, particularly the notion that such immersive marketing tactics capture the attention of a hard to reach, media-literate audience which desires a more active level of participation with media texts. This leads to debates around the kinds of agency available to players and the

implications of being 'active' within a text for notions of control and ownership for media companies and game designers alike. Finally, the chapter introduces the notion of an 'affected audience' - one which develops a strong affective relationship with both the text and the PM team via the immersive, participatory game mechanics. The PM/player relationship is perceived to be based on mutual trust and respect but as producers identify more strongly with their players, they distance themselves from their corporate clients, often defining themselves across what Hills calls 'overlapping and interlocking versions of "us" and "them"' (2002: 3). They perceive themselves as artists, storytellers and creatives, with priorities which do not always match those of their corporate clients. The marketing divisions of such large media conglomerates are believed to be more concerned with quantitative evaluations of the games, lacking sufficient knowledge and understanding of the genre and its audiences. They fail to see the creative value of the games in their own right and have less interest in the ethical issues which might occur when inviting audiences to expend their time, energy and emotions on such an intense, immersive piece of marketing. There is a clear continuation of a perceived binary between art and commerce identified in the literature review. This emotional connection also links back to issues around 'fanification' (Nikunen 2007), affective economics and consumer empowerment. Fanification suggests more media consumers are being encouraged to participate in 'fannish' modes of consumption, which often involve an affective relationship with the text. Affective economics attempts to convert those feelings into brand loyalty but this suggests an element of manipulation which negates arguments for consumer empowerment via participatory media consumption. Data from the producer side of this relationship can only ever provide one perspective on these situations, so Chapter 3 considers them from the audience's point of view.

Using a threefold methodology of participant observation, an online player survey and qualitative analysis of player forum discussion, Chapter 3 asks how audience perceptions of these same issues correlate with those of producers.<sup>1</sup> After a discussion of the methodologies involved, it considers players' motivations, expectations and evaluative criteria for promotional ARGs in comparison with those laid out by producers. It then looks specifically at attitudes expressed by players with regards to ARGs in a promotional context. What initially appears to be fairly relaxed attitude is revealed as more complex, as players display a variety of strategies for negotiating the

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that all quotations from survey responses and forum discussions have only been corrected for spelling and/or grammatical errors where this obscures the meaning or sense of the quotation. Otherwise they appear as found.

more commercial elements of the games, many of which are also utilised by PMs. Their perception of PMs in comparison to their corporate clients is also very similar, with players identifying closely with PMs and often defining them against larger media conglomerates. Players express a strong awareness of their position within the commercial media industry but also demonstrate a desire for a sense of autonomy in that position. Being active within the text in a meaningful way is crucial to this and the chapter goes on to explore how players understood what it meant to ‘participate’ in a promotional ARG, including, but not limited to, narrative agency and control. The sense of ownership was also linked to the affective attachment to the games. This attachment is enabled not only by perceived narrative agency, but by other game mechanisms, including: the trusting relationship between players and PMs, relationships with the player community and a personal feeling that the games were spaces in which they could explore their identities and experience a sense of empowerment. This challenges the effectiveness of both fanification and affective economics established in the previous chapter, but also points to a mode of empowerment which relies not on power or control over the text or the construction of meaning, but on personal and subjective experiences of media texts.

The conclusion of this thesis returns to these recurring themes and theories to engage in deeper, more detailed analysis of their application in the case of promotional ARG producers and consumers. The effectiveness of any attempts at the ‘fanification’ of a wider audience is questioned, given the relatively high barrier to entry of an ARG and the complicated relationship between the hardcore player community and the ‘general public’. The re-drawing of such boundaries also calls into question the distinction between ‘fans’ and ‘cult fans’, definitions of which could be reconsidered in an era when media consumption practices have become more varied. The binaries constructed between ‘art’ and ‘commerce’, encapsulated and almost magnified in promotional ARGs, are also reconsidered. These binaries appear to be persistent for both producers and consumers, despite ever increasing calls for ‘creative’ marketing practices which would appear to blur the distinctions between creative content and commercial intent. In such spaces, theories of consumer empowerment through participation must also be reconsidered. While an ARG can never claim to offer such textual or political empowerment, player testimonies point to an alternative mode of affective empowerment which is more personal, emotional and subjective. An insistence on content control and meaning creation as the primary mode of media consumer empowerment means alternatives are overlooked, despite their importance to many

media consumers. Such affective investments are made possible in part by the trust relationship developed between media producers and consumers. This section of the conclusion suggests an alternative model for this relationship in which players, PMs and media conglomerates play different roles. The close relationship between PMs and players has the potential for great affective impact, but changes in promotional ARGs over time have meant this relationship has become increasingly distant. As this continues, the games drift closer towards being labelled 'just virals' and lose the potential to create meaningful dialogue between producers and consumers. Without this closeness, players may also feel less comfortable making the investments in the games which lead to feelings of affective empowerment. The final section of the conclusion considers the future trajectory of promotional ARGs, having outlined their effective decline over the past 10 years. Suggestions are made for further research in this area, including considerations of the history of the genre, questions relating to gender and generational perceptions of ARGs in their commercial context.

## Chapter 1 - Literature Review

The questions addressed in this thesis can be broadly split into two categories. The first considers Hollywood's production of promotional ARGs. This concerns the motivations behind using ARGs to promote a film, their role in wider film marketing strategies and how producers expect consumers to respond to them. This involves consideration of previous scholarly work on film marketing which exists across many disciplines including: film studies, cultural studies, business and marketing studies, consumer research and economics. However, the bulk of research has occurred within film studies and business/marketing studies. Each takes a different approach to the subject, leaving several questions unanswered. ARGs have also developed alongside other online marketing strategies. As a result they share similarities with viral marketing, brand communities and affective economics. It is important to understand these strategies and the contexts in which they have developed, before addressing ARGs specifically.

The second set of questions interrogates the reception of ARGs. These question whether players use and value ARGs as producers intended and investigates the effect this has on their relationship with PMs. ARGs require the formation of online communities to collectively piece together a narrative, but the appearance of an apparently 'grassroots' community around a piece of marketing for a mainstream film may problematise current understandings of media fandom. This section of the literature review therefore discusses the shifting definitions of fandom, significant arguments around the changing relationship between fans and media producers and recent developments concerning online fandom and fan communities. The final section outlines a definition and brief history of ARGs, highlighting the dominant issues in the small but growing body of relevant literature.

Before considering the different approaches taken by film and business studies, an overview of the broad shifts in marketing theory since the 1950s is necessary to contextualise recent developments in marketing practice. While this is not an in-depth history of marketing theory, it is important to outline the background against which ARGs have developed as promotional materials.

## **From Marketing Mix to Relationship Marketing**

Kerrigan (2010) offers a thorough summary of marketing theory relevant to the film industry, beginning with marketing as exchange (Bagozzi 1975). The AMA definition of marketing circa 1985 was ‘the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational goals’ (cited in Grönroos 1994: 347).

Customers only enter into an exchange transaction if they feel they are receiving value for money/time etc. Accompanying exchange theory was the dominance of Borden’s (1964) ‘marketing mix’ and McCarthy’s (1960) four Ps (products, pricing, place and promotion). Grönroos argues this paradigm does not fulfil the requirements of the marketing function (‘the process of taking care of the fulfilment of customer needs and desires’) because it is product oriented, rather than market or customer oriented (1997: 323). Dixon and Blois suggest that ‘far from being concerned with a customer’s interests (i.e. for whom something is done) the views implicit in the four Ps approach is that the customer is somebody to whom something is done!’ (1983: 4). The model is too restrictive and must be adapted for each marketing situation. Subsequently, different areas of marketing have suggested additions to the Ps, including people, process and physical evidence. Kerrigan offers her own version of the marketing mix for film marketing, including the role of the star, script, genre, age classification and release strategy (2010: 82-98).

Furthermore, Grönroos argues, managing the marketing mix can result in the alienation of the marketer from consumers. Marketers tend to base their work on market research reports and market share statistics, often assuming an increase in share value is equivalent to an increase in customer satisfaction. This approach is too clinical, ascribing a passive role to the buyer and failing to consider the possibility of a personalised relationship between marketer and consumer. It does not fit the realities of, for example, service marketing, where the quality of the product is often based on the perceived quality of personal interactions e.g. hospitality, travel or healthcare industries (Grönroos 1997: 353).

It was in these industries that the concept of relationship marketing (RM) began to emerge. Rather than focussing on short term, singular transactions, RM works to establish long term, loyal customer relationships. Trust is essential to these relationships and literature often concentrates on strategies for gaining and keeping it (Cowles 1997). Alongside this shift towards RM, Kerrigan highlights a movement away from ideas of

value in exchange towards ideas of value in use, 'a notion that value can only be created and acknowledged by the consumer in the act of consumption' (2010: 5). Vargo and Lusch (2006) suggest the consumer is therefore a 'co-creator' of value, ascribing a more active role to the consumer within the marketing process.

Although RM was almost universally taken up as the new marketing mix, it was criticised for failing to practice what it preached. Gummesson argues many practitioners pay lip service to the theory of RM without taking on board the accompanying ethical approach i.e. trust, honesty and a win-win relationship for both parties (1997: 268-269). He suggests RM is often seen as a 'promotional package' to be offered to consumers, rather than a genuine attempt to forge strong, fair relationships with them.

RM seems problematic for film marketers since filmmakers lack a direct relationship with audiences. However, Kerrigan suggests the notion of 'the customer is king' can be reworked for film. Trust can still be developed between consumers and actors, directors, distributors or critics (2010: 112). Audience satisfaction is not achieved by 'giving them what they want', but by making a good quality film, then identifying and engaging appropriately with a target audience (2010: 6). This approach emphasises market segmentation, but also the need to properly understand the needs and expectations of those segments.

### **Contemporary Marketing Strategies**

The desire to understand and fulfil consumers' needs is still at the heart of contemporary marketing strategies. However, consumers are now so saturated with advertising that they may 'switch off'. The internet has also dramatically closed the gap between producers and consumers. Consumers (individuals or groups) are more visible and vocal online: blogging, reviewing and thoroughly researching products before making purchasing decisions. They are not simply receiving marketing messages; they are creating, manipulating or even rejecting them on a global stage. This is not to suggest consumers were ever passively accepting such messages, but their decision-making processes are now more visible to both producers and fellow consumers. This has prompted a shift in the producer/consumer relationship and the development of a variety of online marketing strategies including viral marketing, brand communities, e-tribes and affective economics.



## **Viral Marketing**

‘Viral’ has become a buzzword in contemporary media vocabulary, covering anything from a YouTube video to complex viral campaigns. However, defining the term can be difficult. It is often used alongside or as a substitute for ‘word-of-mouth’, ‘buzz marketing’ and ‘social network marketing’. Some definitions specifically attach it to web-based campaigns: ‘An internet-driven strategy that enables and encourages people to pass along a marketing message and engage in word of mouth’ (Iris 2007: 297). Others are more general: ‘Any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message’s exposure and influence’ (Chad and Watier 2001).

The term was not significantly used before the 1990s, so is at least chronologically associated with growth of the internet as a public and commercial communications network. ‘Viral’ also implies the marketing message spreads faster than traditional word-of-mouth, like a computer virus. Viral marketing therefore includes (but is not limited to) online marketing, but not all online marketing can be termed viral.

The key to viral marketing is getting consumers to pass on the message to everyone they know. Social networking and the informality of email has made it incredibly easy to recommend a website, funny video or clever advert to friends or friends-of-friends. The emphasis is on understanding consumer-consumer relationships well enough to predict referral behaviour. There is also an element of getting the audience to do the marketing work themselves, since they are relied upon to spread positive word-of-mouth. This way the message spreads faster and appears more ‘organic’, resulting in a softer sell which appeals to audiences used to being bombarded by more traditional advertising.

Word-of-mouth has always been deemed a powerful way of spreading the marketing message. The mere volume of online ‘chatter’ (regardless of quality) has been linked to box office revenue (Liu 2006) and viral strategies could be seen as attempts to prompt or control that chatter. Unfortunately online word-of-mouth is notoriously difficult to control and there is evidence that industries still fear the influence of negative word-of-mouth, particularly from demographics such as teenagers (Neuborne 2001). As a result, viral marketing is something of a balancing act. The ‘viral’ element requires a degree of agency and autonomy on the part of the consumer, yet this agency allows them to alter or even reject the marketing message and encourage

others to follow suit. Marketers are thus caught between the desire to encourage agency and the need to limit it.

On the other hand, viral marketing can engage with and gain the trust of difficult and influential audience groups. Burston-Marsteller's (2008) research dubbed this group 'e-fluentials', defining them as consumers 'who have exponential influence shaping and driving public opinion through the Internet and throughout the offline world'. Whether e-fluentials exist in the same way today is debatable, particularly since the internet has come to play a central role in the everyday consumption practices of many consumers. However, the drive to identify and positively influence the influencers within consumer groups remains central to many online marketing strategies.

## **Brand Community**

Muniz and O'Guinn coined the term 'brand community' in 2001, defining it as:

'a specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand...at its centre is a branded good or service... it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Each of these qualities is, however, situated within a commercial and mass mediated ethos, and has its own particular expression' (2001: 412).

Muniz and O'Guinn view brand communities as embracing rather than rejecting the ideology of commercial culture. They see brand meanings as socially negotiated, 'rather than delivered unaltered and in toto from context to context, consumer to consumer' (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001: 414). They also stress that brand communities are not naïve consumers but are conscious of the commercial context of their communities and act with self-awareness and self-reflexivity. Instead of being lost to the alienation and atomisation of postmodernity, the community is alive and well, existing comfortably within consumer culture.

McAlexander et al. (2002) expand these ideas, suggesting that, as an extension of relationship marketing, customer experience is at the centre of brand community. Both studies exemplify the ways in which brand communities contribute to increased personal investment in brands, repurchase rates and improved brand reputation. McAlexander et al. note the lengths to which Jeep marketers go to maintain good

relationships with consumers, ranging from barbeques to weekend-long ‘brandfests’ (2002: 42). Muniz and O’Guinn suggest brand communities also work towards integrating new members and maintaining loyalty. Communities emphasise their members’ legitimacy but also perpetuate ‘oppositional brand loyalty’, creating negative feeling towards rival brands. One website devoted to Macintosh users featured ‘an altered picture of Bill Gates (of Microsoft) that includes devil-style horns and is entitled “Save us from the Gates of Hell” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001: 420). There is also a sense of moral responsibility within a community, particularly regarding retaining members. Social relationships within brand communities can result in defections to rival brands feeling personal. One informant referred to a Mac user switching to Microsoft as “morally reprehensible... He’s kind of a Mac turncoat” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001: 425).

Both studies also acknowledge the problems posed by brand communities. They may reject or oppose brand messages in an influential way, damaging the overall perception of the brand. Intense hierarchies and desires to maintain a status of exclusivity may also be problematic for a brand wishing to expand, causing a tension between the needs of the producer and the desires of the consumer.

### **E-Tribes**

Kozinets’ (1999) work focuses on online brand communities, labelling them ‘virtual communities of consumption’ or ‘e-tribes’. He suggests online communities are distinct from those offline as they are more active and discerning, less accessible to one-on-one processes and provide a wealth of valuable cultural information. He argues database-driven relationship marketing is not sufficient when forging relationships with such communities, because it assumes a passive relationship between the brand and the consumer. Community members’ consumption knowledge is developed within a structure of social relations, so marketers need to understand the group’s cultural norms, language and power structures (Kozinets 1999).

Kozinets breaks these communities into member types:

**Tourists** – no strong social ties to the group and only a passing interest in the consumption activity

**Minglers** – strong social ties but only mildly interested in the consumption activity

**Devotees** – weak social ties but strong interests in consumption activity

**Insiders** – strong social ties and strong personal interest in the consumption activity (1999: 254-255)

Kozinets argues devotees and insiders are more important in terms of targets for marketing. Communities provide ‘forums whereby the influence of influencers may potentially be exponentially increased’ (1999: 259), echoing Burston-Marsteller’s (2008) work on ‘eInfluentials’. He also suggests various ways of understanding and engaging these communities, including differentiating between kinds of community interactions, forms of customer loyalty and hierarchies or divisions within the community (Kozinets 1999: 263). Finally, he highlights the potential power of consumer communities to negotiate product meaning and make demands on marketers that individual consumers cannot (1999: 427).

### **Affective Economics**

Jenkins similarly emphasises the notion of the empowered consumer. He uses the term ‘affective economics’, to describe what he sees as a ‘new configuration of marketing theory’ emerging within the media industry (Jenkins 2006a: 61). Affective economics ‘seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions’ (Jenkins 2006a: 62). Once they understand those emotional attachments, marketers can attempt to shape them, getting people emotionally involved with brands or products. They are seeking brand investment on a deeper level than short term transactions and often invite consumers to participate in a certain level of interaction with the brand to establish this investment. Buzzwords include ‘emotional capital’ and ‘lovemarks’ as opposed to brands (Jenkins 2006a: 69-70).

Jenkins positions affective economics as the theory behind the creation of brand

communities, emphasising that communities are being ‘built’ by marketers as well as forming organically around consumer interests. However, this does not mean marketers are effortlessly manipulating consumer emotions to their advantage. He suggests affective economics places consumers in a position to form ‘collective bargaining structures’ (Jenkins 2006a: 63). When entering into such emotionally invested relationships with consumers, media producers must be prepared to negotiate with consumers whose emotional trust they have courted. Sony’s concession to PlayStation Network customers is an example of the price producers might have to pay having broken that trust.<sup>2</sup> Jenkins therefore maintains the vision of a consumer at least partially empowered by this new relationship.

All these conceptions of marketing acknowledge an active and inquisitive, rather than passive consumer. They are media-savvy, critical of hard sells and respond to brands both emotionally and socially. They appear to have the power to make or break a brand. Marketers’ concern with this new online, empowered consumer is reflected in the wealth of literature aimed at explaining how to reach them, particularly in reference to the web 2.0 generation (Ryan 2009, Qualman 2009, Parkin 2010, Weinberg 2009, Power 2010).

However, even Jenkins’ relatively balanced view of consumer power could be considered optimistic. The collective consumer might have more influence over media producers than the individual, but it could be countered that contemporary marketing strategies simply induce feelings of involvement and participation without offering any real control over the brand. Furthermore, this feeling might be enough for consumers - audiences may not desire the level of control over media products so often ascribed to them. Viewers might even be aware of the level of emotional manipulation at hand, but be willing to negotiate in return for a pleasurable viewing experience. The complexities of this power relationship require further investigation.

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<sup>2</sup> In April 2011, a security breach in the PlayStation Network allowed 77 million PSN users’ account details to be accessed by an anonymous hacker. Sony faced a fall in shares of 2.3% and a law suit. Sony offered free digital games content and PlayStation Plus subscriptions as compensation (BBC News 2011). A Facebook poll of just over 1000 users found that 58% of those surveyed did not find the compensation acceptable (Westaway 2011).

## **Film Marketing**

Academic accounts of Hollywood's marketing practices are often descriptive or historical. Wasko's *How Hollywood Works* (2003) summarises contemporary industry practice and *The Big Picture* (Epstein 2006) and *Open Wide* (Hayes and Bing 2006) give insights from the perspective of industry insiders. Staiger (1990) also sketches the economic development of film advertising from the 1900s onwards. Post 1950s advertising, she suggests, is characterised by the widespread use of statistical marketing analysis and the shift in perspective from mass audiences to segmentation. Other accounts describe the industry's relationship with market research (Handel 1953, Ohmer 2006). Kerrigan and Staiger both note that early research into cinema-goers was relatively limited and unstructured, often more concerned with the impact of cinema on society (Staiger 1990: 15, Kerrigan 2010: 42-43). However, Hollywood has now embedded such research into its development and production processes (see Marich 2005). Specific case studies include Thompson's (2007) account of the marketing of *The Lord of The Rings Trilogy* (2001-2003 Peter Jackson) which interrogates how New Line managed fan audiences through their marketing strategies.

When considering film marketing and its role in film consumption, film studies maintains a primarily textual focus, whereas business and marketing studies are more concerned with the financial and economic functions of marketing materials. Both areas seek to further understand the impact of marketing materials on consumers and should therefore be seen as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive.

Business studies research generally investigates how marketing materials affect either a viewer's decision to watch a film, or the film's financial success. Many studies are concerned with the effect of marketing campaigns on box office takings or stock prices on the Hollywood Stock Exchange (Zufryden 1996, Zufryden 2000, Elberse and Anand 2007). There is also research on the effect of word-of-mouth and consumer/critic reviews on box office performance and pre-release evaluation (Chintagunta et al. 2010). They reflect Kerrigan's (2010) assertion that film consumption, and therefore value creation, extends before and after viewing. However, they usually focus on how pre and post-viewing activities translate into financial gain, rather than how they create value for the consumer in a broader sense.

It could be argued that box-office figures cannot fully represent the impact of a marketing campaign on consumers. Such approaches can appear inflexible, looking for formulae to explain consumer behaviour or relating box office takings to the volume of

online reviews. Others are more accepting of the difficulties in determining regularities in consumer behaviour (De Vany 2004). Some studies highlight film's status as an experiential product, requiring a specific marketing approach (Cooper-Martin 1991, Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Yet despite these acknowledgements, business and marketing studies still seem keen to find elements of predictability within a notoriously unpredictable industry.

Work on branding in film also highlights the difficulty in reconciling film-as-art with film-as-product. Branding is often discussed in the context of product placement or intellectual property (IP) rights (Karrh et al. 2003, Hackley et al. 2008). However, the popularity of franchises, transmedia properties and concepts of synergy means branding is now crucial to film marketing practice. Grainge (2007) argues films are no longer made as discrete entities, but form part of a wider entertainment experience, encapsulated in the term 'total entertainment'. Conglomerates therefore aim to create an experiential or 'inhabitable' narrative universe (Grainge 2007: 55-59).

As Grainge puts it, 'branding cannot be defined neatly in 'cultural' or 'economic' terms; it consists inescapably of both elements' (2007: 23). He suggests 'total entertainment' has two meanings. The first is an industrial principle, 'an attempt by media conglomerates to create an expansive entertainment and communication environment in which they have a disproportionate, near total, stake in terms of ownership and control'. The second is 'a particular form or horizon of cultural and textual practice, growing out of the permeable boundaries and newly 'immersive' modalities of commercial entertainment media' (Grainge 2007: 54). Grainge's account is rare in that he conflates the commercial and the textual relatively comfortably, understanding branding in Hollywood as being governed by an industrial-aesthetic logic. The perceived gap between these commercial and textual elements could be seen as the focal point of differences between film studies and business studies approaches to film marketing. In privileging its textual function, film studies tends to focus on relationships between promotional materials and meaning creation, film aesthetics and narrative.

### **Marketing Materials and Meaning Creation**

Klinger suggests some promotional forms 'encourage diverse positions of viewing', seeking to 'structure reception beyond textual boundaries'. However, she argues that

when the viewer makes an intertextual association between moments in the film and 'promotional epiphenomena', this forms a moment of 'digression' (Klinger 1989: 4-5).

Barker (2004) finds the word 'digression' inappropriate, proposing that marketing materials 'guide and help construct the manner we attend to and indeed often concentrate on the films' rather than moving our attention away from them. He suggests promotional materials propose reasons and strategies for viewing films, which the viewer takes with them into the cinema, affecting their experience and interpretation of the film. They also allow the viewer to reflect on their reading of the film post-viewing, which could subsequently change the overall experience.

Gray (2010) discusses what he calls 'media paratexts' in a similar way. He suggests marketing materials have the potential to change the meaning of texts, describing them as 'filters through which we must pass on our way to the film or program, our first and formative encounters with the text' (Gray 2010: 3). He demonstrates how these materials proliferate, becoming almost unavoidable, and thus how any discussion of a text should take into account its paratexts. However, he situates paratexts in a primarily textual role, arguing this perspective is key to understanding their aesthetic, economic and cultural roles.

Gray's work does not deal extensively with the production contexts or cultures of paratexts, but does suggest they 'police proper interpretations', indicating how producers and marketers want audiences to view their texts (2010: 79). Telotte (2001) similarly argues that the website for *The Blair Witch Project* (1999 Sanchez and Myrick) creates a viewing context shaped by filmmakers and/or distributors, controlling the kind of pleasures the audience might derive from it.

Gray also points to a tension between those who view paratexts as creative entities and those who see them as 'just' advertising. He argues paratexts can productively confuse this binary, revealing this division is not so hard and fast (Gray 2010: 209). If paratexts can be seen to work as part of 'total entertainment', they exist, as Grainge suggested, within both industrial and cultural contexts. However, Gray seems to struggle with this dual location. He discusses branding as 'the process of making a product into a text' but as a result of this focus on their textuality, he privileges paratexts which add meaning to the storyworld or narrative over those which he deems 'merely' marketing (Gray 2010: 209-210). In attempting to break the binary, he seems to create a hierarchy, which could be equally problematic.



Paratexts may work on levels other than meaning creation but the focus on their textual properties means other avenues are often left unexplored. Few studies ask how audiences make use of these meanings or whether all audiences use them in the same way. Schreier's (2004) analysis of *The Blair Witch Project* works towards answering this question, but her study investigates how the campaign affected reception of the film, rather than of the campaign itself.

### **Marketing Materials and Film Aesthetics**

Wyatt (1994) considers marketing strategies in the decades directly before the emergence of the internet, posing a connection between economics and film aesthetics. He argues that by recognising the impact of industrial and economic forces, we can see the emergence of a particular style of filmmaking in the 1970s and 1980s which he labels high concept. High concept can be viewed as a form of product differentiation, characterised by 'an emphasis on style within the films and... an integration with marketing and merchandising' (Wyatt 1994: 7). High concept films are identified by straightforward, easily summarised plots, notable stars, a strong match between image and soundtrack, and pre-sold property. They also display a 'reliance on bold images' which 'reinforces the extraction of images for marketing and merchandising' (Wyatt 1994: 17). Thus high concept films are produced with a strikingly visual aesthetic in mind, which Wyatt links to the design of contemporary goods advertising (1994: 23). Examples include *Jaws* (1975 Steven Spielberg), *Flashdance* (1983 Adrian Lyne) and *Top Gun* (1986 Tony Scott).

The conglomeration of many of the major studios, along with rising production costs, meant studios were less willing to take financial risks. As it became clear that high concept was a successful model it was used repeatedly, resulting in fewer releases and similar films. Finally, Wyatt argues 'the modularity' of the film's units and one dimensional characters distance the viewer from the traditional task of reading the film's narrative. Instead, the viewer becomes 'sewn in to the surface of the film', contemplating the style and production values (Wyatt 1994: 60).

Linking film marketing to aesthetics is useful in that it positions marketing as a key part of the viewing experience, but Wyatt has been criticised for basing this theory around a small selection of films. Bordwell (2006) suggests that although Wyatt pinpoints a trend in 1980s cinema, his argument that style was displacing classical

narrative does not hold up when applied to the majority of Hollywood's output during that time. Moreover, contemporary film marketing techniques have moved away from high concept, anticipating a more active and engaged viewer.

However, connections have been made between newer marketing strategies and film aesthetics. Telotte (2001) discusses the relationship between *The Blair Witch Project* website and the film's aesthetics. Early promotional websites functioned as simplistic 'electronic press kits', offering information on cast, promotional stills, interviews etc. Blairwitch.com marked a radical departure from this norm. The website situated the film as a piece of found footage, discovered after the disappearance of three film students in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland. It offered information on the missing students, positioning the viewer as investigator and directing them back to the film as the final piece of the puzzle.

Telotte draws on Murray's (1997) work which discusses the immersive nature of 'computer-based narratives', a term covering computer games, navigation of the web and 'hypertexts'.<sup>3</sup> Murray highlights three elements of such narratives (immersion, agency and transformation), which Telotte identifies in both blairwitch.com and the film's aesthetics. He suggests both media immerse viewers in a world which is like ours but eerily different. Agency drives the website to an extent as it positions the viewer as investigator, but this is frustrated in the film when the viewer is unable to see beyond the frame. These pleasures and frustrations of agency 'dissolve into transformation' via the extended subjective shot which Telotte links to the experience of multiplayer gaming. As we cut from one student's camera to another we are able to shift our sympathies between the three characters (Telotte 2001).

This close match between marketing and film aesthetics is far from common, but can be considered more broadly. Both Schatz (1993) and Austin (2002) refer to 'open' or 'dispersible texts'. They suggest developments in economic organisation and procedures within the industry (synergy, tight diversification, horizontal integration) have favoured texts which are strategically open to multiple readings. They are 'not unstructured, or infinitely open to interpretation, but [their] multiple address to a coalition of audience fractions is readily amplified through advertising, publicity and merchandising' (Austin 2002: 29). This is not to say all films in a particular era were structured accordingly, but that the economic structure of the industry at the time favoured those which were. Grainge (2007) similarly suggests the contemporary gestalt

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<sup>3</sup> Hypertexts are online fictions which use hyperlinks to allow readers to construct a non-linear narrative path.

of ‘total entertainment’ is what drives corporations to favour films with multi-dimensional, potentially transmedia universes. This is reflected in Warner Bros.’ investments in animation, comic book adaptations and science fiction. Grainge argues the industrial and aesthetic impulses are parallel, but not necessarily complicit (2007: 59). This avoids the problematic suggestion that one might be a direct product of the other and may be a better reflection of industry practice.

### **Marketing Materials and Film Aesthetics**

Telotte’s (2001) analysis of blairwitch.com also investigates the relationship between promotional websites and film narrative. He suggests the two texts work together to immerse the viewer in an alternative reality, extending the plot and offering an opportunity for participation in the world of the film. Booth (2008) argues, (referring to donniedarko.com), that the combination of the two media constitutes a position from which viewers may create their own narrative meanings, paving the way for more intellectually demanding audiences. Beyond the individual film website, Jenkins (2006a) discusses the ‘transmedia narrative’, where the narrative of one film is disseminated across several media platforms. It expands the world of the film but may also fragment the narrative, which, Jenkins argues, allows the consumer to make their own connections between fragments and read the narrative in their own way (2006a: 121).

Yet these arguments acknowledge limitations to this agency. Booth (2008) suggests websites subsume their inherently interactive nature to comply with the linear narrativity offered by film. Such interactivity is also structured by producers, whose economic imperatives may require them to limit audience agency due to IP restrictions. Scholars tend to privilege the creative drive behind transmedia properties, emphasising the efforts to create new kinds of storytelling. However, the tension between ideas of consumer agency and producer control is not discussed in depth. Studies rarely question how consumers feel about these limitations, whether they are testing them, or how producers are responding.

Additionally, if narratives are becoming dispersed, could paratexts displace film texts as the centre of narrative meaning? Owczarski argues that technologies from DVD to the internet have changed the role of the film text to the extent that ‘classical narrative definitions no longer apply’; it has become ‘one aspect of an entertainment

and advertising chain' (2007: 4). Gray suggests in some cases the paratext may 'trump' the film text, as viewers derive narrative pleasures primarily from the paratext (2010: 176). However, he does not conclude that new narrative forms might render old ones obsolete.

Owczarski's argument is one of many claims around the death of narrative cinema (see Lewis 2001). However, these are often criticised as reactionary and unrealistic. Bordwell points to Hollywood films which, despite narrative innovations, continue to use classical narrative strategies and techniques. He argues that, despite seeming complex, '*Eternal Sunshine [of the Spotless Mind (2004 Michel Gondry)] ... is the story of boy meeting girl, boy losing girl, and boy getting girl' (Bordwell 2006: 73). One might argue instead that technologies and paratexts have challenged classical film narratives, promoting the development of alternative narrative styles or creating optional access points for more complex narratives which still hold to classical conventions.*

Marketing materials may also work with narratives less directly. Beck argues some websites and films together may be considered 'non-narrative assemblages that... still retain the emotionality and catharsis usually associated with narrative' (2004: 55). Consequently, these sites allow users to 'dwell, protract and luxuriate in the diegetic space that the film has constructed' and 'prolong and emotionally deepen' their experience of the film texts (Beck 2004: 56-7). In this case linearity is irrelevant but the site and film may retain the emotional or affective impact of linear narratives.

Beck's assertion that promotional websites 'address the site's users as if they really belong to the diegetic universe' (2004: 56-7) resonates with the idea of 'world building', which is arguably more complex than narrative extension. Many ARGs create narratives which have little connection to the films they are promoting. For example, the ARG for *Cloverfield* suggests a conspiracy theory around fictional oil company Tagruato, yet this is never referred to explicitly in the film. Such publicity materials might provide alternative functions which, although related to the film's narrative, could not be described as simple narrative extension.

Indeed, ARGs do not just build a world or extend a narrative, they also appear to build or at least encourage the formation of a dedicated audience for that world. The active construction of what looks like an organically formed fan community for a commercial film text problematises the ways in which academia has previously understood fandom and its relationship to the commercial media industry. The next section looks at the evolution of those theories and the problems ARGs might pose.

## **Fandom**

The evolution of the term 'fan' within Western, consumerist society shifts from a self-consciously subcultural application, as seen in the 1970s 'Midnight Movie' film exhibition context, to its more casual modern-day application, epitomised by Facebook's 'Become a Fan' function. The word 'fan' was applied to sports and theatre before being adopted by sci-fi fandom, the origin of which goes back to the 1920s and 30s and the letters pages of Hugo Bernsback's magazine *Amazing Stories* (1926).

However, little has been written about early cinema or classical Hollywood fans in terms of their interactions with producers. Notable exceptions include Studlar's (1996) discussion of the mode of address of 1920s fan magazines and their construction of star personas. Similarly, accounts of Hollywood's relationship with cinema fans tend to focus on the star system and the industry's construction and perpetuation of star personae in both mainstream media and targeted fan press (see Dyer 1979). If studios were attempting to communicate with, shape the opinions of or recruit fans through other channels, it has not been significantly investigated. The study of cult movie fandom is more extensive (Mathijs and Mendik 2008, Jancovich ed. 2003, Telotte ed. 1991). This can be traced back to the explosion of the post-war youth market, the emergence of 1960s camp and counterculture and the increasing popularity of genres such as sci-fi and horror, as well as low budget, independent and experimental film, all developing in the wake of the collapse of the studio system..

Fan studies emerged as a discipline in the 1980s/early 1990s, asserting that modern media fandom developed from science fiction fandom in the 1950s/60s with the arrival of TV shows such as *Star Trek* (1966-69 NBC) and *The Man From U.N.C.L.E* (1964-68 NBC). *Star Trek* initially gained the most attention. The story of its revival through passionate letter writing campaigns from fans has made it something of an ur-text for fan studies, but its importance in critical works may not reflect its position within fan communities. Other central texts include *Star Wars* (1977 George Lucas), *Doctor Who* (1963-2014 BBC) and *Stargate SG-1* (1997-2002 Showtime; 2002-2007 Syfy) or more recently *The X-Files* (1993-2002 Fox), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2001 WB; 2001-2003 UPN), *Lord of the Rings* and *Lost*. This section of the literature review covers fan studies debates surrounding the definitions of terms such as 'fan', 'consumer' and 'cult fan'. It also considers a central argument referred to as the resistant/incorporated dichotomy and recent issues regarding online fandom.

## Defining and Defending Fandom

Jenkins traces the term 'fan' to its Latin root 'fanaticus' which was associated with excessive religious beliefs, 'mistaken enthusiasm' and madness (1992: 12). Prior to the emergence of fan studies, academic and popular discourses depicted the fan as irrational, pathological and socially dysfunctional. Jenson's (1992) study identifies two major fan stereotypes: the 'obsessed individual' and the 'hysterical crowd'. Examples include John Lennon's assassin, "*The Who Concert Stampede*" in 1979 and organised crowd violence amongst sports fans (1992: 9). A case could even be made for the existence of an 'Obsessive Fan' narrative archetype, including *Play Misty for Me* (1971 Clint Eastwood), *Misery* (1990 Rob Reiner), and *King of Comedy* (1982 Martin Scorsese).

According to Jenson (1992), the fan was portrayed as an unconscious 'response' to the star system, ascribing an element of passivity. Fans were said to enter into fantasy relationships with their idols, wishing to become, possess or replace them. Academic discourse tended to assert that fans displayed exaggerated and dangerous versions of impassioned behaviours present in everyone (Caughey 1978). External forces - the media, rock music, or a celebrity-obsessed society - were often blamed for this behaviour. Fans were also accused of being unable to distinguish fantasy from reality; a stereotype which lingers. Recent media reports claimed some *Avatar* (2009 James Cameron) fans were unable to accept the fictional status of the planet Pandora (Blake 2010). Early fan studies scholarship tended to rail against this image. Gray et al (2007) refer to this as the 'First Wave' of fan studies. These scholars were engaged in reclaiming the status of fans as active, creative, potentially political and often oppositional.

Jenson (1992) suggests fan stereotypes tell us more about our views on modern society than about fans themselves e.g. the loner stereotype reflects fears of the alienated individual in modernity. 'Excessive' fandom is often described in terms of compensation for a psychological lack; a loss of identity or community engendered by modernity itself (Schickel 1985). Meanwhile, the frenzied crowd stereotype reflects fears about the manipulation of vulnerable masses.

Scholars also suggested fandoms could be personally and politically empowering. Grossberg (1992) argues for a model of fandom based on an 'affective sensibility'. He suggests the fan's relation to their chosen text 'operates in the domain of affect or mood' (Grossberg 1992: 56). Affect is not the equivalent of emotion or desire,

but the ‘feeling of life...Affect is what gives “colour”, “tone” or “texture” to our experiences’ (Grossberg 1992: 57). This feeling places objects, practices and meanings on our ‘mattering maps’ (1992: 57). The elevated status of the text on the fan’s ‘mattering map’ allows them to use it as a locus for their own identity. Grossberg views this as a form of empowerment via popular culture, describing fandom as the potential site of ‘optimism, invigoration and passion’ (1992: 65). This can translate into popular struggle and political resistance, which are otherwise ‘likely to be drowned in the sea of historical pessimism’ (Grossberg 1992: 65).

Jenkins (1992) similarly sought to empower fans, conceptualising them as ‘textual poachers’ interpreting and reworking texts to create their own, sometimes oppositional, meanings via fan fiction, videos, and other subcultural productions. He resisted psychologising fans, preferring to explore them as social entities, creators of cultural meaning and productive manipulators of mass media (Jenkins 1992: 12). Jenkins also emphasised the status of fandom as an ‘alternative social community’ (1992: 2), rallying against the image of the fan as social misfit and maintaining a link between fandom and folk culture. Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women* (1992) and Penley’s (1990, 1997) discussions of female *Star Trek* fans, also highlighted the social and creative aspects of fan culture.

Such studies emphasised active, resistant communities. They also discussed the role of women in the production of slash fiction.<sup>4</sup> Studies on slash fiction often focused on sexual politics, some viewing it as a heterosexual appropriation of queerness (Cicioni 1998). The role of fandoms in the exploration of politics of gender, sexuality and identity thus dominated discussion. Less attention was paid to frictions and hierarchies within fan communities, perceiving them as more united than perhaps they were.

These works took a defensive stance when considering fandoms and some were later criticised for displaying ‘moral dualisms’ (Hills 2002: 30). Hills argues that in avoiding psychologising fans, Jenkins psychologises non-fans by suggesting they project their anxieties about the breakdown of cultural hierarchies upon the figure of the fan. Placing fans at the opposite end of the binary means they are defined through the same structures of difference and opposition that ridicule them. Jenkins sets out to discuss fandom on its own terms, but his early work could be considered reactionary, existing as a response to what he saw as the demonization of fans.

According to Hills (2002), fans use a similar system of binaries to define

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<sup>4</sup> A genre of fan writing which posits a romantic or sexual relationship between same-sex characters in the fan text.

themselves against two ‘imagined others’: academics and consumers. Fans see consumers as overly passive, whilst consumers accuse fans of being too emotionally involved with media products. Academics attempt to rationalise the emotional attachment of fans while fans see academics as too readily denying their own emotional investments. For Hills, this perpetuates the ‘imagined subjectivities’ of fans, academics and consumers, all of whom define themselves by what they are not, leaving them unable to admit their similarities (2002: 27). The prevalent stereotype of fans as ‘mindless consumers’ may explain why one of these imagined subjectivities is the consumer.

### **Fans and Consumers**

Despite their anti-consumerist ideologies, Hills argues fans are ‘always already consumers’ (2002: 3). This presents an irresolvable contradiction: to separate consumers from fans is pointless because they are different iterations of the same thing. Furthermore, he suggests when producers target fans as a niche market it can be disempowering for fans because they are separated from the wider audience which may financially support the production of the fan text. Hills therefore argues for fans to be considered as part of a greater ‘coalition audience’ (2002: 37). Jancovich asserts:

‘cult movie audiences are less an internally coherent ‘taste culture’ than a series of frequently opposed and contradictory reading strategies that are defined through a sense of their difference to an equally incoherent imagined ‘normality’, a loose conglomeration of corporate power, lower middle class conformity and prudishness, academic elitism and political conspiracy ’ (2008: 157).

This othering process creates a sense of cultural superiority, making it difficult to consider fans as part of or reliant on ‘mainstream media’ or the ‘average consumer’. Whiteman (2009) builds upon this in her discussions of online media fandoms, suggesting fans use exclusion strategies against other media consumers and texts to define themselves as fans of the TV show *Angel* (1999-2004 WB) and videogame *Silent Hill* (1999 Konami).

Some studies also seek to differentiate consumers and fans. Abercrombie and Longhurst place both along the following continuum:



Consumer--Fan--Cultist--Enthusiast--Petty Producer (1998: 141)

The fluidity of this continuum is emphasised. As the petty producer moves towards professional production in their fandom, they move closer to the domain of consumer capitalism. Yet, this emphasis on changeability clashes with a desire to categorise different types of fan.

Fans are as much a part of consumer society as any other audience, despite efforts to define themselves against it. It could be argued they are a kind of specialist consumer with specific needs or even, as Jenkins' (2006a) later work suggests, an empowered consumer, but to remove them from the sphere of consumerism would inaccurately resolve a contradiction which Hills rightly notes fans must 'live out' (2002: 35). While the 'imagined other' of the consumer may separate fans from 'average consumers', there also seems to be a desire to distinguish between different types of fans, with some being apparently more committed than others.

### **Fans and Cult Fans**

Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) mark a clear distinction between 'followers' and 'fans', locating this difference in self-identification. Fans are 'active participants within fandom as a social, cultural and interpretative institution' and followers are 'audience members who generally watch and enjoy [science fiction programmes] but who claim no larger social identity on the basis of this consumption' (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995: 23). Having separated them, they then suggest 'the boundary between the two groups remains fluid and ultimately somewhat arbitrary' (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995: 23).

To draw a boundary and then determine it 'arbitrary' seems rather conflicted. Yet it appears that even if more than 50% of Americans regard themselves as *Star Trek* fans, this is not evidence enough to suggest they deserve the title, particularly if a section of this audience can be considered 'casual' fans. Despite the fluidity between the two groups, Tulloch and Jenkins feel the need to draw a line somewhere. Similarly, Brooker and Brooker suggest 'Tarantino's admirers might not all be fans... and not all fans will be cult fans' (1997: 294).

Hills (2002) doubts the relevance of separating 'cult fan' from 'fan', using the terms interchangeably. For Hills, the definition of a 'cult fan' rests on the 'cult' status of the fan text and the term is applicable 'when the object of devotion has been specifically and repeatedly described as cult within the fan group and/or related niche media' (2002:

x). Mathijs and Mendik (2008) outline a variety of aesthetic/generic features that could define a text as 'cult', including innovations, badness, transgression, genre, intertextuality, loose ends, nostalgia and gore. Hills suggests cult texts can never be firmly defined, but can be understood in terms of 'family resemblances' (2002: 131) – shared characteristics which allow us to claim certain texts invite a cultish devotion. Jancovich (2008) also highlights the tendency of cult films to be defined by inaccessibility and rarity, giving such fandoms an air of exclusivity. Fan cultural capital is thus gained by being able to find, for example, a rare director's cut, or banned versions of a text.

It could be argued that accessibility is no longer an accurate measure of cult fandom, since the internet has made almost everything accessible (if not always legally so). Additionally, the information economy of the internet means this element of cult fandom can be transferred to more 'mainstream' texts. Fans of Hollywood blockbusters may spend vast amounts of time searching for information about their production in the same way a *Star Trek* fan might mine for details on favoured characters or actors. In this sense every text may perceivably generate a cult following, so instead of attempting to provide aesthetic definitions of 'cult' texts, it might be more useful to interrogate the nature of fan relationships with the text.

Indeed, Hills notes cult texts are equally 'found' (having certain textual qualities) and 'created' by the audience (2002: 131). The definition of cult, therefore, does not lie solely in the text itself. Jerslev argues:

'rather than indicating a certain genre, [cult] may be conveniently attached to a certain mode of reception... a cult film is only brought into existence in so far as one talks of a certain interaction between a text and an audience' (2008: 90).

Although Jerslev suggests this relationship is brought about by specific historical and textual circumstances, her emphasis is on the relationship between text and audience, rather than anything inherent in the film itself.

Austin defines cult by audience behaviour (repeat attenders) and exhibition pattern (screened at irregular hours on a regular and continuing basis) (2008: 394). A film may have a cult following, but would not qualify as a cult film unless it followed the specified exhibition pattern. Yet this definition rests heavily on an exhibition pattern which is now rare, if not extinct. One might find the occasional midnight screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975 Jim Sharman) but rather than being a regular viewing destination, these showings are more nostalgic invocations of the culture of the

‘midnight circuit’. In contrast, Austin’s emphasis on audience interaction and involvement persists in most accounts of cult cinema. It is the relationship constructed between text and viewer that connects these descriptions.

Despite arguing for the interchangeability of the terms, Hills attempts to clarify what ‘cult’ fandoms might look like, offering three ‘dimensions’:

1. Tautological – the use of the word ‘cult’ by fans to describe themselves and their fan activity.
2. Temporal – longevity of the fandom.
3. Affective – cult as an intensely felt experience (Hills 2002: xi).

Some fandoms may fit one or two of these dimensions and they may even contradict each other. Hills seeks a more flexible system of categorisation (but categorisation nonetheless), privileging the temporal element. A fandom is cult if it persists over time, ‘especially in the absence of ‘new’ or official material in the originating medium’. It is not related to the ‘intensity, social organisation or semiotic/material productivity’ of the fandom (Hills 2002: x). For instance he argues *Star Trek* did not become a cult fandom until the show’s popularity persisted after cancellations, and ‘a mythology of fan activism had grown up alongside its commercial reboot as a transmedia franchise’ (Hills 2002: xi). By contrast, at his time of writing, fans of *The X-Files* could not be described as a cult fandom, because it was still being produced (Hills 2002: xi).

Hills’ insistence that fandoms rely on duration for their cult status seems difficult to maintain when many shows attain longevity via DVD and TV re-runs. *Sex and the City* (1998-2004 HBO) and *Friends* (1994 – 2004 NBC) continue to sell box sets and are broadcast in re-runs, but neither would be called a cult series. Additionally, media hype can quickly create cultish reception contexts prior to a film’s release e.g. *The Blair Witch Project*, *Cloverfield*. Although these cult receptions were short-lived, it should be acknowledged that their activities resemble those of a cult fandom. These examples might be considered a new category of fandom. They may not fulfil Hills’ temporal requirements, but would certainly fit the tautological and affective definitions. The word ‘fan’ seems inadequate to describe the audience’s investment in these media properties, but ‘cult’ seems too strong.

What remains constant for many contemporary fandoms of any duration is precisely their ‘intensity, social organisation or semiotic/material productivity’ (Hills 2002: x). To deny some form of cult status to such texts would deny the passionate audience attachment to them. We may need to reconsider the space this audience

occupies and whether current categorisations of ‘fans’ and ‘cult fans’ are still relevant for contemporary audiences.

### **Contemporary Fandom or Fandom Goes Mainstream**

Abercrombie and Longhurst noted that as the everyday nature of media consumption increased, consumers were becoming increasingly ‘follower-like’ in their tastes (1998: 141). More recently, there is a sense that fandom itself may be ‘going mainstream’, blurring previous distinctions between ‘consumer’, ‘fan’ and ‘follower’. Jenkins suggests ‘as fandom diversifies, it moves from cult status towards the cultural mainstream with more internet users engaged in some form of fan activity’ (2006b: 142). Scholars have also noted the targeting of fan groups by marketers and producers:

‘Cult has lost part of the specific sub-cultural meaning traditionally attached to it. The problem is not that film marketing has usurped the concept, but rather that when any film can be marketed commercially as a cult film... then the PR business has labelled a tidal change in media culture’ (Jerslev 2008: 89).

‘Fans are no longer viewed as eccentric irritants, but rather as loyal consumers to be created... or otherwise to be courted through scheduling practices... being targeted as a niche market rather than emerging unexpectedly through ‘grassroots’ movements of television appreciation’ (Hills 2002: 36).

‘Cult works were once discovered; now they are being consciously produced, designed to provoke fan interactions’ (Jenkins 2006b: 145).

Yet Jenkins also describes fan communities as ‘self-organised groups’ (2006b: 137). What happens if fandoms are corporate creations rather than organically formed communities? This does not sound like ‘authentic’ fandom and certainly does not sound very ‘cult-ish’. Jerslev’s use of the words ‘commercial’ and ‘cult’ in the same sentence almost sounds like an oxymoron. How can a cult film be commercially marketed and remain ‘cult’? Additionally, all these accounts refer to the production or marketing of the text but immersive marketing strategies are increasingly selling the fan experience itself. These strategies construct the space and conditions for fandom to occur whilst utilising it as part of a wider marketing exercise. It appears the goal is to build a relationship between consumer and product which reflects the affective tie between fan

and fan object.

The idea of co-opting fandom into mainstream culture is not new. Nikunen (2007) uses the term ‘fanification’ to express how fan practice has influenced audience practices more generally. The result is that media companies increasingly address their audiences as always-already fans. Whilst ‘fanification’ does not always succeed, producers nevertheless seem to aspire to this kind of relationship with consumers. Jenkins suggests fewer people are simply watching a television show – ‘more and more of them are sneaking a peak at what they are saying at *Television Without Pity*, and once you are there, why not post a few comments’ (2007a: 361).<sup>5</sup> He believes similar fan practices are becoming normative modes of consumption. Jenkins even predicts the death of fandom: ‘as fandom becomes part of the normal way that the creative industries operate, then fandom may cease to function as a meaningful category of cultural analysis... maybe in that sense, fandom has no future’ (2007a: 362).

However, just because fandom has changed, does not mean it cannot exist in a different form. Just because companies address their audiences as fans, does not mean they all respond to that address in the same way. Conceptions of fandom and cult must evolve in order to accommodate these changes. Perhaps current terminology has become too loaded. The myriad connotations of ‘cult’ and ‘consumer’ may mean the process of redefinition is long overdue.

As a fannish approach to mainstream texts becomes increasingly normative, it is vital to understand the evolution of these modes of reception. Jenkins almost laments the possibility that ‘perhaps we are all fans, or perhaps none of us is’ (2007a: 364) but even if we are all fans, we are not all fans in the same way. In fact we never were and we never will be. If anything, fandom is now a more complex area of research than ever before.

### **Resistant/Incorporated Dichotomy**

Discussions surrounding the extent to which fan communities ‘resist’ or remain in thrall to the power and influence of media producers structure a great deal of recent fan studies. Scholars have generally come down on one side or the other, creating what Abercrombie and Longhurst describe as a ‘resistant/incorporated dichotomy’ (1998: 15) with fans being either empowered, active consumers or passive dupes, when in fact

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

these relationships are far more complicated.

This argument is rooted in discourse regarding the influence of mass media. Sontag's (1982) work on camp suggests that as early as the 1960s, marginalised subcultures were taking 'low' culture and reclaiming it under a camp sensibility. Although Sontag claims camp is 'depoliticised – or at least apolitical' (1982: 277), Ross notes that camp is most usefully read in terms of cultural power. He views it as countercultural and emphasises its role in 'salvaging the privilege' of legitimizing canons of taste for 'a class that is no longer in a position to exercise its power to define official culture' (Ross 2008: 57).

With the emergence of New Left movements in the UK and US in the 1960s and 70s, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies focussed on socio-political and historical moments of subcultural resistance to dominant culture, often reflecting subjects such as racial inequality, class struggle and feminism (Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982, Hall, Jefferson & ed. 1976, Hall ed. 1978). Hebdige (1979) suggested subcultures made alternative identities using cultural symbols available to them, subverting their intended meanings to create oppositional cultures. By ascribing it political potential, mass culture was saved from its status as another tool in the capitalist system of domination (Althusser 2008, Adorno and Horkheimer 1973) or a debased impersonation of high culture (MacDonald 1963).

Much of this work drew on Hall's (1973) influential Encoding/Decoding model of mass communications in which meaning is 'encoded' within texts and 'decoded' by the viewer at the moment of reception. Hall argues the polysemic nature of connotative signs within mass-media texts mean decodings do not necessarily follow inevitably from encodings. Viewers may construct oppositional or negotiated readings. However, this does not mean viewers are unrestricted in their interpretations. Hall's model maintains a level at which power structures influence interpretation. Codification is always unavoidably 'structured in dominance'.

During the 1980s/90s, Hall's model was considered too rigid to incorporate the various methods of meaning-making occurring in subcultures, which were not always oppositional, nor explicitly grounded in politics of class, race or gender. Fiske (1989, 1992) suggested textual politics occurs among consumers of popular culture more generally. He argued that fandom empowers by offering a means of filling a 'cultural lack' felt by culturally or socially marginalised groups but that it is 'a form of popular culture that echoes many of the institutions of official culture, albeit in popular form and under popular control' (Fiske 1992: 33). It does not reject official culture, it

appropriates it.

It is within this context that Jenkins' early work attempts to empower fandom, focusing on media fandom's capacity for cultural production. He rejects Hall's theory in favour of De Certeau's ideas of 'poaching' (de Certeau 1984). 'Hall's model, at least as it has been applied, suggests popular meanings are fixed and classifiable, while de Certeau's 'poaching' model emphasises the process of making meaning and the fluidity of popular interpretation' (Jenkins 1992: 34).

By repeatedly claiming ownership of 'their' texts, fans are depicted as resisting the power structures of the media industry, which expects a mass audience to passively consume its products. Taylor claims 'fans are not true cultists unless they pose their fandom as a resistant activity, one that keeps them one step ahead of those forces which would try to market their resistant taste back to them' (1999: 161).

This vision of the grassroots fan organisation against the might of the corporate machine risks telling one side of a complex story. Fans depend on the media industry to produce the texts they love. Furthermore, they may be reliant upon 'average' viewers to keep the property popular enough that producers deem it worth continuing. It could be argued that notions of fan agency and resistance were overly celebratory and fans always existed as negotiated parts of the system. This can be linked to Althusser's (2008) theory of mass culture, which argued the mass media is part of an ideological structure which can only work to reproduce dominant ideologies. This system is so involved with the creation of the subject that the subject can never truly form any kind of resistance to that ideology (here, consumer capitalism).

Similarly, Harris argued 'audiences retain a kind of parasitic relationship with television for a chance to play in the game of cultural politics...Real control of the industry remains in the hands of the few' (1998: 51).

Fans never truly control the texts they claim as their own, no matter how creative or resistant their appropriations of that text. Cultural studies has also considered the power of commercial culture to appropriate and reproduce counter-hegemonic styles (Heath 2006, Thornton 2005, Hebdige 1988). As long as fans keep financially investing in their fan objects they remain within a system of media consumption. This argument became more potent as fans began to be recognised and marketed to as a niche audience.

To circumvent this dualism, Hills encourages a focus on individual engagement with fan texts and the personal, emotional and subjective experiences of fandom (2002: xiii). Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) also recommended a move towards a

paradigm of spectacle and performance. They link this to the emergence of the diffuse rather than mass audience, for whom media consumption has become an everyday experience, used in the construction of identity, itself a form of constant performance (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 36). Power becomes less important if we consider fandom from these perspectives.

For Hills, the resistant/incorporated dichotomy is counterproductive since fans occupy a middle ground, whereby they may hold anti-commercial ideologies, but continue to display commodity-completist practices. This is a lived contradiction for any fan, so rather than try to close it down, theoretical approaches to fandom must accommodate it (Hills 2002: 5).

Hills (2002) goes on to cite Adorno (1978), explaining how fans may resist, yet remain within the system of consumer capitalism. Adorno's perspective on mass culture is often considered pessimistic, denying audiences any form of agency or power within the culture industry. Hills argues there is room for optimism in Adorno's work, particularly when he moves away from broader Marxist theory and towards specific instances of consumption. Adorno notes that through play, a child can 'deprive the things with which he plays of their mediated usefulness...rescue in them what is benign towards men and not what subserves the exchange relation that equally deforms men and things' (1978: 228).

However, this may only be achieved in play. In reality the child can never completely remove the exchange value from the object. The two values exist simultaneously and, according to Hills, are inseparable. Based on this interpretation, he argues fan appropriation of texts (like the child playing with a toy) moves the text away from exchange value and towards use value, without ever separating the two. Hence fans remain within the system they apparently oppose (Hills 2002: 32).

Hills continues to argue that the text's exchange value is significantly changed by the fans' appropriation of it. The text remains a commodity in the sense of the 'economy proper', but its reclamation by fans creates a new exchange value 'through a process of localised use-valuations which are not entirely reducible to economic models' (Hills 2002: 35). The monetary value of a *Batman* comic is based on a value system held solely by fans. It has more to do with the preferences of the individual fan or community than its actual economic value. For Hills this means the marketplace 'is underpinned by lived experiences of fandom' (2002: 35). This augmented version of economics means fans are 'complicit' with consumerism, but are involved in it on their own terms. 'Power' or 'control' within this system cannot necessarily be located in one



group or another (Hills 2002: 27).

However, what happens when systems belonging to the 'economy proper' offer a pre-packaged and designed 'lived experience of fandom'? Immersive marketing strategies like ARGs encourage and promote fan-like activity around a property, essentially offering a constructed fan experience. The experience itself is commodified, regressing towards 'exchange value' and becoming a commodity in itself.

Commercialisation of the fan experience is not often discussed, with scholars instead addressing the commercial nature of fan texts. Kozinets' (2001) research regarding *Star Trek* fans suggests fans negotiate the commerciality of the show by, for example, placing the show's utopian values above the merchandise. They may also regard collecting merchandise as an investment, portraying themselves as canny collectors rather than compulsive consumers (Kozinets 2001: 81-82).

This offers an insight into fans' awareness of their place in the commercial media industry, but does not address the commercialisation of the fan experience. Although Hills reiterates the fact that fans occupy a middle ground between consumerist practices and anti-consumerist ideologies, he does not go into detail on instances where fans and producers come to face each other. Accounts that do, tend to discuss well-publicised confrontations. Murray (2004) investigates the oft-cited negotiations between New Line and *Lord of the Rings* fans. This is often portrayed as a momentous occasion of co-operation between fan communities and media companies, occurring at a time when online IP litigation was a major concern for conglomerates. Both Murray (2004) and Grainge (2007) compare it to attempts by Warner Bros. to mediate online activities of *Harry Potter* (2001-2011) fans. Warner issued 107 domain name owners with cease-and-desist notices, whereas New Line offered content to be circulated by selected fansites.

According to Murray, the resistant/incorporated dichotomy left cultural studies unable to cope with instances where fan communities form 'uneasy joint-ventures' with multi-national conglomerates (2004: 14). The *Lord of the Rings* story is often told as a step towards the legitimisation of fan creativity by big business. Murray warns against taking this at face value, noting the actions of New Line were driven by the need to protect IP and gain the trust of an influential audience segment. This was still an attempt by New Line to define an acceptable form of fan activity on their terms.

In *Convergence Culture* (2006a), Jenkins again takes a positive view of the evolving relationship between consumers and media producers, using Levy's *Collective Intelligence* (1997) as a theoretical cornerstone. As consumption becomes a more

collective, social process, consumers form communities around texts and participate in 'collective intelligence', which can be seen as 'an alternative source of media power' (Jenkins 2006a: 4). Jenkins carefully balances his argument suggesting 'some see a world without gatekeepers, others a world where gatekeepers have unprecedented power. Again, the truth lies somewhere in between' (2006a: 18).

Ultimately, he views the contemporary consumer as empowered by participatory culture. Corporations are engaged in a slow but steady process of understanding and utilising these empowered consumers without alienating them. Consumers, in their collectives, have more bargaining power and can make demands on the kinds of media products and experiences offered to them. Jenkins creates the impression that not only has the line between 'producer' and 'consumer' become blurred, but media companies are trying to collaborate with fans to offer the kinds of experiences they want. He does concede that the relationship between producers and consumers has become more complex, suggesting 'we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understand' (2006a: 3). However, he still ascribes a great deal of agency to fan communities, which many would argue is and always was, illusory. Additionally it could be argued that if media producers are working with fans, there is nothing left for them to 'resist'. As Murray puts it, 'poaching can only count as such if there is a gamekeeping regime for it to flout' (2004: 12).

An alternative view is that it is not whether fans actually have agency that is important, but whether they believe they have it and how important this belief is to them. Whiteman's (2009) study indicates fan identity is constructed around ideals of agency and the ability to collectively save or change the media products they care about. The commercialisation of these texts is still a sore point for some fans.

In contrast, Stein (2011: 140) suggests many fans may be untroubled by the commercialisation of the fan experience. She uses the character Cooper from the promotional ARG for the ABC Family show *Kyle XY* (2006-2009 ABC) as a case study. Cooper was introduced as a real fan blogging about his investigations into the show and its ARG. It did not take fans long to discover his site was ABC copyrighted and it became clear that 'Coop's Scoop' was official ABC material intended to ensure fans were being drawn to the game effectively. As a corporate-constructed representation of a fan, Cooper thus becomes 'the site of producer discourse about what they think fans are and need' (Stein 2011: 139). Yet, instead of being outraged by ABC's deception, fans

‘engaged playfully with [Cooper] as yet another character, but one that has entered their (extra-) diegesis... as a text to mine for clues...the fans knowingly interact with Cooper’s officially authored performance of fannishness and fan spaces, and are not averse to suspending disbelief in officially affiliated new media architecture’ (Stein, 2011: 140).

Stein even suggests fan interactions with ABC-authored content were not substantially different from the ‘seemingly more subversive work of *Textual Poacher*-style media fans’ (2011: 140). Her article is one of few dealing with fan responses to the corporate appropriation of fandom itself and even fewer which consider the use of marketing strategies as the method of this appropriation (see also Scott 2009).

Fans were never mindless consumers, but neither could they claim complete ownership or control of fan texts. The relationship between fans and the media industry has always been more complicated yet the resistant/complicit dichotomy still overshadows narratives of fan/producer collaboration. The internet has significantly changed the way the two communicate, but we should be cautious in describing this change as overly co-operative, particularly when considering the motivations of companies in co-opting the enthusiasm and energies of fan communities through promotional strategies. Immersive marketing techniques represent a trend towards not just the co-optation of existing fan communities, but the very construction of a fan experience and community for a media property. It calls for a final pull away from the notion of resistant/complicit fans and for the acceptance of fans that are increasingly comfortable with the commercial aspects of both the fan text and the fan experience.

## **Fans Online**

Fans have always been early adopters of technology, so it is unsurprising that communities migrated online at an early stage in the internet’s development. This movement altered fan culture profoundly. Fan communities entered new levels of visibility and accessibility, increased rapidly in size and became global in their memberships. Fan creativity blossomed as the financial constraints of printing and distributing physical fanzines were lifted and anyone could publish their creations for a wider audience. Fandoms were also affected by the more general hopes and fears regarding virtual communities, democratic and transparent communications and the various implications of ‘life online’. It changed the way fans interacted with their fan

objects, each other, and media companies.

Increased visibility and the archiving of fan discussions online made it easier to investigate fan communities less disruptively. This led to an array of ethnographic work on online communities such as Baym's *Tune In, Log On* (2000). Emphasising the potentially democratic nature of the internet, the web was often portrayed as a safe space for marginalised fan groups, resulting in a strong interest in female online fan communities (Scodari 1998, Cumberland 2000). This prompted further work on the internet's impact on the production and distribution of fan fiction and art including slash fiction (Shave 2004, Bury 2005).

For Jenkins, the internet is crucial in the emergence of participatory culture. Its ability to facilitate rapid, global communications allows for the development of 'knowledge communities', which Jenkins defines as 'voluntary, temporary, tactical affiliations, defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments, held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge' (2006a: 57). Groups can draw from a huge range of expertise and since information is shared and valued equally within the knowledge community, it 'destabilises attempts to establish a scriptural economy in which some meanings are more valuable than others' (Jenkins 2006b: 140).

This is a rather utopian model of the power of the hive mind, but arguments against such ideals can be linked to fears regarding the internet in general. Virtual communications were not considered complex enough to sufficiently replace face-to-face social interaction and some feared prolonged socialising online would be detrimental to the individual's 'real' social life. This can be countered with evidence that many fans who meet online go on to meet in person. As Harris (1998) states, fandom has always been an inherently social phenomenon. Slightly more difficult to deflect is the argument that these knowledge communities are unavailable to those without internet access. The internet may break geographical boundaries, but limitations on accessibility mean that although it appears to be a pathway to a more diverse, global version of fandom, there is little evidence to suggest this is the case in reality.

Perhaps more damaging to the communitarian depiction of fandom was that scholars were able to hone in on the hierarchies within online communities. Writers in what Gray et al. (2007) describe as the 'second wave' of fan studies used Bourdieu as a theoretical framework to argue that fandoms both on and offline replicated power structures, rather than challenging the status quo. Internal distinctions built on social or cultural capital are also frequent, causing what Abbott refers to as 'fractal distinctions',

formed around favoured characters, actors, periods or interpretive strategies (2001: 34). Archived online discussion provided tangible evidence supporting these arguments and MacDonald's (1998) study of Usenet science fiction fansites suggests hierarchies are constructed around knowledge, access, leaders, venue and technological competence.

Despite his optimism, Jenkins describes the internet as a mixed blessing for fans. Their increased visibility and 'cultural centrality' meant fans felt less closed off from mainstream culture. However, it also brought in new fans (unaware of community traditions) who wished to 'redefine fandom on their own terms' (Jenkins 2006b: 142). These disputes, no longer kept between members of the group, were posted on online message boards for all to see.

The internet also created 'lurkers', who check in with fansites but do not participate in discussion. Baym suggests lurkers are 'embraced as legitimized participants' by certain communities (1995: 51). Hills offers a wider variety of interpretations, ranging from lurkers as parasitic, invasive and lacking in ability/motivation to engage, to a friendly readership which is generally tolerated (2002: 136). This in-built audience creates a heightened awareness in fans of their public or online image. They are more aware of their status as resources or objects of study and may feel a responsibility to perform certain kinds of fandom over others to project a particular image of themselves and the community as a whole.

As a result, Hills warns against reading online discussions as a transparent communication of what fans are thinking. He complicates the relationship between online and offline fandoms, suggesting the internet allows for 'the affective ties and relationships to fan texts to be picked over... performed and re-performed' (Hills 2002: 142). Fannish relationships are intensified and these attachments mirrored back to fans. The audience itself becomes a mediated product, a constructed text of fandom performed by fans themselves. The fan audience thus 'consumes a textual construction of itself alongside the original commodity text' (Hills 2002: 139). The online fan audience, rather than resisting commodification, intensifies it and becomes further entangled in its processes.

The consumption of the original fan text and the 'textual construction' of the fan experience are visible not only to scholars but to media producers. The explosion of online fan productivity encouraged the sharing of knowledge and circulation of meaning which Jenkins so enthusiastically champions, but producers feared the misuse or subversion of their brands and images. Jenkins rightly argues that the web 'made visible the hidden compromises that enabled participatory culture and commercial culture to

coexist throughout much of the twentieth century' (2006a: 141).

A string of copyright disputes ensued and the industry is still figuring out how best to approach such issues. Fans are a core audience who, if disgruntled, can seriously damage profits, but the manipulation of IP can irrevocably alter public perception of a brand, character or property. Scholars followed a variety of these disputes, most commonly citing *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars* franchises (Tushnet 2004, Consalvo 2003, Clerc 2002).

Web 2.0 and the popularity of social networking sites mean it is not only fan audiences who are visible to media companies. The opinions of a range of demographics, (notably teens and young adults), are available to corporations who might benefit from better understanding what makes them 'tick'. Although it is important to acknowledge debates around accessibility, the internet is a part of daily life for the audiences targeted by Hollywood marketers. Mobile technology makes this even more pervasive. Companies are realising this is an access point not just for fans but for a mass audience who are increasingly difficult to reach via traditional marketing channels. Online marketing has branched into a variety of subcategories, including viral, buzz and immersive marketing, as companies try to engage consumers with their brand.

Hills' argument remains true not only for fan communities but for most, if not all online interactions. The level of performance involved in presenting oneself on a Facebook page should not be underestimated. These forums are not a clear window into the minds of consumers and should be approached carefully. More pointedly, as Jenkins (2006a) observes, companies are still unsure as to the level of participation they actually want from their audiences. The internet is now a focal point of contact between fans and producers, but there is still debate as to how far companies really want to engage with consumers and whether online communities really have the power to get what they want.

### **ARGs**

As an evolving genre, ARGs can be difficult to define. They are often mistaken for console games that tie in with films, virtual worlds like *Second Life* (2003 Linden Lab), or role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* (2004 Blizzard Entertainment). Askwith (2006) goes some way towards deciphering their complexities. He suggests the conflation of different fields such as immersive marketing, viral marketing, immersive

storytelling and pervasive gaming make it hard to pinpoint a definition for ARGs. These fields are also emerging and evolving; similar but in a state of flux.

Unfiction offers a similar definition of ARGs to complement Phillips' description provided in the introduction:

‘A cross-media genre of interactive fiction using multiple delivery and communications media, including television, radio, newspapers, Internet, email, SMS, telephone, voicemail, and postal service. Gaming is typically comprised of a secret group of Puppetmasters who author, manipulate, and otherwise control the storyline, related scenarios, and puzzles and a public group of players, the collective detective that attempts to solve the puzzles and thereby win the furtherance of the story’ (Unfiction 2011).

Rather than offering another definition, Askwith highlights characteristics which ARGs tend to share:

1. Unfold across multiple media platforms and real-life spaces
2. Offer an interactive, dispersed narrative experience
3. Require player-participants to reconstruct the dispersed narrative
4. Often refuse to acknowledge themselves as games (“This Is Not A Game”)
5. Often have no clear rules or guideline
6. Often require players to solve difficult challenges or puzzles to progress
7. Often encourage/require the formation of collaborative communities (2006: 10)

Transmedia designer Christy Dena also notes that ARGs

1. Respond to player activities through human intervention by “puppetmasters”
2. Are played in real time.

(Dena quoted in Askwith 2006:10)

The Beast is generally acknowledged as the first ARG, created by a team at Microsoft who went on to found specialist company 42 Entertainment.<sup>6</sup> However, Askwith traces similar forms of immersive entertainment/promotions as far back as Orson Welles' radio adaptation of *War of the Worlds* (1938), which presented the story as a factual newscast. The reaction of audiences is well documented, as millions who tuned in after the disclaimers believed the programme to be a legitimate news report

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<sup>6</sup> [www.42entertainment.com](http://www.42entertainment.com) [Accessed 05.01.2014]

(New York Times 1938, Gosling 2009). He also links ARGs to ‘armchair treasure hunts’ beginning with *Masquerade* (Williams 1979), a children’s book which included hidden clues leading to the location of a jewel buried somewhere in Britain. The first example of such a game promoting a commercial product accompanied the release of Pink Floyd’s album *The Division Bell* in 1994.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Askwith refers to the marketing campaign for *The Blair Witch Project* as a watershed moment for the genre, demonstrating the possibilities of using immersive entertainment as a marketing technique. The Beast was the first ARG used to promote a film, as part of the marketing campaign for Steven Spielberg’s *A.I.* in 2001. It drew large numbers of players, roughly 7000 of whom formed a community known as Cloudmakers.

Askwith (2006) argues that understanding ARG player communities is key to their success. To this end he identifies five kinds of players: organisers, hunters, detectives, lurkers and rubbernecks. Whilst the first three are actively involved in puzzle solving and moving the narrative forward, lurkers follow the action without posting. Rubbernecks may offer ideas or comments on forum discussions but rarely interact with in-game characters or register their details with in-game websites. Lurkers make up the vast majority of an ARG audience. Unfiction forum estimates the ratio between active players and lurkers to be anywhere between 1:5 and 1:20 (Unfiction 2011). It is also tempting to think such games appeal primarily to a male adolescent audience. However, Michael Smith (CEO of Mind Candy) claimed participants in standalone ARG *Perplex City* (2005-2007 Mind Candy) included ‘plenty of people over 50 years old, and we know that about half of the people who play the game are women’ (Smith quoted in Askwith 2006: 21).

Askwith also notes differences between types of ARG. The Promotional ARG, exemplified in Audi’s Art of the Heist and ilovebees for *Halo 2* (2004 Microsoft Studios), is the most common. This also crosses over with what Askwith labels the Narrative Extension ARG, which is usually attached to another media property like The Lost Experience. Monetised ARGs like *Majestic* (2001 EA Games) and *Perplex City* have also been attempted. *Majestic* was something of a disaster for a number of reasons, but ultimately its monthly subscription format proved unattractive to players (Pham 2001). *Perplex City*, built around the purchase of collectible playing cards, was

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<sup>7</sup>A Usenet group member started posting messages referring to himself as Publius. He suggested an enigma was hidden within in the album and that there was a reward for the first person to solve it. Although other fans were skeptical, Publius was proven right when he correctly predicted that white lights would appear on the stage at a New Jersey concert, spelling out PUBLIUS ENIGMA. The enigma remains unsolved and the prize unclaimed (Askwith 2006).



considerably more successful. Grassroots or fan-made ARGs are also popular, including Exocog, created by fans of *Minority Report* (2002 Steven Spielberg) and Metacortechs, run by fans of *The Matrix* (1999 Wachowski Brothers). Askwith points out that many games fit multiple categories, further complicating a concise definition of ARGs. This difficulty is summed up when Askwith describes the genre as a ‘collision of traditional promotional marketing and new immersive narrative content’ (2006: 16). The two are not generally seen as compatible and what little academic work there is on ARGs often struggles with the apparent conflict between commercial intent and creative content.

Askwith recognises ARGs as a narrative genre but his two white papers (2006, 2007) are aimed at producers considering using promotional games. He points out the pros and cons of ARGs for advertisers, observing that although they do not necessarily generate quick purchase decisions, they can engage consumers with a product before it becomes available. They are also effective in constructing brand awareness, highly cost effective compared to traditional marketing campaigns and can bring coherence to franchises expanding across media platforms. He also addresses problems which might deter advertisers. ARGs can appear complicated, inaccessible or appealing only to a small, committed audience demographic. The key to overcoming this is to understand all segments of the potential audience and design a game which appeals as much to lurkers as it does to hunters or detectives. It also requires marketers to view ARGs as an entertainment experience into which advertising can be ‘organically’ integrated. They can suffer player backlash if, for example, a logo appears out of place within the gameworld, breaking the immersive aesthetic which is crucial to enjoyment of the game. Marketers are encouraged to consider players in terms of communities of interest who derive pleasure from collaborative and social games, rather than as an audience segment (Askwith 2007: 23-4).

Askwith therefore suggests producers view ARGs as materials which must perform more than the basic advertising function, but, confusingly, must not announce themselves as advertising. This requires a distinct shift in mindset on the part of media companies and Askwith suggests mainstream media industries may struggle to see the value of a dedicated, smaller audience, over the more quantifiable value of a casual, mass audience (2007: 20). The use of such strategies can be considered an acknowledgement by the industry of the growing importance of that dedicated audience. It could reflect an increasing focus on building brand loyalty and audience management over immediately visible return on investment. Although media companies are, to an

extent, driven by financial motivations, they seem increasingly willing to explore new, innovative ways of increasing their revenues.

Other academic discussions of ARGs focus on anything but their commercial potential. Jenkins discusses them in terms of affective economics and brand awareness but emphasises that ‘for the most hard-core players, these games can be so much more’ (2006a: 130). He recognises their commercial intent, but prefers to view them in the context of the empowering nature of convergence culture and collective intelligence. Quoting games designer and scholar Jane McGonigal, he argues ARGs can impact upon the way people think and behave in their everyday lives (Jenkins 2006a: 130-131).

McGonigal has written extensively on ARGs in terms of performativity and play, and is heavily involved in designing and running games.<sup>8</sup> Again, rather than discussing them as promotional devices, she is more concerned with how collaborative play can prompt players to attempt real-world problem solving, and the implications of such collective intelligence for various aspects of social life (McGonigal 2011). Her paper on *ilovebees*, a game she worked closely on, investigates it as ‘an experiment in constructing a game-based digital learning environment, in which players can experience first-hand in a low-risk setting the challenges and pleasures of becoming part of a massively-collaborative knowledge network’ (McGonigal 2008: 6).

Perhaps the most striking example of this is the case of some Cloudmakers who, in the hours following the attacks on the World Trade Center in September 2001, discussed the possibility of using their collective knowledge to ‘solve the puzzle of who the terrorists are’ (McGonigal 2003: 1). Other Cloudmakers quickly became unsettled with the apparent slippage between play and a terrifying real-life situation. Group moderators eventually released an announcement requesting that discussions of ‘solving’ 9/11 be concluded. McGonigal argues that for many, working closely with the Cloudmakers group had ‘profoundly affected their sense of identity and purpose, to the point that a game mentality was a natural response to real-world events’ (2003: 1). She further suggests that whilst players might be overoptimistic in their ability to solve such problems, there is something about the lingering effects of collective gaming that can change players’ perspectives on real-world situations (McGonigal 2003: 7). She argues for collective gaming to be considered for its ‘radical political potential and creative, generative possibilities of multiple social formation and interaction’ (McGonigal 2003: 9).

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<sup>8</sup> For a full list of publications see [www.janemcgonigal.com](http://www.janemcgonigal.com). [Accessed 05.01.2015]

McGonigal also suggests the possibilities this might open up for businesses, for example, as an alternative method of scenario planning. In 2011, she set up *World Without Oil* (2011 ITVS Interactive)), in which 1700 players from 12 countries set out to manage a simulated oil shortage. Although her work acknowledges the potential for ARGs in the business world, it sees them as platforms for social, political and personal change and growth, rather than commercial entities.<sup>9</sup>

In stark contrast, Örnebring (2007) argues ARGs are primarily commercial in nature, comparing official and fan-made ARGs for the series *Alias* (2001-2006 JJ Abrams). He challenges Jenkins' views as excessively celebratory, particularly in the context of transmedia narratives. Jenkins suggests this mode of storytelling almost removes the idea of a central or ur-text (2007b). In contrast, Örnebring maintains there is always central text being marketed via other ancillary texts. Narrative flow, he suggests, rarely moves from these ancillaries back to the main text. *Alias*, however, remains his only example as he argues there is no extra information in the ARG one cannot glean from watching the show (Örnebring 2007). When it comes to promotional ARGs, one might see narrative flow working in the opposite direction.

Örnebring concludes that both fan-produced and official ARGs conform to 'corporate goals of marketing and brand building as well as fan audience's goals of pleasurable interaction with fictional worlds' (2007: 445). Even fan-produced games conform to producers' basic intentions, because the power to set limits on these narratives remains within the cultural industries. Their primary purpose is not to invite interaction or participation but to 'create an enjoyable experience that will build the franchise in the minds of the audience' (Örnebring 2007: 50). Örnebring argues this is as easily provided by 'largely redundant' ancillary texts, as by offering participation opportunities (2007: 455).

Gray (2010) argues pointedly against this perspective. He suggests building a franchise in the minds of an audience might *require* the opportunity for 'interaction, networking and audience participation in mediated narratives'. A text's commercial prerogative or intention does not necessarily 'obviate its substance' (Gray 2010: 209)

It is difficult to dispute the commercial purpose of promotional ARGs but what seems to be under discussion is the relative value of the games as either mechanisms for social change, creative narratives or marketing tools. They can perform all these

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<sup>9</sup> For use of ARGs by charitable organisations, including Cancer Research and The British Red Cross see Smith 2008.

functions but one is always deemed of a higher value than another.

Furthermore, some studies can be presumptuous when discussing the reception of ARGs. Örnebring (2007) suggests the commercial nature of ARGs is problematic when looking at them in terms of narrative expansion, but who is this problematic for? Do players struggle with this issue? He also argues ARGs use a particular mode of address to ‘create conditions for the growth of a fan culture around the series’ (Örnebring 2007: 451). While this might be true, such strategies may also be a response to existing fan cultures. More detailed audience research might reveal whether fans are using these games in the intended manner.

Örnebring (2007) also suggests a straightforward mode of address which invites fannish readings and creates a fan culture around a commercial text. However, as previously mentioned, fans stand in a complex position regarding commerciality. They might not have a problem with the ARG itself being a commercial product, but Askwith (2007) highlights negative reactions to product placement which does not integrate with the game’s storyworld. It may be that this, like the fan’s relationship to consumerism, is a contradiction which cannot be simply erased but is constantly negotiated by ARG players.

McGonigal’s work, in contrast, focusses on player responses to the games. She is emphatic about the positive potentials of such gameplay. Despite discussing them within the commercial context of affective economics, Jenkins (2006a) is similarly optimistic about the power of ARGs to empower consumers. Gray’s (2010) analysis focuses on ways in which paratexts can be meaningful, rather than ‘redundant’ pieces of marketing. In comparison, Örnebring’s (2007) perspective sounds almost pessimistic, making positive alternatives far more attractive. However, downplaying the commercial intent of ARGs serves to simplify what may be a more complicated interweaving of the commercial and the creative.

Different parties may also have different vested interests in emphasising one over the other. 42 Entertainment’s mission statement runs as follows:

‘To produce the world’s most innovative, immersive entertainment.

Original Content Production: As an independent producer, we develop ground-breaking, monetized entertainment experiences for our distribution partners.

Innovative Marketing Campaigns: As a standalone agency, we drive brand engagement and ROI by immersing consumers in our clients' brands' (42 Entertainment, 2008a).

There seems to be a balance here between commercial and creative intentions. Immersive and innovative campaigns *are* what drive brand engagement and ROI. However, in the context of interviews or trade press articles, creators emphasise the collaborative or creative aspects. Sean Stewart, lead writer for *The Beast*, is quoted as saying 'There is no viral marketing. All there is is fun' (Stewart quoted in Hanas 2006). The focus is on creating an immersive and entertaining experience which, when carefully tied into the world of a film or computer game, may result in increased profits.

42 Entertainment were commissioned to create *ilovebees* by *Halo 2* owners Microsoft Studios and endorsed by creators Bungie. It is not clear how much creative control each company holds, or what the directives are when specialist companies are hired by larger media conglomerates. McGonigal emphasises ARGs are built around player responses, what she calls a 'call and response' design, attributing some ownership and control over the game to players (2008: 31). The real-time construction of the games means it is feasible for player actions to change the direction of the narrative, maybe even the ending. However, if PMs relinquish too much control, the narrative may become incoherent or complex, making it off-putting for some players. It is therefore debatable whether the games truly offer players a form of agency or ownership. It is possible, however, that not all ARGs are structured in this way. What happens if, for example, Paramount decides to design games in-house? Does a commercial mindset overpower ideals of collective intelligence in game design? How do players respond to this? How much control over the game's mechanisms do they really desire?

It seems ARGs can perform a number of functions for players, puppetmasters and media conglomerates. Previous studies often prioritise one over the others, offering only part of a bigger picture. Looking closely at the interactions between the different parties involved in commissioning, creating and playing ARGs may provide a better insight into contemporary producer/consumer relationships.

Between the textual focus of film studies and the economic focus of business studies, a number of questions remain unanswered. Studies rarely address the idea that marketing materials may work to foster relationships between media producers and consumers rather than between consumers and text. They also rarely consider the

reception of film marketing campaigns as separate from the reception of film they are promoting. Staiger asserts that studies of the production of advertising cannot answer questions regarding its reception (1990: 4). By asking both questions together, we might better understand how these marketing strategies function for both producers and consumers, beyond their relevance to profits or the film text. This might change how we view those audiences in terms of fans, consumers and cult audiences. This thesis therefore questions not only how and why ARGs are produced, but also how they are used and received by fans and whether this correlates with the intentions of producers.

The games' structures seem to encourage or even to create fan communities, creating a relationship between fans and media producers which requires further investigation, involving significant negotiation and communication. ARGs offer a unique site of real time interaction between media producers and the audiences they are trying to win over. By combining textual analysis of ARGs with audience research and discussions with industry professionals, this thesis aims to clarify how these games work to structure a different kind of relationship between producers and consumers.

Having analysed this relationship more closely, it will then consider how this might problematise contemporary notions of fandom. The complexity of this relationship is realised in current fan scholarship, which has moved away from the resistant/incorporated dichotomy when discussing media fans. Some even consider the idea of 'mainstreaming' fandom, as this becomes a normative mode of consumption of many audiences. However, fan studies has spent so long defining its subjects against mainstream popular culture that there remains resistance to the idea that they might have found a comfortable space to exist within it. Fan discourse itself still reflects what might be considered outdated notions of fandom. Fandom's relationship to the 'mainstream' is changing and ARGs provide an ideal site for investigation into how this might require us to reconceptualise what fandom is and how it works.

## Chapter 2 – What is an ARG?

This chapter outlines the development of promotional ARGs for contemporary Hollywood films. Examining *The Beast* (2001), *WhySoSerious* (2007) and *Super 8* (2010), it summarises the formal and cultural attributes of ARGs as they have developed over time, as well as approaching them from a marketing perspective. *The Beast* was selected as it is the first example of a fully-fledged ARG as well as the first promotional ARG for a film. Many common traits of ARGs can therefore be said to have formed during this game. *WhySoSerious*, developed by prominent producers 42 Entertainment, was also considered a landmark ARG. It is also a strong example of a game which promoted an instalment of an established franchise with a large pre-existing fanbase. Finally, *Super 8* was included as a recent promotional ARG for a film at the time of writing, which I was able to participate in from launch through to conclusion. It is also useful as an example of a game produced for a J.J. Abrams film. ARGs for previous Abrams projects such as *Lost* and *Cloverfield* meant *Super 8* came with expectations for an ARG, or at least an innovative marketing campaign. Abrams had become so closely associated with the genre that it was important to include one of these games in a representative selection of promotional film ARGs from the past 10 years.

The chapter first discusses the context in which ARGs began to emerge, including changes in the use of internet technology, the rise of the gaming industry and the increasing popularity of complex narratives in both film and television. A summary of each case study is provided to facilitate detailed textual analysis as the games involve highly complex narratives and game structures. This is followed by an analysis of the games' structures, the construction of alternate realities, puzzles and interactivity, communities, player/PM relationships and marketing. The marketing section considers the relationship of each ARG to the wider marketing campaign, the film it promoted and the marketing theories discussed in the literature review. This is primarily text-based analysis. Any references to community discussion were gained through the initial participant observation of player communities, which is complemented in Chapter 4 by the results of a player survey and more detailed analysis of forum discussion. Full details of these methods are provided in Chapter 4.

## **The Emergence of ARGs**

The Beast was created in 2001, at the end of the dotcom boom and bust years. High speed broadband was becoming more readily available and internet access was available to the vast majority of Hollywood's key demographics (youth markets with high levels of disposable income). Online marketing became a higher priority for advertisers who saw an opportunity to reach an audience which was spending more time and money online. The success of *The Blair Witch Project* had also proven online marketing could have a significant impact on a film's financial success. Immersive or pervasive gaming was certainly not new at this time, but online gaming was increasing in popularity. Three successful MMORPGs were released in the late 1990s: *EverQuest* (1999 Sony Online Entertainment), *Ultima Online* (1997 Electronic Arts) and *Ascheron's Call* (1999 Turbine Inc.). All were precursors to contemporary games such as *Second Life*, *World of Warcraft* and *Guild Wars* (2005 AreaNet).

The 1990s and early 2000s also saw a growing trend towards more experimental narrative structures in Hollywood cinema. Examples include *Pulp Fiction* (1994 Quentin Tarantino), *Memento* (2000 Christopher Nolan), *Fight Club* (1999 David Fincher), *Mulholland Drive* (2001 David Lynch), *The Matrix*, *21 Grams* (2003 Alejandro González Iñárritu) and *Crash* (2004 Paul Haggis). Buckland describes these as films which 'embrace non-linearity, time loops, and fragmented spatio-temporal reality... [they] blur the boundaries between different levels of reality, are riddled with gaps, deception, labyrinthine structure, ambiguity and overt coincidences' (2009: 9).

This is not to say such challenging films did not exist prior to this moment. However, scholars tend to suggest they existed in the more 'traditionally difficult' categories of art house and European auteur cinema. Kinder (2002) cites Luis Bunuel as a significant predecessor and Elsaesser (2009) refers to Ingmar Bergman, Alain Resnais, Akira Kurosawa and Fritz Lang.

Simons (2008) describes various labels for this narrative style, including: forking path narrative or network narrative (Bordwell 2002, 2008), puzzle films (Panek 2006), mind-game films (Elsaesser 2009) modular narratives (Cameron 2006), multiple draft films (Branigan 2002), database narratives (Kinder 2002) complex narratives (Staiger 2006) and twist films (Wilson 2006). Debates often focussed on whether they constituted a new era of filmmaking, subverting or replacing traditional narrative structures, or whether they were simply a passing trend. Bordwell in particular insisted forking-path narratives 'have stretched and enriched some narrative norms without



subverting or demolishing them' (2002: 91) and that pleasure in such films came from a re-introduction of 'viewer-friendly devices' which allowed the audience to make sense of 'what might seem to be ontologically or epistemically radical possibilities' (2002: 91).

What is interesting about this debate is not so much the issue of narratology, but the changing mode of spectatorship required for audiences to make sense of such films. In short, they require an active mode of reception. Simons (2008) makes detailed reference to game theory and ludology to discuss the reception of the complex temporality and causality of such narratives. In doing so, he is in a sense discussing narrative-as-game. The terms 'mind-game film' and 'puzzle film' also evoke game-playing. Simons (2008) further argues that although gaming scholars have historically strived to separate themselves from narratologists, games and narratives have more similarities than differences. Elsaesser also notes the influence of the increasingly popularity of videogames in this era, although he warns against a simplistic reading of videogame architecture determining filmic narrative (2009: 22).<sup>10</sup> The simultaneous emergence of ARGs and these game-like films suggest not only were audiences developing viewing strategies for these films, but that there was a demand for media products which encouraged that mode of spectatorship.

Elsaesser also suggests these films aim to 'disorient or mislead spectators (besides carefully hidden or altogether withheld information there are frequent plot twists and trick endings)' (2009: 15). However, he notes that rather than feeling cheated, spectators generally do not mind being played with; on the contrary, they enjoy the challenge. Initially, Elsaesser posits that this is because complex narratives more accurately reflect the audience's own experiences of life in a 'contemporary network society' (2009: 24-34). He analyses the films in terms of psychoanalysis and pathology, particularly with regards to characterisation.

Elsaesser finally concludes that the motivation behind this tendency lies elsewhere, suggesting it is

'a type of textual organisation which responds to the conditions of distribution, reception, consumption, cinephilia, connoisseurship and spectatorship appropriate for the multi-platform film, which can seduce a theatre-going

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<sup>10</sup> The years following that article's publication saw a remarkable take-up of the buzzword 'gamification' across various industries, including marketing. This could suggest that gaming structures have more influence over the construction of media products than Elsaesser allows for.

public..., engage volatile fan communities on the internet... as well as “work” as a DVD and possibly even as a game’ (2009: 34).

All these conditions are inextricably linked, but the key point when considering ARGs within this context, is that such narratives are a response to a new kind of spectatorship and therefore a new demographic. Elsaesser states this explicitly when he suggests complex narratives point to

‘a crisis in the spectator-film relation in the sense that the traditional “suspension of disbelief” or the classical spectator positions of “voyeur”, “witness”, “observer” and their related cinematic regimes or techniques... are no longer deemed appropriate, compelling or challenging enough’ (2009: 16).

He identifies these films as a response to a shift in the nature of movie-going audiences, who demand more challenging film experiences. The inclusion of an ARG in a film’s marketing campaign might therefore be a method of incorporating that complexity without building it into the film itself; an attempt to attract both this emerging ‘game-playing’ demographic and those who do not necessarily desire such a ‘difficult’ viewing experience.

Elsaesser also mentions fan activity around complex narratives in online forums. He believes such fansites

‘either ignore the fictional contract and treat the film as an extension of real life, to which factual information is relevant, or they tend to use the film as a start of the database, to which all sorts of other data – trivia, fine detail, esoteric knowledge – can be added, collected and shared. What they do not seem to be engaged in is... interpretation. One has to assume that such “taking for real” is one of the rules of the game that permit participation’ (2009: 35).

This ‘taking for real’, performed by film fan communities, echoes the ‘This is Not a Game’ (TINAG) philosophy governing ARGs, under which the game refuses to acknowledge itself as fiction. This further supports the hypothesis that audiences had already been developing modes of spectatorship akin to those required by ARGs. Furthermore, while Elsaesser states the appeal of ‘mind-game’ films “manifests itself as a “cult” following’, he also notes these storytelling strategies have become commonplace in ‘mainstream cinema, event-movies/blockbuster, indie films, not forgetting (HBO-financed) television’ (2009: 19). What was once considered ‘cult’ and

‘difficult’ is now not that rare or unusual.<sup>11</sup> This highlights the difficulties of categorising audiences like those of ARGs, who display cult-like sensibilities when responding to ‘mainstream’ texts.

Elsaesser’s reference to HBO points to similar changes in television, where character and narrative arcs were developing over a number of episodes, rather than being encased in one. Mittell (2006a) notes these serial, rather than episodic, formats became popular in the early 1980s with shows like *Dallas* (1978-1991 CBS) and *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987 NBC). These laid the foundation for the development of narrative complexity in series such as *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991 ABC), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The X Files* and *The Sopranos* (1999-2007 HBO). Mittell argues these juggled the demands of both serial and episodic storytelling, attempting to provide narrative pleasures to both long term audiences and short term viewers who might dip in for single episodes.

They also frequently violate storytelling conventions, self-consciously bringing attention to narrative mechanisms. Previously, shows had generally provided clear cues for unusual narrative techniques like flashbacks or dream sequences, for fear of disorienting the viewer. Complex narratives tend to lack these signals, leaving the viewer to decipher it for themselves. This demanded a longer term engagement with the series in order for viewers to learn each show’s unique conventions. A key pleasure of such active viewing, Mittell suggests, can be found in the narratives’ ‘operational aesthetic’, encouraging audiences to take pleasure not only in the diegetic storyworld but in figuring out the mechanics behind such complicated storytelling (2006a: 35).

Similarly to Elsaesser, Mittell attributes the emergence of this narrative to changes in audience behaviour, developments in media industries and new technologies. He is careful to note these were not necessarily direct causes, but changes which ‘enabled the creative strategies to flourish’ (2006a: 37). He also describes this mode of viewing in terms of ‘decoding’, suggesting narrative comprehension is built up as viewers learn to master the ‘internal conventions of complex narrations’. This is a ‘competency that regular viewers learn over time’ (2006a: 30). Mittell also finds similarities between the engagement required by puzzle films, videogames and complex television narratives.

This is encouraged further by online fan communities. Mittell references Jenkins’ (2006a) ‘collective intelligence’ when describing how such communities share

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010) is a successful example, with its narrative predicated on the notion of multiple layers of human consciousness.

and discuss information and interpretations of shows with complex narratives. He also points out that producers sometimes joined these discussions to test for viewer understanding and enjoyment, citing *Babylon 5* (1994-1998 Warner Bros.) and *Veronica Mars* (2004-2006 UPN; 2006-2007 CW) as examples (Mittell 2006a). This indicates that not only were audiences developing strategies for comprehending complex narratives, they were also willing to engage with more active relationships with television producers, in a manner which could be seen to pre-empt the relationship between ARG players and producers. Like Elsaesser, Mittell is keen to point out that

‘the consumer and creative practices of fan culture that culture studies scholars embraced as subcultural phenomena in the 1990s have become more widely distributed and participated in with the distribution means of the internet, making active audience behaviour even more of a mainstream practice’ (2006a: 32).

By the early 2000s, the fact that mass audiences had embraced narratives as complex as *Lost*, suggested a climate in which media consumers more broadly were ready to engage with the kind of storytelling *The Beast* could offer.

### **The Beast – (A.I.: Artificial Intelligence)**

Created in 2001 by a small team at Microsoft Games Studios, The Beast formed part of the marketing campaign for Steven Spielberg's *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*. The team was led by Jordan Weisman (Creative Director of Microsoft's Entertainment Division), Sean Stewart (Lead Writer and science fiction novelist), Elan Lee (Lead Director and Producer) and Pete Fenlon (Content Lead). They were supported by several external teams of programmers, web designers and artists.<sup>12</sup> This was genuinely experimental marketing and the Microsoft team instructed anyone with knowledge of the game to deny its existence:

‘The mantra was: “No comment”. We had everybody saying it. Whenever anybody asked them anything about the game, the answer was always “No Comment.” We had Bill Gates saying it, we had Marketing saying it, we even got Spielberg himself saying “No Comment” (Lee 2002).

This secrecy left the public aware of the game but starved for information on it, creating higher levels of media interest around both film and game.

The Beast takes place in 2142, 16 years after the events of the film. Global warming has hit a crisis point with ice caps melting to the extent that some cities are completely submerged. Humans have created artificial intelligence (A.I.) which exists in a number of forms including robots, toys, ‘living’ homes and programmes running amok in the ‘datasphere’, which players tended to equate with a futuristic form of the Internet. They simulate human behaviour and emotions, although scientists are working to develop more nuanced psychological aspects.

As A.I.s become more human-like, some people feel threatened by their presence (embodied in the Anti-Robot Militia or ARM movement) while others campaign for them to have the same legal rights as humans (reflected in groups such as Coalition for Robot Freedom and more militant pro-A.I. factions such as BIOS and A.R.I.).<sup>13</sup> The story centres around the character Evan Chan who is found dead under suspicious circumstances in his A.I. boat, Cloudmaker. In what appears to be a fairly basic premise, players are invited to investigate and solve the mystery of his murder.

The narrative is lengthy, complex and best understood by reading The Guide, a

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<sup>12</sup> Credits mention Three Mountain Group, Atomic Pictures, Field-Y and Code Ring <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/cloudmakers-moderated/conversations/messages/1019> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>13</sup> Players speculated whether these might have been Microsoft in-jokes, referring to the BIOS operating system and the common prompt ‘Abort, Retry, Ignore’.

detailed walkthrough of the game by player Adrian Hon (2001a). There is therefore an element of generalisation to this summary, which focuses on how the central narrative starts, moves forward and winds down to a conclusion.

### Game Summary – Rabbit Hole

There are generally agreed to be three entry points or ‘rabbit holes’ for The Beast. According to Lee, the main rabbit hole was designed to open on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2001 when the movie poster was distributed and the websites went live (Lee 2002). The posters and trailer contained a credit for ‘sentient machine therapist’ Jeanine Salla. This was designed to lead players, via internet search engines, to websites including Jeanine’s university homepage (Fig. 1) and Evan Chan’s family homepage (Fig. 2).



Figure 1



Figure 2

A second entry point was also embedded in trailers and posters. Notches on the words ‘Summer 2001’ corresponded to the phone number (503) 321 5122. On calling it, players received the following voicemail:

“Welcome my child. Once upon a time there was a forest, that teemed with life, love, sex and violence. Things that humans did naturally. And their robots copied – flawlessly. This forest is vast and surprising. It is full of grass, and trees, and databanks, and drowned apartment buildings filled with fish. It can be a frightening forest, and some of its paths are dark, and difficult. I was lost there once – a long time ago. Now I try to help others who have gone astray. If you ever feel lost, my child, write to me at thevisionary.net. And I will leave you a trail of crumbs...” (Quoted in Hon 2001a).

Visiting thevisionary.net prompted a sound file saying “Once upon a time, there was a rude and wicked child who came visiting when told to write!”. At this point the browser opened a new email message window with an empty address box, subject line “I’m so sorry...” and the following text:

“I am so, so sorry. I don’t know what got into me. You weren’t asking very much from me: it was thoughtless and hurtful of me not to do as you had asked. Please accept my apology. I promise that in the future I will try really hard to do better. Your remorseful child.”

After some trial and error it was suggested that because the player was being addressed as child, the anonymous messenger might be ‘Mother’. On replying to mother@thevisionary.net, Mother responded with a cryptic email. When highlighted, this message was revealed (Fig. 3). This was also designed to prompt players to search for Jeanine Salla and join the game.

However, this did not prompt the response the team expected, so they created a third lead. They took several posters and circled letters to spell out “Jeanine is the key” and “Evan Chan was murdered”. These were sent to a selection of game and entertainment magazine editors. When highly regarded gossip site Ain’t It Cool News ran it as a story the team saw website hits jump from 10-15 per day to 20,000 per day (Lee 2002).



Figure 3

As players searched websites for clues they created online groups where they could discuss their speculations. The largest of these was a Yahoo! group named Cloudmakers (CM), reaching around 7,000 registered players at its peak. This was the intended result, as puzzles were designed to be so difficult they would have to be solved collectively.

Players eventually accessed Evan's password-protected email account with his employers DonuTech (Fig. 4). His emails (Fig. 5) revealed Evan was performing due diligence work for a merger between companies Waterworks and Green Microtech.

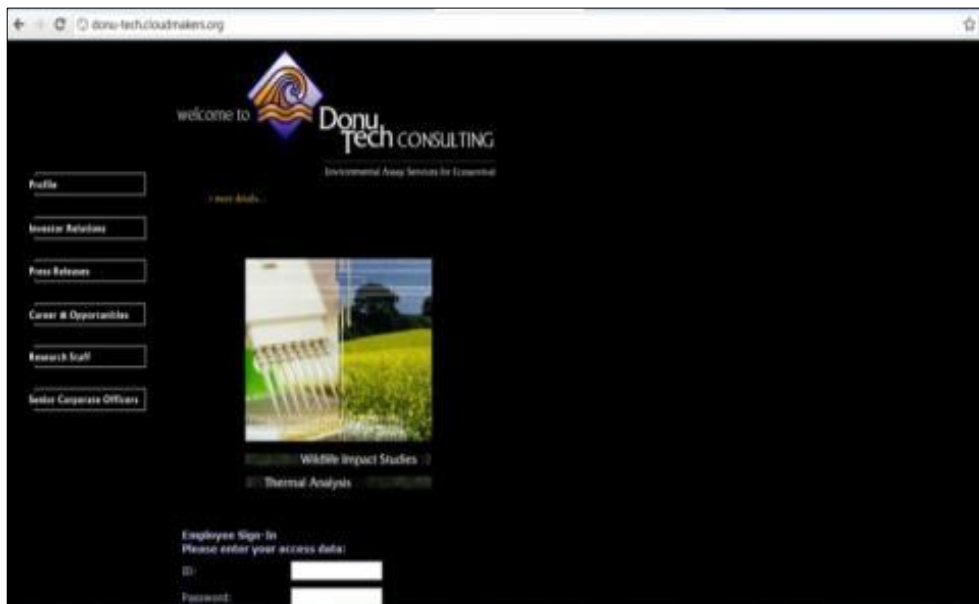


Figure 4





Figure 5

He appeared to have discovered something that required further investigation, slowing the process down. He was killed before he could continue this work and after his death the merger was suddenly pushed forward. A conspiracy theory was already forming. There was also a mysterious email from Mother, addressing the players rather than Evan, leading them to passcodes for voicemail inboxes belonging to Jeanine Salla and Evan's wife Nancy Chan. The messages also confirmed Evan had been in a relationship with Laia Salla, Jeanine's granddaughter. Although Laia was human she had been implanted with an A.I. 'familiar' named Mephisto. She maintained the family website and her memorial page to Evan suggested she also suspected foul play (Fig. 6). The first puzzle was also found via this page, under the link 'Letter' (Fig. 7). This was left on Laia's site but neither she nor Mephisto knew how it appeared without Mephisto's knowledge.



Figure 6

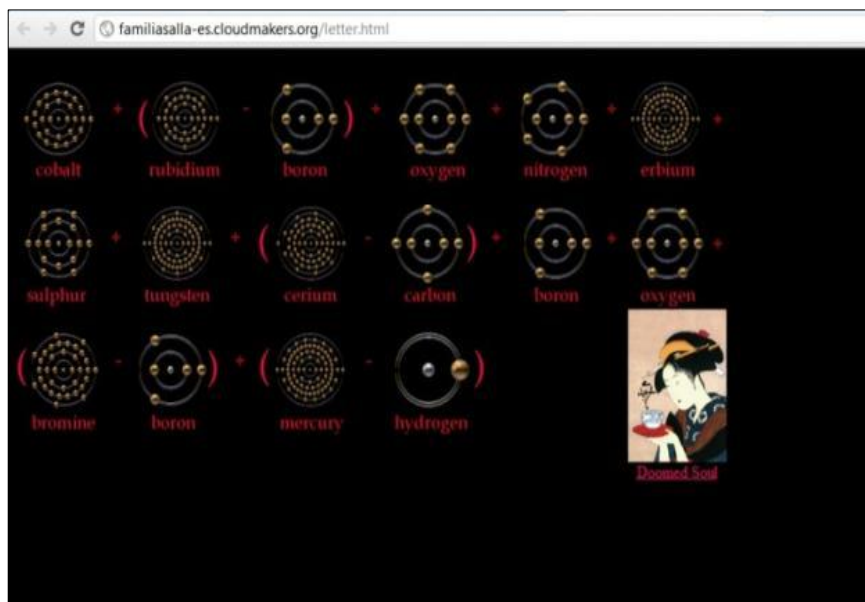


Figure 7

Evan had also been having an affair with Venus, a customised sex robot created by manufacturers Belladerma.<sup>14</sup> Another site, Metropolitan Living Homes (MLH), revealed Venus belonged to Enrico Basta, with whom Evan was vaguely acquainted. MLH also linked to the homepage of Kate Nei, the designer of Basta's A.I. home Isabella. A week later this page updated to include a story about A.I. home architect Martin Swinton, whose homes were inexplicably malfunctioning, causing their deaths.

### Game Progression

Venus was initially suspected of Evan's murder and pursued by the Sentient Police Crime Bureau (SPCB).<sup>15</sup> Lacking faith in the SPCB, Belladerma hired specialist A.I. Diane Fletcher from Rogue Retrieval to find her.<sup>16</sup> After her capture it became clear that someone had programmed Venus to kill Evan, and thus the real murderer was still at large.

The SPCB website initially gave no further clues, but suddenly experienced problems with its images, suggesting it had been hacked. The HTML source code revealed segments of a hidden page with a message in 'hackerspeak' from apparent perpetrator, the Red King. Affiliated with pro-A.I. faction BIOS, he helped Venus escape the SPCB, only to find her memory of the murder had been wiped.

Players became familiar with both pro and anti-robot organisations who, when

<sup>14</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20010416233550/http://www.belladerma-srl-it.ro/> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>15</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20140915052436/http://spcb.cloudmakers.org/> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>16</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20140915124444/http://rogueretrieval.cloudmakers.org/> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

contacted by phone, led to further clues, or voicemail message boxes. They became members of ARM and were invited to attend ‘ARM Rallies’ in New York, LA and Chicago, where further puzzles awaited. A major subplot developed through Martin Swinton, who hired Diane Fletcher to find out who was killing his A.I. houses. Laia became something of a representation of the player community within the game itself and was also investigating this mystery as she believed it was related to Evan’s death.

By further investigating Enrico Basta, players discovered he employed Kate Nei to reprogramme Venus to kill ‘unauthorised users’ if they attempted to be intimate with her. Basta’s A.I. house Isabella had recorded him paying Nei to do the work. She asked Isabella to give her the video and tried to escape with it. Unfortunately, Basta caught up with Nei and murdered her to ensure her silence. Distraught by the loss of her owner, Nei’s A.I. house Ivy took revenge and infiltrated Isabella’s systems to kill Basta. A mysterious third party then stepped in and destroyed Ivy, removing anyone with knowledge of Venus’ reprogramming.

## **Endgame**

It was this mysterious third party which suggested Basta was not looking to remove Evan simply due to his relationship with Venus. The answer actually lay with the initial corporate conspiracy theory.<sup>17</sup> Waterworks, one of the merger companies, were big players in the Thermo-Plankton (TP) Web market.<sup>18</sup> Evan’s investigations led him to discover some of the TP were evolving extremely quickly. They had developed some form of intelligence and their regulatory A.I. could no longer control them. As a result they were causing havoc among other A.I.s, sometimes killing them.

This did not bode well for Waterworks’ stakeholders, including a group called the Dalangs.<sup>19</sup> In addition to their other investments, the Dalangs were in the business of making robots called Passers who looked exactly like specific humans, often creating them to replace people in powerful roles. When a co-worker at DonuTech unintentionally revealed Evan’s discoveries to a member of the Dalangs they decided to have him killed to keep their secret and allow the merger to continue. One Dalang,

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<sup>17</sup> One player guessed this solution at the start of the game, causing some distress amongst PMs. Fortunately, he became distracted by another clue and the corporate conspiracy theory died down.

<sup>18</sup> Scientists developed genetically engineered plankton called Thermo-Plankton which regulated the Earth’s climate, allowing the ice caps to slowly reform. These were structured into a web controlled by an A.I. called THOR. [http://web.archive.org/web/20131217080025/http://bangaloreworlduin.co.cloudmakers.org/bwu\\_news\\_13.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20131217080025/http://bangaloreworlduin.co.cloudmakers.org/bwu_news_13.html) [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>19</sup> A dalang is an Indonesian puppeteer.

referred to as Sencha, disagreed with this action and began leaving clues in the datasphere for Laia to find, including the Chemistry puzzle on her site at the beginning of the game.

The game officially ended when the majority of storylines had been concluded and players received the following email from the Puppetmasters:

From: themanbehindthecurtain<themanbehindthecurtain@visionary.net>

Subject: Surfacing

Date: Tue, 24 Jul 2001 10:25:23 -0800

Dear Players:

Now our play is ended. We have drawn aside the curtain, and let it drop for good.

But we wanted to write one more time, to say again what a profound pleasure and extraordinary privilege it has been to work with you.

We had a magical team to put this thing together. How lucky we were to find a team every bit as magical on the other side of the curtain! Your passion and energy and intelligence has kept us going through more dire emergencies and long nights than you can imagine. We always thought a community could form around this project, but never dared to hope for an audience so engaged and so resourceful. You demanded that we experiment, and were generous enough to stick with us when some of those experiments didn't work out quite as we had hoped.

You made us work really hard. Which was only fair.

The best audience an artist can hope for is one that forgives error but never cynicism; that demands your best work and then appreciates it; that contributes energy and ideas to create something better than you could have ever made on your own. At this moment, we believe we have been blessed with the best, smartest, most passionate audience imaginable. If you have any questions not covered by the FAQ (coming soon!), or just want to hang out and chat, we will have an electronic get-together at 9 pm EST/ 6 pm PST on Tuesday, July 31. (<http://www.zone.msn.com/zxxx/auditorium.asp>)

We think that all of us, puppetmasters and players alike, have been given a chance to be part of a truly original and groundbreaking experiment. There will be other projects that attempt to use the web as a distinctive artistic medium, ones with bigger budgets and larger audiences: but we were here first.

Once again, our profound thanks. It was dazzling, wasn't it?

The PMs

Credits ([www.jeaninesalla.com/credits](http://www.jeaninesalla.com/credits))

(Quoted in Hon 2001a).

### **WhySoSerious? - (The Dark Knight)**

After The Beast some of the key PMs founded 42 Entertainment, an LA-based company specialising in immersive marketing experiences. They went on to create high profile ARGs including ilovebees for the Xbox game *Halo 2* and Year Zero for the Nine Inch Nails album of the same name. Promotional ARGs were also created for non-narrative products, such as The Art of the Heist, which launched the Audi A3. Attempts were also made at monetising the genre, with some having more success (*Perplex City*) than others (*Majestic*).

WhySoSerious was created by 42 Entertainment for Warner Bros. to promote *The Dark Knight*. It is often considered the most successful ARG to date, evidenced by the following figures from 42 Entertainment:

- Between 750,000-800,000 participants engaged in real world activities in 380 cities worldwide.
- 1300 videos and 5000 photos related to the campaign were posted in YouTube and Flickr.
- Forums consisted of 400+ threads, 150,000 posts, 7 million+ views.
- The wiki contains 985 total pages, 560 files, 386 player editors.<sup>20</sup>

A direct comparison with The Beast should take into account the contexts in which each game was produced. By 2008 the rise in social networking sites like Facebook, Myspace and Twitter meant target consumers were maintaining an online presence almost 24/7, offering a wider audience for ARGs to tap into. Online, viral and interactive marketing had become central to film promotion, as opposed to experimental side projects alongside broadcast and print campaigns.

*A.I.* also lacked the creative baggage which often accompanies a commercially successful franchise. PMs on WhySoSerious were more limited as to the kinds of worlds, storylines and characters they could create. Gotham City had already been outlined both aesthetically and thematically in Christopher Nolan's first instalment *Batman Begins* (2005), taking the comic book adaptation in a less stylised, much darker and more violently realistic direction than predecessors Tim Burton (1990, 1992) and Joel Schumacher (1989, 1992). *The Dark Knight* also focussed heavily around the re-introduction of the Joker and Two-Face as old-but-new characters.

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<sup>20</sup>[http://web.archive.org/web/20140422030718/http://www.alternaterealitybranding.com/whysoserious\\_viral09/](http://web.archive.org/web/20140422030718/http://www.alternaterealitybranding.com/whysoserious_viral09/) [Accessed 05.01.2015]

Additionally, *The Beast* did not have to contend with the enormous fanbase attached to the *Batman* franchise, stretching back to the first comics in the 1940s. Even non-fans may have come to *The Dark Knight* with experience of previous *Batman* films. The marketing campaign therefore had to shape and manage those expectations. There was significantly less room for creative experimentation than there had been with *The Beast*. WhySoSerious was more heavily burdened with commercial responsibilities and as a result was a more commercially managed affair.

The game invited players to become citizens of Gotham for its duration from May 2007 to July 2008. Player communities emerged at both Unfiction.com and comic fansite Superherohype.com. It took up the narrative from the end of *Batman Begins* and ended with the bank robbery scenario which opens *The Dark Knight*. The main thread of the narrative recruited players to the Joker's mob, causing havoc across Gotham. They could also sign up with other websites connected to Gotham institutions, including the police department, press and political system. They then took part in tasks for these parties, all of which were revealed to be corrupt on some level.

### **Game Summary – Rabbit Hole**

The rabbit hole was found through official website [thedarkknight.warnerbros.com](http://thedarkknight.warnerbros.com), (released May 11<sup>th</sup> 2007), which linked to [Ibelieveinharveydent.com](http://Ibelieveinharveydent.com) (Fig. 8). This quickly led to [Ibelieveinharveydenttoo.com](http://Ibelieveinharveydenttoo.com) (Fig. 9), an identical site defaced by the Joker: This site prompted players to submit their email addresses. As each person signed up, pixels were removed to reveal the first image of Heath Ledger as the Joker (Fig. 10).

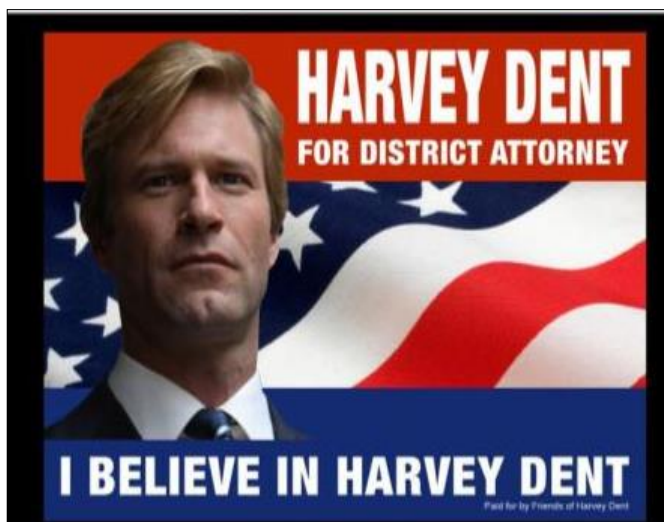


Figure 8

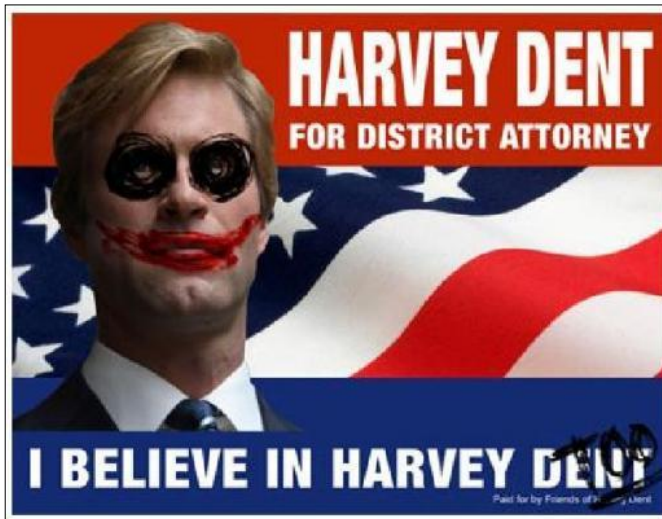


Figure 9



Figure 10

The page was then removed and replaced with a 'page not found' error containing the hidden message "See you in December". The campaign then went quiet until Comic Con on July 26<sup>th</sup> 2007. 'Jokerised' \$1 bills (Fig. 11) were scattered across the site in San Diego, leading to [whysoserious.com](http://whysoserious.com). The site advertised jobs as Joker henchmen and included co-ordinates for a location near the convention (Fig. 12) with a countdown clock ending at 10am the following morning.





Figure 11



Figure 12

Players gathered to see a phone number written in skywriting. A scavenger hunt then began with hundreds of participants collaborating with players online. After solving the puzzles, players were rewarded with Joker masks or a teaser trailer if they were playing online. Three days later [whysoserious.com](http://whysoserious.com) was replaced with [rentaclown.com](http://rentaclown.com), advertising 'clowns' for rent with photos of participants as its "employees" (Fig. 13).



Figure 13

This was the start of several games combining real-world and online interactions. Players were told they would receive a package after Thanksgiving, which was a hard copy of *The Gotham Times* (Fig. 14).



Figure 14

The paper was posted out and updated online at various points during the game, often pointing to new websites via adverts or puzzles. Hidden in the first edition was a

recruitment email address for the Joker (humanresources@whysoserious.com) and content leading to other sites including the hahahatimes.com (a 'jokerised' version of The Gotham Times) (Fig. 15), gothampolice.com (Fig. 16) and wearetheanswer.org (a site requesting tips regarding corrupt GPD officers) (Fig.17).



Figure 15

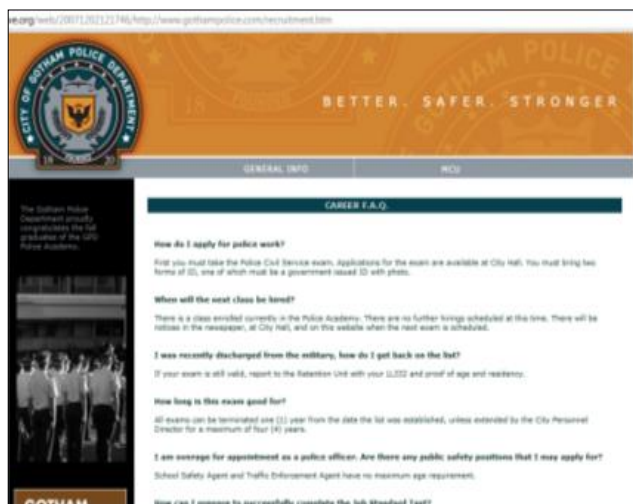


Figure 16

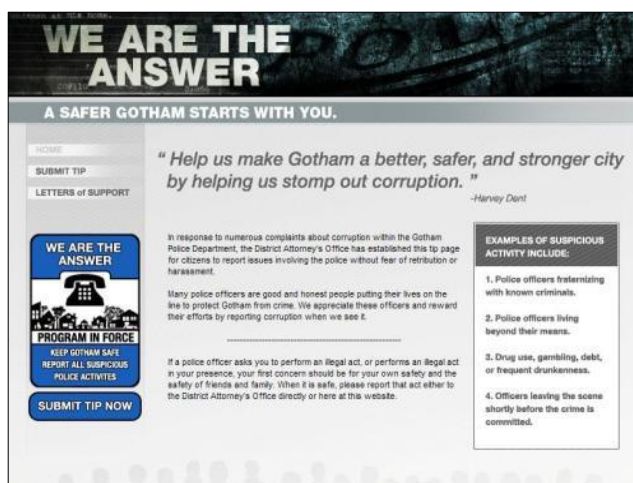


Figure 17

## Game Progression

Players completed puzzles and tasks for the Joker, campaigned for Harvey Dent, ran operations with Gotham Police Department and showed their support for the caped crusader as part of the activist group Citizens for Batman. Each event provided players with a reward, be it physical game/film memorabilia, access to unseen film footage, or simply the conclusion to the scenario.

In the first few stages players gathered online to watch a live streaming of a Gotham Police wiretap operation, resulting in the arrest of two corrupt officers. This was followed by the Step Right Up event. Those who emailed [humanresources@whysoserious.com](mailto:humanresources@whysoserious.com) were led to a carnival themed scavenger hunt and asked to pick up packages at 22 locations across the US. These were cakes with mobile phones inside, which were used to contact players (Figs. 18, 19, 20).



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20

Other rewards for completing the scavenger hunt included a new poster on [whysoserious.com](http://whysoserious.com) and a chance to see a preview of a prologue, due to be attached to IMAX screenings of *I Am Legend* (2007 Francis Lawrence). Players were then informed not to expect anything further from the ARG until the New Year. The Joker Phones had

their accounts renewed until March 29 2008, indicating when the next game might be.

At the start of March, [ibelieveinharveydent.com](http://ibelieveinharveydent.com) was updated to allow players to submit contact information. Players were encouraged to join the Dent campaign by distributing flyers and submitting photos of their efforts to the site (Fig. 21). They received Gotham Voter Registration cards in the post and were notified of ‘campaign stops’ across the US, where they collected free campaign materials including stickers, posters, t-shirts and buttons (Fig. 22). Those registered with other in-game sites also received packages with details of the grassroots campaign and more materials. Online players could download digital content including backgrounds and screensavers.

Towards the end of March the Joker Phones received text messages announcing a new event. They were given a coded letter which, when descrambled, led to [clowntravelagency.com](http://clowntravelagency.com) and a new scavenger hunt occurring on April 1<sup>st</sup>. Players were directed to bowling alleys across the world to collect packages containing bowling balls and a new Joker Phone (Fig. 23). Calling the numbers on the balls led players to [acmesecuritysystems.com/delos](http://acmesecuritysystems.com/delos) where they were asked to disable a security system (Fig. 24).



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23

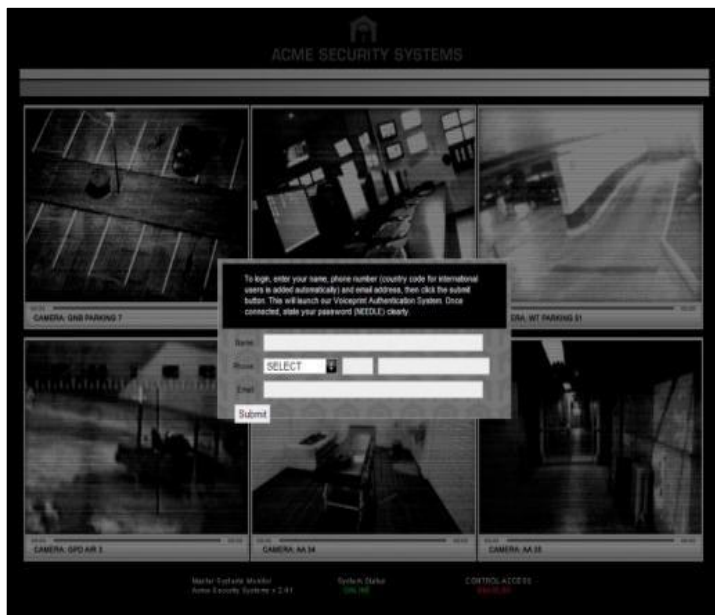



Figure 24

On entering their information they received a phone call from Gotham Police Commissioner Jim Gordon. He informed them that since the police had their identities they were now required to switch sides and work for the GPD. This initiated Operation Slipknot, involving Frank Notaro. The GPD officer had been intimidated into a smear campaign against Dent for mob group 'Concerned Citizen for a Better Gotham' (Fig. 25).

**CONCERNED CITIZENS  
FOR A BETTER GOTHAM**

## WHO IS HARVEY DENT?

[DOWNLOAD THE PETITION](#) [READ THE MANUSCRIPT](#)



Sgt. Jason Tebagiani  
7-Year Veteran, GPD



**HARVEY DENT IS A CORRUPT,  
MEDIA CRAZED INQUISITOR WHO IS  
BETRAYING HIS DUTY TO THE PUBLIC BY  
SENDING INNOCENT COPS TO JAIL.**

**NEWS:**

**Eight Cops Unmask Harvey Dent As Corrupt, Out of Control Prosecutor**

Eight Gotham police officers stood up for the truth today at a morning press conference at Gotham's Hotel International. One by one, the police officers took the podium and told their story. Their devastating testimony showed that Dent is a dishonest, corrupt, out-of-control prosecutor who threatened police officers in order to get them to testify against innocent cops who Dent wanted in jail. Francis Nolano, Sergeant, told the press corps that Dent had offered him money to testify against an innocent cop, Jimmy Scallano.

**WHAT IS CONCERNED CITIZENS FOR A BETTER GOTHAM?**

We are a group of over 100 concerned businessmen, police officers, and residents who work tirelessly for a better Gotham city. We believe in strong values, strong families, and clean government. We believe that to fight crime, we must support our brave police department, which is under attack in the streets by thugs and in the courts by corrupt prosecutors. We contribute our time and money to fight to improve our city for all of its citizens.

**SIGN UP FOR CONCERNED CITIZENS FOR A BETTER GOTHAM UPDATES:**

Joseph Candeloro, Esquire, is the founder of Concerned Citizens for a Better Gotham.

Figure 25

Players were informed via email that Dent was streaming a live press conference at 3pm EDT on April 13<sup>th</sup>. What they heard was not the press conference but a 'live feed' from a hostage situation involving Notaro at a mob-run deli, where he demanded witness protection. Dent diffused the situation, but Notaro was not the only officer on the mob's payroll. Players were asked to participate in a phone survey about Dent and used an access code in the source code of ccfabg.com to discover a hidden voicemail. The message instructed any officers involved with the group to leave Gotham immediately. Gordon then emailed all those caught in the security sting asking them to call the Gotham Intercontinental hotel. They were told to convince the concierge to redirect packages for the corrupt officers to themselves. Information in the packages was uploaded by players and resulted in the capture of 27 out of 30 officers. Players were rewarded with a phone call from Jim Gordon recorded by Gary Oldman. Operation

Slipknot was followed by [whysoserious.com/itsallpartoftheplan](http://whysoserious.com/itsallpartoftheplan), another scavenger hunt, leading players to a cinema where they saw another new trailer.

After a brief quiet period in May, Joker Phones received messages indicating their accounts had been updated until the end of June. Players were then called upon to show their support for Batman himself. Subscribers to US broadband provider Comcast were invited to watch the first of six episodes of news programme Gotham Tonight, which revealed Dent had been elected District Attorney.<sup>21</sup> The Gotham Times was updated online, leading to the discovery of [gothamcitypizzeria.com](http://gothamcitypizzeria.com). Sponsored by Domino's, the site offered free pizzas to players in certain locations. Joker Phones were also sent puzzles indicating a tie-in Domino's ad would air on June 16<sup>th</sup>. The pizza boxes included codes leading to a secret Citizens for Batman forum and [gothamcablenews.com](http://gothamcablenews.com) was updated asking players to submit sightings of Batman. Those who did were sent promotional materials from Citizens for Batman and a countdown timer was added to [citizensforbatman.org](http://citizensforbatman.org), ending July 8<sup>th</sup>. Finally, [whysoserious.com](http://whysoserious.com) was updated with a page detailing the Joker's checklist, hinting at three more tasks or events before the end of the game (Fig. 26).



Figure 26

<sup>21</sup> Episodes were only available to Comcast subscribers, but subsequently became available on YouTube.



## Endgame

These games commenced in July, including an update to the Citizens for Batman forum. This announced that a key organiser for the July 8<sup>th</sup> event had been arrested for trespassing, leaving only an invoice number. After much investigation, the number led to a software key which, when entered into a submission box on the CFB website, revealed the locations of events in New York and Chicago. Players completed scavenger hunts leading to viewing points in each city where they saw the batsignal projected on the Woolworth Building (New York) and the Sears Tower (Chicago).

Meanwhile, Joker Phone owners received a word puzzle by text message which they posted to communities to solve. This led to [whysoserious.com/bamboozle/](http://whysoserious.com/bamboozle/), a fortune teller game which dispensed fortunes on tickets (Fig. 27).

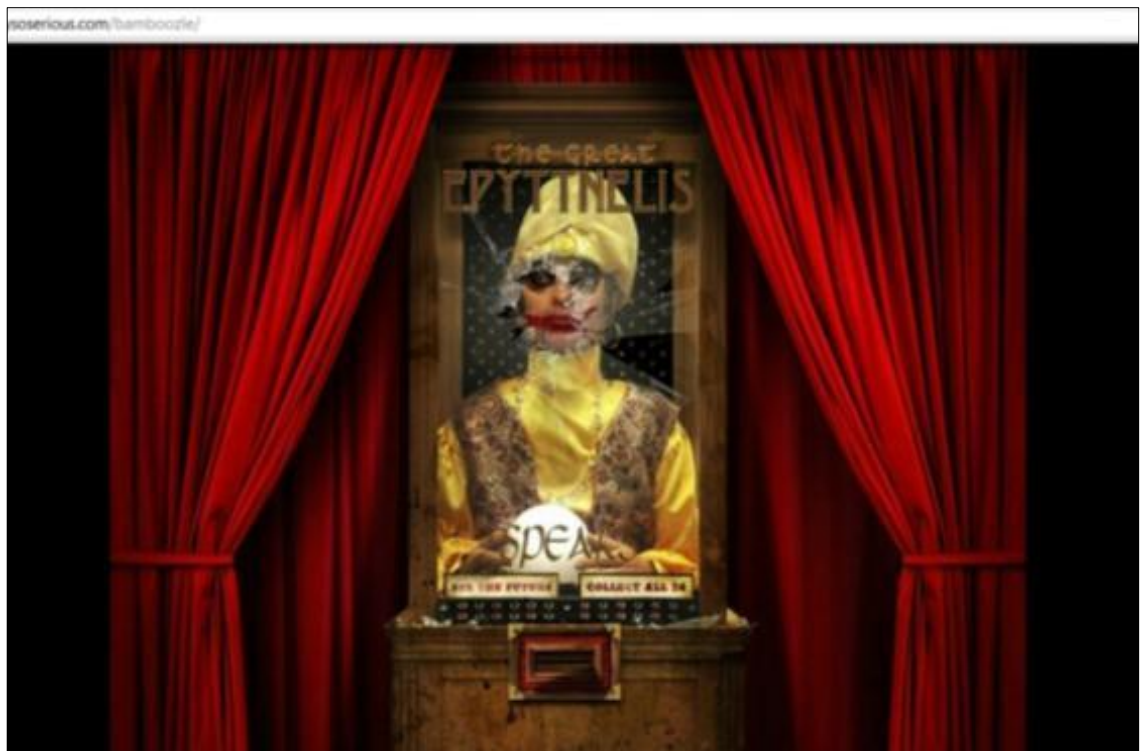


Figure 27

Each ticket had a map co-ordinate on its corner. Players used a map of Gotham (compiled using pieces discovered throughout the game) to work out a series of street numbers (22-1-5-3-4-17-14) (Fig. 28).





Puzzle pieces on certain sites spelt out [whysoserious.com/kickingandscreening](http://whysoserious.com/kickingandscreening), where players could apply for free tickets to IMAX screenings of the film. Joker Phone owners also received free tickets. Anyone who submitted their phone number during the game received a final phone call from 000-000-0000. This was a mash-up of other calls from the game but included a new call regarding Gotham National Bank. In the final episode of Gotham Tonight an interview with Dent was interrupted by news that six men wearing clown masks had robbed Gotham National Bank. Five were killed but one made off with millions. Players would eventually see this scene play out as the opening sequence of the film.

WhySoSerious is still one of the most narratively integrated and organised ARGs to date and is considered to have set the standard for promotional ARGs for films. It marks a shift in the genre from niche experimental marketing to something more structured that reaches out to wider audiences. It also cemented 42 Entertainment's reputation as the foremost provider of such experiential campaigns, winning them their second Grand Prix award at the Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival. The company was held in high regard by players at this time, with very positive responses to '42E' appearing on most of the forums, including player communities at [Unfiction.com](http://Unfiction.com) and [SuperheroHype.com](http://SuperheroHype.com).

## **Super 8 - (*Super 8*)**

By 2010 the ARG player community had expanded and the genre was more established. An entire industry had emerged around transmedia storytelling, including ARGs. Pressure was on developers to keep the genre fresh, innovative and involving. Industry press were also questioning whether such projects were simply gimmicks that would fade as quickly as they had appeared (Goldie 2008). Producers were therefore required to prove their long-term effectiveness if they were to gain contracts for campaigns.

*Super 8*'s ARG was heavily anticipated by the player community. A nostalgic sci-fi/coming of age narrative, directed by JJ Abrams and produced by Steven Spielberg, it arguably needed little in the way of innovative marketing. Abrams had written and produced two TV series (*Alias* and *Lost*) which had run ARGs and both shows were well-known for their intricate, mysterious plots. In 2008 he produced *Cloverfield* which entailed a year-long ARG.<sup>22</sup> Fans therefore expected a *Super 8* ARG. Those expectations required managing in order to maintain his own reputation as well as that of his production company Bad Robot. Originally part of Touchstone Television, Bad Robot moved with Abrams in 2006 to establish long term contracts with both Paramount and Warner Bros. Whether this relationship had an impact on the development of the ARG is uncertain, but this set-up implies a different production context than either *The Beast* or *WhySoSerious*.

*Super 8*'s ARG initially followed a pattern recognisable to seasoned ARG players. However, as the game continued it broke with established ARG rules and developed a less clearly defined role within the rest of the marketing campaign, leading to a mixed reaction from players.

### **Game Summary – Rabbit Hole**

*Super 8*'s rabbit hole was embedded in a teaser trailer released in May 2010 before screenings of *Iron Man 2* (2010 Jon Favreau). Set in 1979, the trailer depicted something being transported by train out of Area 51. The train collided with a truck speeding onto the tracks and something appeared to be punching its way out of the wreckage. Players quickly discovered that slowing down the flickering film reel at the end of the trailer revealed the phrase 'scariestthingieversaw'. This led to

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<sup>22</sup> *Cloverfield* does not feature as a case study as it was released in the same year as *WhySoSerious*. *Super 8* provides an example of a more recent Abrams ARG.

scariestthingieversaw.com (STIES), a website which looked like a remote PC desktop (Fig. 34).

A prompt to ‘print all documents’ produced a printout stating ‘stop posting publicly. I can answer your questions, I have proof’ (Fig. 35). The desktop itself was interactive and following the prompts led players to a new screen (Fig. 36).

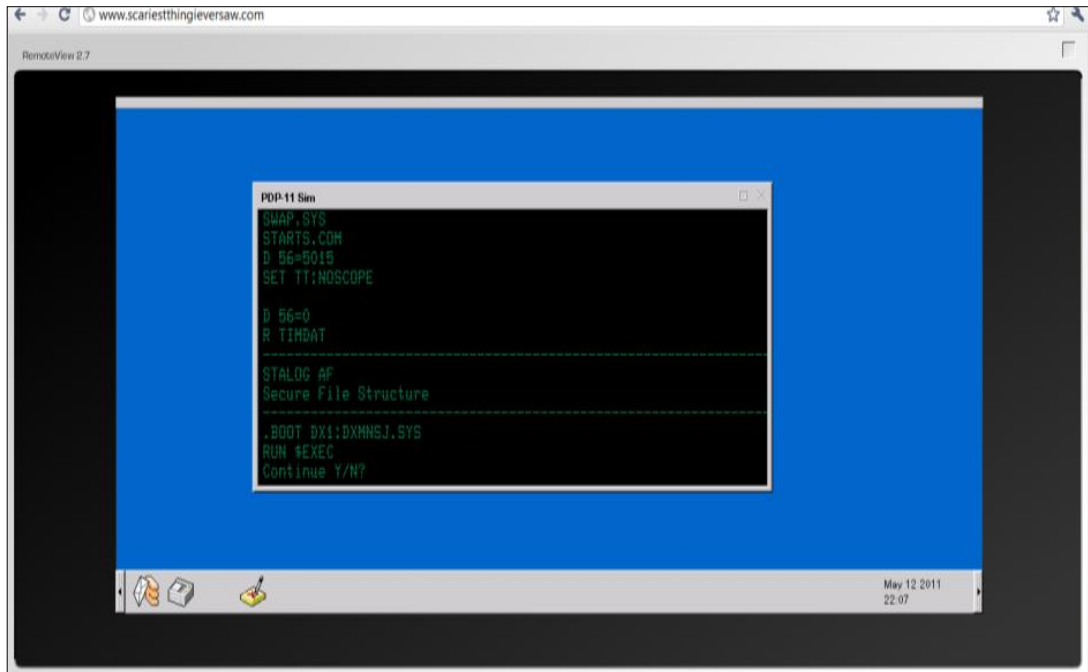


Figure 34

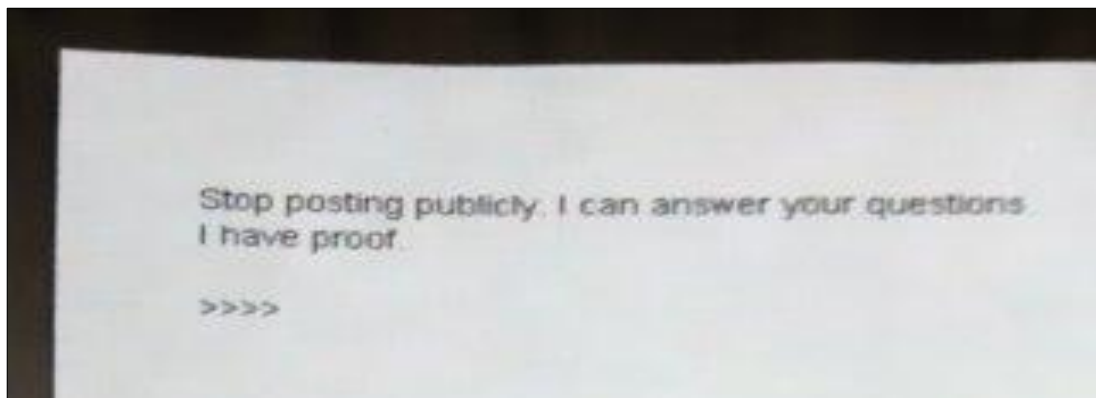


Figure 35

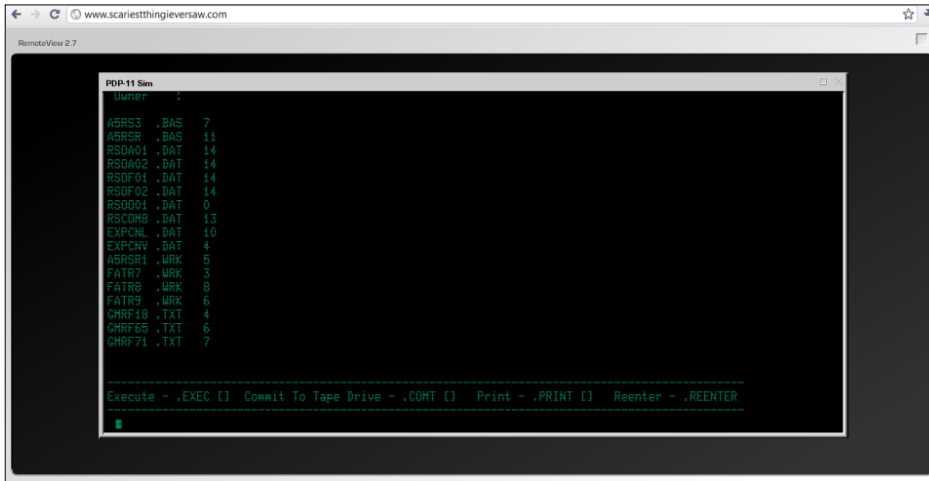


Figure 36

Trial and error revealed RSCOM8 was the only working file, which when teamed with the .PRINT command, produced a newspaper printout (Fig. 37).

The first page was an article on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. The second was an advert for Rocket Poppeteers, a fictional ice lolly brand. When players turned the advert page upside down, laid it on top of the article and lined up the two x's (highlighted in green), the blacked out words (highlighted in red) corresponded with words on the page underneath. When combined these read "No certainty if a live may be after us. We go underground."

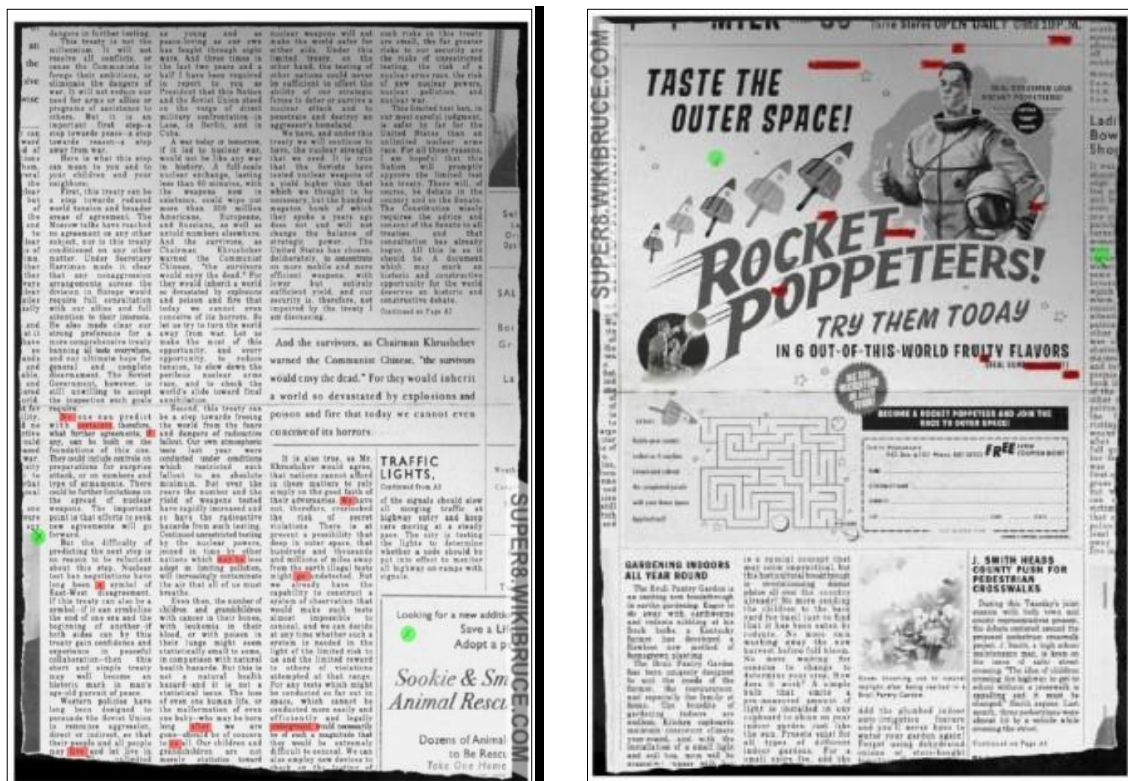


Figure 37

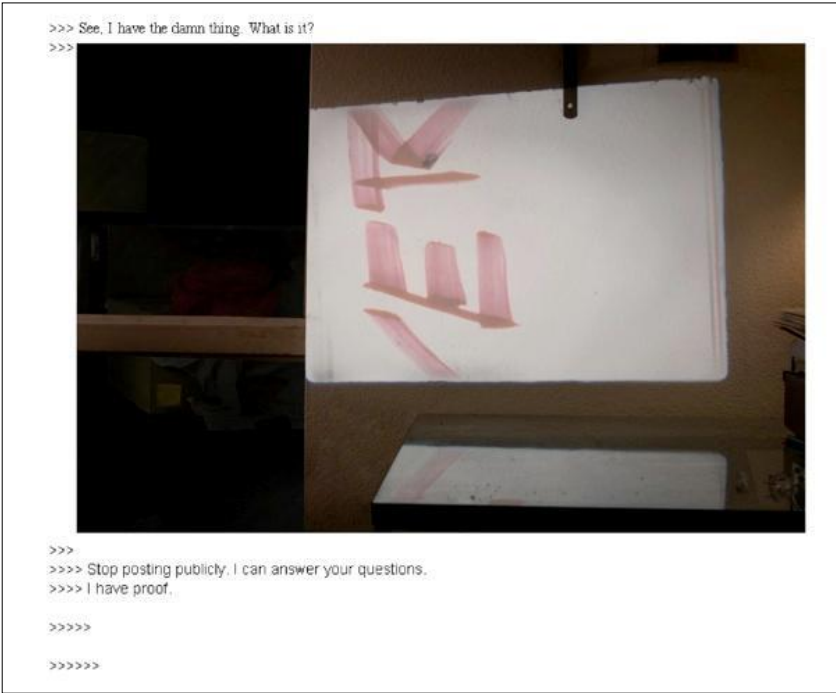


Figure 38

The printable page from [scareistthingieversaw.com](http://scareistthingieversaw.com) then updated to include an image (Fig. 38). The photo contained a dim reflection in the bottom left hand corner. When flipped and enhanced, a 'sold' note could be seen on a box in the corner, along with the zip code 25801 (West Virginia). A hat matching the one on the box was found listed, along with other items, on Craigslist. A billboard behind some of the items had a note attached but was not clearly visible (Fig. 39).



Figure 39





Figure 40

Players pieced together the visible fragments to reveal a phone number (Fig. 40). On calling it they heard a voicemail informing them of a memorial service for Evelyn Minker, organised by her son, Josh. This led to Josh's blog, [hooklineandminker.com](http://hooklineandminker.com). Players could contact Josh via his blog, which detailed his interest in collecting rare fish. Further updates to the printable file on STIES revealed a message from an anonymous source (referred to on forums as Mysterio) asking Josh to remove the sales listings in return for information about his missing father.

## Game Progression

Rocket Poppeteers (RP) became a separate thread of the game. Players who sent the coupon from the newspaper advert to the address in North Dakota received a letter in the post, confirming their enrolment as a Rocket Poppeteer Astronaut (Fig. 41).



Figure 41

Rocket Poppeteers were also in attendance at Comic Con 2010, announced via their Twitter account (Fig. 42), handing out lollies and merchandise (Figs. 43, 44). Those who presented their letters received extra rewards.

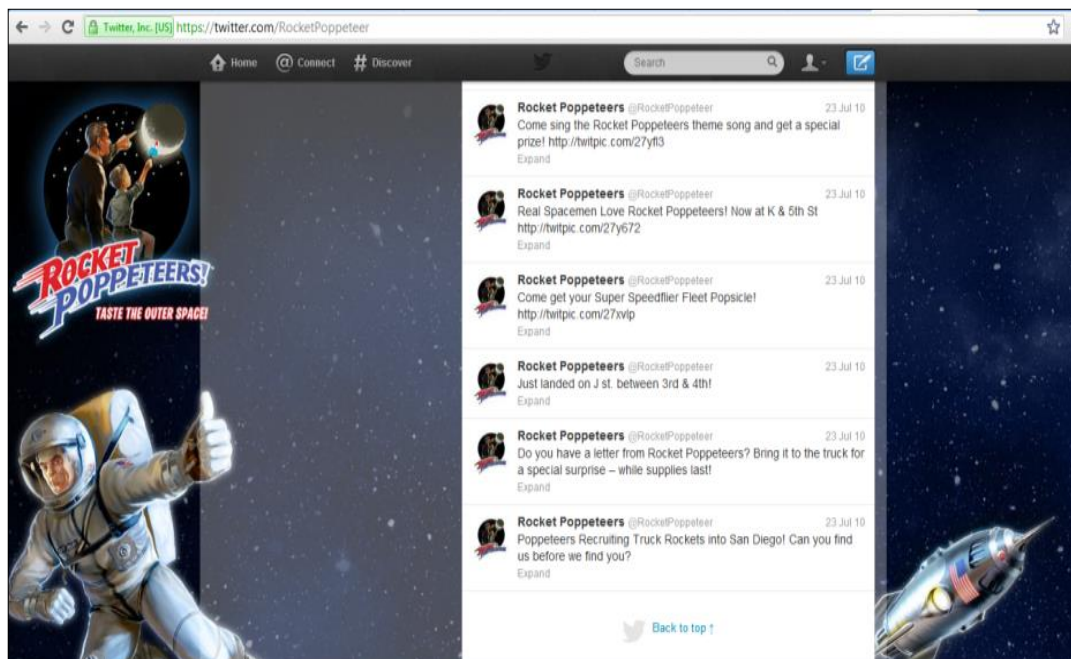


Figure 42



Figure 43



Figure 44

When rocketpoppeteers.com went live it also became possible to enrol online (Fig. 45). Successful applicants received a personality questionnaire assigning them to one of six ‘fleets’, each corresponding to a flavour of ice lolly (Fig. 46).



Figure 45



Figure 46

Players competed in Flash games on the website to gain points for their fleet. An online store was launched selling Poppeteer-branded merchandise and ice lollies were made available in stores in the US. Throughout the game the RP Twitter account was updated with website upgrades and other related news. This thread did not relate to Josh Minker’s story, which provided the main narrative.

Josh continued to correspond with Mysterio through updates to the STIES

printable file. One cryptic message read: ‘Meet me at 4D & 5O's last leg. Bring the foghorn and the unexpected title.’

Over the next few days a chat icon appeared on STIES, requiring a password. 4D & 5O refers to the date and time of the chat, which corresponds to the lunar calendar on Josh’s blog (Fig. 47). The game summary on community group Super8news explains how they deciphered the password:

‘The password is toadfish12. The password was discovered using that cryptic message from the printout. The Foghorn referred to the sound that the toadfish makes and the unexpected title is from a blog post that Josh wrote on Hook, Line and Minker where he didn't put a title and hinted at something unexpected in the first line of the blog, the post was #112 (look at the url).’<sup>23</sup>

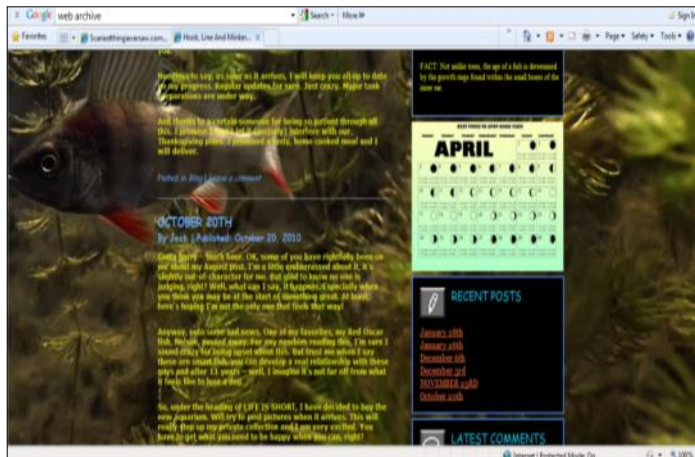


Figure 47

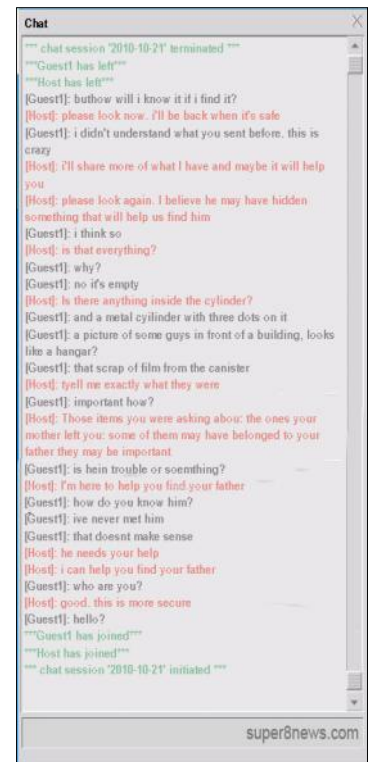


Figure 48

The chatlog (Fig. 48) became a central source of information on Josh’s father. Mysterio also updated STIES with image files, including four Air Force ID badges containing a three dot symbol (Figs. 49, 50). The meaning of the symbol was the source of much speculation but eventually considered to be a red herring.

<sup>23</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20120602093752/http://www.super8news.com/super-8-timeline/> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

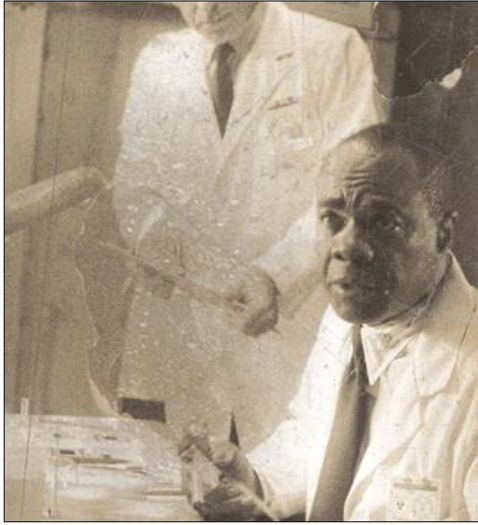


Figure 49



Figure 50

Shortly afterwards, Mysterio updated STIES with a picture of Josh's father. Mr Minker was a Bio-speleologist working on alternative energy sources. Updates went quiet for around a week until Mysterio organised another chat, concerned something had happened to Josh. A blog update told players he was alive and another chat session revealed his house had been burgled. Nothing was stolen but Mysterio seemed to know what they were after. The next day STIES was updated with a map (Fig. 51).

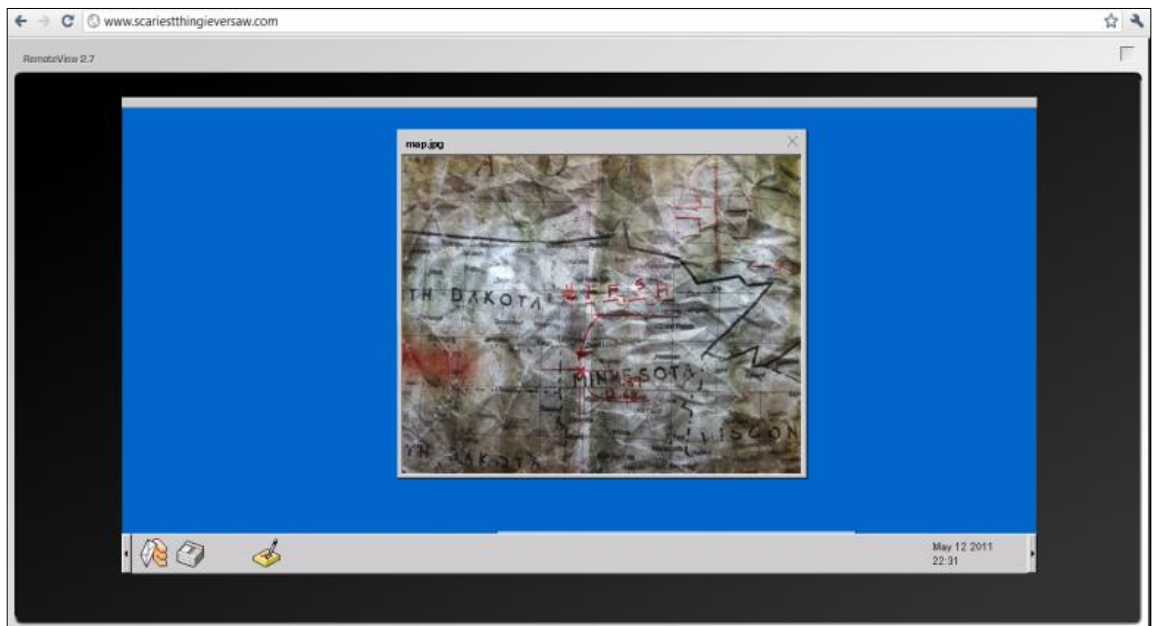


Figure 51

Players established that FFSH stood for Fergus Falls State Hospital. A drawing in the upper right of the map appeared to depict the third floor of the hospital where a spiral staircase was set between two windows. This was taken by some as a signal that the next clue was hidden under the staircase. The building had been disused for years but a local historical society ran regular tours. Players called the society and the city building administrator but neither had heard about the ARG. The hospital was not only closed for the winter, but was inaccessible due to heavy snowfall. It was decided it was not PMs' intentions for players to visit the hospital, although some disagreed.

Meanwhile, a trailer clip appeared online. It was reported to be a shorter version of a TV spot which premiered during the Superbowl. Both were analysed for glimpses of the creature and new letters were found in the film reel at the end of the trailer spelling VITAS RELIC. When the official trailer became available, players noted it was updated almost daily and each version had different images flickering at the end. Super8news compiled them into a single image (Fig. 52), revealing more clues including a date, images of a laboratory and the recurring three dots. Yet despite speculation, no firm conclusions were drawn.



Figure 52

Finally, a file appeared on STIES including a letter (Fig. 53), apparently from Josh's father, reading:

'Hopefully this has fallen into the right hands. If you are reading this, it means you've found each clue. Wherever I am, I'm grateful to you both for your willingness to help and trust me. I wish I could be there to explain in person.'

Perhaps someday. It's been five days since we left the hospital. I'll try to leave as many breadcrumbs as I can. TROGL and the rest. Use them. As of now, the vitas relic is safe. Safer in some places than others but I'll have to rely on luck to keep it secure until absolutely necessary'



Figure 53

Players agreed the people who raided Josh's house were looking for the vitas relic (whatever that was), which his father had hidden. They spotted a book in the top right hand corner of the letter image by Dr Leyda Cupe and a quick web search retrieved revalistic.com.<sup>24</sup> This was a conspiracy site including posts about Area 51, alternative energy sources and Soviet spacecraft. Players emailed the host asking about Dr Cupe and other topics but again made no great discoveries.

The first full trailer was released in March 2011, directing viewers to the official website [www.super8-movie.com/editingroom.html](http://www.super8-movie.com/editingroom.html) (Fig. 54). Designed to look like an editing room with hanging filmstrips, players were encouraged, via Twitter, to 'collect' missing frames to create a clip. The final clip depicted the experiments conducted by Josh's father and Mysterio involving an unidentified creature. Websites including Wired.com and Slashfilm.com were sent packages with a strip of Super8 film, a USB stick containing a black and white film clip and a card with a code and email address. Emailing the code back to the sender unlocked a frame in the Editing Room. Players also unlocked frames by signing up to the Super 8 Development Room via Facebook

<sup>24</sup>This may have been a secondary clue when revalistic.com should have been discovered as an anagram of VITAS RELIC.

and logging in at specific times in the run-up to release (Fig. 55). This entered them into a draw for a *Super 8* t-shirt and film strip including their unlocked frame (Fig. 56). Frames were also hidden in the Super8 iPhone app, iPad app and standees in cinemas.

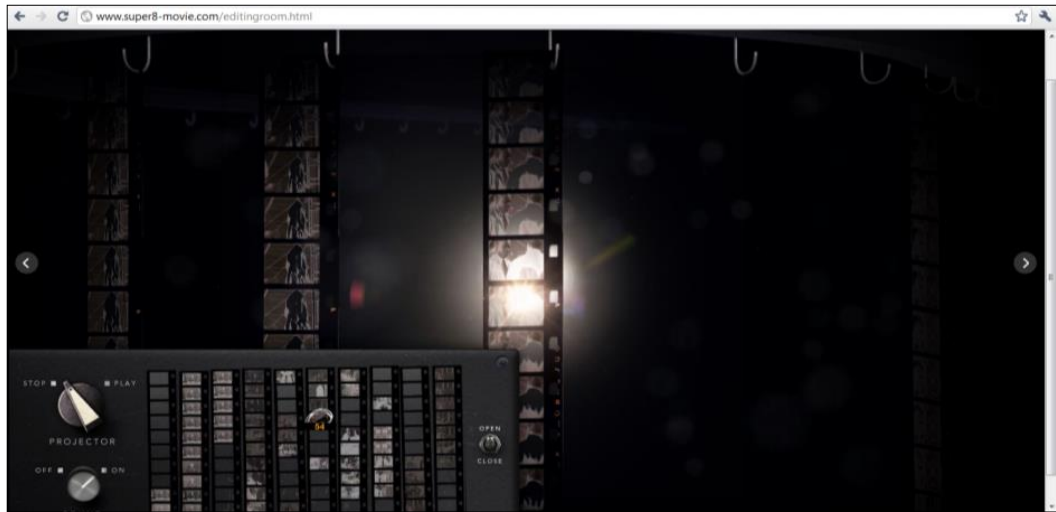


Figure 54

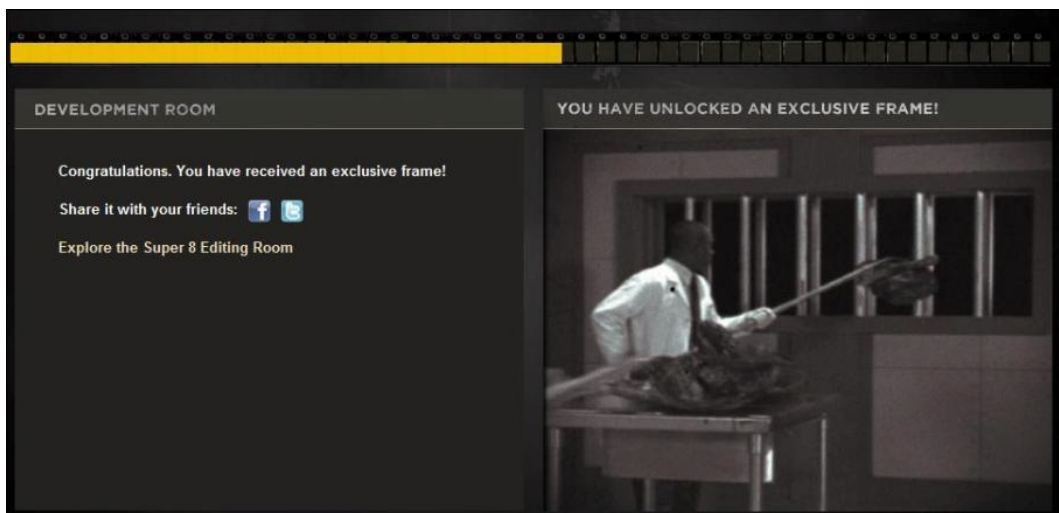


Figure 55



Figure 56



At the end of March, Mysterio hacked Josh's blog leaving a following message (Fig. 57). This led to [revalistic.com/explanation](http://revalistic.com/explanation) which required the password BXTSLWK729 to access a chat between Josh and the site administrator. This turned out to be Josh's colleague Sarah, previously mentioned on his blog.



Figure 57

The chat transcript suggested Sarah's former employer (an oil company) was keeping files on strange projects. One of them mentioned Josh, leading Sarah and her team to break into his house. She wanted to work together to discover the truth behind the vitas relic but Mysterio warned him against involving a third party.

Josh later updated STIES with a photo of the team of scientists with a note on the back (Figs. 58, 59).



Figure 58

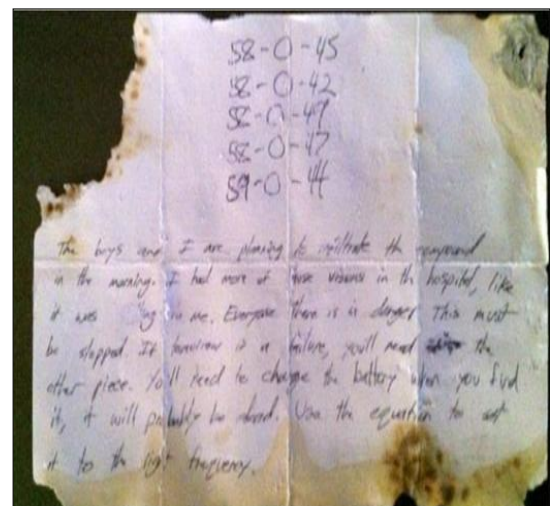


Figure 59

The numbers corresponded to the numbers on the ID badges and the note suggested Josh's father had some sort of psychological connection with the creature in the experiment. The team planned to 'infiltrate the compound' because the experiment was

putting everyone in danger. If this went wrong he instructed the reader to find ‘the other piece’. On seeing this, Mysterio expressed regret for not helping Josh’s father and warned he would not be able to hide indefinitely from his pursuers.

## Endgame

Sadly, they caught up with him and Josh received a photo with a farewell note from Mysterio who revealed his name to be Alexander Kaslov. He warned Josh that someone from his father’s past was after the vitas relic and could not be allowed to obtain it. It hinted he committed suicide rather than being tortured into sharing information. Josh left a note on revalistic.com telling Sarah he was going in search of the ‘other piece’ in West Virginia. He eventually posted again explaining he had discovered a device hidden by his father in a cave (Fig. 60).



Figure 60

Around the same time, an interactive trailer emerged as bonus material for completing the console game *Portal 2* (2011 Valve Corporation) (Figs. 61, 62, 63). Players could explore the wreckage of the train which contained the device Josh discovered, the three dot symbol, a Rocket Poppeteer wrapper and a map pinpointing other stops on the train’s schedule in Ohio.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>For a walkthrough of the interactive trailer with running commentary see - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NgwAmeWhC7c&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NgwAmeWhC7c&feature=player_embedded)



Figure 61



Figure 62



Figure 63

Josh posted again on revalistic.com to tell Sarah he was headed to Ohio, but the next post suggested Sarah was in danger:

You won't see her again unless you meet me at the southwestern Ohio coordinates now. Bring everything. If anyone follows you, she's gone.

Following this there were no updates for days, leaving players confused about Josh and Sarah's fate. An update from Josh finally arrived on June 10<sup>th</sup> (the film's US release date). This was evidently for players since Kaslov was no longer alive to read it. It stated that a flash of light and some kind of energy killed Sarah's captors, but that she was safe. Josh found the vitas relic (a cube of some kind) and vowed to keep it safe and continue searching for his father. The note began with D:1912, which, when entered at the appropriate point on the STIES page, revealed a final message from Kaslov informing Josh his father's grave was in Lillian, Ohio, where the film is set (Fig. 64).

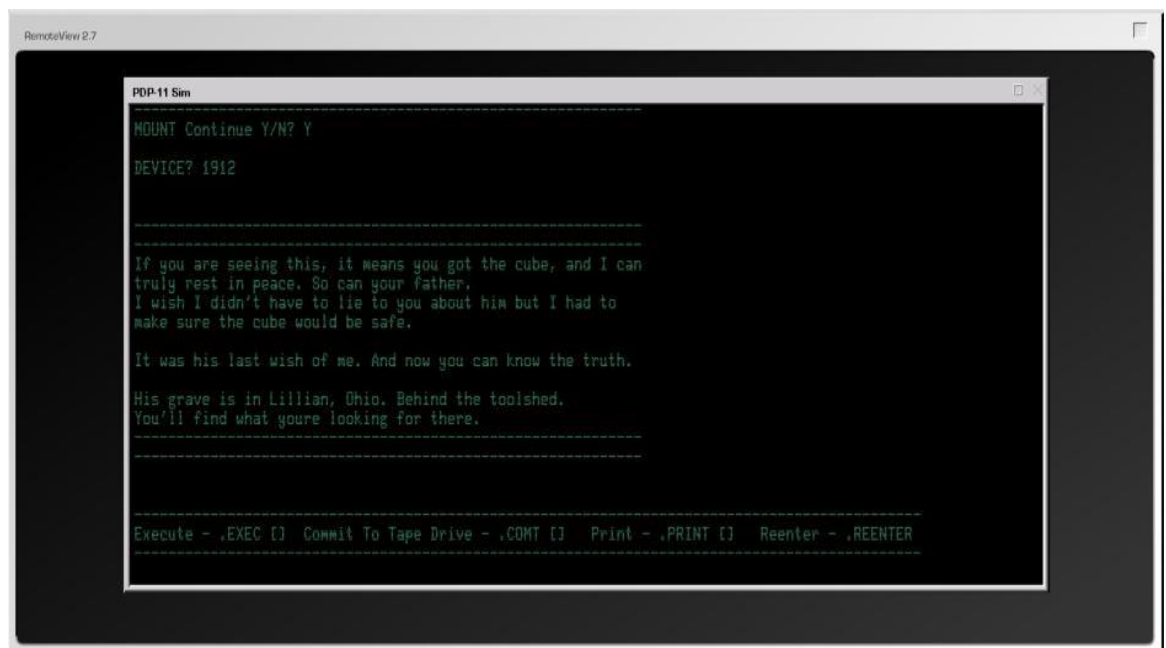


Figure 64

On visiting the grave, Josh found a note from his father which he uploaded to revalistic.com. After his confrontation with the monster, Josh's father had become obsessed with finding the creature again, changing his name and moving frequently. The last sentence visible to players read 'But I'm getting ahead of myself, first I should explain to you what the creature wants and what they mean to...'. This was the final update regarding the Minker thread of the narrative, ending roughly a week after the US release of *Super 8* (9<sup>th</sup> June 2011).

Meanwhile, the final frame for the clip on the Editing Room was unlocked on

8th June. The clip was an incident report from Kaslov and Minker's project, Operation Beltrap. It involved the recovery of an alien spacecraft and the study of both the alien and its technology, including some mysterious metallic cubes (one of which Josh had discovered). These Argus Cubes were shape-shifting blocks which formed the spaceship. They generated energy which scientists were looking to harness using the device Josh found in the cave. The creature itself resided in a 'subterranean dwelling' which was why Josh's father was called upon as a specialist. The clip did not, however, reveal an image of the creature. Josh's father was shown feeding something through the bars of its cage when he was grabbed by a tentacle.

Rocket Poppeteers also wound down around June 10<sup>th</sup> when the five top-scoring players were rewarded with recognition on the site and an Argus cube (Fig. 65).



Figure 65

## Analysis

### Game Structure

Entry points to all three games relied on players noticing something unusual hidden in conventional promotional materials. In *The Beast*, players took more encouraging than expected. Despite their reputation for being detail-oriented, fans seemed unlikely to pick through credits on a trailer unless prompted. However, they swiftly adopted this intense investigative attitude as their *modus operandi*. By the time *Super 8* arrived, players were waiting to sift through the trailer frame by frame. The use of trailers as a rabbit hole is now a standard feature of movie ARGs. The use of the website rather than trailer as an entry point in *WhySoSerious* also indicated the increased importance of a film's official website between 2001 and 2008. A higher proportion of Warner Bros.' target consumers would have had internet access and broadband connections by this time.

Although their rabbit holes were similar, the main bodies of each game were structured very differently. *The Beast* was the most complicated, developing numerous subplots and secondary characters. This flowchart of early game sites suggests the complexity of the storytelling (Fig. 66).

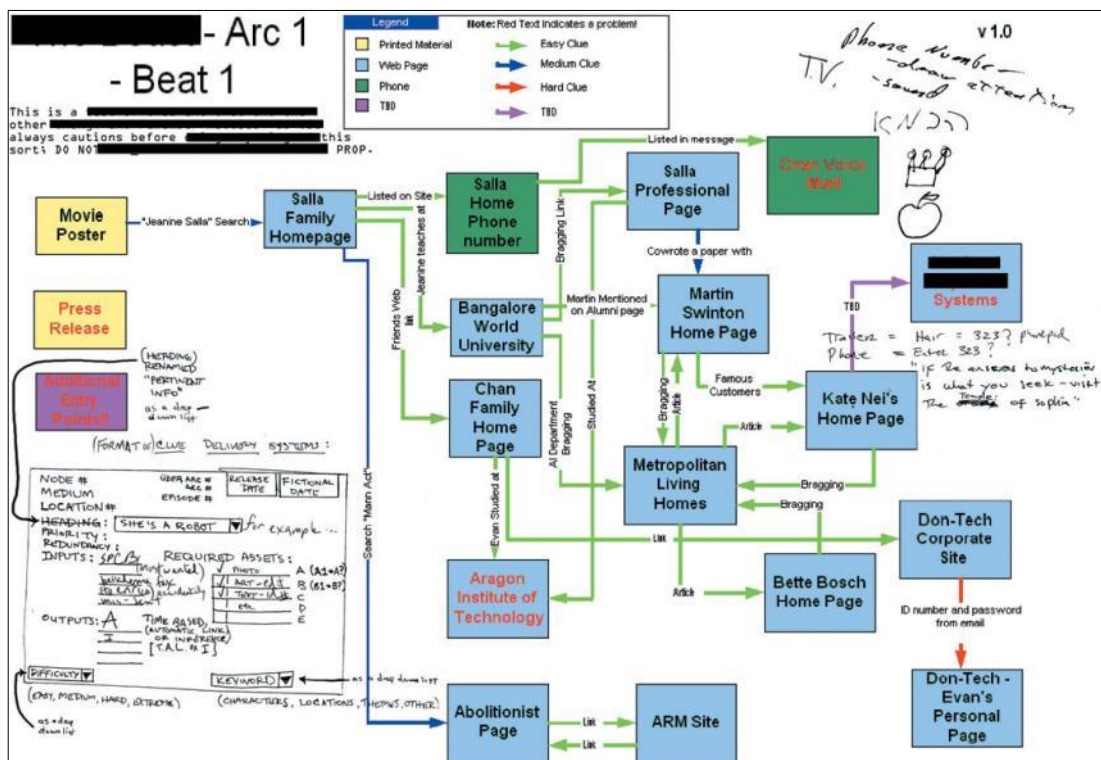


Figure 66

*WhySoSerious* did not share the intricate narrative structure of *The Beast* and had no mission statement as clear as 'Who killed Evan Chan?' Instead, it allowed

players to act on behalf of several characters and institutions, immersing them in Gotham City. It felt less meandering and was somewhat episodic, as players carried out tasks or participated in live events around which the game was rigorously structured. Events had specific names, making them readily identifiable for both players and press. This structure was also flexible enough to allow players to join at different points in the game with less need for backtracking through previous events. For example, it was possible to register with Harvey Dent's campaign with little knowledge of the Joker's previous activities. WhySoSerious was perhaps more appealing to casual players than The Beast, which was more difficult to join at later stages.

Super 8 was divided into three main parts. Rocket Poppeteers existed as its own entity and an outlet for merchandise. The Josh Minker narrative might be referred to as the ARG 'proper'. The third section, which intersected with the Minker narrative, comprised of the Editing Room and Development Room. The narrative was usually furthered by information discovered or updated in other strands of the game and the Minker narrative was relatively complex. Beginning strongly with a conspiracy theory premise, it engaged players quickly. However, towards the end, loose ends were tied together hastily, leaving players with unanswered questions. Characters were underdeveloped (Sarah in particular) and sites such as revalistic.com, with its abundance of conspiracy theories and scientific information, prompted vast amounts of player speculation but rarely provided any answers.

The loose connection between the three parts often made the game hard to follow as a complete entity. Some more sceptical fans were proven right by the number of dead ends and red herrings, particularly in the Minker thread. By the end there were so many unanswered questions that players felt somewhat cheated. One review expresses this succinctly:

'I enjoyed the game very much, but I thought it ended rather abruptly. I was very unsatisfied, as it was too quick and anti-climactic. We never learn who is after Josh, what that energy was that saved Sarah, and why Woodward even wanted Josh to find the vitas relic. This felt like the *Lost* finale without the emotional climax to make up for not giving us all the answers' (Koelsch 2011).

Dissatisfaction with Super 8 came not only from this sense of structural incoherence, but also from the pace at which the narrative progressed. In The Beast, updates from key characters became regular as the story continued, allowing casual players to access new content more easily and leaving keener players to scour game sites for more elusive

updates or puzzles. This usually occurred on 'Update Tuesdays', allowing a week for players and PMs to gather themselves. This also helped to structure the game's many intersecting narrative threads and reinforced a sense of community. Players gathered in Internet Relay chat (IRC) channels and on forums to socialise, speculate and wait for updates. Those who could not constantly monitor game sites also knew this would be the best time to visit forums. The name 'Update Tuesdays' was coined by players as they picked up on the PMs' working patterns, rather than it being announced at the outset (Cloudmakers 2001d).

This pattern may also have been borne out of necessity. The game was designed to run for around six months prior to the release of the film and the team had planned three months of game content with three tiers of puzzle difficulty. The Cloudmakers solved it all within 24 hours. Designers were then forced to produce content and respond to players in real time (Lee 2002). The result is a game that spans 30 websites, 15 phone calls, 35 emails, a fax and live meet-ups in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles. The real-time development may also explain the complexity of the plot, which had to be developed as they went along. This update schedule was developed further in WhySoSerious, in that players were often given in-game indications of the next event. The centrality of the live events suggests a more pre-planned approach and allowed players to organise themselves before the event took place.

Super 8 began at a fairly regular pace but soon slowed down. The Poppeteer thread kept players occupied but updates to the Minker narrative became few and far between, frustrating players who felt the story was not progressing. Long gaps between updates also prompted over-speculation as players made links between seemingly unrelated information, or pondered the significance of the three dot symbols. This may have been a player management strategy; keeping them starved for information until the last minute. However, disgruntled forum discussion suggests this was not an effective way to manage player interest.

Despite a decline in pace, the real-time element remains a standard feature of ARGs. Players are required to check for updates regularly and although game content is meticulously planned, players will not always react as PMs predict, requiring them to make adjustments to maintain the games' momentum. Some narrative decisions in *The Beast* were directly affected by actions or inactions of players. A whole narrative thread about an A.I. doppelganger was created because players spotted a stock photo that had been used twice. The Red King character was also meant to disappear after the first week, but player reaction prompted PMs to give him a more prominent role



(Puppetmaster FAQ 2001).

However, players were rarely encouraged to create their own content or explicitly invited to determine the next stage in the narrative. One exception to this occurred towards the end of *The Beast*, when players voted on the Mann Act II, which granted A.I.s the same rights as humans. Hon points out the creative dangers of offering players too many narrative paths to choose from, making the game too complex and potentially dividing communities. He argues players are more interested in being entertained than making decisions (Hon 2001a). This might suggest that media consumers are not necessarily as interested in having as much control over the media content they consume as theorists might attribute to them.

Neither *WhySoSerious* nor *Super 8* offered the opportunity for players to determine the outcome of the narrative, although player action was required to push the narrative forward. *Super 8*'s levels of interactivity in this context were particularly limited. Updates provided narrative information or communication between characters, but rarely allowed players to interact with those characters. Few puzzles rewarded players with narrative information, so they generally had to wait for this in an update, rather than discovering it for themselves.

This seems to counter arguments that promotional film websites allow players a (limited) amount of agency since the narratives they were constructing were predetermined (Telotte 2001, Booth 2008). However, the games did allow for speculation on alternative storylines. PMs on *The Beast* sometimes built this speculation into the narrative, resulting in a game experience which was arguably constructed by both players and producers (Puppetmaster FAQ 2001). There is no evidence of this *Super 8*, which might indicate a shift in this relationship. Nevertheless, it does reflect Jenkins' notion of a fragmented story pulled together by player connections (2006a: 121). Each speculation builds another potential layer into the official narrative, which could define how players finally come to understand the 'official' narrative, in ways which cannot be controlled by PMs.

The ending of each game is often taken to be the release date of the film, but this can vary. *A.I.* was released roughly halfway through *The Beast* (29<sup>th</sup> June 2001) and the last email from PMs was received on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2001. PMs also followed up with online Q&A sessions. If post-game feedback sessions or exit polls are still a regular feature of promotional ARGs they do not seem to be practised as openly. The ending of *WhySoSerious* is clearly signposted by the Joker's checklist, the 'Exit' page and the distribution of free tickets before the US release of the film on July 18<sup>th</sup> 2008. This did

not amount to the kind of personal ‘reveal’ provided at the end of *The Beast*. The ending of *Super 8* was also indicated by the US release, but additional online content appeared to time with international release dates and it is unclear whether this was linked to the ARG.

### **Alternate Realities**

Each game operates under the ‘This Is Not a Game’ (TINAG) premise. A philosophy as much as a set of aesthetics, TINAG refers to the extent to which the game and characters in it behave as if they are ‘real’. Websites must appear as they would do in ‘real life’. Phone numbers must work, emails must at least provide a plausible auto-response and there must be a sense of continuity. If PMs suddenly change voice actors for a character or have them do something out of turn to facilitate a narrative twist, the sense of immersion is lost. All websites in *The Beast* were designed with different visual and writing styles and Cloudmakers commented on the strong characterisation.

*The Beast* constructs an alternate reality set in 2142. Although based in the world of the film, it takes place 16 years after its events and involves few of the film’s characters. PMs were working with an original film rather than an established franchise, therefore maintaining this alternate reality was relatively flexible. Players expected a level of scientific plausibility (some questioned the likelihood of the existence of something like the TP-Web) but working with a reality so far in the future allowed designers to decide what was and was not possible within the world of *The Beast*. The science fiction elements of *Super 8* also allowed writers some freedom when outlining out the boundaries of their alternate world, similarly allowing for the plausible invention of alien technologies.

There were some restrictions on *Super 8* as designers were working within the film’s relatively recent reality of 1979. Nostalgia for that era, its cinema and its technologies is a central theme of the film. It is by no means a documentary-realist portrayal of that period; it is an imagined 1979, a nostalgic, cinephilic vision, coloured heavily by Abrams’ frequent homages to previous Spielberg films. Nevertheless, the filmic reality was positioned much closer to our own than either Gotham City or the future proposed by *A.I.* The early ARG reference in the newspaper article to the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty immediately set the story in this context, prompting players to search for clues in real-world events from the past.

This timeframe also meant human technology needed to appear appropriately dated for that era. For example, the STIES page is set up as a remote view of a PDP-11 computer, a system available in the 70s which could feasibly have been used by Josh's father and his team. Furthermore, the device Josh discovered in the cave attempts to control the cubes using sound waves, rather than any more complex or invented technology.

The fact that the internet did not exist in that era is problematic when utilising a storytelling genre rooted in that medium. Characters cannot have blogs or email accounts for players to hack; companies cannot have corporate websites. The lack of live events in *Super 8* also made the game even more internet-centric. Building a convincing alternate reality based in the past may therefore result in forfeiting a convincing TINAG aesthetic. *Super 8* partially overcame this by setting the ARG storyline in the present, as Josh investigated occurrences during or prior to 1979. Unfortunately, this made it difficult for players to feel they had participated meaningfully in that world. The nostalgic recreation of the late 70s conjured in Abrams' film was more interesting than the present day setting in which the ARG events occurred.

In contrast to the other case studies, *WhySoSerious* worked with a pre-existing alternate reality as part of a franchise in the middle of a reboot. The game picked up a world originally created in *Batman Begins* and Frank Miller's graphic novels and continued its existence, inviting players into Gotham's timeline at beginning of the Joker's campaign of mayhem.

Gotham was also constructed to be closer to what we recognise as our own reality, although not to the same degree as *Super 8*. Nolan's version of Gotham had more in common with modern day New York than the art-deco stylings of Burton's creations or the gaudy theatricality of Schumacher's. This allowed for lines between reality and alternate reality to be blurred to a higher degree than perhaps is possible with a futuristic world. As citizens of Gotham, players took part in tasks on behalf of the Joker, Dent's campaigners, and Gotham Police, allowing them to experience different facets of this alternate reality. This was expanded by websites for other institutions such as the press, broadcast media, public transport authorities and retailers. Having more real-world, city-based activities worked to create a greater sense of immersion, as well as highlighting a longstanding theme of the franchise: Gotham City as Every-City.

Many WhySoSerious sites were relatively functional in terms of providing platforms for puzzles or clues to push the game narrative forward. However, these were also carefully designed with TINAG and character development in mind. Gotham's online presence reflects its darker, grittier aesthetics. The Joker's anarchic nature can also be read through the design of his sites and the pages for Gotham institutions are sufficiently convincing and detailed. Similarly, The Beast used websites peripheral to the main narrative to flesh out the world of 2142 with creative artwork and detailed articles. A good example is the Bad Metal website, reporting on the gladiatorial circuit, in which specially designed A.I.s fought in spectacular death-matches (Fig. 67).

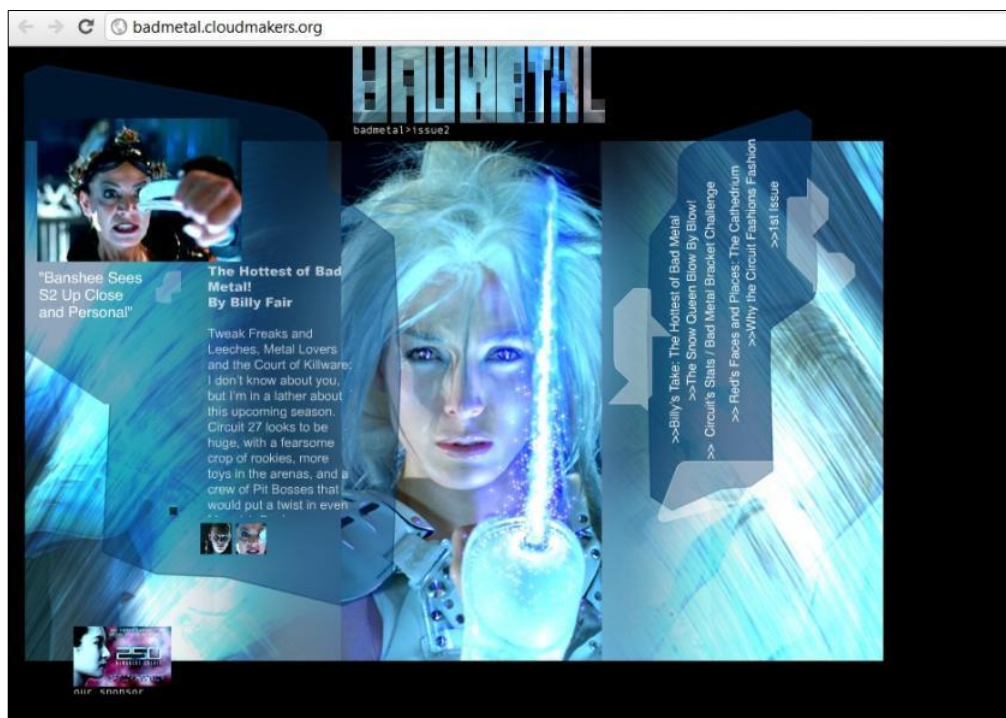


Figure 67

However, some design elements in Super 8 did not ring true. Josh's blog, although designed to look amateur, used formats and fonts which appeared *too* basic and dated. Revalistic.com (Fig. 68), apparently a conspiracy theory site, was so sparse that it gave little indication of this purpose. A brief look at other 'conspiracy' sites establishes them as visually cluttered, text and image-heavy.<sup>26</sup> Revalistic.com became primarily a method of undercover communication between Josh and Sarah, but this continued to make it seem like a simplistic platform for handing out information to players, rather than something designed to reflect either the characters or the wider game universe.

<sup>26</sup> See <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/> and <http://www.theinsider.org/> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

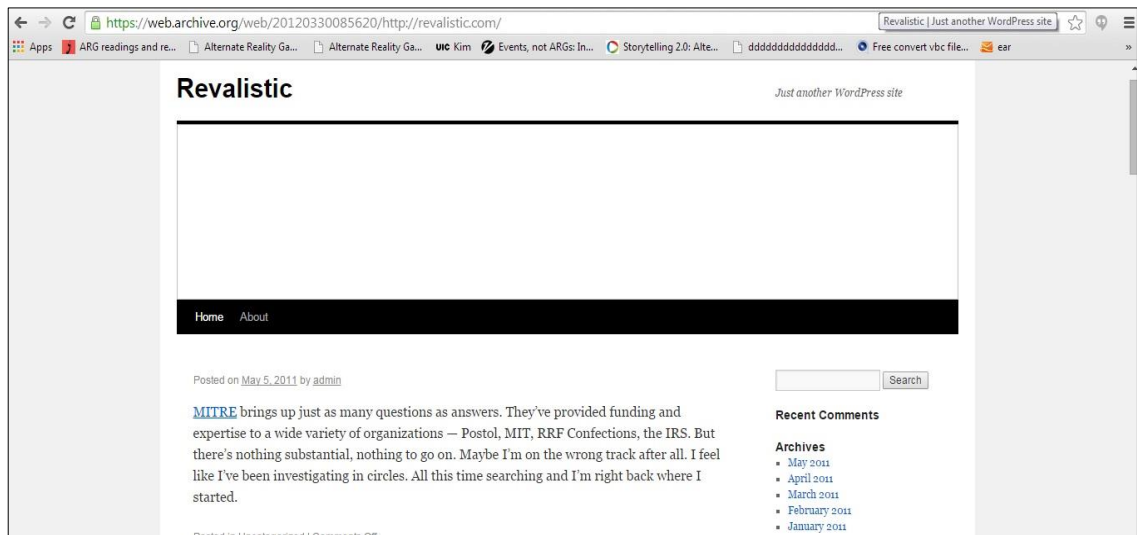


Figure 68

Compared to the plethora of carefully constructed sites in WhySoSerious and The Beast, Super 8 made regular use of very few. There was a distinct lack of peripheral content which expanded the game world or developed characterisation rather than simply furthering the narrative. Information such as Josh’s interest in rare fish makes a start but appears to function more as a red herring (pun intended?) to distract players than a real attempt at developing Josh’s character. This ultimately means the construction of a coherent alternate world is not as strong in Super 8 as either The Beast or WhySoSerious.

### **Puzzles & Interactivity**

Puzzles for all three ARGs varied in levels of difficulty and knowledge required from players. The Beast had routine puzzles such as guessing the password for updates to Martin Swinton’s diary which required knowledge of lines in Shakespeare plays. Others required technical knowledge such as HTML code, binary code, base64 code and hackerspeak. These puzzles are recognisable in future ARGs. Both WhySoSerious and Super 8 required players to guess passwords, or search for clues in HTML source codes. Other online tasks in WhySoSerious took the form of word puzzles, picture games or Flash games. Others required more specific knowledge. For example, in The Beast, a character called Svetlana sent Nancy Chan a message leaving clues to the password of her personal page on the DonuTech website. She presented the clues in the following format:

First Knife:	Second Knife:	First Ladder:	Second Ladder:
G/A A T T C	A/A G C T T	21.2	23.1
C T T A A/G	T T C G A/A	7.4	9.4
		5.8	6.5
		5.6	4.3
		4.9	2.3
		3.5	2.0
			0.56
			0.12

The answer required detailed scientific knowledge and the clearest explanation is provided in The Trail (Cloudmakers 2001d), a site created by the group to keep a list of sites and puzzles in the game:

‘The two knives refer to restriction enzymes. They cut up DNA into different segments... The ladders refer to the resultant sizes (in 1000s of basepairs, or the A-T-G-C you remember from high school biology). Searching on the web for the named enzymes and the numbers, we discovered that the "lambda bacteriophage" (simplified: a virus that attacks bacteria), cut up by the given enzymes, result in the given sizes. That gives the answer to part I: "lambda bacteriophage".

The second part was easier to determine. The string "5'TTGC----TTGC3'" indicates a region on the "string," the bacteriophage, that's affected by a "visitor." After investigating the life cycle of lambda, it was determined that the "visitor" mentioned is the promoter protein CII...

The third part... says that the protein causes the bacteriophage to hide in its host's DNA. It hides/integrates/merges until other conditions cause it to reform,

replicate, and burst (lyse) the bacterial host. This gave us the password, lysogeny'<sup>27</sup>.

Other examples included enigma codes, lute tablature, chemistry and Japanese sword-making. Unfortunately as Harry Knowles commented 'it scared a lot of people off because they felt it was just too involving' (Knowles quoted in Gallagher 2001). Perhaps in response, WhySoSerious and Super 8 rarely required such specific knowledge. Where it was displayed in Super 8, it went unrewarded. A sound file on STIES was analysed and some players recorded the notes and frequencies of each tone to establish a pattern. It emerged that the tones corresponded to the Golden Ratio,<sup>28</sup> but this led no further and their relevance was never confirmed.

### Real World Puzzles

Some puzzles in The Beast were found outside the web. For example, the Red King updated his site with a text box and the message "11. Entr 1 good moov 2 C anuthr". The solution was found by combining two images found in the *New York* and *LA Times* (Figs. 69, 70). By creating a grid around the images and overlaying them, players formed a chessboard image (Fig. 71).

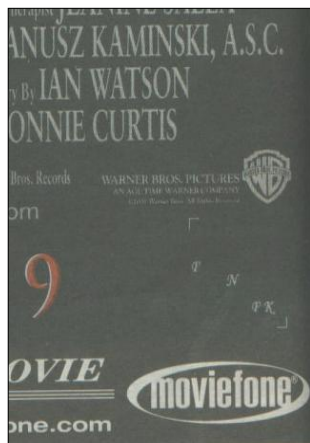


Figure 69

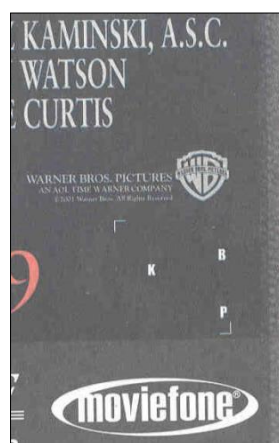


Figure 70



Figure 71

Assuming the *LA Times* letters had the next move, the solution was the code for the best move they could make next. This could be found by either feeding the scenario into a chess program or simply being a knowledgeable chess player. The answer is therefore

<sup>27</sup>For full answer see: <http://web.archive.org/web/20140914091053/http://cloudmakers.org/trail/#3.82> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>28</sup>In mathematics and the arts, two quantities are in the **golden ratio** ( $\phi$ ) if the ratio of the sum of the quantities to the larger quantity is equal to the ratio of the larger quantity to the smaller one. - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden\\_ratio](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_ratio) [Accessed 05.01.2015]

KH1 (white King to H1). Although this puzzle was based in the ‘real world’, it required little real-life collaboration between players. The strongest example of this kind of puzzle is the ARM rallies. After becoming members of ARM, players received invitations to meetings in bars and restaurants in Chicago, LA and New York on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2001.

Roughly 40 players made the New York events, 20 in LA (Fig. 72) and 12 in Chicago. Participants each received a leaflet and bandana. The leaflet had a puzzle leading to three new websites requiring information from each rally, necessitating communication between cities as well as the rest of the online community.



Figure 72

Players solved word puzzles, code puzzles, email puzzles and actual puzzles (Fig. 73). Each city had a 500 piece jigsaw to complete, with pieces missing from the edge. This provided a binary code which was a clue to a previous puzzle. This event involved coordination of players in different time zones, using the internet and mobile phones. It took TINAG further than the creation of realistic websites or characters, truly blurring the line between the real world and the game world and was a very popular element of the game.

Rather than being anomalies, real world events and scavenger hunts were central to WhySoSerious, again requiring cooperation between online and ground teams e.g. Part of the Plan required on-site players to find hidden numbers to crack the code for an online safe, which directed them to a cinema, where they saw the new trailer. One member was then given a copy to share with the community. These interactions were also acknowledged within the gameworld e.g. The Gotham Times might report on the scavenger hunts, using photos or names of participants. Although Super 8 had no offline



components, the discussion in Super 8 around Fergus Falls Hospital reflects the desire for real-world elements and the frustration expressed at the lack of them.



Figure 73

Unfortunately, TINAG can be compromised during real world events because they must end at a predetermined time in a way they would not do in ‘real life’. Encouraging players to be perpetually ‘in-game’ can also cause problems. One ARM rally leader was followed by a player as he left the site, hoping to gain more information. Lee (2002) accepts this was precisely what the game had encouraged players to do - follow up every avenue for information and never break the TINAG mindset. This player’s actions had not been planned for and the actor had to break character to tell the player he had no further information. Lee jokes that when using live actors the only way to solve this is to have their character ‘die’ in-game. ‘If you bring in a guy with a barcode on his neck to talk to the players, you have to kill him! I’m serious. Take him out on a stretcher, because that’s the only way you’re going to get him out of the picture’ (2002). This scenario exemplifies that although live events are attractive components of ARGs, the more elaborate they are, the more problematic they become. They are more expensive, harder to control, more prone to errors and there are further creative, legal and ethical ramifications to running such events on a large scale. However, the attraction for marketers is that they appeal to a wider audience base, which may have been deterred by the more complex demands of The Beast.

### **Co-Op Vs Competitive Puzzles**

The Beast required co-operative rather than competitive play but the extent of that cooperation in terms of what Jenkins (2006a) might call a ‘knowledge community’ is questionable. Hon suggests ‘60-80% of all puzzles are solved by the same dozen or so hard-core players’ (2001a). Others offered speculation, or were consulted for ideas and

the odd puzzle was solved by a newcomer or an unknown. However, Hon suggests this did not prevent casual players from feeling part of the team. 'When you're a member of the Cloudmakers, and you've made a few speculative posts and suggestions about puzzles you feel like you're contributing and that you're making a difference, even if you're not' (Hon 2001a).

The collaborative nature of ARGs is often assumed to be one of the genre's defining features. However, player communities develop their own forms of hierarchies and competitive relationships, regardless of puzzle design, making Jenkins' (2006a) knowledge communities seem less cohesive than they might first appear.

WhySoSerious appeared to be based around co-operative events and communication between players rather than knowledge sharing. In particular those who possessed Joker Phones had the responsibility of updating communities when they received new information. This arguably made it more accessible, but may not have offered the challenge some players desired. Elements of Super 8 also demanded co-operative work, such as collecting frames through the Editing Room. Although individual players were rewarded with prizes, it was in the interest of the whole community to unlock all the frames to reveal the full reel. However, Super 8 also allowed for direct player vs. player competition. This was exemplified in the Rocket Poppeteer competitions, which saw winners awarded much-coveted Argus cubes. The RP thread of the game intentionally divides the community into competing teams, which arguably still encourages teamwork. However, the physical prizes were awarded to players with individual high scores, unlike the Editing Room challenges which led to a collective benefit. This seems divisive, diluting the co-operative nature of the games. It also drives players' focus inwards towards the community and their activities, rather than outwards towards the PMs, so there is less room for conflict or struggles for control to develop between players and PMs.

Physical rewards (known as swag) were also available through participating in co-operative activities, especially in WhySoSerious, which handed out everything from Dent campaign paraphernalia to 'jokerised' dollar bills. Any physical or 'real-life' artefacts acquired during the games were greeted with huge enthusiasm, be it a replica energy cube, or simply being posted a Rocket Poppeteers certificate rather than opening a PDF files.

Whether Hon's assertion about co-op play is correct can only really be answered by players themselves. However, it is important to acknowledge that the co-operative

play so often attributed to ARGs may not always translate into player practice, and that producers are experimenting with competitive games within ARGs.

### Other Modes of Interactivity

The ARGs also offered other modes of interactivity aside from puzzle solving. STIES was one of the most interactive sites in Super 8, with players having to manipulate the PDP-11 interface to search for information. Rocketpoppeteers.com was also highly interactive and players were able to interact with characters like Josh and Sarah.

The interactive trailer attached to *Portal 2* offered something new, although the concept of an interactive trailer was not unique at this point. Films as diverse as *Iron Man 2*, *The Social Network* (2010 David Fincher) and *Sex and the City 2* (2010 Michael Patrick King) used iTrailers as part of their promotional campaigns (Figs.74, 75).<sup>29</sup> They were interactive in that viewers could click ‘into’ the trailer to unlock behind-the-scenes information or links to other sites.

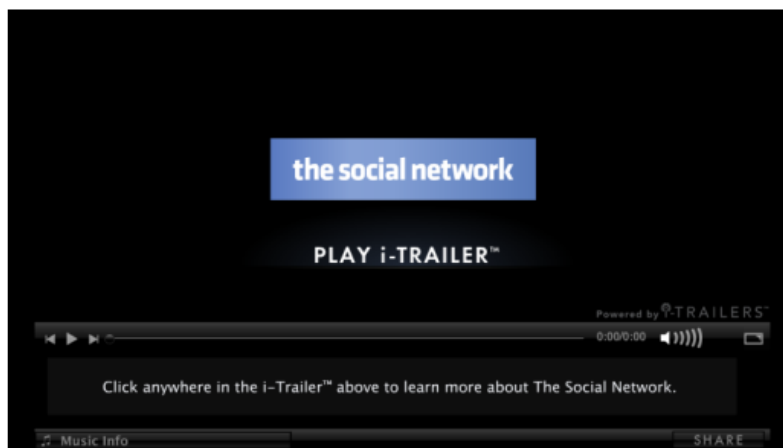


Figure 74



Figure 75

<sup>29</sup> See <http://web.archive.org/web/20110914071425/http://traileractive.com/category/movies-itrailers/> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

The trailer in *Portal 2* took this further. Being able to investigate and move around the train shown in the film trailer provided the interactivity of a console game, which had not previously been part of interactive trailers or the experiential mode of ARGs. ARG players are not represented by an avatar and there is nothing comparable to the translation of player action to character action via remote control. The trailer offers another way of interacting with the world of the film, using what is arguably a more physically immersive mode of interaction. It also reached out explicitly to a more mainstream, gaming audience through its attachment to *Portal 2* and by offering these more clearly gaming-related pleasures.

However, it is important to highlight the trailer's limitations. The YouTube walkthrough noted players could not move particularly freely or interact with objects on the train.<sup>30</sup> The sequence was very much 'on rails'. Players could interrogate the interior of the carriage before the pre-timed crash occurred but action was prevented when they reached the stage when the creature tried to break through. In addition, although it provided some information about the alien, it was not related to the Minker narrative or the universe inhabited by Josh. It therefore straddled the line between in-game and out-of-game in a way which disrupted TINAG and the impression of a coherent alternate reality.

Whether this kind of interactivity is productive or even desired by players is debatable, given that it is so different to other modes of interaction provided by ARGs and is so readily identifiable with another medium altogether. One of the primary attractions of an ARG is that it does not feel like a standard console game. It uses everyday media channels and the player's own communications devices to interact with the fictional world, negating the need for an intermediary like a controller and arguably creating a more immersive experience.

The variety of interactive access points to *Super 8* made it easy for newcomers to jump in at any point and still feel relatively involved. However, seasoned players may have found this strategy too disconnected from platforms on which they were used to playing ARGs. This may also have caused *Super 8* to feel scattered and incoherent in comparison to previous games. Lee speaks emphatically of a need to incorporate these issues into game design, allowing for each level of player to be catered for (Lee quoted in Irwin 2007a). It is debatable whether ARGs are coming closer to achieving this balance.

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<sup>30</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NgwAmeWhC7c> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

## Communities

ARG communities developed quickly after *The Beast*. The Cloudmakers were the most prominent but smaller groups gathered around other forums. CMs were meticulous in documenting every site, email and image associated with the game. This made sense in terms of organising information to make sense of the complex puzzles and narratives, but also suggests acknowledgement of their involvement in something ground-breaking, to be documented for future reference. As the genre was relatively new, the group established rules of play as they went along, debating problems as they arose. They also created *The Guide* and a list of in-game sites (*The Trail*), which became key resources for players and puppetmasters alike. ‘The up side of this enormous, beady-eyed, voracious player-monster was that less than a week after the *A.I.* trailer hit the Web, CM and *The Trail* were our definitive continuity source’ (Puppetmaster FAQ 2001).

Moderators of a grassroots game called *Lockjaw* then developed two central hubs for ARG players. Sean Stacey founded Unfiction.com and Steve Peters created ARGN (Alternate Reality Gaming Network).<sup>31</sup> As an established franchise, *The Dark Knight* already had a large online fanbase to tap into. It is unsurprising, therefore, that superhero hype.com became one of the largest communities involved in the game. Ain’t It Cool News remained a key source and the opening event at San Diego Comic Con cemented the importance of that convention for promotional ARGs. The largest community following the *Super 8* ARG was Unfiction, but followers also gathered at Super8news.com/forums, developed by the creators of *Cloverfield* ARG community cloverfieldnews.com.

One Unfiction member also began to record the progression of ARGs in a more systematic manner on wiki pages.<sup>32</sup> These became information points for those joining the game at a later stage, or wanting to refresh their memories of previous events or puzzles. These are fan-created pages written from the perspectives and experiences of players rather than producers. They provide a better idea of the ways in which the games were received, how they were played and how puzzles were solved, but cannot be said to reflect the intentions of producers.

Unlike *The Beast* and *WhySoSerious*, there is no complete player-created account of *Super 8*’s ARG. A wikibruce page was started but the last entry in the timeline is February 8<sup>th</sup>, well before the end of the game in July.<sup>33</sup> Pinning down the

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<sup>31</sup> [www.argn.com](http://www.argn.com) [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>32</sup> <http://Batman.wikibruce.com> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>33</sup> <http://super8.wikibruce.com/Timeline> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

order of game events involves working through forum discussion or using summaries provided by specialist sites like movieviral.com. This lack of archival activity could be attributed to player dissatisfaction, causing them to lose interest.

All communities were created, run and maintained by administrators and moderators, rather than PMs. Anyone could join the Cloudmakers via Yahoo!'s subscription process. Membership was granted via an administrator to avoid spam but was otherwise very open. Unfiction is even less restricted, with lurkers able to access all message board without having to register. This accessibility allows for PMs to respond quickly to player activities and monitor the progress of the game, affecting the producer/consumer relationship significantly. It also highlights Hills' (2002) suggestion that such open forums allow for fans to 'perform' their fandom to an in-built audience of lurkers and producers.

The Cloudmakers also established rules around message posting, devising a series of labels to outline forum etiquette and organise conversations, which became increasingly difficult to follow as the game progressed. These included:

'SPEC - Speculation. You think your post might be right, and some evidence supports your view, but the point is not conclusive.

OFFTOPIC or OT - This post is totally unrelated to the game.

PUZZLE - A post about game-related puzzles, passwords, UAMs, credit numbers, voicemail codes, etc. If you know the answer, add the word SOLUTION to your subject as well.

SOURCE - Analysis of the HTML source code underlying game-related pages.

META - Discussions of what the moderators are doing wrong, new labels we should use, how people ought to play the game, or about the Cloudmakers organization generally.

FLAME - Replies to a stupid post.

TROUT - The polite response to a redundant or factually false post. The word "trout" is a term of respect.'<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Labels from: <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/cloudmakers/conversations/messages/6591> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

Some terms were already established within general forum regulations, particularly ‘flaming’. Unfiction continues to govern its community relations using similar terms and explicitly asks that users check its Terms of Service before posting. Some of these are more specific rules regarding PMs posting on the boards.<sup>35</sup> ‘Trouting’ is also specific to ARGs and was coined by Cloudmaker Dan Fabulich:

‘So, I’ve been meditating on what we can do to make our newbies feel more at home, and I’ve decided to use a strategy that’s tried and true: we’ll make up something new.

In particular, we’re going to use a new word from now on: "trout"... When I say "trout" to you, I don’t simply mean the fish, I mean to say to you: "Listen. I respect you. It’s great that you’re here and posting and that we’re working together for a common goal. Nonetheless, I have some polite criticisms"’.<sup>36</sup>

Fabulich suggested ‘trout’ could be used on its own (e.g. "Trout. This is in the Trail, section 2.05"); as a verb (e.g. "I trout you. I think you’ve gotten confused about this."); as a post label (e.g. "Subject: SPEC/TROUT Re: Evan is still alive!"). If players did not wish to use the term, Fabulich encouraged them to use a ‘polite disclaimer’ when offering constructive criticism. He felt ‘trouting’ would help newbies to understand

‘[...] that we’re not mocking or disrespectful to those with whom we disagree or to those who post redundant information. Those newbies who DON’T know what "trout" means will at least avoid confusing polite criticism with mockery. Maybe this will work... maybe it won’t. Either way, I hope that this place will become a little bit friendlier on account of it.’<sup>37</sup>

Trouting is now commonplace on ARG forums. The attitudes behind Dan’s post reflect the difficulties of accommodating newcomers or ‘newbies’ into the game, particularly when it reaches its latter stages. Given the complexity of The Beast, it was generally understood that newcomers were likely to make errors such as posting on the wrong thread or reposting on puzzles that had been solved. Despite these problems being acknowledged, it remained difficult for newbies to integrate with experienced players.

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<sup>35</sup> Unfiction Terms of Service: <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=5> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>36</sup> Full post can be found at: <http://games.groups.yahoo.com/group/cloudmakers/message/5748> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>37</sup> Full post can be found at: <http://games.groups.yahoo.com/group/cloudmakers/message/5748> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

Another heavily debated matter was the use of ‘brute force’ tactics. For example, when trying to solve the Rational Hatter password puzzle, instead of guessing any of the 350,000 possibilities, one Cloudmaker created a program to automatically try them all. Such programmes were often regarded as cheating and some believed the game would be less fulfilling if these were used too often. The main issue was whether PMs had designed the games with these tactics in mind. Hon’s short article on this is fairly adamant this is not the case, but others disagreed (Hon 2001b). Brute force is still frowned upon and is only considered in certain circumstances, although there are no formalised rules for its use.

### **Competition and Hierarchies**

Whilst Cloudmakers were trying to find ways to make life more hospitable for newbies in their own community, the discovery of Spherewatch, a newer, smaller player community caused further problems. Until this point the community had been engaged in co-operative play. This sudden injection of possible competition caused debate over whether this should be extended to teams who were further behind in the game. Co-operation between different forum communities is now more common. Super 8 players on Unfiction.com shared information with players at super8news.com as did Unfiction players with players at Superherohype.com. However, when more than one central community is involved, a sense of competition is at play which may undermine the games’ claims to ‘collective intelligence’, if knowledge is not being shared.

Despite outwards appearances as a collaborative community, hierarchies as described by ‘second wave’ fan scholars can be detected in ARG communities (Gray et al. 2007). Superherohype and Unfiction forums also have a ranking system, common on forums, indicating the number of times a member has posted. This initially seems to create a framework for a hierarchy, but if the volume of posts from one member outweighs the quality it is unlikely to gain them respect within the group. There are usually guidelines to warn members against such activity. Hierarchies are often structured around other factors, which match closely with the categories outlined by MacDonald in her work on Usenet science fiction forums (MacDonald 1998). There is a sense of superior standing in ARG communities based on rate of puzzle solving, idea generation and time spent working on puzzles. These fit into MacDonald’s broader categories of knowledge and technological competence, especially given that many



puzzles require specific technological knowledge or skills. Live events automatically create a structure privileging those based in certain locations, matching MacDonald's categories of access and venue. Some games actively encourage the formation of such hierarchies, for example those with Joker Phones in WhySoSerious were immediately elevated because they had access to information required by the rest of the community. Such individuals become de facto leaders, another category identified by MacDonald. The games on rocketpoppeteers.com could also be seen as an attempt to create a hierarchical structure within the community between teams or 'fleets' rather than individuals.

The RP games also allow for the acquisition of swag, another key distinction between players. Those lucky enough to obtain an Argus cube had a significantly higher status in the community. The emphasis on owning game memorabilia is also suggestive of the 'commodity-completist' practices, identified by Hills in other fan communities (2002: 28). Hills senses a struggle between their anti-commercial ideologies and these practices, but it is unclear whether ARG communities struggle with this apparent contradiction in the same manner.

Hills also suggests the 'imagined other' of the mindless consumer is one way in which fan communities define themselves against consumerism (2002: 27). This is particularly relevant during Super 8, where there was a great deal of discussion about what was 'for us'. Previous games had not involved so many elements which merged so closely with the wider marketing campaign, particularly in the case of the Editing Room. This was determined to be 'in-game' because players had already come across images they could identify in the clip e.g. the photo of Josh's father. However its discovery came from an update to the official site, which had been considered out-of-game. The players' sense of exclusivity was therefore at stake. Frames for the Editing Room could be unlocked by fans with no knowledge of the rest of the ARG. Whilst this strategy may have served producer interests by broadening the experience beyond ARG forums, players were keen to distinguish between what was for a mass audience and what was for them. This is an interesting reflection on previous discussions of fan communities and their relationship to 'mainstream' media, which suggests fandoms frequently attempt to maintain a distance between themselves and what they consider to be a 'mainstream' audience, even when the existence of the fan text is dependent upon that audience (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, Jancovich 2008, Hills 2002, Whiteman 2009). This becomes more complicated for ARG players when they seek to be separated from a wider audience whilst remaining part of a highly commercial and

indeed ‘mainstream’ endeavour.

Previous discussions around definitions of ‘cult’ fandoms are also interesting when applied to an ARG community, particularly Hill’s three dimensions of ‘cult’ fandom (2002: xi). It is not clear whether the community considers itself a ‘cult’ fandom, removing the tautological aspect of Hills’ definition. It fits loosely under his temporal definition in that the ARG community may move across different ARGs as they are released, meaning the fandom lasts beyond a single ARG. What seems clearest is the ‘affective’ dimension, which ties in with Austin’s (2002) focus on the intense relationship between viewer and text. This results in an emphasis on audience behaviour as a defining element of a ‘cult’ following, if not a ‘cult’ text. Committed ARG players seem likely to describe their activities as ‘an intensely felt experience’ (Hills 2002: x). The Beast in particular seems to have been located high on what Grossberg (1992) might call players’ ‘mattering maps’, exemplified in their discussions about the potential for the community to contribute to investigations following 9/11. This is perhaps the clearest example of Grossberg’s argument for fandom as a site of ‘optimism, invigoration and passion’ (1992: 65), even if that passion does not translate into actual political or social change.

### **Player/PM Relationships**

The relationship between players and PMs during The Beast was extremely close. PMs observed forums closely and became familiar with key players, many of whom were forum moderators (Puppetmaster FAQ 2001). The final email from PMs to players speaks volumes about their relationship. PMs regarded players as collaborators in a new genre of storytelling and were very open in their communications with them at the end of the game.

This relationship also came with some, largely unspoken, rules. PMs revealed themselves to players only when the game had officially ended. If they felt players needed prompting or required further clues these were delivered ‘in-game’ rather than through direct forum messages. These rules were eventually formalised on Unfiction, making it more significant if they were broken. PMs or others involved in the creation or maintenance of an ARG were requested not to post as themselves unless the game had reached a ‘finite conclusion or ending’. All users were forbidden to post as characters in an attempt to influence players or move the game forward. Forums were

explicitly 'out-of-game' and were not to be manipulated by either PMs or other players looking to mislead or 'hijack' the game.<sup>38</sup>

However, the relationship between players and PMs did not seem as close during *WhySoSerious* or *Super 8*. Admittedly, PMs on *WhySoSerious* were dealing with a game on a much larger scale. The game involved international events and promoted a globally recognised franchise. If ARGs are designed to be immersive campaigns which reach a broad audience, it seems unfair to expect them to simultaneously be highly personalised experiences.

Even without the more intense relationship displayed in *The Beast*, the relationship between PMs and players implies the redundancy of the resistant/incorporated dichotomy discussed by Hills (2002). The real time interactions, the fact that rules are set by both parties and the ability (albeit limited) of players to impact the game's narrative mean this relationship sits somewhere in between these two stereotypes. The real-time interactions particularly suggest the potential for consumers to make more demands on producers in the way that Jenkins (2006a) envisages. The collaborative and social elements of the games could provoke the personal, if not political and social empowerment that Grossberg (1992) ascribes to fandoms.

However, it is not clear whether the limited agency of players is enough to justify the application of Hills' notion that players might be dictating the terms of their involvement with the consumer capitalist elements of that relationship. Hills argues that fans may rework the exchange value of their fan texts according their 'lived experiences', thus renegotiating their position with a consumer capitalist industry (2002: 35). This is trickier with an ARG community, because the promotional status of an ARG positions that 'lived experience' of fandom as something itself imbued with exchange value. In order for players to rework that exchange value towards use value, they would have to be actively re-appropriating the value of fan activity itself, and thus the value of the community and its practices. The game may be valued as something other than marketing, but how easily can players themselves be extricated from that primarily economic system?

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<sup>38</sup>See Terms of Service: <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=5> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

## **Marketing Function**

### **Relationship to Wider Campaign**

The Beast made little use of other promotional materials. Rabbit holes were based in trailers and posters and a few clues e.g. the Red King chess puzzle, were found in print or broadcast adverts. Warner Brother's official website of the film was suspected to be involved, but PMs confirmed this was not the case (Puppetmaster FAQ 2001). The ARG team and the marketing team at Warner Bros. appeared to have been separate entities. This might also account for the terms in which PMs talk about the game i.e. as an experiment in a new genre of storytelling, rather than a piece of marketing. Whilst they are keen to highlight Warner Bros.' support of the project, they tend to speak vaguely about its financial success. Lee also admits the team did not keep a close watch on player demographics which would have been in the interest of the marketing team (Lee 2002). This again distances the design team from the marketing team. Given their close relationship, players may also have responded negatively if it appeared they were being sold to. The Microsoft team may have been invested in an image of themselves as creatives rather than salespeople in order to maintain that trust relationship more effectively.

PMs may develop closer relationships with players than the average media marketer has with their audience. As a result they may have a stronger sense of ethics and morality around their work. This could be considered a very intense form of relationship marketing. It may even be seen as an attempt to close the gap which Kerrigan (2010) highlights between filmmakers and audiences. Although they are not direct links to directors or producers, ARGs may provide a more personal channel through which consumers can develop a relationship with the films being promoted.

WhySoSerious worked more closely with other official materials. The Warner Bros.' website was used to launch the game and online posters or trailers were awarded for solving puzzles or completing events. Channelling official content through fans in this manner could be viewed as an attempt to control the dissemination of that content, keeping fans happy and perhaps dissuading them from seeking content through less desirable outlets.

Although WhySoSerious had its rabbit hole in its official website, all future sites were distinctly independent. Conversely, the Super 8 ARG returned players to the official site (super8-movie.com) at a later stage in the game to find the Editing Room. A

number of ‘official’ channels also connected to the Editing Room as means of unlocking clips (*Portal 2* trailer, iPhone/iPad app, theatre standees). This breaks quite significantly with TINAG. ‘This is not a game’ implies it is not a piece of promotional material either, yet the affiliation with marketing campaign is made clear through the official website.

The Editing Room also seemed separate from [scariestthingieversaw.com](http://scariestthingieversaw.com) and RP was a distinctly independent thread. Other individual interactive initiatives included the Twitter campaign #Super8Secret, which gave away tickets to secret preview screenings across the US. A downloadable Super8 comic was also released, asking fans to design the artwork for the final page. Finally, a further site, [Gonnabemint.com](http://Gonnabemint.com) was also launched by Paramount UK closer to the UK release date (Fig. 76).

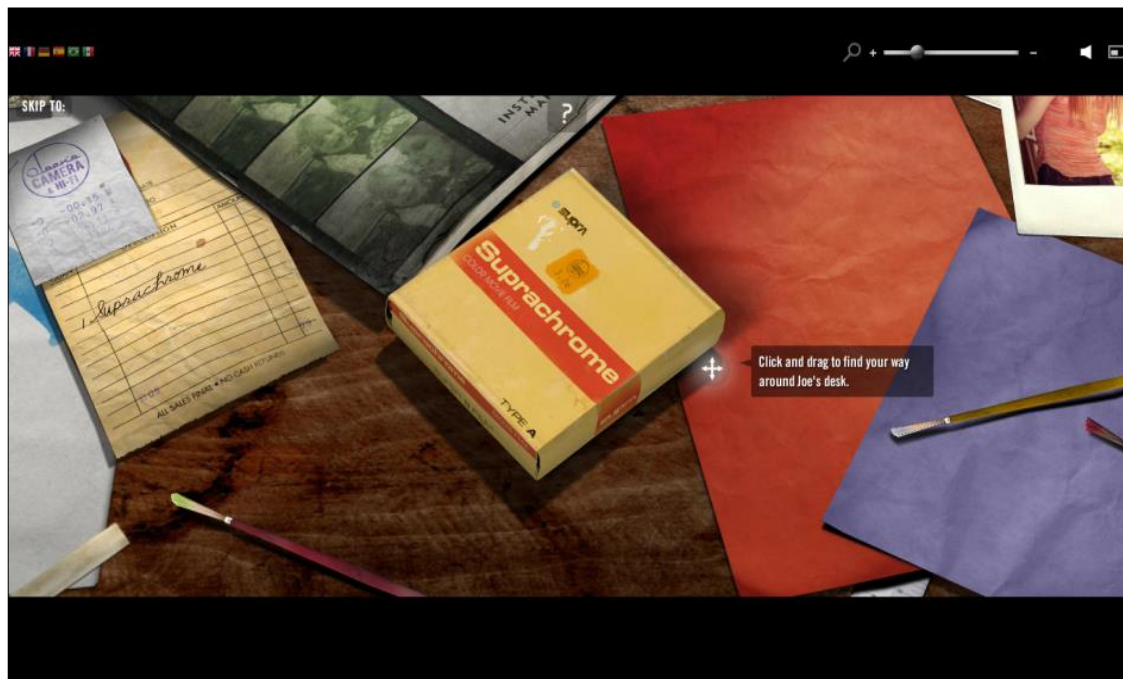


Figure 76

[Gonnabemint.com](http://Gonnabemint.com) allowed users to browse the contents of a desk belonging to the film’s central character Joe Lamb. It contained recognisable ARG references, such as Rocket Poppeteers and a tool box which looks similar to the box in which Josh discovered his father’s final note. However, the ARG had been presumed finished for a month before this site was discovered and it did not revive the Minker narrative.

These numerous access points made it increasingly difficult to distinguish the ARG content from the wider campaign and players began to feel the ARG was being ignored in favour of developing other viral elements for a wider audience. Many access points were also mediated via sites like [Slashfilm.com](http://Slashfilm.com) and [Wired.com](http://Wired.com), rather than being

hidden online for players to hunt down themselves. *Super 8*'s closer ties to the 'official' marketing meant this was a different ARG experience compared to what player communities had come to expect from the genre.

### **Relationship with Promoted Film**

If the primary purpose of a promotional ARG is to drive viewers to see the film, it is important to consider how the ARG is integrated with the film it is promoting. All three ARGs are positioned almost in opposition to what Wyatt (1994) calls high concept. High concept posits a relationship between marketing and films in which the two are stylistically integrated, with films relying on elements which lend themselves to bold, heavily visual marketing, clearly outlining the kind of film viewers are paying to see. In stark contrast, being puzzle-based, ARGs tend to withhold, rather than explicate information about the film, challenging audiences to find it for themselves e.g. the nature of the monster in *Super 8*.

The Beast is the least integrated ARG of the three. Cloudmakers found the answer to one puzzle in the credits, but seeing the film was not essential to completing the game (Cloudmakers, 2001d). The Microsoft team also appear to have had a great deal of creative freedom with the ARG content:

‘We really had free range on what we wanted to do here. Mike Pondsmith, Scott Bayless and Ed Fries were the guys that checked in on us every once in a while, but for the most part would find me on my office floor covered in play-dough, and just back out of the room shaking their heads...’ (Lee quoted in Cloudmakers 2001a)

Both Lee and Stewart read the script before starting the project and felt the film's sci-fi genre and themes about family would translate effectively into a game story but Stewart describes the two as 'very different beasts' in terms of storylines (quoted in Cloudmakers 2001a). He also states the film was a 'done deal', with the ARG created 'inside that infrastructure' rather than developing in tandem (Stewart quoted in Cloudmakers 2001a). Having discarded the pre-planned game schedule within the first week, it is also hard to say, from a textual standpoint, whether links between game and film were intentional.

Similarly, characters relevant to the film did not appear in the game until about

halfway through, requiring players to be completely involved before any direct intersection with the film text occurred. Goodridge described the game as a ‘decoy’ because neither Salla nor Chan appeared as characters in the film (2001: 6). The closest tie was the film’s storyline regarding Martin Swinton (played by Jake Thomas), the human child having difficulty coming to terms with the existence of his A.I. ‘brother’ David (played by Haley Joel Osment). A dark sibling rivalry develops causing their mother Monica to take David back to the manufacturers, where he will be destroyed. Unable to send him to his demise, Monica instead abandons him in a forest and David is left to fend for himself as an unauthorised A.I.

The game starts on the premise that, 16 years later, Martin still struggles with guilt over David’s disappearance. As he investigates the deaths of his A.I. houses, he discovers David’s creators have been working on further versions of him and created an A.I. copy of Monica to take care of them. AI Monica blames Martin for David’s disappearance and lures him to a lab to kill him. Martin outwits her by speaking the activation code that causes the A.I. child to feel love for its parents. Internally conflicted by the instruction to love the child she hates, Monica is destroyed.

This extends the narrative far beyond the boundaries of the film, where Martin Swinton ceases to be a key character once David has been abandoned. What does link the two are broader themes: the genre of science fiction, family, what it means to be human and what Stewart describes as a ‘novel-style’ interpretation of elements of the fictional world which the film delivers visually (quoted in *Cloudmakers* 2001a). Whilst the film provides stunning visual depictions of a world where global warming has left New York City submerged and frozen, the game delves further into the details of this and turns it into a central feature of the narrative. This indirect link between film and game suggest the ARG is involved less in narrative extension in a linear sense and more with Beck’s idea of world-building, creating a more immersive viewing experience (Beck 2004). Whilst the two complement each other, they could be considered two standalone stories occurring within the same universe. This might explain the criticisms levelled at *The Beast* for being more successful as a game in its own right than a piece of marketing, a rare instance of what Gray describes as ‘the paratext trumping the film’ (2010: 176).

Similarly, it could be said that the events in *WhySoSerious* contribute not towards an extension of the film’s narrative, but to more fully depict the world of Gotham. As described by Gray, it is a paratext which provides a definitive lens through which viewers are then prepared to interpret the film (2010: 3). Some events, like

stories of corruption in the GDP, were not overly significant in themselves but served to establish an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust around that particular institution. Whilst it was not necessary to see the film in order to complete the game, the final act sets up the opening sequence of the film, creating a sense of narrative continuity. Prominent lines of the Joker's dialogue (including 'why so serious' 'that's the one rule you'll have to break and 'it's all part of the plan') are included in the game and visual continuity is also established e.g. the Joker vandalises objects in the film in the same style as the 'jokerised' pages in the game.

Players also made plot-related links of their own between film and game, many of which were collected on the Wiki page.<sup>39</sup> Some connections were directly backed by textual analysis, one noting posters from [ibelieveinharveydent.com](http://ibelieveinharveydent.com) in the background of a promotional clip. Another spots the Joker escaping the bank heist in the IMAX prologue in a yellow school bus marked "District 22", an area in which [gothamud.net](http://gothamud.net) had mentioned buses were being diverted. Others were more analytical interpretations:

'The slogan "I believe in Harvey Dent" is said by Bruce Wayne when showing his support for Dent, and is later given a deeper meaning at the end of the film, when Batman takes the blame for the murders that Two-Face committed, so that Dent's legacy as Gotham's "White Knight" will remain.'

Some seemed tenuous and a few were slightly dubious:

'Members of a SWAT team use the phrases "shooting gallery" and "sitting ducks", while attempting to end a hostage crisis that the Joker concocts.'

'Pasqualesbistro.com - The meeting between gang factions that takes place early in the film *may* [my italics] occur in a back room of Pasquale's Bistro'.<sup>40</sup>

It is unclear whether these links were intentional, but the desire of players to create them is certainly evident and may point to an element of agency in the games which allows players to create their own understanding of the alternate reality (and by extension the filmic reality) in a manner which is not directly controlled by PMs. Likewise, the ability of the community to impact the narrative of the game may offer an understanding of the film that is not devised entirely by PMs, but reflects their lived experience of the game.

*Super 8's* ARG drove players towards the film in a much stronger manner than *The Beast* or *WhySoSerious*. The mystery of Josh's father was explained as he appeared

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<sup>39</sup> [http://batman.wikibruce.com/Film\\_references](http://batman.wikibruce.com/Film_references) [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>40</sup> [http://batman.wikibruce.com/Film\\_references](http://batman.wikibruce.com/Film_references) [Accessed 05.01.2015]



in the film as the protagonists' teacher Dr Woodward, who was killed when driving the truck which derailed the train. However, the mystery of the creature and the cubes could only be solved by going to see the film. The game was therefore fundamentally attached to the film's narrative. The film also supported the game in a similar way to *The Beast* e.g. Woodward's interrogation scene explained the presence of the image of a set of syringes in the last communication from Kaslov. Yet *Super 8* seemed distinctly less concerned with world-building. Like *The Beast*, characters in the game did not appear in the film, (with the exception of Dr Woodward) but *The Beast* developed a much stronger sense of the world of *A.I.* using peripheral characters and sites. Josh Minker's world was too disconnected from Joe Lamb's for it to feel like the ARG was a coherent expansion of *Super 8*, despite the chronological link and the presence of his father in both texts. What few connections there were seemed superficial. The only in-game reference to Joe was his name scratched onto the tin in which Josh found the final message from his father. How this got there was never established and the connection never fully explained.<sup>41</sup> *Super 8*'s strong connection with the wider marketing campaign and its loose connection to the world of the film means it comes closer to falling into Gray's category of 'merely a marketing tool' (2010: 209), a status which risked disappointing players who signed up for something more.

In contrast to both *The Beast* and *Super 8*, *WhySoSerious* was heavily involved in developing characters from the film, both central and supporting. This may have been due to its commercial obligation to control fan expectations, particularly regarding the new versions of the Joker and Two-Face. The Joker underwent considerable transformation, from Jack Nicholson's vengeful lunatic created via an accident in a chemical plant, to Heath Ledger's anarchic, amoral terrorist with no fixed motivations whose origins changed each time he told the story of his horrific facial scars. Similarly, Aaron Eckhart's Harvey Dent became a more complex character than Tommy Lee Jones's Two-Face; more the tragic hero than the villain as the film focuses on his attempts as DA to put the mob out of business. When he finally does turn villain Batman takes on this status to ensure Gotham remembers Dent as the hero, concealing the sad truth that the Joker has corrupted the man Gotham viewed as its saviour.

The ARG revealed just enough about these complicated characters to manage expectations without giving away too many details. The design of the Joker's pages

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<sup>41</sup> It is possible that Dr. Woodward took the tin from Joe during a lesson, as the protagonists mention his tendency to confiscate items from them. However this is speculative and never confirmed in the game or film.

reflects his maniacal and anarchic nature, crucial to Ledger's characterisation. Each Joker event functioned as much to exemplify his anarchic desire to destroy Gotham as to forward a narrative. Likewise, Dent's campaign served as much to tell players about what kind of DA he would become, as to tell the story of his election race. Two-Face is not explicitly revealed during the campaign but there are allusions to his future identity. The emphasis on Dent's salvaging of a hostage situation also sets him up as tragic hero rather than straightforward villain. This approach arguably outlined the characters more forcefully and with more immediacy than traditional promotional materials.

WhySoSerious is therefore a strong example of Gray's paratexts acting as a filter for meaning, providing a 'formative encounter' with the text (2010: 3). These are, however only proposed reading strategies; it is highly unlikely that every viewer will use this filter in the same ways, if they use them at all. However, it does suggest producers are using ARGs to encourage a preferred reading, rather than offering opportunities for viewers to create their own.

Although each ARG differed in its relationship to its film, all three provided players with a sense of exclusivity, offering them prior knowledge of characters and storylines which non-players could not access. The Beast provides this in a more general manner, offering players a deeper understanding, for example, of the A.I. politics, which were important in the film but not detailed so precisely. WhySoSerious also made specific references to minor characters which then appeared in the film. Host of Gotham Tonight Mike Engel was held hostage by the Joker; mob boss Albert Rossi was seen in court pulling a gun on Dent and Brian Douglass, leader of the Citizens for Batman forum, appeared in the opening sequence as one of many copycat Batmen. These smaller characters were familiar to players, allowing for the construction cultural capital and in-jokes around them. This applies particularly to Douglass, who became something of a representation of players inside the game.

*Super 8* also allowed viewers to spot references to the ARG. Rocket Poppeteers was referred to via a poster on Charles' bedroom wall and a logo on one of Joe's t-shirts. Players who accessed gonnabemint.com would have also recognised items in Joe's room. When the children discover Dr Woodward's research in his trailer in the school parking lot they also find the video from the Editing Room. However, this only confirmed what players already knew. Although it rewarded their knowledge by affirming it, it did build upon it. Unlike WhySoSerious, which had to work with viewers' prior knowledge, *Super 8* provided that knowledge for them beforehand to deploy in the film. The ARG positioned various pieces of information within the film

and constructs a fan experience for them. Movie fans could also spot classic movie posters, including *Dawn of the Dead* (1978 George A. Romero) and *Halloween* (1978 John Carpenter). Charles and Joe's rooms were constructed as a mass of posters, models, books and comics, a heavily detailed mise-en-scene which could be fruitfully picked over if one took the time, as players are already disposed to doing.

## **Marketing Strategies**

### **Affective Economics**

All three ARGs appear to attempt to tap into Jenkins' idea of affective economics (2006a: 61). The characters, companies and storylines peripheral to the films' narratives serve to explicate the world of the film to the extent that players become emotionally invested. Interacting with this world (particularly with characters) also heightens this sense of personal involvement as does the more personalised relationship with producers. It was even suggested that *The Beast* offered 'an emotional involvement that the film cannot hope to match' (Gallagher 2001). Whilst this might appear to be a failure of the part of the game to transfer this feeling to the film, the mere association of an ARG with the film suggests a desire to achieve this emotional connection. If selling a product is equally about selling a set of emotional experiences, Hills' argument around the subjective fan experience also comes apart a little. He suggests a focus on the personal, emotional and subjective experience of fandom means the notion of power in the consumer/producer relationship is less important (Hills 2002: xiii). However, if that emotional experience is being sold back to fans (via strategies like ARGs) focusing on the emotional experience of fandom no longer circumvents issues of power or control, but becomes central to them.

Jenkins develops his argument by claiming affective economics allows consumers more control over media products (2006a: 63). Whether the emotional attachment created by ARGs actually provides this is debatable, as is the ensuing question of whether players actually desire such levels of control. They may even be willing to cede control, if they feel they have received an entertaining and emotionally affecting game experience in return.

## **Brand Community**

Personal involvement with the world of the film and game is also strengthened by interactions amongst players, creating social bonds and associating personal relationships with that gaming experience. This resonates with the idea of a 'brand community'. Muniz and O'Guinn's article coining the term was published in March 2001, just as *The Beast* was launching, suggesting the game may have been responding to new understandings of relationship marketing, possibly trying to construct or imitate the organic formation of brand communities. ARG communities certainly seem to fit Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) definitions in that they are aware of the commercial context of their communities. Most high profile ARGs to date have been promotional and players seem relatively comfortable with devoting their time and energy to this commercial endeavour.

However, the definition also has at its centre 'a branded good or service' and it is the appreciation of this brand which binds a non-geographically linked community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001: 412). Promotional ARGs may not necessarily create communities whose central concern is the film being promoted. They may be interested in ARGs more generally, moving between games regardless of their origin. Designer Christy Dena (2008a) suggests lurkers (who form the majority of the games' audience) interact more with player-produced content (forums, game analysis, game summaries) than PM-produced content, distancing them even further from the promoted film. This prompts a number of questions: if the aim of an ARG is to construct a brand community, what exactly is the 'brand' which producers are hoping to build a loyal community around? Can ARGs successfully work to reposition the diverse interests and motivations of ARG players to the point that they might be described as a brand community? Kozinets' (1999) 'communities of consumption' are also difficult to apply to ARG communities. The consumption activity they share could be defined as the playing of ARGs, rather than moviegoing, which the ARG is presumably meant to encourage. If the aim is to create a community around the film-as-brand, there is a risk that ARGs will create a community whose focus is not the film, but the game itself.

## **Branding and Brand Ownership**

Grainge's (2007) concept of 'total entertainment' is useful as it explains the branding of Hollywood films in a manner which is appropriately industry-specific, involving both

aesthetic and industrial logics. In this context, ARGs can form part of the ‘inhabitable’ universe which media conglomerates seek to create around a film. Players are invited to become ‘citizens of Gotham’ or to solve a murder mystery in the year 2142. This element of agency within the world, particularly the potential (however small) for players to affect the outcome of a narrative, may provide an understanding of the brand not purely shaped by marketers, but by their individual experiences of the game and the direction in which they and the community take it. The result is a fannish relationship with the brand and a strong sense of empowerment and ownership. This emotional connection to the brand and the collaborative nature of the game, Jenkins (2006a) suggests, is a basis for increased consumer power. The level of interactivity and participation required prompts discussion of ARGs as inherently ‘democratic’. One BusinessWeek article even dubbed the strategies ‘Brand Democracy’, suggesting ARGs reduce the control of marketers and allow consumers to determine the way in which brands are communicated (Kiley 2005).

However, Grainge (2007) argues the industrial principle behind ‘total entertainment’ is also one of near total ownership and control for conglomerates. Viewers are seemingly invited to participate with the brand but to do so in ways which do not threaten the intellectual property of the media company. Players create narratives with the content fed to them by PMs and are rarely invited to create their own, which are more likely to affect the overall brand message. ARGs also tend to offer exclusive trailers, or stills as rewards for completing tasks. The controlled release of that material is arguably designed to deter consumers from searching for it elsewhere, using players as an influential marketing channel through which producers are still able to control content. WhySoSerious allowed players to participate in Nolan’s vision of Gotham City but it did not allow them to construct it. This is not to diminish the significance of the strong creative and emotional nature of that participation, but one might reasonably question how ‘democratic’ such strategies are and whether consumers really desire that kind of relationship with media brands.

### **Sponsorship and Branding**

Forms of branding outside of the film-as-brand also occur within ARGs. The Beast existed in a world relatively free of real-life sponsors. WhySoSerious was a far more commercial game involving prominent sponsors including Domino’s Pizza, Comcast

and Nokia, who provided the Joker Phones. Domino's was integrated into Gotham by being affiliated with gothampizzeria.com. Branding on the site was minimal but clear, using a logo in the bottom right corner of the page (Fig. 77). The Domino's TV advert mimics a chase scene from the film, as a delivery driver takes a pizza to Joker goons (Figs. 78, 79, 80).

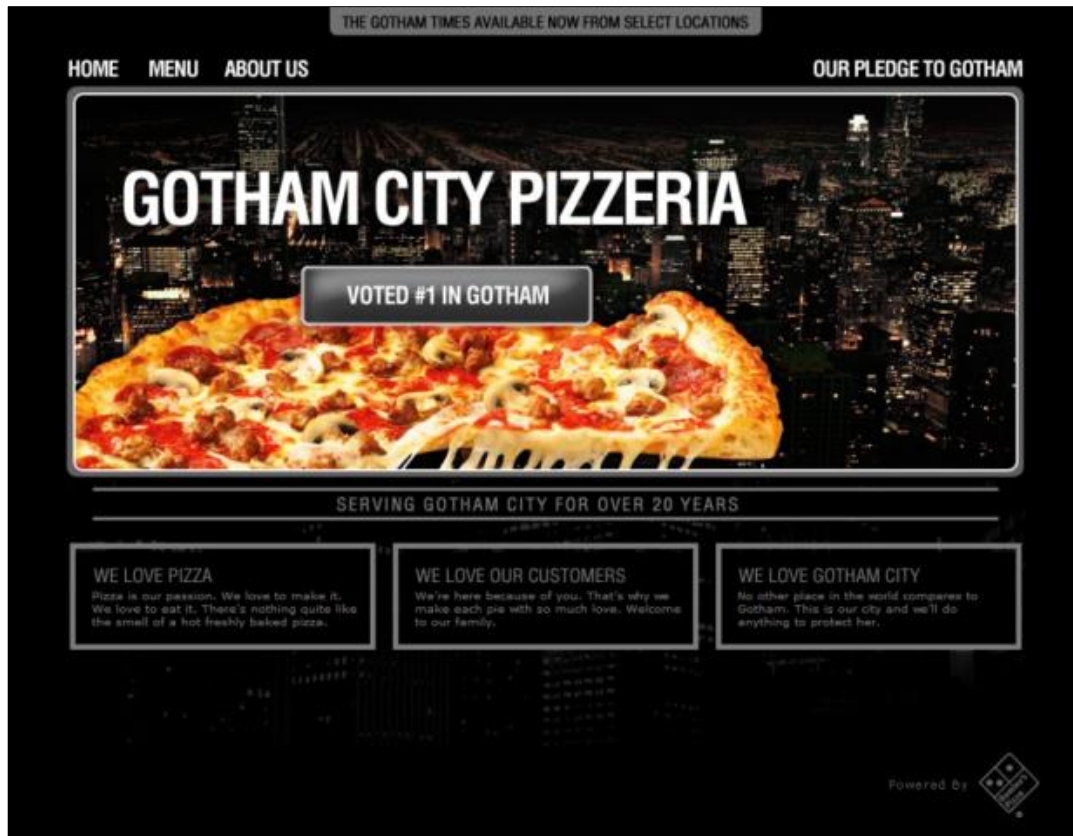


Figure 77



Figure 78



Figure 79



Figure 80

Fictional branding also occurs in *Super 8*. This was familiar to Abrams fans from previous ARGs, which all involved Slusho!, a fictional soft drink. Slusho! was never crucial to the main narratives but became a calling card for Abrams and an element of the game recognisable only to those who knew to look out for it, creating a sense of exclusivity. The Poppeteer thread of the game also briefly references Slusho!, citing its mysterious and addictive main ingredient (katei no mitsu, or Seabed's Nectar) in the ingredients list for one of the ice lollies. Abrams had also become something of a brand himself, well-known for projects shrouded in secrecy, involving complex narratives and dramatic plot twists.

The *Super 8* ARG therefore came with a more complex set of audience desires to be fulfilled. Previous projects *Lost*, *Cloverfield*, *Alias* and *Star Trek* (2009 JJ Abrams) came with ARGs attached so there were expectations that *Super 8* would follow suit. Abrams has also (knowingly or otherwise) constructed an image of himself

as a PM of sorts; a producer who is apparently very involved with the innovative online marketing campaigns for his products. However, a growing number of fans were becoming disgruntled with the amount of ‘red herrings’ and unresolved storylines in Abrams’ projects. This sometimes left viewers dissatisfied and less willing to devote time and energy to the properties. Dissatisfaction with the ARG may also have led to dissatisfaction with ‘Brand Abrams’ perhaps not performing brand management as effectively as was intended.

Player attitudes towards in-game branding require further consideration. Although both Domino’s elements of the campaign were thematically and stylistically integrated, the pizza promotion led to the discovery of the ‘Citizens for Batman’ secret forum, whereas the TV spot was a dead end. The Lost Experience saw complaints from players about poorly integrated sponsorship breaking TINAG (Askwith 2007). Analysis of the reception of sponsorship integration requires a more in-depth look at forum discussions. However, it appears the presence of sponsors’ logos in itself is not viewed by players as problematic as long as an effort has been made to integrate it into the game world. Player attitudes may be changing and more recent ARGs have contained stronger branding and copyright details in their content. However the initial reaction of players to the presence of in-game branding points to the tension in ARGs between their creative content and their commercial purpose. Hills’ argument regarding fan’s relationship to the commerciality of their fan texts is also of note here. He suggests fans constantly negotiate between their anti-commercial ideologies and commodity-completist practices (Hills 2002: 28). If that commerciality is more overt, does this negotiation become more difficult for fans? The commercial nature of a promotional ARG, in-game branding and an increasing emphasis on acquiring merchandise would seem to make that negotiation more difficult, unless players have developed other strategies for dealing with this apparent conflict.

### **ARG Evolution 2001 - 2010**

The development of ARGs since 2001 has seen them move from being experimental pieces of marketing to something more embedded within wider marketing campaigns and with the films they are promoting. The games have evolved a range of standard elements to their structure (e.g. rabbit holes embedded in trailers) and communities have developed cultural norms and rules to which PMs also adhere. Real-life events remain popular, although they feature to different extents in different games. Communities have



also changed since *The Beast*. The previously close relationship between PMs and players has become more distant and although certain hierarchies have always existed, these are increasingly encouraged through competitive play structured into the games themselves.

The shift towards a more stable genre has also seen ARGs reaching out to wider audiences, using prominent social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter and sometimes involving more real-world activities to attract those audiences. There has also been a move from complex puzzles and storyworlds, focussed on a core group of players, to fewer puzzles requiring specific knowledge, designed for broader audiences. This may not, however, be true for all properties, and some fanbases may demand more challenging experiences. According to Jenkins (2006a), more players should mean more collective intelligence, allowing for more complicated puzzles. However, the working assumption seems to be that more players means more casuals, who are believed to require an easier game to keep them engaged. The resulting simplification sees a lot of player energies wasted in speculation. It also suggests a tension between the games as games, and games as marketing, with designers attempting to create a balanced experience to please dedicated players as well as the wider audience. *WhySoSerious* manages to bridge that gap, expanding the filmic world whilst managing commercial obligations. *Super 8* unfortunately appears to slide further into game-as-marketing territory, resulting in a less satisfying experience for some players.

As ARGs become more connected to wider marketing campaigns, it raises the important issue of being able to distinguish between ARG material and other campaign material. Most games have their beginnings in that material which frequently points to the ARG, but given that players are a demographic which reacts negatively to direct selling, producers may have to consider how heavily that material is branded. The increased visibility of sponsorship or 'official' trademarking also denotes this tension, although there seems to be fewer player objections to this kind of branding than in previous ARGs. The desire to reach a wider audience with a 'synergised' campaign needs to be balanced with the desires of players to maintain a sense of exclusivity around ARGs.

The developmental arc outlined in this chapter is very general, and games like the ARG for *Prometheus* (2012 Ridley Scott) could be said to be bucking certain trends, focussing more on storytelling than movie-selling. However, it serves as a useful outline of the emergence and progression of promotional ARGs, and certain changes which the genre has undergone since *The Beast*. It also raises a number of questions. How do

players feel about shifts towards larger audiences and simpler games? How have players and PMs reacted to changes in their relationship? How important are issues like branding, sponsorship and the commerciality of the games for players? Why might PMs encourage more competitive play and how do players respond? Are PMs actively working to construct a brand community? If so, what kind of fandoms are they creating, and what kind of fandoms do players believe they are participating in? All these questions are best answered by talking to the players and PMs involved, which is the main preoccupation of the next two chapters.

## Chapter 3 – Producers

Both media conglomerates (e.g. Warner Bros.) and ARG developers (e.g. 42 Entertainment) have cited a variety of motivations and benefits of the games over the past decade. After a brief introduction and discussion of the methodology, this chapter seeks to analyse the validity of these claims and focus on the most significant of these: the perceived benefits of encouraging an active, participatory audience and the ensuing development of an affective relationship between both audience/text and audience/PMs. It goes on to consider this relationship in the context of brand communities, affective economics and consumer empowerment and finally outlines questions regarding the reception of the games in relation to these theoretical frameworks.

To inform this discussion, data was intended to be collected from both media companies and game designers. With a small number of designers likely to be available and willing to discuss projects, in-depth interviews were more likely to offer a higher quantity and quality of information than alternative methods such as surveys or email questionnaires. However, getting access to information from media conglomerates proved difficult and it became clear that designers and writers were keener to discuss their work. As a result, discussions surrounding the intentions and expectations of conglomerates come from the perspective of their contractors, or through interviews with corporate spokespeople in trade or mainstream press. It is important, therefore, to keep in mind the potential biases and limitations of these sources. They are usually unable to offer information, for example, regarding campaign budgets and often have to protect ongoing business interests and relationships with former clients.

Interviews were conducted with Sean Stewart (Lead Writer on *The Beast*), John Christiano, (CEO of Project C) and Adrian Hon (founder of Six to Start). *The Beast* developed after Microsoft had secured rights to a videogame for *A.I.*, but were struggling to find ways to develop the film into a playable game. Weisman took the idea to Steven Spielberg and producer Kathleen Kennedy, who both gave it the go ahead. Kennedy had also been having a long-running conversation with science fiction writer Neal Stephenson around possible crossovers between books, games and films. Stewart was then invited by Stephenson to work on the project. Weisman also approached Elan Lee, then Lead Game Designer at Microsoft Games Studios, to take the role of Lead Designer. Weisman, Stewart and Lee formed 42 Entertainment in 2003. Lee and

Stewart left the company in 2007 to form Fourth Wall Studios<sup>42</sup> before 42 Entertainment embarked on WhySoSerious.

Christiano's Texas-based company was involved with *Super 8*'s ARG, which was developed and produced by various contractors working for Amblin, Paramount and Bad Robot. Project C were responsible for the Editing Room and Development Room elements of the game as well as [scariestthingieversaw.com](http://scariestthingieversaw.com).<sup>43</sup> They were not responsible for Rocket Poppeteers, which was run by Watson D/G.<sup>44</sup> Both companies had previously provided content for other Paramount/Bad Robot properties, including *Cloverfield* and *Star Trek*. Project C and Watson D/G provide services ranging from 'all-encompassing web campaigns'<sup>45</sup> to individual viral elements for campaigns, web content and strategy for digital marketing initiatives. Whilst 42 have expanded their offer, their focus remains on what they describe as 'immersive entertainment that invites audiences to participate in connected experiences'.<sup>46</sup>

Hon's interviews offer the perspective of an ARG player who went on to pursue a career in transmedia design. He was a lead moderator on the Cloudmakers Yahoo! discussion board, and one of a select group invited to meet the PMs at the end of *The Beast*. He went on to work for London-based Mind Candy on stand-alone ARG *Perplex City* and founded his own company, Six to Start, in 2007. Six to Start have worked on transmedia marketing campaigns for properties including *Spooks Code 9* (2008) for the BBC, *Misfits* (2009-2013) for Channel 4 and the *Young Bond* series (Charlie Higson 2008-2014) for Puffin Books.<sup>47</sup> Hon's perspective is valuable in that he can speak from both sides of the curtain, having experienced ARGs as both PM and player.

Interviews were conducted in person with Stewart and Hon. Stewart's took place at a meeting during a conference visit in London. Hon's took place at the Six to Start offices in North London. Both were relatively relaxed settings, but had some time constraints as they were conducted during a working day. Follow up interviews took place with Stewart via Skype, one from his home, the other from his office at Fourth Wall Studios. Christiano opted to conduct interviews via email.

Interviews were designed using Mason's understanding of qualitative interviews as 'conversations with a purpose' as a starting point (Mason 1996). Face to face interviews were semi-structured, with three planned areas of discussion: relationship

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<sup>42</sup> [www.fourthwallstudios.com](http://www.fourthwallstudios.com) [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>43</sup> [www.projectc.net](http://www.projectc.net) [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>44</sup> [www.watsondg.com](http://www.watsondg.com) [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.watsondg.com/about> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.42entertainment.com/services> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>47</sup> [www.sixtostart.com](http://www.sixtostart.com) [Accessed 05.01.2015]

with the player community, relationship with media corporations and game design. Specific questions were tailored to each individual, based on prior knowledge of their work. Discussion was also extended outside of the prepared questions where appropriate to allow for more in-depth responses and complex answers to be articulated. All interviewees were asked similar questions to allow for comparable responses, but were adapted to allow for variations in individual experiences working on different projects. My own influence on the data collection appears to be minimal and I was largely treated as a neutral party with no particular affiliations with either players or producers.

Interviews were complemented with articles and interviews sourced from trade press e.g. *Advertising Age*, *Brand Strategy*. Other interviews were taken from more mainstream titles such as *Wired* and *The New York Times*. PhDs and other academic publications by designers Jane McGonigal and Christy Dena also provided a different perspective on game design (Dena 2008a, McGonigal 2008). Transcripts of post-game chat between players and PMs of *The Beast* offered an insight into the early relationship between players and PMs. Transcripts from panels at ARG-Fest-O-Con 2007 have also been consulted. The official website describes the conference as ‘an annual community organized conference, festival and meet-up designed to offer presentations and events related to alternate reality gaming, transmedia and serious games.’<sup>48</sup> It started as a small meeting in 2003 but has since developed into a larger conference forum attracting key industry speakers. Transcripts of the 2007 panels, including a 42 Entertainment panel, have been made available on the wiki maintained by the ARG community.<sup>49</sup> All the above documents are available online or in print in the public domain. Access to documents from the Cloudmakers’ Yahoo group required membership of the group, however membership is not restricted.

### **Motivations and Measuring Success**

When *The Beast* appeared in 2001, the enthusiasm expressed by the press was comparable to the response to the viral campaign for *The Blair Witch Project* two years previously. There is something of an origin myth surrounding *The Beast* as the first ARG. Stewart reflects ‘it’s funny how many of the terms that came out of A.I. have become terms of ARG now. Like rabbit hole [...] now people talk about it as if it were

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<sup>48</sup><http://www.argfestocon.com/> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>49</sup>[http://wiki.argfestocon.com/index.php?title=Video\\_Transcriptions](http://wiki.argfestocon.com/index.php?title=Video_Transcriptions) [Accessed 05.01.2015]

this codified thing' (Stewart 2012b).

The Beast was received by many as an extension of the ideas behind blairwitch.com, continuing to push boundaries in terms of what the internet could do for film marketers. Many may have had unrealistic expectations not only of ARGs, but of advances in online marketing more generally. The dot-com bubble was rapidly deflating by early 2001 and the advertising industry was struggling to find a way past banner advertising and click-through ads. ARGs offered something highly innovative in comparison.

Despite the hype, media companies seemed unsure as to precisely what ARGs were and what they wanted them to achieve. Specific instructions provided to companies like 42 Entertainment were initially rather vague. Stewart recalls, 'the remit for *A.I.* was "I dunno, what the hell"' (Stewart 2012a). The Beast was very much an experiment and there were few definitive expectations for the outcomes of the project because 'at that point no one knew what it was' (Stewart 2012a).

Over the following decade, the web became a very different place, with individuals developing stronger individual online presences. Web 2.0 and social media made it easier for marketers to utilise established social networks to spread their message virally. Multi-platform content became more important as media consumption increasingly occurred across different mobile devices, particularly smartphones and later, tablets. Gaming culture also expanded significantly. Mobile games and smartphone apps became an incredibly profitable sector of the industry. New generations of film producers emerged, including Abrams, who were well-versed in web culture and gaming. These filmmakers had clearer ideas about how they wanted their work to be represented and disseminated online. The world that was very much a new, unexplored territory for Spielberg during *A.I.* was more firmly mapped out and easier to navigate for Abrams' generation.

By 2010, Paramount seemed to have a stronger brief for *Super 8*. The project was developed around content provided by Abrams (the short film pieced together by players in the Editing and Development Rooms). Project C were charged with delivering that content in 'a cool way... in small chunks that also engaged the audience in a collaborative effort' (Christiano 2013). Beyond this, however, they were offered very little guidance: 'We were given the idea and then a ton of rope to go make it happen somehow' (Christiano 2013). There continued to be some ambiguity around the genre, leading to suggestions that ARGs were likely to be a short-lived trend rather than a marketing revolution:

‘A couple of years ago clients were asking for virals, then blogs, then UGC [user generated content] campaigns. I do feel that alternate reality games are a bit of a fad right now. If agents and clients do it blindly just because it’s the buzzword then it’ll just lead to copycat tactics’ (Rei Inamoto quoted in Goldie 2008).

Hon speaks in a very straightforward manner about his perception of the thinking behind an ARG commission:

‘You have your marketing budget and it’s set because you spend X amount on marketing. X percent of that is digital, because that’s just what you do. So now the decision is, how do I spend my digital budget? And you have to spend the money, because if you don’t spend the money you won’t get it next time. So I’ll do a game and I’ll do a website and you think, what do other people do? I’ll do what other people do, I’ll do what they said was successful’ (Hon 2012).

Stewart similarly suggests ARGs remain a calculated risk, taken almost as procedure in the division of the marketing budget. What they say in movie marketing is spend 70% of your money on the same stuff you always do, that you know works, or if it doesn’t at least you know why. Spend 20% of your money on stuff that’s maybe, and spend 10% on who the hell knows’ (Stewart 2012b).

The contrast between the anxiety around ‘copycat’ tactics and the desire to label ARGs the ‘future of marketing’ was reflected in the treatment of ARGs in trade press. Brand Strategy emphasised their impact on brand awareness as a ‘long-term strategic tool, not a short-term gimmick’ (Readon 2009).

One year previously, NMA ran a piece warning that although ARGs could ‘engage consumers with a brand in a truly interactive way... that doesn’t mean they’re right for everyone’ (Smith 2008). The article emphasises the ability of ARGs to engage with youth audiences, develop brand loyalty and widen the appeal for many brands, but advises bigger brands to be aware of the ARG audience’s dislike of direct advertising. Jim Russell (Director at advertising agency McKinney Silver) argued the games were ‘one tool in the bag and should be used when the situation demands it, not just because it’s there’ (Smith 2008).

Such a warning suggests companies were keen to use these techniques without thinking through whether this approach was appropriate for their audience. Game designers may have been able to capitalise on these tensions. Since no-one really understood what they were or how they worked, ARGs could be sold as the creative

solution to several commercial problems facing the industry at the time. If no-one was clear precisely what ARGs could achieve, it became easier to suggest they could achieve anything. However, Stewart suggests designers are now moving past the stage where, as he puts it ‘there was a whole bunch of people running around saying ‘transmedia! It’s faster than light speed AND a new dental floss!’ (2012a). Press comments from spokespeople were also unlikely to mention any expectations which were not met and equally unlikely to admit to simply jumping on the immersive marketing bandwagon.

As a result, a myriad of claims were made for the effectiveness of promotional ARGs, some more convincing than others. Some more traditional aims for marketing campaigns were cited, including ROI, boosting sales, attracting positive PR, or to expanding the existing audience to encompass new demographics. ROI depends on initial production costs and reports around these seemed rather vague. ‘It’s a question of how long is a piece of string. It depends who you work with, how complex the game is, how many resources you need’ (Alice Taylor quoted in Smith 2008).

When numbers were mentioned these ranged from ‘7 figure propositions’ (Stewart 2012a) for large scale games to ‘well below \$1,000,0000’ (Gallagher 2001) ‘x hundred thousand, half a million’ (Hon 2012) or ‘anywhere from 50-500k’ (Christiano 2012).

Yet ARGs were frequently promoted as cost- effective, or at least less costly in comparison to other media options (Smith 2008, Weisman quoted in Kyllö 2009). This is potentially due to excitement around the cost-saving implications of viral marketing more generally. One article claimed it could be ‘15 times more effective than ads posted on the net and much cheaper – no costly billboards or TV airtime, just focused free-to-air word of mouth’ (Watson 2001).

Moreover, if you ‘make the customer the medium’, they can do a lot of the hard work for free, reducing the media spend usually required to get such extensive coverage. One article went so far as to call the *Cloverfield* campaign ‘The ultimate in outsourcing’ (Brodesser-Akner 2007).

Clients also looked to sales figures as the measure of a campaign’s success. Unfortunately, as with any form of promotion, a direct link between sales and ARGs was difficult to prove and any claims to achievements in this area were usually vague and often qualified:



‘The ARG’s effect on *Halo 2*’s sales is hard to measure, particularly as the game’s launch was highly anticipated’ (Jim Nail quoted in Di Cesare 2005).

‘I’m fairly confident that we genuinely drove sales on *Year Zero*. But that was a project done with a guy who had a pre-existing fan-base, who was clearly, really invested in what he was doing’ (Stewart 2012a).

This is particularly problematic for the film industry since ‘the number of people who have to see a movie to move the needle on ticket sales is so large that the hardcore ARG audience does not matter... Their impact on ticket sales is going to be minimal’ (Stewart 2012b).

ARGs were often present in campaigns for highly anticipated Hollywood blockbusters whose ticket sales were likely to be high with or without the involvement of the ARG player community. Players often formed part of a broader target audience who would have bought a ticket anyway. For such products, sales or numbers of players might have been less important than press coverage, where ‘column inches are the win, they were going to sell \$100m of *Halo* on the first day’ (Stewart 2012a).

PR impact was one of *The Beast*’s biggest achievements for *A.I.* This was particularly useful because the film itself was not generating a huge amount of publicity. Stewart was told that Spielberg was taking a secretive approach, ‘so the guys charged with doing PR for the film didn’t have much they could do... so they were like whatever you’re going keep doing that!’ (Stewart 2012a). The game was also shrouded in secrecy, which further heightened press interest. In the period after the game had finished, some hailed it as ‘the next big thing’ in marketing:

‘[*The Beast*] changed the way that marketers approached the term viral. The game’s epic feel, homegrown appeal and rich story made it a unique force on the web. The excitement and buzz it created for an online promotion was unheard of... This is what creative marketers were meant to be doing, telling the best stories they could on behalf of clients who trust them to get results’ (Boswell 2002).

Such enthusiastic coverage offered an opportunity for the various parties involved to appear ahead of the curve, an accolade studios were not used to receiving in the arena of online marketing. One analyst claimed studios were ‘starting to get a handle on intellectualising the process of marketing’ (Landau 2001). ARGs were depicted as a strategy for ‘intelligent’, ‘creative’ companies, a level above those lacking the subtlety

to consider such methods. They were constructed as indicative of a more sophisticated approach and attitude, engaging with new technology and making standard print and broadcast tactics look primitive. It also appeared to offer audiences something for free, which McGonigal refers to as ‘gift marketing’ (quoted in Economist 2009). This could have a positive impact on a media company’s relationship with their consumer base, particularly if, like Paramount, they were known for taking a heavily proprietary approach to their IP.

Yet again, some high profile products, like *Halo 2*, were likely to gain media exposure regardless. In these cases ARGs were promoted as a way to access a wider variety of media outlets:

‘*Halo 2* was going to be huge, no doubt about it. But suddenly you saw crazy, fanatic people answer telephones in bee costumes in the middle of a hurricane; you saw that on CNN and you saw that in the New York Times... there’s no way it would have gotten into venues like that’ (Lee quoted in Ruberg, B. 2006).

However, it became increasingly difficult to sustain high levels of buzz. ‘It wasn’t the first time anymore, people had seen it, and by the time we were finishing *ilovebees*, the techniques of *The Beast* had become ubiquitous... it was like yeah, seen it, it’s a marketing thing... I’m not going to give you press for some marketing thing’ (Stewart 2012a).

Press interest in ARGs for *Cloverfield*, *The Dark Knight* and *Tron: Legacy* suggests that from this perspective, ARGs continue to provide this value to marketers. *Super 8*’s marketing campaign received less exposure, but Christiano (2013) maintains this is still a key motivator for using promotional ARGs.

Measuring PR impact is also not an exact science. There are several standardised industry metrics for measuring both press coverage (impressions, reach, etc.) and online audience engagement. Lee notes success for *The Beast* was measured using ‘number of hits, traffic, user base, fan sites, press coverage etc.’ (Cloudmakers 2001a). Project C used Google analytics, blog chatter and player-produced wikis to measure and monitor online engagement (Christiano 2013). These methods have developed to encompass Web 2.0 platforms and the focus is slowly shifting towards qualitative data as the understanding increases that 500,000 followers for a brand on Twitter mean little unless you understand how and why they are talking about the brand.

Finally, ARGs were pitched as a way to open up a property to new audience demographics, by ‘creating a cultural phenomenon around the product’ (McGonigal

quoted in Hoxsey 2005). For *Halo 2*, 42 Entertainment's remit was 'to make something so that people who are not already going to buy *Halo 2* would have a reason to talk about *Halo 2*' (Stewart 2012a) thereby, 'elevating the franchise via national press to pop-culture conversation.'<sup>50</sup> Designers estimated that, similar to *The Beast*, around 50% of players were female. ARGs were attracting a corner of the market which, in 2004, a more traditional campaign for a first-person shooter franchise would almost certainly not have reached, or potentially even have considered targeting (Kim et al. 2008).

However, this situation was specific to the gaming industry at that point in time, and cannot necessarily be expanded to uphold the conclusion that ARGs can broaden an audience for any media property. Films like *The Dark Knight* already had a broad audience base, and even standalone films like *Super 8* or *Cloverfield* appealed to wider demographics. Despite their apparently 'viral' nature it seems unlikely ARGs would make a significant impact on the size or demographics of an audience for a Hollywood blockbuster.

Fundamentally, all these motivations for using ARGs are measured quantitatively and the numbers of players attracted to a game (even taking into account lurkers), does not add up to anything significant enough to have a real impact on figures. Independent ARG designer Evan Jones, also comments that the advertising industry 'has this amazing way of measuring the reaction, even when it seems like a bit of voodoo sometimes' (Brackin 2007). He notes that in contrast to, for example, Nielsen ratings which are standardised, there are several ways to measure and interpret data for online engagement. This makes it hard to convey success to a client who might 'start comparing apples to oranges a little and says 'Well, you're not getting the *World of Warcraft* figures that we were thinking' (Brackin 2007). However he does note that metrics for online campaigns provide a slightly more accurate representation of engagement than, for example, 'a billboard campaign, where you have no real idea how many people have seen it or how they've reacted' (Brackin 2007).

In some senses, the issues surrounding the measurement of a campaign's impact are applicable for any medium. However, the initial unfamiliarity of ARGs is likely to have exacerbated these problems, particularly in the early stages when online more generally lacked a clear set of industry standards by which to measure success. Nonetheless, designers must work within that system to prove an ARG's worth to clients. Perhaps as a result, figures in trade press are often those which would appear attractive to clients, but may not necessarily accurately represent the impact of an ARG

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<sup>50</sup> <http://42entertainment.com/work/ilovebees> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

on audiences. Hon also notes such figures are easily manipulated and are not heavily scrutinised:

‘Well we want to get x million users. You don’t know what’s going to happen, you don’t know how that translates into box office takings. You run the campaign, if you hit those numbers great, if you don’t hit those numbers... you find the best number you can, so you might talk about page views, instead of uniques, or visits instead of uniques. You might go and say well we had 2000 people email us their stuff and the problem is their boss doesn’t care exactly how well they did or not, as long as it wasn’t a disaster. And if it was really successful how would you know anyway? Because no one knows what really successful is... I think it’s a total scam actually, and it kind of makes you realise how ugly marketing is’ (Hon 2012).

A strong example of this is the various figures describing the success of The Beast, WhySoSerious and ilovebees (Fig. 81). The figures vary and are all large scale, but cannot convey engagement on any more nuanced level.<sup>51</sup>

### **Active Audiences**

These more traditional gauges of marketing effectiveness cannot offer a strong analysis of how ARGs work, which suggests they may perform a different function for media producers. We can then look to other claims made for ARGs which tended to focus not around the *numbers* of people engaging but the *kind* of engagement they were involved in. Some press analysis described ARGs as an alternative strategy during a time when audiences were ‘getting savvier... and brands need[ed] an innovative way to deal with things like TiVo and ad-blocking software’ (Clark 2007). Jeff Gomez (CEO of Starlight Runner Entertainment), highlighted that for marketers, ‘partnering on co-branded transmedia story extensions’ (including ARGs) allows them to circumvent problems with evasive digital natives of Generation Y. ‘Simply put, you’re no longer a commercial to be ignored or tuned out, you’re part of the story and audiences will respond accordingly’ (Gomez 2012).

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<sup>51</sup> Comparable figures for Super 8 do not appear as widely in the press, suggesting such figures were no longer newsworthy enough to form part of the PR campaign.

<b>The Beast</b>	<b>Ilovebees</b>	<b>WhySoSerious</b>
300 million impressions. <sup>52</sup>	3 million players. <sup>53</sup>	Over 11 million unique participants in over 75 countries. <sup>54</sup>
3 million people actively participated. <sup>55</sup>	10,000 beekeepers were mobilised in public, 600,000 were actively solving puzzles online and 2.3 million were keeping tabs on the plot (Hoxsey 2005, Landau 2001).	More than 10 million participants. <sup>56</sup>
1 million unique users, more than 3 million sessions, with 28% of visitors remaining online for more than half an hour (Landau 2001).	500,000+ unique hits on ilovebees.com per day (Dena 2008d).	‘The 12-hour cake hunt involved only a few dozen people on the ground but some 1.4million gathered online to see what would happen’ (Rose 2011: 10-13).
Cloudmakers numbered in excess of 7500 (Hoxsey 2005).	2,000,000+ recorded unique hits on an update day (Dena 2008d).	
2.5 million players (Dena 2008d).		

Figure 81

<sup>52</sup>42 Entertainment - <http://web.archive.org/web/20120930005458/http://www.42entertainment.com/beast.html> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>53</sup>42 Entertainment - <http://www.42entertainment.com/work/ilovebees> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>54</sup>42 Entertainment - <http://www.42entertainment.com/work/whysoserious> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>55</sup>42 Entertainment - <http://web.archive.org/web/20120930005458/http://www.42entertainment.com/beast.html> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>56</sup>WhySoSerious Promotional Video - <http://www.42entertainment.com/work/whysoserious> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

The medium was described as ‘far more powerful and resonant than a 30 second TV spot’ (Boswell 2002). Lee frequently referenced the subtlety of the approach, suggesting that ‘if, instead of shouting, instead of pushing our message at people, if we whisper it, if we just embed a small flash of imagery in a TV commercial... it could be so much more powerful’ (Lee Quoted in Ruberg 2006).

This subtle approach was apparently resonant with consumers because it embraced the notion of an active rather than passive media consumer. It acknowledged that online audiences were not only rejecting advertising but embracing more challenging media content, on and offline:

‘Because communities form and talk, television producers and game producers now have access to these discussions and they see their audience is a lot smarter than in the past they’ve been given credit for. As a result, people are willing to take a lot more risks. *Lost* is a great example. They’re constantly forcing the audience to make speculations... Because of that access, there’s a lot more trust, and a lot more experimentation’ (Lee quoted in Ruberg 2006).

The emphasis was not just on getting a message across to a bigger audience, but shifting the mode of address entirely and engaging audiences in a more active and indeed fannish way. Active audiences and player agency thus became a defining feature of ARGs. ‘An ARG is a story or journey... driven by an online community whose interaction and experience determines the journey and often the ending’ (Smith 2008).

### **Imaginative Destinations and Brand Extensions**

ARGs create the space for audiences to participate in the world of the film by expanding that world in both on and offline platforms and allowing them to access it through everyday media channels. This is part of what Stewart refers to as building an imaginative destination:

‘One of the things we talked about with them [Microsoft] was it would be great to sell more copies of the video game, but our actual remit is to make *Halo* a destination for the American imagination in a way that Oz or Middle Earth or Hogwarts is, to create a way in which this world can escape from being tied to this controller’ (Stewart 2012a).

Michael Smith also draws comparisons with Tolkien's work:

'Tolkien was a master of creating incredibly detailed and immersive worlds. He created vast maps of Middle Earth, deep historical information going back centuries, and even designed unique languages. If he was alive I'm sure he'd be using ARGs to tell his stories!' (Hanas 2006).

This is indicative of a more general shift towards content-driven promotional materials and cross-platform narrative expansion. It also reflects a movement in the gaming industry over the past decade towards increasingly sprawling and complex open-world games, with intricate histories, more complex characterisation and narratives comparable to the structures of complex television narratives like *Lost*, *The Wire* (2002-2008 HBO) or *The Sopranos* (Stuart 2013). The early and mid-2000s saw a further push towards emergent gameplay, where players could explore and interact with elements of the game outside of a linear narrative. The game then responds to those interactions 'realistically' according to the rules of the universe. This drive continues as games like the *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-2014 Rockstar Games) franchise push those boundaries and strive for truly open-ended games.

The creative endeavour of 'world building' or 'narrative extension' is also bound up with the more commercial process of 'brand extension'. Gray interprets 'branding' as 'the process of making a product into a text; thus, when the product is itself a text, branding need not mean anything more than adding sites of construction for that text' (2010: 208).

For Gray a film is always-already a brand, so expansion of the meanings or emotions it communicates simply means transferring them to different sites, one of which can be an ARG. These sites then offer different entry points where these meanings can be elaborated upon. All promotional materials can therefore be considered brand-management, as well as extension, as they attempt not to only extend content across different platforms, but to control and shape the meanings and emotions transferred across those platforms. Christiano notes the ARG for *Star Trek* was specifically charged with bringing in a new audience – 'to make *Star Trek* feel current, relevant, action, thriller. To shed all of the stereotypes' (2012). This can be understood as an exercise in re-branding, changing or adapting some of the meanings associated with the brand to appeal to contemporary tastes. Whilst it might allow players to

participate in the filmic world, it is less an opportunity for audiences to shape the meanings of those worlds, than for producers to exert control over them.

However, there are problems associated with using something as complex as an ARG in a world/brand building exercise for a film. Franchises like *Batman* often have an overflow of entry points for people to access and explore that world, in which case an ARG might not seem necessary. Franchises may also present limitations in terms of where the ARG narrative can reasonably go, a problem which is exacerbated if the studio is overly proprietary about their IP. Since such world building is part of an ARG's promise, its restriction could lead to an unsatisfactory experience for players. However, there are ways around this, particularly in the mechanism of the reboot. A reboot suggests that in certain iterations of, for example, *Batman* or *Spiderman* previous rules or narrative expectations do not necessarily apply. Comic book fans are likely to be used to this notion, particularly for the two aforementioned characters, who appear in various forms in different strands of the comics.

Harder to work with might be a franchise like *Star Trek* which is heavily policed not only by its owner Paramount, but also by fans. Abrams' reboot works around the original *Star Trek* universe without denying its existence. It works on the basis that the reboot world exists within an alternate parallel universe, running alongside the original *Star Trek* universe and acknowledging it primarily through the significant inclusion of the 'original' Spock character. Whilst this might seem like a ploy to re-exploit a successful franchise for a new audience, it also offers room for creative expansion of a property which has always been strenuously restricted for producers and consumers alike.

A standalone film, although lacking the breadth of material of a franchise, would seem to have more unexplored territory available. It is not already swamped with ancillary materials through which fans have already explored its wider universe. Whilst this may be the case, Stewart argues some standalone properties might not lend themselves to such Tolkien-esque expansion of their storyworlds:

'there are a lot of examples of things that work for ARGs in some ways, because they're story based, but something that's only ever going to be a one-shot is in fact sort of a terrible thing for an ARG, because the fate of the film economically will be decided in 4 days, and nothing you can do will change that or change that much... you could make an argument that there was no reason to put energy into building that kind of world and community' (Stewart 2012b).



Stewart also notes it is extremely difficult to ask people to dedicate the time and energy to an ARG for a property in which they do not already have some affection or interest (Stewart 2012a). A *Twilight* (Catherine Harwicke 2008) ARG might seem feasible, because fans are already aware of the universe and will want to dig deeper. *Super 8* and *Cloverfield*, although not part of a franchise, are part of a larger body of work linked with Abrams which fans have been exploring via ARGs since *Alias*. One might even argue for the existence of an ‘Abramsverse’ (a smaller, less coherent equivalent of the ‘Whedonverse’), with texts connected by a shared mode of address which always invites audiences to engage with the storyworld in this manner and leads them to expect this kind of interaction.

This may explain why the level of engagement offered by promotional ARGs has shifted over time, to make them more accessible. In early ARGs, players could affect the game narrative via their actions/inactions and their scrutiny of PM errors:

‘Players drove the story more than the puzzle building... Players spotting typos were responsible for two entire characters. Players also voted with their interests. The Red King ... wasn’t supposed to be mentioned past the first week. But the web developers threw in a cool sound file, the players reacted, and a star was born!’ (Puppetmaster FAQ 2001).

As the genre developed some producers noted the barrier for entry for an ARG was often considered too severe by corporate clients. The Beast had set the bar too high and although clients were keen to meet the perceived need for active engagement in media texts, they were not interested in spending their marketing budgets entertaining such a small section of their audience. An ARG had to become more ‘mainstream’ which required a lower level of difficulty and therefore intensity of participation. Christiano (2013) also suggested the more complex projects were financially and logistically too complicated and required too much commitment. What film marketers are now looking for is something with a smaller scale and budget but that has a similar level of impact. ‘The full on Deep Dive just requires so much time and so many resources for a dubious ROI... A lot of people in movies are trying to come up with things that are less ornate and immersive but still get some of the value...’ (Stewart 2012b).

Terms such as ‘interactive’, ‘engagement’ and ‘participation’ have also shifted in meaning. Before internet connections became a ubiquitous part of daily life, the games capitalised on the possibilities around this new connective medium. As Hon

suggests, ‘it was like, wow, you can find a person who knows Sanskrit on the internet! Now it’s not cool, you just go on Reddit and say who can read Sanskrit and half an hour later there’ll be someone there’ (2012).

The prevalence of social networks mean we now take these kinds of resources for granted. For Hon this is also about moving on from an old medium. ARGs like *The Beast* are the past and future is about something that more people can enjoy. In addition, media companies started to question precisely how much they wanted consumers to ‘participate’ in or ‘interact’ with their brand. The initial excitement started to fade and the games began to change in response.

By the time *Super 8* launched its ARG, ‘engagement’ could mean as little as ‘liking’ a *Super 8* Facebook page, or retweeting a promotional message. In either of these examples, interaction is reduced to the single click required to follow through a banner ad. Whilst this might not sit well with more experienced players looking for a challenge, it offers marketers more control over the games. It also makes them easier to measure and monitor quantifiably while still offering the sense that players have ‘participated’, albeit at a very low level.

### **Active Audiences, Control and Narrative Ownership**

At this point discussions of agency and active participation lead to issues of control and media ownership. It was suggested that by offering active participation in an ARG: ‘the narrative is shaped – and ultimately owned – by the audience in ways that other forms of storytelling cannot match. No longer passive consumers, the players live out the story’ (Lee quoted in Rose 2007). McGonigal went as far as to suggest the designers, through ambiguity, must cede control over the final scope and dimensions of the game’s solution to the players’ (2008).

However, other producers argued that even in earlier games players never really had as much control as they believed:

‘You always know what you want players to do... you don’t go and set some goal where you have no idea how they’re going to respond. Sometimes they might do better than you think and that’s wonderful and you might decide to go and change things. Certainly in *Perplex City* they liked one of our characters so much that we thought we’d keep her around a bit longer...But they won’t know whether they did that or not. Sometimes you might let them know by saying you

need to email this person or they're going to die, but in that way, actually, they have less influence over that than they think. Because if you make that threat they can respond in two ways and you plan for both of them. So they don't really have that much control, in a way' (Hon 2012).

Ultimately, Clark argues 'players think they have a lot of control, but really, what you even choose to acknowledge or not to acknowledge makes a huge difference in how that plays out' (2007). Should players attempt to take the game in an unwanted direction, PMs can override this and bring the game back to, or at least closer to, an original plan, although they might struggle ethically with this level of intervention. 'There is no PM out there, I bet that has not given a fake solution to a puzzle that has not been solved or pretended to receive an email when they didn't. It's being pragmatic sometimes... I'm not going to say I've never done it but we don't like doing it... it can't be approached uncritically' (Hon 2012).

Despite her insistence on players' ownership and control of ARGs, McGonigal offers an alternative, almost contradictory model of this relationship in her earlier work:

'The gameplay of a puppet mastered experience boils down to a high-stakes challenge: Perform – or else. Or else what? Or else, be denied the opportunity to play... There is simply no optionality to the power play – do exactly what you're told, or there's no play for you. This underlying power structure requires a level of overt submission from gamers that is simply unprecedented in game culture. And so the players' definition acknowledges: It is the puppetmasters, not the players, who "control the game"' (2007).

This powerlessness, she continues, is pleasurable and wilful for players:

'The pleasures and challenges of real world gaming missions are the pleasures and challenges of dramatic performance. And for puppetmasters, writing real world mission scripts is very much the same process as writing dramatic texts, redesigning them in real time is very much the process of directing live actors on stage' (McGonigal 2007).

McGonigal's theories reflect a tension between the more idealistic desire to portray the games as offering players control over a media text, and the reality that without significant PM control the games become unplayable. There has to be a precise balance so that everyone has a satisfying experience. To extend her original metaphor, actors

might be able to use their interpretations in their performances, but ultimately the director will decide whether this interpretation is valid in their vision of the story.

It is also possible to question whether players actually want to control the narrative. At the conclusion of *ilovebees* ‘gamers were genuinely surprised to hear the design team say the gamers themselves had control over how the plot unfolded’ (Kim et al. 2008: 40).

This might vary with different communities or individuals depending on their previous experience with ARGs. Players of *ilovebees* may have been new to the genre, but *Cloudmakers* would have been more aware of their potential role in creating the storyline. If players are unaware of their ability to affect plot development, is it fair to say this is genuinely part of the games’ appeal? Hon (2001a) addresses this directly in his walkthrough guide to *The Beast*, suggesting players do not want to be burdened with endless decision-making. If they are constantly overwhelmed with options it can detract from the enjoyment and places a strain on producers, who have to provide content for every eventuality.

It was not possible to sustain *Beast*-like levels of agency in the long term due to the sheer amount of labour involved in monitoring and responding to the community at that speed. As levels of interactivity were slowly lowered in subsequent ARGs, the two parties had to further develop that balance of power in their relationship. Players had to trust PMs to control the game to a certain extent to make sure it did not spiral out of control, but they also had to feel assured that PMs would respond appropriately to player actions. Jaclyn Kerr, Administrator at *Unfiction.com* and Assistant Editor at *ARGNet*, put this neatly in a sporting analogy:

‘You can get PMs that will almost try to direct the story... you can almost see the players rail against it and when they start to rail against it they start losing their trust in the PM’s ability to react to the situation.... The PMs are throwing out content and the players are picking it up and throwing it all back. It’s very much like a tennis match. And when that PM team, instead of playing like they normally would, instead of hitting the tennis ball back they hit a bowling ball, it doesn’t make sense... If you can’t hit the ball back within the court area then the players can’t play your game’ (2007).

Some producers questioned the benefits of offering the audience any narrative control. When Stewart asks ‘would *Macbeth* be better if the audience got to vote on the ending?’ he is rejecting what he describes as a ‘choose your own adventure’ model,

whereby players make choices throughout the narrative which send it in a particular direction (Stewart 2012b). He highlights the difference between ‘a story that the audience gets to change [which] is usually a bad idea and is usually a bad story’ and ‘a story that the audience gets to co-create [which] can be a very good story and very engaging experience’ (Stewart 2012b). Fundamentally, he believes:

‘the choose-your-own-adventure model’ breaks the unspoken agreement made at the start of any story that ‘you agree to act as if these people are real and that their lives really matter’. As soon as the story asks you to make a choice about the next event, it says ‘this isn’t something that happens to real people, this is a game that you and I are playing’ (Stewart 2012b).

In this scenario, disbelief is unsuspected and the experience is disrupted. From a more practical angle, giving an audience agency means dealing with the possibility of failstate. To exemplify, Stewart describes an interactive story where the viewer can see a sniper on a rooftop aiming at a character through a window. They can tell the character to duck, or shoot the sniper themselves. Of course, they also have the ability to do nothing, in which case the character dies. This is failstate, the outcome that stalls or derails the entire story. ‘You either have a solution for that or you have to understand that what you are doing is not storytelling in the traditional sense. But there is no path that does not lead to failstate as long as people have agency inside the fiction’ (Stewart 2012b).

As an alternative, Stewart suggests ARGs offer ‘the chance to affect or be seen, or be reflected in the narrative’ rather than actively controlling that narrative. ‘ARGs offer ways for people to see themselves in the story and register their impact in the story’ (Stewart 2012b). At one stage, players built a database of their own nightmares in reaction to the character of Loki, an A.I. who consumed dreams. Stewart then wrote a soliloquy for that character based on the information in the database. Developers created a flash movie and voiceover within 36 hours of the database appearing. Stewart recalls ‘watching people say “Oh my god” then say “wait a minute, that’s me”’ (Stewart 2007b).

In this way, instead of ‘controlling’ the story, he suggests the story is ‘responsive, the story acknowledges the audience’s involvement. All those things *feel really good* and give that *sense* of ownership [my italics] but don’t take you down that cul-de-sac of controlling events’ (Stewart 2012b).

There are other mechanisms in ARGs which can allow players to act within the

text and provide positive feelings of ownership without offering up control of the narrative. The games were praised because they did not ‘push a message on somebody’ (Hanas 2006). Lee frequently discussed the importance of the sense of discovery for players. ‘You, who discovers that bizarre frame that’s out of place on the TV, suddenly you own that experience. It’s yours. You feel this tremendous sense of pride because you found it’ (Lee quoted in Ruberg 2006).

This emotional and personal reading of the games allows players to make a strong investment right at the starting point. This notion of discovery is also the basis of viral marketing and was radical in film marketing because ‘pushing’ was (and to an extent still is) the primary mode of communicating a marketing message. Indeed, ‘high concept’ marketing and filmmaking is still prevalent in Hollywood. Viral marketing places the emphasis on owning an experience without having to own any of the content involved in that experience; passing on someone else’s content and therefore feeling like part of it belongs to you because you activated that content. Web 2.0 has also made it incredibly difficult to be the first or the only person to notice anything, so the stakes and rewards of being a part of something ‘viral’ at the early stages, are now significantly higher.

Christiano maintains media companies are looking for such ‘virality’, which he defines as ‘content getting picked up and spread around/shared by fans’ (2013). Super 8 is a good example, as it focussed on the circulation of Abrams’ short film. However, the desired outcome was the sharing and spreading of *official* content. The game did not offer fans the opportunity to create additional content, or reconfigure the content provided. This is not to say it did not happen, but the design of the game does not explicitly allow for that kind of interaction.

However, McGonigal also notes the plethora of player-created artefacts and networks without which the games are impossible to play including ‘Wikis, group-moderated blogs and multi authored mailing lists, collaborative spreadsheets to list-servs, and toll free online teleconferencing systems’ (2008).

They therefore create not only content but systems to distribute and discuss that content. It is also this content which persists, whereas ‘official’ content is often removed from the web within a timeline specified by the client (Lee 2007). Dena (2008a) also estimates players spend more time interacting with this than they do with ‘official’ game content. There is evidence of other player-generated content which is out-of-game, including web content which interacts with, parodies or spoofs ‘official’ content and merchandise such as t-shirts. Players have also previously appropriated in-game

content for their own use. McGonigal describes how players took ownership of Flea++ (an invented programming language used in *ilovebees*) and started using it in conversations outside of the game (McGonigal 2008).

However, as Dena notes, this is not the primary way in which players can be creative within the game. She describes ARGs as:

‘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... fan practices of extending the original narrative of a primary producer, the gaps to be filled are integral to the primary narrative’ (Dena 2008a).

Co-creation is therefore emphasised over appropriation, but the notion of gap-filling, particularly if those gaps are left intentionally by producers, limits the amount of ownership players can have over the content. They might fill these gaps in unexpected ways or find unintended gaps to fill, but this remains a form of co-creation where producers largely maintain authorial control of the text.

Presenting at a transmedia industry conference, Stewart emphasised the need for players to have real and powerful interactions with the text, but for that to remain ‘in their role as audience’ (2012b), keeping them outside of the fiction. The reaction was revealing: “I had several come up to me and say ‘don’t you believe in transmedia at all?’ And if I had that chance again, I would say ‘listen, what I want is to make some promises we can keep’” (Stewart 2012b).

There is a sense that offering authorial control to the audience is such a central belief and tenet of the industry that to reject it is like betraying the group, despite the clear practical issues this poses.

From an alternative perspective, ARGs could be seen as a way for media organisations to offer the experience of that ownership without actually losing any control over their IP. Stewart also remarks on these ‘illusory’ feelings, suggesting ‘I think we have, without exaggeration, invented more ways for the audience to feel the illusion of control, than anyone in the world’ (2012b). Although he finds the term overly pejorative, it is strikingly difficult to find a suitable alternative. This resonates strongly with the ethical stance many PMs take on their relationships with players. Entering into an affective relationship with players demands a level of trust. If players feel ‘hoaxed’ or tricked in any way, that trust breaks down along with the game itself.

However, players actively and knowingly opt into that ‘illusion’, willing to cede a level of narrative control in return for a well-constructed and engaging entertainment experience. ‘Illusion’ may have connotations of players being somehow hoodwinked, but such knowledgeable players choose to buy into the pleasures of that ‘illusion’ because they know the alternative may result in a less enjoyable gaming experience. PMs, for their part, agree to provide those illusions via a responsive game design which respects that choice by not making them feel they are being manipulated. Örnebring suggests

‘ARGs could be viewed as part of an ongoing contestation of narrative, where (fan) audiences increasingly feel that they have (or ought to have) some measure of ownership over a text, and where media organisations, faced with a world of easy-access downloading and file sharing, increasingly want to retain control over their intellectual property’ (quoted in Martin et al. 2006).

If control of narrative is the key to ‘ownership’ of a media text then audiences could never realistically attain that. It is not even clear they desire such literal authorial ownership. Stewart proposes an augmentation of the relationship which does not take control as its central problem. A text instead responds to and ultimately respects an audience which it acknowledges to be active, knowledgeable and in possession of the means to participate, but who ultimately want to be taken on a journey more than they want the power to map that journey out. If players are doing all the work then who is entertaining who? It seems the feeling or indeed ‘illusion’ of agency is more important than any authorial influence. ARGs may therefore be capable of providing a middle ground in this apparent ‘ongoing contestation’ between media corporations and their audiences; satisfying the players’ need for a feeling of agency whilst allowing IP owners to retain a level of control they feel comfortable with. What makes this possible is the fact that ARGs are able to provoke a powerful, ‘feeling’ or a ‘sense’ of control, connecting with consumers on an affective level.

### **Affected Audiences**

Producers are not necessarily encouraging players to take control of the text when they claim to be looking for ways to ‘make the audience active and not passive’ (Baronoff quoted in Brodesser-Akner 2008a). It may instead be a means of encouraging audiences



to engage affectively with a text.

Affect (as a verb) is defined as meaning ‘to produce an effect upon’, but also has an emotional significance, ‘to act upon (as a person or a person's mind or feelings) so as to produce a response’ (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 2014). Within marketing, affect is ultimately intended to provoke a purchasing decision, as per Jenkins’ (2006a) definition of ‘affective economics’. This is not necessarily a new approach in advertising. Grainge notes a shift in the 1950s from ‘instrumental to emotional advertising’, whereby ‘the ubiquity and significance of promotional communication [is] based not on what consumers know about a product but on how they are made to feel and identify as consuming subjects’ (2007: 23).

The definition of a ‘brand’ therefore has less to do with the properties of the product and more to do with the way it should make the consumer feel; what emotions, aspirations, ideas or meanings it communicates. Taking this one step further, affective economics highlights the importance of the consumer as not only the receptor of those messages but as a reciprocal investor, actively bringing those emotions to bear upon the brand which then dictates their purchasing decisions. ARGs can allow producers to encourage and develop this affective relationship in ways other media cannot, which can provide a sense of ownership unrelated to authorial control.

Storytelling is an intrinsically affective process and a strong conveyor of such emotions and aspirations. Advertising, in turn, is often spoken of in terms of ‘telling a story’ rather than ‘selling a product’. Advocates suggested this appealed to media-saturated consumers because: ‘there’s subtlety in having the brand live underneath a story’ (Horlick quoted in Boswell 2002). As a narrative format, ARGs are therefore somewhat affective already, amplifying this by communicating that story via personal media channels. As McGonigal suggests, ‘when I get a text message on my cell phone from this game it feels personal to me and intimate to me in a way that mass communication doesn’t’ (quoted in Irwin 2007b).

This also brings the marketing message out of the public domain and starts to encroach on the private and personal space of players, who usually have to actively invite the game into that sphere. Whilst that might seem somewhat intrusive, this also comes at a time when many consumers were developing their online presences and social media was increasingly blurring the lines between private and public.

Collaborative play can also contribute to this affective impact. McGonigal suggests ARGs are fundamentally inclusive, offering a chance for everyone to feel they have contributed to the group’s success. ‘The plausibility of so many diverse

interpretations empowered players of all skill levels, natural abilities, inclinations and interest to achieve success... It ensures that no player is left out of the game, no individual discouraged or excluded from the opportunity to contribute to participatory culture' (2008).

Stewart (2012c) believes this is what contemporary audiences prefer. Dena similarly argues that where PMs have included mechanisms such as 'individual rewards' or 'social statuses' to invoke competition amongst the group, there were 'player events that thwart[ed], ignore[d] or reverse[d] them' (2008c).

However, McGonigal's inclusive vision fails to take into account the very high barrier to entry, the difficulty in joining a game which has already begun and the simple truth that *not* everyone gets to contribute. The player community itself is aware of the issue and Hon (2001) drew attention to this when he claimed only 10% of the community were actively solving puzzles during *The Beast*. The emphasis on collaboration also tends to overlook the fact that the community develops internal competitions and hierarchies. Game designers have acknowledged a natural competition within communities but generally feel this should originate from the community itself. 'Who is going to be the leader, who is going to be the one that solves this? ...You can play off that in the game structure... the competition is very organic –I think the competition is healthy and safe for the overall community as long as it doesn't become the centre of attention' (Kerr 2007).

Competition can also develop between multiple communities, as exemplified in *The Beast* when Cloudmakers became irritated by the in-game recognition received by smaller community Spherewatch:

'We wanted to encourage a sense that not absolutely all of the game had to only happen in Cloudmakers so we put out two sorts of shout outs... and the Cloudmakers found the other one many hours in advance and got so angry and furious that someone else was getting any attention that they literally did not notice that they themselves also had a shout out in the game' (Stewart 2012b).

Hon predicted that as multiple communities of players became more common, each community would want the game 'for themselves', requiring PMs to rethink how to effectively manage each community (Hon 2007). However it is not clear whether this has been the case. During *WhySoSerious*, for example, one community formed on *Superherohype* and another on *Unfiction*. More detailed analysis of forum discussion is necessary to form a clearer picture of the relationship between the two but it did not

appear overly competitive.

From a PM perspective the workload is lighter if players compete against each other. A great deal of the entertainment value of an ARG comes from the community interacting within itself rather than with PMs (Stewart 2012b, Weisman quoted in Dahlen 2008). Yet few believe invoking competition is a positive way to structure ARGs. PMs on *The Beast* ‘strongly felt that jeopardizing the community spirit would kill the goose that laid the golden egg’ (Cloudmakers 2001c). Kerr (2007) also argues that elements of the game which challenge the community itself or prevent it from working as a collective intelligence is contrary to the point of ARGs. Yet there is a significant increase in the level of competition involved in more recent promotional ARGs like *Super8*, which used the *Rocket Poppeteers* element of the game almost exclusively for this purpose, suggesting that, for some clients, the benefits of collaborative play may not necessarily outweigh those of competitive play.

The co-operative nature of ARGs, much like the issue of audience control, is something producers are so heavily invested in that to refute it too strongly could draw criticism. Designer Adam Brackin notes that in his team’s early experimentation with competitive games they were ‘accused of a lot of things, like splitting our own community, playing players off of each other... people are hiding information, this can’t be good for the story’ (2007).

The potential social or political implications of ‘collective intelligence’ have also been the basis of much of the academic interest in ARGs to date. If the games are not fundamentally co-operative, then theories of collective intelligence, smart mobs and the power of the group cannot be maintained. For Jenkins (2006a), it is through the collective that consumers can be in a position to claim more ownership and control over media products. It is also one of the arguments made to support the notion that the games are ‘more’ than ‘just’ marketing. If competitive play reduces the possibility of ‘collective intelligence’ developing, it could follow that an increased level of competition reflects an intention to restrict the power of the group. This seems a little extreme, particularly given that competitive design can have a more practical basis in lowering the high level of labour which can be involved in running an ARG.

More pointedly, an ARG with competitive elements does not necessarily restrict players from forming communities and continuing to invest affectively in those communities. The *Rocket Poppeteers* element of *Super 8* divided players into competing teams, but they also collectively assembled spreadsheets of those teams and individual team message threads on Unfiction. This persistent sense of community

emphasised what had already been identified as the inherently social and human aspects of ARGs:

‘It’s very difficult to have a static piece of information on a site really convey excitement, because ultimately it’s brochure-ware. However, when you have another human who’s really excited at the prospect of solving a mystery, excited at the prospect of delving deeper into something about robots, all of a sudden you’re engaged’ (Mooradian quoted in Landau 2001).

‘Reading a book or watching a TV show can be a very singular intimate experience and creating an ARG, and creating a community around that is very much empowering the players to share that intimate experience with 10,000 of their not so closest friends’ (Kerr 2007).

Strong emotional bonds often formed among both players and PMs, evidenced in stories of players finding their future partners through an ARG. Stewart recalls being invited to a number of weddings, commenting ‘that’s quite a different experience. I’ve never been invited to someone’s wedding by someone who read one of my books’ (2012b).

It is possible that even loosely being part of the community is all that is required for consumers to experience the feeling of inclusion and participation, which may work for brands outside of narrative entertainment products:

‘An ARG basically says... we make you part of a group and we do it in such a way that the success of anyone in the group is felt as the success of the entire group. So when a Cloudmaker solves a puzzle, all the Cloudmakers say ‘we’re awesome!’ Old Spice Guy is a tremendously successful example of something much lighter that nonetheless makes people feel involved. When one person has their question answered by Old Spice guy, everyone watching the Old Spice guy says ‘hey look we’re on TV!’... We select one person to stand in for the people and if the people really feel that that person is their surrogate, then they feel responded to. And I think that for brands of all kinds there’s value for them in... having that sort of connection, it’s something they’re looking for’ (Stewart 2012b).

There are no complicated puzzles to crack collaboratively in this example and only one person (or a handful of people) are recognised for their achievements, yet the group as a whole feels involved. They may not even consider themselves part of a community as

such. The 'group' may simply consist of consumers who have engaged with that piece of Old Spice marketing at one point or another, but they are still more likely to invest affectively because they were part of that group. If community building is key to developing affect then this might tie into Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) notion of a brand community.

When the term was posed to Stewart, he was initially sceptical. On thinking it through further he suggested it might be limited to luxury brands because

'something at the heart of a community is social and is aspirational... a Jag invites me into an aspirational world... But soap? Hard to see... They had a granola bar which built trails through national parks. But can you imagine identifying yourself as a member of the Crunch Bar community? You might like the brand but that's a tough lapel pin. Starbucks might in fact be the dividing line. They can't do more to promote a culture; they engineer their shops relentlessly to support that. I think people get into it, and yet I don't think there is a Starbucks community' (Stewart 2012c).

Brand choices are made by consumers based on many factors, including price, brand loyalty, availability, product reviews or perceived product quality. However, when Stewart interrogates the notion of brand community, he argues these will only really form around brands which consumers feel are linked to their self-representation and self-image. Communities are inherently social and will therefore more likely appear around brands which consumers feel express something about their identities or lifestyles. He suggests computers (Mac vs PC) or operating systems (Linux vs Windows) can be said to have brand communities because 'they are the empowerment of a person's ability to project themselves into the world... They are 'tools of self-expression... If you look at Old Spice or Axe, they aren't communities – they are entertaining brands... but a brand community... it sounds like something ad guys say when they're pitching in a campaign' (Stewart 2012c).

Films and other narrative products encourage this relationship more strongly. They are affective and emotionally engaging products themselves, unlike consumer products like soap or toothpaste brands. One might easily identify as part of the *Star Trek* or *Twilight* community. However, these brands do not interact with day-to-day life in the same way as consumer products, so are less likely to be something we use as part of our self-definition. Standalone films with weaker brand identities are also less likely

to produce such a response. So while all films could be considered as brands, constructed and managed via promotional materials, how consumers respond to that construction cannot necessarily be guaranteed.

Stewart is sceptical about whether an ARG could construct a brand community, but does believe this is the kind of affective relationship media producers continue to strive for. ARGs allow them to put mechanisms in place which might encourage the formation of a community. A recent study of the promotional forums and websites launched by Nutella suggests this is also possible with household brands (Cova, Pace 2006). Furthermore, ARGs encourage players to create these spaces themselves (Yahoo! boards for The Beast, Unfiction for Super 8) or utilise spaces and networks they have already built (Superhero hype for WhySoSerious), allowing them to feel more in control of that community. In a Web 2.0 context, games frequently look to tap into existing networks like Facebook or Twitter. Stewart (2012b) refers to these areas as ‘porch space’, a semi private/semi-public space where people feel comfortable performing personalities and identities, including affiliations to brands through ‘liking’, retweeting or mentioning them on their status. By being present in such spaces, companies may develop affective relationships with consumers but they do so in a space in which they do not have authority. They are guests in those spaces and may be as easily rejected as they are welcomed.

Jeremy Reynolds offers a description of ARGs which seems to appropriately summarise the situation while avoiding the more jargonistic term ‘brand community’: ‘As marketing tools, ARGs are excellent because they not only require extended exposure to the advertised product, but they *encourage participants to build an authentic group culture that is interwoven with brand communication* [my italics]’ (quoted in Martin et al 2006).

This is something that could be encouraged, but not manufactured because consumers have to construct that group culture themselves for it to be authentic. ARGs can provide the impetus for a community to form, but it cannot force its creation, nor can it necessarily sustain it after the marketing campaign has ended. The ability to form a meaningful brand community is therefore ultimately in the hands of consumers, but an ARG can provide the starting point for that affective relationship to develop.

## **Affective PM/Player Relationship**

The player/PM relationship was initially highly responsive, with the onus on PMs to modify the game according to player behaviour, not necessarily to direct players down a pre-conceived route. This was a genuinely give-take situation which intimated to players that their actions mattered. This feedback loop is not necessarily new. Stewart likens the experience to 'being Dickens, writing serial novels for the newspapers with a public exclaiming over each instalment as you wrote the next' (Cloudmakers 2001a).

However, the visibility of audiences online intensifies that loop as viewers can express themselves clearly and quickly on forums after or during their consumption of media products. Lee therefore views ARGs as part of a broader move in the industry to respond to the closing gap between producers and audiences. 'If you look at the communities hypothesising about [*Lost*], you can tell in the script writing there are producers watching those conversations, because storylines and characters react to exactly what the community is talking about' (Lee quoted in Ruberg 2006).

Early games often involved post-game chats between PMs and players, in which PMs seemed keen to relate to players on their level. Live chat sessions were conducted through instant messaging, so although there was some scope to pre-prepare or edit answers, transcripts suggest this was a direct and honest exchange. It also took place in IRC channels used by players during the game, so PMs were effectively meeting fans on their own territory.

Game creators were interested in players' experiences; they wanted to talk about what went wrong and how they could improve. This was very much a learning experience with both sides keen for productive, enthusiastic discussions and honest evaluation. Due to ambiguity around *The Beast* as a new genre, players were interested in what could have happened had there been more time/resources. ARG-Fest is a strong example of how this dialogue has continued. The tone of the conversations was relaxed and informal with questions posed by both sides. Sometimes CMs answered collaboratively, with moderators bringing together a consensus e.g. was it better to have the game played co-operatively rather than through competition with each other? (The answer being yes) (Cloudmakers 2001a). PMs also frequently adopted player-created language, highlighting the shared culture that was starting to develop between both parties e.g. Elan – Well, we touched on this a bit earlier on (sorry for the trout)' (Cloudmakers 2001a).

Some of the questions posed to PMs also utilised fannish vocabulary, but PMs

tended to respond modestly, reinforcing their naivety about the scope of the project and reiterating their normalcy:

‘Player - How do you guys feel about suddenly going from authors, web designers etc. to duly worshipped heroes in the eyes of 7500 people worldwide? Mike Royal is regarded as a god by a lot of CMs Sean!

Elan – it’s been really overwhelming seeing as how my only previous exposure to fame has been my friends thinking that my car is pretty cool.

Sean – On the Thursday after the AICN story broke, I called Elan and said “Hey! For one day you and I are the coolest guys on the web!”

Elan – I went to hide.

Sean – Then 12 hours later we realised we had caught a 50 lb fish on a 5 pound line and we got uncocky in a hurry’ (Cloudmakers 2001a).

PMs were equally deferential towards the player community, their collective abilities and their role in the game:

‘Sean – And of course there was the 14000 eyed copy editor and bs-detector roving hungrily like a band of jackals across a battlefield, keeping all the continuity in line ☺ Thank you , thank you, thank you.

Elan – I’m just overwhelmed at how all this came about. We wanted this to be big and you guys made it huge! We wanted it to be pretty and you guys made it gorgeous. We wanted it to be enduring and you guys made it permanent. This really wouldn’t be anything without you guys’ (Cloudmakers 2001a).

The intensity of this relationship was not sustainable from a labour (and therefore cost) perspective. By the time Super 8 arrived, players may have accordingly lowered their expectations for promotional ARGs. Super 8 had almost no visible in-game interaction between players and PMs and Christiano (2013) confirms there were no adjustments to the storyline in response to player discussion, although the boards were monitored to gauge levels of engagement. There also seem to be fewer in-depth discussions with players post-game. The Beast had proven there was potential for media producers to enter into a highly responsive relationship with their consumers, yet this element of the games has increasingly been suppressed. If this feedback loop initially



told player communities that what they did mattered, the gradual reduction in intensity of that feedback loop told them that, really, it didn't. As this relationship weakens, arguments for consumer empowerment in promotional ARGs start to crumble.

However, this did not necessarily impede players from developing strong affection for the games and PMs were keen to emphasise that they returned that affection. Whilst mainstream press was keen to label the more active player community as 'fanboys' and 'comic geeks' (Lee, C. 2008) PMs acknowledged the emotional engagement from players in highly respectful terms and in a manner suggesting an affective experience on both sides. Kristen Rutherford describes her experience as a voice actor for a central character in *ilovebees*:

'When they would listen to the live recording, people asked "How did you not laugh?" When people would sing to us, people were singing all day, and I told them "Well it wasn't funny." ... they were really trying to help her... they were her crew and they just loved her... A lot of times I would just get so caught up in the feelings that everybody had towards her and it was, it was almost easy because the feelings were so strong for her' (2007).

Such an emotional investment led PMs to describe their relationship with players in terms of trust, respect and ethical practice. PMs did their best to reassure players they would not continually fool them with red herrings, or set impossible tasks:

'The whole point of an ARG is to engage the audience member in this bizarre "trust dance", this concept where they want desperately to believe that this stuff is real because it makes it more fun, and the role of an ARG is to do everything in its power to make them not feel stupid about taking that leap with us' (Lee quoted in Siegel 2006).

'There are some people who do play those kinds of tricks, not necessarily maliciously, but because they think it's kind of interesting... but you are abusing people's trust' (Hon 2012).

As a result, PMs perceived the delivery of a substandard game as letting down the audience in a much more personal and profound way:

'Because there is that passion, I will work till midnight to do something that I am paid to do and want to do really well, and I'll work till 2 or 3am because I

don't want to let these people down. The amount of energy and passion that the audience puts into these things just seems like it would be a *betrayal* [my italics]... I am so much more careful about this audience that I am even the audience for my novels. I try really hard when I'm writing book but I do not feel the intense *obligation* [my italics] not to let the audience down that I do with an ARG. And I think I speak for most of us when I say that we cannot let people spend 30 hours a week trying to decode cereal boxes <audience laughter> and not really work hard <audience laughter>' (Stewart 2007a).

This is a heartfelt and earnest description of Stewart's relationship with the ARG audience, using strong, emotive language couched in notions of moral and ethical obligations and trust. Players responded by considering whether their own behaviour was ethical, suggesting this was a mutual concern:

'Stewart – We assumed guns blazing, and were actually very struck by the intense ethicality of a lot of the players.

Player – I always felt guilty that we brute-forced Rational Hatter'

(Cloudmakers 2001a).

This sense of mutual trust also underpinned the TINAG philosophy, which also works towards provoking affective responses to the game. Other media may require audiences to suspend disbelief, but few have felt the need to set this out so explicitly, nor grappled with the issues around it to such an extent. This may be because ARGs ask for more than a suspension of disbelief. They ask players to act upon it, to communicate with characters and follow their instructions as if they were real and as if they matter. For players to take such actions requires a strong emotional investment and trust between PMs and players. The greater the investment the greater the fallout if it proves foolhardy or does not provide the kind of return players are looking for.

Due to the blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction, PMs were initially at pains to explain that ARGs did not intend to trick or hoax people:

'The last thing that we want to do is to make an experience that's indistinguishable from real life, because while it seems like that would be a good goal, it's actually so scary that it becomes really unattractive... You want to be able to opt into the experience and control how much of your life is devoted to

that game. It's a fine line and we're very conscious of it' (Lee quoted in Rubert 2006).

TINAG also required PMs to remain 'behind the curtain' as far as possible, so the level of intervention from PMs became strongly self-regulated:

'It's very important to us to never pretend to be a player... We read everything, and we have not been above eavesdropping on IRC channels, but we never post or point, we never try to direct. It feels like the necessary trust is, if they're stuck or have something wrong, we know there's something wrong then we put something in on the side of the world to correct or lead or guide, but we never go where they live because there is some difficult to describe violation, then it's a hoax, then you're lying' (Stewart 2012b).

Discussions around TINAG are therefore also to do with trust, ethicality and setting of expectations. Shortly after *The Beast*, Lee spoke at the 2002 Game Developers Conference, emphasising the importance of *not* defining gamespace, despite the number of problems that this might throw up (Lee 2002). By 2007, designers were suggesting this was too problematic and led to players becoming confused, lost or deterring them from playing (Kerr 2007). Jones also pointed out that not defining in- or out-of-game sites meant gamejacking could become a serious problem, dragging players in the wrong direction. However he does note that clearly signposting this is 'a particular choice, because you're not then having that kind of fluid in and out of fiction and reality' (Jones 2007). Hon similarly suggests that, realistically, there has to be some transparency in order to manage audience expectations, keep control of the game and avoid accusations of hoaxing:

'Make the proposition to the player much clearer... how long is it going to last, how difficult is it going to be, what is it going to ask of me will I have to travel anywhere, are the puzzles going to be really hard? All this stuff and there's no front page! And I know this would destroy the whole TINAG thing but it's like, do you want to have this and no game or do you want to make a game?' (Hon 2012).

For promotional ARGs this also involves setting expectations around how the game will deal with its status as marketing and whether it will be overt in its use of sponsorship. On one hand, TINAG provides space for product placement or sponsorship

to heighten the sense of ‘reality’ in a game. On the other ‘you can absolutely butcher this concept if you insert things in the wrong way. If it feels contrived, if it feels forced, you’ve accomplished the exact opposite’ (Lee quoted in Siegel 2006).

It pulls them out of the fiction, reminds them that someone is profiting from their suspension of disbelief and makes them feel foolish for taking that leap of faith. Mittell notes the integration of advertising into the ARG for *Lost* ‘irritated’ many players. It was not so much the embedded advertising which offended them, but the ‘tacky and superfluous’ inclusion without ‘significant payoff.’ As an example he describes the in-game character DJ Dan who is anti-corporation but has real life corporate banners on his website (Mittell 2006b).

Similarly, if PMs choose not to announce the status of the game as marketing from the outset, players may feel betrayed when they find out at a later stage. Stewart (2012c) suggests this is less likely to be an issue with narrative properties, ‘because it is, after all, the mirror of the film or book or record – an invitation to a world’ and therefore not necessarily as direct a call to purchase. However, he acknowledges this might not apply to non-narrative properties where the sell is more direct, like Audi’s Art of the Heist. In that case, some transparency is necessary because ‘where you get into trouble is where you try to stealth it in. Generally you just have to treat the players with respect. They don’t like the feeling of being hoaxed on behalf of a product’ (Stewart 2012c). As the games have developed, Hon feels those expectations have been set so players

‘know what they’re getting now.... ARGs are not new, so people are like we get this, we know what’s going on, we know that they are choosing to explain this other world to us through this interactive, online experience. And the people who play these games are already fans of the brand or the universe... they want to know more about the movie, so they’ll go through whatever hoops, and it helps if it looks cool’ (Hon 2012).

He is similarly unsure whether overt sponsorship would genuinely drive players away: ‘I think it’s a matter of degree... I don’t think there would be a massive long term effect, because I think the barrier for entry with ARGs is pretty high in the first place, and once people are following they’re not likely to give up any time soon’ (Hon 2012).

The increase in visible sponsorship in WhySoSerious was notable and Nokia received a great deal of exposure from the campaign, with the brand’s involvement ‘widely covered, dissected and discussed on movie websites and local media’

(Brodesser-Akner 2008b). This neglects, however to state whether that commentary was positive or negative. It may not have deterred players from playing but it may have had an impact on their immersive experience or made them feel that their investment was being exploited.

Stewart describes TINAG as ‘a transitional phase, now past its best before date’ (2012c). The phrase itself may now seem antiquated; something initially developed to guide players through a nascent genre of storytelling which came with no instruction manual. McGonigal’s take on TINAG offers a balanced appraisal of the pleasures at stake:

‘The key to immersive design, we agree, is to realise that the clear visibility of the puppetmasters’ work behind the curtain does not lessen the players’ enjoyment. Rather, a beautifully crafted and always visible frame for the play heightens (and makes possible in the first place) the players’ pleasure – just as long as the audience can play along, wink back at the puppetmasters and pretend to believe’ (2007).

Whilst strict adherence to TINAG may not be practical in order to run a successful ARG, it remains a key part of the philosophy of the games which asks players to invest so heavily in their suspension of disbelief that they are willing to answer randomly ringing public phone or take instructions from a phone they found baked into a cake. It asks players to believe this alternate reality matters so much that they feel justified in acting within it and promises to keep up its end of the bargain by not making them feel foolish for doing so.

Overall, PMs identify very strongly with their audiences. This is unsurprising considering many prominent figures in the industry started out as players and it is therefore heavily populated by ‘prosumers’. However, this identification, which enhances the affective relationship between PM and players, frequently involves game designers distancing themselves from their corporate clients. ARG producers tend to perceive this relationship across a number of different binaries, defining the nature of their work against that carried out by studio marketers or ad agencies. In a similar way, Hills argues fan identities are constructed (by both academics and fans) across several ‘moral dualisms’ a ‘raft of overlapping and interlocking versions of us and them’ (2002: 3). The extent of this varies between those who work on more grassroots or independent projects and those whose work continues to centre around client-based projects. The information collected displays three recurring binaries across which this relationship is

constructed: storytellers vs sellers, moral vs immoral, knowledgeable vs unknowledgeable.

### **Storytellers vs Sellers**

There is a tendency for game designers to emphasise the creative over the commercial when discussing their work. Christiano (2012) specifically identifies himself as a creative first, businessman second. Others described their work as “ARG for ARGs sake. Kind of a pun on ‘art for art’s sake’” (Brackin, 2007). When interviewed about the ARG for his band’s album *Year Zero*, musician Trent Reznor was adamant that he was ‘not trying to sell anything’, paying for the game himself and stating unequivocally that the game was ‘not f\*\*\*ing marketing’ (quoted in Rose 2007). This is part of a larger discourse among both ARG designers and scholars which attempts to define ARGs as ‘more than marketing’, shifting them away from their commercial birthplace and elevating them as anything from ‘serious games’ to ‘cultural events’. Early reluctance to poll users or offer accurate demographics also alludes to the feeling that this was a marketing function which designers were keen to disassociate themselves from (Lee 2002).

Most designers prefer to discuss their work in terms of either storytelling, or as an artform. Stewart’s interview responses were highly anecdotal, a theme which recurs in the transcripts from ARGFest. This reflects his background as a novelist and somewhat natural inclination to narrate, but in the context of the conference this also constructs a particular image of 42 Entertainment and its employees as storytellers.

Stewart’s various references to classical and modern art and literature also situate ARGs in a primarily creative, artistic context. He argues there are three forms of artistic ‘energy’: the first is gained through context, exemplified by Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917). The second is ‘locked up’ or present in the piece itself, e.g. a Michelangelo or Dante’s *Inferno* (1555). The third is a personal energy provided by the audience themselves:

‘That macaroni art you made when you were in 1st grade which honestly is not going to be hanging in the Tate but felt very special to you because you made it. The sense of engagement that you feel, doesn’t translate to anybody else, they just see macaroni... It’s one of the things social media wants, is that sense of

involvement, what it enables, which a book or TV show does not, is that ability to get the extra... that comes with that personal connection' (Stewart, 2012a).

The focus here is on how audiences experience that artistic energy. The ephemeral nature of ARGs means players cannot return to that piece of art and experience it again, as they could a work by Michelangelo. The key to an ARG's artistic energy is therefore the audience's participation which Stewart believes resonates with contemporary audiences. He is not necessarily making a direct comparison between ARGs and classical art, indeed he highlights their differences. However, he clearly feels they belong in a similar space: 'the energy that there is in doing something experiential... is real and true... the point that Duchamp made with the *Fountain* is real and true... and you don't need to think that it's the only kind of art that's valid' (Stewart 2012b).

On such a level playing field, the participatory energy of an ARG sits alongside the contextual energies of a Duchamp and can be valued equally. This emphasises the creative over the commercial but also highlights the fact that the 'artistic energy' of an ARG is an entirely personal and affective one which players themselves bring to the games. One configuration of this is that "The game isn't the art, or the puzzles or the story. They are designed to precipitate, to catalyse the actual work of art. Which is YOU' (Stewart quoted in McGonigal 2008). This does not necessarily transfer control of the game or the promoted text to the audience, but could still inspire intense feelings of pride and ownership to those who have taken part.

Stewart also felt players made a strong distinction on both sides between marketers and PMs. 'When on A.I. the "big prize" was to go to a theatre and watch an advance showing one day early and act like *Star Trek* fans, there was eye rolling, but they were pretty canny, and could actually pretty easily see where the PMs ended and the Movie Marketing Overlords began' (Stewart 2012c).

There is the suggestion here that ARG players felt this was predictable of a movie marketing campaign, especially given that *The Beast* itself has been so innovative. Yet, advance screenings continued to be set as rewards in *WhySoSerious* and *Super 8*. Analysis of player chat may reveal whether there was similar 'eye rolling' in these cases, or whether this has been accepted as part of the ARG 'toolkit'. The continued inclusion of such rewards suggests producers do not believe this to be an issue for players and the reference to them being expected to act 'like *Star Trek* fans' acknowledges a continuing tendency for media companies to perceive fan audiences as predictable and malleable, when this was a very different kind of audience indeed.

Conversely, coverage of *The Beast* in particular suggests marketers wish to promote themselves as storytellers as much as sales people. There is something about the detail and participatory approach of transmedia which Gomez believes offers marketers ‘the opportunity and responsibility to become bonafide storytellers’ (2012). The assumption that marketers want to be ‘bonafide storytellers’ (as opposed to sales people who tell stories) draws on a discourse of authenticity. This is a ‘challenge’, an ‘opportunity’ and even a ‘responsibility’ for them (Gomez 2012). They should want to take up the first two but Gomez is almost obliging them to do so with the last term. There is a suggestion that creativity can elevate marketing to a more respectable level.

Academic discussion around transmedia continues to contribute to this discourse in much the same way. Jenkins actively privileges the creative, suggesting the *best* projects are those with a creative rather than commercial impulse.

‘Transmedia has been closely linked to the industry’s new focus on “audience engagement” and sometimes uses “viral” (or spreadable) media strategies. But, the best transmedia is driven by a creative impulse. Transmedia allows gifted story tellers to expand their canvas and share more of their vision with their most dedicated fans’ (2008).<sup>57</sup>

For those who continue to produce promotional games, there is still a balance to be struck between the two, one which might mean privileging commercial interest over creative ones, as highlighted by Christiano:

‘[Narrative links between the film and the ARG are] important to us and filmmakers, but I don’t think it’s considered important by the studios. It can be difficult to bridge the gap between us and the filmmakers because the studio is in the middle – and ultimately writing the checks. If there is a more cost-effective execution that will reach a broader audience – the narrative takes a back seat’ (2013).

When asked directly whether he felt there was any conflict between creative and commercial imperatives, his response was simply: ‘Always ;) but that’s the business we’re in’ (Christiano 2013).

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<sup>57</sup>In using this quote I am implying ARGs fall under the larger category of transmedia. In the same interview Jenkins’ points out that ARGs are often conflated with the term transmedia to the point that people presume transmedia means games. Whilst I do not wish to deconstruct a term which is heavily contested in the industry, I should make clear that my use of it here is as an umbrella term under which ARGs can be seen to fall, as one of many different kinds of cross-platform entertainment experience.



## **Moral vs Immoral**

Many comments from PMs involved language which reflects concerns around ethics and morality when producing promotional ARGs. PMs and players have a relationship deemed to be based on mutual trust, whereas media companies appear less concerned:

‘I think media companies only care in so much as it works. Whereas I think 42 or Fourth Wall would say we would prefer not to do something that exploits players, even if it works in potentially selling tickets or making money’ (Hon 2012).

Marketing is sometimes spoken of as a less than ethical industry. Hon often describes his experiences of making and evaluating promotional ARGs in negative terms, particularly in his suggestion that the methods of measuring the effectiveness of such campaigns are something of a ‘scam’ (2012). This ‘dishonesty’ runs to the fact that promotional ARGs and other immersive marketing practices are often branded as ‘transmedia’ or ‘brand extension’, which avoids the term marketing altogether:

‘I think the better thing would be to just call it digital marketing. That’s more honest. And then you could say immersive digital marketing. Because how much transmedia is there that isn’t marketing?’ (Hon 2012).

This is not only an acknowledgement of the disavowal of the commercial status of promotional games but a strong criticism of that disavowal. Several PMs have therefore consciously moved away from promotional work to focus on independently funded games. Hon describes this move in terms of financial and creative independence, but again brings the point around to issues of honesty:

‘It’s making games that people will enjoy and people will pay for. I see it as being much more honest, basically, and in the end the rewards are far greater. Purely from a commercial standpoint, you make a really good [promotional] ARG, you’re not going to get paid any more, you’re going to get to work on bigger ARGs. You make a really successful [non promotional] game and you stand to make a lot of money. And also you’re the guys who made it, you own the IP and you stand to benefit further down the line from that and you get complete creative control’ (2012).

Stewart similarly felt this related to personal as well as professional ethics:

‘I was never a million selling author but I was at a point in my career where if I wrote a book someone was going to publish it... and at a personal level, I had a week in which I was asked to come up with an immersive transmedia experience for the new horror movie and also to create a pitch to make an ARG that would convince black women aged 25-44 to buy a brand of car. I went to the President of 42 and I said “I could, by the way, make something and it would be really good and compelling and scary but can we please not be in the torture porn business?”... we have employees and we have to bring in business so we can send their kids to school and pay their rent, I get it. But maybe I’d like to go make a business where that isn’t part of the decision tree’ (2012a).

Discussions of ‘creativity’ in marketing also involve a moralistic tone. On the release of *The Beast*, Boswell suggested ‘promotion, storytelling, marketing and experience all meet in viral marketing to demonstrate the creativity of those behind good entertainment and at the same time respect the audience enough to give them a little more’ (Boswell 2002).

Creativity is therefore bound up with moral value, as Boswell suggests this new approach demonstrates ‘respect’ for the audience, a quality which, presumably, previous marketing tactics were not seen to possess. Creativity validates morally dubious marketing.

### **Knowledgeable vs Unknowledgeable**

Producers tend to construct themselves as pioneers, innovators and experts within the working relationship, with clients not really understanding what it is they are paying for, how to control it or indeed how to relinquish control of it. 6 years on from *The Beast*, Lee felt the broader industry still lacked an understanding of what ARGs were and where they belonged: ‘They’re not sure, are we part of marketing, are we a stand-alone project? We get a tiny percent of the ad-spend and because they try to shoehorn us into this bizarre-shaped box where, “Hey, that’s how much it costs to build a website, so take it and build a website, call it an ARG and we’re done”’ (Lee 2007).

Hon’s more recent description of the thought process behind the decision to run an ARG suggests he feels little has changed from the clients’ perspective: ‘So you go

and call up someone like us, or whatever, and you go with someone who's done it before because you don't want to go with inexperienced people. So you go ok, I want to do an ARG, how much does this cost, because you have no idea' (Hon 2012).

PMs have also commented on clients' lack of knowledge about ARG audiences. Corporate clients are not always interested in reaching the core ARG community, but in 'the ripples that come from what you guys do, from the people that are lurkers or are reading the news coverage' (Clark 2007). Similarly Christiano (2013) suggests the target audience for Super 8 was very broad. Consequently, the complexity of the games can be off-putting for corporate clients.

Again, this suggests clients may not appreciate the importance of the smaller core community in creating those waves. In contrast, Lee emphasises the importance of designing games that engage players on multiple levels (Lee quoted in Irwin 2007a). 42 Entertainment envisaged their audience as an inverse triangle, a structure which Lee explains clearly:

'The largest broad part at the top is the very very casual player. There are more of them than anyone else. So we try to make sure there is at least some easy way into every game we create – a 2-10 minute experience that is rewarding and fun and will hopefully encourage you to come back...

The middle part is not nearly as populated as the top. Those guys are going to maybe check in every week, every two weeks. We try to make sure they have plenty to do whenever they want to experience it...

And then the very tip of the triangle. Those are the crazy guys – the hardcore guys... And the cool thing about this pyramid is there's a really lovely side effect where the bottom part entertains the top parts.... And that's just as entertaining. That's like reality TV right there... but in order for any one of our experiences to be successful we have to have some mechanism to allow all three of those kinds of players' (Lee quoted in Irwin 2007a).

If, as Dena (2008a) suggests, most players engage more with player-created content than official content, the hardcore player community may be more important to an ARG than some clients realise.

Although media companies might be looking for higher levels of interactivity with their audiences, an ARG can also challenge perceptions of their relationship with

their target market and ARG communities, who are likely to be something of an unknown quantity, so they turn to the expert opinion of PMs:

‘I’ve found fear works good <audience laughter>. Seriously. Like, basically, if you can get the client terrified of ARGers, right? This starts to be the right level of respect... you trip up they’ll eat you alive. You do it right, they’ll be your biggest fans forever. And that makes them start to go “Okay, I think we’ll take the native guide’s opinion on which one of these trails to take” ... it’s definitely how much risk they can take and how much control they’re used to having over things, because this is certainly about surrendering a lot more control to the audience that most corporate marketers are ever used to giving. They’re used to having everything in lockstep’ (Clark 2007).

This problem is expressed succinctly by a Senior Vice President of Digital Marketing at Universal in response to the success of *Cloverfield*’s campaign: ‘We like our materials to always be on message. There’s always a risk if fans are discovering that [message] on their own’ (Brodesser-Akner 2007). It is difficult to balance an enticing mystery and audience agency with the tighter control that marketers are used to having over audience interactions with their brands. However, not all ARGs are as secretive as *Cloverfield*’s and the risk level is likely to fluctuate depending on the nature of the film being promoted.

Designers may also have a different understanding of risk compared to their corporate clients. Producers may therefore have to reconsider elements of the project in according to clients’ priorities, particularly when they address legal risks in what PMs perceive to be an overly controlling and constrictive manner. For PMs, risk is not only inherent to the nature of the genre, but offers the space for the game to be more challenging, entertaining and innovative.

Ultimately, ARG producers are inclined to define themselves against corporate media organisations and make a very clear investment in that differentiation. This continues to play out a historic relationship within the cultural industries between the ‘suits’ and the ‘creatives’, particularly notable in the era of the studio system and the Hays Code, when directors such as Orson Welles struggled for creative control.

This is exacerbated by the fact that Hollywood is arguably a cultural industry more heavily grounded in corporate capitalism than others. Yet promotional ARG designers still find themselves straddling that line more heavily than, for example, a contemporary film director, who maintains a certain distance from their audience. PMs

have a far more direct connection with their audiences and identify themselves not only as creative with a responsibility to their products, but also with a much more tangible, moral responsibility to their audiences. It is perhaps unsurprising that producers define themselves in this space in much the same way that Hills (2002) suggests fans do. Like fans, producers could be using such binaries as a method of negotiating an uncomfortable existence within an overtly corporate capitalist space. The manner of this self-differentiation means the culture clash described by producers could be considered partly real and partly constructed. When they forge a relationship with the player audience, PMs project an image of themselves which is less corporate and more fan-like than producer-like. ARGs can therefore create an affective relationship between players and PMs, providing a middle ground between audiences and media producers as PMs take pains to identify with their audiences in a way which large media conglomerates are still unable or unwilling to do.

Game mechanisms such as TINAG and community formations support the development of an affective investment in ARGs. This investment can allow players to feel a sense of ownership over a game and perhaps even over the text it promotes without necessarily offering them any authorial control over the game itself. A cornerstone of this affective investment appears to be the relationship developed between PMs and players either through game mechanisms or explicitly outside of the game. Although this contact may be reduced in more recent examples, ARGs have the capacity to significantly augment the relationship between players and PMs as part of this process in a manner which may complicate perceptions of the power dynamics between media producers and consumers.

### **Fanification, Affective Economics and Empowered Audiences**

A strong affective relationship with texts is a mode of media consumption often relegated to smaller, niche fan communities. One might suggest ARGs do the same, since numbers of hardcore players remain small in comparison to the total audience figures expected for the films they promote. However, the increasing tendency is not to make games more challenging, which would appeal to that core audience, but to make them more accessible to wider audiences, without losing the elements which encourage that affective relationship to develop.

Hon believes this is essentially because the niche audience is no longer quite so

niche. Players have to spend a significant amount of time online to participate in ARGs, but as more people spend more time online the potential audience expands. Hon indicates this when he claims ‘there really isn’t a ‘mainstream’ anymore... But I think increasingly what's going to happen is we have to start making it easier to play. Not just for one audience, not just to make it more enjoyable for the people who are playing at the moment’ (2007). There is no mainstream because early adopters are no longer a niche audience. It therefore seemed pointless to continue aiming the games at the smaller segment of the audience when they could be made more accessible for the increasing number of people making themselves at home in an online space.

Nikunen’s (2007) theories of ‘fanification’ seem to be playing out here. Brand Strategy suggests the main achievement of WhySoSerious was building ‘interest in the film even among those not seeing the pieces of creative’ (Readon 2009). The excitement spreads from the core player community outwards to lurkers and those who never even touch the ARG, a kind of diluted version of the same enthusiasm that might otherwise have remained locked within the walls of the fan community. Much is made of the potential for ARGs to turn casual consumers into evangelists. Susan Bonds (CEO of 42 Entertainment) suggested the aim of such promotional tactics was ‘not a question of hitting people over the head with a message. It’s about pulling people into your story. Then they become evangelical’ (Bonds quoted in Mullins 2008). Such evangelism is developed through encouraging not only an active relationship with a media text, but an affective relationship as well.

This is arguably not an unusual development, perhaps even the next logical step in the ‘fanification’ process. Genres such as science-fiction, fantasy and comic books, previously considered the realm of the ‘cult’ fan have been picked up and developed for ‘mainstream’ audiences for many years. One article notes this trend peaking with the successful release of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, claiming ‘we are all nerds now... could it be that a nerd is defined not so much by his specialist genre than by the nature and intensity of his interest?’ (Brooks 2003). This echoes one of Hills’ three defining features of a ‘cult’ fandom: the ‘intensely felt experience’ (2002: xi), which is precisely its affective impact. Promotional ARGs appear to filter that experience out to wider audiences without requiring the higher level of investment made by the core ARG community. Evangelists are more valuable than casual consumers, according to theories of ‘lovemarks’ and affective economics, and whilst media producers can never force audiences to experience their properties in this way, they can go some way towards encouraging them to do so.

This seems to back up Jenkins' statement that the very notion of fandom 'has no future' since we may all be fans now (2007a: 364). If this is becoming the normal way in which media industries and audiences operate then it becomes significantly harder for fan communities (and the ARG player community) to define themselves against the 'average consumer'. Whilst ARGs seem to be complicit in this 'fanification' of audiences, they can simultaneously provide the structure for the re-emergence of that 'intensely felt experience' (Hills 2002: xi) albeit in the casings of a multimedia corporate vessel. From one perspective this activity simply supports the mechanisms of 'fanification'. Indeed, without the intense activity of the core audience much of the interest and attraction for casual players is lost. Yet from another, this can be construed as fandom adapting to its new environments, learning to further exist within the system rather than becoming overrun by the changes occurring within mainstream media consumption patterns.

As Hills (2002) notes, fandoms must constantly negotiate their position within a consumer capitalist system, and this is intensified as more audiences are encouraged to form affective relationships with promotional media texts which are firmly embedded in that system. Promotional ARGs have built-in mechanisms which can aid that negotiation, particularly in the TINAG philosophy, and the PM/player relationship, both of which encourage a disavowal of the commercial status of the games. PMs also appear to be involved in this negotiation and their status as storytellers (as opposed to marketers) leaves them well-placed as middle men between media companies and audiences who may feel disillusioned with, or even antagonistic towards large corporations. This is not to suggest players approach promotional games uncritically or unaware of their purpose as marketing, but that the games provide a framework which allows them to more easily negotiate their enjoyment of a highly commercial text. The previous chapter suggested this could either function as effective brand management, or alternatively allow players to disregard the promotional status of the game entirely and treat it as a primary entertainment experience in its own right. In this case the games no longer function as marketing because they are not received or consumed as such, and players, not producers, define the purpose and meaning of the games.

If this is the case then it is possible the affective relationship will not transfer from the ARG to the promoted film and therefore the end goal of affective economics is not achieved. Hon felt this transferral of affection was possible: 'If they develop an unexpectedly close relationship with a character we'll keep them around longer and

their relationship with the brand as a whole will be stronger' (Hon 2012). However, Stewart remained thoughtful but ambivalent on the subject:

'I think that transferred very strongly to Nine Inch Nails, but the audience brought that with them... Is there an affection for Old Spice? Sure... I think? That campaign, among others, has done a tremendous job of... rebooting that franchise, and making it sort of hip and relevant. Does it do it in a way which is profoundly different from a funny line, just a good line of ads in any other context? I don't know that it does, I don't know that it doesn't... Did you know there is Old Spice/Beowulf fan fic? I think we're more likely to see that than if it had just been an ad on TV' (Stewart 2012b).<sup>58</sup>

The effect therefore may not be specific to ARGs but the games may work as part of a number of approaches geared towards creating affection for a brand which prompts a kind of engagement and interaction (in this case fan fiction) that other methods are less likely to encourage. However, the affective investment may also remain within the games and the player communities, where the primary concern is for the ARG to be entertaining in its own right. Like producers, players may see the promotional status of the games as a means to an entertaining immersive gaming experience, in which case the effort to take advantage of 'affective economics' has effectively failed.

The payoff of affective economics for audiences is also questionable. According to Jenkins (2006a) consumers gain the ability to become influential critics of as well as ambassadors for the brands they are invited to invest in emotionally. However, just as an active audience is not automatically an empowered audience, an affected audience does not necessarily acquire authorial control of the media texts it consumes, despite a more intimate producer/consumer relationship and the feelings of ownership relationship may promote. If audiences are only active through official marketing channels it seems even more unlikely they are ever in control. Yet this notion persists. Similarly the industry is so invested in optimistic perceptions of agency and co-operative play in ARGs that it is difficult to let them go, despite the fact that it might not correlate with the actual experience of players.

However, for PMs, affective investment in an ARG is not simply a conduit to a purchasing decision, nor a route to authorial control. It provides a sense of

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<sup>58</sup> The fan fiction to which Stewart is referring can be found here <http://archiveofourown.org/works/143758> [Accessed 05.01.2015]



empowerment entirely separate from these issues. Lee even uses a superhero analogy to explain the 'empowering' nature of the games:

'Your superpower is simply that you notice this cool thing that most people don't notice. ...There's something very empowering about saying there's a little bit of magic in this world and if you pay attention you'll find it... Oh my god, a phone's ringing! Maybe it's someone who needs to talk to me because only I can save the day. So we try to say yeah, only you can save the day, and that phone ringing is for *you* so answer it' (Lee quoted in Siegel 2006).

This is not a form of consumer empowerment embroiled in issues of textual politics and control. It is a far more personal, individual and emotional sense of empowerment and control which reflects Grossberg's (1992) understanding of affect and empowerment. Grossberg argues the affective sensibility is not the same as emotions or desires, but is more akin to mood, an intensely personal, subjective experience which simultaneously produces and functions within 'mattering maps' (1992: 57). However, when an audience is active within a text (on any level), they are arguably investing energy into that text and therefore displaying that text somewhere on their 'mattering maps'. For Grossberg, empowerment refers to:

'[...] the reciprocal nature of affective investment: that is, because something matters [as it does when one invests energy in it] other investments are made possible. Empowerment refers to the generation of energy and passion, to the construction of possibility... Fans' investment in certain practices and texts provides them with strategies which enable them to gain a certain amount of control over their affective life, which further enables them to invest in new forms of meaning, pleasure and identity in order to cope with new forms of pain, pessimism frustration, alienation, terror and boredom' (1992: 65).

This highly personal mode of 'empowerment' fits well with Hills' (2002) desire to focus on the individual's engagement with fan texts and the personal, emotional and subjective experiences of fandom. However, Grossberg's arguments also contain a broader political undertone. His version of affective investment allows for the possibility of empowerment beyond the fan's own 'mattering map' and into the realms of political resistance (Grossberg 1992: 64). Whilst he argues this is not guaranteed, he maintains it as a condition of the possibility of resistance. If media companies are looking for this kind of investment from consumers, and utilising strategies which

encourage it, there is a sense that producers are appropriating the very thing which offers the possibility of empowerment. A promotional ARG develops and directs that affective investment and maintains a level of control over the possibility of resistance to power structures surrounding the relationship between media producers and audiences.

Yet, this feels like a rather reactionary reading of the function of ARGs (bordering on conspiracy theory) and returns us to the outdated notion of fandoms being unwittingly 'incorporated' into a system of consumer capitalism by media companies looking to control their affective lives. ARGs might allow media producers to profit from consumers' affective investments, but they cannot necessarily control those investments or their consequences. Whilst promotional ARGs cannot offer political or textual empowerment, this is not the same as the kind of emotional empowerment described by Grossberg which, although linked to political empowerment, could be seen to function on a more personal and subjective level. The games may be produced in the service of affective economics but are not necessarily received as such. If ARGs elevate the brands they promote onto consumers' mattering maps then they are provoking something far more personal for players, which contributes to defining their identities (on or offline) and therefore starts to resemble something of the subcultural according to Fiske's (1992), where consumers may appropriate mass culture but not necessarily have to reject it or oppose it in the process.

Stewart's understanding of brand communities has elements of the subcultural about it, despite being focussed on mass market products. They involve using elements of the brand message attached to commodities to express something about themselves, their personalities or their beliefs. They do not necessarily subvert or resist those messages and meanings in any political way in order to do so, but they use them with an intensity and personalisation which sets them apart from other consumers. By defining a relatively exclusive social space with its own set of norms in which this intense interaction can occur, ARGs have the potential to return something of the subcultural to a brand which, for some fans, may have become too overtly commercialised. WhySoSerious certainly seemed to offer this to *Batman* fans, who may have become disillusioned as the franchise sprawled out of its comic book origins and into a mass media giant. This could be conceived as a reaction to the 'fanification' and the emergence of nostalgia for a mode of fandom which seemed to be being appropriated by media companies. In ARGs there can be a space for fans to re-create that sense of community and the subcultural, both despite and because of the systems of consumer capitalism. They continue to negotiate their fan activity within spaces constructed by

corporations because they are must increasingly exist within that system rather than outside of it.

Although these spaces might be constructed by media companies, they are not moderated by them and they cannot control the activity within them. An ARG might encourage players to feel part of a brand community but cannot construct one unless players identify with that brand in a very personal and intimate way. Some brands or products may simply not lend themselves to such a level of engagement. When Stewart talks about Starbucks being the 'dividing line', he may be identifying a point at which it is simply not possible to assign elements of subculture or community to a brand, despite efforts to do so. This can only be brought to bear on a brand by consumers, which does, in a sense empower them. Media companies may be making a concerted effort to win them over to a brand emotionally, but the ability to assign subcultural meanings to those brands, those which are the most personal and matter the most, is in the hands of the consumer.

The ambiguity of the specific function of an ARG in a marketing campaign has led to myriad of claims being made for their effectiveness. The most significant is the manner in which ARGs encourage audiences to participate 'actively' within a media text. There is an acknowledgement of the value of active, affectively engaged audiences and of the changing nature of media audiences in a digital era. However, what does not seem to be occurring is any kind dramatic shift in attitude from media companies. There are no real concessions made to these audiences without a fairly high level of restriction or qualification. Concerns regarding fan communities and IP control still exist and, if we are all 'always already fans' then these concerns may now be playing out on a broader scale. The difficulties encountered by game designers when working with corporate media clients attests to this and it seems media companies claim to want their audiences to take on a more 'active' role but still seem unsure as to what the terms of that 'activity' should be.

Perhaps as a result of these ongoing concerns, there is often a focus on whether or not this activity provides media consumers with more or less control over the text. However, what seems more important is the affective relationships encouraged via this mode of address and the feelings or sense of ownership they prompt. Such a relationship is made possible not only via the mechanisms of the games themselves, but through the relationship between PMs and players and the strong definition of PMs against their corporate media clients.

## Chapter 4 – Players

Considering the contexts of an ARG's production can provide information about their intended use, but we cannot assume they were received precisely in this manner. This chapter therefore seeks to complement the focus on ARG producers by considering players' perspectives on their involvement in promotional ARGs. After discussing the methodology, it considers players' motivations and expectations, including their perception of the commercial role of the games and their negotiation of that commercial status. It is during these negotiations that the importance of 'meaningful' participation is highlighted. The previous chapter noted producers' emphasis on narrative agency as a strong selling point for ARGs, illusory or otherwise. Players stress the importance of narrative control but believe feelings of ownership may lie in other elements of the game. They identify strong emotional and affective connections with the game content, PMs and the player community. However this does not guarantee similar connections with the promoted product, prompting the final section of this chapter to question the role of promotional ARGs in relation to fanification, affective economics and the 'empowerment' of the media consumer.

This chapter uses netnography as its methodological basis. Kozinets defines netnography as 'an adaptation of participant-observational ethnographic procedures' (2010: 74). This approach has been used in similar studies of online communities of consumption and specifically in work on communities of media consumption, including *Star Trek* and *X-Files* fan communities (Cova & Pace 2006; Kozinets, 2001; Kozinets 1997). Whilst Kozinets acknowledges that some researchers may apply 'observational' or 'passive' netnography, he emphasises the importance of participating in the observed community in order to 'experience embedded cultural understanding' (2010: 75). For Kozinets, 'lurking, downloading data and analysing while sitting on the sidelines are simply not options' (2010: 75). Participant observation was important in order to gain a clearer understanding of the ARG player community, but elicited data and analysis of archival data on a wider range of forums was also required to answer the specific questions posed by this thesis. This chapter therefore takes an approach guided by netnographic principles and uses three main methods: initial participant observation, which informs the design of an online survey, the results of which in turn inform the analysis of archival forum data using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo).

## **Participant Observation**

Unfiction forum was selected as the location for participant observation as it is 'relevant, active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous and data-rich' (Kozinets 2010: 89). I registered as a member of Unfiction in January 2011 to play the Super 8 ARG and posted on other promotional ARGs and virals including campaigns for *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012 Mark Webb), *Apollo 18* (2011 Gonzalo Lopez-Gallego) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012 Christopher Nolan). This provided useful insight into the experience of 'newbies' entering the community.

Kozinets also provides guidance around entering an online community as a researcher (2010: 75-80). Survey requests might have been rejected by the community if I was not at least partially involved in community activity beforehand. This involved deciding how strongly I wanted to identify myself as a researcher on the Unfiction discussion boards. Announcing this on a forum post might have been off-putting to some community members. However, not declaring my intentions at all risked deceiving the group of people I would later be asking to provide me with information. As a middle ground between these two positions, my status was made clear on my user profile, detailing my research interests and my identity as a PhD researcher.

I was most active on the forums between Jan 2011 and March 2012. I primarily lurked and posted on emerging promotional campaigns, as well as the 'Meta' boards to prompt discussions around game design issues. My approach was therefore not overly intrusive and it became clear that some threads had already developed rich, relevant conversations prior to my joining. Other researchers had previously posted requests for survey responses and players had been happy to help. Satisfied this was appropriate in the context of the community, survey links were posted on four Unfiction boards in April 2013, having obtained the permission of the site administrator. The text accompanying these links made it clear to participants that the survey was for research purposes and would be anonymous. Implied consent was therefore provided by participants who had read the message and then accepted the link to complete the survey.

## **Survey**

Kozinets suggests surveys are useful for gaining 'a sense of people's attitudes and opinions about online communities' and learning about 'people's self-reported

representations of what they do, or intend to do in regards to their online community and cultural activity' (2010: 45). He goes on to suggest less obtrusive netnographic approaches can be effectively combined with survey work to inform one another (Kozinets 2010: 56). This chapter utilises two bodies of information: the results of a player survey and analysis of forum discussion. This was intended to provide both 'self-reported', elicited information and what might be termed 'in-game' or 'in vivo' expressions of attitudes and opinions. However the relationship between the two was dependent on the response rate of the survey. It quickly became clear that the survey would only provide a representative sample of the active community, as lurkers were unlikely to respond to survey requests if they were not willing to post on the boards. In addition, the study was primarily concerned with the motivations of more dedicated players.

The survey was therefore aimed at highly active users. As response rates did not provide a representative sample, the survey performed a signposting function, providing a basis on which to more effectively question attitudes expressed by players in the vast swathes of data within forum discussions. Such signposts were key to making sense of a large and potentially unwieldy set of data. Data from the survey was then mapped onto data from the forum discussions, making it easier to see where the two complimented or contradicted each other.

Unfiction was chosen as the location for survey activity as this was the most high-profile, active ARG-specific community, with 33,674 registered members at the time of the survey. Other forums were considered, but Unfiction was the only ARG-dedicated forum covering multiple games with a large enough base of current, active users. The average length of site membership was 6 years, with around 1/3 of players joining between 2006 and 2009. Approximately 76% of registered players had never posted or very rarely posted on the forums (1-10 total posts). These players were designated as lurkers, leaving 23% of the community labelled 'active' and 1% 'highly active'. The survey was therefore aimed at the last two groups, targeting 24% of the community.

<b>Player Category</b>	<b>Number of Players</b>	<b>% of Unfiction Community</b>
Lurkers (0-10 posts)	26,074	76%
Active (11 – 500 posts)	7,600	23%
Highly Active (500+ posts)	317	1%

Figure 82

The survey was designed using Survey Monkey as the system was easy to use and provided useful analytical tools. It was comprised of 37 questions and split into five sections: Playing ARGs, ARGs as Marketing, Game Design, Player/Puppetmaster Relationship and Community. All questions were based around 4 of the initial research questions which required input from a player perspective:

- To what extent do the various parties involved influence the design and development of promotional ARGs?
- How and why do online communities of ARG players make use of and respond to the games?
- What can this tell us about consumer/producer relations?
- How might this problematize contemporary notions of fandom and how might we rework these understandings in light of this?

Questions were designed to be ‘clear, unambiguous and useful’ (De Vasu 1991: 83) but structured in a way that would elicit relevant information. Knowledge of the community gained through participant observation also informed question design. Rather than asking broadly about community relations, questions were structured around known issues, such as the integration of new players into a game.

Questions on demographics and frequency of gameplay were closed-ended or set around frequency scales. However, the survey was primarily aimed at gaining comparable attitudinal information from players regarding their views on and experiences of promotional ARGs. The survey therefore used a Likert scale or ‘a multiple indicator or –item measure of a set of attitudes relating to a particular area’ (Bryman 2004: 68). Players were presented with hypothetical ideas or situations and asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with those statements. A scale of five options was offered ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. These were arranged in a horizontal closed question structure (Bryman 2004: 138). Participant observation had started to reveal some attitudes which meant statements could be

designed around ideas previously expressed by players themselves. Question design therefore emerged from within the context of the community itself, demonstrating prior knowledge of that community on the part of the researcher.

Participant observation also revealed the community to be highly self-reflective. The survey design needed to accommodate players who wanted to express more nuanced attitudes in their own words, beyond those offered by a Likert scale. Some questions were therefore completely open ended and all closed-ended questions were accompanied by a text box for further comments.

The survey was initially put to a pilot group of five players, all of whom were either forum administrators or held a significant ranking within the community. The group also offered feedback on potential design issues, including the length of the survey, the clarity of the questions and the use of in-game language e.g. swag or TINAG. Responses were all positive regarding the length of the survey and suggested some amendments to the wording of the questions which were taken into account. The use of ARG-specific language was not considered problematic. Survey links were then placed on four discussion threads in Unfiction: WhySoSerious game thread, Super 8 game thread, 'Meta' discussion thread and 'Press & Other Analysis' thread. One member posted a link on the Super8 ARG Facebook group and a link was also circulated on Twitter. The Cloudmakers Yahoo! Forum was considered but was not as active and a large number of its members had already migrated to Unfiction. Superherohype.com was also considered, however it would not have been possible to accurately target the ARG audience on this much broader forum.

A total of 38 survey responses were received (27 complete and 11 partial). All survey data is anonymous and no specific forum members have been referred to by either name or forum handle. All respondents posted on forums at least once a week during a game, with around 30% posting every day. This suggests the survey reached an appropriate level of user. They also made full use of the free text boxes, including those supplementing closed-ended questions. However, the 38 responses could only be considered 0.5% of active users on Unfiction and is therefore not a representative sample. The survey therefore performed the signposting function previously discussed, providing a strong basis on which to further question and effectively map the positions expressed in the forum discussions.



## Forum Discussion Analysis

Discussion data was collected from three forums: Unfiction (UF), Superherohype.com (SHH) and the Cloudmakers Yahoo! Group (CM). This provided data on each case study. The Beast was played primarily via the Cloudmakers site and Super 8 via Unfiction. WhySoSerious was played in Unfiction but saw significantly more activity on SHH. This forum also provided important information from the perspective of *Batman* fans as opposed to ARG fans.

Kozinets notes the ethical complexities surrounding observational online research of this nature, given the conflation of the public and private in such spaces (2010: 140-142). However, he does suggest ‘oftentimes the Internet is used as a type of textual publishing medium, and culture members are fully aware of this public function’ (Kozinets 2010: 141). He also highlights Walther’s assertion that

‘it is important to recognise that any person who uses publicly-available communication systems on the internet must be aware that these systems are, at their foundation and by definition, mechanisms for storage, transmission, and retrieval of communications. While some participants have an expectation of privacy, it is extremely misplaced’ (Walther 2002: 207).

Kozinets therefore surmises that one may regard the use of some computer-mediated interactions as similar to the use of a text if:

- a) ‘the researcher does not record the identity of the communicators’
- b) ‘the researcher can legally and easily gain access to these communications or archives’

(2010: 142).

Following this recommendation, all forum sites used for analysis were legally and easily available to view publically without becoming a member. All forum discussion has been anonymised and no users have been individually identified either by name or by forum handle.

Discussions were collected by capturing individual threads in pdf format using the browser extension NCapture and then importing and organising them in NVivo. The number of threads is detailed below:

The Beast	13,887 (CM)
WhySoSerious	318 (SHH) 135 (UF)
Super 8	554 (UF)

Figure 83

Each thread was broadly coded to categorise its overriding content, which was often stated in the thread title (e.g. a thread titled ‘Plans for a thank you to 42e’ was coded under a node for discussions regarding 42 Entertainment). Some categories were predetermined according to research questions and survey questions (e.g. Player/PM Relationship) but others developed from the data itself as recurring themes or topics started to emerge (e.g. Rewards and Payoffs). Text searches were also performed on all threads to find more specific references to, for example, puppetmasters or named media companies such as Warner Bros. or Paramount. This ensured that, for example, discussions on marketing would be picked up in threads which were not initially coded in that category. All data was further coded to establish any recurring attitudes. Although text searches were run based on research questions, they were always considered within broader contexts, providing reflections which were relevant to the research questions but had often evolved organically from the data itself. This was an incredibly time consuming process in terms of gathering and organising information. There are often methodological challenges involved in archiving any online activity due to the constantly changing, ephemeral nature of the medium. In this case volume caused the most difficulties, making NVivo more appropriate for the task than manually coding forum discussions.

The survey provided a means of effectively questioning a large dataset which required a more structured approach. The combination of these methods was therefore appropriate for the needs of this particular part of the thesis. The database now also forms a solid basis for future research on these particular forums and could be analysed to pursue further research questions which were not within the scope of this project.

### **Demographics**

Some demographic data was collected to give a broad overview of the ARG audience, although this chapter is more interested in qualitative than quantitative information. Data was gathered from the survey and more comprehensive location data was available

on the members list of Unfiction. SHH had 47,754 registered members as of December 2014 but it was not possible to identify precisely which members played WhySoSerious. Similarly, there were 6,616 registered Cloudmakers as of December 2014, but demographics were not readily available and many were already represented on Unfiction. As the most active forum dedicated solely to ARGs, Unfiction therefore provided the most accessible and accurate demographic data.

The age range of survey respondents was broad, running almost evenly between the 15-18 category up to the 40-60 category, the latter containing 18% of all respondents. See Appendix 4 for detailed results. Around a quarter of respondents were students or in full time education. The other 75% registered a range of occupations, with an emphasis on Computer Science/IT and Art, Design and Entertainment sectors. This contradicts the notion that players are predominately teenagers or students. 65% of survey respondents were from the US, 20% from Europe and Canada, and 15% from Australia and South America. Unfiction forum data reflects a similar geographical distribution of players which remains consistent regardless of activity level:

<b>Location</b>	<b>Survey</b>	<b>Unfiction Members List</b>
North America	65%	59%
UK	12%	21%
Europe exc. UK	9%	8%
Canada	3%	8%
Rest of World	9%	4%

Figure 84

Despite claims made by producers for a 50/50 gender divide, just under 70% of respondents were male. This could indicate that more active members are more likely to be male, but as this is not representative data it is not possible to come to any broader conclusions.

Whilst education level was not specifically surveyed, the distribution of employment categories along with the age range suggests most players were at least high school educated or equivalent. Many were in occupations likely to require degree level education and a text search for terms such as ‘dissertation’ or ‘PhD’ suggest a number of active players were graduates or postgraduates.

Aside from this quantitative information, qualitative data revealed more about the kind of players attracted to ARGs. The existence of a ‘Meta’ thread suggested players were not just self-aware but exceedingly self-reflective about the games and the

implications of their rules and structures. Long, intense discussions can be found on the vices and virtues of TINAG and players frequently dissect their motivations for playing ARGs. This dispels preconceptions of gamers as being oblivious to the commercial context of their games, or being too immersed to intelligently critique their own involvement in and reactions to the games. ARGs require players to simultaneously immerse themselves in the game (as per the TINAG philosophy) and distance themselves enough to consider the implications of its ability to blur the lines between fiction and reality. In particular, players must differentiate between in-game and out-of-game sites, requiring an awareness of the game's commercial context. The genre began with so few rules or boundaries that many were eventually set by players themselves, requiring high levels of self-reflection on their own gaming practices. These intense ruminations also guide player expectations and evaluations of promotional ARGs.

### **Motivations, Expectations and Evaluations**

At first glance there are as many different motivations for playing an ARG as there are for creating them. Askwith (2006) identifies several different kinds of player, each of whom is likely to have different motivations. He designates 3 kinds of active player: organisers, hunters and detectives. Organisers enjoy 'the administrative crowd control tasks that enable player communities to efficiently gather, share and interpret the various clues and leads uncovered' (Askwith 2006). The communal experience of the games is therefore likely to be important to them, as without this their role is somewhat redundant. Hunters enjoy scavenging for clues and updates to help solve puzzles and Detectives take pleasure in cracking codes and collaboratively working through ideas to solve riddles. Puzzles are therefore important to these players, as is the community experience.

In addition to individual preferences, different forums may have different priorities regarding promotional ARGs. With little to no expectations, the CM community were intensely motivated by curiosity and a sense they were participating in a radical new storytelling platform. SHH, on the other hand, is home to dedicated forums for various comic book/superhero franchises. WhySoSerious was more frequently referred to as 'the viral campaign' or 'the virals', emphasising the marketing function. Their focus is often on the ARG in relation to their preferred fan property, rather than judging the game on its own merits. Yet despite these differences, player

communities, (unlike marketers) often have similar ideas about what makes a good ARG, promotional or otherwise. These include complex puzzles, strong characterisation and storytelling and swag or rewards.

### **Storytelling & Characterisation**

According to survey respondents the primary reason for playing ARGs was the enjoyment of unravelling a story online:

*‘The true merit of any ARG is going to be its ability to tell a story’* (Respondent #23)

Unfiction discussion broadly supports this response. The Meta threads provide space to discuss motivations and of 21 threads dealing with this topic, 16 mentioned strong stories or characterisation.

The second most popular response was puzzle-solving and the third was ‘being involved in a collective experience that’s bigger than me’. Accordingly, when asked which elements of the game were most important, storytelling was ranked first by 75% of respondents, followed by engaging characterisation and challenging puzzles. These three were also identified as being mutually dependent:

*‘Without storytelling there is nothing to make it feel ‘real’ – without good characters, it becomes a cliché, without puzzles it isn’t a game’* (Respondent #21)

Askwith’s player categories focus on the puzzle elements of the games and for some this is the initial draw of ARGs:

*‘There’s nothing like the moment you solve a puzzle that has been eluding you for hours, and suddenly everything seems so clear’* (UF).

However, some players became frustrated or even alienated by overly complex puzzles and placed higher value on storytelling and characters:

*‘Story, no question. There can be puzzles (think murder mysteries) but too many puzzles annoy me...’* (UF).

I would therefore add another category to Askwith’s list to reflect an, admittedly smaller, group of players whose enjoyment comes primarily from following a story and interacting with characters. They are likely to participate in the game as Detectives,

speculating about character motivations or potential narrative developments to move the story forward. However their preference is for complex narratives and characters over complex puzzle solving.

Traditional narrative pleasures are at stake here, yet ARGs are not experienced as conventional narratives. In particular, linearity is not valued. The more positively reviewed ARGs offer players the opportunity to diverge away from the central storyline to investigate and develop other narrative arcs themselves. A semblance of linearity is required to keep the story from spiralling out of control and a lack of closure can frustrate players, suggesting they do desire some sense of a classical narrative structure. However, more complex games like *The Beast* or *WhySoSerious* allowed, or at least appeared to allow players to poke into different corners of the game world. In *WhySoSerious* players acted on behalf of multiple characters and establishments including Batman, The Joker, Gotham Police and Harvey Dent. Whilst the Joker's games were the most involving, keeping track of other websites opened up other mini narratives. For example, Joseph Candoloro, founder of Concerned Citizens for Gotham, was involved in a detailed storyline surrounding a smear campaign against Dent. The character was affected by player-driven events such as Operation Slipknot but reflected a decidedly narrower avenue for dedicated players to pursue which expanded the game universe. Players also tested the edges of these worlds, particularly when deciding whether a website was in or out-of-game. One player commented insightfully on the irony of a game in which players must at least partially invest in the TINAG philosophy, yet continually seek out its constructed walls:

*'ARGers say they don't like walls in a game and like the blur [between fiction and reality], but will push at the edges of the world until they find the wall anyways'* (UF).

More acclaimed ARGs resemble sandbox console games such as *Red Dead Redemption* (2010 Rockstar Games) or the *Grand Theft Auto* series. These also became increasingly popular between 2001-2010, along with more complex television narratives. These arguably more sophisticated narrative pleasures do not necessarily reflect the linearity of the Hollywood films which ARGs promoted. Games with more linear narrative paths were often less well received. Particularly in its latter stages, *Super 8*'s ARG was continually driving back towards the film itself, positioning itself as part of the film's linear storyline via the short film in the editing room. The more tangential storyline involving Josh, Mysterio and Sarah was less prominent. Whilst this made sense for marketers looking to keep focus on their product, players sought a

different narrative experience and judged the game accordingly. Despite constant speculation they were unable to push further into the gameworld and became frustrated when the game did not fulfil these expectations. There is a distinct mis-match between the pleasures provided by the ARG and those provided by the film it seeks to sell. This can either be perceived as ‘added value’ for the more established medium, or a problematic rift, which results in the game being more engaging than the film or simply highlighting the shortcomings of each medium.

In contrast, the demand for strong characterisation depended on a more traditional sense of character, in that characters were judged on depth and consistency. Characters were analysed in terms of how players believed they would ‘realistically’ behave, based on knowledge of their personalities:

*‘I mean if he [Josh] has talking [taken] their relationship beyond the workplace, would he be wanting to blab about it to others online? I don't think so based upon the type of character the PMs have been painting him’ (UF).*

In ‘reality’ of course, people are not this predictable. One player makes this distinction but it is not a frequently expressed view:

*‘I think the PMs are wanting to make the interaction as legitimate as possible. As realistic as possible; therefore, not every email gets answered and Josh isn't really at all predictable. Just like a real life, small town, fish fanatic might be’ (UF).*

It seems for all the focus on the ‘realness’ of the games, there is still a need for the pleasures of more traditional fictions to be fulfilled. However, there are a few strong exceptions. During *The Beast*, the character Mike Royal took live phone calls from players trying to convince him to act to save the Red King. Players used what knowledge they had of Mike to spur him into action, but as a live character he was essentially unpredictable and such live interactions with characters were often the highlights of players’ gaming experiences, with one CM claiming the Mike Royal calls were *‘the MOST thrilling part of the game since it started’ (CM).*

Storytelling and characterisation are strong motivators for many ARG players. However, they evaluate these elements based on non-traditional narrative experiences, which have little in common with the narrative structures of the promoted product. ARGs are expected to bring different, possibly more complex, narrative pleasures to those provided by film, rather than simply extending a linear narrative onto an online platform. Such a structure tends to push the story back towards the film, which players

are likely to perceive as prioritising the ARG's marketing function over its function as an entertaining game in itself, which is not in line with player priorities.

### **Swag & Rewards**

In keeping with this perspective, the least selected motivations for playing were those most readily associated with the games' promotional purpose. Only two respondents felt receiving exclusive clips or information on a forthcoming film were relevant motivators, two felt they would play because they were a fan of the producer or director of the film, and four suggested they would play because they were already excited about the film. The opportunity to acquire swag was also rated the least important element of a game.

However, forum discussion suggests this attitude differs between communities. Cloudmakers were excited about the prospect of receiving movie posters or memorabilia, but swag was never intrinsic to their game. In stark contrast, SSH players were extremely focussed on receiving marketing materials, be they more traditional (e.g. trailers and stills) or specifically game-related (e.g. Dent campaign materials). When asked what they felt their final reward should be, swag was by far the most popular request, although some also requested film content:

*'One word. SWAG. Glorious Glorious Swag for everyone. joker masks, makeup paint, lots more stuff. thats an easy way to make alot of people happy' (SHH).*

*'I want some footage or a trailer. Getting pics, magazine covers, posters. It doesn't do it for me' (SHH).*

Many felt this was the reward they deserved for the time and effort invested in following or playing the game. Discussions often revolved around the appropriate 'payoff' proportionate to time invested. Preview screenings were also high on the list of expectations for SHH players, whereas Stewart recalls 'eye rolling' at the notion at the end of *The Beast* (Stewart 2013c). Where there were negative evaluations of WhySoSerious, these were usually related to lack of 'payoff', which was almost always measured in terms of swag or exclusive footage. Some responses were more measured than others:



*'The idea and original games were great, and the rewards were proportionate to the tasks (Send some E-Mails, clear a picture). But as the campaign has moved on the games have become more tiresome and involve much more hard work and time, which cannot be given up likely - time is precious... only getting one image for running all over the country isnt an equal deal' (SHH).*

*'At first, it was really cool. But now, I'm just tired of all the games, and all the waiting. I know some people got Make-Up, and Gotham Times, and Masks, and Wizard World Footage, but you know what? A LOT of other people didn't get jack \*\*\*\*, \*\*\*\*ers. I'm one of the people who didn't get \*\*\*\*. So, it's like, HELLO! Where's my slice? I want more than equal rights! I want EVERYTHING FOR FREE!!!' (SHH).*

Some hoped for documentation of the game on the DVD or perhaps a credits sequence.

*'On the Dark Knight DVD & Blu-Ray, there will be this big behind the scene feature about the whole 42 Entertainment viral game with a listing congratulation of everyone that was involved' (SHH).*

Here, recognition is the reward. Having been invited to play, players felt producers should have made efforts to acknowledge them as a valued part of the process. A similar concern lies beneath the initially materialistic appearance of the demand for swag, which comes from the desire to be appropriately rewarded for their participation. Some eschewed this attitude entirely, suggesting the reward was 'the experience itself' or viewed swag as a memento of their game experience, emphasising their affective value:

*'I don't think the final prize is the point - it's about getting some neat background info and immersing fans into the world of TDK' (SHH).*

*'It represents all this time I spent going nutso over something and I can always look at it and be like, 'Oh yeah...that was pretty awesome'' (SHH).*

*'I plan on passing it along to my son when he gets old enough' (SHH).*

Grossberg argues such affective investments elevate places, or events on an individual's 'mattering map', to the point that these become 'places at which we can construct our own identity as something to be invested in, as something that matters'

(1992: 57). For these players swag is important not because it has exchangeable value, but because it has affective value, relevant only to themselves and their personal experiences. Some players were viewed as materialistic for selling swag online. It was more acceptable to exchange swag internally, with values based on the scarcity of that item:

*'Thou shalt never contribute to people hocking precious viral swag for gregarious prices on ebay. Capitalism. Don't you just loathe it?! People making money from nothing. Swag that was for REAL fans'* (SHH).

*'I really do like the economy in these forums though - trading swag for the swag you missed out on is nice'* (SHH).

This approach to in-game swag reflects Hill's argument that the exchange value of fan objects are not determined by the 'economy proper' in the Marxist sense, but through a 'process of localised (fan-based) use-valuations' (2002: 35). This pulls the object back towards its use value and, although it might eventually return to exchange value through the system of consumer capitalism, it does so through processes which are 'underpinned' by the lived experience of fandom (Hills 2000: 35). Use value and exchange value cannot be fully separated but at least in this configuration it is not a process over which fans have no control or influence.

In this case the value of swag comes not from any monetary value but from the subjective, emotional experience it represents for an individual fan and the value placed on its exclusive nature by the community. However, players seem to want to keep swag even further away from the established collectibles market. Selling swag for profit (and implicitly financially exploiting fellow players) is criticised, the preference being to keep it out of the marketplace 'proper', trading it within the forum's own internal swag economy and guaranteeing a sale to a deserving player. Swag is, after all, memorabilia intended as a reward for participation. Players may be actively reaffirming its use value, not satisfied with simply being able to determine its worth in a system of exchange value.

Swag also functions as cultural capital, proof that players 'were there'. This is particularly important because the games are, by their very nature, ephemeral and transient. Swag provides more permanent evidence of participation in an exclusive experience which swiftly becomes inaccessible. Jancovich notes that cult texts are often defined by such inaccessibility, giving those fandoms a similar sense of exclusivity

(2008: 151). WhySoSerious and its attendant swag returned that experience to a franchise which had perhaps become overly accessible, reinstating something of the subcultural or the 'cult' to the fandom. This might explain why WhySoSerious players were more focussed on acquiring these items. Such a status is particularly hard to attain in the contemporary media environment and involvement in a promotional ARG offers the opportunity to acquire cultural capital which is not available to the average internet user.

The focus on the affective resonance of swag and the reluctance to allow such materials to enter the wider marketplace could also be viewed as part of a wider, ongoing negotiation of the games' place in a consumer capitalist system. Players are acutely aware that promotional ARGs are part of a drive to sell a film, however their relationship with the games as marketing is complicated and requires more careful consideration.

### **Consuming ARGs as Marketing**

Surveyed players overwhelmingly acknowledged the purpose of the games to be the creation of hype around a property, rather than, for example, offering fans the opportunity to participate in the storyworld. Yet only 18% felt this would deter them from playing. 80% also felt sponsorship could be used effectively as long as it was carefully integrated within the game world and did not disrupt the immersive experience. It seemed it was more important that the game be entertaining and engaging in itself, whether it was promotional or not.

Both CM and SHH players perceived the use of an ARG as a move away from traditional marketing, which they associated with a more cynical kind of commerciality. However they had slightly different expectations as to how they wanted this new form of promotion to interact with them. The rabbit hole for *The Beast* was in a film trailer, situating it immediately as part of a marketing campaign. Players were therefore aware of this but often got so involved in deciphering the mechanisms of this new genre that some felt the community should be reminded of its purpose:

*'We should remember that this is, in fact, a marketing campaign, even if it is the coolest marketing campaign I've ever seen'* (CM).

As the game became more complicated, players began to speculate there was more to it than ‘just marketing’, since it stood in such stark contrast with traditional movie marketing methods. On discovering Microsoft’s involvement many suspected it to be a ‘promotion-within-a-promotion’, for the new Xbox console. Others thought they might be part of a beta test group for EA’s immersive game *Majestic*. Since PMs could not come out from behind the curtain to confirm or deny these rumours, they circulated freely. The notion of ‘marketing’ was somehow too broad; players constantly tried to crystallise a more nuanced understanding of what the game was asking of them. Their identity as ‘consumers’ was also debated, particularly since the game was free:

*‘Technically, we're not [consumers]. We have no expectations (in the legal sense), there have been no terms and conditions. There's been no contract, there's been no offer and there's been no sale. I don't even think we could be implied as consumers, either. We never paid anything’ (CM).*

They were also quick to note the film’s distinctly average commercial success and questioned the ARG’s effectiveness as a piece of marketing:

*‘This entire project was ostensibly a marketing campaign, right? But \*A.I.\* isn't doing so hot in the box office. So in the eyes of the investors, all the money poured into the game simply wasn't worth it, correct’ (CM).*

Others concluded it must have had some alternative purpose, linked to innovation and experimentation. They understood the community to have been part of something historic, not just in a promotional context, but as a broader movement within entertainment media:

*‘To everyone reading this right now, you've become a part of massive-multiplayer gaming history. The first major mystery game based on Internet and other modern communication technology and backed by a major studio, and you are right on the bleeding edge, with just a few thousand other people... We just birthed the next generation of gaming. Don't blink, you might miss history’ (CM).*

More radically, the game provoked players to explore their capabilities as a collective intelligence. Some suggested they could solve real world issues, although others quickly pointed out they were a group of puzzle enthusiasts, not a think tank:

*'If CM were so inclined to solve world hunger, I'm sure we could take a stab at it, although it's subjective on the successfulness of such a quest. If we wanted to send our crack theories of terrorism based on Google results, I'm sure we'd find someone to send them too. This group as a whole does not want to do these things. Get over it'* (CM).

Finally, many players spoke of their personal attachment to the community and the game experience:

*'WAY TO GO! This is what this game is all about (beyond shameless movie promotion :). A bunch of people with common interests meeting each other who might not otherwise get the chance'* (CM).

Here, CMs appeared to set aside the commercial status of the game, reflecting Hill's suggestion that fans are aware of their position within the commercial media industry and constantly negotiate that role (2002: 28–35). The ambiguity surrounding *The Beast* may have made it easier to make claims for its alternative purpose and value. By the time *The Dark Knight* arrived in 2008, ARGs were no longer such an unknown quantity. Rules and boundaries were clearer and expectations had shifted. Some CMs had turned PM and were setting up grassroots games, but there was still an understanding that financing for larger ARGs was likely to come from marketing budgets. This perception led to ARGs being more readily associated with advertising. SHH players certainly spoke about the games *as* marketing more explicitly and seemed more comfortable with their involvement in the campaign. Most were appreciative of the games, tending to view ARGs as a way of helping them cope with the long wait until release day.

*'[...] the games give us a chance to follow the space between BB and TDK; and instead of us sitting and b8tching about when we'll get our next peek at the film, they're keeping us entertained . . .'* (SHH).

Those who complained about delays or lack of swag were referred to previous *Batman* marketing campaigns in comparison, suggesting a vast improvement: *'Embrace it...'* *'Do you want it to be 1997 again?!'* (SHH). Previous experiences of marketing strategies for what had become a highly commercially-oriented franchise therefore inflected their understanding of this new approach. One SHH player was uncomfortable with 'the idea that one's individual experiences should become \*brand\* experiences'.

They described it as ‘creepy’ that players should become sentimental over ‘an extended advertisement’. Another felt producers were exploiting the ‘innocence’ of fan enthusiasms for a product which was intended primarily to entertain and only secondarily to make money. This opinion was quickly refuted by a third player who acknowledged the necessity, for example, of a money-minded publisher to sell JK Rowling’s books, or a profit-focused studio to take on Peter Jackson’s expensive *Lord of the Rings Trilogy*. This player was adamant that being involved in a consumer capitalist system should not mean a text could not be ‘pure or good or artistic’ because if it did, he argued, there would be next to nothing pure or good or artistic in the world. There was a sense that this fan had absolutely come to terms with their position in a consumer system and was not just negotiating but defending that role within that system.

SHH players evaluated the marketing campaign as a creative, as well as commercial practice and held it to the same rigorous standards they would the final product. Having almost fully incorporated the marketing into the text itself, fans may no longer find this negotiation so problematic. They also developed an increasingly transactional relationship with 42 Entertainment. Although they were delighted the game was free, their participation came at a price and they became more demanding about response times, availability of swag, etc. Many of their communications addressed 42 Entertainment as a customer services outlet, to whom they could direct their complaints about a faulty product. This was exemplified when the Domino’s Pizza sponsored segment of the game went awry and some players did not receive the in-game code which was due to come with a free pizza:

*‘If there is any way that this code could still be received, that is all we are looking for at this point. I don't want a pizza because, honestly, I don't like Domino's. However, I was willing to have it for dinner seeing that I was about to enjoy something better on line. Please let me know if you have any other information about this. Thanks for your time in reading. Sincerely, Elizabeth and Timothy’ (SHH).*

However, criticisms of corporate sponsors were not made because they were overtly commercial, but because they failed to adequately support the game experience. The primary issue with Dominos’ involvement in WhySoSerious was not that they were too overtly identified as Dominos’ (they delivered under the thin guise of Gotham

Pizzeria) but that ineffective communication caused their part of the game to malfunction; breaking with the fiction and leaving players without the swag they were promised. Furthermore, it can be argued this is less a criticism than an observation and many players simply adjusted their expectations of promotional ARGs to take sponsorship issues into account.

Yet SHH players used similar strategies to CMs and PMs to frame the game as something other than ‘just marketing’. Some players referred, as many producers did, to the ARG in terms of artistry, with 42 Entertainment the artists:

*‘This is not a game... it's art.’ (CM).*

*‘Even though this is all just marketing, I like to think 42 sees it as more than that’ (SHH).*

*‘Of course the pastors [PMs] are getting paid for their efforts; I never implied they weren't. But do you honestly think, given the amounts of creativity they've displayed in their efforts, that they are looking at this as 'just another job'?’ (CM).*

‘I never implied they weren’t’ belies a defensiveness which reflects continuing fan concerns around being labelled the ‘incorporated’ or ‘passive dupes’ of the media industry. Players assert their knowledge and awareness of the practical workings of the commercial media industry almost to prove they are not ignorant of their role in that process. Alongside that defensive impulse, however, is a desire highlight the creative nature of the marketing materials. In one sentence this Cloudmaker simultaneously acknowledges the commercial nature of *The Beast*, yet distances themselves and the PMs from it using discourses of artistry and creativity.

Cloudmakers were never ignorant of the PMs’ corporate links but doubted Dreamworks’ marketing department was creative enough to achieve such a feat of game design:

*‘It now seems a virtual certainty that this game was developed by Microsoft's games division. The only other PM possibility would be WB's or Dreamwork's PR divisions, and this game is (pardon the expression) far too geeky to have been created by Hollywood PR flacks.’ (CM)*

Warner Bros. were discussed in terms of a source of financing or as the body in control of distribution decisions, but rarely in terms of providing creative input into the ARGs.

Media companies were perceived to have only commercial interests in ARGs. As one Cloudmaker put it: *'Hollywood will pick money over art any day'* (CM). This view is substantiated in the previous chapter where PMs cite difficulties in convincing corporate clients to grasp this value, preferring to measure success quantitatively. Some suggested 42 Entertainment had 'sold' out by selecting such commercial sponsors, but this was not universally accepted:

Player 1: *'It just seems so strange for the virals. I mean, all the stuff they've given us, it hasn't [been] anything like this, nothing this commercial. I wonder why they took this turn...?'*

Player 2: *'It's a comic book movie. It isn't selling out--it's a franchise. That's just how they happen'* (SHH).

References to previous campaigns justified the presence of some commercial brands but also highlighted that these were somewhat out of sync with the tone of the new approach:

*'Does anyone else feel it's a bit off to advertise the Dark Knight for Dominoes and have toys in cereal boxes. This isn't Batman Forever'* (SHH).

However, 42 Entertainment were rarely considered as 'corporate' as their partners and failings were more often pinned on sponsors, such as Domino's. They were not expected to behave like a media conglomerate and were even perceived as less litigious. Super 8 players considered JJ Abrams in the same light:

*'Again there is the question of whether or not the copyright holder would wage any litigation against you, and in the case of 42e unless it was blatant and you were using it for profit I doubt it.... I do think it's more likely you'd meet with hassles from Warner Bros...'* (SHH).

*'Although I doubt JJ would go after his fans, we have to consider the movie company. They tend to get picky about copywrite'* (UF).

Whilst this seems to paint a negative picture media companies, there were indications that corporate clients could benefit from being associated with these creative values. During The Beast Microsoft was often perceived as a company overly concerned with profit:



*'Keep in mind Microsoft itself is behind this. When was the last time they were convinced to do anything that wasn't in their best financial interests?'* (CM).

However, by the end of the game some found their attitudes towards Microsoft had shifted:

*'I've never had a lot of reason to be charitable to Microsoft. Now, knowing they're cool enough to employ Elan Lee, I'm a \*lot\* more likely to think well of them'* (CM).

Hills' moral dualisms emerge again as players align PMs with positive creativity and media companies with negative commerce. These dualisms allow the work of PMs to be raised above the status of 'just marketing', distancing both players and PMs from the commercial intent of the games by focussing on their creative content. Players identified more with PMs because they perceived them to have the same creative interests at heart. This was an image PMs were keen to project and fans received it in the intended spirit.

Fans further negotiated the commercial status of the games by viewing them as a 'gift' or 'treat' for established fans, removing the need for them to identify themselves as part of a commercial endeavour:

*'All this Joker Marketing stuff feels very much like a gift from WB and Nolan to us'* (SHH).

This reflects McGonigal's (2009) description of promotional ARGs as 'gift marketing'. However, the notion of 'gifting' is more pertinent in the context of fan communities, since their construction and maintenance has often been discussed in terms of a 'gift economy', as opposed to a market economy. Hellekson (2009) has explained how fan-produced objects are exchanged within communities based on the three elements of 'gifting' identified by Mauss (1990): giving, receiving and reciprocating. Such objects include fan fiction, art or vids, to analysis, discussion, links, wikis databases and conferences. These can be individual gifts from one fan to another, but, as Turk (2014) notes, they are more often received by the community as a whole and may be produced collaboratively. Scholars have previously argued that the gift economy acts as a defence from legal action since no profit was made from using the IP and that it functions to strengthen the bonds within a community as 'economic investment gives way to sentimental investment' (Jenkins et al. 2009). However, when media producers enter into this economy of gifting, concerns are raised about its appropriation for economic gain. The efforts of the site FanLib to profit from fan fiction is often cited as an example

of the failure of that enterprise, flawed because it failed to recognise the nature of the community it was attempting to co-opt, and its status as a pre-existing community as opposed to a community created and controlled by FanLib (De Kosnik 2009, Hellekson 2009, Jenkins 2007c).

In perceiving a promotional ARG as a 'gift' from producers, fans seemingly remove themselves and their activities from the sphere of commercial economics and position then within a gift economy. In Mauss' terms, if producers perform the 'giving' of an ARG as a gift, players and fans perform the 'receiving'. However, the reciprocation is complicated. The time and energy expended on the games equates to the 'gifts of time and skill' (Hellekson 2009) valued by fan communities and particularly so by an ARG community. One 'effort gift' from the media company therefore deserves another in return. Indeed the game *requires* that reciprocation and fan labour then goes on to profit the producers in the form of free marketing. Scott (2009) also argues that such ancillary content simply 'regifts' an acceptable version of fan activity back to communities, breaking with the moral economy of gifting. It presents something old as something new and therefore presents a false gift, according to Scott.

Perhaps sensing this falseness in the 'gift' of a promotional ARG, players may respond with a more transactional attitude, which has more in common with a commodity economy. Their understanding of media corporations as profit-focussed may leave them suspicious of a 'gift' from such companies. Instead of participating on the terms of a gift economy in which they fear exploitation, fans might prefer to take a more demanding stance, expecting suitable return on their investment. SHH players seemed most comfortable with this approach, possibly because the notion of gift-giving relies on a sense of trust which did not necessarily exist between *Batman* fans and Warner Bros. at that time given their previous approaches to marketing the franchise, which were heavily reliant on merchandise and sponsorship.

Booth (2010) argues an ARG is an 'amalgam of the gift and the commodity economies', which he refers to as the 'Digi-Gratis' economy, in which the two are mutually beneficial and one need not necessarily supersede the other. In promotional ARGs, this may well be the case. By drawing upon notions of both gift and commodity economies, players may manoeuvre themselves into a more comfortable relationship with promotional ARGs in which they stand to benefit as much as producers.

Yet not all players felt this position gave them any leverage in that relationship. Some took the more cynical (or perhaps realistic) view that producers were unlikely to feel the need to meet their demands:

*'So all of you who are complaining about it just need to shut your faces and realize that they don't owe you anything. All it is is an extended commercial done in a cool way, and be grateful for anything you get from it' (SHH).*

Some SHH players felt the games were designed to keep fans happy, but interpreted this as a move to placate fans, rather than a genuine invitation to participate in the franchise. Survey responses offer a similar perspective of marketing as manipulative:

*'The marketing has integrated the fans, but in a superficial way' (SHH).*

*'If I see links to developers, movies the ARG is promoting, or have to sign a user agreement before playing then I feel like all I'm agreeing to is being subjected to advertisements willingly and that their main goal is selling me a product rather than creating something fun' (Respondent #10).*

*'I don't like to feel like a marketing tool, but rather as a participant in the game/marketing technique' (Respondent #15).*

These responses again echo concerns about being 'used' by media companies and being placed at the 'incorporated' end of the dichotomy. One intense conversation developed between two SHH players concerning the impact of WhySoSerious on players' perception of the Joker. Player X argued, in a long and considered post, that a large proportion of fans were initially unsettled by the fact that this version of the Joker wore white make-up.<sup>59</sup> Player X viewed this as a fundamental and recurring issue regarding comic book canon, as characters were increasingly being reimagined for film adaptations. Player X then claimed the emotional investment made by players in the ARG played a strong role in softening attitudes towards the new Joker, bringing them around to 'Nolan's vision'. Significantly, the term 'manipulate' was used in the description of the eventual conversion of the fanbase, but the observation was emphatically not intended as a slight.

Responses were short, with most players attempting to remain neutral. Player Y then intervened, taking issue with the suggestion that the audience had been manipulated into changing their views. Player Y claimed many fans were always in support of 'Nolan's vision' of the Joker and those who changed their minds did so because they became tired of complaining and eventually accepted it 'naturally'. The

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<sup>59</sup> In both the original comic and Tim Burton's instalments, Joker develops 'perma-white' skin in a chemical accident.

argument continued at length but the central issue was always whether players could have such strongly held opinions changed, even reversed, by a marketing campaign. Player Y seemed to resent the suggestion, continuing the defensive tone found in previous player responses.

One CM similarly rejected the idea of receiving a prize, for essentially *'being manipulated by the marketing department of spielberg'* (CM). Even those who appeared comfortable with the commercial nature of the games expressed misgiving about being used to those ends. This was particularly true of games where it was felt they were not offered enough chances to participate, including Super 8:

*'All the clues they give us are all about the movie. The clips are found in the ads for the movie. It's just like we are the global advertising network for this movie'* (UF).

*'With Super 8, it ultimately felt like we were being force-fed information and promo materials'* (Respondent #15).

However, one respondent suggests *'maintenance of TINAG helps me connect with the product in a way where I don't feel like [I'm being] used'* (Respondent #15). Another argues TINAG is *'what makes the difference between an ARG and an advertisement'* (Respondent #26).

Hills' moral dualisms are again identifiable in these quotations. TINAG allows players to feel they are participating in a 'good' ARG - a piece of entertainment content in its own right, not a manipulative 'bad' advertisement. Although Hills criticises these binaries, they continue to linger. TINAG therefore functions as something of an in-built negotiation strategy for players – if This Is Not A Game then This Is Not Marketing either. Without it, the marketing function becomes overriding, the game is no longer enjoyable and players may indeed feel manipulated or taken for granted.

There is a strong sense of players trying to resist the 'incorporated' stereotype of fans unquestioningly taking instruction from a piece of marketing. Player Y is effectively claiming autonomy and agency for the fan community in these processes and does so in a manner which belies the sensitivity of the topic. Players are not as comfortable with their position within a consumer capitalist system as it might initially seem. This ambivalence towards its status as marketing supports Hills' (2002) argument that fans do not straightforwardly resist or capitulate to the commerciality of their fan text. Instead they actively negotiate, debate and analyse that position in a way that

displays their awareness of their inevitable position as consumers as well as their desire to remain autonomous in that position. Part of that sense of autonomy hinges on their ability, real or perceived, to participate in the marketing in a meaningful, rather than superficial way.

### **Active Audiences**

‘Participation’ in an ARG can work on different levels. It can mean narrative agency, which game designers were keen to promote. Nearly 70% of survey respondents agreed ‘the ability to affect the outcome of an ARG is one of the genre’s main attractions’. Discussions on Unfiction support this and suggest players see it as a defining element of the genre:

*‘The idea that a player can affect the narrative is not a new one, but ARGs implement it as a more central aspect’ (UF).*

*‘When I’m playing an ARG, I want to care. I want to be able to live for the game and play it knowing that I am in control. So many games don’t offer this; instead, they write a story, place some puzzles between the beginning, middle and end and just drip-feed a predetermined narrative to the player as a reward for solving certain tasks’ (UF).*

There was no rulebook for The Beast, so a lot of time was spent working out what players were able to control.<sup>60</sup> They quickly realised the forums were being watched by PMs and their speculations were sometimes integrated into the game. This gave the impression that the game’s narrative was not set in stone and players enjoyed knowing they could influence the gameworld or push PMs to make decisions they would not otherwise have made:

*‘This is an interactive game, not a book or a movie. That mean that we are in the driver's seat, to a degree’ (CM).*

*‘[...] it seems they may be listening to some of our speculations and incorporating them into the universe in subtle but interesting ways...’ (CM).*

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<sup>60</sup> Control was also a narrative theme of The Beast. The game frequently asked players to question how far humans could expect to control A.I.s and much free will they should be allowed.

PMs confirmed that players' affection for the Red King prompted his upgrade from peripheral to central character. The Mike Royal call was a highlight because players sensed their influence on the story. Some questioned the limits of this influence but most were excited by the interaction available:

*'PMs could have planned to have RK be saved through an interaction with Mike Royal. However, if we don't get it right, if they want him to live, they definitely would have a backup storyline' (CM).*

*'[...]today it's been kicked up a level by their placing a real person on the other end of the phone, not just a recording. How cool! I agree, if they say we need to do something, then do something' (CM).*

The importance of narrative agency is emphasised when it becomes restricted. A distinct lack of this kind of agency in Super 8 caused complaints:

*'I also feel the "finding" of things is left to the ARG characters rather than us and we just follow their reports' (UF).*

*'This has been a hand fed Movie Viral from day one' (UF).*

It is at this point that some games may be deemed 'just marketing' or 'just virals' rather than 'real' ARGs. One survey respondent put it:

*'These ARGs are much less likely to bend to the will of players or give players any sense that the choices they make have any sort of impact since the final product (be it a TV show or movie or whatever, already exists... so it's more of an 'interactive fiction' story, where you plod along with the plot the PM has in mind and interact with it when necessary but nothing you do is going to actually show an impact to the end product' (Respondent #10).*

Not all promotional ARGs were so criticised. Unfiction players had a great deal of praise for more in-depth promotional games, particularly WhySoSerious and Flynn Lives. However, when asked for examples of players impacting narratives, most cited grassroots games (e.g. Lockjaw, Metacortechs). Some promotional games were mentioned, including ilovebees, Last Call Poker, Project Abraham and WhySoSerious, all produced by 42 Entertainment. Most involved players deciding the fate of a character but they were notably in secondary story arcs rather than main plotlines. None

suggested examples from Bad Robot/Paramount/Abrams ARGs despite the Lost Experience and Cloverfield games being prominent on the boards by this point (Nov/Oct 2009). Super 8 was far less interactive and complex in its storytelling and characterisation than either The Beast or WhySoSerious. As a result, a number of players decided that at least parts of the game were indeed ‘just virals’. Such criticism therefore occurs not because the games are promotional, but because they do not fulfil player expectations for ARGs. Again, players may adjust their expectations for promotional games in the understanding that PMs are likely to have fewer opportunities to change plotline and characters relating to the film, let alone to allow players to have any effect on them. However, if this is important to them, they may look to grassroots games to fulfil this expectation.

Narrative agency is one of the standards by which ARGs are judged, regardless of their marketing status. It also helps promotional games transcend their commercial status, moving it away from its label as ‘manipulative’ marketing. Yet, despite 67% of survey respondents expressing a desire for games which allow for more narrative control, exactly the same percentage agreed PMs were ultimately in control of any ARG. One respondent argued for the importance of *‘the illusion of control, not necessarily the control itself’* (Respondent #6). This awareness of the limitations of that agency was also reflected on forums, where some suggested restrictions were necessary to facilitate storytelling and a satisfying player experience:

*‘I see ARGs as the storytelling version of MMORPGs, where fundamental interaction is mostly sacrificed in order for a more detailed story to be told...’* (UF).

There is also an understanding that some narrative features must be pre-determined, but that these should to be designed with the flexibility to shift according to player actions or inactions. Game designer Lance Weiler once described this as ‘controlled spontaneity’ (quoted in Andersen 2009). For some players, this is, understandably, an oxymoron. Planned agency is necessarily controlled agency and therefore not ‘true’ agency. Yet designers are adamant that uncontrolled agency ultimately makes for bad storytelling and a bad game. Fortunately, most players understand the need for a balance between the determined and the unpredictable to create an enjoyable experience. Although Stewart found the term ‘illusion’ pejorative, players seemed to find it less problematic. As previously noted, enjoyment of the games requires an ability to immerse oneself in a game world, but also to analyse and critique the game from the outside, acknowledging those illusions. As a result, players are

unlikely to feel ‘fooled’ or ‘hoodwinked’ because they appreciate both the pleasures of the illusion and the context in which that illusion is constructed. Additionally, player agency in ARGs is not always confined to narrative control. Players identify other forms of participation available to them, including character interaction, live events and forms of user generated content (UGC).

### **Character Interaction**

Strong characterisation was essential for players, but the ability to interact with those characters was equally vital, increasing the level of emotional attachment. Affective responses to fictional characters are certainly not new or unusual in other media. However, players felt the opportunity to interact with characters made this connection more intense:

*‘...one of the best parts of ARG's is the communication between players and characters. People get a sort of rush by talking to someone they know has secrets. What are they going to reveal? How can I gain their trust? Could I get another website out of them? It's this small, euphoric high that drives some people to play these games’ (UF).*

*‘I know players who were deeply saddened and disturbed by the deaths of some (well-written) characters in the games, and in one case players went out of their way to make SURE that one character DID NOT DIE’ (UF).*

Super 8 players noted a disappointing lack of character development, prompting further speculation by the community to fill the in the gaps:

*‘Every time I look at Player X's deep theories into the details of who the characters really are, make the little fire stir within “in hopes” as it were. But then I see how top skim the information we have received is and go back into my “oh well” disappointed view’ (UF).*

Batman fans were already strongly attached to characters from the franchise, but producers were looking to modify that relationship in their rebranding of the Joker. Although some took issue with this as a ‘manipulation’ of the fan community, the reaction to the character would no doubt have been different had the community not had the opportunity to communicate with the character through the ARG:



*'I find myself rooting more and more for the joker due to this ARG. I've always loved the joker but now I find myself wanting batman to fail just so the joker succeeds'* (SHH).

Posters, trailers and TV spots were unlikely to have communicated the personality of the character, which informs his physical appearance, in such a direct and effective way. By the end of the campaign their allegiance to the Joker as part of his 'mob' was reflected in their acceptance of his new image.

However, some players distinguished between 'direct' and 'indirect' interactivity with characters, differentiating between on-on-one (direct) communications and interaction occurring between characters and community as a whole (indirect):

*'Going all the way back to The Beast, I think we can say that by today's standards there was little to no interaction. Sure there was the Mike Royal call, but that's really the only example of direct one-on-one communication. Everything else was rather impersonal and to the community – the emails and phone calls were sent to any & all on the list. Even so, I'd be surprised if any of the players felt that they didn't have an impact on the story or the universe'* (UF).

One player acknowledged differing player preferences, suggesting direct character interaction made them feel nervous and pressurised. Others felt indirect communication was more integral to the game experience:

*'If it was an in person thing, I wouldn't run away. But Phone? Ack. I think I'd gasp, hang up the phone and then realise I just upset hundreds of thousands of players and OMG! WTF DID I JUST DO?!'* (CM)

*'For me, the ARG experience is less of what I do directly (that's more of a bonus to the experience) and more of what everyone else does within the context of the plot, and its believability, knowing that there are many 'roles' to play in the experience'* (UF).

Players can, and sometimes prefer, to experience the emotional impact of agency vicariously through the combined actions of others. This echoes Stewart's (2012b) assertion that if the group accepts an individual as their spokesperson, they may feel that individual is acting on their behalf. They can then experience those actions as their own without the pressure of being that representative. This is not necessarily just about performing actions which impact the games, but experiencing those actions as part of a

group, which would allow the 76% of the community who are lurkers to feel part of communal action.

### **Live Events**

Live events offer another form of participation. The Beast integrated three simultaneous live meetings, which were well-received by the player community:

*'I just want to say that the rally night was amazing fun and it just boggles my mind how elaborate this game is'* (CM).

42 Entertainment went on to set a precedent during Year Zero and ilovebees, leaving expectations high for large scale, live events in WhySoSerious. Scavenger hunts frequently appeared on list of favourite game moments and those from smaller towns or outside of the US were unhappy about their lack of access to these events (SHH). Super 8 had no comparable live events but this did not stop players from speculating about the possibility of clues being hidden in an abandoned hospital:

*'I'm almost crazy enough to make the 18 hour drive there and look for something'* (UF).

*'I think the email from the curator has essentially confirmed nothing within building, and the likelihood of hiding something in the area is low (though if someone wanted to check, fantastic)'* (UF).

The length of this debate suggests an expectation of and desire for 'real-world' events. Online games tended to be perceived as aimed at those with more specific 'techie' skills, whereas live events were often more collaborative, with those online directing those on the ground. Although expensive and logistically difficult, real world events are enormously popular elements of the genre.

### **UGC – Official & Unofficial**

ARGs also provided space for what might be termed 'official' UGC - content which was firmly in-game and requested by PMs. For example, players were asked to provide

pictures of their ‘sightings of Batman’ to participate in the Citizens for Batman thread of WhySoSerious. However, this occurred within parameters set by PMs and the boards revealed a great deal of content created ‘unofficially’ outside those boundaries. Some unofficial UGC was necessary in order to keep track of the game, e.g. The Trail in The Beast, wiki for WhySoSerious or Rocket Poppeteers Spreadsheet for Super 8. However, some was created purely for the enjoyment of the community. In games where their ability to impact a narrative was more limited, players were indirectly creative with the storyline through speculation, allowing them to create narratives outside the game for their own entertainment or make further connections to assist with puzzle-solving. This occurred so frequently that players were requested to use a ‘SPEC’ label when posting. The original characters, storyline and science fiction setting of The Beast meant a wide range of stories could be told by players. WhySoSerious provided less room for such creativity, since it involved such well-known characters and narratives. Despite this, speculation sometimes prompted evaluative discussions around the authenticity of character behaviours, most notably the Joker. With little narrative information to work with, Super 8 players were even more inclined to fill the void with their own speculations. Those who had played Cloverfield anticipated a similar structure for Super 8. Both games involved vague conspiracy theory narratives and characters which were considered underdeveloped. This left more room for players to conceptualise those characters and narratives themselves, often gaining a great deal of enjoyment through ‘spec’ with other players:

*‘Because this is likely to play out a bit like Cloverfield, there’s likely not going to be conventional puzzles. That means a lot of detective type work which means a lot of speculation’ (UF).*

*‘Granted the clues have not really led to much more than advertising venues or purchase opportunities in the guise of a game. Nonetheless the fun has been in trying to make something out of a pile of poo. We would have never met the funny, quirky people we have met on this journey if it wasn’t for this ARG. And, at this point, what does it matter?’ (UF).*

Spec therefore performs a dual function. As a form of UGC, it allows players to exercise a form of participation within the games but monitoring such discussions also allows marketers to better understand the expectations and values of a fan community and circulates further hype about the film.

Other ‘unofficial UGC’ included fansites like [whysoseriousredux.com](http://whysoseriousredux.com). This performed an archival function, which players were keen to promote given the ephemeral and experiential nature of the games. Others discussed developing physical scrapbooks for the same purpose. Super 8 players also produced their own merchandise including mugs, collaboratively designed t-shirts and stickers, all of which were designed with careful consideration of the legal ramifications of using certain images or phrases. Players were aware of Paramount’s reputation for protecting their IP but were not actively looking to challenge that position:

*‘We should play it on the safe side and try to stay away from verbiage or logos which might tend to imply anything directly about the IP (intellectual property) of JJ Abrams, Spielberg, and Paramount. We here as fans created the ‘We Must Party’ slogan relative to the film, so it’s ours’ (UF).*

It is this consideration which separates these activities from the ‘textual poaching’ described by Jenkins (1992). There is little sense of a fan community seeking to reclaim a text from the hands of its producers. Super 8 players are as interested in merchandise which identifies them as ‘Unfictioners’ as that which designates them Super 8 fans, often preferring designs involving community in-jokes like the phrase ‘we must party’. All three games consistently display more discussion around ‘unofficial’ than ‘official’ UGC, affirming Dena’s (2008a) assertion that players interact with more player-produced content than ‘official’ content. ARGs may create space for players to create within the limits of the ‘official’ content but this does not necessarily prevent them from getting creative outside of those boundaries.

Being ‘active’ and participating in an ARG means different things to different players, creating a diversity of ‘agency’ beyond narrative control. Even seasoned players can be uncomfortable with taking too much control of the story and many find pleasure in other modes of agency. However, as Stewart (2012b) noted, players do want to be heard within the game. They want to feel like their actions matter, either collectively or individually. This does not necessarily mean they impact the narrative outside of its planned trajectory, although it may be desirable.

The increasing lack of interactivity could be read as producers restricting the abilities of consumers to control a narrative and therefore a brand message, but the situation is more complex. 75% of survey respondents reported a strong sense of ownership over ARGs they played. However, they were less certain about the relationship between ownership and narrative control. 50% agreed the two were linked

but just as many either disagreed or remained neutral. One respondent suggested the sense of ownership over a game did not come from the ability to influence a story, ‘real’ or illusory, but from ‘*the give and take, call-and response mechanics along with the feeling of community*’ (Respondent #2). Players are engaged in a far more personal and emotional desire for their actions to have an effect on something else; to connect with something outside of themselves and exist in dialogue with it. Understandably, they also want that emotional investment acknowledged and respected. This is perhaps something which has historically lacked in mainstream media communications with audiences, where the relationship has often been a one-way street. As one respondent put it:

*‘Ultimately, I feel this is like a company receiving suggestions from the public. A bad company disregards them, a good company makes the public feel acknowledged, and a great company actually takes them into consideration’* (Respondent #32).

Ownership is therefore not solely linked to narrative control, real or perceived, but instead is more related to the affective relationship which can be prompted by various elements of an ARG.

### **Affected Audiences**

55% of survey respondents agreed ARGs could be described as an ‘intensely felt, emotionally affecting experience’, a phrase taken from Hills’ definition of ‘cult’ fandoms (Hills 2002: xi). Expressions of such experiences in forum discussions were coded into one group and then further coded to ascertain what players were responding to with such passion. The response to in-game characters has already been discussed, but players also spoke enthusiastically about the community itself and links between the game experience and their personal lives. Players also had to trust that PMs would not design games that took advantage or made light of their affections, making this relationship key to allowing such investments to occur.

The previous chapter posits the development of a relationship between players and PMs based on mutual trust and respect. Survey respondents offered similar analogies to those described by game designers:

*‘Collaborative’* (Respondent #12)

*‘Each is very dependent on the other’* (Respondent #28)

*'Symbiotic' (Respondent #35)*

*'Tango – one may be leading the other at any given time but ultimately the dance is done together' (Respondent #6)*

*'Like jazz musicians, playing off each other. NOT like two chess players playing against each other' (Respondent #2)*

*'Performer and audience... but in both directions' (Respondent #22)*

One respondent stated *'PMs care about their players'* (Respondent #18) During The Beast, the relationship was certainly very affectionate. PMs met with players on a number of occasions post-game, flying forum moderators out to Seattle as a gesture of thanks. There were no expectations for this kind of response from PMs and players were delighted to have the opportunity to meet with and question game designers. They referred to PMs in a warm, personal and informal tone:

*'We have been blessed by a consensual, shared immersive environment they [PMs] have painstakingly and expensively put together. Rather than half-assing it and just going with whatever they scripted no matter how quickly we blew through it, they have constantly adapted to our techniques, our skills, our knowledge and likely to our theories. They have given us the product of their sweat, their labor, their creativity, their muses, their passion and their skill, without even the ability to have their e-mail addresses attached so we can send them mail and say "this is really really good"' (CM).*

They described the relationship as essentially collaborative rather than confrontational and The Beast offers the strongest examples of this collaboration. Players were aware of PMs responding directly to their in-game and out of game activity, incorporating their spec into the game:

*'And it \*is\* fluid and flexible - swaying to move with what the players do (ie using the nightmare database - the PMs could never have known what people would have written, and therefore had to wait til it was created by - us!!' (CM).*

Accordingly, players felt they were in a position to outsmart PMs, creating a much more reciprocal power dynamic. They continually searched for PM 'mistakes', from spelling errors and narrative inconsistencies to incorrect coding. This scrutiny put

pressure on PMs to either avoid making mistakes or make them look intentional. Players also knew that the Microsoft team was relatively small and felt that, comparatively, their collective intelligence could outwit the PMs' puzzles:

*'Ok, this may be a bit of hubris (not for my own contributions, but for those of the group), but really, I wonder if in some ways we are collectively better off than the folks putting this thing together' (CM).*

Yet they were also aware that no matter how collectively intelligent their behaviour, PMs remained in control of the majority of story information. The fact that they could sometimes gain the upper hand therefore left the community feeling they truly had a stake in the game. One respondent describes the relationship in a manner which suggests a sense of co-authorship:

*'I once described my first meeting with the PMs of I Love Bees by comparing it to meeting the stars of the best movie you ever saw and having them tell you how much they loved your work in the audience' (Respondent #22).*

This emphasis on co-operation, collaboration and trust was particularly important in *The Beast* as there was no roadmap for the relationship that developed between PMs and CMs. As a result, when players referred to PMs it was usually to speculate on their intentions or motivations, be it their overall intentions for the marketing campaign or the intended solution for an individual puzzle. They also spent a great deal of time trying to figure out their identities and employers, although they took pains to draw ethical lines around this endeavour:

*'There is, and always has been, a movement here on Cloudmakers to discover who the PMs are. While such curiosity is inherent in the way we Cloudmakers do business, it has been pointed out (and rightly so) that blasting the PMs for clues, stalking PMs, etc. would just ruin the game and potentially get people in legal trouble' (CM).*

TINAG required PMs to remain behind the curtains, but with such uncertainty surrounding PMs' identities, players were taking a leap of faith by following their in-game instructions. Like narrative agency, the importance of trust to the group was best exemplified in instances when it became endangered; for example, when Cloudmakers realised PMs had linked directly to the Spherewatch community. They felt this was a slight against their own community and its hard work on the game:

*'The Cloudmakers respected the puppetmasters for acknowledging their efforts. When one of the puppets [in-game characters] mentioned the Cloudmakers' website, the Cloudmakers were honored. But when the puppets started referring to other sites, like bwunn.com, which has very poor production values, or SphereWatch, which lacks any of the structure or organization that we had worked so hard to develop, the Cloudmakers felt hurt. They felt cheated'* (CM).

PMs had not anticipated such an emotional response. It reflected the affection players felt for PMs but also their desire to keep that relationship somewhat exclusive to the group. CMs also speculated about the presence of PM 'plants' on the boards posing as players, a serious accusation:

*'Moderators have taken notice of -- and are upset at -- the increasing number of posters being singled out and branded as "plants." If someone solves a puzzle, he is not a plant. He is intrepid, hardworking, helpful, and lucky. We would not be as far as we are in the game without the work of single individuals riffing on the information the group provides to solve a puzzle. Actions that call people "plants" or "shills" derail our group's credibility and undermine our community'* (CM).

This was a significant breach of trust, firstly because there was an understanding that PMs would never intervene as it would be a *'disservice to their creation if they have to actively get involved in solving the case'* (CM). Secondly, players wanted to feel they had earned the answers to the puzzles themselves. If a PM plant passed answers to them, this invalidated their collective work and was effectively cheating, which was why some players took the accusation so personally:

*'I must say that I was personally offended on several levels by this particular post as well as similar comments made by other people. For instance, this particular statement brands me a liar and a phony--which is what I would have to be since my detailed explanation of how I came up with the answer was obviously rejected as the truth'* (CM).



There was a particular backlash when it emerged that forum moderators had contact with PMs during the game which was not disclosed to the rest of the community.<sup>61</sup>

*'I'm upset because I feel lied to and a bit betrayed. I feel as though those to whom we looked for leadership were possibly running another agenda. I feel that the bond of trust that has developed over these months has been tainted by the months of misleading and deception on the part of the mods'* (CM).

The passion in these protests exemplifies the importance of trust between community members, the emotional investment made in the games and the impact of having that investment made to look or feel misplaced. In particular it validates game designers' concerns about the importance of not misleading or 'hoaxing' players and respecting their role in the game.

Whilst players expected PMs to maintain a sense of respect for the community's abilities, they also consistently analysed their own behaviour, questioning whether the solution to a puzzle had been found in the 'right' way according to the PMs' intentions. As there were no real rules at this point and many argued against limiting players in this way:

*'I'll repeat myself. When there are no rules, then there's no such thing as cheating. Don't tell me I'm playing unfairly when we have no idea what's fair or not'* (CM).

This issue was raised when puzzles became increasingly difficult and players began to consider using brute force:

*'I think the brute force approach is appropriate considering that we've analyzed all of the available clues that we've been given and have come up lacking'* (CM).

As the genre developed, a set of guidelines were generally agreed by players which continued to be reflected in discussion boards for Super 8. Brute forcing a site was frowned upon and players were expected to trust that PMs would release information in a timely fashion. Trying to force that information out ahead of time was not only cheating, but also breaking that trust because *'it circumvents the chain of events the PMs had planned for their game'* (UF).

However, the trust relationship functioned differently in Super 8. Players did not have a strong relationship with PMs, possibly because it was difficult to consistently

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<sup>61</sup> Adrian's blog goes into detail on the subject <http://photo.vavatch.co.uk/seattle/> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

identify a single or collective author. The film itself was heavily marketed on the basis of a joint venture between Spielberg and Abrams and players were aware of the relationship between corporate media giant Paramount, its owner Viacom and the more innovative, indie image of Bad Robot. In addition, different elements of the game were designed by different marketing companies, providing little sense of cohesion and no central group of ‘PMs’ with whom a bond could be made. As a result, the relationship was distant in comparison with other ARG experiences:

*‘In the case of Flynn Lives 42E was hidden behind a ‘faux wall’ – if we had any questions (about prize shipments etc) we email them or call them (as long as in the email we stayed in-game.) With Super 8 We... had to find ways to access materials but then it was just a waiting game for the PMs to update. We spent hours analysing the posts for deeper meaning... for something more for us to do...’* (Respondent #15)

Yet player expectations were guided by an understanding of Super 8 as an ‘Abrams’ ARG. Players discussed Abrams as if he were the orchestrator of the game. He was sometimes referred to as ‘chief puppetmaster’ and players often addressed him directly in anticipation that he or a member of his team was monitoring the boards. Christiano (2013) confirmed Bad Robot had final approval on everything creatively, but did not suggest they were monitoring the boards. Despite this, players continued to display a desire for that kind of relationship with the producer/director. Neither *Lost*, nor *Alias*, nor *Cloverfield*’s ARG involved a personal relationship with PMs and players did not make these demands of Super 8. In particular, they anticipated the game would pose more questions than it answered:

*‘going by previous projects of the Master of Mystery JJ Abrams, Super 8 will probably spawn a LOT of speculation’* (UF).

This is a trait not just of ‘Abrams’ ARGs but of his work in general. Abrams produced a TED talk in which he emphasised the attraction of mystery in fiction - the notion that it is more exciting to wonder about the contents of the box than to discover the answer (Abrams, 2007). This approach fostered certain misgivings since the mystery box theory can lead to a lack of satisfying narrative closure. For those who have put the time into an ARG, being frequently misled in this manner can be regarded as a break in trust:

*'I know there's some of us out here who fear getting burned by Abrams and his Mystery Bag motif as we have been in the past. Trust is a fragile thing'* (UF).

However this reputation also allowed players to be more realistic about their expectations for Super 8. Their more relaxed stance might reflect changing attitudes towards precisely how this relationship should work. Opinions are similarly shifting on the importance of TINAG to that relationship. This requires PMs to remain behind the curtain, but complete anonymity can prevent players from fully trusting them, thus breaking the game. Nearly 90% of respondents agreed it was important for TINAG to be maintained. When asked why, a popular response was that it helped maintain a sense of immersion which allowed for higher levels of engagement and emotional investment:

*'The more real everything seems the more emotionally invested you can get in it'* (Respondent #27).

*'It helps me immerse myself within the universe'* (Respondent #35).

There is a careful balancing act at work in which players need to have enough information to feel comfortable continuing the game, but not so much that they lose their sense of immersion. Many are aware of the limitations of TINAG and this self-awareness is key to the enjoyment of ARGs. Players must move fluidly between acknowledging, or even questioning those boundaries and disregarding them completely to appreciate the pleasures that come with immersion. PMs are increasingly obligated to break TINAG to be more open about their identity and the status of the game before launch and no survey respondents suggested the felt direct communication to be overly negative. Over half had been contacted by PMs in various capacities, mostly to organise prizes or for post-game feedback. However, two were contacted for advice or asked to post information to address in-game issues (Survey Respondents #25 and #10).

One SHH player felt clues from 42 Entertainment were acceptable if transmitted by 'ninjas' on the boards, communication which would not have been deemed acceptable during The Beast.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, players happily contacted 42 Entertainment directly during WhySoSerious regarding anything from a failure to receive swag to confirmation of the end of a particular section of the game.

This shift in communication style also reflects changes in the perception of PMs from players' point of view. During The Beast, they tended to identify PMs as individuals

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<sup>62</sup> Players were informed there were no ninjas or plants on the SHH boards. All puzzles were completed by the community alone.

rather than representatives of an organisation. They were aware PMs read the boards and often addressed them directly: *'Uh, if PMs are listening, could you PLEASE fix this...'* (CM).

By the time WhySoSerious began, PMs were no longer a group of individuals, but a creative marketing company with a strong brand reputation. Players were more likely to refer to '42E' than to 'PMs' and understood the company to have a specific 'style'. There was less distinction of individual puppetmasters and no real expectation that players would meet the design team at the end.

However one player did meet with three 42 Entertainment employees after the game. This encounter was far more guarded than meetings at the end of The Beast and names of employees were replaced with pseudonyms 'Twitchy', 'Twitchy Jr.' and 'Rent-A-Clown Girl.' Responses were still relatively open, friendly and often humorous. Players were as fascinated to learn about PM decision-making and design ideas as they had been during The Beast:

*'We totally broke their servers on multiple occasions. During Operation Slipknot, the phone server that adeptly handled the load on the NIN [Nine Inch Nails] ARG completely fizzled, and they decided to divert the calls to Twitchy's personal phone while they tried to fix it. His voicemail immediately filled up and players started getting his phone number on his voicemail message, and apparently it was posted here. Twitchy still gets spam calls to this day'* (SHH).

This affection was reciprocated at the end of the game when players paid tribute to the company:

*'42...how do we even begin. I wouldn't have chosen to spend these last few many months of my life any other way. You guys are brilliant, you guys are revolutionary, you guys bring people together. Keep doing what you do, because you do it best'* (SHH).

Other tokens of appreciation were discussed, ranging from websites to bespoke videos. Some suggested it would be better to provide constructive feedback in a format they could present to future clients. This focus on the more corporate side of the company was not unusual, but provoked a response which seemed to encapsulate the community's feelings about 42 Entertainment:

*'this is also for the individual 42e employee, the guy and gal like you 'n me who worked long hours, busted their butt... and every night when they went to sleep*

*they were wondering what would come of their hard work... If you want to spend the time to create a business presentation explaining our thanks to give to the higher ups @ WB, please... do.. they'll need it. but 42e & DC are human companies. not mindless corporate machines' (SHH).*

Even when taking a more transactional approach to the company, SHH players felt 42 Entertainment would listen to them and respond to any problems quickly and efficiently, because they respected the investments made by players in the games.

*'Mention something to 42E maybe? They do listen to us when stuff like this goes down' (SHH).*

The relationship in Super 8 was significantly less personal; however this was not entirely unanticipated or universally criticised by players. Survey respondents recognised a shift in the relationship between players and PMs when games had to deal with larger audiences:

*'I think that for larger marketing ARGs the relationship is less intimate now, but grassroots games still exist that maintain that sort of relationship' (Respondent #28).*

*'movie marketing has moved away from the early ARG model precisely because the relationship needed to change as the size of the audience grew' (Respondent #8).*

This is not something players necessarily begrudge but it does mean promotional ARGs designed to reach wider mainstream markets are unlikely to foster the kind of relationship experienced by Cloudmakers on The Beast. Players looking for that closeness may therefore avoid promotional games and head for smaller grassroots ARGs. The downside of this is that smaller games may lack funding but the grander live events but as the games has evolved it seems players simply consider this a personal choice, one of many options in a genre which has diversified to appeal to different audiences.

Overall, players and PMs both perceived this relationship to be based on mutual trust and respect. They felt a genuine sense of collaboration and co-authorship of the games, even when it became clear that they did not necessarily have a large amount of control over the narrative. The personalised element of the relationship meant players could develop an affective relationship with PMs, perceiving them to have the same

creative interests at heart, despite their increasingly obvious corporate affiliations and identities. They felt PMs respected their decision to play and this respect supported players' emotional investment in other elements of ARGs. These often provided a stronger feeling of ownership than any authorial control, including the community spirit and the games' links to their personal lives.

## **Community**

Surveyed respondents selected community as their third most important element of an ARG. When asked to describe their relationship with other players, responses were overwhelmingly positive. The intensity of relationships varied from those who were close with fellow players outside the games, to more casual friendships. In conversations about their favourite ARG moments, players often related this to their experience of the player community:

*'the cohesion here is amazing, people are generous and kind... with a common ends in mind, I don't think there's anything an intelligent, cohesive group of strangers can't do'* (UF).

SHH, Unfiction and CM forums all placed heavy emphasis on the collaborative elements of ARGs:

*'90% of the fun of this game for me is interacting with the other players and forming these online compatriots'* (CM).

*'I love the community that forms around a well-developed and presented game... gives me a sense of being part of "something bigger"'* (UF).

*'I joined here during the virals myself, but the people here ARE definitely AWESOME and I too will OF COURSE continue posting'* (SHH).

90% of surveyed players also preferred collaborative puzzles and many felt this was key to the genre:

*'ARGS are meant to be collaborative. When you foster competition you foster the opposite spirit of intentions'* (Respondent #21).

A popular explanation for this preference was that collaborative work was inclusive, while competition encouraged a negative atmosphere and excluded some players:

*'I'm not personally the best puzzle solver... but working together I get to feel like a hero by getting specific aspects sometimes'* (Respondent #6).

*'It gives everyone a chance to throw in their two cents'* (Respondent #4).

*'The competitive challenges seem to favour people that can spend all day online – not everybody can do that and players should not be penalized for this'* (Respondent #14).

Players seem as invested as PMs in the notion of ARGs as fundamentally collaborative. However, this investment is complicated by competitive elements of gameplay, which emerge from external sources and within the community itself. The desire to define the games as inclusive clashes with a desire to maintain a sense of exclusivity. In this situation, communities may struggle with naturally occurring hierarchies and competition, revealing further 'raft[s] of overlapping and interlocking versions of "us" and "them"' (Hills 2002: 27).

### **Internal Competition**

One respondent notes the pleasures of being *'the first person to post a solution to a puzzle or share previously unknown information'* (Respondent #23). However, it is extremely difficult to attain that status. Even collaborative puzzles can be solved so quickly that players without the time to keep up can feel excluded:

*'Never catch any clue first and get to solve it before anyone else, thus making my contribution literally zero'* (CM).

Some found the games too difficult, but were happy to watch others work on puzzles, backing up Lee's assertion that active players provide as much entertainment for lurkers as the game itself. However, those who complained about difficulty levels could find themselves criticised:

*'I love this game. It's way too hard for me, but I can simply follow along rather like watching a movie'* (CM).

*'The last thing I want when I come here is "This sux an I dont like it cause its too hard so obviously its stuupid"' (CM).*

Having joined Super 8 near the beginning, I rarely discovered an update first, or felt I had made a substantial contribution to puzzle solving. I was wary of posting irrelevant or previously discovered information and this made me reluctant to post without long consideration and searching the boards first. However, I was never reprimanded for making any speculations. Given a different game, I might have had more opportunities to feel part of the team. Overall I felt Unfiction to be a welcoming community, even if I had few opportunities to contribute to communal puzzle solving. One player notes *'another important thing for an ARG to have is a sense of secrecy, which leads to players using very technical language and actions which makes it hard for newbies to join'* (Respondent #32). It is this sense of exclusivity players are looking to protect. Player communities have historically struggled to incorporate 'newbies' and with no previous games to take guidance from, Cloudmakers had most trouble with this issue. The community firmly believed in itself as a collaborative, inclusive hive mind. However, when newbies posted solutions to puzzles which had already been solved, they often received frustrated replies from more established players instructing them to do their research before posting:

*'Please, for the love of God, READ THE TRAIL IF YOU'RE JUST GETTING STARTED!!!'* (CM).

*'Frankly, I'm very sick of the "forgive if this is trout" line. If you really were sorry, or dilligent, or actually concerned about not clogging the board with bullshit, you would have gone back and noticed that this has been discussed numerous times'* (CM).

A divide therefore emerged between older and newer community members. The term 'trout' was coined to address this, but moderators had to intervene to stop 'trout' itself becoming a negative term. Moderators did their best to remedy the split, but this continues to be an ongoing problem within ARG player communities:

*'I would like to again stress the need for an understanding of its use. Trout does not mean "You're an idiot."' (CM).*



*'We've asked for the "newbie v. oldie" battle to end before, and judging by recent posts it hasn't. We beg, we plead: just cut it out. It's tedious, and it's not getting us anywhere'* (CM).

In some senses game design encourages this since ARGs can become so complex in such a short space of time that it becomes a barrier to later entry. This might even be irresolvable without reducing difficulty levels and providing more opportunities for individual input, but this then goes against the collaborative image of the games. In rare cases game design forced an element of internal competition in the community. The Rocket Poppeteers element of Super 8 split the community into teams to compete against each other playing flash games. Furthermore it was not the team who shared the reward, but the highest scorer in each team who received a collectible Argus Cube. Players seemed to respond well, breaking off into teams and engaging in friendly rivalry:

*'My competitiveness has forced me to stop lurking. We're going to need to use our stamina trait to get back into the race playing Pilot Eyes... C'mon fellow Sonic Strength Fleet members, let's pick up the pace'* (UF).

This did not seem to threaten the community and Super 8's individual rewards were never detrimental to the community spirit. The editing room game offered individual prizes for unlocking frames, but the final reward of the completed film reel was communal and achieved through a collective effort. It is possible this would have been received differently in a community like SHH, where swag played a more important role in motivating players. However, competition which really endangered the community spirit of an ARG occurred when dealing with competition from an external source.

### **External competition**

When players discovered PMs had linked to player site Spherewatch they feared this would draw new players away from Cloudmakers to an inferior group:

*'Most of all, they worried that newbies would go to the SphereWatch group and fail to find all of the wonderful resources for newbies that the Cloudmakers had*

*created. They worried that they would see a mess of a discussion and not a group of organized devoted fans' (CM).*

This fear was eventually tempered but became the focal point of intense discussion. Games which have since attracted multiple communities have not generally faced these difficulties. SHH and Unfiction referred to each other from time to time during WhySoSerious (each usually presuming themselves to be superior to the other) but neither seemed concerned about losing players to the other.

A stronger line was drawn between player communities and 'the general public'. It was in this version of 'us' and 'them' that tension between inclusivity and exclusivity were strongest. Producers might argue that the collective, inclusive nature of the games draws lurkers from the outer to the inner circles of the games. This would work towards the 'fanification' of a wider audience base, creating evangelists from casual players. However, player communities consistently counteract this by re-asserting boundaries between themselves and 'the general public' whom, it was assumed, would not want to take part in something so complicated and time consuming. During The Beast, some Cloudmakers were confused as to how the game would appeal to 'the normal joe', given its difficulty and obscurity:

*'I mean, pretty soon the trail is just going to get more complex and convoluted until it becomes a bitch for the normal joe to follow. It's not out yet in the mainstream entertainment news. Why are they keeping the rest of the public at bay? Or does Spielberg want a more personal audience? I just think its strange with all the talk of marketing this for the masses' (CM).*

Whilst its function as publicity was recognised, some players expressed a desire to 'keep this underground' (CM) with one player suggesting 'it's much funner when there's not as much publicity' (CM). Combined with the issues around 'newbies' and other communities, this paints a picture of a fan community struggling to define both itself and its texts. This was more visible during The Beast since it was the first example of an ARG, but these negotiations have persisted. This boundary drawing allows players to define who they are as a community, who the games are for and who they belong to. These processes of self-definition may also allow for a sense of ownership of the games, structured around Hills' 'raft' of dualisms (2002: 27).

SHH players often defined 'us' as the Batman fan community. The game was perceived as being 'for' committed fans, rather than the franchise's wider audience:

*'All of it is was phenomenal. It's almost as if the marketing of this movie was done just for us'* (SHH).

SHH players also complained the 'exclusive material' would have eventually been released to the public anyway, whether or not they had taken the time to participate in the virals:

*'What you get is what you where always going to get'* (SHH).

*'So the regular folk who're going to watch Iron Man will see the trailer before us fanboys, who've invested so much time and energy in this viral campaign. Nice going, 42E'* (SHH).

Whilst this argument did not apply to in-game items gained from scavenger hunts, it held true for the 'exclusive' promotional material unlocked by those activities such as footage, trailers or posters. These were only exclusive in that players viewed the material before it became available to the wider public. For some, the advance nature of the viewing was not sufficient. They were looking for something completely inaccessible to wider audiences; not 'an exclusive look' at something, but exclusive content in and of itself. This echoes Jancovich's (2008) argument that cult texts are defined by their inaccessibility. SHH players seemed to view the ARG as an opportunity to acquire (or indeed regain) something of that status for the fandom. Whilst in-game swag provided this to some extent, for some the only way to attain this status was to acquire film-related materials which were unavailable to any other audiences.

For Super 8 players, 'us' was the ARG community. The t-shirt designs were emphatically about identifying each other as Super 8 ARG players, not necessarily as Super 8 fans, or even JJ Abrams fans. Many players also questioned the effectiveness of game as mass marketing. The game was not prohibitively difficult, but even enthusiastic players found it difficult to sell to non-players:

*'Him - 'So what is about then'*

*'Me - ' Well basically there's this guy called Josh, and his Dad was involved with the alien in some way and well that's about it really.'*

*Him - 'Sounds like a waste of time'*

*The long and the short of it is that basically I couldn't tell him WHAT this is about or WHY we are playing it!' (UF)*

Yet players also felt there was not enough content designed 'for us' and too much content addressing a mass audience, suggesting it was appealing to neither audience group:

*'It would be nice if we common ARG folk could be active players instead of just being fed occasional pictures and blog posts. How about some kind of puzzles or real world quests for us?' (UF)*

*'I fear sometimes they try to invest in other target groups, which could sometimes fail, because addressed people don't care about the movie, and we, who cares, are le[f]t out' (UF).*

However, players do not want to completely lock themselves off from wider audiences. SHH players in particular express an understanding of a need for the 'general public' to support the film as much as they do:

*'[...] without the general public TDK will make nothing in the cinemas. we are a VERY small percentage of the movie going public' (SHH).*

Moreover, they are keen for the virals to reach as many people as possible. Despite expectations for a more traditional marketing push, many felt wider audiences would respond to more unusual forms of promotion:

*'I personally hope they continue this form of marketing and work to expand and improve on what they are doing so it does reach many more people in a much richer way than it does now' (SHH).*

*'I'd say that normal viewers will appreciate a more inventive marketing campaign from WB' (SHH).*

Hills notes that niche marketing, which appeals directly to the values and authenticities of fan communities, can isolate the text from other audience groups, without which it is not economically viable (2000: 38). *Batman* fans express an understanding of this dependency but simultaneously appreciate the ARG as something which speaks directly to them and their understandings or misgivings about the new

instalment. The ARG, as one small part of a wider campaign, therefore allows fans to maintain a sense of themselves as an important niche market without requiring the product itself to ‘capitulate’, as Hills puts it, to their agenda as a target market (2000: 38).

There seems to be a constant struggle between wanting to behave inclusively, bringing the games to a wider audience, and maintaining a sense of exclusivity. 60% of surveyed players believed the games could appeal to broad audiences without diluting the experience for committed players. This reflects a generally positive attitude about the inclusive, communal and collaborative nature of ARGs but one respondent admits they do not know how this would be achieved (Respondent #32). The complexity of some games is also likely to be off-putting for corporate media companies and even players note this can be a barrier to entry. Competitive games like the flash games on Rocket Poppeteers are simpler and naturally appeal to wider audiences. These sorts of games and puzzles are increasingly seen in promotional ARGs. As with the decreasing levels of agency, it is possible to read this as media companies trying to lock down potentially powerful collective intelligence. However, it seems more likely that this model simply does not appeal to media conglomerates who want to get large audiences involved in their games.

Corporate clients might initially intend to use an ARG to expand the audience through fanification, but community relations are complex and will not necessarily allow this to occur. Affective ties to the community do not always guarantee members will behave inclusively when it comes to newcomers. This might be why, despite players’ clear emotional attachment to their ARG communities and their investment in their collaborative natures, games like Super 8 opt for puzzles which allow for more individual than group success. Players also expressed emotional responses to the games of a more personal, subjective nature, highlighting the importance of viewing player communities as individuals, as well as a collective.

### **Personal Connections**

Players noted how addictive the games were, to the point that they prioritised them over other aspects of their lives. The boards attest to players losing sleep, sometimes due to problematic time zone differences, but also to wait for updates, research clues or post

messages. Others mentioned playing at work, putting off schoolwork or having to ensure the game did not encroach on time spent with families:

*'Some players get so involved with a game (that they know is not real) that they feel guilt at not spending as much time as they think they should playing/watching/interacting with an ARG and its population of characters'* (UF).

*'Today I cancelled a fairly important meeting because it was more important to hang out here and wait for 10.'* *'I did the same thing!'* (SHH).

Addiction metaphors were common, with a dedicated thread on SHH for the 'Official TDK Viral Marketing Support Group', where players light-heartedly swapped stories of their difficulties at the end of the game:

*'I checked the wiki this morning.. I checked the wiki two minutes ago.. when I wake up I know i'll check it.. I don't control my compulsion, it controls me Just one last taste, one last taste of viral goodness, i'll take swag, i'll take a text from human resources, i'll take a call from Gordon, I'LL TAKE ANYTHING'* (SHH).

The game was gripping enough to work its way into an important place in the lives of many players. For some this was due to connections between the game experience and their personal lives. Many of their favourite moments were those shared with friends or relatives:

*'[...]the recent Dark Knight screening because I got to share it with Giskard who was visiting from the Netherlands'* (UF).

*'The small favours task in Last Call Poker. I brought my daughter alone and it turned out to be one of the most memorable moments of her life (she was three at the time)'* (UF).

Some of these more personal responses reflect the position of ARGs on what Grossberg (1992) might call players' 'mattering maps'. For example, one discussion around games which explicitly ask players to take on a role or persona was initially about defining ARGs against more traditional role playing games (RPGs). However, as the conversation continued, the issue became the importance of personal identity and empowerment:

*'It's an experience that places you in a world where anything may be possible and it's up to you, not your character – you, to uncover the possibilities, to explore those possibilities, to experience those possibilities'* (UF).

*'At a fundamental level my identity as a player reflects who I am and what I believe'* (UF).

These responses reflect Lee's notion that ARGs can offer players an empowering sense of discovery, which resides on a personal level (Lee quoted in Ruberg, B. 2006). It is an ability (real or perceived) to take a level of control or ownership over a space or world, or least to be considered a part of it that matters. ARGs encourage elaborated forms of self-consciousness and self-reflection, dispelling stereotypes of gamers as overly introverted or inward-looking (Jenkins 1992). As players become rigorously analytical of their in- and out-of-game behaviours, ARGs become increasingly personal experiences through which players can reflect upon their own identities. The 'reality' element of an ARG, combined with the fact that you play as yourself and not as a character or avatar, enhances this feeling in a way an RPG might not. In the context of a marketing campaign, this could help fans and general audiences feel more important and recognised as individuals within the mainstream media landscape where they have historically been viewed as faceless groups to be sold to, be it as one 'mass' homogenous group or a number of market segments. However the feeling of empowerment expressed by these players resides firmly outside of that context, in a much more personal and subjective realm.

### **Affective Economics, Fanification and Empowered Audiences**

Whilst PMs and players seem to view these affective investments as important in their own right, they have little value to marketers unless they work in the service of either fanification or affective economics. If the aim is to turn casual consumers into 'evangelists', player responses suggest ARGs do not necessarily work in this manner. Whilst they might tell friends and family about the games there are a number of elements which can be off-putting for newbies, thus preventing them from gaining the more intense, affecting experience which might convert them into evangelists. Scott argues that ancillary content models (which could include promotional ARGs) can be seen to 'regift' a sanitised version of fandom to mainstream audiences, 'masking

something old as something new, something unwanted (or unwieldy) as something desirable (or controllable, or profitable)' (2009). However, she also notes that fandoms often respond to this by more forcefully policing their boundaries, 'fortifying its borders and rites of initiation' (Scott 2009). This is evident in the treatment of 'newbies' and 'the general public' by existing players. ARGs are often difficult and although collaborative elements of the games are lauded, the speed at which the hive mind works means newbies can get left behind very quickly.

Once the games become easier and more accessible to wider audiences they are often deemed not 'real' ARGs. A discourse of authenticity comes into play and the games become something which serves a minority community rather than extending the experience of that community outwards. A marketing mechanism becomes a device with which to further cement the exclusivity of a fan community and assist its self-definition against the 'average consumer', rather than to draw the average consumer into an inner circle of fandom. Such players are likely to remain in an outer circle, consuming an 'official' version of fandom which might leave them as 'enthusiasts' but never really attaining a status which might befit the term 'evangelist'.

Players and PMs can both be seen to negotiate (but never entirely disavow) the commercial status of the games in a number of ways. These include the use of TINAG, positioning the games as 'art' and PMs as 'artists' and focussing on their personal, affective responses to the games, which can render their commercial context somewhat irrelevant for them. This could have two functions, the first being brand management, softening the attitudes of players to media companies who employ such innovative techniques. The response of CMs to Microsoft's involvement in *The Beast* suggests this is entirely possible. The games' impact as brand management can also be seen in *WhySoSerious*, where fans were arguably won over to Nolan's new *Joker* by the playing a game that asked them to side with him. However, players are not ignorant of the relationship between game designers and their clients. An affectionate relationship with the PMs does not always translate into affection for the hiring corporation. The second implication of this negotiation is the most apparent in player discussion. The games' marketing functions are often disregarded (but again, never denied) and ARGs are evaluated and experienced as games in their own right, with players ultimately defining their purpose and meaning. They may come to mean different things to different individuals or communities with different motivations, but ultimately players judge the games based on their own value systems, not those of the producers.

So if the games are not experienced as marketing, or even evaluated as such, can



affective economics transfer the emotional connections between player, PM and game to the product being sold? 80% of survey respondents agreed a good ARG would make them more likely to see the film being promoted and the same percentage agreed the ARG could leave them feeling emotionally invested in the film. However, player discussion suggests they are most emotionally attached to the community, in-game characters and the immersive nature of the game experience. For this to be useful to marketers, that sense of empowerment has to transfer to the brand being promoted, prompting a greater sense of brand loyalty.

However, many players were already fans of the property or of associated directors or producers. One respondent '*already loved A.I.*' (Respondent #32) and SHH players were *Batman* fans long before the game began. If these players are already emotionally invested in the film, what further benefit can an ARG offer in terms of Affective Economics? Player responses suggest the games need to provide the sense that their original emotional investments are being acknowledged and respected. Whilst game designers seem to recognise this, corporate clients are less likely to be interested in appeasing a fan community that forms a small part of their target audience. This may go some way to explaining the recent decline in full-scale promotional ARGs.

Promotional ARGs may also make fans feel they have a platform to demand more from media companies, because ARGs demand more work from them. If marketers ask them to become involved in 'official' promotional work (which they are often happy to do), they will demand a return on that investment, in keeping with the rules of the consumer capitalist game they are being invited to play. This was particularly evident during WhySoSerious where the problem, as one player puts it, is that:

*'nolan and WB are having the control. they basicly showed us that no whining will help. they are having this under control. we are sheeps folowing....lets never forget that. and no matter if WB posts a f\*\*\* you fanboys ,TDK will still make money'* (SHH).

The notion that affective investment can offer increased power to criticise or influence a brand is therefore questionable. Players are rarely under any illusion that they might be able to affect the end product by participating in its ARG. While authorial control over the game is desirable, there is also an understanding that this is less likely to occur in a promotional game and a strong awareness of the limitations of those promises. Since the Beast, opportunities for any real control over the narrative have been increasingly limited and other modes of interactivity have become more restricted. This could be

construed as an attempt by media companies to regain perceived control of their IP whilst offering a modicum of participation to an audience it believes desires an illusion of control over media texts. However, an alternative argument seems more convincing. Offering an experience like *The Beast* is financially and logistically risky and does not appeal to a wide enough audience. Focussing on kinds of interaction that involve established social networks like Facebook and Twitter, or widespread mobile technologies like iPhone apps makes the games more accessible and allows a broader audience to get involved, as displayed in *Super 8*. Players have already noted this tendency in promotional ARGs and have adapted their expectations of them accordingly.

However, while ARGs may not offer textual empowerment, they do have the potential for a kind of personal, emotional empowerment, which Grossberg (1992) claims can in turn form the basis of a more concrete form of political power. Sometimes this spills into real life when players feel collectively empowered to act in the real world. The most cited example is the CM response to the events of 9/11, when they felt their collective intelligence could genuinely help towards tracking down the perpetrators. Other examples can be found in *WhySoSerious*, when serious consideration was given to protesting a planned picket at Heath Ledger's funeral by Westboro Baptist Church. One player also discusses the possibility of using *Unfiction* players' skills to contribute to the investigation of Norwegian murderer Anders Breivik:

*'Not an ARG, but needs some work nevertheless ...The guys over at Reddit are working on cracking what the Norweigan police apparently think might be a code in Breiviks manifesto - gps-coordinates, disguised as html-links and scattered with cryptic text.... I realise that Unforums deal with fictional events and that Breivik is as real as it gets, but you guys are crazy good at cooperating and picking each other's brains to figure stuff like this out. Perhaps you should have a go at it' (UF).*

Such conjectures are often curbed by the community itself and rarely result in action. The most important impact of such discussions is more subjective; a form of empowerment akin to Grossberg's sense of 'the generation of energy and passion... the construction of possibility' (1992: 64). Players feel they collectively or individually have an ability to make a difference through their participation in the game, whether or not that possibility is translated into action. This is emphatically not the intended result of a promotional ARG and realistically has no value to marketers, but all the value in

the world to players who can and do receive these games as something other than marketing.

The sense of subjective empowerment also returns the discussion to Fiske's (1992) notion of the subcultural, which might appropriate mass culture for its own uses, without rejecting it entirely. Players were as reluctant as Stewart to identify themselves as part of a 'brand' community with 70% suggesting this was not an appropriate term to describe ARG player communities. This was partly because they felt, justifiably, that this limited ARGs to their promotional sub-genre, when the games have developed to be much more diverse. However, many of the most affective statements made by players of ARGs make reference to notions of identity and self-awareness. If self-definition is a cornerstone of the subcultural, ARGs provide a strong space for the resurfacing of the subcultural within an increasingly corporate media environment.

Many discussions of ARGs and ARG players have revolved around audience agency and its implications for textual empowerment, yet less is said about what seems to be an important outcome of these games for many players: their sense of personal, emotional empowerment. Hills (2002) is keen to emphasise the importance of treating fandom and fan cultures as highly subjective experiences, and this is perhaps what is missing from previous considerations of this particular community. Jenkins (2006a) is keen to prove that collective intelligence can provide platforms for consumer empowerment and ownership or perhaps co-ownership of media texts. McGonigal (2011) argues it can be used to solve real world problems, but is also one of few to delve into the more personal, subjective perspective of the gaming experience, with Jenkins only briefly touching on this in his discussion of *The Beast* (2006: 130) As Grossberg notes, 'there is, in fact, more to the organisation of people's lives than just the distribution of meaning, money and power' (1992: 55). ARGs do not necessarily allow for a re-distribution of textual meaning, power or allow players to profit from what is essentially fan labour. However, they do provide important personal experiences which may come to be significant in players' lives. This is not an intended outcome, but more of a by-product of promotional ARGs. A constant struggle can be seen between the commercial and creative impulses behind these games, but also between the ways in which players' emotional investments in these games are valued in and of themselves by PMs and as a more of a means to an end by media companies. Unfortunately, as promotional ARGs become less responsive and less creative in their world building, they may restrict the genre's innate ability to offer those emotional connections and personal experiences.

## Conclusion

ARGs provide a space where media producers and consumers exist in unusually close proximity. Emerging conflicts between intended and actual use of the games open up many theories on media audiences for further analysis in the context of an ever-changing contemporary media environment. These include: notions of ‘fanification’, mainstreaming fandom and the creation of a fan audience; related arguments around consumer empowerment and/or manipulation; the continuing conflict between art and commerce and the changing dynamics between ARG players, PMs and corporate clients. Some of these categories deal with similar questions. For example, perceptions of fan negotiations with the commercial media industry are questioned both in the context of fanification and in the conflicts between commercial and creative imperatives within the industry. Pervading all these issues is the decline of large scale promotional ARGs, a subject which is considered in this conclusion but could benefit from further research.

### **Re-drawing Boundaries: ARGs, Fanification and Redefining Cult Fandom in a Web 2.0 Era**

Nikunen (2007) and Jenkins (2003) argue media audiences are becoming increasingly ‘fan-like’ and are ‘expected to enlarge their television [or cinema] experience on the Internet’ (Nikunen 2007: 114). Jenkins believes contemporary popular culture has ‘absorbed many aspects of fan culture which would have seemed marginal a decade ago’ (2003: 291). The use of ARGs in promotional campaigns for Hollywood films suggests media producers are working to take advantage of this pattern and even to promote the ‘fanification’ of mainstream audiences online. As early adopters, fan communities were quick to claim their own online space at an early stage in the development of the internet. Over the ensuing decade, with the rise in mobile technology and broadband connections, other media users have followed suit. A far larger and broader media audience now populates the web on a near constant basis. Producer testimony supports the view that media companies believe this audience desires a more active, participatory, fan-like relationship with media products. Lee’s audience breakdown invites us to read a flow of influence from a very active core audience to a larger, less active, but equally enthralled audience on the outskirts (Lee

quoted in Irwin 2007a). Many of the more active players also perceive a flow in this direction, discussing how many people they have introduced to the ARG and therefore to the film being promoted:

Player 1 – *'I still say that it won't reach enough people and promote the movie enough to justify the effort.'*

Player 2 – *'Nope... maybe not directly. But how many people have you told so far about this marketing campaign? (Guilty of introducing at least four...who might introduce another four...'* (CM).

However, as these players also note, numbers of dedicated Cloudmakers were relatively low as was the conversion rate from lurker to hardcore player. Newbies can be put off joining the inner circle of players by a range of issues covered in the previous chapter, from game difficulty to prohibitive internal community relations and hierarchies. ARGs may well reach for a wider audience who are increasingly media literate and have a strong online presence. However, these case studies show that many 'newbies' either cannot or do not want to join the more demanding, dedicated players. This level of gameplay is more likely to appeal to existing fan communities who have already displayed the levels of determination and commitment required to get deeply involved with the game, like the *Batman* or JJ Abrams fan communities. Far from generating new legions of fans for the film, *The Beast* produced a small, dedicated following for the game and the genre. Fanification via ARGs has, in this sense, failed.

However, this depends on what kind of behaviour such 'fanification' is intended to provoke. Audiences may extend their viewing experience online in any number of ways which need not reflect the kind of productivity generally ascribed to fandoms. An ARG may not turn hordes of casual viewers into evangelists, but it might encourage them to engage online with the film in a more basic manner. They may not be inclined to solve difficult puzzles or follow a detailed storyline, but they might share a link to a creative website on Facebook or Twitter or follow a Twitter feed in the hope of winning free tickets. More people are likely to engage more often in this kind of online activity and this is more likely to provide the 'World of Warcraft figures' which Jones (2007) recalls a corporate client expecting of early ARGs. As the presence of the full-blown promotional ARG starts to dwindle, it is increasingly being replaced with viral marketing content. Such virals are heavily plugged into existing social media networks which are easier to monitor and measure. This reflects PM perceptions of corporate

clients as being more concerned with reportable, quantitative measures of audience engagement.

One recent example is the viral campaign for the film adaptation of bestselling erotic romance novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (E L James 2012).<sup>63</sup> The viral site and mobile app ask users to apply for an internship at Grey Enterprises Holding, owned by mysterious and controversial love interest, Christian Grey.<sup>64</sup> This effectively puts the user in the position of protagonist Anastasia Steele. They are requested to complete a series of tasks, some requiring a piece of basic knowledge from the book e.g. the tail number on Grey's helicopter. The more tasks they complete the higher up the rankings they climb and the more rewards they receive, often in the form of images from the set or film. Every task includes a request to publicise your progress or achievement by sharing on Facebook or Twitter. Two tasks ('share the trailer' and 'help grow the team') specifically require users to perform this action to complete the task. They require little or no puzzle solving or creativity but do hint at contact with the characters, (Grey specifically) via phone and post.<sup>65</sup> There is a lukewarm promise of immersion and interactivity but it is minimal in comparison with something like *The Beast* or *WhySoSerious*. It would seem this is the kind of engagement media producers are most comfortable with. Yet, as so many definitions of fandom are reliant on the notion of fan productivity, even this could only really be considered 'mild' fanification.

This reflects a perceived need to limit or control rather than extend the 'fanification' of a wider audience. Between the time of writing the literature review and the conclusion to this thesis, Facebook had a change of heart about how it wanted to use the word 'fan, changing their 'Become a Fan' function in 2010. Users no longer 'became a fan' of something, instead they 'liked' it, in the same way they might 'like' a friend's status, usually expressing approval or agreement. The function of the button did not change; it still linked to a brand or 'community' page. This allowed users to express their interest to others, but also allowed Facebook (and therefore brands with 'community' pages) to monitor those interests. Facebook argued that the change in terminology made language more consistent across the site, but also provided a 'more light-weight and standard way to connect with people, things and topics in which you are interested' (Huffington Post 2011). The 'like' button was being used twice as often as the 'fan' button (Jacobsson 2010) and Facebook seemed to perceive this as language

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<sup>63</sup> Directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson and due for release in February 2015.

<sup>64</sup> <http://www.greyenterprisesholdings.com/> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

<sup>65</sup> This was only available to US residents as was the downloadable mobile app. Fans elsewhere could only participate via the website.

issue. The term ‘fan’ was apparently ‘heavyweight’ in comparison to the ‘light-weight’ ‘like’, which seemed to involve less commitment and was a less loaded term. Some claimed Facebook’s motivation for this change was to drive more ‘likes’ towards brands and advertisers who were increasingly using this to measure engagement on their Facebook pages (Jacobsson 2010).

Jacobsson (2010) suggested this change would not affect the take-up of the button because it was not the language, but the function users avoided. They preferred to ‘like’ a status or picture because that action did not publically define their personal interests, preferences and affiliations in the way the ‘fan’ button did. Nor did it so explicitly send that information to be monitored by corporations. Either way, the change of language indicates Facebook felt ‘fan’ was strong enough to dissuade people from publically associating themselves with brands in this manner. It also suggests that although Facebook wants users to get involved, it is more concerned that a higher number of them are willing to press a button, which keeps advertisers happier. It is less interested in what that action means to users or the quality of engagement that action represents. This concern is reflected in the movement away from ARGs and towards viral ads which make it easier for wider audiences to engage on a lower level, often through their existing social media channels in ways which publically declare their interest in the promoted product. Producers may have initially hoped for evangelists but recently seem to have settled for mild enthusiasts. Yet in changing the language Facebook has acknowledged that what makes a ‘fan’ is in fact the kind or quality of participation and that they believe the majority of media users want to keep that participation ‘light-weight’. This is not just a concern for marketers. As an entertainment product in itself the difficulty of a standalone ARG restricts the audience and therefore the game’s earning potential. As Hon notes, if the games are to be independently financially viable, they need to be accessible to more people; everyone should be able to join in the fun (Hon 2012).

Jenkins’ (2007a) concerns about fandom’s absorption into mainstream modes of media consumption may therefore be unfounded. He argues fandom has become such an ‘elastic’ cultural category that it no longer holds any meaning; that the definition of fandom has not just changed but is potentially being obliterated. Yet Facebook’s actions and the shift away from intricate ARGs towards simplified virals suggests the term continues to hold connotations which producers believe wider media audiences are simply uninterested in. Just because more media users now share the same online spaces, does not mean they want to do the same things in that space, an issue which is

often recognised by PMs. A certain kind or quality of participation is still considered to be the preserve of an audience group which could be termed ‘fans’. The boundaries of this category might have stretched, but lines of division are still being drawn by both producers and consumers. ARGs may not just fail to draw casual players into the inner circles; they actually allow players to redraw boundaries between those groups. Players forcefully determine for themselves the difference between those who play ‘real’ ARGs and those who are likely to opt for less challenging viral games. Players of WhySoSerious noted the increasing online presence of ‘the general public’, but in the same conversation forcefully distinguished this audience from themselves:

Player 1 - *‘more so that 3-4 years back I’d say, the internet isn’t confined to basement dwellers anymore, kids, adults even elder people use the internet, even knuckle dragging jocks probably go on the interweb, somehow a lot more mainstream.’*

Player 2 - *‘Exactly. Sure they’re STILL a bunch of dim-witted, misinformed, gullible, incompetent nincompoops, but most of them have the internet just like the rest of us. I’ll give them that much’* (SHH).

Such boundary redrawing also reflects a shift in the continuing negotiations which Hills (2002) sees in fan communities, relocated in a Web 2.0 environment which fans now share with ‘average’ media users. If, as Hills notes, fans must negotiate their apparently contradictory place within a consumer capitalist system (2002: 29), they must also negotiate their position in an online space which, as early adopters, they may have previously dominated. They must exist amongst other groups which are increasingly making their own presence known online 24/7, as part of what Hills calls a ‘coalition’ audience (2002: 37). ARGs can provide a seemingly privileged space for fan audiences even if it cannot necessarily bring that audience into being. They may therefore be more effective as a method of managing existing audiences, rather than tools for creating evangelists out of casual viewers. Indeed, the more complex viral campaigns tend to be those which have played to the interests of existing fan communities. The campaign for *Prometheus* saw a return to the more complex puzzle-solving and storytelling elements of early ARGs, based around the mythology of the *Alien* (1979-2014) franchise. In the face of an overpopulated online space, fandoms are often grateful for such provisions and recognition from media producers, although some sceptics will undoubtedly view such appeals to fan communities as manipulative or deceptive.



These player comments also reflect hierarchies based on knowledge and competencies, which are common in previous descriptions of fan communities, particularly online (MacDonald 1998, Baym 2000). This is perhaps why ARGs work so well for established franchises which already have a core audience. Here they can reinforce existing fan/mainstream boundaries in the face of increasing fears around the ‘mainstreaming’ of a property, restoring something of the specialness and uniqueness to both the property and the fan community. This may even prompt the return of something of the subcultural to that community, particularly for fans of properties like *Batman* which have become strongly mass-market oriented franchises.

Two elements in particular point to this return of the subcultural. Firstly, ARGs create and encourage the flow of subcultural capital as they emphasise the importance of, as Thornton puts it, ‘being in the know’ (2005: 186). Their real-time, ephemeral nature makes being ‘in the know’ all the more difficult to achieve and therefore all the more desirable. Collectible swag and live events also emphasise the importance of ‘being there’, of being part of something unique and unrepeatable.

Secondly, ARGs can allow space for players to use branded content in a process of self-definition and self-identification. This is not the case for all players and is certainly not what marketers are looking to achieve but it exists nonetheless. Most understandings of subculture revolve around the appropriation of cultural symbols to create counter-hegemonic meanings and identities, despite an acceptance that not all subcultures are necessarily oppositional (Hebdige 1988, Thornton 2005, During 2007). This process is more about the appropriation of a commercial text to furnish a sense of self-identity not just as a fan (arguably part of the ARG’s goal of fanification) but as a number of other things: puzzle solver, detective, communicator, team-player, community member or even, as Lee (quoted in Siegel 2006) suggests, superhero.

Whilst such appropriation may not be radical, oppositional or indeed widespread, there is still a sense of players taking promotional materials and finding meanings in them which they can relate to their own personal experiences and identities. One player even claims ‘*At a fundamental level my identity as a player reflects who I am and what I believe*’ (CM). Of course, ARGs cannot guarantee this kind of relationship with a media text, and so this lies more in the hands of the consumer than the producer. A subcultural community cannot be brought into being by sheer willpower or force. By the same logic, an ARG cannot guarantee the creation of what might be described as a ‘brand community’. The location of the ‘brand’ is too indistinct, when it is often the game itself around which players congregate and find meaning, rather than

the film. 70% of surveyed players disagreed with a definition of ARG communities as 'brand communities'. As Stewart (2012c) notes, belonging to such a community suggests that a brand forms part of the community member's sense of identity or self-image. The affective nature of an ARG can encourage this but it is the player who decides whether or not the game and/or its attached brand speak to them in this intense, personal way.

In returning a sense of the subcultural, ARGs may also be engaged in the creation of a 'cultish' audience around 'mainstream' films, an idea which initially seems contradictory or at least incompatible. As Hills rightly notes, a cult text is both 'found' and 'created' (2002: 131). It cannot be defined solely by its textual elements and therefore cannot simply be manufactured; it must also be received and accepted by an audience as 'cult'. However, many promotional ARGs, as extensions of their primary film text, may be seen to fit some of Hills' descriptors for a 'cult' text. One of these is 'hyperdiegesis: the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension' (Hills 2002: 137). Both *The Beast* and *WhySoSerious* either create or contribute to an existing hyperdiegesis and even *Super 8* starts to point towards a wider universe beyond the film. Along with other Abrams texts, *Super 8* also works towards what Hills calls the 'endlessly deferred narrative – endless interpretation and speculation predicated upon a point of identity or closure at which the narrative will expire, and a point which is endlessly warded off' (2002: 142). Although many fans found this element of Abrams ARGs frustrating, others found pleasure in the experience of speculation:

*'The best part of Cloverfield was the insane speculation. What I want to see is more pictures with stuff circled. Every frame has a face in it so far. I love it!'*  
(UF).

*'Lot's of reasons could be speculated... We don't have a ton of information to go on, so I say just let this play out for a little bit. After all, the mystery is the fun of it'* (UF).

Finally, Hills argues that 'cult status is recurrently linked to ideologies of romanticism, either through notions of 'uniqueness' and 'art' (via the figure of the auteur) or through endlessly deferred narrative which, as an 'unfinished-focused' type of narrative structure, reconstructs a sense of romantic 'excess' and 'unknowability''

(2002: 143). PMs and players alike responded to ARGs as ‘art’ and focussed on their novelty and ‘uniqueness’:

*‘we're at the forefront of a unique genre, and therefore, it is up to us, the players, to set the path for the future of the games (along with the PMs of course)’ (CM).*

*‘Part of the most elaborate and innovative marketing strategies ever conceived’ (CM).*

The games’ ephemeral nature similarly contributes to this, providing a genuinely unrepeatable experience. It seems difficult to argue for an auteur figure in this situation, given the emphasis on co-creation and collaboration. However, PMs are certainly revered as authorial figures and Abrams is also considered in this light, as ‘chief Puppetmaster’. 42 Entertainment could also be said to be working towards that status as they developed a recognisable style. This may all help to confer ‘cult’ status to a film which might not otherwise be considered as such.

There is an element of ‘programmed-ness’ to these texts which Eco might argue makes it emphatically non-cult, in the same way he argues *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981 Steven Spielberg) and *E.T. the Extra Terrestrial* (1982 Steven Spielberg 1982) cannot be cult because they are too self-consciously intertextual (Eco 1995: 210-211). Hills counters that these arguments have ‘not aged well’ and that they express an almost generational mistrust of postmodern intertextuality (2002: 132). However, its reception by audiences must also be taken into account. Eco might find the ‘programmed-ness’ of intertextual referencing somewhat fragmentary and lacking in meaning. Yet for a contemporary media audience, prepared to read those references, they are replete with meaning. They may link an individual text to a wider fictional world, or one fictional world to another. Such a connective function surely works to create unity, rather than to fragment into meaninglessness. *Super 8*’s ARG particularly plays into this, connecting not only film and ARG with intertextual references, but also invoking a wider sense of nostalgia for film history, something which Abrams is clearly interested in fostering in a film which plays as an homage to Spielberg’s back catalogue. ARGs also instil a sense of exclusivity and rarity to Hollywood films which are almost overly accessible in an age of multiple digital distribution platforms (legal or otherwise). Their ephemeral nature, real-time response structure and collectible merchandise swag all work to create an experience which is inaccessible to those who are not in the know, at the right time,

on the right day. Such exclusivity, Jancovich (2003) argues, is key to defining the ‘cult’ film.

However, as Hills also highlights, an overly ‘manufactured’ cult text can be rejected by fans either collectively or individually, demonstrating the importance of the relationship between fan and text in defining a ‘cult’ fan. Yet here an ARG also fits the description. Whilst not wishing to lay down too many restrictions on the term, Hills claims his own use of ‘cult fan’ ‘delimit[s] more precisely a particular (enduring) form of affective fan relationship’ (2002: xi). The affective element of that relationship has been exemplified in both the player survey and forum discussion. However, the third facet of ‘cult’, temporal endurance, is a problem for ARGs. They are, definitively, ephemeral. Their pleasures are rooted in their experiential nature. Yet, their affective impact is enduring, demonstrated in an Unfiction thread labelled ‘What have you learned from playing ARGs’:

*‘I’ve learned a great deal about being part of a functioning community. I know that my attitude towards other people has changed - my expectations are that people will help each other, people care about each other. I didn’t feel that way before’ (UF).*

*‘Even though I have only been through a few ARGs, I feel an actual confidence, a sort of swagger that says, “yeah, with enough time, I’m up to it”’ (UF).*

This affective experience however, much like the designation of a subculture or a cult audience cannot be manufactured because it is so subjective and relative to an individual, personal and often emotional experience. Many elements of an ARG encourage this affective response, but it cannot be guaranteed and ultimately belongs to the player. This all leads to the suggestion that a promotional ARG might encourage a ‘cultish’ relationship with a mainstream text or may be designed to provoke it, but that definition ultimately remains with the audience. It is therefore likely to have more success in terms of brand management with existing fan communities than it is with constructing one from scratch, which Stewart (2012a) also confirmed from a design perspective.

However, if ‘cult’ is a case of self-definition as much as textual definition, there is one aspect of Hills’ argument which ARGs seem to contradict. Hills argues it is not the ‘intensity, social organisation or semiotic material productivity’ (2002: x) which separates ‘cult’ fans from ‘fans’. However, this is precisely how many ARG players define, identify and validate their activities in comparison to other audiences:

*'I don't think they intend for the masses to play the game. After all, the masses are hardly going to sift through source code or analyze images in Photoshop. The masses don't consider that to be a Fun Time'* (CM).

It is also an integral factor in determining their affective relationship with the game, and therefore key to their 'cultish' relationship with the text. As previously noted, the quality of interactivity enabled by a game makes it easier for players to immerse themselves and to raise the game's position on what Grossberg calls their 'mattering maps' (1992). The reduction of more complex ARGs to viral sites limits this interactivity and therefore the opportunity to create this 'cultish' relationship. Similarly, it reduces the elements of hyperdiegesis, deferred narrativity and artistry which limit its 'cultishness' from a textual point of view. ARGs have the potential to encourage this kind of relationship with the text even if they cannot guarantee it. Whilst certain kinds of investment cannot be manufactured or controlled, they can be encouraged or indeed discouraged. However, it seems that in the current media environment it is not in the interests of media companies to actively develop this relationship in such depth and with such intensity.

So how to describe this relationship using the terminology available? One can certainly be a 'fan' of mainstream media, so it stands to reason one might also be a 'cult fan', given that 'cultishness' derives from the individual's relationship with the text and not just the text itself. Yet 'cult' is too loaded, with too long a history steeped in opposition to 'mainstream' media, which is why it is always tempting to return to 'cultish' or 'cult like', when actually this is more like 'cult' adapted to a new media landscape. This kind of 'neo-cult' audience lives and breathes within the mainstream media despite sharing many aspects of more traditional cult audiences and texts.

Where audiences do develop this kind of relationship through an ARG, its importance should not be diminished because of the game's 'constructedness', because it is part of a marketing campaign or because it promotes a mainstream film. This unfairly devalues the affective investment made by players and returns to stereotypes of fans which fan studies has long tried to escape. If anything, promotional ARGs reveal more clearly the vast spectrum of ways in which all media consumers can and will invest and engage with a media text in the contemporary media environment. As much as scholars and marketers alike would like to differentiate between 'fan' 'follower' or 'cult fan', they frequently come back to describe the terms as 'fluid' or 'interchangeable', calling into question the very process of categorisation. Moreover,

fan investments are individual and personal and are unlikely to fit into either old or new classifications for very long. According to some perceptions of Millennial media consumers they are also particularly fickle (Green 2014). Rather than trying to find new boxes to fit media fandoms into, or suggesting traditional fandom is somehow being cannibalised by mainstream audiences, I would rather argue that we are seeing producers trying to make spaces which attract as many kinds of media consumer as possible, and media audiences (fans and non-fans), trying to make themselves comfortable in a new, shared environment which continues to change at a rapid pace. To suggest their involvement in such spaces or practices is something ‘lesser’ than ‘real’ fandom is to devalue the investments of players. To claim it foreshadows the end of fandom as a cultural category is unnecessarily alarmist, continuing to place fans and ‘mainstream’ media consumers at opposite ends of a binary which, as Hills points out, is not a realistic representation of contemporary media audiences (2002: 29).

### **Art vs Commerce and the Problem of ‘Creative’ Marketing**

Promotional ARGs would seem to challenge perceived distinctions between art and commerce. As pieces of ‘creative marketing’ they perform both functions and therefore embody the breakdown of this established dichotomy.

The review of literature provided two definitions of ARGs from both PM (Phillips 2005) and player (Unfiction) perspectives. McGonigal further defines them as:

‘An interactive drama played out in online and real spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which dozens, hundreds or thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks and work together to solve a mystery or problem... that would be absolutely impossible to solve alone’ (2004: 9).

None of these definitions mention marketing, promotion or advertising. According to creators, audiences and analysts, ARGs are not marketing materials in the same way as trailers, teasers or posters. They are pieces of entertainment content in their own right, emerging primarily from the networking possibilities opened up by the Internet and online communications. Yet as Askwith (2006) neatly summarises, the genre’s roots are as heavily based in advertising as they are in narrative artworks. However, the title of Askwith’s white paper ‘*This Is Not (Just) An Advertisement*’ encapsulates player,

producer and academic perceptions of ARGs as something ‘more’ than ‘just’ marketing. Gray uses a similar phrase, despite noting that ARGs helpfully blur a constructed boundary which continues to exist between the creative and the commercial. He argues that paratexts (including ARGs) which do not contribute to, or even harm the narrative of the wider text can be more easily criticised as ‘mere’ marketing (Gray 2010: 209).

PM interviews seem to reflect this division rather than breaking it down. Many early ARG designers were and are keen to move the genre away from its commercial roots, citing various reasons including an increased level of creative freedom and fewer moral or ethical issues. They also believe this form of narrative storytelling can and should stand on its own, allowing for the creation of more original content. Former 42 Entertainment Puppetmaster Steve Peters recently launched a crowdfunding campaign with fellow designers for a transmedia experience entitled *Project Alibi* (2014). The language on the Indiegogo page suggests this feeling persists among transmedia designers: ‘This is a project we’ve been eager to bring to you for a quite some time, without the shackles of clients or serving someone else’s story.’<sup>66</sup>

Many PMs continue to work on commercial projects, but view the games’ promotional status as a means to an end. Funding for the games has to come from somewhere and as Christiano (2013) points out, negotiating the commercial needs of the client and the creative desires of producers and audiences is part of the process. A similar range of responses are expressed by players. Many WhySoSerious players were comfortable with the promotional status of the game and with their own identities as consumers. They acted accordingly when they felt the game failed to deliver on its promises and were quick to contact 42 Entertainment directly to put in their complaints. The apparent divide between art and commerce was not so problematic for this group:

*‘Why can’t 42e be the artist and Warner Bros be the guys who want to make money?... to call any of these works art for art’s sake is wrong. I don’t know why people think a thing can’t be pure, or good, or artistic as long as money is involved’* (SHH).

Stein also notes that ABC’s ‘Millennial’ youth audiences were constructed as ‘liminal and yet poised to be mainstream... willing to go the extra mile in terms of textual investment and yet happy to play within the officially demarcated lines’ (2010: 130). Fans did not seem to find the corporate nature of the transmedia content problematic and were ‘not averse to suspending disbelief in officially affiliated new media

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<sup>66</sup> <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/project-alibi-a-multi-platform-ghost-story> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

architecture' (Stein 2001: 140). Stein is referring to a particular generational audience but this attitude is also reflected in some ARG player perspectives on more explicitly corporate games. If sponsorship or corporate ownership of sites is not deemed intrusive, it can be perfectly acceptable to players:

*'When it's based on a movie/TV show, we know where it's coming from, and the corporations have to protect their copyright. So the presence of the branding isn't so bad'* (UF).

Many recent campaigns (most of which would be described by players as 'virals' rather than 'real' ARGs) have increased the presence of corporate branding e.g. company logos at the bottom of emails purporting to be from 'Weyland Industries' or 'Grey Enterprises Holdings'. Players express an understanding that producers are under pressure to maintain a level of corporate branding, accountability and IP protection.

As previously noted with regards to 'fanification', both players and producers can be seen to negotiate the commercial status of promotional ARGs in manner reflecting Hill's assertion that their relationship with commercial culture is an 'inescapable contradiction which fans live out' (2002: 29). Hills argues this must be tolerated within theoretical discussions of fandom because an alternative theoretical perspective will never fully shut this contradiction down. Both players and PMs of promotional ARGs can be seen to deploy a variety of tactics in order to negotiate the commercial status of the games, allowing them to continue existing within a consumer capitalist system they apparently oppose (Hills 2002: 28). None of these strategies completely negate the status of the games as marketing materials. They do, however, frequently prioritise their creative content over their promotional functions or seek to define ARGs and PMs against the perceived commercial interests of larger media conglomerates. Most striking is the emphasis on the personal, subjective and affective impact of ARGs and the strong emotional investments made by dedicated players.

Both parties favour discussing the games as an art form or narrative genre, as opposed to marketing materials. Players actively acknowledge PMs as 'artists' and often view companies like Warner Bros. at best as a creative partner, but more often as a source of funding or distribution decisions. Being aligned with creative companies like 42 Entertainment can boost a client's reputation, but this is not always the case, particularly if the game does not fulfil player expectations, which have become more defined over time. Maintenance of TINAG also plays an important role in this negotiation – if it is not a game then it is not a piece of marketing either. It is also



TINAG which helps define whether in-game branding will be tolerated by fans, as it must be effectively integrated into the game world for this to be deemed acceptable. Without this, the marketing can disrupt the enjoyment of the game.

However, players are often more forgiving than producers or academic critics. Gray argues that the Domino's promotion in *WhySoSerious* is an example of 'mere' marketing, because it fails to deliver any extra meaning to the narrative or storyworld (2010: 210). However, for players this was not necessarily the main problem. Where there was criticism of sponsors or marketing partners, these were not made because they were 'too commercial', but because they failed to adequately support the game experience, failed to deliver swag and broke with TINAG too abruptly. Although they felt the brand was not a good 'fit' with the tone of the campaign and the film but understood the need for its presence:

*'Its definitely off...me and a guy on xbox 360 were talking about how it kinda down plays the whole feel of the movie...but we understand because its more money for wb...'* (SHH).

The issue was not widespread enough to compromise the quality of the game as a whole and did more damage to the reputation of Domino's than of 42 Entertainment, Warner Bros., the ARG or the film itself:

*'I don't blame 42E, I guess I do blame the dominos people though haha. It seems to be the consensus that they are the ones that screwed up so I'll go with that'* (SHH).

Although there were some grumbles about the commercial nature of the task, the negative energy came primarily from fans who had not received swag, whose local Domino's were not participating or who had tried to ask Domino's employees about the virals and had been met with blank faces. Had staff been better informed, the tone of the main thread (which is an extensive 113 pages long) might have been more positive.<sup>67</sup>

One explanation for players' flexibility on this matter is that enjoyment of an ARG requires them to move fluidly between states of in-game immersion and out-of-game critical analysis. Players must simultaneously immerse themselves in the game (as per the TINAG philosophy) and distance themselves enough to appreciate its commercial context, and its ability to blur distinctions between fiction and reality. Players critique and analyse not only game design but also their own in-game and out-of-game behaviours. This may mean players find it easier to accept the dual identities of

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<sup>67</sup> For full thread see: <http://forums.superherohype.com/showthread.php?t=304617>

a promotional ARG as both art and commerce without consistently needing to privilege one over the other. If anything, the genre highlights the continuation of the negotiations which Hills sees fans enacting around their position in a commercial media industry (2002: 28) as they construct a middle ground between the two positions to enable their continued enjoyment of the games.

Further negotiations can be seen as both producers and players define themselves against an imagined and often commercial 'other'. Again this reflects Hills' argument that fans often perform their identities through various versions of 'us' and 'them' (2002: 27), but also incorporates PMs, positioning them closer to their audiences. Game designers often refer to conflicts of ideas and priorities when working with corporate clients, situating their own work in a creative context and the work of the client in a commercial, financial and sometimes morally ambiguous context, echoing Hills' assertion that constructing such identities often involves moral dualisms (2002: 30). Where Hills refers to fan and academic perceptions of 'good'/'bad' consumers, here we see the emergence of ideals of 'good' and 'bad' producers. Hills warns against this as it continues to value 'production' and to devalue 'consumption' in a way which does not reflect the reality of these two impulses for fans. Not all fans are productive, or produce in the same way and this should not result in categorising them as 'lesser' fans or 'bad' fans (Hills 2002: 30).

What is interesting is that the dualisms around producers are constructed in part by producers themselves. Designers differentiate, define and in many ways validate their work as 'more' than marketing, often in contrast with the corporate client. There is a marked difference in perception of what large, multinational advertising companies want to achieve and what a smaller, creative marketer can bring to the table. The 'creative' marketer usually emerges as the innovator, with a stronger understanding of their audiences. The corporation works primarily in business logic, unable to see the value of storytelling which cannot provide quantifiable returns.

However, we should perhaps also caution against the acceptance of this binary at face value. The trust relationship required between ARG players and producers means PMs must place themselves on the 'good' end of that binary to function effectively, particularly if the brand reputation of the client is not wholly conducive to that trusting relationship e.g. Microsoft or Paramount. They therefore have a vested interest in maintaining that image. Many of these interpretations of corporates vs creatives also come from very personal experiences and opinions and therefore shift considerably amongst individuals within the industry. As Christiano (2013) also points out, there is a

balancing act to be performed. While he might consider himself a creative first and businessman second, working with corporate clients requires that his company sits somewhere in between. Such a balance must also be maintained in the case of standalone ARGs and PMs certainly understand the need to keep commercial imperatives in mind when it comes to their own products

Similarly, marketers might argue they have always understood the importance of storytelling. The Cannes Lions Awards for advertising have, according to their website, been ‘inspiring creativity since 1954... benchmarking innovation in anything from mobile and billboards to design and branded content’.<sup>68</sup> That creativity takes on a far more important role in a multi-platform, transmedia world. The narrativity of an advert becomes more crucial if it is to form a coherent and effective component of a wider brand. One might think this would mean the creative and the commercial would become increasingly enmeshed and that binary distinctions between them would start to dissolve. This does not appear to have been the case with promotional ARGs. If anything, studios must balance their commercial needs, not only with creative desires of directors and actors, but of content producers right across their properties. Such conflicts may be resolved through compromise but are unlikely to vanish completely, much in the way fans must negotiate their own conflicts with the commercial nature of their fan texts. The privileging of the creative, or the productive, over the corporate and commercial, does not simply reside in academic discussions or fan discourse, but remains a central facet of the media industry. This not only reflects Hollywood’s historical battles between ‘suits’ and ‘artists’, but shows no sign of dissipating in its current digital incarnation. Rather than subsiding, these tensions have persisted in a new context and must, as ever, be understood and managed.

Such tensions also exist for the ARG player community, which has a slippery relationship with ‘the general public’. Players are heavily invested in the collaborative and inclusive ideals behind ARGs:

*‘The community, the co-operative aspect of ARGs is a big part of what keeps me at least coming back here’ (UF).*

*‘It gives everyone a chance to throw in their two cents’ (Respondent #4).*

These are in conflict with their desire for exclusivity and the genre’s general difficulties involving new players in games which have already made substantial progress. This

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<sup>68</sup> [http://www.canneslions.com/about\\_us/](http://www.canneslions.com/about_us/) [Accessed 05.01.2015]

leads to differentiations between what is ‘for us’ as a player community and what is ‘for them’, the wider audience whose skills and interests are considered less refined. ‘Real’ ARGs are separated from that which is ‘just’ a viral or ‘just’ a piece of marketing and Hills’ moral dualisms and binary definitions re-emerge. Although they may recognise themselves as part of a coalition audience, ARG communities are a niche in that group which separates itself from the crowd by defining itself against it; mobilising subcultural capital and discourses of authenticity. Similarly, although players are happy to praise promotional ARGs when they meet certain standards, there is a strong belief that marketing materials are so necessarily restrictive that this is far less likely to occur. Again, the non-commercial is given priority over the commercial.

Additionally, players may almost disregard the promotional status of the games through affective investments, meaning the games take on a highly personal set of meanings rendering the promotional context almost irrelevant. Following Grossberg’s argument, such affective investments do not work primarily to benefit marketers, but to elevate them on an individual’s ‘mattering map’, to the point that they become ‘places at which we can construct our own identity as something to be invested in, as something that matters’ (Grossberg 1992: 57). In this situation the values and purpose of the games have moved so far away from marketing that while this cannot be completely negated, it is of less consequence to players who have invested in the games as something other than, if not ‘more’ than marketing.

By ascribing these personal values to the games, players also support Hills’ (2002) arguments around use and exchange value in fandoms. Hills argues that through appropriation of fan texts, fans move the text away towards its Marxist ‘use value’, without ever fully breaking away from its ‘exchange value’. By re-valuing commodities using their own experience-based values, they can have some form of control within the system, even if they cannot break free of it (2002: 35). This is problematized when the fan text is a promotional ARG. It is not just a text to be sold; it exists to sell other texts. Furthermore, it sells corporate-constructed versions of the fan experience. How can fans be said to drag this back towards ‘use’ valuation when the text and their own experience is being commodified and sold back to them?

As we have seen, through their affective and emotional valuations of ARGs, players can remove or at least distance themselves from the commercial purpose and value of the games. What is interesting is that, since ARGs are indeed games, players achieve this specifically through play, which Adorno argues is the only mechanism through which this temporary separation can be achieved (1978: 228). When that

element of play is lost, or the game stops being fun, the use value fades and the emphasis on exchange value starts to return. If, as Stewart suggests ‘there is no viral marketing. All there is is fun’ (quoted in Hanas 2006) then by the same logic when there is no fun, there is only viral marketing. It is through fun or play that the games may take on these alternative meanings and as they become less complex, and limit the possibilities of that play, they limit the potential for creating those alternative meanings and they are ‘just’ marketing. Yet *The Beast* and *WhySoSerious* suggest there is no reason why these games could not perform both of these functions, but to do so effectively the games must provide enough space and freedom for affective play. This may not always be possible when logistical, financial, technological and IP restrictions are so frequently imposed on promotional ARGs.

Scott (2009) argues that ‘ancillary content models’ (a category which would include promotional ARGs) replicate a version of fandom’s own gifting economy. Media companies are therefore ‘re-gifting’ fandom back to itself to control it, placate it or to widen its membership through fanification, functioning as a ‘potential gateway to fandom to mainstream audiences’ (Scott 2009). This is an inauthentic version of fandom and is often rejected or treated with caution and scepticism by fan communities. Just because fans may claim use value for ARGs through play does not mean promotional games are not engaged in a process of selling fan values back to them, but it does mean they are less likely to succeed.

However some contemporary media fans are willing to accept these corporate practices to an extent. Stein’s (2011) case study points out that Millennial fans demonstrate an ability to navigate corporate incarnations of fan texts without concern. Such problems do appear to arise more in theory than in practice and the generations of fans who have been courted as a niche market from the beginning of their fandom experience may simply view this differently. Stewart notes that his daughter is ‘perfectly OK with fannish acts that I cannot square with my sense of canon... She doesn’t object to being marketed to per se, though she does if it’s clumsy, clueless, or patronizing’ (Stewart 2014).

Surveyed players seem to support this idea, with only 18% suggesting a game’s involvement in a marketing campaign would have a negative influence on their decision to play. Stewart feels concerns about media companies co-opting fandom and fannish practices are somewhat outdated and rarely trouble younger fan audiences - ‘This is a Baby Boomer thing, a Fight the Man thing, but it just isn’t what millennials fear’ (Stewart 2014). This is a pertinent argument and further studies into generational

differences in fan practices and opinions could clarify the matter. Furthermore, generation gaps between producers may also reveal a shift in opinion over time on the varying attempts at co-opting fan communities and fan practices in marketing.

Örnebring (2007) felt previous work on ARGs had not sufficiently problematized their (at that time) predominately commercial nature. Whilst this thesis attempts to address that from a theoretical perspective, many results suggest that from an audience perspective, this is often not problematic at all, particularly if the games can simultaneously meet their creative expectations. A number of the more pointed divisions of art/commerce come from producers, as PMs often find themselves caught between the commercial needs of a client and the creative impulses of both themselves and their audience. What is important to note, however, is that although both parties appear comfortable with the commercial intent of a promotional ARG, discussions and behaviours always arise which reveal this binary to be persistent for some fans and for some producers.

As Hills (2002) argues, this is a constant negotiation that should not be resolved simply by privileging the creative over the commercial in a manner which tends to flatten the roles in producer/consumer relationships into 'good' and 'bad', despite the fact that this may be a strategy of negotiation in itself. To do so is to simplify a far more complicated situation. It also threatens to downplay the explicitly commercial context of promotional ARGs which, although not necessarily 'problematic' as Örnebring (2007) suggested, should be taken into account when considering the impact of such a genre on the dynamics between producer and consumer or indeed artist and audience. That context will mean different things to different individuals, production teams and fan communities, but should never be dismissed as irrelevant. The apparent tactics of negotiation displayed by both players and producers highlight the continued importance of the issue to contemporary media producers and audiences for whom it plays a key role in defining their relationship with each other and with the text itself. Promotional ARGs can and do perform both commercial and creative functions but the need to prioritise one of these over the other persists for both producers and consumers of the games, even within the most flexible of player communities. If it is this important in practice then any theoretical understandings of that relationship should acknowledge that these negotiations are not simply part of fan discourse but continue to be central to many different working relationships within the contemporary media industry.

## **Towards Alternative Modes of Consumer Empowerment**

Hills' work attempts to move away from the 'resistant/incorporated' view of fandoms by placing them somewhere in between these two positions. In a relationship where there are many overlapping versions of 'us' and 'them' being performed, locating power or control in one group or another becomes very difficult (Hills 2002: 27). Attempting to do so tends to return to the very binaries Hills is trying to avoid. Yet as McKee notes, many writers continue to perceive 'power' in media as 'a zero-sum game... one agent must have more power' (2013: 761). He suggests commentators such as Jenkins and Örnebring continue to fall into 'optimistic' or 'pessimistic' camps regarding issues of power in participatory media, despite acknowledging the complexity of these relationships (McKee, 2013: 761).

Promotional ARGs challenge a number of perceptions about the nature of 'power' or 'consumer empowerment' in contemporary producer/consumer relationships. Initially, they appear to outline the potential for a closer and more reciprocal relationship. Power is constantly negotiated in a genre where players and PMs respond to each other in real-time. The two parties may genuinely be involved in a symbiotic relationship and exist in constant dialogue. They are also mutually dependent on each other for the game to work. If one side starts pulling harder on the strings than the other, the game collapses. However as 'real' ARGs start to give way to more PM-controlled virals, corporate producers appear to be shying away from this kind of relationship. More recent ARGs or virals heavily dictate the manner in which players can interact with the gameworld. Players who find this too restrictive may turn away from promotional games and towards grassroots productions. However, there are varying expectations surrounding the kinds of interactive experiences ARGs should provide and for some players a lack of interaction is less problematic because they are motivated by other elements of the games:

*'Every ARG has different 'roles' players can take... some don't like interaction, some thrive on it' (UF).*

*'Some people play ARGs for the story. Some for the puzzles. Some for the community. Some for the interaction. Some just for a prize at the end' (UF).*

It is all too easy to conclude that Hollywood is pulling back the potential power an ARG can offer media audiences, despite acknowledging their desire for more involvement and participation in media texts. This does not mean one faction of players

is 'complicit' with the desires of media producers while the other 'resists'. Nor does it mean media producers are locking down interactivity in order to control or contain 'creative' audiences who might go rogue with intellectual property. This would be a very narrow take on a far broader issue. Producers cite a number of difficulties with promotional ARGs including the economic climate, logistical difficulties and minimal audience reach, all of which may have contributed to the decline of full-scale ARGs.

Many preconceptions about these power relationships arise from understandings of power, engagement and participation in the contemporary media environment. Engagement and participation is often viewed in terms of productivity. Power therefore resides with the party who has most control over that production. There remains a level at which the 'productive' or 'creative' audience is still privileged as the empowered audience because they are deemed to have control of content and therefore control of meaning. This also privileges the power of production over reception when it comes to meaning creation, despite work from Hall's *Encoding/Decoding* (1973) to Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992) which make clear the importance of reception in that process.

Hills (2002) also notices a moral bias in this perception of fan communities. The 'good' fan is the productive fan, whereas a 'bad' fan practices more passive forms of fandom. He argues this does not reflect the variety of fan practices and unfairly places them in a moral hierarchy (Hills 2002: 30). McKee also notes that while analysts often return to an idea of 'power' as a singular substance, debates have historically referred to many different kinds of media power, including 'economic power', 'institutional power' and 'purchasing power' (2013: 762). Yet academic work on promotional ARGs reflects a continuation of this focus on content control as empowerment. This does not take into account other modes of participation available to ARG players which can prompt alternative feelings of empowerment.

Promotional ARGs reveal that, as Grossberg argues, an 'active' audience does not always mean an audience in 'control' of a text (1992: 54), or necessarily a 'productive' audience. In fact being 'active' and 'participating' in a media text in a Web 2.0 era spans a wide spectrum of activities including lurking, tweeting, remixing and producing fan fiction, videos or sites. Narrative control of ARGs was deemed important by players but was by no means the only mechanism through which they were able to feel a sense of empowerment, ownership or indeed authorship of the game. Players forged affective connections with characters and with the community itself which developed a sense of participation, co-operation and co-authorship. They were also able to be productive in ways which did not impact the narrative, including speculation,



‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ user generated content. Many of these strategies allowed players to feel they had participated and were active within the game and the community without having a great deal of influence over content. Some activities may create, subvert or change textual meanings but these generally remain within boundaries set by producers. In fact, surveyed players seemed uncertain as to whether the two had a particularly strong causal relationship. This reflects Hon’s (2001a) assertion that players are not interested in making narrative decisions in a game and supports Stewart’s (2012b) suggestion that players prefer to see themselves ‘reflected’ in the narrative rather than controlling it. Many of the elements which had a strong affective impact on players were not related to narrative control, calling for a far broader and more subjective understanding not only of specific modes of fannish consumption, but of ‘participation’ and ‘power’ more generally in contemporary media environments.

Affective investments often led players to feelings of control or involvement in an ARG, which, Jenkins argues, is the specific goal of affective economics. He suggests that whilst this could be read as straightforward emotional manipulation of audiences, such investments allow consumers to form stronger bargaining units and ultimately to influence their favourite media brands (Jenkins 2006a: 63). Without this caveat, affective economics threatens to return us to a perception of media audiences as passive dupes. ARGs certainly encourage an affective attachment to the games, and 70% of surveyed players believed this would increase their emotional attachment the brand being promoted. 68% of players also agreed that this gave them a sense of ownership which extended to the promoted product. However, the notion that this leaves communities in a more empowered position regarding content control cannot reasonably be said to have been proven in this case.

Despite this apparent sense of ownership, 67% of players also agreed that control ultimately lay in the hands of the PMs. What these emotional investments can provide, however, is a more personal, subjective sense of empowerment related to a sense of personal identity. This kind of empowerment echoes both Grossberg’s definition of affective empowerment (1992) and Lee’s superhero metaphor (Lee quoted in Siegel 2006). Player discussion suggests that although players may not feel they have influence over the media text, the impact of the games is strong enough to raise that text on their ‘mattering maps’ and provide a locus around which they can build a sense of personal empowerment which Grossberg argues has the potential to move into a more political or social form (1992: 64). The focus on content control as the empowering element of affective economics leaves players in a difficult position. They cannot

realistically hope to control the content of a film via a promotional ARG and indeed they do not expect to. By conceptualising power in a different way we can view their emotional investments not as being cynically manipulated, but as forming an alternative kind of empowerment which may mean more to them than having control over media content.

McKee (2013) argues that Hollywood's 'entertainment logic' is innately inclusive of the audience in textual production, as opposed to art logic which impacts on and may change the viewer, but does not allow that flow of influence to be reversed. He cites the continued use of focus groups to shape Hollywood's output as confirmation of the willingness of the industry to let consumer demand help shape the end product i.e. giving audiences what they want (McKee 2013: 766). He argues that the focus on the audience as passive has been due to the fact that many cultural critics impose an 'art' logic, rather than accepting Hollywood's 'entertainment' logic. Considering the strong focus many players and producers place on ARGs as an art form, is it possible to suggest that ARGs work in a space between the two (which McKee does not necessarily suggest are mutually exclusive). The games can certainly change the audience in the way McKee suggests art is credited for (2013: 760). They can have an impact which changes or challenges their point of view or even their perception of themselves and their abilities:

*'I have learned that everyone has different strengths and weaknesses and that sometimes, I have to leave it up to other to do, because they are better at it than I am (this is a HUGE thing for me, as I am forced to supervise my employees from a distance for the past 6 months, and thanks to people here, I have become a better supervisor, my heartfelt thanks!)*' (UF).

However they are not passive receptors of this change, as 'art' logic suggests or indeed demands. They achieve that change through (sometimes restricted) play with the text, whether or not that text is actually changed as a result.

The emphasis on content control also means these alternative modes of empowerment may be labelled illusory or inauthentic. This leads back to views of fan communities as complicit with, or 'incorporated' into the desires and needs of media companies. The term 'illusion' also implies they have been fooled into this position, returning to a stereotype of fans as 'dupes'. Furthermore this unfairly devalues what are valid and important emotional responses to ARGs. What makes this argument a little more complicated, however, is that narrative agency was one of the key promises made

by the genre in its early stages. From this perspective it promises all the positive feelings associated with agency without ever actually handing over that ‘power’ to the consumer. Yet Stewart remains reluctant to use the term illusion due to its pejorative associations and players themselves fully understand the nature of their participation in promotional ARGs:

*‘I worship player interaction and control over the direction of a story, even though I admit that, in reality, the Puppet Masters manipulate the players’* (UF).

They are particularly aware of their limited influence over promotional ARGs and for some players the feelings of involvement prompted by other game mechanisms can be just as, if not more important. The persistent focus on content control as the most important form of cultural power in media relationships threatens to overshadow the other ways consumers use and experience media which leave them feeling similarly empowered.

Linked to these fears of ‘illusion’ and ‘manipulation’ are concerns surrounding the ‘co-optation’ of fan communities and fannish activities by media companies which Scott (2009) sees occurring in ‘ancillary online content’. Co-optation in this context can be defined as ‘to use or take control of (something) for your own purposes’ (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 2014). This does not sound particularly ominous, yet the Wikipedia entry for the same term reads: ‘the process by which a group subsumes or assimilates a smaller or weaker group with related interests; or, similarly, the process by which one group gains converts from another group by attempting to replicate the aspects that they find appealing without adopting the full program or ideals’.<sup>69</sup>

This description sounds slightly more sinister, selecting only the appealing aspects of an idea to entice new group members, or the assimilation of an apparently weaker group by a more powerful one, implying one group’s inability to resist such a takeover. There is a tendency to read the co-opting of fandoms by media producers as inherently negative; corporations attempting to control the terms of fannish discourse etc. Yet this focus often fails to recognise fandom’s ability to refuse or ignore these terms. There are more stories of failed attempts at co-optations than successes (see the case study of fan fiction site FanLib in Jenkins 2007c). Promotional ARGs exemplify a contemporary online fandom which is wary of such approaches, but is not completely averse to them if they meet certain expectations or provide a reasonable ‘payoff’.

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<sup>69</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Co-option> [Accessed 05.01.2015]

Earlier examples like *The Beast* or *WhySoSerious* demonstrate the genre's ability to provide corporate-built spaces for fandoms to roam, investigate and interact with the text in which they feel relatively comfortable. At the same time, Scott (2009) notes that these spaces are rarely taken at face value by fandoms. They frequently claim them as inauthentic in the same way they might pass judgement on a media text specifically aimed at a niche community. Players make clear distinctions between what they feel is appropriate for them and what is, as Scott puts it, a 'gateway to fandom' for mainstream audiences (2009). Many *Super 8* players reacted negatively to the lack of material which was 'for us' but this did not always deter them from playing. It was expected that, as a promotional ARG, it would necessarily have to reach out to wider audiences, but players did not want this to be to the detriment of their own enjoyment:

*'The editing room is visibly linked on the official website now. It seems to me the direction of this ARG is to allow more of the public into the game by making portions of it smack dab in their curious faces. I don't know if this means weakening a more challenging game for us...'* (UF).

They are not 'resistant' to this approach, but a bad experience may influence future decisions to play. One respondent felt so negatively about the *Cloverfield* campaign that they refused to play *Super 8* based on the assumption that the same team were involved in its design:

*'The Cloverfield campaign started so badly and generated such a waste of forum space that it deterred me from giving Super8 any of my time'* (Respondent #8).

Stewart feels there is a reluctance to attribute a sufficient level of importance to the ability of the audience not to play (Stewart 2014). They are perfectly happy to leave and find something else which suits their needs, or may even build their own spaces or games.

The flexibility and fluidity of contemporary fandoms is also rarely given enough weight. Many media fans shift from one community or property to another with little concern. Surveyed players all played games for multiple properties. Many chose to play ARGs based on the perceived quality of the game rather than the property itself:

*'I don't pay attention to who makes games, largely because it's not going to influence my decision to play, in most cases. I'll play if it's an engaging trailhead'* (Respondent #20).

They then make individual or group decisions about how far they are willing to follow a game before it ceases to provide the experience they seek. Like Stein's (2011) Millennials they will work within corporate spaces to an extent but will leave them if they ultimately fail to fulfil their expectations. As previously mentioned, such consumers are often deemed fickle and maintaining their loyalty is a concern for many contemporary brands, who often appear fearful of their ability to evaluate a product or experience and move on quickly (Green 2014). One may view the co-opting of fannish activities via promotional ARGs as an attempt to commodify and sell the interests of this demographic back to them in order to maintain loyalty or gain trust. However these attempts can always result in the consumer's vocal refusal in earshot of a wider online audience. This is more likely to happen once they have been emotionally engaged with a product. They also have the ability to hack or break a constructed experience. However, examples of this in promotional ARGs are often unintentional. If players brute force a password or cause servers to fail it is usually in their enthusiastic efforts to solve puzzles, or involves long and serious discussions within the community about the appropriateness of those tactics. More malicious attacks generally come from those outside the community looking to gamejack, which is thoroughly condemned by the player community:

*'Making fake photos from a film and presenting them as stills you found is a gamejack. Having them on a site so where [the] audience can't tell if the photos are real or not, and allowing that to continue, creates confusion, division and frustration in the audience'* (UF).

They have the tools to dismantle the game if they choose, yet in most cases they choose not to so long as they continue to receive a satisfying game experience.

These communities are neither 'resistant' nor 'incorporated' and if they are 'co-opted' then this is far from a straightforwardly negative or positive process. There is a more complex system of constantly negotiated power at work, sometimes resting more with one side than the other but with neither ever in full control. This is a potentially difficult situation for media corporations in an era of 'total entertainment' (Grainge 2007). If the industrial logic of total entertainment is that media companies have near

complete control of media properties, it is unsurprising that virals are becoming more popular with marketers than full-blown ARGs. However, neither The Beast, nor WhySoSerious, nor Super 8 ever really gave players the opportunity to create or repurpose IP in any ‘unauthorised’ manner; it allowed them to play with it within designated boundaries. Most players were delighted with the outcome of these games and would be happy to participate in a similar manner again. If the reluctance to use these modes of promotion is based on protection of IP (which, as previously mentioned, is one of a number of factors) it would seem somewhat unnecessary. It seems theorists and media companies are more concerned about the implications of the co-optation of fan activities and communities than fan communities themselves.

Finally, there may be concerns about the manipulation of ‘power’ with regards to fan labour. ARGs prompt the spread of positive word-of-mouth from dedicated fans to a wider audience. They also provide a source of entertainment for the huge lurker demographic. They do not do this unwittingly, they are completely aware of the marketing processes they are involved in:

*‘Movies are bigger than ever because of the internet. It’s turned us fans into cheap marketing tools to spread the buzz’ (SHH).*

*‘We’re doing the marketing FOR them by dressing up as Jokers and running around and taking pictures. And then one day when they see trailer and other marketing they’ll remember us as clowns acting a fool and they’ll talk about it [with] someone. Which means word of mouth will spread’ (SHH).*

But for the second poster, this is a two way negotiation:

*‘Trust me... this is all well planned out and working perfectly. For them AND us’ (SHH).*

Terms like ‘exploitation’ are waiting to be deployed in this situation but again this gives fan communities little credit for acknowledging their position and playing the game anyway. They anticipate a return on their investments including, for some, an element of payment in kind beyond the game experience itself, in the form of swag. If these needs are not met they are clear on the channels through which they can and will demand reimbursement for their time and effort, be it through acknowledgement in credits, free tickets or swag. They discuss their position candidly and knowledgably,

aware that forums are monitored and were happy to contact 42 Entertainment directly to make complaints:

*'I sent 42E a email saying I didn't receive my package and less than an hour later I got a call from "Gotham City Pizzeria" asking if I received my package' (SHH).*

Expectations for the games differ between communities and individual players, but all are clear on what actions to take if they are not met. This is far from a straightforward manipulation of power. In fact, as virals become the more widespread form of immersive promotion, this approach is more open to this kind of criticism than a full-blown ARG. For example, in order to receive rewards through the *Fifty Shades of Grey* viral app, players must tweet, re-tweet and share promotional messages about their involvement in the campaign. However, the amount of sharing to be done does not seem comparable to the rewards, the first of which is an image of Christian Grey's helicopter and the second a posed photo of two Grey Enterprises receptionists. This does not seem adequate recompense for the social media work, even accounting for the fact that the effort required to tweet is far less than that of attending a scavenger hunt. Complex ARGs seem more aware of the appropriate level of reimbursement for the services rendered than these more simplistic virals.

No media consumer (fan or otherwise) could ever really be placed into the binary categories of 'resistant' and 'incorporated', as individual interactions with media products are incredibly varied, personal and subjective and resist such strenuous categorisation. ARG players are no exception, as player responses have shown. The relationship between players and PMs implies an ongoing negotiation of power and mutual dependence, but further analysis reveals a more complex set of power negotiations which may change depending on the property, expectations of the community and kinds of interactivity afforded by the game design. Power may shift between producers and consumers but, as Hills (2002: 27) suggests can never be said to lie completely within one camp. The case of promotional ARGs also reveals many of the concerns around media power in an entertainment context to be somewhat more pressing in theory than in practice, with a possibility of a generational shift in the perception of these issues which this research does not address. The insistence on correlating power with control of content, whilst understandable and an important issue, often means the possibilities of other forms of empowerment are not given serious enough consideration.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of promotional ARGs but not at the expense of recognising the audience's ability to choose not to play or their limited ability to impact the text. Web 2.0 environments offer new modes of communication which change the relationship between players and producers, particularly in terms of the way they communicate with and respond to each other. In the particular case of promotional ARGs, however, this has not caused a seismic shift in the balance of power. What does occur is a continual power negotiation on both sides which is perhaps more subtle than the more radical negotiations Jenkins (1992) sees occurring in earlier forms of media fandom. Sometimes there is more give than take but the relationship could not be definitively described as manipulation or exploitation. Such terms verge on scaremongering in this particular context. Promotional ARGs tend to call more attention to the balance of power because the curtain is so much thinner, the relationship can be so much closer and the negotiations more clearly documented on player forums. As Jenkins (2006a) notes, this points to a continuing process whereby producers are still trying to decide how they want audiences to 'participate' in their media texts, given the vast number of ways they can now choose to do so. It is possible that ARGs constitute a unique version of that relationship and it remains to be seen whether this particular configuration of consumer/producer power will re-emerge in the future in another form, or whether it was an experiment which, although innovative and exciting, was simply not sustainable within the framework of Hollywood's industrial logic.

### **Players, PMs and Corporate Clients – Relationship Marketing and Enabling Affective Investments**

Aside from issues of power and control, three other central aspects of this relationship are a sense of mutual trust and respect, (without which power and control is less negotiated, more forcibly removed) a level of responsiveness from PMs (without which the game is in danger of becoming 'just' a viral) and, for some players, an affective bond between PMs and players.

Players and game designers both used similar terms when asked to describe their relationship and were committed to a view of it as co-operative, collaborative and co-creative. Trust is key to such collaborations and to the smooth running of an ARG. Producers express a strong sense of moral obligation to players who invest their time



and players are often moved to expressions of immense gratitude towards designers' extensive efforts, both personal and professional:

'Because there is that passion, I will work till midnight to do something that I am paid to do and want to do really well, and I'll work till 2 or 3 AM because I don't want to let these people down' (Stewart 2007a).

*42, You can all go home and pay attention to your families now. Thank you for a great 14 months' (SHH).*

Whilst this might seem to be a unique mode of engagement between media producers and consumers, it reflects existing theories of relationship marketing (RM), perhaps taken to new levels. RM is intended to develop long-term customer loyalty and is also focussed on the importance of trust in this relationship. It is difficult to accurately describe the player/PM interaction as a 'long term' relationship, as players come and go from games for a variety of reasons. Few surveyed players responded particularly strongly to the involvement of specific companies in a game. A wider range of attitudes were recorded when it came to Abrams and 42 Entertainment, but overall more players did not feel that knowledge that a certain company had been involved would affect their decision to play (see survey question 15 for detailed breakdown). This suggested a relationship is not always being built with the affiliated production companies.

This reinforces the image of a 'fickle' (or perhaps just prudently opportunistic) Millennial consumer. Alternatively, some were already long-term fans of either the genre, the franchise or the producer/director attached (Abrams). In this case the game may have maintained or developed existing long-term consumer relationships or perhaps instigated a longer term interest in ARGs for new players. It would not necessarily guarantee a continued relationship with the film or brand being promoted for those who were not already invested in some sense.

However, Respondent #8's suggestion that the *Cloverfield* game deterred them from playing Super 8 suggests the gaming experience does have some impact on how players view producers and whether they are willing to enter into longer term relationships with them. A negative experience was likely to prevent a long term relationship developing, suggesting an impact beyond a single game. Moreover, in terms of promotional materials, ARGs present a relatively sustained and intense relationship with the audience. The average piece of film marketing might range from a 2 second glance at a billboard to an extended trailer of a few minutes. In contrast, ARGs

and other related viral campaigns may demand months of dedicated attention to gain a sense of satisfaction from playing. This does not necessarily draw players back for another game, nor guarantee their attendance at the cinema, but there must be a degree of trust involved in order to sustain that intense mode of engagement for that period of time. This in itself is deemed valuable in what Goldhaber (1997) terms an Attention Economy where gaining the attention of the increasingly dismissive (or indeed discerning) media audience is perceived to be as valuable as actual cash flow. So despite their apparent ephemerality, these elements suggest promotional ARGs are performing a kind of RM.

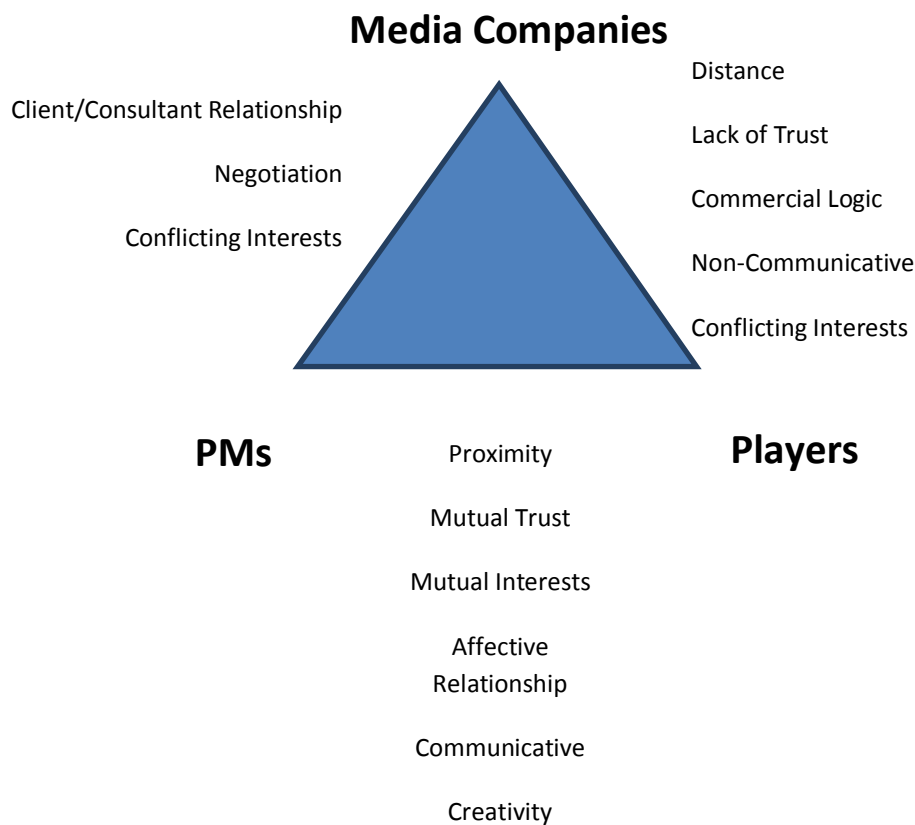
More pointedly, RM values the consumer as ‘co-creator’ of value (Vargo and Lusch 2006). Both players and producers perceive the games as collaborative and feel they are involved in an act of co-creation, even if this is limited for players. Players ascribe their own meanings and values to the games, which are often extremely personal and subjective. These do not necessarily correlate with the intended uses or meanings denoted by media companies. This notion of valuing ‘use value’ over ‘exchange’ value also returns us to Hills’ argument that fans may prioritise and determine the ‘use’ value of a product based on their own ‘lived experience of fandom’ rather than in standard economic terms (2002: 35). Yet Kerrigan notes that marketing theory has been moving in this direction for some time, placing more emphasis on the consumer’s perceptions of value than those of the producer (2010: 5). ARGs might be considered a further expression of this tendency, as media companies start to take more interest in finding out how audiences create meaning and value in their relationships with media products.

This might sound like a positive step in producer/consumer relations. However, the aforementioned fears around co-optation also come into play because producers may be seen as taking those fan-created values and using them for their own financial gain. This issue is not confined to media producers, similar practices are often frowned upon when they occur with the ARG player community. As one SHH player claims, ‘*no real fan would EVER immediately try to sell [swag] on ebay*’ (SHH). ARGs are structured to promote a sense of rarity and exclusivity which Jancovich (2003) argues is highly prized by cult fandoms. If producers are taking fan values like exclusivity and using this to structure promotional materials, does this affect the nature of the trust relationship which the ARG, as a piece of RM, is looking to establish and develop?

This has perhaps already been answered by previous criticisms of RM, which suggest many marketers who made claims for RM failed to put the theory into practice. Gummesson argues that the ethical viewpoint of RM, (trust, honesty, and a win-win

relationship) was sometimes offered to consumers when producers had no real intentions of forging such relationships with them (1997: 268-9). This accusation could well be levelled at promotional ARGs which promise a level of participation which then does not materialise; manipulating fans' emotional investments or simply use them as free labour to spread positive word of mouth.

Yet looking at both PM and player descriptions of this relationship, the situation is rarely perceived this negatively. This is partly because the relationship between players, PMs and corporate clients is somewhat triangular, with players identifying closely with PMs. The diagram below highlights mutual dependencies as well as perceptions of conflict in each relationship:



PMs are often conceptualised by players as individuals with whom they can have a communicative relationship and are believed to share common interests and opinions. This includes a view of ARGs as essentially collaborative and inclusive pieces of entertainment content in themselves, which require respect and trust from both parties if they are to function to the benefit of everyone involved. The moral and ethical perspectives expressed by PMs also suggest that whilst they may feel their clients are paying lip service to these elements of RM, designers take them very seriously and appreciate the importance of ethical gameplay. This image of PMs is based strongly

around differentiating themselves from the ‘Movie Marketing Overlords’ (Stewart 2012c), of whom players often already have a rather sceptical view. PMs similarly identify strongly with their audiences and display a mode of self-identification which paints them as the very opposite of their corporate clients, often utilising the moral binaries Hills (2002) associates with fan communities or academia. As a result, players tend to react more positively to PMs and their organisations than to media conglomerates, of whom they tend to remain more wary. This can, however, bring the corporate client into a more positive light as well, as in the case of WhySoSerious, when Warner Bros. were frequently congratulated in the same sentence as 42 Entertainment:

*‘Well done 42E and WB. It's been a blast’* (SHH).

In acknowledging the role of companies like 42 Entertainment as contractors to a larger media conglomerate, players can also identify more closely with them as an entity which is, to an extent, beholden to the demands of that larger company.

*‘42E is not completely in control of their own game. Warner Bros commissioned them; Warner Bros is their client, and therefore, Warner Bros can tell them what to do’* (SHH).

Neither 42 Entertainment nor *Batman* fans can, or indeed expect, to drastically impact Nolan’s ‘vision’ of Gotham, but both appreciate the desire of the other to open up that vision to be experienced in new ways. Commissioning something like an ARG promotes the view that the media conglomerate is also interested in offering fans these new experiences, although players may be sceptical of such claims:

*‘I don’t think that some WB executive woke up one day with vision that he had to tell the world a special story in a special way, and to hell with what anyone else says he is going to tell the story how it needs to be told because he owes it to the fans and damn the cost/benefit ratios’* (SHH).

This configuration makes it harder to accuse PMs of such deceptions, but is it possible to accuse media companies of being disingenuous in their use of RM? Are they using immersive promotional tactics to provide all the trappings of a win-win relationship with audiences, without ever being committed to those ideals? Without more detailed information from media companies themselves this is difficult to ascertain. However, the suggestion that media companies are somehow abusing the trust of audiences for profit comes apart a little when one starts to question exactly what the conglomerate

stands to gain from a promotional ARG in comparison to what fans and wider audiences might get out of the experience. With ROI so difficult to discern, PR value dwindling and their ability to draw wide audiences in question, it seems the audience benefits more from promotional ARGs than the media company, whether those benefits were intended or otherwise. This may also explain their relatively swift decline in the past decade.

RM is difficult (but not impossible) to apply to the film industry because of the disconnection between film producers and their audiences, which explains player scepticism towards media companies. However, promotional ARGs can effectively bridge that gap and help to build up a trust relationship. PMs function as a kind of middle-man, allowing audiences to feel closer to media producers, even if that distance is only marginally shorter. This relationship does not feel as immediate in viral campaigns, and when it becomes clear PMs are overtly controlling the story, players may lose that sense of trust in PMs because it appears that the PMs do not trust them. If the game requires them to communicate with it in some way, they want it to talk back, whether this is via in-game characters or more subtly in real-time manipulation of the games to respond to their preferences and suggestions:

*'The player's actions and interactions should be able to shape the narrative, alter a character, make and break bonds. I want to feel as though I make a difference'* (UF).

Promotional ARGs allow for a more direct line of communication between producers and audiences but this is of little relevance if audiences do not feel they have been heard. Kerrigan emphasises the need for understanding the desires of audience segments if RM is to work for the film industry (2010: 6). ARG players clearly express their expectation for the genre to provide two-way communication. To reduce this to one-way traffic removes one of its main appeals, confounds player expectations and prevents it from working as RM.

Without some sense of trust in the relationship players are also likely to feel uncomfortable making the affective investments which enables their sense of empowerment. Hills makes an argument for trust in the fan/producer relationship arguing that 'fan trust' is 'central to the creation and maintenance of the cult' (2002: 138). However his argument relates to the 'ontological security' of the text (2002: 138). Fans may continually test the hyperdiegetic world for breaks in continuity or the logic and consistency of the textual universe. This process allows them to develop a secure relationship with a text in which they may embark on 'identity management' and 'affective play' (Hills 2002: 138). This is where the more restricted ARGs may fail. For

many players, the element of affective play is one of the biggest draws of an immersive medium like an ARG; to become emotionally involved in a responsive gameworld. For some, these investments extend to a process of identity construction, where they relate their in-game decision making to their real-world lives, the two of which exist in close proximity in a genre which blurs the lines between fiction and reality. Trust in solid textual construction requires trust in the architects of that world, be that a producer/director of the promoted film, like Abrams, or game designers like 42 Entertainment. Without this the game not only collapses in a structural, practical sense, it also loses credibility for players as a space in which meaningful affective play can take place.

The relationship is a form of affective investment in itself, exemplified in the players' direct addresses to PMs during the games, their effusive post-game expressions of gratitude and the collegial tone of post-game FAQs and chats. Even in their more corporate form as 42 Entertainment, the exchanges retain a personal tone. This kind of affective relationship is also predicated on the belief that two-way communication is occurring between players and PMs, despite the TINAG curtain being drawn where possible. This will not necessarily be off-putting for all demographics, but without it the promotional ARG loses another of its main attractions and a characteristic which sets it apart from less immersive viral campaigns. Yet examples of this more intensely affective relationship have become increasingly scarce in promotional ARGs. Christiano (2013) notes that boards were monitored in *Super 8* to measure engagement, but the game itself was never changed in response to player actions, inactions or requests. In fact there was little direct or indirect communication between PMs and players at all. Yet players continued to address PMs directly, either as Bad Robot, Paramount, Abrams himself, or as PMs more generally:

*'Psssst, if you're reading this Super 8 viral people - THROW US A BONE!'* (UF).

There is an expectation for this relationship to continue in some form even when there is no clear response from PMs either in or out of game. As this fades in promotional ARGs, players may find themselves looking to grassroots games to find this kind of dynamic:

*'these days a movie promotional game is rarely a true ARG in the traditional sense, and the relationship to the audience differs from the kind of engagement players feel with smaller ARGs run for the sake of its own story-telling model'* (Respondent #8).

As Stewart notes, this level of responsiveness was expensive, time consuming and, at times, a little soul destroying for those on the other side of curtain. It was therefore never reasonable to expect the rapport developed in *The Beast* to ever be fully reconstructed. In addition, it was only ever a small portion of the ARG audience who really demanded that kind of response. The proportion of lurkers was so much higher that it was unlikely that media companies would be willing to spend to please the few over the many. However, in Web 2.0 environments, consumers of all varieties expect to be able to contact a brand or company, for example via Twitter, and to receive a response sooner rather than later. As the level of monitoring and watching starts to outweigh the level of responding and modifying, that communication channel becomes narrower and provides less of an opportunity for players and wider audiences alike to feel their views have been heard. They are also more likely to feel as though have been ‘used’ as part of a marketing exercise. Some survey respondents referred to being valued as a contributor to a marketing exercise as opposed to being ‘*one of many sheep in a marketing campaign*’, herded through an experience that they played no meaningful part in (Respondent #15). Reducing the potential for dialogue in an ARG does not take full advantage of the genre’s ability to draw consumers closer to the media experience and make them feel genuinely involved.

The relationship developed between PMs and players of promotional ARGs absolutely has the potential to be affective, personal and positive in a way which allows players to use the ARG space as something which takes on a great deal of importance for them. As this relationship becomes increasingly distant, it reduces the possibility for this to occur as well as restricting what could be a productive dialogue between media producers and consumers. There are many logistical reasons for this from the perspective of media companies, who want to reach as wide an audience as possible. Sustaining that kind of relationship with each member of that audience is simply not viable. Trying to make mass communications feel genuinely personal is also difficult at a time when consumers are becoming more aware of targeted marketing tactics and are proficient in avoiding them. Players criticise games which rely heavily on social media networks like Twitter or Facebook because this has become something of a cliché. However it is also symptomatic of an approach which presumes anything received through these channels will automatically feel more personalised or have a greater affective impact. The reality is that these areas, which Stewart refers to as ‘porch space’ (2012b), are becoming almost as saturated with advertising as television channels, which users often simply ignore. Such networks might offer access to a vast online

audience but they are neither a shortcut to a network of undiscerning eyes, nor a swift route to affective connections or brand loyalty. Online strategies, including ARGs, need to be more subtle and creative, a challenge which, if met, will be thrown down again by demanding, digitally competent audiences in what Dovey refers to as ‘upgrade culture’ wherein the new itself has intrinsic value (2011: 139).

The decline of this close relationship particularly denies fan audiences an opportunity to feel part of a dialogue. It also denies media companies the opportunity to strengthen fan community relations and achieve more positive brand management, which WhySoSerious proves is possible via a complex ARG. This is perhaps the level at which the games are most valuable for such companies, rather than their negligible impact on PR or sales. Existing fan communities genuinely enjoy them and often view a ‘real’ ARG as a fair and meaningful reward for fan loyalty. To term it a ‘gift’ is problematic when players are required to pay for that gift in time and energy, but they often feel the payoff is worth the effort. The games can thereby increase feelings of respect for those companies willing to expend their own resources creating them. It will always risk coming across as a manipulation of fan energies but when executed with concern and genuine interest in fan expectations and desires, a promotional ARG can provide the space for a give-take relationship to develop, from which both producers and consumers can benefit.

The emergence of promotional ARGs in the early 2000s was supported by a several factors. While broadband internet connections were not commonplace, there was a significant increase in the numbers of internet users and the amount of time those users were spending online. The dot-com bubble had burst by 2001, but e-commerce was still a significant area of the web to be explored and online marketing relied on strategies like banner ads to gain the attention of a growing online consumer population. This was potentially one of the most appealing elements of ARGs to media producers, given that their ROI was particularly difficult to discern. Aside from grabbing the attention of an increasingly media savvy audience, the games were innovative enough to provide positive PR and word of mouth spread not by producers but by the audience themselves. As the decade continued it also played into industry models such as synergy, what Grainge (2007) refers to as ‘total entertainment’ and cross-platform entertainment, which became more important with the widespread uptake of smartphones and mobile technology in the late 2000s. They also functioned as brand and audience management, particularly in relation to committed fan audiences who were highly responsive to this mode of engagement. With the rise of Web 2.0



technologies and social media environments it was assumed that the audience was no longer happy to be passive but desired a more active role in their consumption of media products, one which had previously been attributed to fannish or cultish modes of consumption.

For PMs, the games provided a new and innovative storytelling platform; a dramatic shift in the way an audience could experience a narrative which involved complex, often non-linear narratives and extensive world-building, a trend in narrative entertainment which was already developing in other media including film and television. ARGs were able to use online and offline spaces to make these stories more immersive, experiential and emotionally immediate. They were also community-focussed, harnessing the power of the hive-mind and rewarding collaborative work. The immersive, immediate nature of the games meant players and PMs often developed an affective, emotional and personal response to the games and each other.

For players, this level of affective play caused the games to become meaningful to them in ways which were not necessarily intended by marketers. Different players sought different kinds of immersive experiences. Some preferred less interaction while others found the element of co-creation and intense participation to be definitive characteristics of the genre. Different communities similarly valued some game mechanisms over others e.g. SHH players were more interested in collecting swag than Unfiction players. A good promotional ARG was often referred to as something 'more' than marketing or even as a 'gift' from media producers. A poor promotional game was one which did not meet expectations for the genre, including high levels of participation, strong storytelling and characterisation and a sense of responsiveness from PMs. These was often referred to as 'virals' rather than 'real' ARGs, revealing that although players initially seemed relatively comfortable in their relationship with this new mode of marketing, they continued to practice complex strategies of negotiation, belying anti-commercial sentiments.

Closer inspection of player and PM perspectives on how and why promotional ARGs are used reveals attitudes which challenge established scholarly perspectives on the relationship between media producers and consumers. Divisions between 'fans' and 'cult' fans are brought into question, as are notions of fanification, which are countered by the continued re-drawing of boundaries between different kinds of media consumers as more people interact with media in increasingly varied ways. Negative connotations of fanification and mainstreaming fandom are also revealed to be somewhat overstated in this particular context. Fears around the co-optation of fan spaces seem to neglect

more complicated negotiations of power which occur more visibly in the context of a genre involving real-time communication between the two parties.

Despite efforts to move away from binary perceptions of consumer-producer relationships these persist, not only in academia and fan communities but also within the media industry. When creative marketing companies step in to provide a form of middle-man in this relationship this perception can be softened, but is also accentuated as players identify with PMs who tend to define themselves against corporate clients. Similar understandings of art and commerce also continue to thrive, despite the rise of increasingly creative marketing which appears to blur those boundaries. Players often seem better equipped to comfortably negotiate those divides than academics or producers, a skill for which they are rarely afforded enough credit. A contradiction they struggle a little harder with is the conflict between the investment in ARGs as an inclusive, co-operative space and the desire for a sense of exclusivity, which is sometimes supported by game design. This is another contradiction which, as Hills (2002) argues, players cannot close down but must live out and negotiate. Again these boundaries are re-drawn through discourses of authenticity and 'real' fans, rather than being broken down.

The emphasis on 'active' or 'participatory' audiences as 'empowered' audiences also comes under scrutiny, appearing to be oversimplified in many accounts. The equation of participation and production neglects the myriad of other ways in which audiences can be active within a text. Indeed, playing an ARG as it was intended can be as affectively empowering as challenging PMs' designs. This area could benefit from further research as there may be other modes of interaction and engagement with media texts which are not receiving the attention they deserve. Identifying these also allows us to understand media audiences as they actually behave, rather than continuing to claim one kind of 'active' viewership for what is now a very broad and varied media audience. Furthermore it might help to pull away from defining that 'activeness' in terms which continue to be loaded with historical fan studies definitions of resistance, appropriation and empowerment.

Despite the positive reception of promotional ARGs like *WhySoSerious*, there have been distinctly fewer promotional ARGs in recent years. *Tron: Legacy* was the last film to have a large-scale game attached as part of its marketing strategy in 2010. *Super 8* was released in 2011 but its ARG was decidedly smaller scale, although similar to the approach taken for *Cloverfield* and *Star Trek*. Much more common are viral campaigns which offer reduced levels of interaction, immersion and less intricate storytelling.

The reasons for the decline in this kind of promotion could be attributed to several issues highlighted in previous chapters. For media companies, there are any number of reasons not to use the genre as part of their marketing strategy. Christiano (2013) noted the logistical difficulties of a large-scale game and live events in particular are not only costly but difficult to run. The games are labour intensive, requiring a core, committed team to work long hours to respond adequately to player movements. The ROI on a promotional ARG is difficult to discern, which is off-putting in the current economic climate. There is also something of a limit to their reach. Despite the abundance of lurkers and the potential for a wider (but not measurable) spread of word of mouth, many promotional ARGs will not reach the audience numbers which Hollywood demands for blockbusters. Although designers maintain the games can provide different levels of engagement for different users, this is difficult to manage successfully.

Virals, in contrast, work towards solving a lot of these problems whilst retaining some similarities with ARGs. Reduced (but not completely removed) levels of interactivity reduce logistical and financial risk. The increased integration of established social networks like Facebook and Twitter allows engagement data to be more measurable and quantifiable using existing industry metrics. This makes them more reportable and it becomes a little easier to argue for positive ROI. This strategy also allows the virals to access large audience segments in spaces which are semi-personal but do not necessarily encroach on dedicated fan spaces like fan forums or fan-created websites. Unlike dedicated fan spaces, such social networks are occupied by fans and non-fans, allowing word of mouth to spread more efficiently to wider audiences, rather than being confined to the fan community. All these adjustments also make the games infinitely more accessible. Hon's (2012) perspective that everyone should be able to join in the fun, is far more appealing to Hollywood's industry model unless there is an existing fanbase to court. It is usually in these cases that virals continue to be more complex and ARG-like, e.g. the *Prometheus* online campaign, aimed squarely at existing fans of the *Alien* franchise. This approach also limits the ways in which fans can be creative with IP. Yet it seems this is more a bonus rather than a driving factor in using virals over ARGs. As previously discussed, the claims for agency and creativity in promotional ARGs were always disputable and virals appear to tackle other issues associated with the games which were likely to be far more pressing for media companies than fan manipulation of IP via promotional ARGs.

Promotional ARGs bring together media producers and consumers in a unique

manner which challenges common perceptions of power in media, definitions of media fandoms and the meaning and value of 'active participation' in a shifting media landscape. It points not to a breaking down of boundaries or a reversal of power structures, but a space in which these are continually in flux and can therefore come to be understood and valued in many different ways. All of these perspectives should be attended to by media producers; however the study highlights the inability of mass media producers to attend to them all equally. Most striking was the personal, emotional and subjective experiences of individual ARG players and PMs. The potential of the genre to have this kind of impact is astounding, even when limited by commercial constraints, making them not only fascinating for future research, but also worthy of respectful and careful attention. The games have made people feel they have been a part of something important and for some, if only for a short period of time, like superheroes.

### **Notes for Further Research**

ARGs audiences display a sense of affective empowerment which is not entirely connected to a sense of control or authorial ownership of a media text. Further research around other groups or modes of engagement may similarly reveal more about different configurations of power which have previously been either disregarded or undervalued because they do not relate to the construction of meaning through control of media content. While this is an undeniably important issue, the experiences of many ARG players suggest other forms of empowerment might also be meaningful for media audiences.

There are also a number of issues which this thesis has highlighted but has not had the scope to investigate in-depth. Although player demographics were touched on, there is certainly further work to be done on the role of gender within ARG player communities and indeed the role of women in the transmedia industries. Despite the insistence that the player community is fairly evenly split with regards to gender, this was not the case for surveyed players and it does not follow that because more women play, their contributions are valued in the same way. However, one player did note a specifically gendered angle to her feeling of empowerment:

*'I've been playing for a long time (7 years I think). It's fun being a girl and not being stared at by gawkers because I actually have a) an opinion and b) can find things no one noticed'* (UF).

Research could be conducted into these experiences to explore this issue further following on directly from a wider body of work which discusses the internet as a potentially safe or empowering space for female fans (Scodari 1998, Cumberland 2000). Generational differences in perspectives on fanification or co-optations of fan spaces would also be a useful avenue to pursue further. Stewart (2014) suggests the 'Millennial' generation is less concerned with these issues yet their skittish attitude towards brand loyalty might suggest otherwise.

A wider historical survey could also be undertaken to provide more information on the spectrum of promotional games over the past decade and the decline in their use. Comparisons could also be made between ARGs and similar viral campaigns. Further work could be done on the use of virals or other forms of immersive promotional techniques and the power relationships which might emerge there.

Finally, while this study focuses specifically on promotional games, fan-produced and grassroots games equally deserve further attention. Indeed, surveyed players were often at pains to point out *'ARGs aren't just advertising campaigns. Just keep that in mind'* (Respondent #21). Örnebring's (2007) comparison between promotional and fan-produced ARGs could certainly be extended to consider their differences, similarities and reputation within the player community. Alternatively, further work could be done on standalone commercial ARGs. The release of games like Google's *Ingress* (2012 Niantic Labs) starts to blur boundaries between alternate and augmented reality gaming as the genre continues to evolve and these games may result in a different configuration of producer/consumer relationship.

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*A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001) Dir. Steven Spielberg, USA

*Babylon 5* (1994-1998) Warner Bros., USA

*Alias* (2001-2006) ABC, USA

*Alien Series* (1979-1997) 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, USA

*Angel* (1999-2004) WB, USA

*Apollo 18* (2011) Dir. Gonzalo Lopez-Gallego, USA

*Avatar* (2009) Dir. James Cameron, USA

*Batman* (1989) Dir. Tim Burton, USA

*Batman and Robin* (1997) Dir. Joel Schumacher, USA

*Batman Begins* (2005) Dir. Christopher Nolan, USA

*Batman Forever* (1995) Dir. Joel Schumacher, USA

*Batman Returns* (1992) Dir. Tim Burton, USA

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2001) WB, USA; (2001-2003) UPN, USA.

*Casablanca* (1942) Dir. Michael Curtiz, USA

*Cloverfield* (2008) Dir. Matt Reeves, USA

*Crash* (2004) Dir. Paul Haggis, USA

*Dallas* (1978-1991) CBS, USA

*Dawn of the Dead* (1978) Dir. George A. Romero, USA

*Doctor Who* (1963-2014) BBC, UK

*E.T. the Extra Terrestrial* (1982) Dir. Steven Spielberg, USA

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) Dir. Michel Gondry, USA

*Fight Club* (1999) Dir. David Fincher, USA

*Flashdance* (1983) Dir. Adrian Lyne, USA

*Friends* (1994-2004) NBC, USA

*Halloween* (1978) Dir. John Carpenter, USA

*Harry Potter Series* (2001 -2011) Warner Bros., UK

*Heroes* (2006-2010) NBC, USA

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*I Am Legend* (2007) Dir. Francis Lawrence, USA

*I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) CBS, USA

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*Kyle XY* (2006-2009) ABC, USA

*Lost* (2004 – 2010) ABC, USA

*Memento* (2000) Dir. Christopher Nolan, USA

*Minority Report* (2002) Dir. Steven Spielberg, USA

*Misery* (1990) Dir. Rob Reiner, USA

*Misfits* (2009-2013) Channel 4, UK

*Mulholland Drive* (2001) Dir. David Lynch, USA

*Play Misty for Me* (1971) Dir. Clint Eastwood, USA

*Pulp Fiction* (1994) Dir. Quentin Tarantino, USA

*Prometheus* (2012) Dir. Ridley Scott, USA

*Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) Dir. Steven Spielberg, USA

*Sex and the City* (1998-2004) HBO, USA

*Spooks Code 9* (2008) BBC, UK

*Stargate SG-1* (1997-2002) Showtime, USA; (2002-2007) Syfy, USA

*Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966-1999) NBC, USA

*Star Trek* (2009) Dir. JJ Abrams, USA

*Star Wars* (1977) Dir. George Lucas, USA

*Super 8* (2008) Dir. JJ Abrams, USA

*Tron: Legacy* (2010) Dir. Joseph Kosinski, USA

*The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) Dir. Mark Webb, USA

*The Blair Witch Project* (1999) Dir. Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, USA

*The Dark Knight* (2008) Dir. Christopher Nolan, USA

*The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) Dir. Christopher Nolan, USA

*The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* (2001-2003) Dir. Peter Jackson, New Zealand, USA

*The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964-1968) NBC, USA

*The Matrix* (1999) Dir. Wachowski Brothers, USA

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) Dir. Jim Sharman, UK, USA

*The Sopranos* (1999-2007) HBO, USA

*The Wire* (2002-2008) HBO, USA

*The X Files* (1993-2002) Fox, USA

*Top Gun* (1986) Dir. Tony Scott, USA

*Twilight* (2008) Dir. Catherine Harwicke, USA

*Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) ABC, USA

*Veronica Mars* (2004-2006) UPN, USA; (2006-2007) CW, USA)

## **Audio Sources**

Pink Floyd (1994) *The Division Bell*, EMI, UK

Nine Inch Nails (2007) *Year Zero*, Interscope Records, USA



*War of the Worlds* (1938) CBS Radio, 30th October, New York, USA

## **Artwork Sources**

Duchamp, M. (1917, replica 1964) *Fountain*, Porcelain, Tate Modern, London, UK

## **Videogame Sources**

*Ascheron's Call* (1999) Turbine Inc., USA

*Bejewelled* (2001) PopCap Games, USA

*Call of Duty* (2003 – 2014) Activision, USA

*EverQuest* (1999) Sony Online Entertainment, USA

*Farmville* (2009) Zynga, USA

*Grand Theft Auto* (1997-2014) Rockstar Games, USA

*Guild Wars* (1995) AreaNet, USA

*Halo 2* (2004) Microsoft Studios, USA

*Majestic* (2001) EA Games, USA

*Portal 2* (2011) Valve Corporation, USA

*Red Dead Redemption* (2010) Rockstar Games, USA

*Second Life* (2003) Linden Lab, USA

*Silent Hill* (1999) Konami, Japan

*Ultima Online* (1992) Electronic Arts, USA

*World of Warcraft* (2004) Blizzard Entertainment, USA

*Zombies, Run!* (2012) Six to Start, UK

## **ARG Sources**

*Art of the Heist* (2005) GMD Studios, USA

*Ilovebees* (2004) 42 Entertainment, USA

*Ingress* (2012) Niantic Labs, USA

*Last Call Poker* (2005) 42 Entertainment, USA

*Perplex City* (2005-2007) Mind Candy, UK

*Project Abraham* (2008) 42 Entertainment, USA

*Project Alibi* (2014) Steve Peters and Alison Norrington

*Super 8* (2010) Project C, USA; Watson DG, USA

*Superbetter* (2012) Super Better Labs, USA

*The Beast* (2001) Microsoft Games Studios, USA

*The Lost Experience* (2006) ABC, USA; Channel 4, UK; Channel 7, Australia      *World Without  
Oil* (2011) ITVS Interactive, USA

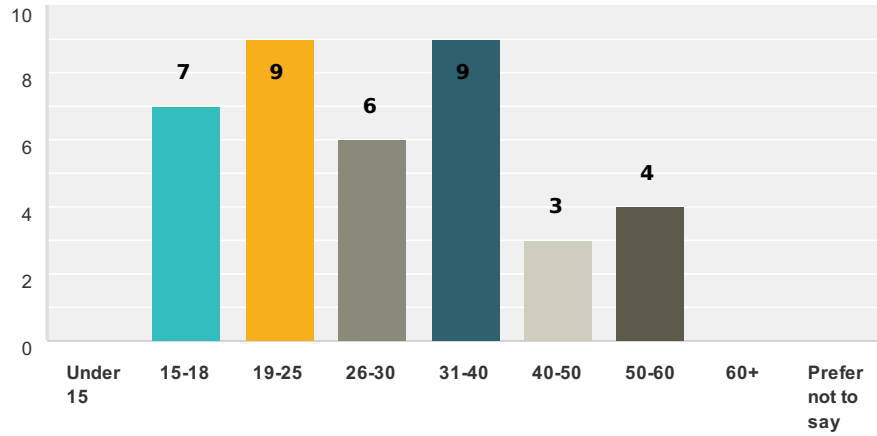
*WhySoSerious* (2008) 42 Entertainment, USA

*Year Zero* (2007) 42 Entertainment, USA

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q1 Age:

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0

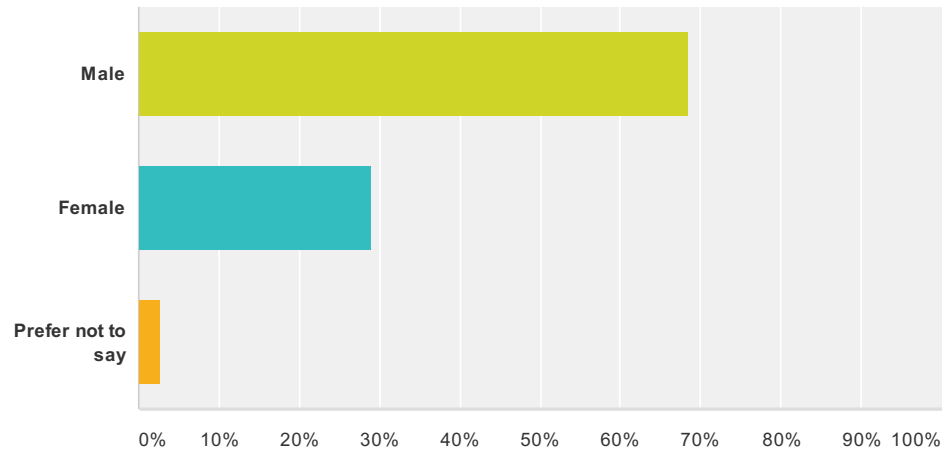


Answer Choices	Responses	
Under 15	0.00%	0
15-18	18.42%	7
19-25	23.68%	9
26-30	15.79%	6
31-40	23.68%	9
40-50	7.89%	3
50-60	10.53%	4
60+	0.00%	0
Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>38</b>

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q2 Gender:

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0

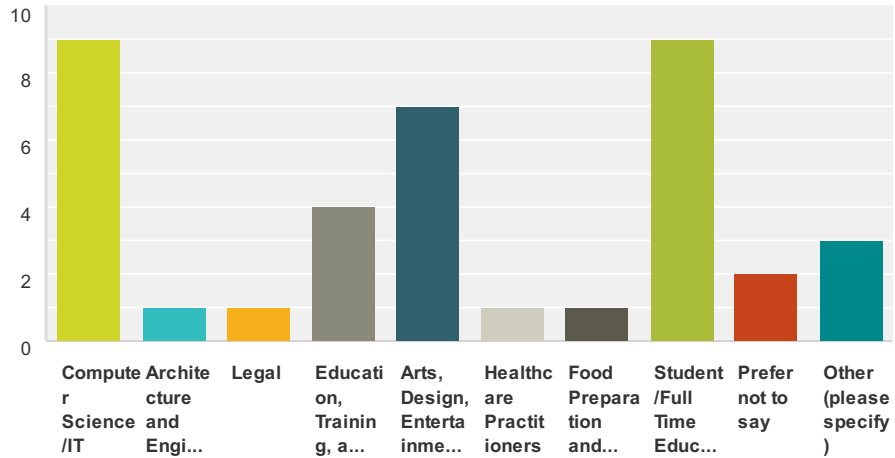


Answer Choices	Responses	
Male	68.42%	26
Female	28.95%	11
Prefer not to say	2.63%	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>38</b>

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q3 Which of the following best describes your current occupation?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices		Responses
Computer Science/IT		23.68% 9
Architecture and Engineering		2.63% 1
Legal		2.63% 1
Education, Training, and Library		10.53% 4
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media		18.42% 7
Healthcare Practitioners		2.63% 1
Food Preparation and Serving		2.63% 1
Student/Full Time Education		23.68% 9
Prefer not to say		5.26% 2
Other (please specify)		7.89% 3
<b>Total</b>		<b>38</b>
#	Other (please specify)	Date
1	Research	6/27/2013 11:46 PM
2	Stay at home wife/mother	4/30/2013 8:06 AM
3	Experience Designer	4/1/2013 9:57 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q4 Location:

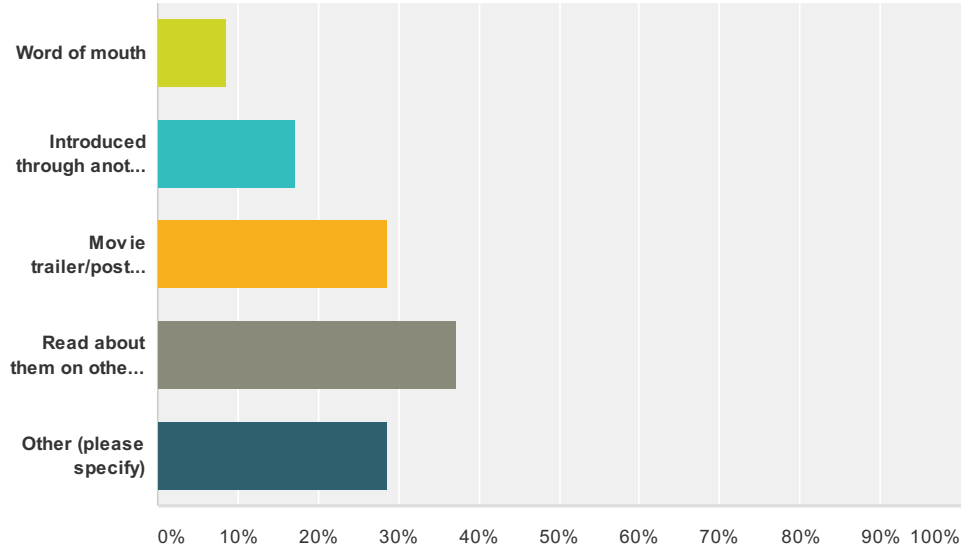
Answered: 34 Skipped: 4

#	Responses	Date
1	Minnesota, USA	12/17/2013 10:09 AM
2	Hamburg, Germany	10/31/2013 9:30 AM
3	Minnesota, USA	10/24/2013 9:48 AM
4	Australia	9/3/2013 1:04 AM
5	New Jersey	9/2/2013 7:04 PM
6	Lima, Peru	8/29/2013 12:43 AM
7	Uk	6/27/2013 11:46 PM
8	Brazil	6/22/2013 7:17 PM
9	k	5/30/2013 3:58 AM
10	UK	5/29/2013 3:43 AM
11	puyallup washington	5/6/2013 3:34 PM
12	Colorado	5/4/2013 2:42 PM
13	NY	5/4/2013 8:10 AM
14	Australia	5/2/2013 11:27 PM
15	Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA	5/2/2013 10:11 AM
16	Los Angeles, California, USA	4/30/2013 10:22 PM
17	NJ	4/30/2013 8:06 AM
18	San Antonio, TX	4/27/2013 11:45 AM
19	Pa	4/26/2013 2:13 PM
20	Fort Lauderdale, Fl	4/26/2013 12:29 PM
21	Los Angeles, CA	4/26/2013 9:19 AM
22	Cleveland, Ohio	4/26/2013 9:00 AM
23	MN US	4/26/2013 7:10 AM
24	America	4/26/2013 4:41 AM
25	Sweden	4/25/2013 7:25 AM
26	Garland TX	4/14/2013 11:24 PM
27	Colorado, USA	4/13/2013 8:29 AM
28	Philadelphia, PA	4/12/2013 12:16 PM
29	California, Silicon Valley, USA	4/12/2013 12:04 PM
30	Cardiff	4/12/2013 12:02 PM
31	United States	4/6/2013 11:28 AM
32	Germany	4/2/2013 3:09 PM
33	Los Angeles, CA	4/1/2013 9:57 AM
34	Canada	3/25/2013 7:14 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q5 How were you first introduced to ARGs?

Answered: 35 Skipped: 3



Answer Choices	Responses
Word of mouth	8.57% 3
Introduced through another fan community	17.14% 6
Movie trailer/poster/other promotional materials	28.57% 10
Read about them on other media websites (e.g. Wired, SlashFilm etc)	37.14% 13
Other (please specify)	28.57% 10
<b>Total Respondents: 35</b>	

#	Other (please specify)	Date
1	read about an internet horror story, found out it had turned into an ARG	9/3/2013 1:05 AM
2	Have always been interested in puzzles and was searching online for puzzle/treasure hunts and found ARGs	5/2/2013 11:32 PM
3	I was finishing my last undergrad year in college. I was somewhat of a gamer and stumbled upon Electronic Arts' Majestic. After the trouble in the US in September 2001, Majestic went offline. I started searching for other games in this genre and have been a small part of the community ever since.	5/2/2013 10:20 AM
4	Read an article in an actual newspaper back in 2001	4/30/2013 10:25 PM
5	The webcomic Penny-Arcade made a news post about "ILovebees" and I decided to check it out. I didn't play much of ILB but I found another ARG right away that I fell in-love with {Urban Hunt/Dread House} and got hooked.	4/30/2013 8:17 AM
6	Back in the 90s, a film called 'The Game' came out. Shortly after, my sister and I ran a really ... unpleasant ARG for our brother's birthday, involving about twenty of our friends. It lasted about six weeks and spanned a few cities. That was my first ARG. So, I guess you can blame the film for putting the idea in our heads.	4/30/2013 6:35 AM

### Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

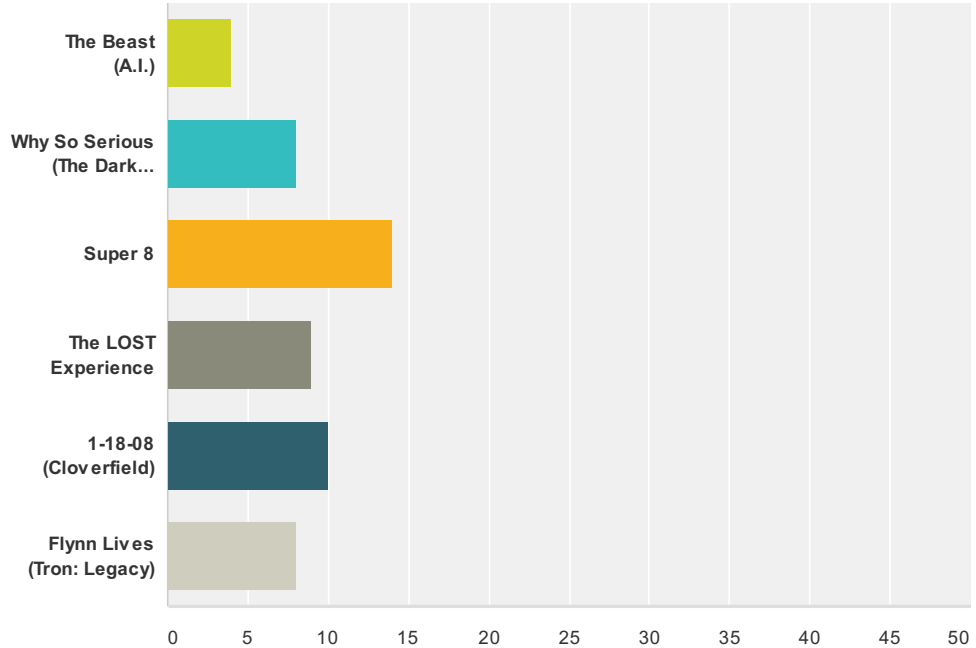
7	Googling to see if I could find some answers about some of the more cryptic elements in the movie 'The Matrix', I stumbled into unFiction around the time the Metacortechs / Project Mu game was beginning.	4/25/2013 7:27 AM
8	Friend sent me a link to the first Marble Hornets video asking me what it was, I liked it and did some research and found unfiction, found other games on News&Rumors	4/14/2013 11:26 PM
9	used a search engine to find info and discussions about a television show promotional contest	4/12/2013 12:06 PM
10	My first ARG was 1-18-08 (ARG/ARE for Cloverfield). I experienced my own introduction to ARG during recherches and participations on forums. To that time I begun to write my blog on ARGs and viral marketing.	4/2/2013 3:18 PM



## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q6 Which of the following ARGs have you participated in? (Select all that apply)

Answered: 23 Skipped: 15



Answer Choices	Responses
The Beast (A.I.)	17.39% 4
Why So Serious (The Dark Knight)	34.78% 8
Super 8	60.87% 14
The LOST Experience	39.13% 9
1-18-08 (Cloverfield)	43.48% 10
Flynn Lives (Tron: Legacy)	34.78% 8
<b>Total Respondents: 23</b>	

#	Other (please specify)	Date
1	Play the Player not the Cards	10/31/2013 9:30 AM
2	the umbrella sword, moorpond school, doublecrosshearts	9/3/2013 1:05 AM
3	I Love Bees	9/2/2013 7:06 PM
4	junko junsui, men in black smalltime arg, sort of the beast (wasn't aware i was playing it)	8/29/2013 12:44 AM
5	Dexter	6/27/2013 11:48 PM
6	Rewriting the Future	6/22/2013 7:18 PM
7	Urban Hunt, I Love Bees, Perplex City, Project Gateway, Wildfire Industries, Art of the Heist	5/29/2013 3:49 AM
8	Potato Bundle (Portal 2), Harvest (Boards of Canada),	5/4/2013 2:43 PM

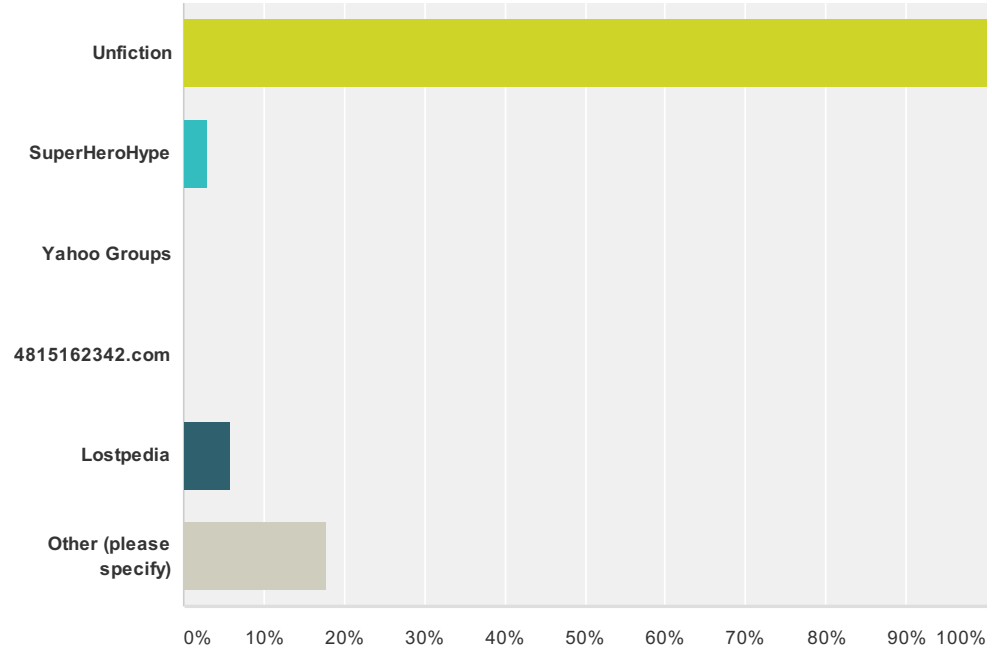
## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

9	CTW, Wallace 1&2, cardkeepers, 5gum,(Test subjects needed) and a few other small ones	5/2/2013 11:32 PM
10	There area lot of other ARG's. Doritos and 2012 come to mind as a couple less prominent marketing campaigns.	5/2/2013 10:20 AM
11	I Love Bees, Last Call Poker, Catching the Wish, Plexata Complex, EDOC Laundry, Find the Lost Ring, Year Zero, The Way the World Ended, Who Killed Amanda Palmer?, Miracle Mile Paradox	4/30/2013 10:25 PM
12	The other ad camp games I've played include "ILoveBees" ~ "Monster Hunters Club" ~ "District 9" ~ "Find the Lost Ring" ~ "Institute for Human Continuity" ALSO I notice you lack in Grassroots game listings here. Let me help. "Geist" ~ "Urban Hunt/Dread House" ~ "Chasing the Wish 2: Catching the Wish" ~ "ARGTalk" ~ "Sammeeeeees".	4/30/2013 8:17 AM
13	Third Realm, imbeingfollowed, Evelyn Crane, Ditch the Tech, Offene Graben, Charlotte is Real, find the /b/ox, (probably a few more I've totally spaced)	4/30/2013 6:35 AM
14	Mission IceFly (5 gum)	4/26/2013 2:14 PM
15	Star Trek 2009	4/26/2013 7:10 AM
16	Project Mu, Art of the Heist, PXC, others too numerous to list	4/25/2013 7:27 AM
17	My Dad's Tapes, Karen is Missing, AlterNET	4/14/2013 11:26 PM
18	Grassroots games (White Rabbit Black, etc)	4/13/2013 8:31 AM
19	Last Call Poker, Art of the Heist, others	4/12/2013 5:18 PM
20	I honestly don't think I can list them...a lot?	4/12/2013 12:17 PM
21	I Love Bees	4/12/2013 12:06 PM
22	Star Trek, Find the Lost Ring, Fringe (actually an ARE), Junko Junsui (hijacked ARG-art-project), Mir-12 (ARG for Game "Singularity"), some German ARGs and many grassroots	4/2/2013 3:18 PM
23	ilovebees, last call poker, metacortechs, lockjaw, push nv, chasing the wish, sara connor chronicles, more...	4/1/2013 9:58 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q7 Which forums do you use when playing ARGS? (tick all which apply)

Answered: 34 Skipped: 4



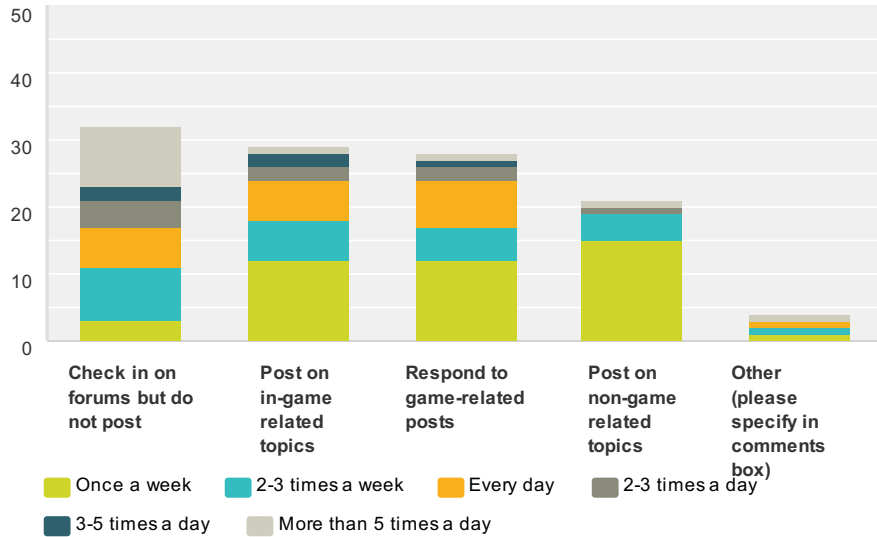
Answer Choices	Responses
Unfiction	100.00% 34
SuperHeroHype	2.94% 1
Yahoo Groups	0.00% 0
4815162342.com	0.00% 0
Lostpedia	5.88% 2
Other (please specify)	17.65% 6
<b>Total Respondents: 34</b>	

#	Other (please specify)	Date
1	argreporter.de	10/31/2013 9:30 AM
2	Facepunch	5/4/2013 2:43 PM
3	Facebook groups	4/26/2013 9:19 AM
4	Google Plus	4/12/2013 5:18 PM
5	comment: Lostpedia as a resource not a forum	4/12/2013 12:06 PM
6	forum.argreporter.de (German ARG forum)	4/2/2013 3:18 PM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q8 On average, when playing an ARG, how often do you:

Answered: 33 Skipped: 5



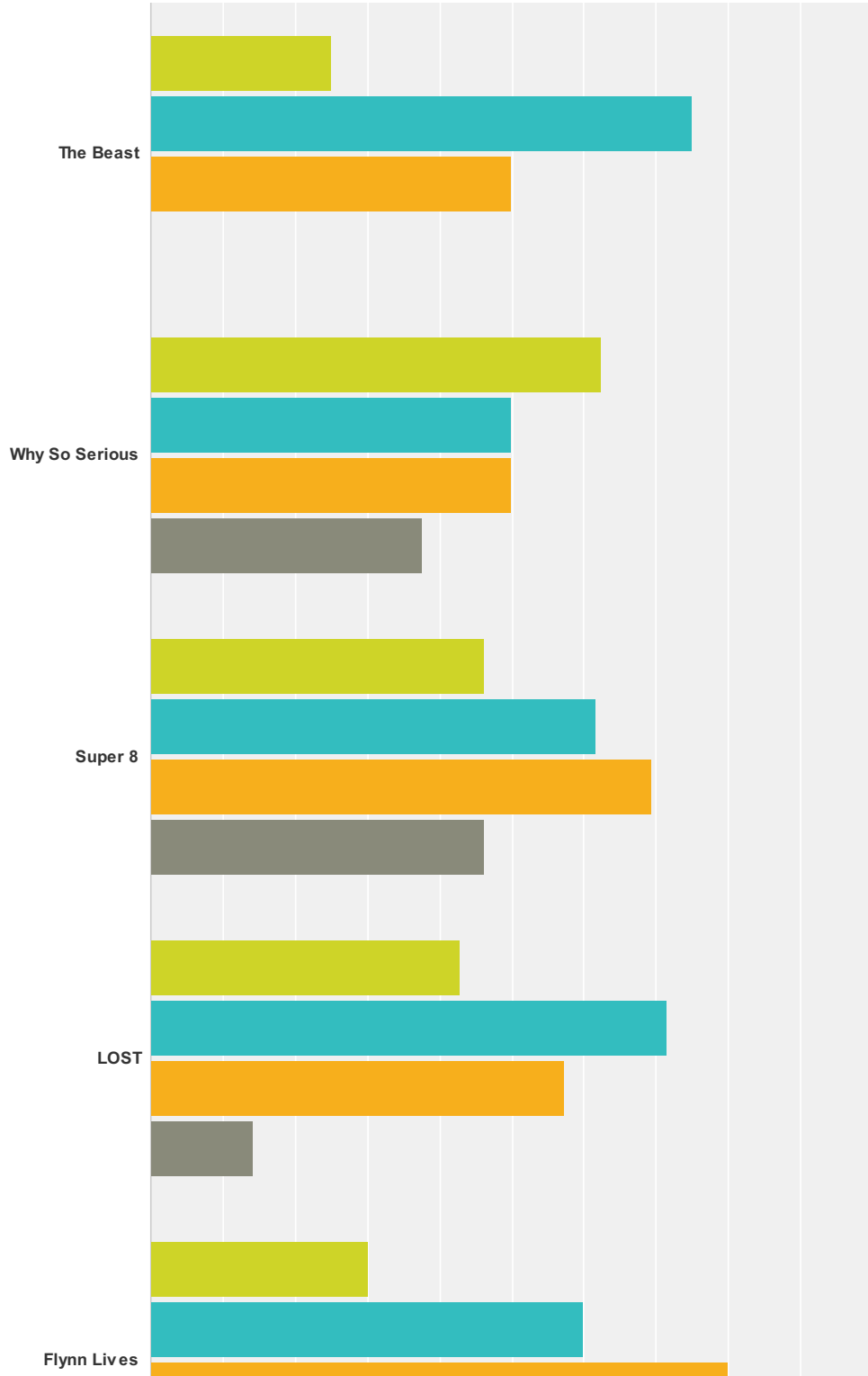
	Once a week	2-3 times a week	Every day	2-3 times a day	3-5 times a day	More than 5 times a day	Total Respondents
Check in on forums but do not post	9.68% 3	25.81% 8	19.35% 6	12.90% 4	6.45% 2	29.03% 9	31
Post on in-game related topics	44.44% 12	22.22% 6	22.22% 6	7.41% 2	7.41% 2	3.70% 1	27
Respond to game-related posts	42.86% 12	17.86% 5	25.00% 7	7.14% 2	3.57% 1	3.57% 1	28
Post on non-game related topics	71.43% 15	19.05% 4	0.00% 0	4.76% 1	0.00% 0	4.76% 1	21
Other (please specify in comments box)	25.00% 1	25.00% 1	25.00% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	25.00% 1	4

#	Further Comments	Date
1	I'm too scared to check more often, but too curious not to. Some ARG's, like Marble Hornets or Junko Junsui itself are really scary to me.	8/29/2013 12:45 AM
2	I'm also a Moderator at UnFiction, so my need to check in on the forums so often is skewed.	4/30/2013 8:18 AM
3	monitor chat and log IRC channel activity	4/12/2013 12:10 PM
4	Playing ARGs I am blogging about the progress of story and about efforts of ARG community. I'm posting more times a week.	4/2/2013 3:20 PM

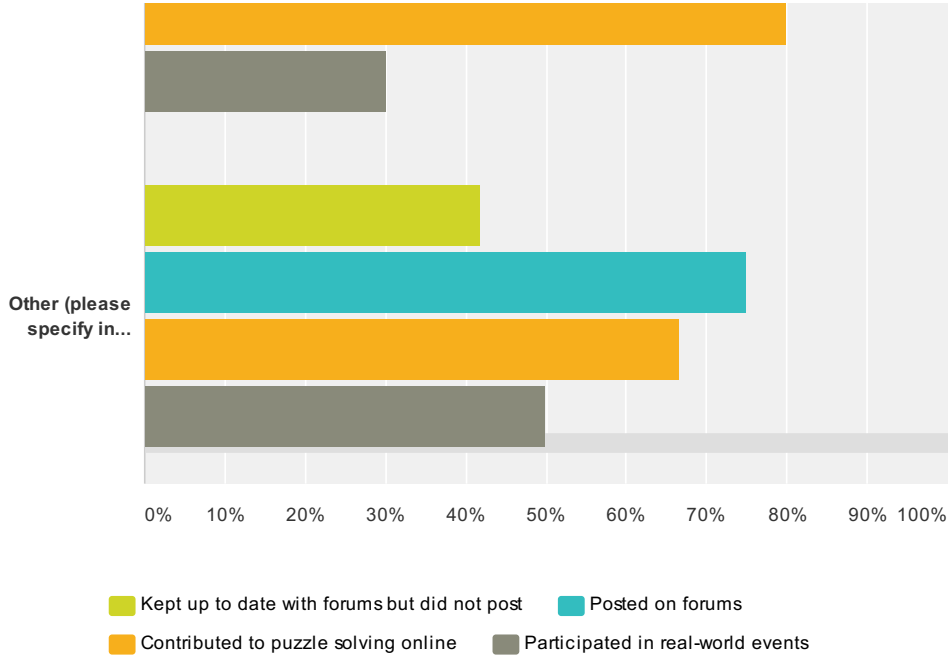
# Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

## Q9 Which of the following activities did you participate in when playing:

Answered: 27 Skipped: 11



### Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey



	Kept up to date with forums but did not post	Posted on forums	Contributed to puzzle solving online	Participated in real-world events	Total Respondents
The Beast	25.00% 1	75.00% 3	50.00% 2	0.00% 0	4
Why So Serious	62.50% 5	50.00% 4	50.00% 4	37.50% 3	8
Super 8	46.15% 6	61.54% 8	69.23% 9	46.15% 6	13
LOST	42.86% 3	71.43% 5	57.14% 4	14.29% 1	7
Flynn Lives	30.00% 3	60.00% 6	80.00% 8	30.00% 3	10
Other (please specify in comments box)	41.67% 5	75.00% 9	66.67% 8	50.00% 6	12

#	Further Comments	Date
1	Alcatraz, I Love Bees	9/2/2013 7:07 PM
2	What i liked about Junko (granted, i came for the fake google mirror, but i stayed for this) was that the live drops were near my territory. I mean, it wasn't on my country, but it neither was on the US or EU, as it tends to be.	8/29/2013 12:46 AM
3	Rewriting the future	6/22/2013 7:40 PM
4	Portal 2 ARG, and Boards of Canada.	5/4/2013 2:47 PM
5	For all I have done: CTW, wallace 1&2, cardkeepers, 5gum (test subjects needed) and other small args	5/2/2013 11:32 PM
6	I Love Bees, Last Call Poker... oh, geez, just look at the last one	4/30/2013 10:27 PM
7	I didn't play any of those, so...	4/30/2013 6:36 AM
8	1-18-08	4/27/2013 11:47 AM

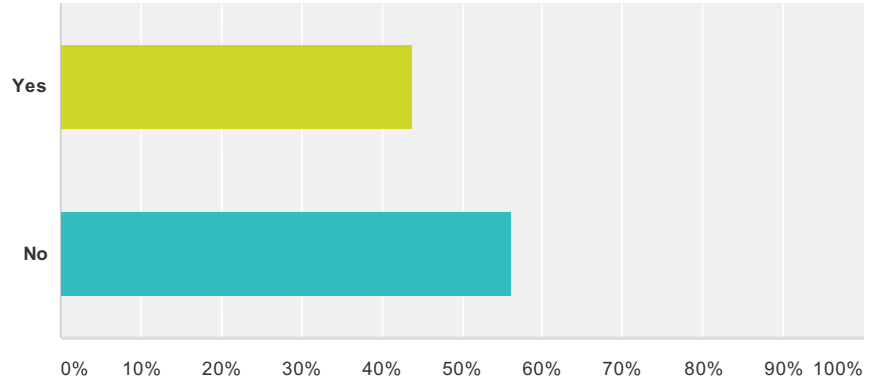
### Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

9	For Mission ice fly i worked with others to finish puzzles and progress further, same with Super 8.	4/26/2013 2:16 PM
10	Sadly, I didn't get introduced to ARGs until all of these were done with. I contributed to the chats, puzzle solving, phone calls and Trial videos during the CRUX-Crucible ARG though.	4/14/2013 11:28 PM
11	Cloverfield	4/13/2013 8:33 AM
12	was a chat room moderator during I Love Bees; was a forum moderator during the first LOST experience	4/12/2013 12:11 PM
13	I participated in live events in many German ARGs.	4/2/2013 3:21 PM
14	Was part of the team that produced Why So Serious, did not play Flynn Lives or Super8.	4/1/2013 10:00 AM
15	Lockjaw, I Love Bees, Last Call Poker	3/25/2013 7:16 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q10 Have you ever produced game content during an ARG?

Answered: 32 Skipped: 6



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	43.75%	14
No	56.25%	18
<b>Total</b>		<b>32</b>



## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q11 Please provide details of content you produced during the ARG.

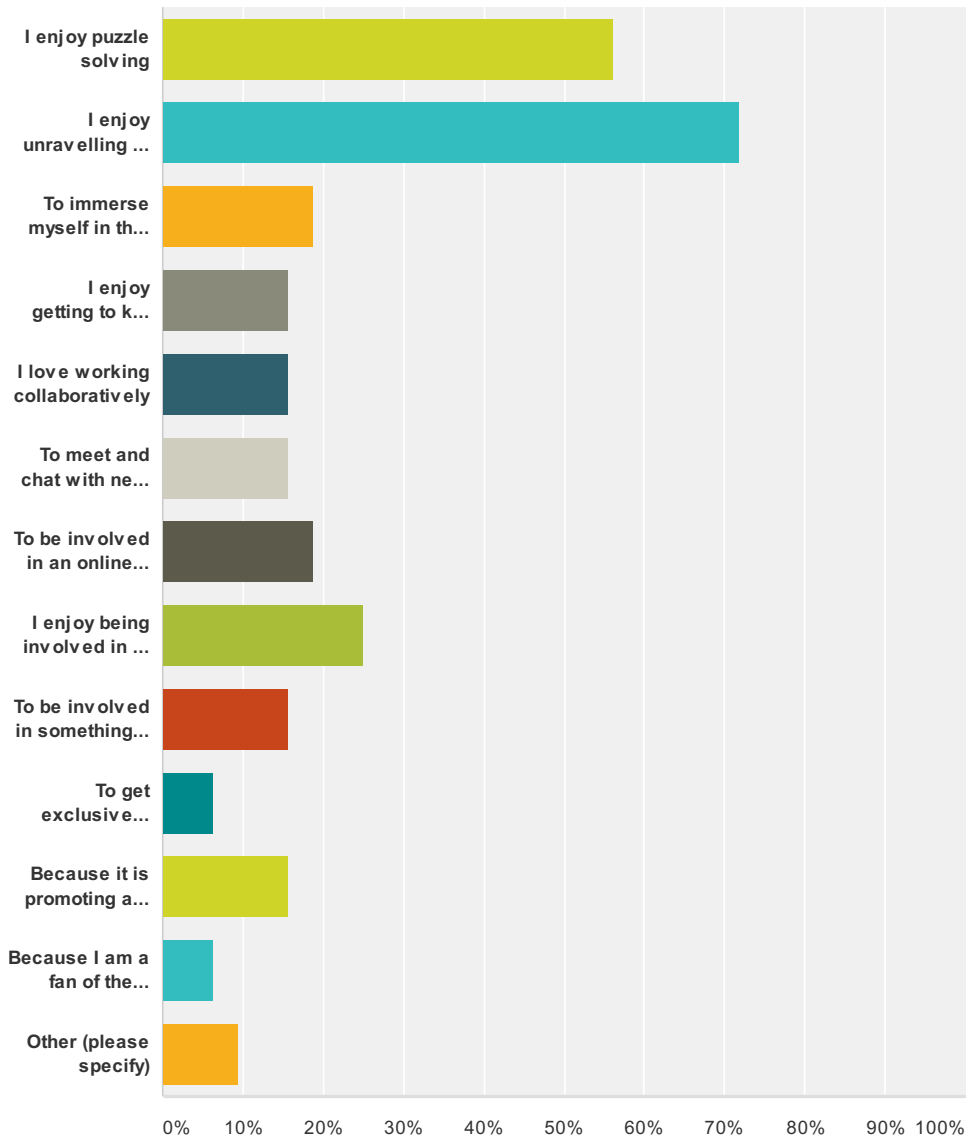
Answered: 14 Skipped: 24

#	Responses	Date
1	Telephone Conversations Small Movies Pictures	10/31/2013 9:32 AM
2	I'm working on my own ARG right now, but I helped provide pictures as part of a challenge for an ARG recently.	10/24/2013 9:50 AM
3	Wildfire Industries - created a couple of puzzles, and played an in game character in IRC chat, emails, etc.	5/29/2013 3:53 AM
4	Not necessarily related to advertising for film or corporate business, I created film and real world objects for What Is This Game? Heck, I even 'won' that ARG but the creators had a falling out just after the end and couldn't follow through with their promise.	5/2/2013 10:24 AM
5	Posts to characters, posts from characters, stories, photographs, a labyrinth	4/30/2013 10:29 PM
6	Well, I was on the production team for one, so quite a bit in the way of clues and physical arranging of public spaces.	4/30/2013 6:38 AM
7	I made a protest sign for the live Flynn Lives event in San Francisco.	4/26/2013 9:22 AM
8	I was pretty active in ilovebees, and the people running that game were happy enough to incorporate the input of players ... like adding payphones to their list	4/25/2013 7:29 AM
9	Responded to and recorded phone calls/transcribed text messages from 'donotcontinue' from the currently running My Dad's Tapes (currently the only one receiving phone calls since I'm his 'favorite') and from Baritone when the Crucible ARG was running. Participated in and recorded myself during the Crucibles/Trials of ARC during CRUX-Crucible. Helped solve puzzles and participate in in-game chats with Crucible.	4/14/2013 11:30 PM
10	image	4/12/2013 5:19 PM
11	Collaborative YouTube videos, personal YouTube video, news articles, created a wiki, contributed to a wiki	4/12/2013 12:19 PM
12	To some ARGs I produced an ingame forum for player to communicate with characters without penetration the meta level (like Forum for Junko Junsui). To other ARGs I produced some creative content, which was used ingame (like userpic of Molok0 for Star Trek ARG). I never gamejacked ARGs, but I have slightly tendency to spread creative products in the ingame world - and I am always glad, if PMs are playing this.	4/2/2013 3:24 PM
13	The ARG. :)	4/1/2013 10:00 AM
14	Puzzle trail for end of Lockjaw, including one.mp3	3/25/2013 7:16 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q12 Which of the following most closely describes your main reasons for playing ARGS? (Select the three most relevant):

Answered: 32 Skipped: 6



Answer Choices	Responses
I enjoy puzzle solving	56.25% 18
I enjoy unravelling the story online	71.88% 23
To immerse myself in the world of the film/tv show	18.75% 6
I enjoy getting to know the characters	15.63% 5

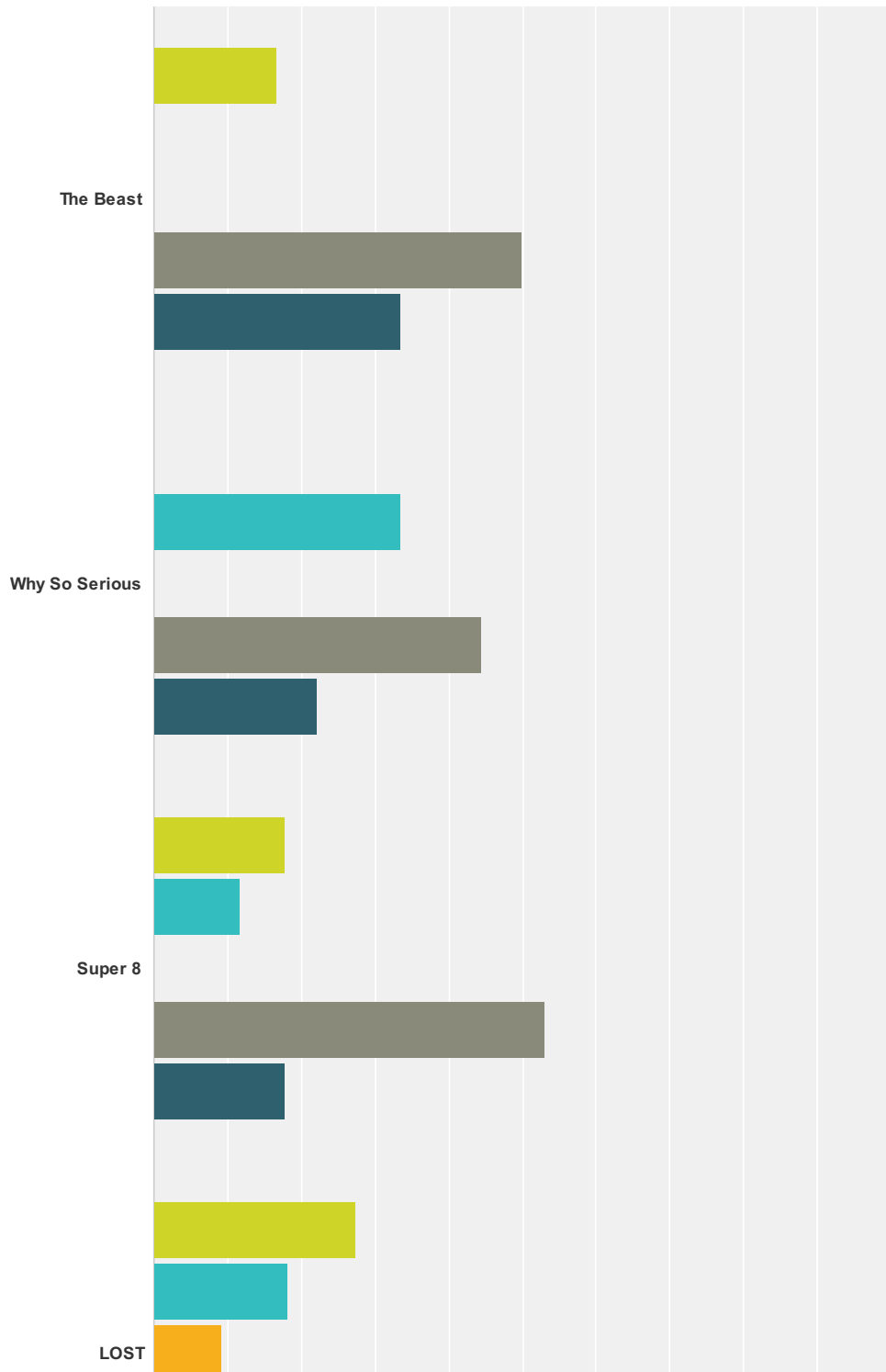
## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

I love working collaboratively	15.63%	5
To meet and chat with new people who share my interests	15.63%	5
To be involved in an online community	18.75%	6
I enjoy being involved in a collective experience that's bigger than me	25.00%	8
To be involved in something other people might not know about	15.63%	5
To get exclusive information and clips from forthcoming films/tv shows	6.25%	2
Because it is promoting a film/tv show I am already excited about	15.63%	5
Because I am a fan of the producer/director of the film/tv show it promotes	6.25%	2
Other (please specify)	9.38%	3
<b>Total Respondents: 32</b>		
<b>#</b>		
<b>Other (please specify)</b>		<b>Date</b>
1	I find ARG's most exciting because they make the people playing it feel like they're doing exciting and meaningful work while having fun, a-la Shutter Island. I also believe they can become a powerful teaching tool if used correctly, but that's still quite a ways from becoming reality.	8/29/2013 12:48 AM
2	1. Really to provide a deeper back-story to the film/series that you would fail to get on passive viewing, but in an interesting format. 2. To learn about aspects of cryptography through creative puzzles	6/27/2013 11:52 PM
3	ARGs are for me one of the appearance of transmedial genre, which is imho future of our culture - interactivity, activity and creativity plus communication with author through his fiction - this is what does fascinate me at the most.	4/2/2013 3:27 PM

Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

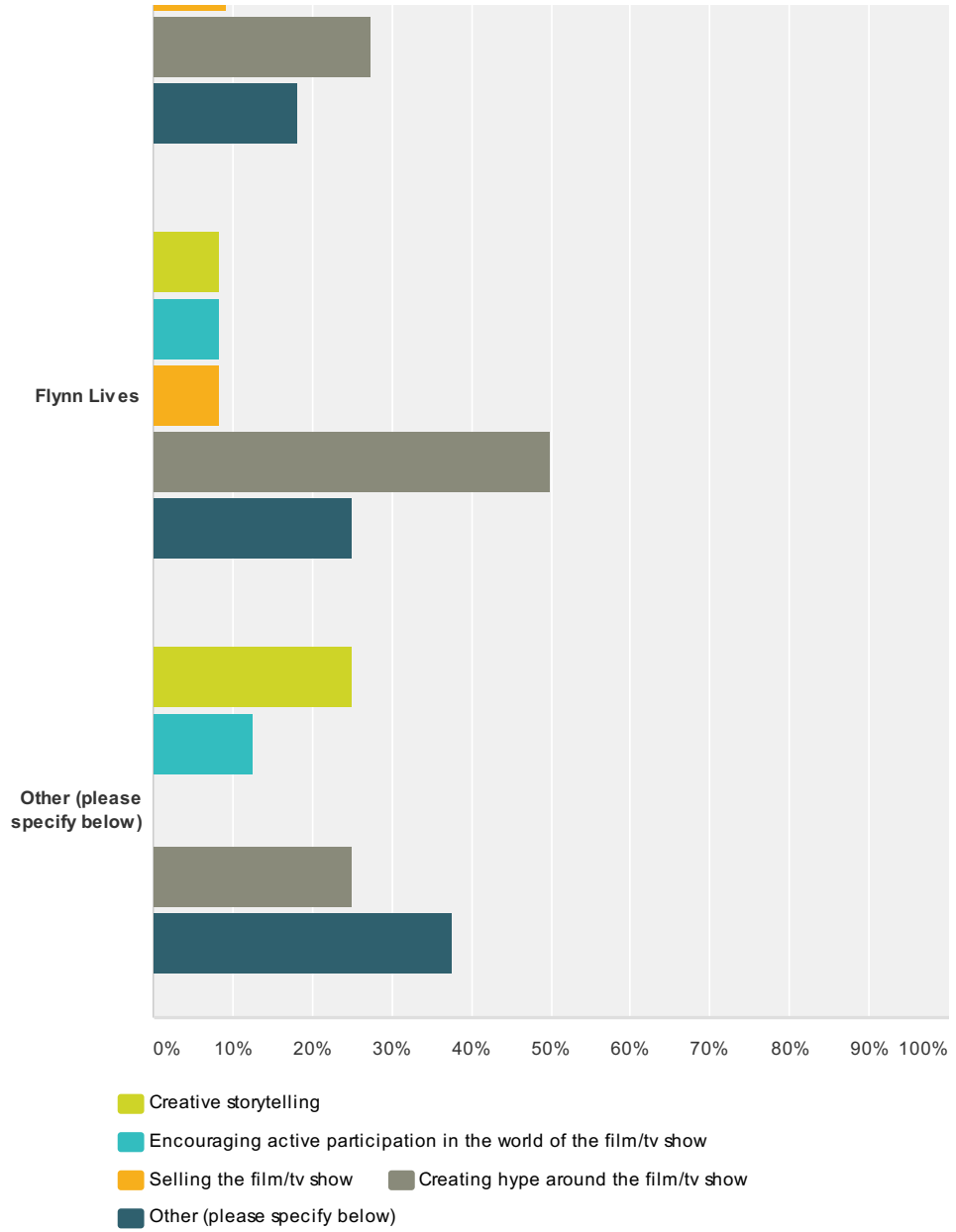
**Q13 When playing the ARGs listed below, what did you feel was the main purpose behind them?**

Answered: 26 Skipped: 12



18 / 56

### Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey



	Creative storytelling	Encouraging active participation in the world of the film/tv show	Selling the film/tv show	Creating hype around the film/tv show	Other (please specify below)	Total
The Beast	16.67% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	50.00% 3	33.33% 2	6
Why So Serious	0.00% 0	33.33% 3	0.00% 0	44.44% 4	22.22% 2	9
Super 8	17.65% 3	11.76% 2	0.00% 0	52.94% 9	17.65% 3	17
LOST	27.27% 3	18.18% 2	9.09% 1	27.27% 3	18.18% 2	11

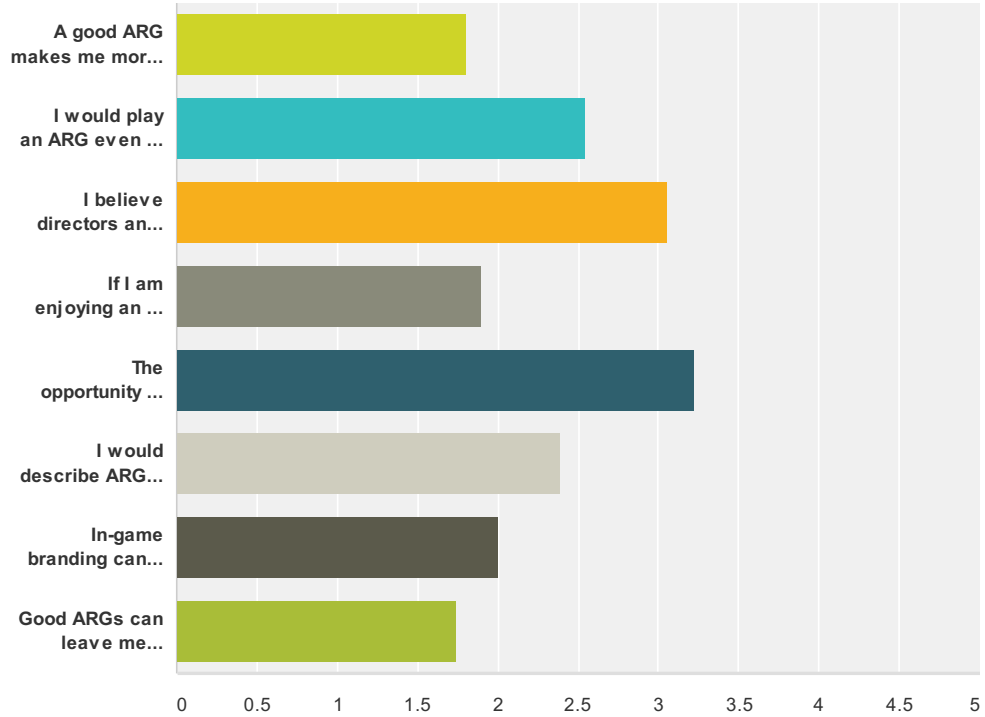
## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

Flynn Lives	<b>8.33%</b> 1	<b>8.33%</b> 1	<b>8.33%</b> 1	<b>50.00%</b> 6	<b>25.00%</b> 3	12
Other (please specify below)	<b>25.00%</b> 2	<b>12.50%</b> 1	<b>0.00%</b> 0	<b>25.00%</b> 2	<b>37.50%</b> 3	8
#	Further Comments					Date
1	Dexter					6/27/2013 11:53 PM
2	Rewriting the future: Presenting challenges that encouraged a skill learning to solve					6/22/2013 7:41 PM
3	Portal 2 had enough hype before the ARG, and was focused on creative storytelling and expanding the in-game universe. Boards of Canada had no story or characters to speak of, and was used solely to promote the album.					5/4/2013 2:49 PM
4	Few of mine have been directly film/show related					5/2/2013 11:33 PM
5	I don't feel these choices are mutually exclusive. In creating hype around the film/tv show, they ARE selling the show. In encouraging active participation, they ARE creating hype. In creative story telling (*IF* they had it, which none of the Lost Experience "games" did) they are encouraging active participation.					4/30/2013 8:24 AM
6	Again, the only two 'major' ones I'm a part of are My Dad's Tapes and Crucible. Both of them the main purpose was 'hey we have a great story so let's share it with people'. No advertisement involved.					4/14/2013 11:33 PM
7	Cloverfield					4/13/2013 8:34 AM
8	honestly the PURPOSE of them all is about marketing the show or brand but the choice to do the KIND of ARG they did varied with the property (I cannot judge the ones I did not play)					4/12/2013 12:19 PM
9	Promotional ARGs exist to create hype and market the property. Period.					4/1/2013 10:01 AM
10	Did not play or follow Super 8 or Flynn Lives					3/25/2013 7:18 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q14 How far do you agree with the following statements?

Answered: 31 Skipped: 7



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Average Rating
A good ARG makes me more likely to see the film/tv show it is promoting	41.94% 13	38.71% 12	16.13% 5	3.23% 1	0.00% 0	31	1.81
I would play an ARG even if I was not interested in the film/tv show it is promoting	12.90% 4	41.94% 13	22.58% 7	22.58% 7	0.00% 0	31	2.55
I believe directors and producers have a high level of input into ARGs which promote their films	3.23% 1	32.26% 10	29.03% 9	25.81% 8	9.68% 3	31	3.06
If I am enjoying an ARG I will encourage friends to play as well	45.16% 14	32.26% 10	9.68% 3	12.90% 4	0.00% 0	31	1.90
The opportunity to collect swag or merchandise is an important element of ARGs for me.	9.68% 3	12.90% 4	38.71% 12	22.58% 7	16.13% 5	31	3.23
I would describe ARGs as '#an intensely felt, emotionally affecting experience'.	22.58% 7	32.26% 10	32.26% 10	9.68% 3	3.23% 1	31	2.39
In-game branding can be used effectively in ARGs if it makes sense within the game world	26.67% 8	53.33% 16	13.33% 4	6.67% 2	0.00% 0	30	2.00
Good ARGs can leave me feeling emotionally invested in the film/tv show	48.39% 15	32.26% 10	16.13% 5	3.23% 1	0.00% 0	31	1.74

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

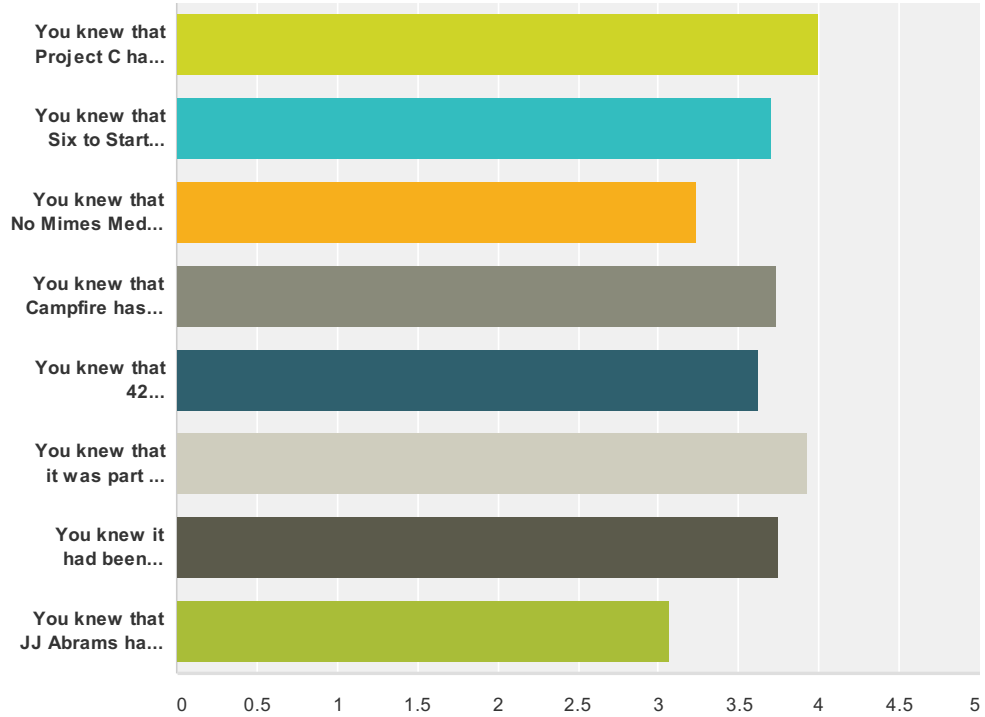
#	Further Comments	Date
1	<p>First: Hasn't happened yet. I already loved A.I., junko doesn't has a clear purpose, i was already a big fan of the MIB series            Second: Junko! Its sort of hard to be interested in something you don't know            Third: Sadly, i believe directors can be a lot more immersive in their approaches, but are not being so yet.            Fourth: Sure! The more the merrier, etc.            Fifth: If only... It would be really cool to get some, tho.            Sixth: Some, not all. If anything, it has the potential to be so in every case.            Seventh: Sure can! ARG's might be Alternate Realities, but in most cases they start in a realistic setting, only to change things as the story progresses, not necessarily denying previous real events.            Eighth: See first.</p>	8/29/2013 12:52 AM
2	<p>A good ARG should be able to integrate itself into a player's life with only a thin seam. It should be difficult to tell if the game is a game or if it's real or if it's the protagonist having a psychotic break            Here's a good example of 'doing it right' that's still going on:  <a href="http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=36166">http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=36166</a></p>	4/30/2013 6:43 AM
3	<p>I am using the current broad definition of ARG as any online game and not necessarily a story-driven immersive experience (which is becoming a rare thing)</p>	4/12/2013 12:21 PM



## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q15 Would you be more or less likely to play an ARG if:

Answered: 29 Skipped: 9



	I would definitely play	Much more likely	A little more likely	No more/less likely	A little less likely	A lot less likely	I would definitely not play	Total	Average Rating
You knew that Project C had been involved.	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	4.17% 1	91.67% 22	4.17% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	24	4.00
You knew that Six to Start had been involved.	0.00% 0	4.17% 1	20.83% 5	75.00% 18	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	24	3.71
You knew that No Mimes Media had been involved.	8.00% 2	16.00% 4	20.00% 5	56.00% 14	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	25	3.24
You knew that Campfire has been involved.	0.00% 0	8.70% 2	13.04% 3	73.91% 17	4.35% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	23	3.74
You knew that 42 Entertainment had been involved.	3.45% 1	17.24% 5	17.24% 5	48.28% 14	6.90% 2	3.45% 1	3.45% 1	29	3.62
You knew that it was part of a marketing campaign	0.00% 0	3.57% 1	25.00% 7	53.57% 15	10.71% 3	7.14% 2	0.00% 0	28	3.93
You knew it had been produced by a larger media company e.g. Paramount, Fox, Warner Brothers	0.00% 0	17.86% 5	28.57% 8	32.14% 9	7.14% 2	10.71% 3	3.57% 1	28	3.75
You knew that JJ Abrams had been involved	25.00% 7	10.71% 3	21.43% 6	28.57% 8	7.14% 2	3.57% 1	3.57% 1	28	3.07

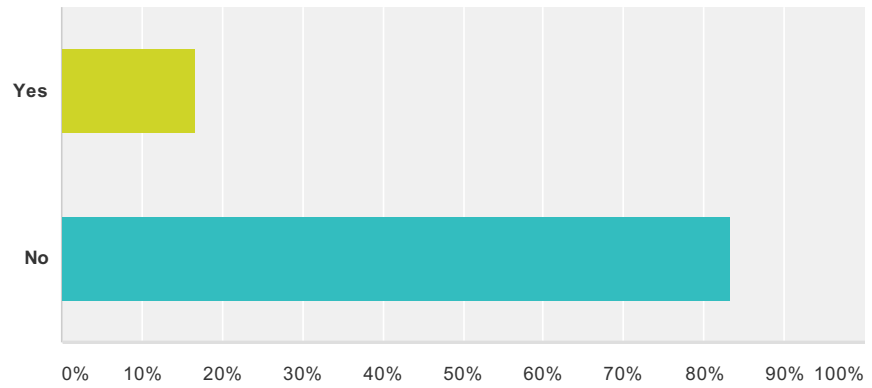
## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

#	Further Comments	Date
1	I've heard those names as references to other ARG's, but have never witnessed their works firsthand, so i'm not exactly a big fan of them, sorry! Regarding larger media companies, i've seen some cases where the in-game pages have links to Privacy Contracts or Terms Of Site pages completely OOG, which is a big no-no for me. Knowing that an ARG is part of a marketing campaign sort of takes away the 'TINAG', but its no biggie.	8/29/2013 12:55 AM
2	I'm not familiar with the first 4 organizations.	5/4/2013 2:52 PM
3	Nice. A separate category for Abrams. That's actually kinda funny.	5/2/2013 10:28 AM
4	If Fourth Wall Studios were still making ARGs I would definitely play	4/30/2013 10:31 PM
5	I'm much more attatched to grassroots PMs than to promotional Ad Camp companies.	4/30/2013 8:28 AM
6	I don't pay attention to who makes games, largely because it's not going to influence my decision to play, in most cases. I'll play if it's an engaging trailhead.	4/30/2013 6:47 AM
7	the Cloverfield campaign started so badly and generated such a waste of forum space that it deterred me from giving Super8 any of my time	4/12/2013 12:22 PM
8	There are many other developers out there who have, quite honestly, surpassed 42 in quality and scope, at this point. Campfire, Ignition, GMD studios, Six to Start, etc. 42 is currently pretty irrelevant in the ARG landscape, as everything they do nowadays is formulaic and exploits the player community in a way that's not good. Your mileage may vary. :)	4/1/2013 10:04 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q16 Have you ever been contacted by PMs or media companies to take part in market research?

Answered: 30 Skipped: 8



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	16.67%	5
No	83.33%	25
<b>Total</b>		<b>30</b>

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q17 Please provide some details of the market research you were asked to participate in.

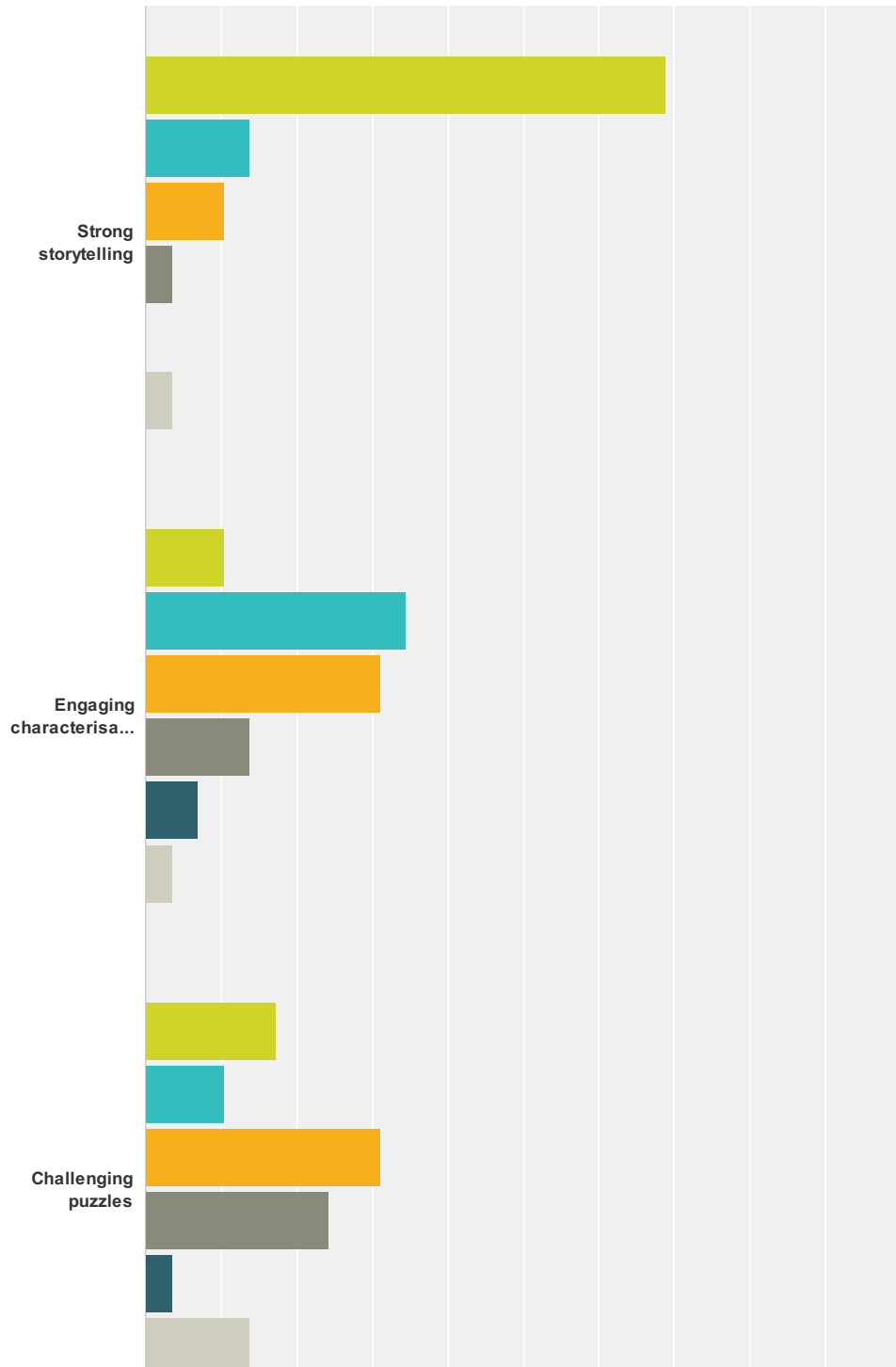
Answered: 5 Skipped: 33

#	Responses	Date
1	I've gone to several test screenings of films over the years, where we had to fill out survey cards afterwards.	4/26/2013 9:26 AM
2	I have taken surveys for doctoral candidates so often that I cannot remember which PM also posted a survey link but it might have been for Andrea Philips for her book?	4/12/2013 12:23 PM
3	I distinctly remember that Find the Lost Ring did a post-game survey...IGDA also does annual surveys...there might be a few more I'm forgetting.	4/12/2013 12:22 PM
4	They asked me about statistics of my blog, since I was blogging about them.	4/2/2013 3:30 PM
5	Post-mortems and surveys just like this.	4/1/2013 10:04 AM

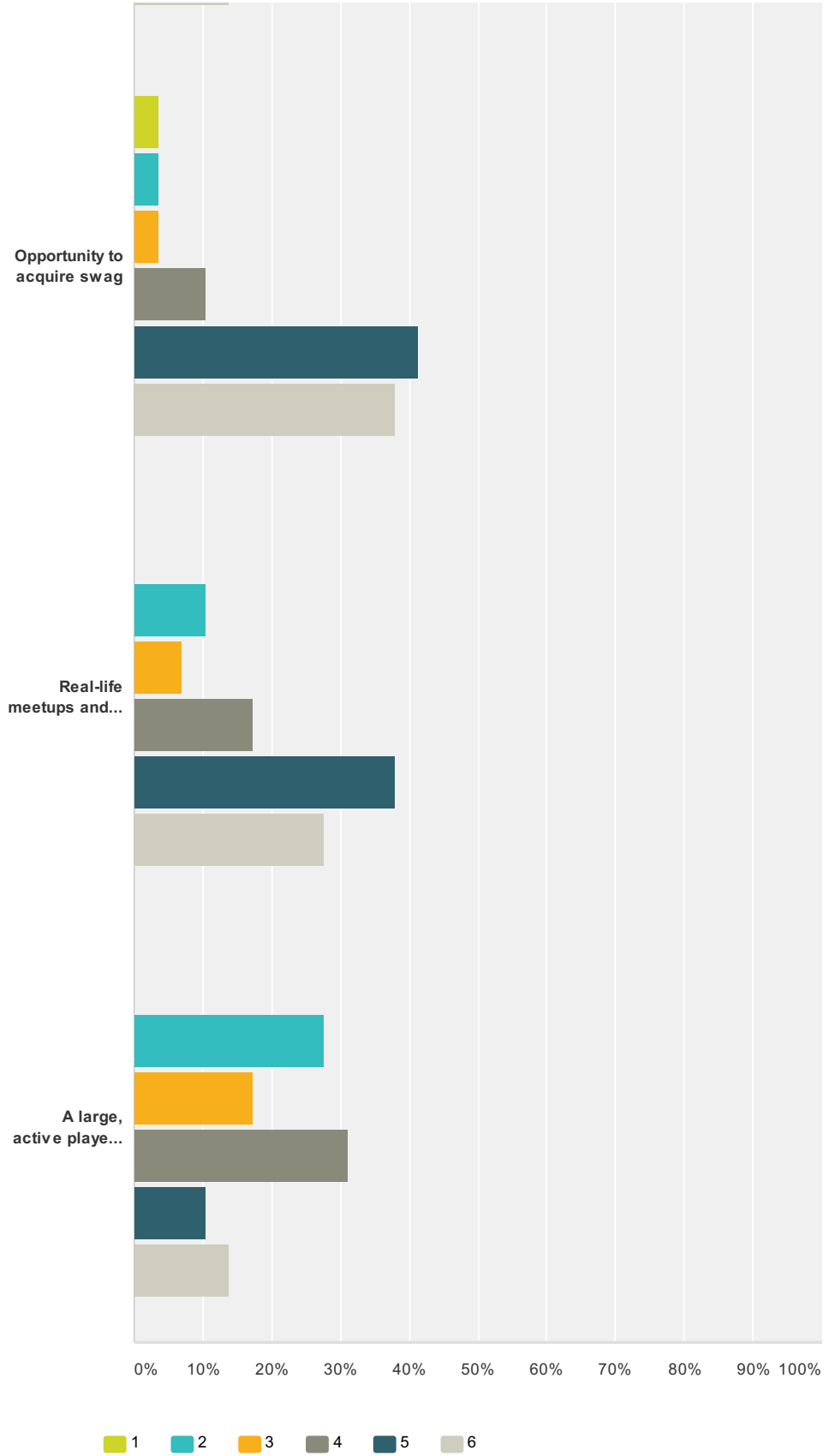
Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

**Q18 Which of the following are the most important elements of an ARG? (Rank in order of importance, 1 being most important)**

Answered: 29 Skipped: 9



### Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey



## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total	Average Ranking
Strong storytelling	68.97% 20	13.79% 4	10.34% 3	3.45% 1	0.00% 0	3.45% 1	29	5.38
Engaging characterisation	10.34% 3	34.48% 10	31.03% 9	13.79% 4	6.90% 2	3.45% 1	29	4.17
Challenging puzzles	17.24% 5	10.34% 3	31.03% 9	24.14% 7	3.45% 1	13.79% 4	29	3.72
Opportunity to acquire swag	3.45% 1	3.45% 1	3.45% 1	10.34% 3	41.38% 12	37.93% 11	29	2.03
Real-life meetups and games	0.00% 0	10.34% 3	6.90% 2	17.24% 5	37.93% 11	27.59% 8	29	2.34
A large, active player community	0.00% 0	27.59% 8	17.24% 5	31.03% 9	10.34% 3	13.79% 4	29	3.34

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q19 Please specify any other elements not listed here which you feel are also important.

Answered: 6 Skipped: 32

#	Responses	Date
1	PMs with a lot of time on their hands	5/4/2013 8:14 AM
2	It seems silly to separate "Strong storytelling" and "Engaging characterization" because you can't have a strong story without engaging characters.	4/30/2013 10:33 PM
3	Chances to discover things hidden about a movie	4/26/2013 2:21 PM
4	None.	4/14/2013 11:36 PM
5	THE WIDGET in Q17 is broken and will not let me change the ranking order! I put PUZZLES as number 1, with charaters and story equally next, swag can be last, the rest are equally low.	4/12/2013 12:28 PM
6	Strong and elaborate ingame communication between characters and players. This was the most misunderstood topic for many PMs whose games I played. Because every little answer of one character let raise rapidly the motivation to play this ARG.	4/2/2013 3:34 PM



## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q20 Why have you ranked the top three as most important?

Answered: 22 Skipped: 16

#	Responses	Date
1	I like being able to interact with the characters, and that often requires strong storytelling. I also enjoy puzzles, and they make a game more fun.	10/24/2013 9:53 AM
2	I believe ARG/CF's are, above anything else, tools to tell a story. As such, if the story's not told well, it's disappointing to say the least. IRL meetups and diversions are the best way to leave a mark in the player, in my opinion. Sure, hacking and cracking online is fun and hard and interesting and whatever you want it to be, but nothing compares to the experience of actually having to get out of your PC and go out to search for something most people don't know how to look for, specially nowadays when it's easier for most to search hidden indexes on the deep web for secret archives than go to your local library and find a book on world history.	8/29/2013 12:58 AM
3	See earlier	6/27/2013 11:55 PM
4	Because challenges is what attract me to the genre, collaborative work is essential to the trully difficult challenges, and I like a good story.	6/22/2013 7:44 PM
5	The most engaging part of the whole experience is the story that is being told combined with the people who are playing along with you. So anything that is elaborating on the story and the people playing needs to be most important.	5/6/2013 3:40 PM
6	They're what makes an ARG unique and interesting.	5/4/2013 2:59 PM
7	The true merit of any ARG is going to be its ability to tell a story. You can play games and puzzles all day long without any context. You can get promotional materials without understanding history. A great ARG will primarily be based on a good story with active characters that gets you, the player, involved in such a way that the fictional realm bleeds into your everyday life.	5/2/2013 10:34 AM
8	If there's no story then it's not Alternate Reality, and if there are no challenges then it's not a Game.	4/30/2013 10:33 PM
9	Without story telling, there is nothing to make it feel "real" - without good characters, it becomes a cliché - and without puzzles, it isn't a game.	4/30/2013 8:29 AM
10	Without those three, there is no game. 5&6 are largely unappealing to me, and 4 is unnecessary to success; small, dedicated teams are just as good, and in some cases more effective.	4/30/2013 6:49 AM
11	Everything needs a good story	4/26/2013 2:21 PM
12	I want to be invested in the story of the ARG if I'm going to invest my time into it. However, I'm also a memorabilia collector, so I may play games even if the story is not top-notch—if the prizes and rewards are cool and/or attainable.	4/26/2013 9:29 AM
13	If the three items I selected as most important work together to form a cohesive storyline, the experience can be quite engaging - the Cloverfield and Super 8 ARG's both proved to be addictive.	4/26/2013 9:07 AM
14	The story is the central issue; is it compelling? I like puzzles, they are fun! Part of a strong story is characters that are worth your interest.	4/25/2013 7:32 AM
15	ARGs are, to me, all about becoming a part of something bigger and getting to engage directly with the community of players as well as the characters themselves. Some ARGs don't really have the interaction with the characters element, and to me, that doesn't make it a real ARG. It's just a new way of telling a story.	4/14/2013 11:36 PM
16	I want an ARG to feel like a real-life game that I'm playing, and you can't have that without the top 2. Challenging puzzles are another important element for me because they give the players more interactivity with the story since it can't (or shouldn't) progress until the puzzle has been completed and something has been "unlocked" to further the story for the players. I'm too busy and don't live in a popular area for ARGs so meetups are not important to me, nor our goodies.	4/13/2013 8:39 AM

### Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

17	I want a good story as much as a well-written book or a well-acted movie, but I got into ARGs to solve challenges most of all.	4/12/2013 12:28 PM
18	Story comes first for me, but a strong community can fill in the gaps the "official" storytelling falls short on.	4/12/2013 12:23 PM
19	These are the ones that most peaked my interests	4/6/2013 11:33 AM
20	Because ARG is for me new genre: immersive, creative, cooperative	4/2/2013 3:34 PM
21	Story is fundamental, as are a good player-base to gain critical mass.	4/1/2013 10:05 AM
22	Engagement comes from good material to be engaged in.	3/25/2013 7:19 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q21 How important is it to you that there is a strong connection between the ARG story/characters and the film/tv show story/characters?

Answered: 30 Skipped: 8

Very important	Quite important	Quite unimportant	Very unimportant	Don't know	Total	Average Rating
6.67% 2	43.33% 13	23.33% 7	13.33% 4	13.33% 4	30	2.83

### Q22 Why is/isn't this important to you?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 18

#	Responses	Date
1	It builds upon the universe.	10/24/2013 9:54 AM
2	Dexter is good example. It was related but not directly, but still provided a really good backstory	6/27/2013 11:57 PM
3	The game by it's own right is more important.	6/22/2013 7:44 PM
4	I like the idea of a game that has a small tie in to the actual story or characters of the film. But other than that I like it to be its own story in itself. It makes me more interested to go see the film and try and find the smaller connection between the two.	5/6/2013 3:42 PM
5	It can give additional insight to the world of the characters without relying on them for narrative.	5/4/2013 3:00 PM
6	Having an ARG use characters that are not somehow linked to the film/show may be challenging for the player to involve themselves emotionally.	5/2/2013 10:43 AM
7	If the story is strong and the characters are engaging, it doesn't matter whether they're also primary characters in the property being promoted. Sometimes it gives ARG creators more freedom when they can create their own characters in the universe, and they have a lot more strictures when using pre-existing characters. (Examples: Harvey Dent in Why So Serious? -- everyone knew he was going to win the election -- and Kevin Flynn in Flynn Lives -- everyone knew we weren't going to be able to find him anywhere)	4/30/2013 10:35 PM
8	Not sure.	4/30/2013 8:29 AM
9	The connection isn't the most important thing, but I appreciate it greatly after having invested myself in the world for such an extended period of time.	4/27/2013 11:54 AM
10	Most off the args are more enjoyable if they tell you about the film. There are a few exception; ie. Super 8 which didn't tell to much but still created a bit of the aliens backstory	4/26/2013 2:23 PM
11	If there is no connection, it makes me feel like one of many sheep in a marketing campaign. In most cases, I feel like I've been involved--even an asset--to the product's campaign, when the ARG and filmic stories are connected and my enthusiasm shows.	4/26/2013 9:32 AM
12	The ARG should provbide more info about the movie, and when it ends, you should feel a sense of closure - Super 8 didn't really do that, and I felt there was a large part of the ARG that was not explained.	4/26/2013 9:09 AM
13	Investment	4/26/2013 7:16 AM
14	A good story can stand on its own ... it need not even touch the 'mainstream' story necessarily if it entertains in its own right.	4/25/2013 7:33 AM
15	If the ARG is too directly related to the film/TV show then I would be worried about spoiling some aspects that I would find out by watching the movie/show. If it has to be connected to a movie then I would prefer it to involve completely different characters or just reveal background information I wouldn't normally get that wouldn't negatively impact my viewing of the movie or show later on.	4/13/2013 8:41 AM

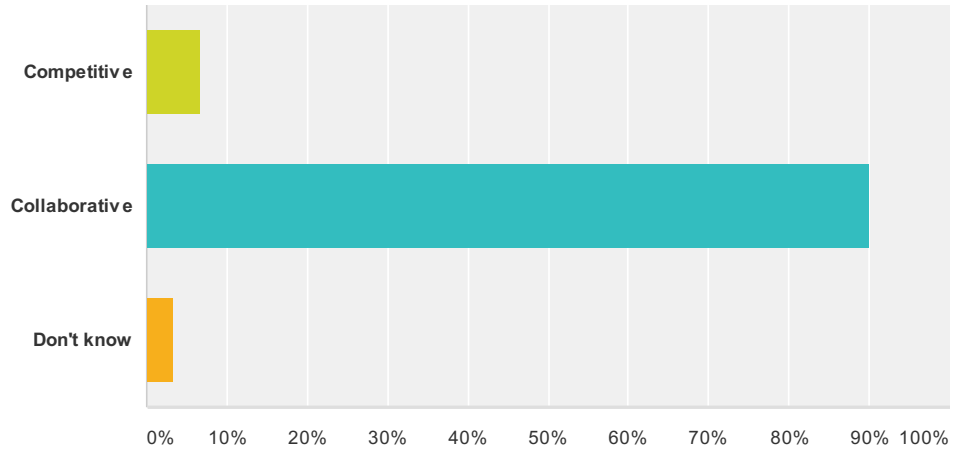
## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

16	I am happy to engage with a parallel set of characters in the same universe but I still want some connection to the main property to make it worth the investment of my time.	4/12/2013 12:29 PM
17	Some of my favorite experiences (the Dexter ARG) were able to exercise greater creative freedom by being only thematically related.	4/12/2013 12:23 PM
18	If the film/tv show has no ties to the ARG then there is essentially no point in making one just to lead fans on a wild goose chase leading nowhere	4/6/2013 11:34 AM
19	Actually, if the ARG story and narratives are interesting, I am even able to miss all these themes in the movie/book. Sometimes are ARGs better than the product.	4/2/2013 3:36 PM
20	Ideally, the ARG should feel like it's part of the same story it's promoting, assuming it's a promotional ARG.	4/1/2013 10:06 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q23 Do you prefer competitive or collaborative puzzles?

Answered: 30 Skipped: 8



Answer Choices	Responses
Competitive	6.67% 2
Collaborative	90.00% 27
Don't know	3.33% 1
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q24 Why do you prefer this kind of puzzle?

Answered: 24 Skipped: 14

#	Responses	Date
1	It was fun to see everyone doing their part. It also makes me feel a little less left out, because I'm not always capable of solving puzzles.	10/24/2013 9:55 AM
2	Not only competitive puzzles make half of the people involved "lose", but to have more people working on a single objective allows a puzzle to grow in complexity and depth. Besides, the collaboration between players may give a feeling of alliance between them, as long as its not overdone (see Tapjoint)	8/29/2013 1:00 AM
3	A bit of both actually. It should be balanced	6/27/2013 11:58 PM
4	It trains an important real life skill, and if I was going for puzzles I can solve alone, I would stick to solo-play internet puzzles	6/22/2013 7:45 PM
5	Makes you feel like part of a community.	5/29/2013 3:59 AM
6	It brings the community together and that is one of my top interests in an ARG.	5/6/2013 3:42 PM
7	It encourages real thinking instead of hurrying to the complete the puzzle before anyone else.	5/4/2013 3:01 PM
8	I certainly love being the first person to post a solution to a puzzle or share previously unknown information. If an ARG has some difficult puzzles, I still like to solve them on my own. Me is a big fan of spoiler tags.	5/2/2013 10:45 AM
9	Just my preference, I guess. Generally better when we're all working together towards progressing the story, rather than refusing to share information because we're all competing with each other instead.	4/30/2013 10:36 PM
10	ARGs are meant to be collaborative. When you foster competition, you foster the opposite spirit of intentions. Communities become full of anger, and lies/mistruths.	4/30/2013 8:30 AM
11	It's the PvE vs PvP question. I prefer PvE games, overall, and therefore, I like my ARGs to be PvE, as well. Competition against NPCs or IG organizations? Excellent. Against other players? I'm bored and no longer engaged.	4/30/2013 6:52 AM
12	I'm just in it for the fun of the game.	4/27/2013 11:55 AM
13	A team is always more fun than working alone	4/26/2013 2:24 PM
14	Because everyone is a winner. If I put in the time and effort for a prize or goal and I don't get it, I get frustrated and upset (especially if I'm passionate about the game).	4/26/2013 9:33 AM
15	The competitive challenges seem to favor people that can spend all day online – not everybody can do that, and players should not be penalized for this.	4/26/2013 9:10 AM
16	These tend to be more challenging, and requiring the efforts of many to effectively tackle. I find this more interesting.	4/25/2013 7:34 AM
17	Again, ARGs for me are all about the collective.	4/14/2013 11:37 PM
18	Part of the major reason I like ARGs are because it's a bunch of people putting their skills together to find a solution. The community aspect is very important to me, but making it into a competition breaks up that community and turns it more individualistic.	4/13/2013 8:42 AM
19	I do not need the stress of a leaderboard or conflict with others and prefer to feel the sense of community working towards a common goal.	4/12/2013 12:30 PM
20	I'm not personally the best puzzle solver (even though I go out to the MIT Mystery Hunt), but working together, I get to feel like a hero by getting specific aspects sometimes.	4/12/2013 12:24 PM
21	It gives everyone a chance to throw in their two cents	4/6/2013 11:35 AM
22	Because collaboration is most fascinating thing, and this experience you share with huge community.	4/2/2013 3:37 PM

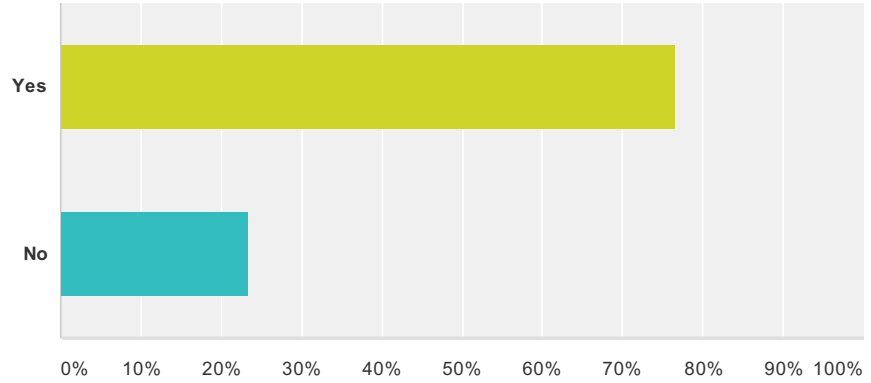
## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

23	Strongly think that competitive puzzles is the best way to kill your ARG. :)	4/1/2013 10:06 AM
24	It means I don't need to be an expert, just a cog in the machine.	3/25/2013 7:20 AM

Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

**Q25 Would you be able to explain what 'TINAG' means without looking it up?**

Answered: 30 Skipped: 8



Answer Choices		Responses	
Yes		76.67%	23
No		23.33%	7
<b>Total</b>			<b>30</b>

#	If you have answered YES please enter a brief definition here:	Date
	There are no responses.	



Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

**Q26 Please provide a brief definition of TINAG here.**

Answered: 0 Skipped: 38

#	Responses	Date
	There are no responses.	

**Q27 How important is it that TINAG is maintained?**

Answered: 23 Skipped: 15

Very important	Quite important	Quite unimportant	Very unimportant	Total	Average Rating
26.09% 6	60.87% 14	8.70% 2	4.35% 1	23	1.91

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q28 Why is/isn't this important to you?

Answered: 19 Skipped: 19

#	Responses	Date
1	It makes it feel very real to me and it helps me immerse myself within the universe.	10/24/2013 9:55 AM
2	As i mentioned back in the ARG makers part, TINAG is an extra which makes the story's flow more comfortable for both parties involved. Not only it erases the need of a reason to take the game seriously, but it gives that 'secret' and 'hidden' vibe coming from the game, which tends to appeal to most. To me, it makes the game scarier and harder to get into, but i believe that's too personal to be a general consensus.	8/29/2013 1:02 AM
3	For immersion, but it shouldn't be on the way of a good puzzle	6/22/2013 7:46 PM
4	I think it maintains the immersion. However, I have also seen games that don't particularly maintain TINAG and have still been very successful ARGs, so I don't think it's absolutely critical.	5/29/2013 4:00 AM
5	It adds to the investment you feel in what is going on. The more real everything seems the more emotionally invested you can get in it.	5/6/2013 3:44 PM
6	It's what makes the difference between an ARG and an advertisement.	5/4/2013 3:02 PM
7	Over the years, the concept of ARG has been muddled by lots of people misusing the true art. Certainly there have been few marketing campaigns that really kept the curtain closed, but now we have all of the multi-media promotions calling themselves ARGs. The real fun with a true ARG is that you start out -knowing- that you are playing a 'game' but later, when you are thoroughly involved, you are anxious to find out what the players are doing and what situations they have overcome with the assistance of you and your colleagues. It's a difficult process to get the player involved at this level, but a blatant disregard for TINAG will generally dissuade ARG players from further participation.	5/2/2013 10:56 AM
8	I'm a strong supporter of the slight emendation that Elan Lee and Sean Stewart made: They didn't mean "This Is Not A Game" -- of course it's a game! -- but, rather, "We Will Never Make You Feel Foolish For Treating This As If It Were Not A Game." It helps the players immerse themselves into the ARG world and story, which makes for a better, more compelling and memorable experience. And if you're trying for an immersive experience, it doesn't help if the PMs are (figuratively speaking) constantly winking at you and nudging you and saying things like, "Pretty cool game, huh?"	4/30/2013 10:39 PM
9	It keeps both players AND pms from over stepping certain boundries - however it is a very misinterpreted term.	4/30/2013 8:31 AM
10	As I said earlier, there should be integration with only a very thin seam. One should be able to get decently far into the game, still going 'is this a game? I can't tell'. It's so much easier to engage, when the characters take themselves seriously, and the PMs don't let light leak under the curtain.	4/30/2013 6:55 AM
11	As I said before, I don't like to feel like a marketing tool, but rather as a participant in the game/marketing technique. Maintenance of TINAG helps me connect with the product in a way where I don't feel like used.	4/26/2013 9:35 AM
12	In my understanding of the term, it is central to the premise of a believable piece of interactive fiction. If the world portrayed does not act like it is real / believe in itself ... then it's hard for it to be compelling. What would you call fiction that is self-aware in the sense that it knows it is just a story, doesn't have any consequences / or matter in the sense that the participants have a motivation of some kind ... boring.	4/25/2013 7:36 AM
13	If it's in The Beast sense of "if something goes wrong OOG we won't break the story or scene to tell you it went wrong" that's fine. I don't mind marketing an ARG with flyers or a website that says it's an ARG- One i'm currently creating is doing pretty much just that. We have the out of game archive website, and then everything else on the web (aside from uF) is 'in game'. We won't break the story to tell you "oh btw we're sponsored by so-and-so" but we might have a poster from that store show up in an episode.	4/14/2013 11:39 PM

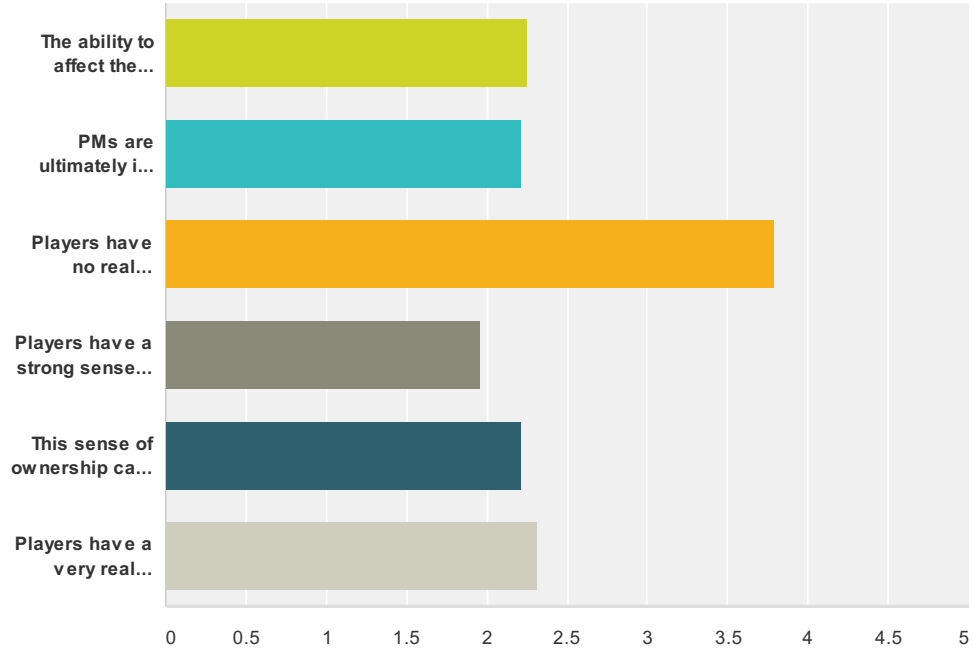
## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

#	Further Comments	Date
14	TINAG brings immersion and a sense of reality to the game. If I see links to developers, movies the ARG is promoting, or have to sign a user agreement before playing then I feel like all I'm agreeing to is being subjected to advertisements willingly and that their main goal is in selling me a product rather than creating something fun.	4/13/2013 8:44 AM
15	We know a movie or novel is fiction and can still enjoy it.	4/12/2013 12:32 PM
16	Rather than take up space in your answer field, see <a href="http://www.argn.com/2012/02/a_fond_farewell_to_this_is_not_a_game/">http://www.argn.com/2012/02/a_fond_farewell_to_this_is_not_a_game/</a>	4/12/2013 12:26 PM
17	Difficult question. Some games speaking about TINAG are immersive and let disappear the boundaries between fiction and reality. Another games calling about TINAG are confusing in some negative way. But mostly in order to feel the "being-there"-Experience I would prefer TINAG.	4/2/2013 3:40 PM
18	Not important at all, today, as there is so much noise that you really NEED to be overt in your promotion of your game. It's ok to make it FEEL a little TINAG, though.	4/1/2013 10:07 AM
19	It's crucial to the game dynamic that the game characters exist in a world where they believe that they are not part of a game. Otherwise, the game lacks credibility and authenticity.	3/25/2013 7:23 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q29 How far do you agree with the following statements?

Answered: 28 Skipped: 10



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Average Rating
The ability to affect the outcome of an ARG is one of the genre's main attractions	17.86% 5	50.00% 14	25.00% 7	3.57% 1	3.57% 1	28	2.25
PMs are ultimately in control of any ARG.	21.43% 6	46.43% 13	21.43% 6	10.71% 3	0.00% 0	28	2.21
Players have no real ownership over the ARGs they play.	0.00% 0	7.14% 2	17.86% 5	64.29% 18	10.71% 3	28	3.79
Players have a strong sense of ownership over the ARGs they play	28.57% 8	46.43% 13	25.00% 7	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	28	1.96
This sense of ownership can extend the films/tv shows they are promoting.	17.86% 5	50.00% 14	25.00% 7	7.14% 2	0.00% 0	28	2.21
Players have a very real ownership of ARGs because they can influence the game as it is played.	25.00% 7	25.00% 7	42.86% 12	7.14% 2	0.00% 0	28	2.32

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

#	Further Comments	Date
1	Oookay, pointy subject here. I believe a good PM can trick players into believing they're giving him a hard time and yet keep control over the ARG at every given point. Players feel they're controlling the ARG because most ARGs tend to be 'interactive', meaning the relationship between PM and player is both-ways; not just a 'PM gives content to Players', but a 'Players give input to PM' too. Sort of like a rubik cube which is passed between two people, each giving it one spin each time. Also, the sense of ownership extends not only to the game, but to whichever media the games promote. Take for example Prometheus' ARG. Not only the players 'participated' in the creation of one of the main characters of the movie, but they also made possible the plot by decoding the messages that drive our cast into their spacial voyage. As such, ARG players can't help but feel like 'I'm important! I made the game come true!'. Another good example is the I Love Bees ARG, but i dont know that much about it so i can't give good examples. As for the real ownership ARG players have over it... as i said before, a good PM can control the degree of ownership the ARG players feel they have, but a DAMN GOOD PM knows the input of ARG players should not be completely negated because most times players purpose interesting ideas to make the media related more interesting. Ultimately, i feel this is like a company receiving suggestions from the public. A bad company disregards them, a good company makes the public feel acknowledged, and a great company actually takes them into consideration.	8/29/2013 1:09 AM
2	"PMs are ultimately in control of any ARG." I laughed. And then I laughed some more. Anyone who's ever been a tabletop GM can tell you there will always be that one player who will do something you seriously didn't predict, that has the potential to derail the entire game. A good PM should be extremely capable of damage control. I'm also not sure how to speak of 'ownership', here. A player obviously owns what they produce. A PM or design team own what they produce. A game is a collaborative effort between the PM and the players, in which 'ownership' seems a little silly. It matters that a good PM has designed some good content, to get things going, and that some good players then got into that content and expanded it both toward the logical end and in ways the PM never originally anticipated. It's up to the players to force the world open with their actions and questions.	4/30/2013 7:01 AM
3	Statements 1, 2, and 6 really depend on issues of design and puppetmaster decisions. They can open the doors to influence or control by players, or shut them.	4/25/2013 7:37 AM
4	The idea of "ownership" is what makes ARGs that exist to promote something problematic because these ARGs are much less likely to bend to the will of the players or give the players any sense that their choices they make have any sort of impact since the final product (be it a TV show or movie or whatever) already exists. The decisions the players make can't impact that product, and so it's more of an "interactive fiction" story where you plod along with the plot the PM has in mind and interact with it when necessary, but nothing you do is going to actually show an impact to the end product (the film/show).	4/13/2013 8:48 AM
5	Again I refer to the fact that these days a movie promotional game is rarely a true ARG in the traditional sense, and the relationship to the audience differs from the kind of engagement players feel with smaller ARGs run for the sake of its own story-telling model (such as the Eldritch Errors chapters).	4/12/2013 12:37 PM
6	It's the illusion of control, not necessarily the control itself.	4/12/2013 12:26 PM
7	I don't think it's the ability (actual or perceived) to influence the story that gives ownership, as much as the give-and-take, call-and-response mechanics, along with the feeling of community.	4/1/2013 10:09 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q30 How would you describe the relationship between players and PMs?

Answered: 23 Skipped: 15

#	Responses	Date
1	Symbiotic. The players need the PM to provide them with content, and the PM needs to have players to move the story along.	10/24/2013 9:57 AM
2	See the previous answer.	8/29/2013 1:11 AM
3	They set up the breadcrumbs, and if necessary loosely guide	6/28/2013 12:01 AM
4	Very subtle, as it should be	6/22/2013 7:47 PM
5	Each is very dependent on the other! I think the PMs need to keep up with the player community regularly but also maintain some distance from them.	5/29/2013 4:02 AM
6	I feel in the relationship players know the PMs exist. But they can only infer their actions from the game moving on. Which is great.	5/6/2013 3:46 PM
7	I would say that the relationship between PM and player is a bit like the term PM suggests. A PM has the story and creates a world of possibilities. The player enters the world, exploring the possibilities until some challenge arises. The player attempts to overcome the challenge using various means. The PM can make several choices at this stage to steer the outcome of the player's actions to suit the needs of the story. In effect the PM pulls the right strings and the player responds with a specific action. Although the player does not realize that their 'own' actions were manipulated, the story continues as the PM desired.	5/2/2013 11:04 AM
8	Performers and audience... but in both directions. The PMs watch the players and their creativity as much and as closely as the players watch the characters, and they are equally impressed by it. I once described my first meeting with the PMs of "I Love Bees" by comparing it to meeting the stars of the best movie you ever saw and having them tell you how much they loved your work in the audience.	4/30/2013 10:41 PM
9	Co-dependant.	4/30/2013 8:32 AM
10	It should be somewhat distant, mediated, until the game is over, by the PM's characters. A player should not be sure who the PM is, or even if the PM is.	4/30/2013 7:17 AM
11	Depends on how responsive PMs are willing to be.	4/27/2013 11:57 AM
12	PM cares about their players.	4/26/2013 2:26 PM
13	In the case of Flynn Lives, 42E was hidden behind a "faux wall"—if we had any questions (about prize shipments, etc) we email them or call them (as long as in the email we stayed in-game). With Super 8, it ultimately felt like we were being force-fed information and promo materials. We had to find the ways to access materials, but then it was just a waiting game for the PMs to update. We spent hours analyzing the posts for deeper meaning...for something more for us to do...but in the end all we had was Rocket Poppeteers (Bad Robot/QMx's ARG) and scariestthingieversaw.com (Paramount's promo/ARG).	4/26/2013 9:40 AM
14	The PM's should monitor the game, and help along when things get sidetracked.	4/26/2013 9:15 AM
15	Collaborative	4/25/2013 7:38 AM
16	Challenging. There's a fine line between letting the players have key roles in the game and giving them the keys to the asylum and having them wreck things without realizing it. The PMs also have to make sure that they're in control without being TOO in control. There's a lot of types of ARGs, some less or more interactive than others. I love the high-interactive ones, and it's pretty easy to tell right off if it's going to be interactive or not.	4/14/2013 11:42 PM
17	The relationship is give-and-take: The PM gives the players a portion of the story, the players then take that and give the PM more than just answers and whatever is required to unlock the next portion, but also give the PM new directions to take the story.	4/13/2013 9:00 AM

### Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

18	the players have a primary relationship with the characters directly but still know that a PM remains behind a curtain; sometimes this is just an author-readers but ideally is more like Dungeon Master in tabletop gaming.	4/12/2013 12:45 PM
19	I like the tango analogy – one may be leading at any given time, but ultimately the dance is done together.	4/12/2013 12:27 PM
20	I am not very sure what a PM is to be honest	4/6/2013 11:36 AM
21	PMs should trust players. They shouldn't let them wait. They should give some data bit for bit - otherwise demotivation is guaranteed. PMs should listen to players and handle after this. Players should be patient and trust PMs. They shouldn't gamejack. They should play fair.	4/2/2013 3:45 PM
22	Like jazz musicians, playing off each other. NOT like two chess players playing against each other.	4/1/2013 10:09 AM
23	PMs create content that players can discover, analyze, manipulate and react to. Players create reactions that allow the PM to make creative choices as to the direction of the story while maintaining control of the overall story arc.	3/25/2013 7:26 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q31 Do you think this relationship has changed since early ARGs?

Answered: 22 Skipped: 16

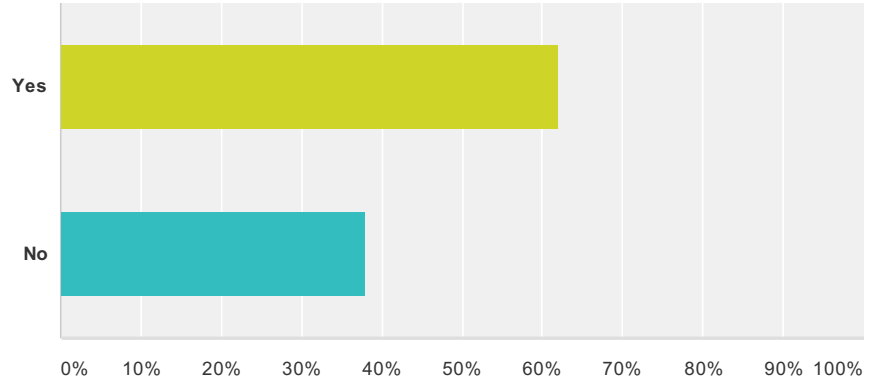
#	Responses	Date
1	I think their relationship may have gotten closer over the years.	10/24/2013 9:57 AM
2	Haven't been there on early ARG's... at least, not knowingly. In any case, i believe that as the genre is exposed to a wider pubic (which happens with time), it becomes more serious and not only PMs but the people in charge of the media related to it start taking it more seriously, which can lead to this (ARGs) becoming a great thing.	8/29/2013 1:11 AM
3	Don't know	6/22/2013 7:47 PM
4	I think that for larger marketing ARGs the relationship is less intimate now, but grassroots games still exist that maintain that sort of relationship.	5/29/2013 4:02 AM
5	I think early on the PMs had far more control. Now a days to add to the immersion PMs give a little more freedom to players to allow them to be even more emotionally involved.	5/6/2013 3:46 PM
6	Again, I think that ARGs have changed considerably over the years. Some of the inherent principles are still adhered to, but most people do not understand that this is also a very specific art form. The curtain may remain pulled back, but there are a lot of players that know there is a curtain there.	5/2/2013 11:04 AM
7	Oh. I *was* referring to early ARGs. That hasn't changed for good ARGs, but there does seem to be less	4/30/2013 10:41 PM
8	n/a	4/30/2013 8:32 AM
9	I think more PMs engage their players directly, OOG, and I think, in some ways, the games lose a lot for this decision.	4/30/2013 7:17 AM
10	I think it varies from game to game.	4/27/2013 11:57 AM
11	Definitely	4/26/2013 2:26 PM
12	Not sure. Didn't start playing till Flynn Lives.	4/26/2013 9:40 AM
13	Not necessarily. I think all are learning how to collaborate better over time ... at least those that are paying attention and learning lessons from past experience ... but the relationship is basically the same.	4/25/2013 7:38 AM
14	No? I haven't been around long enough to say, really. I think that so far, the TINAG aspect has been given more leeway with marketing and grassroots ARGs and such.	4/14/2013 11:42 PM
15	I think many early ARGs were much more linear, now (some) PMs are more willing to adapt. PMs who adapt make more successfully ARGs, in my opinion.	4/13/2013 9:00 AM
16	yes	4/12/2013 5:23 PM
17	movie marketing has moved away from the early ARG model precisely because the relationship needed to change as the size of the audience grew.	4/12/2013 12:45 PM
18	For the larger scale games, one party may be leading more than others.	4/12/2013 12:27 PM
19	I would not know as I have not kept up with any for some time	4/6/2013 11:36 AM
20	Yes, since PMs are now not pioneers, but have a huge experience background. Same about players. Positive: both groups are handling with more freedom. Negative: they have recently not so many interesting ideas as earlier (I hope, it's just my affected point of view)	4/2/2013 3:45 PM
21	No	4/1/2013 10:09 AM
22	Yes. I believe that privacy concerns have forced PMs (individuals and teams) to be much more open about who they are and what they are creating even before the ARG has launched.	3/25/2013 7:26 AM



## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q32 Have PMs ever contacted you directly?

Answered: 29 Skipped: 9



Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	62.07% 18
No	37.93% 11
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q33 What was the nature of this contact and how did you respond?

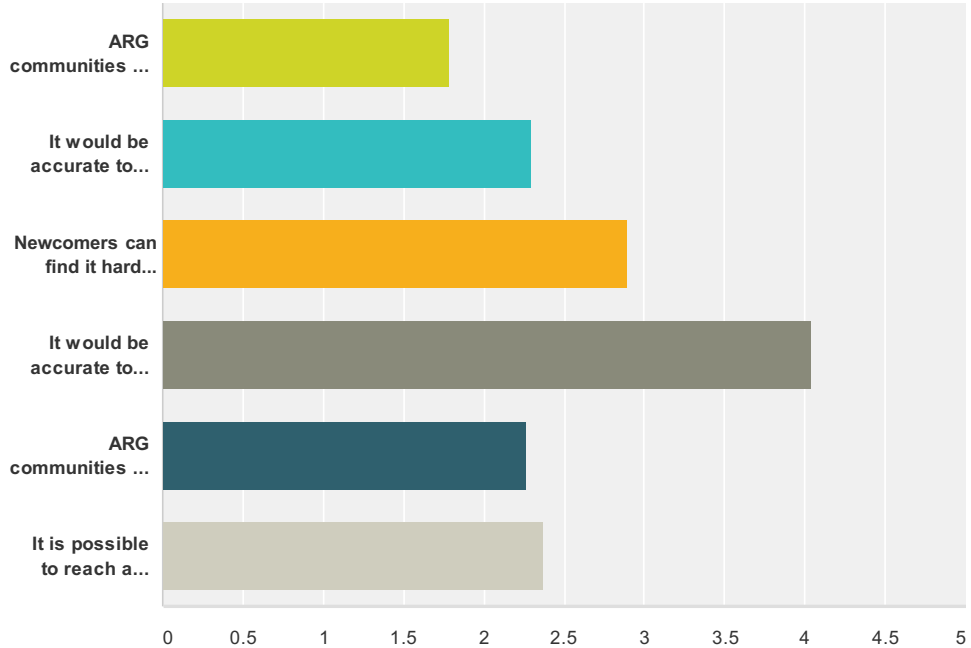
Answered: 15 Skipped: 23

#	Responses	Date
1	They sent me a trailhead, and I sent them a response asking some questions about their cause.	10/24/2013 9:57 AM
2	The PM of Project Gateway contacted me after the game to see if I wanted to be involved in the next project, and I agreed.	5/29/2013 4:03 AM
3	Game advice, I responded with what I thought would be appropriate	5/4/2013 8:16 AM
4	I have been contacted by PMs to participate in a RL event and as a NPC, to help move their story along.	5/2/2013 11:05 AM
5	Mostly post-ARG, and I responded fully. One exception, where I was friends with one of the PMs even before the ARG launched, so we sometimes chatted about it a bit (but no spoilers!). All other contacts during an ARG have been in character communications.	4/30/2013 10:43 PM
6	Grassroots PMs frequently contact players for a variety of reasons. Over the last 9 years, it's happened, I can't always remember why.	4/30/2013 8:34 AM
7	For Flynn Lives, I had prize inquiries, so I emailed Flynn Lives/42E, and they helped me sort out the issue. For Rocket Poppeteers I was the highest ranked player in my fleet, as well as one of the top 4 players overall (I think I'm the only person who made both lists!), so they had to contact me to ask where to ship my ARGUS cube, and for a reference photo for the final Rocket Poppeteers poster with the fleet score leaders animated on it.	4/26/2013 9:43 AM
8	Too numerous to relate, and in many cases, promised confidentiality is something I wouldn't break.	4/25/2013 7:39 AM
9	I had asked questions on unFiction about the game's status if the Kickstarter funding failed and he emailed me OOG explaining that it would still happen, just slower updates.	4/14/2013 11:43 PM
10	I had a PM message me OOG, asking me to post a letter to the players to address some issues that had come up in the game. I posted the letter, but then quit playing.	4/13/2013 9:02 AM
11	during Eldritch Errors I was asked to find contact info on fellow players so they could be sent surprises in the mail	4/12/2013 12:46 PM
12	Launch information, out-of-game disclosures / apologies, and similar incidents. I handled it like I respond to practically any communication.	4/12/2013 12:28 PM
13	In some times they wanted to make an ARG with me on their side. And I did it (e.g. Eklipse Global). In some other ways they tried to explain their sufferings, seeing in me somebody like moderator of some sort. They used me almost as psychotherapist (like in Junko Junsui, as PM wrote to me, that nobody understand him etc.)	4/2/2013 3:47 PM
14	It happens daily. I work with many ARG developers.	4/1/2013 10:09 AM
15	PM contacted me after I found a bug. I responded that I was thankful they fixed it.	3/25/2013 7:27 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q34 How far do you agree with the following statement?

Answered: 27 Skipped: 11



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Average Rating
ARG communities are open and friendly	40.74% 11	44.44% 12	11.11% 3	3.70% 1	0.00% 0	27	1.78
It would be accurate to describe ARG communities as fan communities	25.93% 7	44.44% 12	3.70% 1	25.93% 7	0.00% 0	27	2.30
Newcomers can find it hard to integrate into ARG communities	14.81% 4	29.63% 8	18.52% 5	25.93% 7	11.11% 3	27	2.89
It would be accurate to describe ARG communities as brand communities	0.00% 0	3.70% 1	25.93% 7	33.33% 9	37.04% 10	27	4.04
ARG communities are a grassroots phenomenon	14.81% 4	48.15% 13	33.33% 9	3.70% 1	0.00% 0	27	2.26
It is possible to reach a broad audience without diluting the experience for committed players.	18.52% 5	44.44% 12	22.22% 6	11.11% 3	3.70% 1	27	2.37

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

#	Further Comments	Date
1	<p>I've found unfiction, the only place i've been at, welcoming enough to be a "open and friendly" community. They are, indeed, fan communities because fans of the games gather there to solve them together. PM's might gather there too, but its considered unpolite to make their presence known. Another important thing for an ARG to have is a sense of secrecy, which leads to players using very technical language and actions, which makes it hard for newbies to join. Regarding the last point, there's this Google game, Ingress, which in theory is an ARG that has reached a broad audience without diluting the experience for committed players. This is only in theory, though, for a player, if (s)he chooses so, can decide to know nothing of the game's lore and use the android application as a fancy hi-tech Foursquare meets Geohashing. As such, i believe the game (Ingress) is not a good example of an ARG. Regardless, it goes to show how there are ways to spin the concept of ARG and that leads me to the conclusion that it IS possible to reach a broad audience, i just dont know how.</p>	8/29/2013 1:17 AM
2	<p>These are broad generalizations, and I guess as uF admin, I have spent far too much time seeing so much variation in all of these phenomena to feel comfortable making general statements about them.</p>	4/25/2013 7:40 AM
3	<p>Styles of games have changed and the ARG label now applies to such a broad spectrum of offerings that it makes for a stratified community; older groups welcome new members but expect their behavior to conform to community standards; newer games have spawned different styles of play and discussions where new members will stay if they are comfortable with that.</p>	4/12/2013 12:51 PM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q35 How would you describe your relationship with other players?

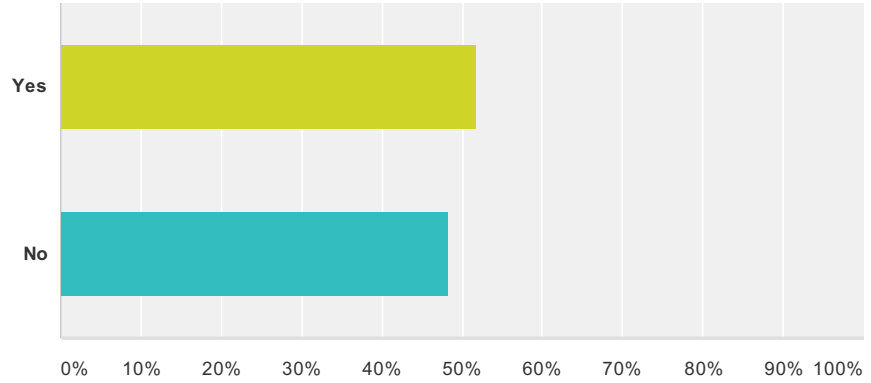
Answered: 24 Skipped: 14

#	Responses	Date
1	I enjoy speaking with them, but once the ARG ends, so does my contact with them, usually.	10/24/2013 9:58 AM
2	For all meanings and purposes, i'm a lurker. Haven't talked much, sadly, so i don't have a lot of experience in this topic. Regarding meeting other forum members, its hard finding some because of my geographical location. haven't done so yet.	8/29/2013 1:18 AM
3	Entertaining	6/28/2013 12:02 AM
4	Friendly	6/22/2013 7:48 PM
5	I formed many close friendships with other players.	5/29/2013 4:34 AM
6	I think the other players in the game were amazing! I loved getting to know them and having things that were special to a small group. *we must party!*	5/6/2013 3:48 PM
7	Friends	5/4/2013 8:16 AM
8	I'm generally very amiable to other players in the community.	5/2/2013 11:06 AM
9	Positive, on the whole	4/30/2013 10:43 PM
10	I am very close to a LOT of members of the UnFiction community. Attending ARGFest every year, and staying in touch off of the forums. We are part of each other's personal lives as well as "online" lives.	4/30/2013 8:36 AM
11	Distant. But, I don't maintain close relationships with people, outside the community, either.	4/30/2013 7:19 AM
12	Friendly, collaborative.	4/27/2013 11:58 AM
13	My relationship with other players is friendly and like a family	4/26/2013 2:28 PM
14	I have become great friends with a couple of the other players.	4/26/2013 9:44 AM
15	Casual	4/26/2013 9:16 AM
16	Which ones? ;) Cordial? Friendly? Hostile? It really depends on who exactly. I get along with most, not with all :)	4/25/2013 7:41 AM
17	Some players I know really well and know them on Skype, etc. Others I just play games with. I'd love to meet some of them face-to-face but we all live too far away.	4/14/2013 11:44 PM
18	The ARGs I have the best experience with are ones where we, the players, spent a lot of time together not only solving puzzles but also chatting to pass the time while waiting for more to come from the PM. I considered these players as friends. However, sometimes I can get frustrated with other (particularly newer) players who don't share information with the group.	4/13/2013 9:05 AM
19	respect for intelligence and communication skills	4/12/2013 12:53 PM
20	Anywhere from exceptionally close (meeting in different cities to finally hang out in person) to ambivalent.	4/12/2013 12:29 PM
21	A very close one where everyone knows everyone else through our mutual interest in what the game will ultimately lead to.	4/6/2013 11:37 AM
22	Friendship. Almost family.	4/2/2013 3:48 PM
23	Some of my very best friends.	4/1/2013 10:10 AM
24	With some, very close. With others, they are respected as members of a larger group I am in.	3/25/2013 7:28 AM

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q36 Do you ever meet other forum members face to face?

Answered: 27 Skipped: 11



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	51.85%	14
No	48.15%	13
<b>Total</b>		<b>27</b>

## Alternate Reality Games: Player Survey

### Q37 Describe the contexts in which you usually meet other players face to face.

Answered: 12 Skipped: 26

#	Responses	Date
1	It started with ARG-related live events, but now I see a group of Perplex City players often socially, and have been to their weddings, for instance.	5/29/2013 4:35 AM
2	It's a rare event to meet another player face-to-face unless your friends all participate in ARGs. There are a few situations that, while traveling, you tell your online friends that you will be in a certain town for a certain time and you can arrange to meet. Sometimes, through casual conversation you meet someone that had participated in a particular campaign. Then, there is the convention.	5/2/2013 11:10 AM
3	I've participated in numerous live events, I've attended a couple of ARGFest-o-Cons, and a couple of the players with whom I've kept in touch have lived near me so we'd occasionally meet up.	4/30/2013 10:44 PM
4	ARGFest every year, visiting each other's houses for vacations, meeting up locally to "hang out" when possible.	4/30/2013 8:37 AM
5	Conventions	4/26/2013 2:29 PM
6	Aside from live events, we hang out from time to time for birthday parties, trips to Disneyland, etc.	4/26/2013 9:44 AM
7	ARGFest, primarily ... I haven't had the good luck to live in the same place as most of my fellow players ... so that's where we get together.	4/25/2013 7:41 AM
8	gathering at ARGfest as well as ingame live events	4/12/2013 12:53 PM
9	Usually, ARG conferences. Sometimes, related conferences like DIY Days or live events like Cryptozoo.	4/12/2013 12:29 PM
10	Mostly on ARG meetings. But later just as friends.	4/2/2013 3:49 PM
11	Day to day, and at events.	4/1/2013 10:11 AM
12	ARGFest-o-Con every year since 2007. I also meet friends if I am in a city where they live (New York, LA, etc.).	3/25/2013 7:29 AM