

Through the Rabbit Hole

A Beginner's Guide to Playing
Alternate Reality Games

PREVIEW CHAPTER

by Dave Szulborski

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Website: www.immersivegaming.com

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Website: www.thewishcomic.com

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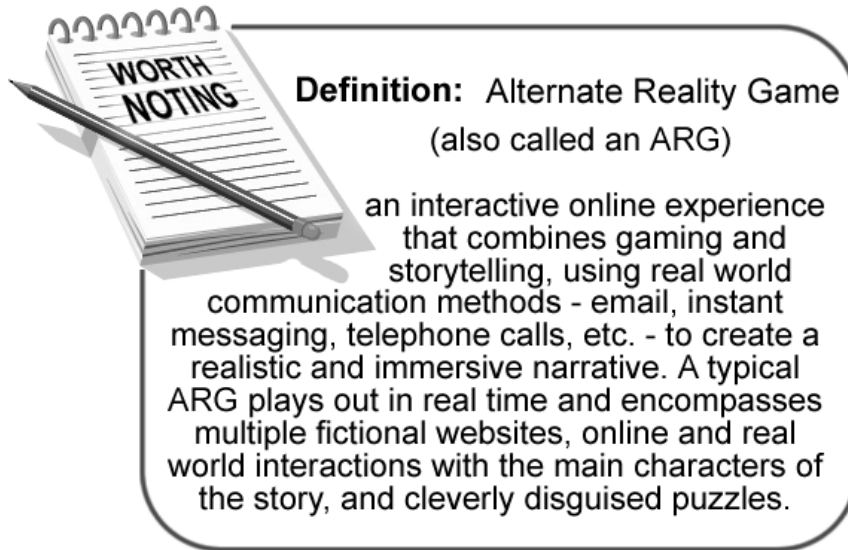
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Last summer I saved the world from a time traveling artificial intelligence, and also helped rescue a group of strangers who were trapped beneath an abandoned mental hospital when a reality TV show they were participating in went wrong. This year, I've already helped two world-renowned stolen art recovery experts track down a missing Audi A3, while breaking up a plan to steal valuable art masterpieces from the Uffizi Museum in Italy, and also helped find and rescue several kidnapping victims. I'm currently helping some friends track down an invaluable lost cultural artifact, which could possibly prevent the entire society from self-destructing.

By now, you are bound to be thinking that I am either crazy or possibly imagining everything written above, and wondering if any of this really happened. Well, what if I told you that I have emails, phone messages, text messages, newspaper clippings, website addresses, and even physical mementos proving that all of it actually did happen? But, what if at the same time I confessed to you that none of it was real?

Instead, everything I mentioned was a part of various alternate reality games, or ARGs for short, which I have been involved in over the last year or two. You'll notice that I said "have been involved with"

rather than “have played,” because, in many ways, alternate reality games are really more like experiences or events than what most people think of as traditional games. So what exactly is an ARG and why do I, or should you, want to play one?



A Game That's Not a Game

An alternate reality game is a game or a story of sorts that is based on but not necessarily restricted to the Internet. Many people think that ARGs resemble online novels, fictional narratives that you experience in some ways similar to a traditional printed book. This comparison works well in many cases and we'll use it frequently throughout the course of this book, but there are some important differences between ARGs and novels worth noting initially as well.

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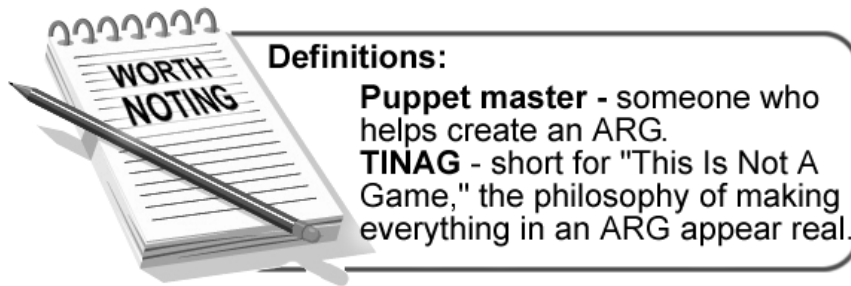
The first and most obvious difference is that an alternate reality game is not limited to any one format or medium, like a printed story or book is. ARGs normally take full advantage of the technical capabilities of the Internet and often integrate multi-media assets into the game, such as video and audio files. Delivering parts of the story content in this manner, along with using email, instant messaging, and even phone calls in the same way, makes an ARG experience much more realistic and immersive than reading even the most well-written novel. The sensation of immersion or of *getting lost in the story*, along with the real-time interaction with the characters of the game, make playing an ARG an active rather than a passive experience.

This experience is exactly the reason why ARG creators, called puppet masters within the ARG community, usually strive to present all of their content as if it were real. In other words, alternate reality game websites normally look just like any other website for a real person or company and do not say anything like, “This web page is part of a fictional game.” In fact, sometimes if you communicate with the fictional characters of the story about it being a game, they will adopt the attitude and convey the message that “this is not a game,” which has become the catch phrase of sorts for the entire manner in which ARGs are created and conducted.

This is not a game, or TINAG for short, also means that, quite often, the identity of the game’s creators will not be known until the game has concluded. This process of staying anonymous, or staying “behind the curtain” in ARG terminology, is critical to maintaining the

illusion that the fictional world of the game really exists, the equivalent of the old “pay no attention to the man behind the curtain” sequence from the classic **Wizard of Oz**.

TINAG also means, by definition, that the fictional world the hidden puppet masters have created should feel and respond much like the real world does. If you want players to pretend it’s not a game and that what is happening is real, then the elements of the story must behave that way also. If a player sends an email to a character in the game, he will expect that character to respond to him.



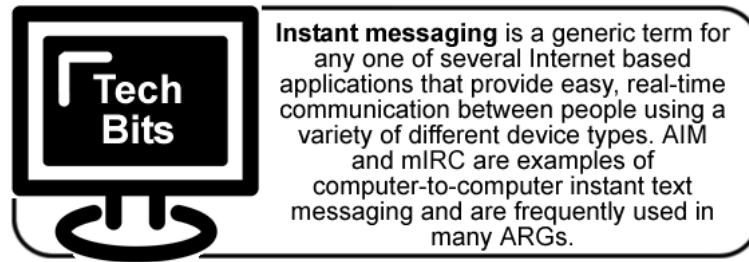
That leads to the second key difference between ARGs and printed stories. Alternate reality games are interactive in that they encourage and sometimes require the players to interact with the fictional characters and entities from the story in order for the plot to progress. In reading a book, interaction is usually limited to turning the pages to find out what happens next, but in an alternate reality game, sometimes you can’t even “turn the page,” to use the same analogy, without first writing an email, or calling a phone number, or initiating

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some other form of communication with someone in the game. In fact, an average alternate reality game is usually incredibly interactive and players will find themselves communicating with the fictional world of the game constantly throughout its run.

If you've never experienced an ARG, you're probably wondering just how exactly you might go about contacting and corresponding with a fictional character, since almost all of your experiences in life so far with fictional worlds have been one-sided and non-interactive. You can't just pick up the phone and call your favorite character from that book you just read, or send an email to the hero of that movie you watched last night. In an alternate reality game, however, you can do just that. And it's even more fun that, most of the time, they answer back!

That's right; the characters in ARGs actually use everyday communication methods to interact with the players of the game. They will often personally answer email sent to them and frequently show up online using any one of a variety of online instant messaging applications – AOL instant messaging, or AIM for short, and mIRC are two of the most popular – to chat in real time to anyone available. Sometimes they will even call you on the telephone, at any time of the day or night! Talking to these fictional characters using the same technologies that you use to communicate with your real world friends and associates makes it an incredibly realistic experience, and a great example of interactive fiction.

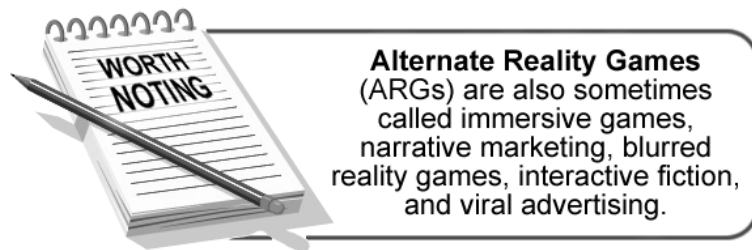


An Alternate Reality

Most alternate reality games go to great lengths to present complex and internally consistent fictional worlds for their players to explore, consisting of multiple websites, believable characters, and everyday methods of communication – email, instant messaging, phone calls, and the like. A story or game that begins on one web page or with a single mysterious email could easily spread out and encompass a dozen different sites and an entire world of make believe yet incredibly realistic acting characters. Discovering the in-game world of an ARG is sometimes compared to stepping into a whole new area of the world you never knew existed, like visiting a foreign country or land. Even though they are sometimes obviously fictional, the way they are created and presented often make them feel amazingly real.

Who Creates These Things and Why

Traditionally alternate reality games have come from a couple of different sources and can be grouped together into two general categories – grassroots (or independent) and commercial. Grassroots ARGs are normally produced by fans of the genre itself and are not usually intended to promote any particular product or service. They are self-funded and often attract smaller audiences than commercial games, but can attain levels of artistic quality and production values rivaling the professionally produced variety.



Commercial ARGs are most often created as part of multimillion dollar marketing campaigns and are intended to promote particular products or brands. Recent examples include a campaign for the introduction of the Audi A3 model to the US market called **The Art of the Heist** and a 2003 promotion for the **Halo 2** video game called **I Love Bees**. Some commercial ARGs don't promote any product or outside entity, how-

ever, and are instead intended to be profitable forms of entertainment in and of themselves. Electronics Arts produced such a game called **Majestic** in 2001 that was ultimately unsuccessful. More recently a British company, called Mind Candy Ltd., has launched a project called **Perplex City** which looks to succeed where **Majestic** failed. If **Perplex City** does become a viable commercial product, other such ARGs are sure to follow.

Where are the Rules?

By now, many people new to alternate reality games, are usually getting a little lost in the whole concept, which can be, admittedly, a bit overwhelming at first. If an ARG contains all these different elements, from websites to instant messages, and yet doesn't want to admit it is even a game, how does anyone know what to do with it? How do you find one and then how do you go about getting started playing it? In other words, where's the damn rulebook?

Good question. Many people have been asking that same question for years now and, unfortunately, some of them have been too lost or overwhelmed to continue on with ARGs when they learned there wasn't one. And so this book, Through the Rabbit Hole, was created.

There are many resources out there already that newcomers to the world of alternate reality games might find useful. The online ones, such as ARG community forums like

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www.unfiction.com and www.argn.com, contain a wealth of information about how to play ARGs, from players' past experiences with dozens of complicated and successfully completed games.

The image shows two screenshots of ARG-related websites. The top screenshot is the 'unforum' interface for user 'a.r.g.b.b'. It features a forum thread titled 'Games, Rumors & Diversions' with a subforum 'Potential: Conspiracy of B'. The thread has 1311 topics and 28869 posts, with the last post on Wed Sep 07, 2005 at 9:09 pm. Below the forum is the ARGN website header with the text 'ALTERATE REALITY GAMING NETWORK' and a search bar. The main content area of ARGN includes a 'LATEST NEWS' section with an article titled 'Virtucube Winner Announced' by Jonathan Waite, dated September 05, 2005. The article describes a puzzle contest where Richard Patterson won a \$500 cash prize. To the right of the news section are 'FEATURES' and 'WHAT'S HOT' lists, and a 'MAIN' navigation menu with links like 'home', 'about', 'forums', 'chat', 'press', 'article archives', 'announce list', 'ARG graveyard', 'contact', and 'mobile'. There are also advertisements for 'perplex city', 'orbital colony', 'conspiracy of b', and 'Student union'.

Two ARG discussion and forum websites – UnFiction and ARGN.

Unfortunately, many of these past games have discussion posts numbering in the tens of thousands, making it a daunting task indeed to wade through them, in hopes of pulling out basic “how to play” information, especially when one is brand new to the whole concept of ARGs.

Additionally, the printed resources available about alternate reality games, including an earlier book I wrote entitled This Is Not A Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming, also contain some great beginner’s information, but it’s interspersed with more complex material on the theory, history, and creation of ARGs, again making it a hard read for someone brand new.

This book, Through the Rabbit Hole, takes an entirely different approach to introducing alternate reality games. It sets out to explain how to play ARGs and nothing more, to serve as the no-nonsense rule book that has been missing for far too long. Through the Rabbit Hole is intended to be the “missing manual” that should have been in the box with the ARG when you got it, describing the pieces, playing board, and rules of the game so you can get started enjoying this great new form of entertainment right from the start.

As you’ll soon discover, since there aren’t any real rules, pieces, or even playing boards for alternate reality games, this sometimes can be a difficult task. As often as possible, however, Through the Rabbit Hole will use comparisons with and exam-

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ples from everyday games you are already familiar with, to make the concept of ARGs easier to digest.

