

# 7 things you should know about...

## Alternate Reality Games

### Scenario

Collin attends a small liberal arts college where each year all incoming freshmen participate in a semester-long symposium designed to introduce them to the institution's academic activities while connecting them to the physical campus and each other. This year's topic is Renaissance art and music, and faculty have designed an alternate reality game (ARG) as one component of the symposium. A week before classes begin, the roughly 350 students are asked to sign on to a website where they can post information about their interests and set up learning teams with their peers. When Collin registers on the site, a news alert reports that a 17th-century viola da gamba has been taken from the college's Music History Museum. A note from the "thief"—who calls himself Mad Jack—says the instrument is hidden on campus.

The museum catalog describes the instrument but does not include a photo. Collin exchanges information with the other students in an online forum and then joins his online learning team in a private chat room. By the first day of class, when all the teams meet in a lecture hall, Collin and his group have found digital images of similar instruments on the website of an Italian museum and discovered an article from the college newspaper about the original donation of the item. Initially, as Collin's team follows-up on clues, they compete with other teams. At the second meeting of the full symposium, however, Mad Jack himself grabs the microphone to rile the students, calling them "thick as seven planks" and saying it's a waste of his genius to stay ahead of them. The freshmen unite against Mad Jack and begin to trade clues and expertise across teams. They pursue hints and taunts from Mad Jack left on phone messages, a chalkboard in a coffee shop near campus, and in an article accessed through the college online library system.

The freshmen enlist the help and expertise of various departments—music, history, visual arts, language, sociology, and psychology—seeking faculty and staff to answer questions. Long before the students outwit Mad Jack, they begin to use the campus library and online databases for research and introduce themselves to the people who will influence their education. By the end of the semester, Collin has not only learned about the Renaissance and the ways art can influence history and culture, but he has also begun to understand the fundamentals of academic research and how to work collaboratively with other students and faculty.

### What is it?

Alternate reality games (ARGs) weave together real-world artifacts with clues and puzzles hidden online to create an engaging, collective experience for players. In an ARG, players follow a narrative through clues, puzzles, and events orchestrated by the "puppetmaster" or game designer(s). ARGs are not computer or video games, though electronic devices—including computers, cell phones, and GPS-enabled handhelds—are frequently used to access clues. ARGs are not role-playing games, in that players generally function as themselves in a real-world environment. Clues and pieces of the puzzle can be anywhere—websites, libraries, museums, stores, signs, recorded telephone messages, movies, television programs, or printed materials (textbooks, reference books, novels, and so forth). Players can meet and talk with characters in the narrative and use resources like postal mail, e-mail, the web, or the public library to find hints, clues, and various pieces of the puzzle. Since no one is expected to find all the clues, the game's solution depends on collaborative effort. Several characteristics are common to most ARGs, including a narrative that must be inferred, rules that are not specified at the outset but must be uncovered in the process of the game, and a suspension of disbelief—in this case, the sense that "this is not a game."

### Who's doing it?

ARGs, most of which are free to play, have been embraced by marketers, nonprofits, training groups, and higher education—venues that can absorb the cost of development. Many ARGs have been successful as viral marketing tools, with notable examples including "I Love Bees," promoting the 2004 release of the video game *Halo 2*, and "Year Zero," promoting a new album by Nine Inch Nails. Because ARGs facilitate social discovery, these games offer students a means to engage with subject content in nontraditional ways. For example, in "World Without Oil," participants were encouraged to imagine a near-future world in the grip of a global oil shortage. Players were encouraged to blog about their experiences, submitting their stories by e-mail, telephone, and video; stories were then collected and presented as part of the game. The European Union is funding an ARG called "ARGuing for Multilingual Motivation in Web 2.0" that brings together technologists, ARG experts, pedagogy specialists, and language instructors to take advantage of Internet technologies to actively engage students in learning languages.

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## How does it work?

Players put together story scraps and clues that lead them through a narrative. They enter the game through “rabbit holes”—sites or events that point the way into the game by suggesting that at a certain website or a certain physical location there is a curious matter to be investigated. ARGs often have multiple entry points, and participants researching an initial strange occurrence or peculiar posting may find an e-mail address or telephone number that draws players into interaction with the fictional world of the game and the characters within it. Frequently the games, puzzles, and mysteries encountered in an ARG are challenging enough to require input from multiple players working in cooperation. In general, ARGs offer easy entry points for beginners and rely on collaborative play throughout the activity. Most, but not all, ARGs offer a definite conclusion that closes the game.

## Why is it significant?

Some suggest that ARGs constitute a new form of literary expression in their presentation of participatory fiction. For educators, ARGs invite students into the world of subject matter, urging them to search for and share information in the effort to solve a mystery. Such activity familiarizes students with the tools of scholarly research as it promotes collaborative learning, problem solving, and experiential learning. It may offer new ways to address different learning styles—including kinetic, auditory, or visual—in that each student in a team-learning situation can offer clues that might have been missed by others. Perhaps more to the point, ARGs open doors into the future of students’ professional lives, where they will be expected to solve complex problems by taking necessary raw materials from multiple resources, thinking critically and analytically, and putting their individual skills, interests, and abilities at the disposal of a group dedicated to a common goal.

## What are the downsides?

ARGs can be complex to design and execute. Effective games for learning require a compelling narrative, a strong sense of what is to be accomplished, a series of puzzles and clues that lead to a pre-arranged conclusion, and instructional design expertise. As a result, constructing them might be best undertaken in a team environment. While they encourage players to interact with the game content in absorbing ways, if clues are too difficult to decipher or too easy to understand, players will become frustrated or bored and might simply choose not to participate. ARGs are not common in education, and notable examples of the genre continue to be linked with marketing. Even where resources for excellent design and execution exist, the medium may not appeal to all students or instructors. Finally, to the extent that an ARG employs a disturbing scenario (perhaps including crimes and violence) and successfully creates the suspension of disbelief—the sense that “this is not a game”—players unfamiliar with the ARG model can become alarmed and upset.

## Where is it going?

The genre is emerging and evolving as it distinguishes itself from antecedents that include role-playing games, solve-the-murder parties, and scavenger hunts. Awareness of ARGs is growing, with much of it coming in the wake of public awareness of virtual worlds and the educational possibilities that they offer. The overlap with virtual worlds and augmented reality might be extended or deepened in the future—a peek through a cell phone camera viewer, for example, could reveal the building on the corner not as the familiar warehouse it is but as a castle or ancient oracle with a clue written above the archway. Some have suggested that ARGs may constitute a new curriculum of problem-based or experiential learning in which students can learn to work with others to solve real-world problems.

## What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Because no one participant finds all the clues and because it’s improbable that anyone could unravel all of an ARG’s puzzles without help, these games offer new opportunities for collaborative learning, either in competition with one another or in opposition to a puppetmaster. By offering engaging content that embraces multimedia, these games present learning challenges that can be solved in many different ways, allowing students to leverage answers obtained from online searches, library resources, texts, and experts in the field. Because design of these games can draw on the skills and knowledge of many contributors, ARGs might be well suited to production at the departmental or institutional level, where whole courses might consist of the game alone.

ARGs will force many educators to think in new ways about their students—as participants in a collaborative learning environment and characters in the narrative—and ask new questions. Will students profit from increasingly difficult challenges? Are students learning useful information as they search for answers? How have new technologies changed the ways that students search for information? When such matters are taken into consideration, ARGs might become a common component of a wide range of educational programs, offering students new opportunities to hone their critical-thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative-learning skills.