



Industry Watch: Games Break Loose

by Michael Mascioni, October 2008 issue



A distorted reality is now a necessity to be free

The term itself - alternate reality game - is nebulous in many respects. Generally, ARGs are multiplatform interactive experiences that blend reality and fiction and incorporate a game element, according to Brian Clark, CEO of GMD Studios, which together with McKinney developed the highly successful game "The Art of the Heist." A distinctive element of ARGs is that their stories generally develop according to user response. But, as Clark acknowledges, the term arg is expansive and amorphous, comprising many different interpretations. For the gaming community, ARG essentially connotes platformless games. For advertisers, "they're branded entertainment ... and for film-makers, they're extended reality experiences," he says.

"They are still in their infancy," adds Tom Geary, associate creative director at McCann Worldgroup San Francisco, which is currently developing an arg for a client as part of a program to test the marketing effectiveness and impact of alternate reality games. The primary value of args for advertisers derives from the quality of impressions and depth of engagement they offer, not standard ad impressions, Geary says.

Denis Coyne, creative producer at the Nightingale Company, points to the capability of args to "remodel the user's conception of a brand and afford a completely different context."

In the Game

For a TV world that has become increasingly game-like and multiplatform in nature, args have particular appeal. args allow TV programs to engage audiences in a different way beyond the context of a weekly TV series, says Hazel Grian, director of Licorice Film and codesigner, with Jonathan Williams, of "The Sky Remains." ARGs also allow TV producers to receive instant feedback from the

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audience and allow more people to become involved with programs. Some TV properties lend themselves particularly well to alternate reality games, such as *Lost*, Grian says. For TV companies, ARGs essentially transform recorded experiences into live events in tandem with live broadcasts, and give life to content outside the limits of a one-hour TV series, says Evan Jones, president of Stitch Media. They afford TV shows an opportunity to flesh out their back stories.

Companies such as Licorice Film have focused on more video-oriented ARGs, which have an affinity with TV. For example, Grian characterizes "The Sky Remains," launched in April, as "akin to TV because it involves video as well as puzzles." Jones points out that the greater prevalence of video-oriented args is not coincidental, since video enables ARGs to become more accessible to a mainstream audience.

The enthusiastic audience response to "The Art of the Heist," sponsored by Audi, underlines the strong promotional and brand impact. One of the key findings from a study conducted by McKinney was that online advertising connected with that campaign generated 91,000 participants. "Thirty-one percent of this traffic displayed a buying indicator," McKinney notes. "This percentage represents the most qualified online ad-generated audience of any Audi car launch."

Brands are taking markedly different approaches with their sponsorship of alternate reality games. McDonald's, for example, took a subtle approach with its sponsorship of "The Lost Ring" by AKQA - the burger chain isn't even mentioned in the ARG. The company strove to avoid overly branding the game, explains Mary Dillon, executive vice president and global chief marketing officer at McDonald's. It proceeded cautiously because ARGs "are a new world for us."

The Conversation

For advertisers, ARGs also have a cost advantage over traditional media. Geary views the cost of ARG development as "modest" compared with other efforts. In fact, he maintains that args can typically be developed for "a fraction of the cost of traditional ad campaigns."

One of the great promises of ARGs is their capacity to open up games and interactive entertainment in general to wider audiences. In fact, Jones maintains that ARGs "have already redefined the demographics for games, with gender and age skewing differently." One of the key reasons for ARGs' greater accessibility is that they tap into skills users already have, such as searching the Internet and using e-mail, and they don't involve a video game console, Grian explains. She also attributes the greater accessibility of ARGs to their facility for allowing users to play the games while doing other things at the same time.

Most ARG developers agree that the arg audience is older than the typical game audience. Jones has found the average ARG users to be in his or her late 20s. In Clark's experience, the ARG audience is primarily dominated by "34- to 45-year-old females," contrary to the common perception of advertisers. Overall, the ARG audience is "more mature, seeking a different kind of game experience that is more story-focused," notes Jones.



"The Lost Ring," in particular, attracted a widely varied audience with different levels of interaction. At the highest level, the ARG has "superusers, who handle a lot of heavy



coordination, such as building Wikis and organizing live events," reports Jane McGonigal, designer of "The Lost Ring" and president of AvantGame. The next group of

users "interacts with the characters, translates artifacts, and plays the games." It has also attracted a broad global audience, with 28 percent of the players in North America, 25 percent in Europe, 18 percent in Asia Pacific and 13 percent in Latin America.

Users connect with each other through blogs, forums and wikis, and post their findings on YouTube, Twitter and Flickr, which are aggregated and mapped out on a Google Maps mashup, explains Edwin Veelo, associate creative director at AKQA. They also organize their own training events in the game. Early players have written a beginner's guide to the game on one of the wikis, which now is linked from the main site. More than 3 million people have viewed the game and 1.8 million have participated, according to Dillon, the McDonald's executive.

User-generated content is particularly important for alternate reality games because gamers are essentially creating content for the rest of the community and helping unlock different clues and puzzles, Clark says. But he cautions that such content must be carefully integrated into alternate reality games, and it must be sufficiently open-ended to nurture the development of user-generated content. Clark stresses the need to avoid overly preprogramming ARGs with structure, and to allow users ample opportunity to create their own structures and participate.

Alternate reality games are gaining momentum, especially given the rapid growth of multiplatform entertainment and users' ever-growing interest in immersive entertainment. Jones believes ARGs will have the opportunity to develop many different business models as the genre matures. For now, the sponsorship model is clear, but self-sustaining business models will come down the road, Jones says.

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