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Promotional Alternate Reality Games – More Than ‘Just’ Marketing.

Structured Abstract:

Purpose: This paper seeks to investigate the ways in which players and producers of promotional alternate reality games negotiate their commercial status, similar to the way in which Matt Hills argues fan communities negotiate their position within a commercial media industry (Hills, 2002).

Design/Methodology/Approach: In-depth interviews with game designers is combined with the results of an online player survey and qualitative analysis of discussion on player forums. This provides a strong platform from which to discuss player and producer attitudes towards the status of promotional ARGs as marketing materials.

Findings: Both players and producers use various strategies which allow them to negotiate their relationship to the commercial nature of promotional alternate reality games. These include a focus on the immersive nature of the games (also known as the ‘This Is Not a Game’ philosophy), defining their creative interests strongly against the perceived commercial interests of corporate media companies and an emphasis on the personal, emotional or affective impact of the games.

Originality/Value: In the very slim body of academic work on promotional ARGs, few scholars have considered the status of the games as marketing from the perspective of the audience. The paper provides original audience research which is of value and interest to scholars in a diverse variety of disciplines, and to anyone involved in the production or consumption of alternate reality games.

This article builds upon arguments previously presented in Players and Puppetmasters: Alternate Reality Games and Negotiated Consumer/Producer Relationships (Janes, 2013). As part of a wider discussion on promotional Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), Janes argues that both players and producers of promotional ARGs seek to distance themselves from the commercial status of the games. This reflects Hills’ suggestion that fans consistently negotiate their position within the commercial media industry, allowing them to simultaneously exist within and oppose a co system (2002: 28). This article focuses more closely on these negotiations, outlining specific strategies used by both producers and consumers and considering how this might enable an understanding of promotional ARGs as ‘more than just marketing’.

Defining ARGs

Game designer Andrea Phillips defines ARGs as:

‘A cohesive narrative... 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 [...] players of these games typically organize themselves into communities to share information and speculate on what it all means and where it’s all going. These are platform-free MMORPGs, where there is no out-of-character, no avatar, and no definite distinction between the in-game world and the real world’ (Phillips, 2005).

The largest active ARG player community Unfiction.com provides a similar definition, noting the role of game designers or Puppetmasters (PMs):
‘A cross-media genre of interactive fiction using multiple delivery and communications media [...] 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’ [I].

Neither of these definitions mentions marketing, promotion or advertising. According to both designers and players, ARGs are not marketing materials in the same way as trailers, teasers or posters. They are already pieces of entertainment content in their own right, emerging primarily from the networking possibilities afforded by the Internet and online communications. Askwith (2006) traces similar forms of immersive entertainment as far back as Orson Welles’ radio adaptation of The War of the Worlds (1938), which presented the story not as a radio play, but as a factual newscast. He also links ARGs to ‘armchair treasure hunts’ beginning with Masquerade (1979), a children’s book which included hidden clues leading to the location of a jewel which the author Kit Williams had made and buried ‘somewhere in Britain’. Askwith (2006) identifies other categories of ARGs including Narrative Extension ARGs which often serve as cross-platform extensions of the text as well as promotional materials. Fan-produced and monetized ARGs also exist including Majestic (2001), a subscription based game from EA Games, Mind Candy’s Perplex City (2005), based around the purchase of collectible playing cards and Metacortechs, developed by fans of The Matrix (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999).

Yet the genre’s roots are as heavily based in advertising as they are in narrative artworks and this study is particularly concerned with promotional ARGs. The first example of such a game promoting a commercial product accompanied the release of Pink Floyd’s album The Division Bell (1994). Finally, Askwith refers to the marketing campaign for The Blair Witch Project (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) as a watershed moment for the genre, demonstrating the possibilities of using immersive entertainment as a promotional technique (Askwith, 2006). It is generally acknowledged that the first ARG was The Beast, developed as part of the marketing campaign for Steven Spielberg’s A.I.: Artificial Intelligence (2001). A team at Microsoft Games were hired to create the experimental piece of marketing, which attracted large numbers of players, including 7,000 who formed a community known as the Cloudmakers. Key members of that team, including Lead Writer Sean Stewart and Lead Designer Elan Lee, went on to found specialist company 42 Entertainment in 2003 [II]. Over the next decade, 42 Entertainment developed several high profile ARGs tied to marketing campaigns. These included ilovebees, for Halo 2 (Microsoft Games, 2004) WhySoSerious for The Dark Knight (Christopher Nolan, 2008).

Academic work on promotional ARGs has often sought to validate the games by shifting the focus away from their marketing function. Jenkins discusses ARGs in terms of affective economics and brand awareness but emphasises that ‘for the most hard-core players, these games can be so much more’ (2006: 131). He recognises their commercial intent, but prefers to view them in the context of convergence culture and collective intelligence. Citing McGonigal, he argues ARGs can impact upon the way people think and behave in their everyday lives (Jenkins, 2006: 130-131).

McGonigal has written extensively on ARGs in terms of performativity and play, and is heavily involved in designing and running games. Again, rather than discussing them as promotional devices, she is more concerned with how the strategies and techniques of collaborative play can

If ARGs are discussed as marketing materials, it is often in the context of transmedia narratives, paratexts, or narrative flow between the game and the film it promotes. For example, whilst Jenkins (2006) suggests this mode of storytelling almost removes the idea of a central or ur-text, Henrik Örnebring (2007) maintains that in every transmedia narrative there is a central text being marketed via other ancillary texts. Narrative flow, he suggests, rarely moves from these ancillaries back to the main text. 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) Their primary purpose is to ‘create an enjoyable experience that will build the franchise in the minds of the audience.’ For Örnebring this is as easily provided by ‘largely redundant’ ancillary texts, as by offering opportunities for participation (2007: 459). Gray makes a pointed argument against this view, suggesting a text’s commercial prerogative or intention does not necessarily ‘obviate its substance’ (2010: 209). He does, however, suggest some promotional paratexts can be deemed ‘merely’ marketing if they do not contribute to the narrative or storyworld (Gray, 2010: 209).

Whilst it is impossible to dispute the commercial purpose of promotional ARGs, what does seem to be under discussion is the relative value of ARGs as either mechanisms for social change, creative narratives or marketing tools. They can perform all these functions, but one is always more valuable than another. Most often, creative content is positioned as somehow worthier than commercial intent. Reinhard (2011) considers ARGs within a broader category of ‘gameplay marketing strategies’ and is one of few to address the power relationship which develops between producers and consumers in a specifically commercial context. She calls for further studies combining audience research and political economic studies. Indeed a textually analytical approach is often favoured over a consideration of how promotional ARGs are designed, their subsequent reception by audiences, and how the two parties in this power relationship respond to the commercial nature of the games. This study takes a step towards rectifying this.

Producer/consumer relationships are central to fan studies and Hills notes that fandoms have historically been placed within what Abercrombie and Longhurst call a ‘resistant/incorporated’ dichotomy, in which fans are primarily seen as actively resisting the powers of the commercial media industry or simply as passive dupes (Abercombie & Longhurst, 1998: 15). Hills argues that, in stark contrast, fan communities stand in a complex position regarding their role within the commercial media industry, continually negotiating their status in order to maintain both ‘anti-commercial ideologies’ and ‘commodity-completist practices’ (2002: 28). This often involves the deployment of moral dualisms, by both fans and academics, wherein fannish modes of consumption are designated ‘good’, productive and creative, whereas the ‘average consumer’ is deemed the ‘bad’, unknowledgeable and undiscriminating (Hills, 2002: 30). Hills encourages a movement away from these binaries and other scholars have taken alternative approaches. For example, Grossberg 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 is ‘closely tied to what we often describe as the feeling of
life...Affect is what gives ‘colour,’ ‘tone’ or ‘texture’ to our experiences’ (Grossberg, 1992: 56-7). It is this feeling that places objects, practices and meanings on a person’s ‘mattering map’ allowing them to use it as a locus for their own identity. These alternative, more subjective approaches allow for a more complicated interweaving of the commercial and the creative which could be applied to both players and producers of promotional ARGs.

**Methodology**

Since many of these binaries and dichotomies are based upon the perceived relationship between media producers and consumers, information was collected from both ARG players and puppetmasters to reflect both sides of this relationship. PM perspectives were taken from personally conducted interviews as well as trade and mainstream press interviews, and Transcripts of ARG-Fest 2007. ARG-Fest is an annual conference which has provided an open forum for discussion between PMs and players since 2003 [IV]. Transcripts are available on the wiki maintained by the ARG community [V]. Unfortunately, getting access to media companies who contracted ARG designers proved difficult, whereas designers and writers were keen to discuss their work more openly. As a result, many of the discussions surrounding the intentions and expectations of conglomerates in commissioning ARGs come from the perspective of their contractors, or 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.

Interviews with PMs were semi-structured, with 3 broad areas of discussion:

**Relationship with the player community** - e.g. How would you describe your relationship with players? How does the promotional status of an ARG affect that relationship?

**Relationship with media corporations** - e.g. Why do you think clients approach you to create an ARG for their property? How do clients measure success of an ARG?

**Game design** - e.g. How important is the TINAG (This is Not a Game) philosophy in promotional games? Discuss the role of in-game branding in promotional ARGs.

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.

Player perspectives were collected using two complimentary methods, using a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography 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; 1997). Kozinets suggests surveys can provide ‘a sense of people’s attitudes and opinions about online communities’ and information about ‘people’s self-reported representations of what they do, or intend to do in regards to their online community and cultural activity’ (Kozinets, 2010: 45). This was therefore appropriate for investigating players’ attitudes towards and involvement in promotional ARGs. However, a survey alone may not have provided a representative sample and elicited attitudes may have differed to those expressed in-game on the forums. Analysing forum discussion was therefore necessary but a more structured approach was required due to the vast quantities of data. Kozinets suggests less obtrusive netnographic approaches can be effectively combined with survey work to inform one
another (Kozinets, 2010: 56). This study therefore uses the initial stages of the forum analysis to inform the design of an online survey, the results of which in turn inform the more detailed analysis of archival forum data.

Discussion data was collected from three forums: Unfiction (UF), Superherohype (SHH) [III] and the Cloudmakers Yahoo! Group (CM) [IV]. This provided data on three games: The Beast, WhySoSerious and Super8, although this article primarily references the first two. Discussions were collected by capturing individual threads in pdf format using a browser extension (NCapture) and then importing, organising and coding them using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo). All forums are available to view without becoming a member and all posts reside in the public domain. No forum members are identified, either by their name or forum handles.

Unfiction forum was selected as the primary focus for the survey as it is ‘relevant, active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous and data-rich’ (Kozinets, 2010: 89). It forms the largest, most established and most active hub of active ARG players (39,627 registered users as of July 2014). As with the forum discussion analysis, all survey data is anonymous. The survey was comprised of 37 questions, initially put to a pilot group of 5 forum administrators. Rather than asking broadly about community relations, questions were structured around known issues e.g. the integration of ‘newbies’. Questions therefore emerged from within the context of the community itself. Most questions utilised a Likert scale as the aim was to measure ‘a set of attitudes relating to a particular area’ (Bryman, 2004: 68), however it became clear through forum analysis that the community were highly self-reflective about their own practices and would probably want to express more nuanced attitudes in their own words. Some questions were therefore open-ended and all closed-ended questions were accompanied by a text box for further comments. Questions were then split over 5 sections:

**Playing ARGs** – e.g. How were you first introduced to ARGs? Which of the following statements most closely describes your main reasons for playing ARGs?

**ARGs as Marketing** – e.g. When playing the ARGs listed below, what did you feel was the main purpose behind them? How far do you agree with the following statements: ‘A good ARG makes me more likely to see the film being promoted’

**Game Design** – e.g. Which of the following are the most important elements of an ARG? What is TINAG and why is/isn’t it important for it to be maintained?

**Player/Puppetmaster Relationship** – e.g. How would you describe the relationship between players and PMs? Do you think this relationship has changed since early ARGs?

**Community** – How would you describe your relationship with other players? How far do you agree with the following statements: ‘ARG communities are open and friendly’.

38 responses were received (27 complete, 11 partial). However, as anticipated, this could not be considered a representative sample of active users on Unfiction. The survey therefore performed a signposting function, providing a strong basis on which to further question and effectively map the positions expressed in the forum discussions. This multi-method approach was therefore appropriate for the needs of this study and allowed for comparisons to be made between player and producer attitudes towards the commercial nature of promotional ARGs.
Negotiating Commercialism

Surveyed ARG players were highly aware of the promotional status of the games but few felt this would deter them from playing (Janes, 2013). Many promotional ARGs are praised in player communities, including The Beast, WhySoSerious and Flynn Lives. It seemed more important that the game was entertaining in itself, regardless of its promotional status. SHH players certainly seemed comfortable speaking about the games as marketing, perhaps because they have seen the Batman franchise evolve in a commercial sphere over many years. In many cases these fans are as critical of the content of the marketing campaigns as they are the text themselves. One or two expressed some discomfort with ‘the idea that one’s individual experiences should become *brand* experiences’, feeling this to be exploitative of ‘innocent’ fan enthusiasms (SHH). However this was refuted by another player who was adamant that being involved in a system of consumer capitalism should not mean a text could not be ‘pure or good or artistic’. If this were the case, they argued, there would be next to nothing pure or good or artistic in the world. This player seemed to have come to terms with their place in a consumer capitalist system and was not just negotiating but defending that position.

Other survey responses suggested this position was not as straightforward as it first appeared. Players often evaluated promotional games using the same criteria as they would for any other ARG. Surveyed players identified strong characterisation, storytelling and puzzle design as the most important criteria:

‘Without story-telling, there is nothing to make it feel "real" - without good characters, it becomes a cliche - and without puzzles, it isn't a game.’ (Survey Respondent No. 9, 2013)

However, forum discussion also revealed the ability to participate meaningfully within the game world was vital. They often expected to influence narratives, interact with characters, and for PMs to be responsive to player actions or indeed, inactions. Promotional games, frequently failed to meet these expectations:

‘[…]these ARGs are much less likely to bend to the will of players or give players a sense that their choices they make have any sort of impact since the final product (be it a TV show or movie) already exists.’ (Survey Respondent No. 4, 2013).

These games were not criticised because they were ‘commercial’, but because they were considered poor ARGs. This is not a simple condemnation or ‘resistance’ to their promotional status. However, players increasingly utilised a discourse of authenticity, branding the games ‘just virals’ or ‘just marketing’ as opposed to a ‘real’ ARG (Janes, 2013). Any ARG can become a piece of viral marketing, but not all viral marketing can be a ‘true’ ARG.

This suggests players are not as comfortable with the commercial status of these games as they initially appear. A ‘real’ ARG means something more to players, elevating the games above ‘mere’ promotion. Janes (2013) notes this simultaneous acknowledgement of and distancing from the games’ promotional purpose occurs with both players and producers. On closer analysis, there are a number of strategies at play as both parties negotiate their relationship with promotional ARGs, in the manner suggested by Hills. Whilst some strategies almost negate the commercial status of the
game, others suggest players and producer define and evaluate the games in a more personal, affective context, rendering the promotional context almost irrelevant.

**TINAG**

ARGs have something of an in-built strategy which works towards negating the commercial status of the game. The ‘This Is Not a Game’ philosophy (TINAG) was established during *The Beast* and refers to the extent to which the game and characters in it behave as if they are ‘real’ (Thompson, 2005). Websites must appear as they would do in ‘real life’. Phone numbers must work, emails must at least provide a plausible auto-response, and as players come to know the characters 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, it breaks the spell. This also requires PMs to remain ‘behind the curtain’ until the end of the game. If kept strictly, they must refrain from contacting players on forums, either as themselves, as characters or under pseudonyms.

Players have always debated the relevance and practicality of maintaining TINAG and it has been suggested that the term has become outdated (Andersen, 2012). As the genre has grown there has been an increasing acceptance of the need for PMs to be more open about who they are and who they work for. This is particularly pertinent for promotional ARGs which often require players to sign up to websites using personal details such as email addresses, or through social media accounts like Twitter or Facebook. However, for many players, the attraction of an ARG is the blurring between the boundaries of the real and the fictional. TINAG works to maintain that sense of immersion in the game world.

This Is Not A Game, by extension, also means This Is Not Marketing. TINAG therefore allows players to distance themselves from their commercial context or at least feel more comfortable with their involvement:

‘Maintenance of TINAG helps me connect with the product in a way where I don’t feel like [I’m being] used.’ (Respondent #, Player Survey 2013)

‘It’s what makes the difference between an ARG and an advertisement’ (Respondent #, Player Survey, 2013)

The first respondent’s words echo a continued concern about being ‘used’ by media companies, and therefore about being placed at the ‘incorporated’ end of Hills’ dichotomy. This is particularly relevant for promotional ARGs in that they arguably use players to spread word-of-mouth and so perform marketing work for media producers. TINAG allows players to negotiate that negative perception. Hills’ moral dualisms are also 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, and not a manipulative ‘bad’ advertisement. Although Hills criticises these binaries, they continue to linger.

Many players complained extensively about Domino’s Pizza’s involvement in *WhySoSerious*. They were due to deliver pizza boxes containing Batman masks, but in many cases either failed to do so or delivered empty boxes. Not only were players lacking their prizes, but the fiction was broken as they had to return either to the Domino’s Pizza branch to complain, or contact 42 Entertainment to enquire about their prize. Whilst attitudes towards TINAG may have been relaxed since the genre emerged, promotional ARGs may need to maintain it mores strongly. In order to be acceptable to
players as a piece of marketing, it must do its best not to behave like a piece of marketing, negating its commercial status where possible.

Yet as before, this was not a straightforward criticism of the commercial nature of the game. The primary offense was not that they were too overtly identified as Domino’s Pizza (indeed they delivered under the thin guise of Gotham Pizzeria) but that ineffective communication caused their part of the game to malfunction. Furthermore, enjoyment of an ARG requires players to move fluidly between states of in-game immersion (as per TINAG) and out-of-game critical analysis. In particular, players must differentiate between in- and out-of-game websites, which also requires an awareness of the game’s commercial context. Forums are filled with ‘meta’ discussion, in which players critique and analyse not only game design but also their own in- and out-of-game behaviours. The genre therefore highlights the constant state of negotiation which Hills sees fans enacting with regards to their position in a commercial media industry (Hills, 2002: 28), rather than suggesting players straightforwardly negate or ignore that context.

Creative Self vs Commercial Other

Both players and producers emphasise the games’ creative content by defining PMs against the corporate client, who is perceived to be more aligned with its commercial purpose. This is strikingly similar to the manner in which Hills argues fan communities define themselves using a ‘raft of overlapping and interlocking versions of “us” and “them”’ (Hills, 2002: 3) which often also work across moral dualisms.

When discussing their work there is a tendency for game designers to emphasise the creative over the commercial. ARG designer Adam Brackin described his work as ‘ARG for ARGs sake. Kind of a pun on “art for art’s sake”’ (Brackin, 2007). Many prefer to discuss their work in terms of either storytelling, or as an artform. Stewart argues there are three forms of artistic ‘energy’: The first is gained through context, exemplified by Duchamp’s Fountain. The second is ‘locked up’ or present in the piece itself, e.g. a Michelangelo or Dante’s Inferno. The third is a kind of 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 real-time, ephemeral nature of ARG means players cannot repeat that experience, as they could a work by Michelangelo. The key to an ARG’s artistic energy is therefore the audience’s participation, and while Stewart is not necessarily making a direct comparison between ARGs and classical art (in fact he highlights their differences), 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, 2012a).
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. Players similarly argue for artistry in promotional ARGs, identifying game designers as artists:

‘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 about 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 and SHH players also distinguished between companies like Warner Brothers/Dreamworks and PMs. Warner Brothers were discussed in terms of a source of financing or as the controllers of distribution decisions, but rarely in terms of providing any creative input into the ARGs. Corporations were generally perceived to be driven by financial rather than creative imperatives:

‘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)

This is substantiated by transcripts from ARG-Fest 2007 where PMs cite difficulties in convincing corporate clients to grasp this value, preferring to measure success quantitatively. Clients were generally concerned with return on investment, improving sales or PR impact – and as with any form of promotion, a direct link between these aims and the ARG itself was often difficult to prove (see Clark, 2007; Brackin, 2007).

However, corporate clients may benefit from being associated with creative work of PMs. On discovering its links with Microsoft, some players questioned the purpose of the ARG, suspecting it was an advert for Xbox or was designed to put Mac users at a disadvantage. Yet, by the end of the game some attitudes 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)

Again, Hills’ moral dualisms start to emerge as players align PMs with positive creativity and media companies with negative commerce. This also finds expression in trade press:

‘Marketers now have the tools and permission to engage us in ways they wouldn’t have dared before. Promotion, storytelling, marketing and experience all meet in real 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. Boswell suggests this new approach demonstrates ‘respect’ for the audience, a quality which, presumably, previous marketing tactics did not possess. Here, creativity practically validates morally dubious marketing, forming a distancing strategy used by both players and PMs to focus on the creative content of the games over their commercial intent.

**Affective Impact – Personal Journeys**

PMs and players also discuss their relationship in terms of mutual trust. This is possibly because while other narrative artforms might require suspension of disbelief, ARGs ask players to act upon it, to communicate with a character and follow their instructions as if they are real and as if they matter. For players to take such actions requires a strong emotional investment and a level of trust between PMs and players, without which the game becomes unplayable. The greater the investment, the greater the fallout if it proves foolhardy or does not provide the kind of return players are looking for. PMs therefore feel morally obliged to respect that investment:

‘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).

‘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 and not really work hard’ (Stewart, 2007).

The importance of that trust relationship reflects the affective impact that an ARG, promotional or otherwise, can have on players and PMs alike. Many players cited an attachment to characters, not unusual in any other media, intensified by the opportunity to interact with those characters and affect their storylines:

‘[...]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?’ (UF)

‘In one case players went out of their way to make SURE that one character DID NOT DIE.’(UF)

Players also made strong personal connections with the community itself:

‘I felt like we’ve lived a full life as a group. Friendships were made.. Enemies were found’ (CM).

In addition, players noted how addictive the games were, to the point that they started to take priority over other aspects of their personal lives. Addiction metaphors were common, with an entire thread on SHH dedicated to the ‘Official TDK [The Dark Knight] 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
For some, it was not necessarily the game itself that was important, but the connections between the game experience and their personal lives. Many of their favourite moments were those shared with friends or relatives:

‘the ilb [ilovebees] training event because I got to bring my son (and he got to play Halo on the big screen) (UF)

One discussion was about games which ask players to adopt a role or persona. The debate initially focussed on defining ARGs against more traditional role playing games (RPGs). However, as the conversation continued, the issue became about personal identity and empowerment:

‘At a fundamental level my identity as a player reflects who I am and what I believe.’ (UF)

‘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)

PMs similarly express the belief that affective investment in an ARG is not simply a conduit to a purchasing decision. It provides a sense of empowerment entirely separate from these issues. Elan Lee frequently described it as an empowering sense of discovery, extending this into a superhero metaphor:

‘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 empowerment resides on a personal level, rather than a textual or political form of empowerment, but is valuable nonetheless. It is the ability, real or perceived, to take a certain amount of control or ownership over a space or world or at least to be considered a part of it that matters. These games encourage elaborated forms of self-consciousness and self-reflection, dispelling stereotypes of gamers as overly introverted or inward-looking which often informed Hills’ resistant/incorporated dichotomy. As players become rigorously critical and analytical of their in and out of game actions, ARGs become increasingly personal experiences through which players can start to consider their own identities. The ‘reality’ element of an ARG combined with the fact that users play as themselves, enhances this feeling in a way that an RPG might not.

Within the context of a marketing campaign, this could help fans and wider 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 at, be it as one ‘mass’ homogenous group or a number of market segments. Yet these attachments are often so abstracted from the product being promoted, or even the game itself, that it cannot necessarily be said to work solely in the interests of marketers. 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 game could leave them feeling
emotionally invested in the film. Yet one respondent notes they ‘already loved A.I.’ and it is clear that SHH players were Batman fans long before the game began. It is therefore possible that these investments perform an alternative function.

Instead, such personal connections could reflect the position of ARGs on what Grossberg refers to as an individual’s ‘mattering map’, allowing them to use it as a locus for their own identity. Grossberg views this as a form of empowerment via popular culture. In this context, empowerment is

‘[…]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’ (Grossberg, 1992: 65).

This form of empowerment is subjective and personal; much like Lee’s description of the sense of discovery enabled by ARGs. It has relevance and meaning to players that moves their individual experience of ARGs so far beyond marketing, that its promotional status becomes almost irrelevant. That such alternative values are made possible through game mechanics also reflects Hills’ evaluation of the appropriation of fan texts using Adorno (2002: 31-35). By assigning their own affective values to promotional ARGs, players move the game away from, but never completely remove, its ‘exchange value’ and imbue it with their own ‘use value’, specific to their ‘lived experience of fandom’ (Hills, 2002: 35). They accomplish this specifically through play, which Adorno argues is the only mechanism which can achieve this temporary separation (1978: 228). If, as Stewart (quoted in Hanas, 2006) says ‘there is no viral marketing. All there is is fun’ then perhaps when there is no fun, there is only viral marketing. If the possibility for play is limited, so is the possibility for creating those alternative, personal meanings and the games may indeed become ‘just’ marketing. ARGs could perform both these functions, but they must provide enough space and freedom for such affective play and this may not always be practical when logistical, financial, technological and IP restrictions are so frequently imposed on promotional games.

Conclusion

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, much in the way Hills argues fans negotiate the commerciality of their fan texts, allowing them to continue to exist within a 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. They often do so using binaries which echo Hills’ assertion that constructing such identities often involves moral dualisms (Hills, 2002). Here we see the emergence of ideals of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ producers, defined in this manner not only by audiences looking to validate their own modes of consumption, but also by producers themselves. Many seek to validate their modes of production outside of a framework of ‘bad’ commerce which persists despite the
importance of ‘creative’ marketing and storytelling in a multi-platform, transmedia environment where promotional materials must increasingly 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 which existed between them would start to dissolve. This does not appear to have been the case with promotional ARGs. Increasingly, studios must balance their commercial needs not only with creative desires of directors and actors, but of content producers right across their properties. The privileging of the creative, or the productive, over the corporate and commercial remains a central facet of the media industry in a way which 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.

Player strategies of negotiation similarly reflect these dualisms surrounding creativity and commerce which continue to play a role in defining consumers’ relationship to both media texts and their producers. However, the most striking of these is the emphasis placed on the personal, subjective and affective impact of ARGs and the strong emotional investments made by dedicated players. 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). This is emphatically not the intended result of a promotional ARG, and realistically has little commercial value to marketers. Yet it has all the value in the world to players who can and do receive these games as something other, if not more, than marketing.

References


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Notes


[VI] https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/cloudmakers/info (accessed 24 July 2014)