Alternate Reality Games:
Defining Gender through an Updated Taxonomy

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Abstract: Since their origin, Alternate Reality Games or ARGs have presented a great variability in their structures, forms, rules and objectives, compromising a definition capable of describing them in a univocal way. This circumstance has forced writers and designers of ARGs in the first place, and secondly researchers and theorists of the games, to articulate different classifications capable of bringing together all manifestations of the phenomenon. As if this were not enough, the different attempts of classification on the genre have had to face its spirit always tending to contingency, change and transformation according to technological advances or new experiences of use, a fact that forces the constant updating of the categories or sub-genres in which ARGs could be divided. This paper aims to analyze the fundamental characteristics of the different types of ARGs with the intention of proposing an updated taxonomy that covers all cases in a generous and flexible way but trying to delimit the boundaries as clearly as possible.

Keywords/Keywords: Alternate Reality Games, Serious Games, Advergaming, Transmedia Storytelling, Interactive Fiction

1   Introduction

The Alternate Reality Games are the first-born sons of cultural convergence [1], with a card in the illustrious club of digital incunabula [2], imagined from the first sleepless nights of *Homo Ludens [*3], a product or perhaps a symptom of the World Wide Web without which they cannot be conceived [4], and at the same time related to a myriad of ancestral narrative forms without which they do not seem to be understood either. ARGs are questioned about everything, from when they were born and what their seminal piece is, to which family they belong, not escaping anyone, but their bastard lineage. Their very name throws up at least two controversial units, the concept "game" and the concept "alternate reality" [4] [5]. 5] From this primary critical reflection, a collection of terminological, structural and thematic divergences unfolds that correlate to its evolution, from its first germinal stage, its subsequent maturity, and the current stage, which we could venture to call a *rebirth, in* light of its current development.

What seems to be unanimously assumed is that the ARGs found their fundamental breeding ground from the proliferation of new actors in a media ecosystem [6] called to be overpopulated, thanks to new technologies capable of performing the miracle of a digital transmutation, what Negroponte calls "the conversion of atoms to bits" [7] and the combination of these new tools, digital environments, web pages, emails, etc. added to other types of more traditional packaging. The fact that ARGs are perhaps the most notable example of this emulsion of old and new technologies is one of the conventions signed by the practical majority of authors who reflect on the genre, as well as its narrative heart [4], its interactivity and its transmedia nature [8] or the role that reality plays in this type of playful experience, treated as a component or diegetic stage, making the game transcend its own limits and breaking the magic circle [3] under the legendary motto that has governed ARGs since their birth: *This is not a Game* (or its acronym TINAG). But beyond minimum agreements, the truth is that Alternate Reality Games are a true catalogue of dissensions, discrepancies and slippery slopes where what is defined in consensus is systematically redefined by a new practice: if for some people TINAG means a philosophy to be strictly followed, disguising the game in reality and deceiving the player until the weight of fiction forces the voluntary suspension of disbelief, for others it is nothing more than an aesthetic that governs but starts from an a priori agreement with the players [9] while some people underline its potential to produce changes in the life of the players [10], speaking at another time of the manifestation of an identity crisis [5].

In our view, there are several factors that explain the above-mentioned difficulty in finding adherence to the concepts that define gender. Firstly, the inexistence of a founding text or truly binding shared codes and, therefore, the presence of an exaggerated experimental nature that leaves each designer free to reinvent the genre in almost every new project. Secondly, an exceptional dependence on technologies and a great sensitivity to their dizzying evolution (obsolescence of some of them, appearance of others, etc.). And thirdly, what seems to us to be the most significant reason: a variability in terms of objectives and strategies to meet these objectives, or in other words, a scenario in which each ARG aims to meet a different objective and uses any means to achieve it, regardless of transgressing the hypothetical rules established by the majority. So, it seems that the only strategy of adherence and the only way to consider the phenomenon in all its dimensions would be the one that subdivides it and studies it in that dissociation, responding to the peculiarities of each of the subgroups and vertebrate a definition that, although it will be poly-headed, should also aspire to present a single conceptual trunk.

1.1 Operational definitions of terms

The ARG universe contains a series of native concepts that somehow live in all the examples and serve as units of measure to analyze their morphology.

. Puppetmasters. The directors of the game. The creators, writers and developers who set the guidelines, write the story and design the game elements, mechanics,

puzzles and subplots, modifying them, if necessary, according to the players' interactions. They are usually anonymous and work as a team, playing a combined role of opponent and assistant. The puppeteer would represent a mode of production [11].

. Rabbitholes or Trailheads. These are the entry points to the game. Evoking the rabbit hole in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), rabbitholes are gateways to the diegetic universe, calls to play or in marketing terminology *calls to action (*CTA). They can be known by players like in ARGs of an educational or training nature [12] or by respecting the principle of TINAG*,* camouflaged in an anomaly that happens in the participant's routine and that also leads them to the gameworld, which is the real world [13]. Rabbitholes would be narrative devices [11].

. The Curtain. The curtain is defined by the space that separates the players from the puppetmaster, a metaphor for the distance between the diegetic and the real, an intersection, a threshold that inevitably confronts the two entities in play and represents the social contract made by both. The curtain is the conceptual framework [11].

. TINAG. Acronym for *This is not a Game* that sets the basis for a mechanical and rule system, and founds the philosophy and aesthetics that govern most Alternate Reality Games, separating them conceptually from the rest of the game experiences.

Once we have reviewed the concepts of the ARG universe, we will explain the objective of our research and how we have carried it out.

2   Methodology

The present work aims to create a taxonomy that manages to cover all types of ARG, describing their fundamental characteristics and carrying out a comparative study between the different subgroups, in order to finally be able to articulate a sufficiently broad definition to respond to all the cases studied. Furthermore, we believe it is important to underline the relevance of undertaking the mission from an updated time perspective, taking into account the evolution of each of the subgroups and contrasting their current state with their past states. Only in this way do we consider the study of the ARG as a living entity and not as an obsolete phenomenon, as a memory. And we do so because we believe in the validity of the ARG, a genre which, although it has never managed to leave behind its label of "emerging" [14] despite promising a revolution [15], currently seems to be leading a renaissance and a gradual decentralised proliferation, going beyond its place of birth, the United States.

For the elaboration of our taxonomy, we have carried out three previous analytical tasks. First, we have made a bibliographic review in search of generic definitions made by relevant authors over the years. This work has provided us with an overview of what Alternate Reality Games mean to designers and theorists beyond

classifications, i.e. what they are supposed to be in the collective imagination. Secondly, given the expected shifting territory of generic definitions, we wanted to look for ARG classifications made by researchers of the genre years ago. This search has allowed us to know the methodologies used to classify ARG in the past, offering us valid criteria to undertake our own classification. Finally, we have proceeded to compile and study ARG cases with characteristics that seem significant to us in order to, taking into account their objectives and the presence of the so-called native concepts in them, in addition to their duration and their means of financing, carry out our own taxonomy, also observing the evolution of each category in case there were substantial changes from the past to the present.

3   A New Taxonomy for a New Definition

Below we describe the categories of ARGs raised in this study mentioning as examples a number of significant cases with their respective authors.

. **Grassroots or canonical ARG**. The ARG that embodies the conventions of the genre more faithfully, more closely. The grassroots or canonical ARGs is that based on the premise of play for play's sake, whose backbone is playful but with the narrative as its heart (in fact Mcgonigal calls it narrative ARG in 2011 [10]). The canonical ARG, moreover, is the one that best represents the spirit of *This is not a Game,* since in most cases it disguises its nature until well into the narrative development, not demanding from the participant the suspension of disbelief a *priori* but rather giving him the sensation of living a real and unique adventure, only denied or rather nuanced a *posteriori*. But it is perhaps in contrast to other playful experiences that the character of this ARG subtype, and by extension, ARG in the truest sense, can best be understood, comparing its fundamental vectors with their translation into other playful languages. For example, regarding the well-known sense of conscious reality / fiction ambiguity invoked in each TINAG, developed based on the use of the real world as a diegetic setting and alien to other experiences deployed in that same world but that harbor little identity doubt, namely, experiences such as recreational treasure hunts [12], much more focused on the prize and therefore much more competitive and with a much less narrative content than the ARG or experiences such as Geocatching, where the player roams the corners of the city in search of treasures left by other players, very aware of their participation in a collaborative but also little fiction narrative. Or compared to games that require ad hoc interfaces to enter that other world, from those that use costumes or props materials, as in the common case of Live Action Role-Playing Game (LARP), to those that use technology to do so, augmented reality on mobiles, virtual reality glasses etc., distant forms from the ARG device that is precisely based on the negation of the interface. And speaking of those responsible for such denial, in this subtype the puppetmaster usually remain anonymous, work as a team (although they may also be the only directors), and usually finance the projects with their own savings or seek methods of financing that, in any case, never go against their anonymity and the narrative itself

(in some cases even offering financial rewards to the players). Dave Szulborski, responsible for titles such as *Chasing the Wish* (2003) or *Urban Hunt* (2004) would be a significant example of a grassroots puppeteer in the origins of the genre. In basic ARGs, rabbitholes are presented in a camouflaged way and in many cases require a predisposition to be found. In basic ARGs, the transmedia level is usually very high and the archaeological demand is also very high, requiring a great effort from the players to collect all the pieces of the narrative mosaic. This sub-genre is therefore preferred by the fandom, not only because it is aimed especially at this minority group, although it is deeply loyal, as Jenkins [1] or Scolari [6] say, but also because it is born from its own bosom and is based on the collective intelligence of its participants. We cannot forget that although *The Beast* (42 Entertainment and Microsoft, 2001) is probably considered the ARG par excellence, the first ARG with all the ingredients to be considered as such, when we talk about grassroots ARG we are referring precisely to those that are born after the end of the previous one, as a result of the excessive interest of fans in the incipient genre, the so-called *cloudmakers,* those who then began to theorize, deepen and propose their own productions. With regard to its chronological evolution, it should be noted that the grassroots ARGs were the undisputed protagonists during the first years of the genre and that although their production gradually decreased in the following decade, it always maintained its numbers in a more or less sustained way. Nowadays, the basic ARGs that are carried out show a certain tendency to change, translated into a changing narrative timing (for example, the whole experience can be encapsulated to be seen at once), a wide casuistry regarding the identity of the puppetmasters (in some cases their identity is never known and in others they appear from the very beginning), a development of games that can be completed by a single person without paying too much attention to the community element and, above all, a propensity to give priority to narrative over puzzles, often confusing it with more conventional transmedia narratives and reserving its playful element to the fact of having to collect fragments of information to witness the complete narrative experience. *Ben's Playhouse* (Collin Henson, 2018) would be an example of a modern-day ARG with a transmedia narrative structure, information fragmented in channels such as Youtube, Instagram or Vine, and in addition, a use of false documentary techniques, found footage and hoax appearance for its exhibition, this being the preferred style of the modern-day ARG to transcend its limits and show a real appearance. Other relevant examples of this category since its foundation: *Lockjaw* (Andy Aiken, Bruce Cain, Clay Chiment, Derek Jensen, Brooke Thompson y Krystyn Wells, 2002), *Catching the Wish* (David Szulborski, 2006), *Noc+10* (Anonymous, 2015), *Jejune Institute* (Jeff Hull, 2008), *This House Has People in It* (Alan Resnick, 2016).

. Grassroots but promotional in appearance. It is worth mentioning here a hybrid between the first category and the second one that we will develop next. We are referring to grassroots ARG but located in a prefabricated fictional universe and that looks like an official promotion effort of this one. In these cases, we witness a kind of appropriation by the puppeteers who, either as an exercise in fan art [1], or taking advantage of the media pull and the facilities it provides, locate the narrative

within a world of fiction already created, become spontaneous and, in most cases, illegal co-creators without official permission. *Metacortechs* (Steve Peters, Krystyn Wells, Brooke Thompson, and Sean Stacey, 2003), ARG set in the *Matrix* universe (The Wachowskis, 1999) and released several months before the release of its third and final installment *Matrix Revolutions* (The Wachowskis, 2003), and *Exocog* (Jim Miller, 2002), grassroots ARG set in the universe of the film *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002) would be the two greatest exponents of this type of ARG, which even though they had nothing to do with the official promotional campaigns of these films, they were confused with them, for the reasons described.

. **Promotional or Branded ARG.** Let us use the adjective "promotional" proposed in the first place by Barlow [16] and also by Askwith [17] or the other proposed from here, we refer at this time to the ARGs associated to some brand or product and that are articulated as part of an advertising campaign to solve a specific marketing objective related to these. Commonly used to advertise cultural products such as films, series, video games, recordings, but also observable in other markets, from cars to computer operating systems, promotional ARGs are a creative form of advertising that is increasingly valued for its loyalty and branding potential. In this subspecies, all the elements of the ARG organism are subordinated to the achievement of these marketing objectives, as well as the weight, complexity and depth of both the narrative and the playful elements, a fact that explains the tendency of this type of ARG to practical laxity and to the slogan of making *it easy for* the player/client. This happens in various ways: either by undermining the media universe of action with rabbitholes or directly by breaking the TINAG and identifying them as games; either by decaffeinating the puzzles or by creating easy-to-follow narratives, always keeping the aesthetic of immersive narrative away from other persuasive social games that often condemn the plot and other times also immersion. In general terms, we observe two prototypical cases of promotional ARG: on the one hand, that which has to do with advertising in a teaser mode, being set in motion months before the product's launch and developing with different degrees of secrecy and camouflage in reality, and on the other, that which has to do with promotion once the product is on the market, a subtype that Askwith calls "of narrative extension" [17]. A clear example of the first situation would be the already mentioned *The Beast,* for the promotion of the film *IA, Artificial Intelligence* in 2001, or the case of *I Love Bees* (42 Entertainment, 2004)*,* ARG for the promotion of the video game *Halo 2* (Bungies Studios and Microsoft, 2004), both reference Alternate Reality Games, launched months before the film's release and the game's release respectively, sharing TINAG's philosophy and a very important complexity, by the way, both made by the same company, *42 Entertainment,* flagship of this kind of experiences. To illustrate the second situation, just look at examples of tactical transmedia [18], where Alternate Reality Games are one of the branches within the communication structure, as in the case of the spanish fiction *El Internado* (Globomedia, 2007-2010) which in 2009 and synchronized with the premiere of the sixth season of the fiction, launched an ARG called *Dónde está Yago,* where viewers had to look for a missing former student; or the case of *La Garduña exists,* ARG for the promotion of the spanish fiction *La Peste,* which in

2019 was launched almost simultaneously with the premiere of its second season, without hiding at any time the nature of the game. Other examples of promotional ARG: *K, Uncap the Ride* (BMW, 2002), *The Art of the H3ist* (Audi A3, 2005), *Last Call Poker* (Activision, 2005), *Edoc Laundry* (Eponymous Company, 2006), *Cypher Hunt* (Fiction Series, Gravity Falls, 2016).

    . Commercial or payment ARG. We could define the commercial ARG as those conceived with a commercial objective and designed to pursue an economic return, only being enjoyable in its entirety after payment by the players. Either paying *a priori* for the full game, or by subscription and enjoying certain content (for example exclusively for one season), commercial ARGs are another of the oldest and currently most widespread types of Alternate Reality Games. They make up a rather diverse *corpus* (in fact we include both "productive" and "single-player" ARGs, which in 2006 Barlow classified separately [16], as well as the "monetized" ARGs that Bakioglu talks about in 2015 [19] and the "live event" ARGs, named by Jane Mcgonigal in 2011 [10], a heterogeneous group with which you have to spin the wheel to get them right. An ARG that is free but seeks its own financing through, for example, the sale of certain elements integrated into the narrative, we could not consider it commercial if it did not suffer a significant impairment of its own narrative or playful experience by not acquiring such a product. An example of this is the ARG, *Perplex City* (Mind Candy, 2005), a game that, in order to be financed, included the sale of collectible cards that provided additional information about the universe in which the plot was developed. [20] The acquisition of these cards, while making the players' experience more complete through discussion or exchange, was not necessary to enjoy the full narrative, so we could not consider it a commercial ARG but a basic self-financing success. What we could consider as the first commercial ARG is the failed *Majestic* (Electronic Arts, 2001), born in the heat of the end of *The Beast* and raised as a subscription game, something that did not convince the community of players condemning it to its premature cancellation. There is a wide variability of commercial ARGs regarding its fidelity to the conventions and rules of the genre. There are those that do not differ much from the grassroots ARGs, beyond needing a preliminary fiction pact to be carried out at the time of formalizing the purchase. This is how *Majestic* worked, declaring itself under the parameters of *This is not a Game,* just after the players accepted the terms of purchase; or also how the proto-ARG worked that the protagonist of *The Game* (David Fincher, 1997) enjoyed (or rather suffered), a film recognized as one of the most relevant precedents of the genre and in which a millionaire, played by Michael Douglas, played a perverse ARG acquired by his brother from a specialized company as a gift. There are also commercial ARGs whose peculiarities structurally break the canon. In them, the eventual and therefore ephemeral character of the canonical ARG is transformed into a permanent and on-demand character, giving rise to the Permanent Alternative Reality Games (PARG), packaged games that can be enjoyed whenever the player wishes. Also the collective spirit of the canonical ARG becomes individual, being able to be enjoyed as a single-

player experience without the help of the community. Or there are also those that are collective, happen punctually and demand the player to create an avatar and its characterization, the so-called *Real Games,* hybrids very close to the *Live Action Role-Playing Game* (LARP) or even the *Escape Rooms*. As we can see, the range of possibilities in this ARG category is multiple, blurring the limits and being, as we said, very common nowadays as products offered by development companies in their catalogues to individual players or groups of friends, such as those called by "private" [21] or to companies or organizations that demand some kind of activity to fill a *teambuilding* event agenda. Some examples of developers offering this type of service today: *Realidad Alternativa* (Spain) with their games, *Signal* and *1787, Action Barcelona (Spain)* with their games, *Rescue Your Boss* and *Swat Countdown*, and *Alice and Smith* (Canada) with their games *Bloodline 2, No Man's Sky* and *Black Watchmen*.

    . Serious ARG. We define the serious ARGs as those whose objective are didactic, organizational or of fomenting the critical spirit on the reality of the player. We wanted to raise a subgroup wide enough to collect all those cases that, although they show a dissonant form with respect to the established canon, can be considered Alternate Reality Games taking into account their vocation for change or improvement in the reality of the player. We incorporate the so-called ARG "of educational training" [16], "of life management" [10], "educational" [22], "civic" [23], "formative" and "organizational" [12]. Serious ARGs are directly related to other forms of gameplay that pursue objectives applicable to the player's real life but are developed primarily in digital environments such as *Persuasive Games [*24] or *Epistemic Games [*25], and could be classified within a broader category that would include all games whose purpose goes beyond simple fun, the so-called *Serious Games* [26]. Serious ARGs take many forms; they can be used in school or university settings to encourage students to learn a subject or also to train lateral thinking, as in the case of *ARGuing* (2008), an ARG funded by the European Union to encourage multilingualism among secondary school students in EU countries. They may also occur in corporate environments where companies seek to train their workers in some aspect or intend to measure their response to possible contingencies, as in the case of *I Love Trees* (2011), ARG developed during the *Pennsylvania Educational Technology Expo and Conference to* introduce participants to a system called *Powerful Learning Practices* on educational technology. On the other hand, serious ARGs seek reflection and critical thinking as in the case of *World Without Oil (*2007), Jane Mcgonigal's illustrious ARG where a hypothetical scenario of a world without oil was proposed and participants were asked to reflect and try to provide solutions to the problem. Or in another sense, the author's games dedicated to promoting healthy living behaviours even serving as therapy in the recovery from physical traumas, as in the case of her game *Superbetter* (2009). As we can see, the possibilities are multiple and the structural changes in each one of them can also be very pronounced: The *This is not a Game* acquires a different meaning, the narrative can be relegated to simple mechanical support, the ARG rules are blown up and the game itself becomes a sort of vital play only being able to be identified with the original label because of its

unequivocal tendency to colonize the player's reality, although in a *different way*. Regarding its evolution, we have to emphasize that the serious ARG appeared some years after the foundation of the genre, they lived an important development mainly thanks to the multidisciplinary approach on the part of all type of professionals, psychologists, pedagogues, theoreticians etc. and at the present time they are one of the most studied and with more practical possibilities. Some examples of serious ARG: *Robots Are Eating the Building* (Harrisburg University, 2010), *Chore Wars* (Kevan Davis, 2007), *Evoke* (Jane Mcgonigal, 2010), *Conspiracy for Good*, (The Company P, 2010) y *The Confort of the Strangers*, (Evan y Johnson, 2008).

After articulating our classification, we believe it is pertinent to propose an updated definition that works as a minimum agreement, capable of including the fundamental characteristics shared in all ARGs in one way or another.

An ARG is a type of game characterized by a relevant narrative quota that normally unfolds in a fragmented way and following a transmedia logic, which assumes reality as a component of the game, emerging in it to the point of converting it into diegetic space-time after a fictional pact with the players and ultimately seeks a transforming effect on them, either by giving them a demiurgic illusion of narrative protagonism, challenging them to overcome playful challenges that require a cooperative effort to overcome them, or by stimulating the critical application of the mechanics learned in the game in real environments and situations as creative ways to improve their lives.

5   Conclusion

The Alternate Reality Games are a living genre with the same hybrid vocation and the same tendency to break and transgress borders as when they were born. Although the forms have been able to transform over time, the background of this transgression remains the same: first, breaking the boundaries that separate the game from reality, emerging in the player's life to change it somehow and then, breaking those that pretend to department them, cracking the walls that contain them and running spontaneously. Even so, we believe that only in a classifying effort is it possible to understand them in their complexity, finding the common denominators to back up a sufficient definition. After identifying native concepts thrown up in the first known cases and inferring from these a sort of paradigmatic structure, we set out to compile enough examples over the years and analyze them, highlighting the most important characteristics to finally pose a series of categories capable of effectively framing all the examples studied. With the reference of other classifications always as a cardinal point, we wanted ours to be generous and ductile, even with solid outlines, and of course to take into account that congenital propensity to evolve by hybridizing by system. In short, we believe that as far as the Alternate Reality Games are concerned,

the frontier attack is guaranteed in the future as they become more popular and more used, so it will depend on the analytical effort to continue reconstructing the perimeters on time to reveal the mutations of the genre.

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