

Alternate reality games and participatory storytelling beyond entertainment: new and more effective ways of triggering and creating communities.

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Case study

Designing experiences and complex systems blurs the lines between research, design and prototype ideally bringing designers, stakeholders and users to the same table at the same time. In this scenario the sandbox within which all these processes happen appears to be decisive in getting a positive output from the design work and building the base for future traction.

This case intends to bring into the service design community the practise of alternate reality games and participatory storytelling as tools for user triggering, community engagement and co-creation by drawing concepts and best practises from a case study. Working in conjunction with a television broadcaster and a game publishing company I faced the challenge of creating a new entertainment format that needed to merge together traditional television fiction with the new possibilities of online social gaming and transmedia storytelling.

Alternate reality games are interactive narratives that literally use the real world, both physical and digital, as a playground where players can interact with each other and with the stories themselves affecting directly the evolution and the outcome of the experience. Riddles, cyphered messages, enigmas, real time interactions and pervasive actions are all elements that the game designer uses in order to engage and trigger the players.

ARGs have been recognized in recent years as sophisticated marketing and promotion tools but with this project I discovered how powerful they can be as instruments of problem solving and co-creation. During an air time of three months with weekly episodes players tended naturally to create a strong and collaborative community capable since the first days of acting as a hive mind. More than 1000 active players generated by the end of the game about 60000 messages solving in a few minutes stories, games and enigmas that took months to be scripted and developed.

Take home

From this project I drawn the idea the ARGs can be more than entertainment and can become one of the tools of service design. I want to introduce service designers to a particular kind of games they might be unfamiliar with. I want this case to inspire service designer in thinking about different, creative and maybe controversial ways to approach end users/customers and bring them in the design process.

The case study introduces both the genre and dynamics of Alternate Reality Games and a specific overview of the design and production phases of the game in order to provide the participants with a general workable framework and some insights of the time, effort and profiles needed for creating similar experiences.

Beside giving practical information on the design process of an ARG the aim of this case study is to generate a discussion among designers and practitioners on if and how these games can be integrated in the design process.