Abstract: Video games and their associated forms stand as the most lucrative entertainment sector on the planet, dominating other forms of visual media in dollars generated annually. In the proposed paper, adapted from a dissertation chapter, I will draw upon my experience as a game designer to illuminate the increasingly dire ways that various actors in the political sphere – from online trolls all the way to world leaders – have combined the language and techniques borne from the industrial practices of game design with the power of social media and other online communication platforms to produce new forms of disinformation, propaganda and conspiracy theory. In this paper, I will trace the history of a specific form of game – the Alternate Reality Game (ARG), from its early literary history in 1903 to its modern incarnations. Subsequently, by harnessing lessons from my own work developing ARGs for both video game and film productions, I will examine how closely the principles employed during ARG marketing campaign have been in similar use in American politics since the 2016 American presidential campaign, culminating in the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capital. I will discuss how modern totalitarian systems will almost certainly continue to refine and deploy these strategies in the future as a new, dangerous form of propaganda: one that lives primarily in online discussion platforms and, much like the narrative of an ARG, is constructed both unwittingly and collaboratively by the targets of the propaganda themselves. Finally, I utilize my experience both as a designer and online community manager to address how, especially during COVID-19 quarantine, these emerging risks can be combatted as the daily intersection of digital and analogue worlds continue to merge ever closer.

Dangerous Games: ARGs, Social Media Platforms and Participatory Propaganda

Alternate Reality Games, or ARGs, are a form of entertainment that combine traditional game design, narrative storytelling, broad-scale social interaction and the temporality of a live event. They often straddle the line between a serious attempt at interactive narrative and a commercial marketing effort, being deployed not for their own sake but instead with the goal of boosting the market presence of another project. ARGs ask their players to willingly suspend their disbelief and step into a game world that overlays the real one – an alternate reality where fictionalized events take place. The ARG's design principles, which allow for thousands, or even millions, of simultaneous players, have broken free of their previously-constrained place in the world of entertainment and begun to echo across the modern geopolitical landscape. Observing the real-world application of these principles provides an answer to the question, "How can a political actor both effectively communicate to a large population and also convince an audience to believe and participate in a

specific, preconstructed version of reality?" As a form already largely streamlined for marketing efforts, the ARG presents an off-the-shelf solution for groups looking to propagate a message. In this paper, I will touch on the history of the ARG as a form, briefly describe my own experience designing commercial ARGs, and highlight how malicious political actors are already using tools birthed from industrial game design to disseminate new forms of propaganda and political speech.

The concept of an alternate reality game was presaged in the short story "The Tremendous Adventures of Major Brown," published in 1903 by G. K. Chesterton in *Harper's Weekly*. Over the course of the story, the retired Major Brown becomes an unwilling participant in what would be, by modern standards, a custom-tailored ARG. Actors approach him with information, he is given confusing messages, encounters bizarre phenomena (for example, a bed of pansies spells out the message "Death to Major Brown"), is assaulted by a mysterious figure, and is sent on a small-scale adventure to track down the source of the conspiracy. Upon doing so, he learns that this has all been done by the Adventure and Romance Agency, Limited. The puppet masters running the Agency have accidentally targeted the Major with their game, which was commissioned on behalf of the prior resident of his home.[1] Even in this nascent form, this proto-ARG story was acting as a tool for commercial promotion: though the tale runs only four pages in Harper's, nearly half of that space is dedicated to advertisements for hotels, bread machines, cigarettes, automobiles and other goods and services. Since their earliest theoretical conception, as we can see, ARGs have been inextricably linked to the idea of a marketplace. Even were one to read

Page 2 of *Major Brown* in *Harpers*, illustrating the space allocation between the story (left column) and advertisements.

[1] Additional writing on ARGs and *Major Brown* can be found in Bryan Alexander's white paper "Antecedents to Alternate Reality Games," published in 2006 by The International Game Developers Association's Alternate Reality Games Special Interest Group.

Chesterton's story in anthology, divorced from the advertisements that surrounded its initial publication, one would find market forces to be present in the work itself: Major Brown, upon confronting his tormentors, is presented with a bill tallying the expenses for the adventure he was provided. In other words, the ARG has always been transactional. My own experience designing ARGs has exposed to me the thin line between what we think of as "play" and what are aggressive sales techniques, though what is being sold is not always a durable good and can often be a philosophy or set of ideas.

The first modern proto-ARG was a piece of outsider art called *Ong's Hat*, conceived circa 1987. After gaining popularity online in the 1990s, the form was quickly imitated for commercial purposes. In the words of its creator, Joe Matheny, "I saw Hollywood grab the ARG thing and just basically prostitute[d] it out to be a vehicle for marketing" (Matheny). Matheny was referencing the first mainstream marketing ARG, which debuted in 2001, nearly a century after Chesterton published *Major Brown*. That year, Microsoft launched *The Beast*, an ARG created to promote the release of Stephen Spielberg's film *AI: Artificial Intelligence*, and with that launch, the modern commercial ARG was born. Using clues hidden in the film's trailers, print marketing, posters and other promotional material; a vast network of story and puzzle content in the form of writing, video, interactive games and more, was strewn across dozens of websites. Sean Stewart, head writer on the project, wrote of a design philosophy which looked to dominate every platform:

> "[the] idea was that we would tell a story that was not bound by communication platform: it would come at you over the web, by email, via fax and phone and billboard and TV and newspaper, SMS and skywriting and smoke signals too if we could figure out how. The story would be fundamentally interactive, made of little bits that players, like detectives or archaeologists, would discover and fit together. We would use political pamphlets,

business brochures, answering phone messages, surveillance camera video, stolen diary pages…

Anybody who noticed these connections could experience a story that tied to that of the film and appeared to be actually happening in the "real world" despite being clearly fictional – thus creating an alternate reality. To unravel the secrets of *The Beast* required the collaboration of thousands of players who had never experienced anything like it. At the peak of its activity, a discussion list dedicated to the game was generating tens of thousands of messages each week (Manjoo).

Other subsequent successful mainstream ARGs follow a similar model: with the goal of marketing a film or product, a designer will plant clues that first seed a broader storyline and then build a community of puzzle-solvers that will, in theory, both consume the product and serve as a viral marketing team, promoting the game to friends and across the broader internet as the player community attempts to recruit ever more people to help solve the ARG's puzzles.[2]

This is not to say that ARGs are solely the realm of the corporate marketing department. Artist collective Synydyne's performance art ARG *This is My Milwaukee* (2008-2009) or Jeff Hull's San Fransisco based *Jejune Institute* (2008) are two prominent examples of noncommercial projects, with the story of the latter inspiring a television show for AMC in March 2020. ARGs have also been used for education and research. The 2007 game *World Without Oil*, from a team headed by Ken Eklund, sought to explore a future reeling from a sudden shortage of oil and was funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, while Patrick Jagoda and a team produced *The Source* to study ARGs as a scalable learning platform. However, non-commercial ARGs tend to be outliers; the vast majority of large-scale projects are created for product promotion. As author and ARG designer Maureen McHugh told me, "most

[2] This didn't work so well for *The Beast*, as *AI: Artificial Intelligence* failed to make back its budget at the box office despite the popularity of the ARG.

ARGs are expensive to produce, and the only funding available, unless you get an art grant, is to find somebody who thinks they can use it as content marketing."

In 2019, I was asked to work on a new ARG for the company Definitely Real. The company was pursuing a film project called *Dared My Best Friend* ("*Dared*"), which was described as "Alternate Reality Cinema." Instead of drawing upon the more traditional film/ARG model pioneered by *The Beast*, where two projects ran in parallel, connected by plot and thematic details, Definitely Real's film looked not only to tie the narratives of the film project to an ARG, but also to a network of thirty to fifty other collaborators, who produced related but distinct art and media projects across the internet that spoke to the themes and ideas of the film. The distribution of the film was also novel: instead of being distributed by a major studio or even released all at once, it aired episodically online, with each episode releasing in real-time over online streaming services such as YouTube. When a new episode launched, the amount of time that had elapsed in the story was the same amount of time that had passed in the real world since the release of the previous episode, giving the appearance that the events of the film were actually happening.

The plot of *Dared* is straightforward. Two best friends, Zander and David, are bored during summer vacation and dare one other to ruin each other's life as a way of keeping themselves alert and sharp. The dare escalates far beyond the bounds of good sense, and both characters are thrust into a dark world of computer hacking, modern technological social manipulation, and eventually death. From the project's outset, one of its goals was to serve as not only entertainment but also as an educational service which instructs and informs the viewer-players about internet safety and security in the 21st century. To facilitate this goal, over the course of the narrative the Zander forms an online "team" for support and assistance. Zander then issues missions to his team, with the goals shifting in tone and escalating in severity in the face of David's repeated attempts to ruin his life.

What begins as an attempt at self preservation transforms into revenge after Zander's sister is kidnapped. The content of missions ranging from asking users to access websites only available via the TOR browser to infiltrating fictional web forums for "Team Takedown," an antagonistic online community of disaffected angry people, mostly men, with whom the protagonist's friend had allied himself, and whose members vaguely resembled people who had participated in the online hate movement, Gamergate, in 2014.[3]

As *Dared* demonstrates, the production and dissemination of fictional content in the service of an entertainment product closely mirrors techniques and strategies used by disinformation campaigns. Much as Russian troll farms were used to impersonate Americans and sew division in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, *Dared* hired multiple actors to play fictional characters online, maintaining their social profiles and interacting with players as if they were real people caught up in the thrill of the ARG. With only slight tweaks to the formula, a skilled disinformation department could disseminate political propaganda to befuddle the masses. Unlike traditional propaganda, where disinformation flows from the top down – in other words, from a government to its citizenry (or to whomever the target is) – the new age of propaganda is largely bottom-out. Although the information may still originate with a government or other powerful organization, it is primarily distributed by the targets to each other.

This new paradigm is what Alicia Wanless and Michael Berk call "participatory propaganda." "Participatory propaganda," they explain, "moves beyond a traditional, unidirectional 'one-to-many' form of communication, to a 'one-to-many-to-many more' form" (Berk and Wanless, 6). They continue by explaining that under this system, the target(s) of propaganda can themselves double as spreaders of propaganda, producing new content that expands the reach of the original

[3] More information about this project can be found at the website of the production studio: http://www.definitelyreal.com

message to new audiences in what they describe as a snowball effect. Because the message is designed to resonate with preexisting dispositions of the targets, targets are incentivized to share and spread the message. This technique was on full display in the 2016 American presidential election as part of Donald Trump's "Great Meme War." Alex Gekker explains that "[t]his semi-facetious term, which references bloody conflicts of old yet is filled with purposefully self-deprecating humor, was favored by online supporters of Trump, claiming to have 'actually elected a meme as a president'" – one only need look at images of cartoon character Pepe the Frog, a character often drawn by right-wing internet users to resemble Trump, for a visual example of this way of thinking (Gekker, 400). In pointing out that "the main conceptual innovation of Trump's campaign was utilizing micro-volunteering for cultural meaning-making," Gekker cuts to the heart of this new technique for disseminating political messages: with very little effort, one can catalyze one's audience to proselytize, amplifying one's statements and expanding the scope of one's reach far beyond the audiences available using traditional propaganda. There is also no reason to fear that the message will become lost or distorted as it moves through the hands of others: "Even if modified through the consumer's own interpretation, the core message remains intact, and sometimes [can] even acquire a 'new life' (e.g. a new wave of content dissemination)" (Berk and Wanless, 6).

The new methodology of spreading propaganda imbues any information disseminated in this way with a deeper level of danger, as it circumvents one of the major hurdles that propaganda has historically been forced to overcome. Hannah Arendt writes, "Since totalitarian movements exist in a world which itself is nontotalitarian, they are forced to resort to what we commonly regard as propaganda. But such propaganda always makes its appeal to an external sphere – be it the nontotalitarian strata of the population at home or the nontotalitarian countries abroad. […] The external sphere can also be represented by groups of sympathizers who are not yet ready to accept the

true aims of the movement…" (342-343). Conquering this external sphere has always been the major challenge for totalitarian movements, yet participatory propaganda allows those who utilize it successfully to sidestep the obstacle. This is because the propaganda appears to originate from within the external sphere, as shared by members of that external sphere, for their own in-group consumption. It takes only a single individual in the external sphere to adopt the message and share it with friends and family for that message to become integrated into that selfsame sphere. As there is no sense of an outside government or power attempting to impose ideas from an outside position, there is less suspicion from members of the sphere in question. The internet has provided plenty of external spheres ripe for infiltration due to the public-yet-insular nature of online communities; anyone can join, but each communy has its own micro-power structures, influencers, and social dynamics.

Like participants in many other enthusiast cultures, gamers have been forming online communities for decades. What differentiates gaming communities from many others types of fan communities is that the content of many modern titles has inadvertently conditioned game players to be receptive to messages promoting violence, hatred, and other negative mindsets. Hate groups have long been aware of the power of games to propagandize for their causes. Michael S. Waltman writes:

> Online games "allow the hate monger to conquer the out-group rhetorically. Many online games position the player to take the point of view of a shooter or bomber and accumulate points by killing members of the out-group. The game, *Watch Out Behind You, Hunter*, allows the game player to conquer gay men symbolically by hunting and killing gay rapists" (97-98).

These sorts of hate-games present as propaganda, perhaps at times even as satire due to their grotesque and over-the-top content, but as Waltman notes, "Arguably, when players repeat these games time after time, they may eventually see themselves killing their enemies in real life." Whether the consumption of violence in video games can be linked to real-world violent acts continues to be a controversial subject. The American Psychological Association notes that, while video games may lead to aggression, not all aggression is violent, and that, especially when taken within the context of the broader cultural fractures in modern American society, presenting hateful content as a form of entertainment can have the effect of normalizing the beliefs.

It is not hard to draw the line between my own work and the participatory propaganda model. Much of my work on ARGs has taken place on social media platforms such as Twitter, Twitch, and Discord, because these platforms provided immediate access to an audience of millions of users who are already predisposed to be receptive to the game and to become engaged in the play thereof. The ubiquity of these online services makes ARGs the ideal vehicles for Wanless and Berk's model: the content of the game is diffuse and spreads by word-of-mouth, incentivizing existing players to pull in as many new players as possible to lighten the load of investigation. Each of these existing ARG players becomes, individually, a potential content dissemination vector. Furthermore, as my own experience with reactive game design has shown, it is possible for ARG players to generate content that the game masters feel is superior to their original plan. When this happens, the ARG masters can seamlessly integrate this content into the ARG without the knowledge of the players. It is not inconceivable for a politically motivated "game master" to elevate specific ideologies that emerge from within their own playerbase and use those ideas to advance their goals of radicalization. The playerbase becomes more likely to accept these ideas because the ideas were generated from within

the playerbase itself, as opposed to being handed down from above, as is the case in traditional propaganda models.

The collaborative work of ARG players often takes place on message boards or in private chat rooms. Christian Fuchs notes: "One often hears that social media and the decentralized character of the internet overcome hierarchies and foster a participatory culture and democratic communication" (Fuchs, 72-73). Though Fuchs acknowledges that there have been objections to the absolute truth of this claim, it is this participatory culture and democratic communication that was on display as I observed the playerbases of the ARGs that I have developed. The vast majority of this communication occurred via the Discord chat platform.

Discord, as a communication platform, is especially notable because although it exists as a social network, it differs from other major social network services. Discord, unlike Facebook, Twitter, or other web media firms, does not advertise for services other than its own – it is funded by user subscriptions and venture capital, and therefore has a profit orientation that is a step removed from the targeted advertising ecosystem of other social networks. Discord is both a platform for communication and a forum for information dissemination, but apart from subscription solicitations, the funds from which, support the platform itself, there is no targeted advertising or sales of promotional material. Furthermore, the nature of the system is a double-edged sword with regard to ideological dissemination. Due to the private, decentralized nature of Discord servers – servers can be set to private and made invite-only – it has been trivially easy for bad actors to operate on the network. April Glaser reported in 2018 that "Leaders [of the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville] didn't do the bulk of their logistical planning in any kind of public forum or open Facebook group. They used […] Discord." Although Discord purged many accounts associated with the alt-right, she writes:

> In the course of an afternoon, I found and joined more than 20 communities on the platform that were either directly about Nazism or white supremacy or reveled in sharing anti-Semitic and racist memes and imagery. "Discord is always on and always present among these groups on the far-right," says Joan Donovan, the lead researcher on media manipulation at the Data & Society Research Institute. "It's the place where they do most of the organizing of doxing and harassment campaigns" (Glaser).

It can be seen that even in an ecosystem seemingly primed to prohibit the spread of certain types of propaganda, the very steps that inhibit that spread can foster the growth of alternate and potentially even more malicious ideologies.

There is not clear agreement among ARG designers as to the degree that they themselves are responsible for the rise of the modern conspiracy theory and propaganda methodologies. Designer Adrian Hon believes that it is not much. "It is possible that modern disinformation people, practitioners, have taken some ideas from ARGs, but I don't want to give ARGs too much credit," he explains. "I think it's more kind of family resemblance than actual direct inspiration. I say that because ARGs have never really been that popular… most people […] haven't played an ARG. Most of my friends haven't played ARGs. I think they use tools in the same way, but it probably would have happened anyway, […] it doesn't keep me up at night thinking 'did I bring about the downfall of western civilization by helping popularize ARG tools' because I think it would have happened anyway, and in a way it did" (Hon). *Ong's Hat* creator Joe Matheny thinks it's not that simple: "I was seeing [the ARG] being turned into a propaganda arm of this kinda alt-right/right-wing conspiracy nut thing that's been going on for a while, which all seems to be in opposition to anybody that opposes Trump" (Matheny). Matheny experienced a "conspiracy nut" scare firsthand in 2000, when, following recieving threatening

phone calls and having anonymous individuals contact his employer with warnings that he was dangerous, he found conspiracy theorists camped out on his front lawn, convinced that the story of *Ong's Hat* was real (Odelbaum). Where both agree is that designers need to be increasingly vigilant in their creative work so as to not inadvertently create tools for, or worse, promote themselves, destructive ideologies.

We live in a time when world leaders are attempting to use their bully pulpits to produce a real-world alternate reality: one that serves their political interests even if it comes at the expense of the lives of their citizens. The 2020 American presidential election put the question of reality itself on trial, asking Americans, as they voted, to decide how they define reality: is what the president says the truth, even when it seems to fly in the face of their own observations? At the same time, COVID-19 has forced much of the world into a quarantine state where increasingly, real-world social relationships take shape within the same delivery mechanisms as virtual ones: through the computer or phone screen, in text or via video. At a moment when conspiracy theories like Pizzagate and QAnon have become regular fixtures in the news cycle and gaming-related terms such as "NPC" (non-player character) have entered the public discourse as insults, it is apparent now more than ever that the boundaries between digital spaces and the real world are collapsing. The advice of Hon and Matheny is correct, though not sufficient. The vigilance of designers as regards their own work may help going forward, but cannot address the genie that is already out of the bottle. There is, however, existing research suggesting that ARGs can be used as a tool to counteract the forces heretofore described. Jagoda and others' educational ARG work, mentioned above, can be taken together with the research done by political scientist Josh Lerner about ways in which games can be used to promote democracy and democratic participation, as only one example among many. Any solution must be twofold, palliative and preventative. Designers must take steps to address

potentially harmful practices being utilized right now, while simultaneously taking up the challenge to use our tools proactively in new ways that directly combat the root causes of antidemocratic urges. Although the question of how to definitively solve viral misinformation is beyond the scope of this (and realistically any) paper, there exists a good roadmap available for those willing to look. It is up to those who can read it to help move us toward a better future.

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