

Alternate Reality Game

Background

Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) have often been used as a way to market a product in innovative, immersive ways. ARGs work by adding a fictive layer on top of the reality of the real world. This fictive layer is accessible through the close investigations of someone's surroundings, sometimes with technological tools, to reveal clues that gradually reveal a story.

Picture this:

One day you're sitting on your laptop, and you get an email with the subject 'Please delete after reading.' Opening it, you find it looks like a perfectly ordinary email from a perfectly ordinary source. However, you notice something... the first letter of every line in the email text spells out the phrase 'check the origin'.

Curiosity aroused, you go into the headers of the email and you find a strange bit of text in the metadata of the email. It points you to a domain you have never heard of, but the name of it is a cry for help. Perhaps it is www.i-need-your-help.com or www.only-you-can-save-me.se. (Those aren't real websites, they're just examples.)

Even more curious now, you go to that website, and you find a blog. It's a normal looking blog, containing a picture of a smiling woman with her arm around a smiling man. But there's something weird about their eyes... So you download the picture and you see that it's been tampered with and it has an unexpectedly large file size. By experimenting with some photo software, you find that it's been used as a piece of steganography. A sound file is embedded within it and the sound file tells you to check a location in the city centre. When you go there, you find that it has a notation in Google Maps that points you towards...

That's an ARG. The story is spread across emails, twitter bots, tiktok videos and anything else you can imagine. It blends the real world in which we live with an imaginary world you can only explore if you solve the puzzles. And, in most cases, they end with a sales pitch. They're fun to do, fun to design, and we'd like someone to make one for us.

Description

While ARGs can exist purely for the fun of it, the difficulty of design and the cost of running them mean that they need to earn money somehow. But we have a slightly different thing we want to sell – we want to sell the idea that coming to this university means you'll get to do cool things like this for projects. We want you to develop an ARG that sells to people the idea that they should apply to do a degree here.

This is a complex project involving a lot of skills. You'll need to come up with, in collaboration with your supervisor, a narrative. You'll need to distribute that narrative across a range of physical locations and digital services. You'll need to design puzzles that incorporate AR and real environments. And you'll need to do it in a way that is modular – the client for this project would like to use it for real, and it'll need to be easy for them to

modify the story, the narrative beats, and the clues. It should be easy to change, but also easy to expand. And, importantly, there should be several compelling ways in which people are inducted into the game experience. They can't be left purely to stumble upon it by accident. You need a way to get people started even if they don't currently study here.

It's not expected that your ARG be 100% complete. Playtesting of the game will be something that gets done over a long period of time. Hence the need for modularity. The aim of the project is that you will develop the technology that lets this happen, and design the core of a story that we can hopefully run for years.

Suggested Reading Material

- The Institute (2013) – a documentary about a large-scale ARG.
- Dispatches from Elsewhere – a television show that fictionalizes the experience of playing the game in the documentary above.
- [I Love Bees](#) – an ARG that was used to market the game Halo 2.
- https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-642-24500-8_38

Target group

D, DV, E, IT and I

Special Prerequisites

The exact emphasis of the project will depend on student capabilities, but will involve some mix of software development, game design, user centred design, player psychology and qualitative research methods.

The author of this proposal speaks some Swedish, but not at a high enough level for all discussions to be conducted in Swedish. However, some mix of Swedish/ English for discussions and correspondence is possible, and written submissions would be accepted in either English or Swedish.

Proposal Author

Pauline Belford, pauline.belford@chalmers.se

Supervisor

Pauline Belford, pauline.belford@chalmers.se