

ARGs: Your Old School Scavenger Hunt on Steroids

By Tony Walsh

Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) shatter the stereotypical video screen, grabbing us not just in our comfy living-rooms, but even in our workplaces and public spaces. This border-crossing game genre, barely five years old, appeals to players willing to go way out on a limb. With elaborate plots, compelling characters, and shocking twists, the interactive ARG narratives are notorious for blurring the line between fantasy and reality, causing us to wonder if we're playing the game, or if the game is playing us.

"What we're experimenting with is using lots of different kind of media together to create a new platform to tell stories," said U.K.-based ARG advocate Dan Hon during a panel

on the topic at the 2007 SXSW Interactive Festival. "Text messages, phone calls, faxes, live events and blogs are woven together to create a more coherent experience than you'd get with just one of those mediums."

Fellow panelist and ARG-maker Brooke Thompson thought the panel reflected the rapid emergence of these games: "I was pleased by the range of attendees, from their backgrounds to their knowledge and understanding of ARGs. To see filmmakers and web guys and gamers all in the audience and asking questions was great."

Alternate Reality Games are a relatively unique game form. Players navigate these cross-media experiences using a variety of tools from computers to pay phones, and players

are often more interested in collaboration than competition. From often distant locations, players commonly work together — usually via the Internet — to solve a game's complex puzzles, crack impossible codes or discover multi-layered clues left scattered between the fictional and real worlds.

Typically, an ARG is "soft launched," starting out with a mysterious trailhead such as a web-based countdown, an intriguing missing-persons poster, or a cryptic series of envelopes sent by postal mail. Invariably, players are tipped off to the stealthy goings-on, and they dive into the game like Alice down the rabbit hole. From here on in, there's little the operators of the game — typically called "Puppetmasters" — can do to stem the frenzied investigation most

The packed ARG panel at SXSW 2007. From left: Alice Taylor (moderator), Brian Clark, Evan Jones, Brooke Thompson and Dan Hon.

