

players are willing to mount in order to further the storyline of the game. Tasks can be as simple as hunting through a website's ownership records to find a hidden phone number, or as involved as seeking out a character from the game (played by an actor) in a real-world setting, such as a train station. Part scavenger hunt, part Mensa puzzle, part street theatre, the unpredictable nature of game play is a thrill both for players and for those behind the curtain.

With roots in such reality-bending ventures such as the historic Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* radio play, and 1999's *The Blair Witch Project* promotional campaign, it was probably 2001's *The Boat*, an ARG behind the Spielberg robot movie *A.I.*, which helped kickstart the genre, as it ran for three months and created a community of dedicated players which is still active today. Larger-scale campaigns, such as 2004's *I Love Bees*, mounted to promote the hit Xbox game *Halo 2*, and 2005's *The Art of the Heist*, which promoted the Audi A3 automobile, demonstrated that the game form was an effective marketing tool, generating both word-of-mouth buzz and mainstream media attention.

In 2007, ARGs have enjoyed high-profile placement as interactive extensions of such television properties as ABC's *Fallen* television movie, as lead-ups to feature films such as *The Nines* and *Transformers*, and even as a tie-in to Nine Inch Nails' concept album, *Year Zero*.

What's in store for 2008 and beyond? Thompson sees more ARGs reaching more people than ever. She says the game form is expanding, and its community of players is

evolving along with it. Even the definition of "Alternate Reality Game" is changing from what was once the arena of hardcore game players to a more casually-involved (but no less emotionally-invested) audience. Thompson says, "A lot of the more 'diluted' ARG experiences really open up the genre to new people, allowing us to see new ideas and how they could work."

This year, a contest dubbed "Let's Change the Game," intended to raise money for cancer research, will invite ARG creators to submit their best game designs for consideration. Organizer Adrian Hon (brother of Dan Hon) says that designers will have at their disposal "600 stores, monthly TV ads, hundreds of races and live events, and mailings going out to over 20 million people." The winning ARG might end up being the biggest ever deployed.

If you're interested in getting involved in Alternate Reality Games, either as an auteur or player, help is as close as your nearest web browser. The largest and most sociable community of ARG players can be found at Unfiction.com, an invaluable resource for gamers and game-makers. In addition, it's easy to stay on top of news on the ARG scene through regular visits to the Alternate Reality Gaming Network's news page, or by tuning in to the ARG Newscast, an ongoing podcast hosted by those in the know. Be bold, jump down that rabbit hole, and see what mysteries you can unearth! ■

Tony Walsh has helped write and design three award-winning ARGs, including the Primetime Emmy-winning *Fallen*. He lives at www.secretculture.com and blogs at www.clickableculture.com. Connect with Walsh and other SXSW attendees at YourMeetSpace.com.



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