9 ▪ ▪ ▪

Social Fiction
Branding with Alternate Reality Games

> If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't. And contrary wise, what is, it wouldn't be. And what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?[1]

Brand engagement starts with a desire to do more than just push brand messages through traditional channels to a target audience. Today, consumers want to be involved. They want to cocreate a brand's message. They want interaction with the brand and with others who are interested in the brand. Brands that understand this opportunity for consumer involvement are energizing their brands using many of the devices we have discussed already: social networking, consumer-generated advertising, and viral video. But many are also exploring other forms of social communities. One such community is that of the players who participate in ARGs. As a form of social media, ARGs begin with a scripted scenario but become a form of CFM as the network of gamers participate in the game by discovering clues, sharing information with others, and changing the structure and plot of the game with their responses. In this chapter, the focus is on the communities that surround the play of ARGs.

■ What Is an Alternate Reality Game?

What does Alice know about branding? It seems she understands the very philosophy behind this relatively new entertainment (and branding) genre. In fact, Alice's fall down the rabbit hole inspired the terminology for the official start to a game. Alternate reality gaming, which is also referred to as immersive fiction, is, at its core, gaming, but the term gaming doesn't begin to capture the intricacies of this genre. Unfiction.com (www.unfiction.com/glossary), a leading Web site for the ARG community, defines an ARG as ''a cross-media genre of interactive fiction using multiple delivery and communications media, including television, radio, newspapers, Internet, email, SMS, telephone, voicemail, and postal service.''[2] This definition points to the truly cross-media, cross-channel (all-wheel network) communication structure of ARGs.

ARGs are interactive narratives that comprise fiction and nonfiction, mystery and detection, and scripted and unscripted scenes played out by characters and real people. The games unfold over multiple forms of media and utilize many types of game elements, each tailored for the media platform used. ARGs may utilize telephones, e-mail, outdoor signage, T-shirts, television, music, and more to reveal story clues, compose scenes, and unite gamers. It would be impossible to solve the puzzle alone; hence, the term ''collective detective'' acknowledges the need for a team approach in solving the mystery. It is this reliance on social networks and collaboration necessary to share clues and scenes quickly and efficiently that ensures online communication is the primary outlet for uniting geographically dispersed players. Thus, despite the use of so many media channels, the Internet is the central channel by which gamers share information and collaborate to solve the pieces of the puzzle.

Jordan Weisman, creative director and cofounder of 42 Entertainment (arguably the leading company for the development of ARGs for branding), emphasized that the Internet was the inspiration for his experimentation into ARGs, saying, ''The experiment was to develop a narrative structure that was organic to the web. In looking at the web, I realized that it had been and still is used primarily for distribution of narrative formats that existed prior to the web—audio, video, written word, etc. There wasn't a narrative structure that embraced the chaotic and frustrating nature of the web.''[3] Weisman's experiment has subsequently inspired several audacious brands to develop games to engage consumers in the story guiding the game and, importantly, in the brand's story.

Games (and their stories, scenes, and characters) are written and controlled by writers and directors known as puppet masters. Teams of

players may work together to find clues, analyze what's happened so far, and further the story by communicating theories about the plot and the game's meaning. By the way, despite the references to gaming, ARG enthusiasts live by a basic mantra established during the original ARG, the Beast: *This is not a game!* These stories seek to involve people in becoming game participants, but even spectators can feel involved by monitoring advances and developments in the game.

Take, for example, the start to the "I Love Bees" ARG used to promote the launch of the video game "Halo 2." According to the Web site, "I Love Bees Quick Start Guide" (see http://www.mirlandano.com/quickstart.html), this ARG began when several people received a Fed Ex package of honey. A few days later, the promotional trailer for Halo 2 referenced a Web site, ilovebees.com/xbox.com. This Web site provided lists of pay phone numbers, GPS coordinates for the phones, and a time each number would be called. More instructions and clues were then delivered via calls to the pay phones.[4] From the start of the game until its conclusion (with players earning a preview experience of the Halo 2 game), players and observers visited the I Love Bees Web site for updates on the narrative and new clues. In addition to material posted on the official Web site, numerous Web sites and forums developed for those following the game. Just in this brief summary of the start of I Love Bees, the characteristics of the ARG genre are apparent.

- ARGs are based on a fictional story. Game characters, events, places, and plot are imagined and explored by the game writers, known as puppet masters.

- The story unfolds as a mystery, which invites players to solve clues before more of the narrative is revealed.

- Story clues are offered using a variety of media, ranging from traditional media like television and newspapers to text messages and messages hidden in code in movie trailers or even concert T-shirts.

- The story is fictional, as are the game characters, but the game space is not. The players are real people, and the clues are revealed in real time. Consequently, real life is a medium. This characteristic has led to the ARG "TINAG" belief—"This is not a game!" Telephone numbers, Web sites, and locations revealed in game are all real and functioning.

- Players collaborate to unravel the meanings of the clues offered.

- The story unfolds, but typically not in a linear fashion. The speed of disclosure is influenced by the player's success and speed in solving clues and sharing them with the player population.

- Even the story may not unfold as initially conceived. Because players interact with the game, and player response can dictate the next scene in the story, stories are fluid, organic, and unpredictable.

- Players rely on the Internet as the hub of communication.
- The desire that players share information with each other and even that the story be followed by observers attests to the viral nature of ARGs.
- ARGs are not exclusively designed for marketing purposes, but the most successful ARGs to date have been affiliated with brands.

ARGs are mystery-based narratives designed by game architects and revealed via multiple media platforms to encourage players and observers to collaborate online to solve the mystery. Although the experience of playing the ARG may be its primary mission, ARGs are often created and executed with the goal of engaging consumers with a specific brand sponsor, as was true of I Love Bees.

■ The Vocabulary of ARGs

ARGs have their own vernacular—understanding the lingo is the first step in understanding the culture of alternate reality gaming. This list, adapted from Unfiction's glossary (www.unfiction.com/glossary), presents the basics of the lexicon of alternate reality gamers.

- Puppet master: The authors, architects, and managers of the story and its scenarios and puzzles.
- Curtain: The invisible line separating the players from the puppet masters.
- Rabbit hole: The clue or site that initiates the game.
- Collective detective: A term that captures the notion of collaboration among a team of geographically dispersed players who work together to further the story.
- Lurkers: People who follow the game but do not actively participate.
- Rubbernecker: A person who does not actively play in the game but may participate in forums about the game and contribute to the game's solution.
- Steganography: The tactic of hiding messages within another medium such that the message is undetectable for those who do not know to look for it.
- TINAG: This acronym stands for a defining mantra of ARGs—This is not a game!
- Trail: A reference index of the game, including relevant sites, puzzles, in-game characters, and other information. Trails are useful for new players coming late into a game and to veteran players piecing together the narrative.

■ ARGs as Transmedia Stories

Henry Jenkins, author of *Convergence Culture,* notes that ARGs are one manifestation of a new form of storytelling, transmedia storytelling.[5]

He defines a transmedia story as one that "unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole."[6] Transmedia stories are not necessarily branded, at least not beyond the brand of entertainment itself. The Matrix, for instance, is offered in *Convergence Culture* as an example of transmedia storytelling. The Matrix did not simply offer merchandising through co-branded goodies distributed via fast food merchandise and toys modeled after story characters. As a transmedia story, The Matrix utilized three films distributed via movie theaters and DVD, a comic series, a series of film shorts, a video game, and a multiplayer online role-playing game. Each component could exist on its own, and fans could enjoy the story without all the components offered, yet the story held more depth, richness, and opportunities for involvement because of the synergistic effects of the multiple platforms. Indeed, entertainment properties like The Matrix are well suited to transmedia storytelling because the story is a brand.

We can conclude that an ARG is a form of transmedia storytelling in that the use of multimedia is one of the defining elements of an ARG, with each clue or story scene contributing to the game as a whole. But ARGs differ from other forms of transmedia storytelling. First, an ARG is not simply a story told via a variety of media platforms. Rather, the story behind any ARG is in part influenced and scripted by the players. Other forms of transmedia storytelling exhibit a greater degree of control over the narrative. Second, transmedia storytelling utilizes multiple platforms, but an ARG is more likely a single technique, albeit a complex one, in the arsenal of a transmedia story.

Jenkins, among others, has acknowledged that transmedia storytelling lends itself to transmedia branding—building a multimedia story, backward and forward, to promote a brand among its target audience. Nowhere is this potential clearer than in the case of entertainment brands like the Halo series of games, television programs such as *Lost,* or even novels like *Cathy's Book.* Each has included an ARG in its promotional campaign.

Grant McCracken likens the value of transmedia storytelling for brands to that of soap operas for Proctor & Gamble.[7] He points out that a loose association between P&G and the soap operas it sponsored was quite effective in building the P&G brand. As "cadet narratives," as McCracken calls these loose associations, the narrative is tied to the brand by association more than it would by building stories directly related to the brand itself. How is risk minimized? Because the story (or, in the case of ARGs, the game) is not acknowledged as a branding mechanism or tied solely to other components of a brand's marketing campaign, decisions can be

made to distance the brand from the ARG or heighten the relationship between the brand and the game. Importantly, ARGs accomplish this same benefit by providing an intriguing story with which to engage consumers and brand loyalists while providing brand managers the necessary distance from the brand meaning to minimize risk to the brand's equity.

Importantly, while some of the most well-known and successful ARGs are associated with story-centric entertainment brands, ARGs have also been embraced by other products, including goods (like The Art of the Heist ARG affiliated with Audi) and environmental movements (like the World Without Oil ARG, which sought to bring about awareness of the potential for a global oil crisis). These brands have shown that ARGs can be used successfully as a transmedia device for nonentertainment properties.

■ Branding & ARGs

Again, not all games are brand sponsored, but to date the most successful ones (based on participation statistics and online dialogue) have been. The movie launch of A.I. started it all with the development of ''The Beast.'' Since then, some of the brands that have used ARGs as branding devices include General Motors, Audi, Nine Inch Nails, and Microsoft's Xbox, among others. The prevalence of brand-initiated ARGs is at least in part due to the funding necessary for building an intricate, multimedia, multichannel narrative with characters and clues spread on- and off-line. For instance, David Kiley reports that Audi spent $5 million to run its Art of the Heist ARG.[8] Compared to traditional advertising, the cost of an ARG is minimal. However, the resources required are sufficiently substantial to warrant the need for a brand sponsor. Game architects have sought to develop player-funded games; Perplex City's Receda Cube is an example. It was launched in 2005 and ended when a player found the Receda Cube in early 2007. Thus far, player-funded games have not gained the traction (or been capable of generating resources) necessary to compete with branded games.

The value of branding for the ARG genre is not limited to resource generation. In addition to covering the development costs, a brand sponsor provides for the ARG's foundation or story context. Brands help establish the in-game characters, set the scenes, establish the plot, and identify the meaning of signs and symbols used in clues. The brand's history lends itself to the ARG's back story. Further, brand enthusiasts bring to the game knowledge of the brand, which can assist in the discovery and interpretation of game clues.

The relationship between brands and ARGs are mutually beneficial. The reach and ability for an ARG to engage those it reaches is undeniable. Those who are curious about the reach and effectiveness of ARGs are encouraged to visit Christy Dena's site (www.christydena.com). Dena maintains a Web site detailing the statistics for several ARGs on her site.

Brand enthusiasts are likely to participate in an ARG affiliated with a favored brand, but they are by no means the sole target. ARGs also attract game enthusiasts who seek a game opportunity and, through interaction with the brand, may become a customer. Players may come from either group—game or brand enthusiasts—but ARGs extend beyond active players to reach passive observers. Consider this common line from brand-sponsored sweepstakes, "you don't have to play to win." ARGs attract attention from people who choose not to play. They stay involved as "lurkers," defined by unfiction.com as people who follow the game through posts online but do not directly participate, or "rubberneckers," defined by unfiction.com as those who attend chats online, post on game boards, and even contribute to the solution of the puzzle through their participation in the game dialogue, but do not have direct contact in the game. From a branding perspective, lurkers and rubberneckers are just as critical to the success of an ARG as are the active players. Unfiction.com estimates that the ratio of lurkers to active players can range from 5:1 to 20:1, depending upon the game.

There is a clear branding implication here: the reach of the game is far greater than the number of active players. For instance, Audi claims that 500,000 consumers, in its target audience of 25- to 35-year-old, upper-income males, participated in its Art of the Heist ARG with average exposure of four to ten minutes spent on numerous Web sites and pages used to embed game clues.[9] Did the ARG pay off for Audi? Kiley reports that hits to Audi's Web site were up 140% during the game with the most hits originating from game sites; its dealers earned 10,000 qualified sales leads, and 3,500 test drives could be attributed to the game.[10] Xbox's ARG for Halo 2, "I Love Bees," performed even better, attracting 750,000 active participants, and another 2.5 million casual players.[11]

There is no doubt that ARGs have value as reach vehicles. Frequency of exposure is high because the engagement devices pull enthusiasts (players, lurkers, and rubberneckers) into the story and encourage them to seek out new information as it is presented in the game. ARGs are welcomed brand messages among gamers because they do not invade people's space with a brand message. Instead, the rabbit hole and all subsequent clues are passive. They only take on meaning as they are discovered and pursued by

consumers who seek them out and make them a part of their lives. The length of exposure, especially compared to other online advertising, is also high with most participants spending several minutes over several weeks and even months with game-related Web sites.

That's not all. Once involved, ARG enthusiasts are not just thinking about the brand when exposed to specific brand messages. They are cognitively involved in the story even when they are away from the game, doing all the things they typically do in their daily lives. Because ARGs are puzzles, they invite the gamers to cognate on the messages. Experts believe there is also long-term value to the players' involvement. For instance, John Hegarty, one of the principals of BB&H, referred to this as ''seed branding.'' He went on to say, ''if you develop a brand from the ground up like this, you encourage the customers to be evangelists.''[12]

Yet another benefit to ARG sponsorship is the value of unpaid media coverage that brands earn when ARGs are revealed in news stories. Perhaps there will come a time when ARGs are so mainstream that they do not warrant media coverage, but for now press coverage of ARGs provide enormous value in terms of media impressions. For example, consider the ARG used by the band Nine Inch Nails to promote the launch of its latest album, *Year Zero.* Speculation about the ARG inspired numerous stories about the band, its tour, and album; a typical album launch for a less-than-mainstream band is unlikely to capture such media attention. Additional coverage and buzz is provided as bloggers talk about the game. The greatest advantage of all, though, is the ability for an ARG to engage. Perhaps Jonathan Cude, creative director of the McKinney agency, which developed Audi's Art of the Heist ARG, captures the advantage of ARGs best, ''Marketers are realizing that in this landscape you are not competing against other luxury auto manufacturers. You are competing against pop culture for people's mind space.''[13]

■ Games for All Brands?

Are there any drawbacks to using ARGs? Every strategy has some negative potential, and ARGs are no different. ARGs can only be used by brands whose target market enjoys the aspects of an interactive, online, complex game. Commenting on why ''I Love Bees'' was so successful James Hilton, the creative director of AKQA, the agency that developed the ARG, emphasized, ''I Love Bees worked very well for Xbox because its audience is far more inclined to investigate further, hack into sites and solve problems.''[14] ARGs have a great deal of potential for many brands, but there must be a good fit between the brand, the meaning the

brand wishes to communicate, the target market, and the story and plot that form the foundation of the ARG.

ARGs are not without substantial work from the initial conception of the ARG, planning, and execution. Further, because the story line can change depending upon the response from players, ARGs require active writing and responsiveness from the game architects through and even beyond (as players are debriefed) the game's end. Because the game can evolve in ways the architects did not originally plan, there is a risk involved. Like the cocreation of brand meaning that occurs when brands invite consumers to generate their own branded advertising messages, ARGs are cocreated. Some brand managers might think the engagement power of ARGs is not worth the risk of damage to an established brand's meaning. For some brands this may be true, but those brands ready to embrace Web 2.0 and beyond recognize the desire among today's consumers to drive their own brand experiences.

This point also highlights a related dilemma. Brands with a loyal base can enhance their relationship with an ARG, but the loyalists may resent the influx of new people brought about by interest in the game. Nine Inch Nails experienced this criticism from longtime fans when it used an ARG for the launch of its *Year Zero* album. Still, the criticism does not appear to have negated interest in the band, its album or tour, or participation in the ARG.

Another limitation of ARGs is in its potential for impact. Compared to some options, an ARG's reach is small. For instance, measures of Audi's ARG success referred to a reach of 500,000, but a display ad on MySpace's home page could reach millions. Of course, the attention and involvement components are entirely different for these two examples, and it is important to consider the entire range of benefits and disadvantages associated with online advertising choices.

■ Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Brand-Sponsored ARG

How can we measure the effectiveness of ARGs as a branding tool? ARG effectiveness measures are similar to those used for other Internet-based branding tools such as social networking with an emphasis on site traffic and participation. The most common indicators then include number of players, number of active players, number of lurkers and rubber-neckers, rate of player registration from launch or from specific game events, number of player messages generated, traffic at sites affiliated with the ARG, number of forum postings (at sites like unfiction.com),

and average play time. In addition, ARGs should be evaluated by the media impressions made through publicity generated about the ARG. For instance, The Beast generated more than 300 million media impressions in magazines, news programs, newspapers, and Web sites like Wired and Slashdot.

Ultimately, ARGs used for branding should consider how success will be measured in the initial concept and planning stages. When the purpose of the ARG is marketing, achievement of specific marketing objectives should be tied to the effectiveness measures used to evaluate the ARG itself. For instance, Audi's Art of the Heist sought to generate interest in the U.S. launch of its Audi A3. But Audi did not simply want to generate awareness of this new model, but it also needed to generate leads for dealers as well as some action on the part of prospects (i.e., test drives). Thus, Audi's measures of effectiveness included the number of queries about the car generated from qualified prospects (over 16,000), the number of quote requests on car pricing (over 13,000), leads to dealers (over 10,000), number of test drives (4,000+), and number of cars sold (1,025).[15] In addition to measures based on prospect responsiveness to the product, Audi also measured the ARG by media impressions (over 45 million), visits to the AudiUSA.com Web site (2 million, representing five times the average traffic to the site), number of active players (500,000), and posts to the unfiction forum (204,622 posts), among others.[16] There are many possibilities when evaluating the success of an ARG, but success is not simply audience engagement and player enthusiasm—the ARG should drive achievement of the brand's marketing objectives.

■ Using Brand-Sponsored ARGs

By now it should be clear why ARGs are a growing tool for branding. They engage brand enthusiasts, gamers, and drive publicity and buzz for brands. They are interactive—a characteristic consumers favor. They enable a brand to build a story backward and forward and to be woven tightly or loosely into the story's fabric. ARG participation spreads virally, and so playing (or at least lurking) encompasses a social component that provides for the "contact comfort" so many consumers find appealing. Below are guidelines for developing a successful brand-sponsored ARG.

- Have a story to tell. ARGs are first and foremost an interactive story. This story may be closely related to the brand's meaning or may be a "cadet narrative." In either case, it should be captivating, dynamic, and inviting.

- Ensure that the story and the notion of interacting in a game with geographically dispersed players are appropriate to the brand's image and its target audience. Audi's Art of the Heist targeted affluent, technologically savvy, Web-centric young men. There was a clear match between the Audi brand, the ARG, and the target audience.

- Plan, plan, and plan more. Begin by assessing how the ARG can facilitate accomplishment of the brand's marketing goals. Then figure out the back story (the pregame narrative), the primary narrative, and the forward story (if appropriate). Perplex City (http://seasonone.perplexcitystories.com/story.html) offers a detailed overview of its architects' planning process, including the pregame back story, the game overview, and flowcharts of game segments.

- Reveal the story narrative over time using obscure clues and messages that will require player interaction to decipher the scenes. This will encourage collaboration among players, incite buzz, and generate more interest in the game.

- Include plot lines that are nonlinear and can be revealed sporadically. The development of the narrative must not be predictable and must not rely on a linear unfolding of events to make sense.

- Design a story that will enhance the sense of reality in the story. Players should not be reminded of the game but should be invited to make the game part of their reality.

- Break the narrative into fragments, which can be reassembled by the players.

- Layer the story, and layer the clues. Figuring out each step in the game should not be obvious and easy for every player—if it is, players will be bored and attrition will occur. But some players must be able to decipher clues for the game to continue. Using layers of clues at various levels of complexity invites collaboration among the players and allows players to play at different skill levels.

- Utilize a variety of media, and carefully design game elements to leverage the characteristics of the delivery medium. There is no limit to the delivery choices. Past ARGs have utilized code on T-shirts and posters, Web sites identified in video trailers, posts to blogs, e-mail, text messages, and mass media advertising.

- Chart the flow of the story, clues, and media used for each as a planning tool.

- Be prepared to change the direction of the narrative in response to player input and response to past clues and events.

- Don't overcommercialize the ARG. Most ARGs are brand sponsored, and ARG enthusiasts understand this. Still, players want to immerse themselves in a mystery. If the ARG unfolds like a consumer-interactive advertisement, it will offend the ARG community, and much of the value possible will be lost.

- Commit to the ARG and its management. Although the expense is minimal compared to many advertising options, it can be a substantial portion of a brand's ad budget. ARGs take time and continued involvement and management as the story unfolds. The pace of the story may need to be revised, new scenes may need to be developed, and responses to player actions may be necessary—the game requires active management throughout.

- Use an agency with ARG experience. Brands would be wise to use experienced agencies like 42 Entertainment, Mind Candy, and McKinney & Silver when developing and executing ARGs.

- Measure the effectiveness of the ARG based on the objectives for the promotional campaign, not just according to game participation, site visits, and other traffic-based statistics.

■ A Case Study: Nine Inch Nails' *Year Zero* Launch

Inasmuch as people play games, alternate reality gaming is best understood with a story. Let's take a brief look at some highlights from the rock band Nine Inch Nails. The band formed in the late 1980s, fronted by Trent Reznor, the band's vocalist and director. On April 17, 2007, the band released its twenty-fourth album (but only its sixth major commercial release) entitled *Year Zero.*

In a prepared statement, Reznor said,

> This record began as an experiment with noise on a laptop in a bus on tour somewhere. That sound led to a daydream about the end of the world. That daydream stuck with me and over time revealed itself to be much more. I believe sometimes you have a choice in what inspiration you choose to follow and other times you really don't. This record is the latter. Once I tuned into it, everything fell into place...as if it were meant to be. With a framework established, the songs were very easy to write. Things started happening in my ''real'' life that blurred the lines of what was fiction and what wasn't. The record turned out to be more than just a record in scale, as you will see over time.[17]

This quote sets the stage for the band's use of an ARG to promote the album's launch. Who knows whether Reznor's statement really referred to the creation of music that ultimately inspired the ARG or reflected instead Reznor's marketing prowess. Either way, blurred lines between real life and fiction are prevalent in ARGs.

Reznor went on to describe the album as being about the future. He stated, ''It takes place about fifteen years in the future. Things are not good. If you imagine a world where greed and power continue to run their

likely course, you'll have an idea of the backdrop."[18] Players in the game found clues (and are still finding clues), which linked to Web sites, phone calls, and images from "the future." The clues found were consistent with Reznor's depiction of the future, bleak and disturbing. The "rabbit hole" in the game, the first clue, was discovered on the back of a shirt promoting Nine Inch Nails' current European tour. On the back of the shirt, several letters are highlighted, which spell out, "I am trying to believe." The words led fans to the Web site www.iamtryingtobelieve.com, which describes a drug named "Parepin" that, in the story of *Year Zero,* is being added to the water supply to dilute people's minds. The site also contained a blurred image of a hand-like figure reaching down from the sky. This was the first sighting of the image, later tagged the "presence," but it would not be the last. The image of the "presence" has served as a primary symbol for gamers tracking clues. It is also the image on the album's cover.

Several of the clues link back to the band. For instance, at the February 12, 2007, Nine Inch Nails' concert in Lisbon, Portugal, a USB flash drive was found in a bathroom stall. It was later found to hold a single audio file with the title "My Violent Heart." Later, it was discovered that "My Violent Heart" is a track from the yet-to-be-released *Year Zero* album.

The clues are well integrated. For instance, gamers noticed static at the end of the audio file found on the USB drive at the Lisbon concert. Using a logarithmic spectrometer to analyze the audio file, the gamers discovered an image embedded in the file. The image was the "presence." The "presence" is also described, though not directly mentioned, in phone calls which are accessed by dialing numbers found through various sources and Web sites. One such telephone number was delivered through another leaked song from the album "Me, I'm Not." Like the image of the "presence," the number was embedded in the file and visible when analyzed with the spectrometer. Several Web sites were used to provide additional game information. Clues lead to the various sites, among them www.anotherversionofthetruth.com, www.churchofplano.com, www.uswiretap.com, and www.artisresistance.com. The Art is Resistance Web site provided several downloaded items for fans, including icons, printable stickers, stencils, and posters. Physical renditions of these items have since appeared as street art in several locations around the world.

The ARG concluded around the album's release date with players registered at the Open Source Resistance site invited to meet in Hollywood. There, some players were given cell phones. Days later, the phones rang and gave the players instructions to meet again, where they were loaded on a bus and delivered to an abandoned warehouse—the site of a brief performance by Nine Inch Nails.[19] The games end? Prerecorded

messages to the phones reportedly relayed this message: "we've got to go dark for a while, but that is ok—you don't need us anymore." Susan Bonds, president of 42 Entertainment, the agency behind this ARG, noted in an interview that this ARG might continue, particularly given that Reznor conceived *Year Zero* as a two-part album. Because the cell phones are still in the hands of the players and the forums are still active, reactivating the game is a definite possibility.[20]

While many brands use ARGs as brand-building devices, Nine Inch Nails used its ARG to advance album sales by generating enthusiasm among fans, both music and game enthusiasts. Puppet masters, agencies, and brands involved in ARGs are notoriously secretive prior to the conclusion of a game, so it is no wonder that we have not seen any measurement statistics on the effectiveness of this ARG (e.g., number of hits to the various game Web sites, increases in traffic to the main Nine Inch Nails Web site [www.nin.com], and estimated number of players, lurkers, and rubberneckers). The album and tour were acknowledged for their commercial success, and the ARG gained much media attention.

The Nine Inch Nails example is a well-designed ARG. It featured all of the components of well-designed games, including a good fit between brand, target audience, and plot. The clues were leaked in innovative ways using multimedia and multichannels. The symbols, including the image of the "presence," the Web site URLs, and the songs leaked, were all integrated into the meaning of the album and into the ARG plot. Players were so anxious that bathrooms were stormed when concert gates opened during the *Year Zero* tour with players searching for flash drives that might contain clues. Message boards about the ARG were active, and there was press and blog coverage of the tour, album, and ARG. Importantly, this ARG can be reactivated at any time, and it seems the players are clamoring for just that.

ARGs, as illustrated in this case study from Nine Inch Nails, are an emerging form of social media with extensive opportunities for engaging audiences and building a branded community. What is yet to be seen is whether social fiction can develop the scalability necessary to make it a form of social advertising that can rival other techniques like social-network advertising. As a platform, social fiction has great potential but has not yet been adopted widely even by marketers actively involved in social-media marketing. In any case, it will be interesting to see how brands will initiate a digital dialogue with consumers using these innovative approaches.