

Hello all,

Really looking forward to seeing everyone again this weekend. I think we're gonna blow some minds with this one.

Attached is a draft of the text, which the attentive among you will note is largely a cut-and-paste job from our discussion transcripts (though we've made some efforts to frame and organize things, if only to improve our chances at a high impact score come Review – and we've also done our best to ferret out the voicecap errors). Extra points if you can identify Gristll or BornToWeave by tone and diction...

Kaspar.

ESPA/ESSAP/TMRRAP History of Knowledge

CENTENNIAL ESSAY

"Alternate Reality Games and Pre-Splash Knowledge Studies:
Hypothetical Worlds; a Better Future"

(HK600)

INTRODUCTION: PRE-SPLASH KNOWLEDGE STUDIES

For some, the very notion of "pre-Splash Knowledge Studies" (PSKS) is an oxymoron. The academic institutions of the time were notorious for being wasteful where they should have been stingy, and stingy where there was need. Worse, restrictive copyright laws and archaic credentialing rituals sealed off important participation vectors and created an atmosphere of distrust and resentment.

Significantly, one doesn't require the remove of time and circumstance to make this bleak assessment of the period. Thought leaders clearly understood that crucial components of the academic ideal, such as the free and universal access to knowledge, were "compromised by the current intellectual property regime," and that the so-called 'new media' initiatives put forth by most institutions were "about disciplining the flow of knowledge rather than facilitating it."¹ And yet while this frustration was shared by many within the Humanities, few seemed to know what to do.

¹ Henry Jenkins, "Why Universities Shouldn't Create 'Something like YouTube' (Part Two)," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, October 2008. http://henryjenkins.org/2008/10/why_universities_shouldnt_crea_1.html [accessed by remotedevice 11 December 2009].

Part of the reason for this desperate state of affairs was a lack of examples of alternative knowledge production systems that could point the way. As one scholar noted:

[Reimagining the Academy will] involve developing projects which span disciplines, which link several classes together and [require] students to build on each other's work, and which may straddle multiple universities dispersed in space. All of this is easier said than done, of course, but we should be experimenting with how to achieve this goal since at this point it is even hard to point to many real world examples of what this would look like.²

Indeed, despite the incredible advances in network technology and ubiquitous computing that had taken place during the early 2000s, the inherently conservative nature of degree-granting academic institutions meant that official scholarship continued to treat "digitally (re)produced research...as if it were more or less a prosthetic extension and enhancement of print."³ Worse, in many cases, knowledge produced in online spaces - particularly collaboratively-produced knowledge - was often rejected altogether. So high was the anxiety about the

² Henry Jenkins, "Why Universities Shouldn't Create 'Something like YouTube' (Part One)," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, October 2008. http://henryjenkins.org/2008/10/why_universities_shouldnt_crea.html [accessed by remotedevice 11 December 2009]

³ Gary Hall, "Pirate Philosophy," *Culture Machine 10*, October 2009. <http://a.aaaarg.org/text/4160/pirate-philosophy-20> [accessed by remotedevice 11 December 2009].

future that many turned to denial, attempting to wish the unfolding changes out of existence by clinging to the past; in so doing, these actors did their part to set the stage for the cataclysms that accompanied the Splash. Such was the tenor of the time.

On the other hand, it has become something of a Crosbyism to simply equate all pre-Splash knowledge production practices with corporatism, neofeudalism, and rampant careerism. As broadly accurate as these clichés might be, the reality is, of course, much more nuanced. Our research has revealed numerous progressive models for the production of knowledge that were actively explored in various sectors during the decade leading up to the Splash. One such practice, namely that of "[Alternate Reality Gaming](#)" (or "Search Opera"⁴), a cross-platform recreational knowledge production activity whose popularity exploded in underground "alpha geek" culture in the years immediately preceding the Splash, has captured the imagination and enthusiasm of our node to such an extent that we have decided to dedicate our centennial activity almost exclusively to its study. By exposing this little-known genre of story and play to a wider audience, we hope to spark fresh discussion

⁴ Other names for this class of activity from the pre-Splash period include: Chaotic Fiction, Distributed Fiction, Extended Reality, Cross-platform Experience, Full-Media Entertainment Experience, Immersive Brand Marketing, Search and Analysis Gaming, Pervasive Gaming, Participant Drama, and Ambient Storytelling. Each of these appellations reveals the ARG in a slightly different light.

about popular conceptions of life and learning in the first decade of the 21st century. Further, by revealing how the ARG community (among others) enacted many of the very practices that would have enabled the Humanities Academy of the time to break free of its self-imposed chains, we intend to make a larger point about the all-too-human tendency to miss the solutions to one's problems even when they're sitting right in front of one's nose.

ANYWHEN and EVERYNOW

An informal poll conducted by HK Core revealed that, as of 16 July of this year, less than 1 percent of habitat-cleared HK sub-100s could provide an example of or definition for an Alternate Reality Game (ARG). The genre, it seems, is as obscure to us today as *Penny Dreadfuls* or *Playing at Snap Dragon* might have been to the minds of the early 21st century. Perhaps this is because to identify this kind of storytelling and play as a particular "genre" seems redundant from our current perspective. Story is everywhere. Play is everywhere. *Work is everywhere*. These are basic facts of our existence. As Darvin Koogan so evocatively puts it, "We live on the helix of anywhen and everynow."⁵

⁵ Darvin Koogan, "The new politics," *dkoogan (OMF)*, June 2077. [omf: dkoogan](http://omf.dkoogan) [accessed 11 December 2079].

Needless to say, concepts like Koogan's Helix were not in currency during the early 2000s. While literacy of all kinds was expanding at a furious pace throughout this period, older models of how knowledge can and should be produced, evaluated, and distributed continued to institutionally dominate insofar as they were aggressively articulated by those who held stakes in maintaining the status quo. However, although this de facto campaign of fear and disinformation had effectively paralyzed the Academy, other less-fettered knowledge-production entities were beginning to freely explore new ways of leveraging network technology, structuring participation, and building communities. Among the many actors that took these first uneasy steps into creating what we now call *distributed intelligence* (DI), the designers and player/participants of Alternate Reality Games represent a special case.

ALTERNATE REALITY GAMES: REAL-WORLD DI BEFORE THE SPLASH

Put simply, an ARG is "a kind of investigative playground, in which players...collect, assemble, and interpret thousands of different story pieces"⁶ distributed across physical and online space in order to solve a puzzle and/or uncover a story. In contrast to previous storytelling forms such as novels, films, and television series, ARGs demanded that their audiences (or,

⁶ Jane McGonigal, "Why I Love Bees: A Case Study in Collective Intelligence Gaming," *The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning* - (December 1, 2007): 199-227, 202.

more accurately, *communities*) work collaboratively in order to find and piece together the constituent elements of the game's story world. In this sense, an ARG was a system for creating and leveraging distributed intelligence via a kind of improvised partnership (or "dance") between the game's designers and its emergent player communities. Among the many ways that ARGs differed from institutional knowledge production practices, this was perhaps the most fundamental.

Additionally, unlike early academic DI experiments and "open access" projects in scientific fields like medicine, physics, and astronomy,⁷ ARGs typically held no allegiances to professional organizations or societies. Even when compared to other non-institutional (and arguably more civic-minded) DI/collective authorship projects of the period, such as [LittleSis](#) or [Wikipedia](#), ARGs - which were meant purely to entertain and amuse in order to open pathways to consumer products - felt little in the way of public pressure to conform to a particular style of community or intellectual rigor. This lack of constraint lent the ARG space a distinctively "Wild West" flavor, enabling designers and players alike to experiment with and rapidly iterate a dazzling array of new methods for distributing and processing story components and problem sets.⁸

⁷ See <http://arxiv.org/>, <http://www.us-vo.org/>, or <http://zoo1.galaxyzoo.org/>.

⁸ See <http://forums.unfiction.com/>.

To anyone with a habitat pass and a k-score of more than 0, these methods would seem as workaday as salt pills or insect repellent. But to many academic institutions in the early 2000s, the notion of modeling higher education and advanced inquiry along the lines of an ARG would have seemed absurd and even dangerous.⁹

UNDERSTANDING AFFORDANCES

Unlike the increasingly limp Academy, tied to the earth by its traditions, protocols, and fears, the ARG was a lithe beast, “born digital” to run free in the Elysian fields of the early 21st century’s burgeoning global technoculture. Indeed, many ARG designers and commentators opined that the form’s constituent engagement with new and broadly-adopted online practices such as social networking, blogging, mobile media, and so-called “viral” marketing, was its defining characteristic. Sean Stewart, a seminal figure in the early development of the genre, put it more simply:

⁹ The authors would like to note that it is not the province of this document to identify the myriad reasons why the Humanities Academy of the early 2000s was so fearful of the kinds of knowledge production practices on display in activities like ARGs. To the modern ear, any litany of these reasons would sound ridiculous and arbitrary in the absence of an exhaustive backgrounder on the Byzantine copyright laws, credentialing practices, and peer review traditions that comprised the academic environment of the time. Suffice it to say that at the commencement of this century, the Humanities Academy was in a terminal crisis concerning its purpose and core procedures. In the end, this crisis would create the opportunity for a new paradigm of knowledge production to emerge; but in the years leading up to the Splash, the inability of the Humanities, in particular, to make sense of and adapt to radical shifts in the nature of text, authorship, and intellectual property rendered it incapable of performing its role as analyst, arbiter, and broker of culture. This impotence exacerbated an already totalizing crisis, leading in short order to shocking events such as the London Copyright Riots of 2012 and the Modern Language Association (MLA) serial killings of 2014-15.

The world of the infosphere – the web and Google and email and instant messenger and cell phones – is about two fundamental activities: searching for things, and gossiping. [ARG pioneer] Jordan [Weisman]'s genius was to recognize that, and build a storytelling method to match.¹⁰

Although we would take issue with the narrowness of Stewart's envisioning of the "fundamental activities" of the "infosphere," the essence of his statement still holds: instead of grafting old models for story and participation onto the emerging structures of social media and ubiquitous computing, ARGs from the get-go were conceived to exist *within* and *across* such structures. Indeed, our node would like to suggest that the ARG – or, more comprehensively, the broader class of activity known as "search and analysis gaming"¹¹ – can be seen as a kind of inevitable emergent property of the Network, a product of humanity's natural inclination to tell stories, create community, and generate meaning with whatever tools are at hand.¹²

That said, it is important to understand that the ARG's embrace of the "tools at hand" did not produce a bond of

¹⁰ Sean Stewart, "Alternate Reality Games," *seanstewart.org*. <http://www.seanstewart.org/interactive/args/> [accessed by remotedevice 11 December 2009]

¹¹ Jane McGonigal, "Why I love bees," 222.

¹² This tendency arguably transforms into necessity when those same tools become inseparable from the social fabric of a given population, as was increasingly the case during the late pre-Splash years.

allegiance with any particular device, platform, or set of practices. True, without a global telecommunications network, social media, and search tools like Google, it is difficult to imagine how something like an ARG could have emerged; and yet, once the idea was there, it never really went away, even in the face of monstrous catastrophe.¹³ Alternate reality gaming, unlike the vast majority of earlier forms of play and storytelling, was less a "medium" or "format" than it was a *mentality*.

"Platform agnosticism" was thus a founding tenet of the genre. While video games and other televisual entertainment artifacts were becoming ever more invested in various conceptions of the technological "cutting edge," ARGs were equally across a range of low- and high-tech environments. For an ARG designer, any single expressive medium - be it text or video or a certain kind of code - was merely one of many possible vectors for communicating story elements, presenting puzzles, and engaging DI - a very different situation from, say, that of a film director, for whom - at the risk of stating the obvious - the particular medium of the cinema was an absolute necessity. Further, since the putative purpose of ARGs was

¹³ In the early years of the Recovery, "mail drops" - an ad-hoc network of postal depots in Midwestern North America - became a popular means of sharing stories about the Splash and connecting with other survivors. During those difficult years, the mail drop system became an integral part of survivors' efforts to restore order and solve the myriad water, insect, and neurological problems that ran rampant across the globe. As conditions improved, storytellers began to use the mail drop infrastructure as an avenue for journalistic reportage, artistic interventions, and, toward the end of the Recovery, game play. Many stories and legends from this period persist to this day, regardless of the fact that the medium in which they were conceived has long since been abandoned.

almost exclusively to build community and buzz (motivated both from the player side, in terms of the potential for social reward, and from the designer side, in terms of driving attention toward products, brands, and practices), the ARG as a form was strangely immune to the issues of obsolescence and shifting standards that plagued earlier and more formal attempts to computationally mediate story and play. Indeed, despite the centrality of the "home computer" or "laptop" and Web browser to the first wave of ARGs, scholars and practitioners of the form looked toward a future free of such devices:

Right now the computer is still an essential element of [most ARGs]. It is where the social network forms and [serves as] the primary vehicle for dissemination of information within a game... This will change. As computers become something else, something which fits into one's pocket for example, then the idea of "sitting down" to play one's ARG will transition out, and the real-world game elements will become the focus even more than they are now. ARG will become what one does from moment to moment while at the restaurant waiting in the line, for his or her food to come to the table, and wherever else we want.¹⁴

LOSE YOUR RELIGION

¹⁴ Adam Brackin, "Tracking the Emergent Properties of the Collaborative Online Story Deus City for Testing the Standard Model of Alternate Reality Games." University of Texas, 2008, 118.

The contrast between this attitude toward technology and that of the pre-Splash Academy could not be more sharply drawn. Even among many self-identified 'new media' scholars, the emphasis throughout much of the pre-Splash period was on resisting and lamenting the tide of obsolescence rather than accepting it as inevitable and seeking out new forms of discourse and community that, like those of the ARG, could exist independently of any particular technocultural apparatus. The Electronic Literature Organization (ELO), for example, which our node had initially expected to be in advance of some of these retrograde impulses, in fact devoted the bulk of its energies during the final years of its existence to preserving, making accessible, and encouraging the further development of "hypertext novels," a genre of point-and-click branching narrative that briefly flowered during the mid-1980s and 1990s. And while we agree that the ELO's dedication to preserving the works produced in this format was in some sense a noble endeavor, most node members felt that the organization, as an erstwhile high-profile representative of 'new media' practice within the Academy, had somehow abdicated its duty to develop new understandings of, definitions for, and approaches to, notions of the literary. As one observer noted, "claims about the obsolescence of cultural forms often say more about those doing the claiming than they do

about the object of the claim." The same observer goes on to write:

[Agonized] claims of the death of technologies like print and genres like the novel [or, in the ELO's case, the hypertext novel] sometimes function to re-create an elite cadre of cultural producers and consumers, ostensibly operating on the margins of contemporary culture and profiting from their claims of marginality by creating a sense that their values, once part of a utopian mainstream and now apparently waning, must be protected.¹⁵

Sadly, this kind of protectionism and obsession with ultra-specific media formats was not limited to well-intentioned satellite groups like the ELO. Instead, at the precise historical moment when broad-based ARG-style platform agnosticism was becoming an imperative, the Academy as a whole was turning increasingly "religious" in terms of the practices and technologies it would embrace.

A good portion of the blame for this piety can be laid on predatory "e-learning" companies like Blackboard and iParadigms, which descended like missionaries on ill-prepared administrations, locking entire institutions into restrictive

¹⁵ Kathleen Fitzpatrick, "Planned Obsolescence » Introduction: Obsolescence," <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress/plannedobsolescence/introduction/> [accessed by remotedevice 11 December 2009].

multi-year contracts for software services that seemed more concerned with pleasing investors and maintaining market share than they did with satisfying the changing needs of universities, students, and the society at large. But the rest of the fault clearly belongs to the Academy itself, which simply could not see the forest for the trees. As one critic put it, the one thing you could count on in the new media environment was that "[the] old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff is put in its place."¹⁶ Any commitment to technology that did not take this into account was doomed. And yet it was precisely this kind of commitment that, time and again, the pre-Splash Academy chose to make.

STRUCTURING PARTICIPATION, BUILDING COMMUNITY

The nomad ethos of flexibility, portability, and platform agnosticism on display in ARGs was not just a consequence of the fact that a sizeable portion of the genre's demographic consisted of tech-savvy geeks and early adopters who arguably came to the activity with higher-than-average media literacies. It was also an economic imperative, a means of opening a multiplicity of what designers called "rabbit holes" or access points to the world of the story.

¹⁶ Clay Shirky, "Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable," <http://www.shirky.com/weblog/2009/03/newspapers-and-thinking-the-unthinkable/> [accessed by remotedevice 11 December 2009].

Rabbit holes could be anything from real-world graffiti to spam emails to words flashing on the screen at the end of a movie trailer. The idea was to pique the interest of a potential participant and to thereby draw her into contributing her own literacies and competencies (and powerful marketing potential) to the game's emerging DI. To encourage this process, designers worked hard to construct puzzle sets that would require an enormous amount of know-how to complete (therefore eliciting contribution, participation, and collaboration from a range of variously-skilled players). Finding and nurturing a diverse player community was thus the *sine qua non* of a successful ARG:

First, we require a player who has instant access to every skill, talent, and resource imaginable. [As ARG designers], we have to be able to trust our players. We have to trust that if we put out a puzzle that involves 16th century lute tablature, Photoshop, and you have to be an expert on Shakespeare...[our player community] will be able to muster those skills... Second, we require a player who has the ability to propagate information immediately... [and Third], we require a player who has the desire to collaborate, socialize, and create.¹⁷

¹⁷ ARGFest 2007 - Keynote Address ~ *Play My Game!* (1 of 2), 2007, 12:00 (Elan Lee)

While it is unlikely that any one person would possess all the skills, resources, and predilections specified above, a crowd of people very well might - and could probably do a whole lot more, too. ARG designers knew this truth, and recognized that the ability to mobilize such a crowd was quite possibly the most powerful thing a storyteller could do with a computer. Indeed, as Sean Stewart remarks in a video from 2007, part of his role as a designer was to "watch the communications infrastructure the players were building and try to guess one or two days before they did how powerful it could be..."¹⁸

CONVENE, CONNECT, COORDINATE

From its very inception, the ARG was about convening, connecting, and coordinating crowds.¹⁹ In an ideal situation, these three stages would happen simultaneously, with allowances made for new players to discover the world of the game at the same time as veteran players were entering into its deepest recesses. However, since most ARGs worked within tight temporal constraints determined by product launches and other marketing-related deadlines, a degree of linearity and focus was required to ensure the game commenced and concluded at times that were appropriate to the overall strategy. As a result of this constraint, it became common among designers to refer to an

¹⁸ *ARGFest 2007 - Keynote Address ~ Play My Game! (1 of 2)*, 2007, 12:30 (Sean Stewart)

¹⁹ Jane McGonigal, "Why I love bees," 204.

inverted triangle or funnel (figure 1) in order to illustrate the relationship between the three stages of the game as it played out over time.

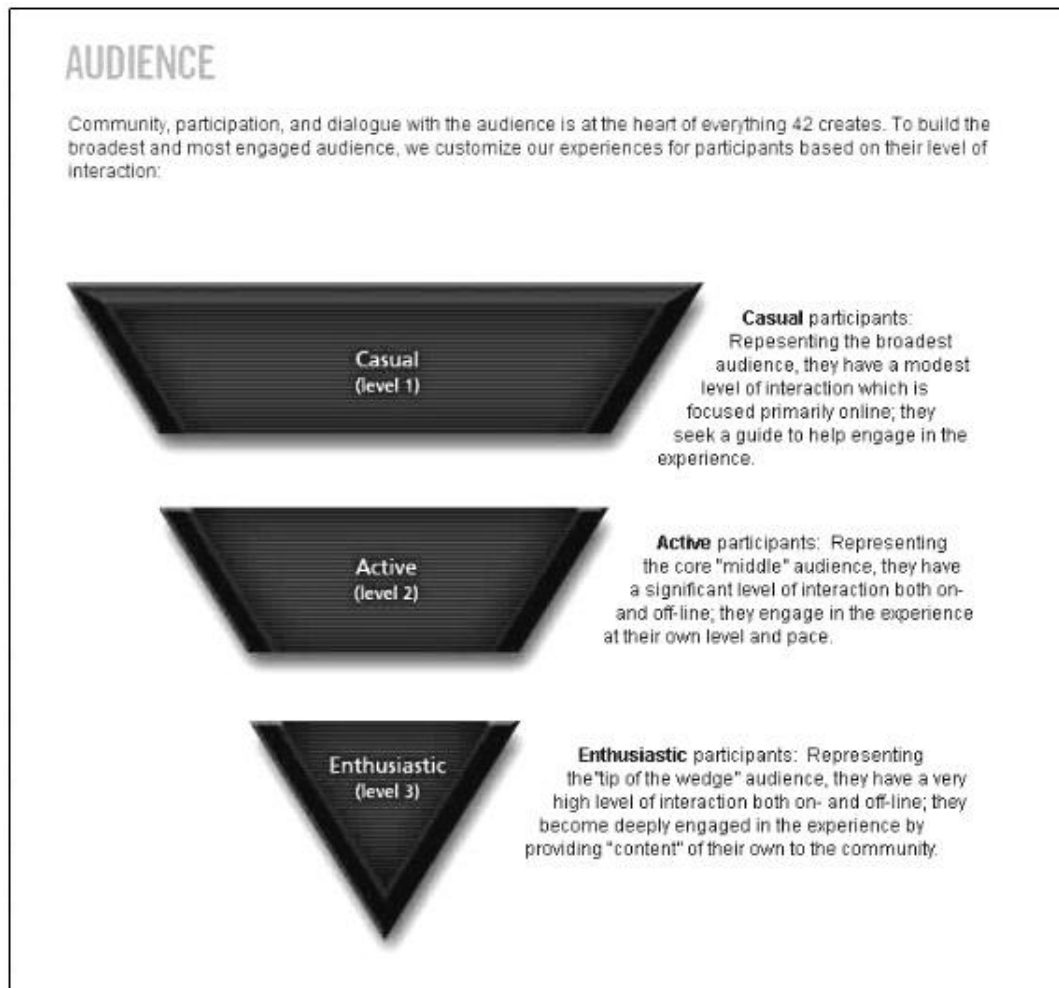


Figure 1: The Inverted Pyramid model of ARG Participation (42 Entertainment)²⁰

The progression of an idealized player through these three stages begins with the discovery of the world of the story (level 1) through a rabbit hole or word of mouth. Should the

²⁰ 42 Entertainment, "How We See Things," 42 Entertainment. <http://www.42entertainment.com/see.html> [accessed by brackin April 8, 2007].

story world interest her, the player might then begin to engage with any online communities that might exist around the story and its attendant mysteries (level 2), eventually participating in online discussions and sharing ideas, resources, and brain power. Finally, as both emotional and participatory investment climax, the ideal player will look back and realize that she has in fact become *an essential part of both the community AND the story* (level 3): without her efforts and the efforts of the players she has worked with, the game simply would not have existed. And while it was true that around half of those who played a given ARG would remain at the casual level for the entirety of the game,²¹ one of the most fundamental attractions of the ARG both as a genre of storytelling and as a marketing instrument was the promise it made of something *more*. The ARG said to its players not only, "there's something here, dig a little deeper;" it said, "you matter. You're important. Without you, none of this would be possible."

One effect of these metacommunications was to create a sense of investment, ownership, and pride in those players who progressed beyond the casual level of participation. From a marketing perspective, the idea of connecting feelings such as these to a product or brand was something of a Holy Grail - which explains why ARGs became such a popular activity in the

²¹ Adam Brackin, "Tracking...", 86.

last years before the Splash. But from an educational and knowledge-production perspective, the post-Enlightenment authoritarian legacy that had hobnailed the Academy for so many hundreds of years precluded any such arrangement from taking root within its domain. Pyramids of a different kind reigned there, at the top of which sat a hooded clutch of Anointed Experts: the unreachable movie stars of scholarship. Stephen Duncombe, a scholar and activist best remembered for his heroics during the London Copyright Riots, observed that the hierarchical and paradoxically anti-participatory nature of progressive politics was one reason why neoliberal economic policies had taken over the globe with such ease:

The mainstream models of progressive politics, from the professionalized Democratic Party to the ritualistic "March on Washington" of those further to the left, don't learn from celebrity culture; they ape it. A star up on the platform is seen and heard, while the rest of us merely watch, applauding at the right moments. This has to change. Instead of waiting for the charismatic camera-ready politician to arrive and save the party, and in place of organizing demonstrations around star speakers, we need to look downward, concentrating on building local

organizations where all participants can witness the efficacy of their participation.²²

This last part, the notion of enabling participants to “witness the efficacy of their participation,” was one of the great strengths of the ARG. Marketers knew that a participant who felt like she was an important part of an unfolding mystery or adventure was almost guaranteed to continue to participate – and to work to get others to do the same. They also knew that the only way to make someone feel this way was to *actually make them important*. People just knew if they were being patronized or pandered to – which partly explains why the public education system of the time was such a dismal failure. By creating honest and transparent pathways linking casual players to the emerging knowledge structures built by active and enthusiastic players, and by creating puzzles and story situations that genuinely demanded the cooperation and coordination of large numbers of participants, the creators of ARGs motivated the establishment some of the best and earliest examples of true DI.

Unfortunately, the Academy did not take notice. Fear trumped all. Any suggestion of porting the inverted pyramid of the ARG to the “official” creation of knowledge was viewed as non-credible and naïve. For even as universities expressed

²² Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, The New Press, New York, 2007. 113.

support for the ideals of open access, there was one yard they could not give: believing that academic authority would be undermined by the mediation of crowds and machines, they built a redoubt around the Author, and there they made their last stand.

FINAL FANTASY

As a collective fantasy and simulation exercise, our node, with assistance from the HK-metacuratorial forum and the TMRRAP Visualization Lab, embarked on a brief imagining of what might have happened had the Academy of the early 2000s received advance notice of the impending Splash. Would the gravity of the situation have stirred the waters of change? [wording? - K.] And was it even possible for the Academy to shift course without entailing its wholesale dissolution?

Our findings were surprising. In most of our scenarios, upon receiving 10 years' notice of the impending Splash - entirely possible considering *muscina prolapsa* had been sequenced as early as the 1990s - the transition from the old regime was, despite many fears to contrary, relatively painless. Even in our worst-case scenario, as soon as one major university committed to open access for all its publications, took an aggressively Fair Use position on copyright, and began offering degrees not on the basis of credits but rather on the k-system, every other university in the country switched within two years.

Clearly, one of the limitations of our collective fantasy is that the k-system is so deeply engrained in our being that it is difficult to imagine education and knowledge production taking place in any other way. However, in the context of this discussion, the fact that the k-system terminally biases our simulations can be overlooked simply because ARGs and ARG-likes are (as any attentive reader surely must have recognized) fundamentally rudimentary k-systems. That is, we did not demand that our imaginary Academy have a leap of insight that only our position so far away in time could justify. After all, it is the fact that the Academy - and everyone else, for that matter - *could* have innovated a new system, but did not, that is one of the core tragedies (and mysteries) of the pre-Splash era.

In closing this thematic introduction, our node would like to thank the HK-metacuratorial forum for doing such a great job creating event-appropriate constraints for this scholarship. Writing this document in the old style has taught us as much about the crippling limitations of pre-Splash knowledge production as did our research itself. It is our hope that all of us, human and insect alike, can continue to learn from the mistakes of the past as we confront the challenges of the future.