This is not a game, Rise of the ARG
The alternate reality game took the early 21st Century by storm, harnessing a brave, new online world to create an innovative strand of storytelling. Now the dust has long since settled, can the ARG still live on as more than just a publicity tool and help shape the future of the videogame medium? We head down the rabbit hole with the original puppetmasters to find out...

If you're looking to attribute the launch of the alternate reality game to any one person, that person is probably Jeanine Salla.

Jeanine wasn't a game designer, or a programmer, or some kind of avant-garde narrative engineer. Jeanine was a sentient machine therapist — or at least, she was listed as such on the trailer credits for Steven Spielberg's anticipated 2001 sci-fi A.I. Artificial Intelligence.

If, at the time, viewers had been curious as to what a sentient machine therapist actually did on a movie set and had run an internet search on Jeanine's name they would have been taken to a rather unassuming biography at the fictional university where she worked, along with a contact number and an email. Little did players know at the time, but they had just jumped down the rabbit hole, commencing on one of the first ever fully realised ARG experiences.

That seemingly nondescript but peculiar clue hidden just beneath the topsoil pulled players into a swirling cosmos of online narrative, Jeanine's biography unravelling into a story of murder and intrigue across a variety of media. Each new strand of narrative sent the audience to new websites, new clues and new locations, each immersed in a real-time alternate universe of sinister assassinations and anti-robot sentiment.

This game was called 'The Beast', and it was played by three million people. A new form of entertainment had been born.
but what exactly is an ARG?

For the community, that definition is largely rooted in the 'this is not a game' aesthetic. ARGs are games that do not acknowledge that they are games; they pose as alternate realities hidden away in streams of dormant internet code. Their stories exist not in unified narrative, but are spread across phone lines, email addresses, websites and any other forms of media that the puppetmasters – that is, the game's creators – deem to exist in real-time as constantly evolving, potentially boundless storytelling experiences.

Yet despite these definitions, there remains no established rule set. "There aren't really rules for ARGs," admits writer and transmedia artist Joseph Matheny. "There's the basic TINAG principle that everybody has to practice, and things like the launch has to be clandestine and the rabbit hole – that is, the first media artefact that draws in players – can't be obvious. But you're not limited to those rules. An ARG can be whatever you want it to be as long as you're building an immersive world for players to embed themselves; to cross the scene and to become an active participant in the story."

Matheny himself was there at the beginning of the ARG, when the increasing prominence of online media got him thinking about new forms of storytelling. "I've been a tech person since the Eighties," he reminisces. "I was an IT expert and moved up into software, and I used to play the Steve Jackson games a lot. I also played the Flying Buffalo play-by-mail games, which were kind of like a LARP but done through mail, phone and faxes. You would send your mailing address and your phone number and you would start getting stuff in the mail.

"I started thinking about the integration of story arc within games and started putting all of these pieces together, and Ong's Hat came out of that."

Ong's Hat was more of an experiment in transmedia storytelling than what we would now consider to be an ARG, but its DNA – the concept of telling a story across various platforms and new media – is evident in every alternate reality game that came after.

The project, also known as the Incunabula Papers, was a selection of documents posted on The Well, a pioneering internet social site in the late Eighties. Having sat dormant for a decade, the documents provoked a widespread online investigation in the late Nineties, with participants immersed in a fictional story about alternate realities via bulletin board systems, old Xerox mail art networks and early eZines.

With Ong's Hat, Matheny took the concept of "legend tripping" – that is, the act of venturing to areas of some horrific and supernatural event à la Blair Witch Project – and shifted it online. "I set up this mythos, and hid elements of it all over the internet," he remembers. "There were phone numbers that you could call and you would get strange voice mail messages; you might even get a call back from one of the characters. Everybody would come at it from a different angle. It was not a zero-sum game. The whole thing was set up to be an infinite play, so different people would get different things out of its persistence."

This element of the experience, with players reassembling the scattered elements of the story in order to determine exactly what it all meant, would go on to become one of the defining features of the ARG. Rather than present a simple A to B narrative, ARGs present storytelling as a form of archaeology, making the players themselves responsible for discovering and building the chronologically unified narrative.

"People who are interested in this kind of experience are interested in working together. It's what the community calls the 'collective detective' scenario," says Matheny. "One of my influences was also the murder mystery theatre things that they used to do... I think that people like that kind of stuff. They like to feel that the story is crossing the proscenium and they're immersed in the story – even to the point of being a character in the story."

"I think that's the hook with ARGs." However, it wasn't until the start of the new millennium that Xbox game designer Elan Lee and Microsoft creative director Jordan Weisman would create a similar experience, inspired by a moment of desperation. Hired to create a game of the movie A.I. in 2001, the two were faced with a problem. "We went to a screening and my heart just sunk," laments Lee.

The whole thing was set up to be an infinite play, so different people would get different things out of its persistence. **Joseph Matheny**

"The ARG has garnered some attention as of late: US intelligence agency IARPA is keen to discover how alternate reality environments can help it develop "high-quality behavioural and psychology research in near-world contexts."

"I hope people will remember..." says Matheny. "I hope that people will remember that ARGs are games about participation and community and those two things will make you care about something else."

The internet has been a creative catalyst for ARG designers and players, bringing millions of people together that previously had no way of interacting with each other.
"There's this robotic child who wants more than anything to get his mother's love and to become a real boy, but by the end he's watched not only her die but also all of civilisation crumble. No one walks away from that thinking, 'Wow! I really want to play the racing game of that!'"

Lee and Weisman had all the narrative, characters and a world to tie their game together, but lacked a solid idea with which to make an engaging experience out of it. "We had all the 'glue' but didn't know how to release it," says Lee. "I was sitting at lunch with Jordan trying to work it out, when at that moment his phone rang and he said, 'Woudn't it be cool if this was the game calling me right now?' That's where everything started."

Over the coming months, Lee and Weisman built what is now widely considered to be the first 'alternate reality game'—a murder mystery instigated by a Jeanine Salta that spanned hundreds of thousands of websites, phone numbers, emails, fax machines, physical locations..." remembers Lee. "It took place in the real world, day by day, as if it were alive. However, we grossly underestimated what it would take to build a game like that," he admits.

"We released the first six months of content, and in 24 hours the players had worked through all of it. That was the scariest evening of my life because we realised, 'Hey, tomorrow we have nothing. Literally nothing.' At that point the nature of game design changed for me."

Such as Matheny used the Agile software development principle when designing Ong's Hat, Lee too had to find a more flexible way of telling stories. "I was used to building console games where you could make a straightforward narrative," says Lee. "In a console game when you walk too far you will hit a mountain or an invisible wall. You simply can't walk farther than that; you understand that those are the constraints. But in a game like The Beast or any ARG you can crawl off the edge of the map."

It's an interesting reversal of problems. Adaptive narrative is something that videogames have long sought to achieve, but even the best examples such as Heavy Rain have failed to realise the concept in a truly

**THE EXTENDED WORLD**

The Beast created a marketing craze that's been harnessed by many entertainment launches over the years. Here are some of the biggest.

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**Nine Inch Nails - Year Zero**

NINE INCH NAILS’ Trent Reznor never intended for Year Zero to be just an album—it was a project that encompassed an entire alternate future reality where a Chaisian fundamentalist state had dissolved civil rights and a mysterious being named The Presence was threatening to end the world. The rabbit hole in this case was a code hidden on the back of a NIN tour T-shirt, but clues also came in the case of a USB flash drive found in a Portuguese bathroom stall and images hidden in the spectrogram versions of songs. A secret NIN gig attended by players was even shut down mid-way by a SWAT team.

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**Halo 2 - I Love Bees**

I LOVE BEES WAS something of an odd campaign, in that Microsoft chose to build hype for its sci-fi space marine shooter using a website for bee-keeping enthusiasts. The twist? The hacking of the website was the result of a rogue AI named Melissa who was slowly being overtaken by the Covenant. Players were repeatedly sent GPS coordinates to payphones all around the country that would ring and offer new clues as to the advancement of the story—or even conversations with the AI itself.

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**Cloverfield - Slusho**

JJ ABRAMS LOVES to generate an atmosphere of mystery around his projects and Cloverfield was no different. The viral marketing campaign that unfolded around the initial enigmatic shakycam footage was rather obscure, involving the Japanese slushy brand "Slusho!" and a company named Taguaro. Yet players who stuck with the ARG eventually learned a great deal about a deep-sea drilling mishap as well as clues that suggested the Slusho company was responsible for the creature's appearance.

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**The Dark Knight - Why So Serious?**

ONE OF THE MOST extensive ARGs ever made, the Why So Serious? campaign bridged the gap between Batman Begins and The Dark Knight. It kicked off when people found $1 bills with Joker-style graffiti on them at Comic-Con, each of which led to a page advertising for jobs for Joker henchmen. From this the ARG led to phone numbers written in the sky, cakes that had cell phones stuffed inside them, and players deciding to be a Joker henchman, work for Lieutenant Gordon, or join Harvey Dent's campaign.

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**Harvey Dent for District Attorney**

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*games*
convincing manner. ARGs suffer from the opposite – the puppetmasters can’t simply prod their players through a pre-defined experience because they have the ability to go “off map” at any given moment, investigating clues and characters that may not have been deemed as integral to the central narrative strand.

According to Lee, for an ARG to be successful, the puppetmasters must adapt and alter the story in response to player action, even going as far as to leave “white space” for the players to fill in themselves. “The Beast became live dinner theatre,” he tells us. “It was improv. Tap dancing. Every single day. With any ARG the players who are on the other end of that dance partnership either follow that lead or they go off somewhere else, and the puppetmasters have to react to that. The community you’re interacting with have brains of their own. They have to offer the content as much as you do.

“The most powerful games are the ones that acknowledge that and reward both sides of the creation process. Sometimes the players challenge you to create a world that far surpasses anything that you thought you could create, and those are the most beautiful moments.”

The man in charge of creating these moments was Sean Stewart, a respected sci-fi scribe hired on a recommendation from the Spielberg camp. “Jordan [Weisman] called me up and after about fifteen minutes asked me, ‘By any chance do you know what a role-playing game is?’ And I said, ‘Well if you’re looking for a guy who’s played Empires Of The Postal Throne with the Rune Quest damage tables, that would be me.’ That turned out to be my secret Masonic handshake.”

Stewart’s pencil and paper RPG experience proved pivotal in his ability to generate story ideas on the fly. “An ARG is like playing an RPG with two million of your closest friends. It’s a narrative that you need to control, but you also have to be responsive to what the audience is doing without breaking the shape of the story that you started with.”

For instance: one website in The Beast’s canon posed as a secret hacker page, on which a puppetmaster programmer had included a Russian accent barking, “Hacked by the Red King!”

There are several basic design principles that make up the ARG, including storytelling as archaeology; platformless narrative; using real life as a medium; collaborative storytelling; and the “this is not a game” aesthetic.

“In a sense, any kind of serial drama is like this,” he continues. “You get a chance to see what the audience is interested in. Charles Dickens publishing books by chapter in the London newspapers meant he had a chance to see what people were responding to and what they weren’t while keeping his overall structure together. When you hit upon a new concept or plot line that people are interested in, run that out a little. When you try something no one cares about, wrap that up and move on. I think if you’re willing and you enjoy that dance, that collaborative work with your audience, it’s quite exhilarating.”

Videogames are far from being at a point where they can be this reactive – they must always adhere to the code implanted before they leave the development studio, tunnelling players along predefined narratives that offer only the illusion of choice. However, that’s not to say that developers have never attempted to intertwine some of the ARG methodology into their experiences.

For example, Lexis Numerique’s 2003 title In Memoriam saw players receive emails from other in-game characters and find clues on the Internet from both real and specially created websites. Less embedded into the actual videogame experience but still built around it are the 2009 BioShock 2 ARG Something In The Sea, which saw players immerse themselves in character Mark Meltzer’s quest to find his missing daughter, and the Morse code and SSTV encoded images that pre-empted the release of Portal 2.

In the future, however, Lee expects to see a great deal more videogames incorporate the concept of ARGs on a far deeper and more meaningful level. “Games have this problem, in that it’s very hard to tell a story where a character has the ability to break the pacing, because in doing so they’re breaking the story,” he tells us. “ARGs on the other hand are actually quite good at telling stories. You’re still controlling a character, but the character is you. It’s where you want to look. It’s the interactions you have with the community.

“But that said, ARGs aren’t nearly as exciting as saying, ‘I got to shoot thirty terrorists today,’” he admits. “So I think that videogames right now are striving to move closer to ARGs because they want to feel more real and ARGs are striving to move closer to traditional games because they want to be more exciting.

“Ultimately we’re going to meet somewhere in the middle and define a new form of entertainment that will be custom built for the 21st Century – games that follow you around after you turn off the console. Games that call you and allow you to have
AUGMENTED REALITY GAME

If there’s any one element of contemporary technology that our interviewees agree presents an important next step for ARGs, it's that of augmented reality. Some titles are already adopting features of both the augmented and alternate reality experience, such as GPS treasure-hunting game Geocaching and the glossy Ingress. Currently in closed beta, NianticLab's Google's Ingress is a massively multiplayer online game played on Android devices, with players joining one of two warring factions in order to find sources of a mysterious energy known as "exotic matter" out in real world locations.

The experience shares several elements with that of the ARG - in fact, it even begins with a message stating, "You have downloaded what you believe to be a game, but it is not."

Ingress pushes players out into the outside world, tracking down XM portals on the streets and roads around their home, and simply by choosing to side with the 'Enlightened' or "Resistance" they become characters in the story, aligning themselves with a collective usebase in order to achieve a common goal. All of these features contain the DNA of alternate reality gaming - even the game's website - www.nianticproject.com - presents itself as an online investigation board where cryptic clues are posted. When solved, they grant bonus XM to lucky players.

With its levelling up and item collection Ingress is more RPG than ARG, but the elements that take players out of the house and looking up from the screen are certainly the consequence of ARG design.

During The Beast, a piece of stock was mistakenly used for two different characters. Stewart wrote an entire subplot to cover up this mistake, which ended up being "one of the more haunting and ultimately sad moments in the entire experience."

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"The experience of working with NIN was wonderful," says Stewart on writing the Year Zero project. "While a lot of musicians spend a lot of time scoring movies, I'm one of the few writers who got to score an album!"