



The Tension Experience - Performance in Alternate Realities

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Abstract. This paper aims to discuss the notion of performance in the alternate reality game based on an analysis of the *Tension Experience* project, conducted in 2016 under the direction of Darren Lynn Bousman, which features the use of immersive theater strategies in a number of special contexts, and the use of multiple media support to create an emerging fictional universe so that each participant has a unique and personalized experience. *Tension Experience* establishes a form of blind performance in a narrative game with no rules or clear objectives, that seeks to enter the daily life of its participants, providing an experience that acts between the fictional and the non-fictional. In this way, the work updates some traditional strategies of alternating reality games as an immersive entertainment format, with a greater focus on narrative and role-playing aspects at the expense of hidden puzzles and mysteries.

Keywords: Alternate reality game · Performance · Immersive theater

1 Introduction

The alternate reality games – ARGs – appeared in the 2000s aiming to create a ludic experience with immersive qualities. They work as a game without clear rules and specific goals that goes on for an indefinite period of time and that is developed through the coordinated use of multiple medias (internet, TV, mobile, etc.) in association to actions in physical environments, in a way to keep a coherent narrative unit that is also related to the reality of the participants, in a combination of fictional and non-fictional elements.

In this way, it is created a structure that endorses the fictional universe that unfolds through the daily life of the involved ones, as a second layer of reality full of challenges that demand an active participation of the subjects in various performing actions that are ambiguous for happening not according to rules that are duly established, but rules that must be explored to be figured out. Those are characteristics that give to the experience of ARG strong immersive shapes, reconfiguring the classic understanding that one has of games as an experience with specific and limited space, time, and rules. This broad the possibilities of performance by the participants and their social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, intensifying an immersion process in the experience.

The alternate reality game has qualities that support a whole contemporary artistic trend in which, as Canton [5] points out, “materializes through a constant negotiation between art and life, life and art”, which is also visible in the spectrum of mediatic entertainment in the last decades, which Works that increasingly use strategies of mediatic convergence to provide actions where the public participates [10].

For having such characteristics, ARG has been strategically used in entertainment, in many fields (cinema, TV, advertising, etc.) as a way to involve the public directly with elements of mediated fictional universes. For example, *The Tension Experience* project - led by movie director Darren Lynn Bousman and writer Clint Sears - uses strategies of the alternate reality game together with those of the immersive theater in order to create intense emotional experiences for its participants, requiring of them a different mode of performance from what is traditionally practiced in the media and theater. In order to understand this performance dimension in the ARG, this article aims to analyze the elements of the alternate reality game as well as *The Tension Experience* project and its relationship with the immersive theater in order to understand how the performance of participants in this form of playful experience, whose main aesthetic is the lack of well-defined boundaries between fiction and non-fiction.

2 The Origins of Alternate Reality

In 2001, in one of the first trailers [2] and posters (see Fig. 1) of the A.I. Artificial Intelligence (United States, A.I. Artificial Intelligence, 2001), directed by Steven Spielberg, some viewers noticed something unusual in the credits of the work team. Among the listed professionals came the name of Jeanine Salla, credited as a sentient machine therapist - which also appeared on promotional posters. By researching her on the internet, in addition to discovering Jeanine Salla’s personal website, the audience was also led to a set of interlinked websites set in the year 2142 that dealt with the technical, social, philosophical, and sentimental problems of artificial intelligence.

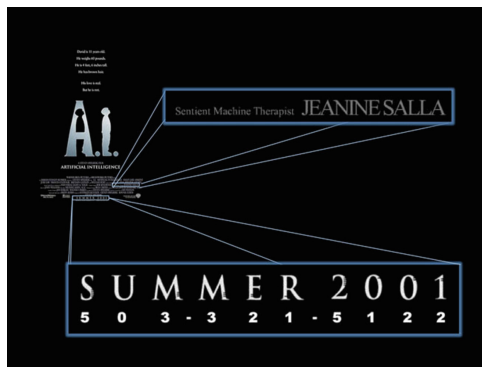


Fig. 1. Poster details of *A.I.- Artificial Intelligence* (2001) which were the rabbit hole to ARG *The Beast*

Slowly, Jeanine Salla proved to be a gateway to an investigative adventure about the death in unusual circumstances of her friend Evan Chan, with internet users as her main allies. To solve this enigma, several puzzles were created, ranging from websites, e-mails, and recorded links to those who were willing to explore this world, in a four-month conspiracy plot, from April to June 2001, involving about of 7,480 members of the main group of participants, known as Cloudmakers [12].

The experience came without any official announcement and happened thanks to the public's curiosity about the clues left in the promotional trailers of the film - although it did not directly involve any character in the film, approaching only their fictional world. What many regarded as a game, due to the puzzle challenges proposed by it¹, it did not have an official name and its existence was not even confirmed by the production crew of the film. Subsequently, what was only referred to as the A.I. marketing campaign or its web game [18], was named *The Beast*² by its makers Sean Stewart (writer), Elan Lee (director and producer), and Pete Fenlon (content manager) under the supervision of Jordan Weisman, who was then the creative director of the Entertainment Division of Microsoft Games Studios - who signed a contract for the development of a franchise of games based on the A.I. movie. The original project of the games was canceled by Microsoft shortly after the results of A.I.'s poor reception in its debut (July 2001) and *The Beast* was closed as well in the same period instead of keeping going until December, as it was originally planned, when videogames based on the universe of the movie would finally be released [12].

The proposal of *The Beast*, as Sean Stewart claimed in an interview to McGonigal [12], was to create mediatic evidence of a fictional world as if it actually existed, and then to break it "into thousands of small pieces and buried them in the midst of 70 billion pieces of online content". In this way, the experience would not be constituted as a sensorial simulated reality, but an alternative world that was accessible by objects of everyday communication, which occurred in a persistent and parallel way to the daily life of the participants.

The Beast is considered to be the precursor of the form of ludic experience that has become known as an alternate reality game, defined by Martin [11] as games that take "the substance of daily life and weaves it into narratives that place layers of meaning and interaction in the real world". This additional layer is what Christy Dena [6] points out as the main aesthetic of alternate realities design, which seeks to reduce the evidence that could characterize it as fictional in order to create a truthfulness of the facts so that they can be treated as plausible events.

Since then, other projects of this nature have been created, whether linked to audiovisual works, such as *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010) and its *Lost Experience* (2006) [20]; to publicity, such as the *Guaraná Antarctica*'s campaign known as *Uncertain*

¹ About the challenges, Andre Phillips, one of the participants, stated in an interview: "the puzzles made us read Goedel, Escher, and Bach, translate from German and Japanese, even from an obscure language called Kannada, decipher Morse and Enigma codes, and execute an incredible range of operations in sound and image files" [16].

² The name came from an internal joke of the makers because of the number of documents created for the game, which accounted for 666 files, the number of the beast, as revealed by writer Sean Stewart in his blog [19].

Zone (2007) [7] made in partnership with Editora Abril; or used in independent projects such as *Perplex City* (2005–2007) [14], produced by the British game company Mind Candy, which took over as a business model the sale of decks with jigsaw puzzles, which were brought from a reality parallel to ours. Aimed at a specific niche audience that has arose after 2001, the ARGs did not have major changes in their basic formula, always developing through the internet, especially with investigative plots that usually refer to conspiracy theories hidden between websites and discussion forums.

These strategies are also found in *The Tension Experience* project, which began in 2016 in Los Angeles, to create experiences focused especially on actions inspired by immersive theater, in which performances “use expansive installations and environments that have mobile audiences and which invite the audience to participate” [3], removing their status as an observer and becoming co-author of the narrative represented.

In this sense, the first experience was divided into two parts: (1) *Indoctrination*, an ARGs that extended from February to September 2016, involving the articulation between a fictional world and daily world through the internet, in addition to live interactions of characters with some participants (estimated around 40); (2) *Ascension*, a ticketed immersive play inside a warehouse³. The experience has as main motto to follow the trajectory of Addison Barrow (Sabrina Kern), a young actress who, when moving to Los Angeles, is seduced by an organization called *The O.O.A. Institute*, a facade for a secret society with touches of religious worship where a series of intrigues of power among the leaders - called Gatekeepers – happens [4].

The Tension Experience is inserted in a context of works focused on the performance of the audience, who stops being only a viewer to become a user in an experience open to modifications that evade a mere mechanical interactivity, having the participation as something substantial for the progress of the experience. But before any specific analysis on the project, it is necessary to delineate some characteristics of the alternate reality games, better defining the way in which the performance of the participants is constituted.

3 Alternate Reality Game and Performance in the Dark

According to McGonigal [12], the main focus in alternate reality games is to create immersive situations for the player without resorting to interactive and sensory strategies that constitute a virtual world apart. In the case of ARGs, the participants’ day-to-day communication devices are used to blur the boundaries between gaming and non-gaming (fiction and non-fiction). The motto “this is not a game” (TINAG)⁴, was defining in the first alternate reality games, in the sense of defending the quest to hide the projected/artificial nature of the ARG and to place it as an obscure layer of reality that is hidden between encrypted messages. Following this precept defined first

³ The presentations occurred Thursday through Sunday hourly from 6:00 to 11:00 pm, with a audience of 8-12 people each show, totalizing 300 members per week [15].

⁴ The words came in a trailer for the A.I. movie, aired on North American television on June 7th, 2001, blinking rapidly in red letters along with credits [11].

by Elan Lee in a conference in 2002 [12], who worked on *The Best*, the ARGs should follow three principles: 1 - “Tell no one”, the game should not be announced, so that it arouses people’s greater interest in knowing more about mysteries, providing the feeling of dealing with something unique, so they enjoy sharing it with others; 2 - “Do not build a space for the game”, that is to say, do not confine the experience to a single environment; 3 - “Do not build a Game”, the instructions and rules should not be clear, nor even have specific objectives, just as the daily routine does not have properly clarified rules.

Faced with these qualities, McGonigal classifies ARGs as ubiquitous games, which create a persistent ludic infrastructure by rethinking the reality and functioning of their technical devices for ludic purposes. This breaks with Huizinga’s [9] classic notion of the game as an activity apart from ordinary life, with well-defined space, time, and rules that runs within dedicated places and projects for this, as a magic circle, “that is to say, places that are forbidden, isolated, closed, sacred, within which certain rules are respected. All of them are temporary worlds within the habitual world, dedicated to the practice of a space activity”.

The transposition of these boundaries of the game would happen by the activation of affordances of gameplay in the everyday world. As McGonigal [12] explains, affordances refer to the fundamental properties in goals, determining how they can be manipulated and used. They are sensory cues that help users to understand how to interact with the properties of things and cognitively build the environment. The perception of affordance depends on the skill of the user who is taking a particular action that will produce an effect in relation to a specific object. This response may be predicted or directly observed, and is also a culturally recognizable property (such as a door-opening knob) or empirically accessible by exploiting the object’s utilities. In this way, the ARGs would be activities that give new meanings and ludic functions to reality, updating the relationship between its participants and the environment, which originates a reactive system that unfolds in fragmented narratives, revealing an universe hidden as yet.

As McGonigal [12] explains, alternate reality games would be game structures that activate certain properties of the world: “[...] transforming everyday objects and places into interactive platforms; game structures also activate players by making them more responsive to potential calls to interaction. This is because the act of exposing previously unperceived affordances creates a more meaningful relationship between the actor and the object or the space in the world.”

But, as the author comments, these features arise only by the performance of the subject with the encrypted messages. On the concept of performance, Zumthor [22] says that “performance is recognition” because it “accomplishes, concretizes, makes something go from virtuality to the present”. An act that is situated in a cultural and situational context, as an emergency that escapes the common course of things, a “phenomenon that leaves this context at the same time as in that it finds place” [22]. An action that, for the author, modifies the knowledge of the subjects involved and gives new forms to the perception of the environment, leaving the mere mechanical function of communication.

McGonigal understands the performance of ARG participants through the concept of dark play formulated by Shechner [17]. The author uses the concept to refer to ludic activities in which the participants are not sure whether they are playing, because “Unlike carnivals or ritual clowns whose inversions of established order are sanctioned by the authorities, dark play is truly subversive, its agendas always hidden.” [16], such as a mouse trapped in a maze or a person captured unnoticed by a game of deception. For him, there is always a danger in these experiences, because of the delicate limit between the security of representations and the risk to the daily life of those involved. The reward for the participants occurs through fraud, disturbance, and excess - that is to say, by strong emotional engagement, which for the McGonigal is transformed into pleasure in discovering the occult and to be surprised to reveal the staging or farce.

This intensity in engagement can be measured by the time that the participants of the ARG *The Beast* took to solve the puzzles of the first stage of the project. The producers estimated a three-month deadline for everything to be solved, but when the ARG was released, the mysteries of the first stage were solved in about one day only.

However, as pointed out by researchers such as McGonigal [12] and Dena [6], the commitment of participants is not proportional to the number of participants. Few people actually engage in these kinds of experiences, even when they have a broad reach across the internet. The ARGs have come to be known as projects aimed at a specific niche of the audience that is avid to look out for puzzles and that like to solve complex problems and speculate in online groups about possible narrative paths of a still obscure fictional world.

As Mind Candy’s co-founder Dan Hon [8] complained during his talk on the *Everything We Know About Transmedia Is Wrong!* panel at the PICNIC 2010 conference, the ARGs failed to become popular for wasting their time on things nobody want to see or do. He mainly criticizes the producers for using cryptography and puzzles without any narrative justification, since “the number of people interested in mathematical cryptography is negligible; instead, let’s do things that entertain people” [8].

In this sense, *The Tension Experience* explores other aspects of the format of what is seen in traditional alternate reality games. In this experiment, the focus shifts from exploration of the subject’s cognitive performance in solving puzzles and goes to the action of dealing emotionally with a game in the dark, as defined by Shechner [17]. By incorporating precepts of the immersive theater, which is intensified by the strategies of design of alternate realities previously listed, the ARG seeks to break the daily life of its participants, collecting their personal data in the networks, interfering in the day to day actions with live actors and telephone calls, in actions that demand an active performance of the subject in trying to separate the game from non-game.

4 The Tension Experience and the Immersive Theater

Journalist McKendry [13] reports that the first edition of *The Tension Experience* (and its first part named *Indoctrination*) was primarily disclosed to a select audience of media professionals and entertainment journalists living in Los Angeles. Invitations were sent via email from an institution called O.O.A., offering lighting to those who were willing to participate in the experience and learn its secrets. Anyone who accepted the

invitation could subscribe to the experience through the institution's website [21] or by telephone. Shortly thereafter, an extensive questionnaire was sent regarding personal information, which came with the following warning: “ *The Tension Experience* is a paranoia, fear based experiment. We use personal information and data collected to tailor the experience for each participant involved. By using this website you understand that we will go out of our way to create a unique experience based on YOU. At any time you wish to end your experience with us please email TheTensionExperience@gmail.com. Upon your request all information will be deleted from our servers, and your GAME will end.” [16].

After the registration, an interview was scheduled in an isolated warehouse in the city and until this meeting, the user would receive anonymous calls, as reported by Adrew Kasch McKendry [13]: “I receive a series of creepy anonymous phone calls. Some laughing. Music playing. I posted an announcement of my wife's pregnancy on Facebook and a minute later, the phone rings and a creepy voice says ‘Congratulations!’ and hangs up”. In the same statement, Adrew describes his face-to-face meeting in which he had to answer another questionnaire and at the end hitchhike to a crying girl, who supposedly had passed the same test and was desperate. As she leaves the car, the girl declares that they have shown her a picture of him.

This was the tone of the participants experiences for seven months, interacting with characters over the internet or in public places, always having the support of platforms such as the forum of the O.O.A. and its social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, which periodically provided clues about the main plot and broadcast it to short videos. In one of these transmissions [1], the spectator was taken into a car with three occupants. In the background, a casual song was playing, until they all get out of the car and take out an injured man who is soon recognized by the users as one of the characters of the main plot. From such events, participants are becoming aware of the intrigues



Fig. 2. Photographic record of the immersive play that closes the events of *The Tension Experience: Ascension*.

behind the O.O.A. and the role of Addison Barrow (Sabrina Kern) in the power struggle among the group's leaders. Having as its peak a collective event, a second part of the experience named *Ascension*, accessible by the purchase of limited tickets, in which a shed with various scenarios for an immersive play - staged periodically between November and December 2016 (see Fig. 2).

As defined by Belo [3], in the immersive theater there are no barriers between the audience and the actors, having the audience the freedom to interact with the cast and the scenario, and "there is a single central narrative, but each member of the audience creates his own narrative, linked to his experience, there being as many narratives as the number of members of the audience the piece has" [3]. According to the author, such an immersive performance format emerges as a counterpoint to the experience of a world so mediated by technology, where people crave for tactile and intimate experiences.

This form of performance art refers to the experiences and ideas that sought to break the fourth wall of the theater from the 1930s onwards in order to create a viewer emancipated by the intensification of the senses and by creation as a form of consciousness - with such dramatic writers as Bertold Brecht in the epic theater, and Antonin Artaud in the theater of cruelty. In the 1970s, in Brazil, Augusto Boal sought to create pieces with active audiences through the idea of the Theater of the Oppressed, in which the public had the concession to interfere in the direction of the narrative for the outcome of the play, with constant improvisation by the actors.

These features are taken by *The Tension Experience: Ascension* and potentialized through the activation of gameplay's affordances that give rise to performances within the design of the game in the dark - not having a clear awareness of where a performance action begins or ends, tracking at all times loopholes that indicate the limits of zones in which fictional events may be occurring.

As stated by the participant Adrew Kasch [13], each of his friends who joined the experiment stated that they witnessed events different from their own, each with its own narrative, according to the individually constructed profile, making it unlikely to predict any future action. Project's director Darren Bousman also explains that the rules themselves should be obscured so as not to break with the subject's cognitive immersion process, providing different layers and views on the same event.

At the end of each piece, for example, characters are killed in sacrificial rituals, and the audience can intervene and change the ending by speaking a specific Latin phrase that was secretly written in notes that participants had access to during the ARG. However, it requires collective consent for such an act, as he reports in one situation: "One person found it and tried to do it, but he was so meek in his approach that he just muttered it. Everybody turned and looked at him, but he didn't say anything else again. If he would have said it again, it all would have happened." [4]. Despite the apparent failure of the subject, it is incorporated and becomes coherent within the narrative spectrum of performance, for from the recognition of performance, possible worlds open up through participation, resulting in paths of frustration for a single individual (as mentioned above), among other tracks in which it is up to each participant to develop their conclusions.

5 Final Considerations

This article sought to discuss the notion of performance in the alternate reality game from a brief analysis of the *The Tension Experience: Ascension*, which incorporates dynamics of the immersive theater in order to create an experience with a more narrative focus instead of exploring the dynamics of puzzles solutions that were so common in early ARGs. In order to do so, it was made a rescue of the trajectory of what was considered the first alternate reality game, *The Beast*, made in 2001, based especially on the premise “this is not a game” in order not to expose itself as a game and require participants’ ability to decipher hidden puzzles in movie trailers, images, and websites.

In this way, it was possible to point out the main characteristics of the ARGs, focusing especially on how the performance is constituted by the activation of gameplay functionalities in the daily environment, mixing the fictional with the non-fiction, and providing an ambiguous quality in its performance - Something that is representative in *The Tension Experience: Ascension*, for developing its narrative lines in a personalized way to each participant, crossing them in a final collective event having as support the immersive theater, which requires the participation of the audience for its progress. Qualities that corroborate to create a linear performance that requires participants to be guided by experience and discern the events involved with the game through the daily experience.

The experience is focused on developing a greater participation in its narrative dimension, the performance of its participants along with actors, and through personal messages through the platforms. There is an escape from the structure of mysteries in puzzles or activities that require many collaborative actions, attending to the details of the daily life of each participant, within an unique business model based on the purchase of tickets, and with a geographical space of action well delineated - which contributes to all sustainable production logistics, one of the major bottlenecks when it comes to the production of alternate reality games.

The possibility of working on *The Tension Experience* universe in a serialized way, with new projects launched annually, allows experimentation still unprecedented in its format, considering that the alternate reality game projects developed over a long period are rare. Thus, *The Tension Experience* would be an object of study to be followed in its next editions in view of the potentialities of innovation that it can provide for the field of immersive experiences, as well as reflections on performance in the dark.

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