TEXTO DIGITAL
Revista de Literatura, Linguística, Educação e Artes

I Subscribed to a Missing Girl's YouTube Channel and You Won't Believe What I Found: A Study on Alternate Reality Games

Eu me inscrevi no canal do YouTube de uma garota desaparecida e você não vai acreditar no que eu descobri: um estudo sobre Alternate Reality Games

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Abstract: Alternate Reality Games – commonly abbreviated as ARGs – have emerged in the first decade of the 21st century. The main feature of such games is their claim to reality, denying these narratives to be fictional at all. Moreover, the effectiveness of the genre's storytelling often relies on its ability to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality. In light of these observations, this article seeks to identify the tools utilized by ARGs to create a narrative that simulates reality; it aims to analyze how the simulation of reality in ARGs engages communities across social-media platforms, at times even moving outside the virtual space. In order to perform this analysis, this study outlines common features of the genre, briefly reviewing the history of ARG as described by Garcia and Niemeyer (2016). As a theoretical support to comprehend how this genre attempts to simulate reality, McLane's (2007) and Aufderheide's (2007) studies of the conventions of documentary are mentioned. The narrative of a 2018 ARG called "AshVlogs/i-know-where-she-is" is reported in order to exemplify some of the characteristics of the genre, furthering the discussion about ARG's possibilities of intersecting reality and fiction.

Keywords: Alternate Reality Games. Possible Worlds. Convergence culture.

Resumo: *Alternate Reality Games* – comumente abreviados como ARGs – surgiram na primeira década do século XXI. A principal característica desses jogos é sua intenção de se apresentarem como histórias reais, negando que qualquer aspecto de suas narrativas seja ficcional. Dessa forma, a eficácia deste gênero com frequência depende da habilidade da narrativa de disfarçar os limites entre ficção e realidade. Em vista dessas observações, este artigo busca identificar as ferramentas utilizadas pelos ARGs para criar histórias que simulem a realidade; a análise busca compreender como a simulação de realidade nos ARGs engaja comunidades em diversas plataformas de redes

sociais, por vezes até avançado para fora do espaço virtual. Para realizar tal investigação, esse estudo descreve características comuns do gênero, brevemente revisando a história de ARGs como descrita por Garcia and Niemeyer (2016). Como apoio teórico para compreender como os jogos simulam a realidade, os estudos de McLane's (2007) e Aufderheide's (2007) sobre as convenções do gênero documentário são mencionadas. Um ARG iniciado em 2018 chamado "AshVlogs/i-know-where-she-is" é analisado para exemplificar algumas características do gênero estudado, aprofundando a discussão sobre as possibilidades de textos como ARGs de criarem intersecções entre ficção e realidade.

Palavras-chave: Alternate Reality Games. Mundos possíveis. Cultura da convergência.

Introduction

A YouTube user leaves a comment on a video that reports the story of an allegedly missing girl, saying "I'm always scared that one of these days there will be an 'arg' that isn't an arg, and it is entirely real and disturbing and criminal. The whole concept of args always freak me out for this exact reason, it could (almost) always be real". The user is referring to Alternate Reality Games. These can be defined as digitally mediated games that trespass into the "real," physical world, "situated as a primary reflection of how the real world and imaginary narratives intersect" (Garcia; Niemeyer, 2017, p.2), encompassing different aspects of virtual text: comments on social media, forum posts, or audiovisual texts, such as long or short videos and vlogs. These games often start under the guise of real interactions posted to social media (a thread on a forum, or a series of vlogs uploaded to a YouTube channel) that serve as clues, or points of entrance, to a broader narrative that can be unveiled if a person on the Internet identifies something amiss within the internal logic of the narrative.

If the person then decides to investigate the clues left by the game developer – maybe realizing the fictional nature of the material, or maybe believing it to be real – the "game" itself starts, and online communities gather to uncover the mystery by following clues that might be scattered across different social media platforms or even in the physical space

around the players. In light of that, the present article seeks to identify the conventions utilized by ARGs to create a narrative that simulates reality. This study also aims to analyze how the claims of truthfulness in ARGs engage communities through the internet, across platforms, and often creating experiences that have effects outside the virtual space. In order to achieve that, this study focuses on the formal aspects of the ongoing ARG known as *AshVlogs*, or *I_Know_Where_She_Is*. Although by now many people have understood the fictional nature of the channel and play the game for entertainment, the eventual user still stumbles upon the story and proceeds to post concerned messages to the forums asking whether the story is real or fake.

The methodological procedures consist of a general review of the common features of the ARG genre, briefly reporting on the history of this interactive media, while commenting on its relations to other cultural products present themselves as non-fictional. This article then goes over the theoretical concepts of convergence culture and possible words, seeking a better understanding of the narrative components of the selected corpus. Finally, the initial storylines of *AshVlogs* will be described in order to point out the mechanisms which sustain its claims to truthfulness.

ARGs and claims to truthfulness

The boundaries between reality and fiction have been blurred, at many points, by the creation of cultural products which claim to be truthful. Within the realm of audio-visual media, documentary films were perhaps the first products to merge reality and fiction to the extent that they became indiscernible within the narrative. As Betsy McLane (2012) explains, documentary films generally take up specific and factual events as their subject; as the name of the genre itself emerged from the word "document", these films sustain the idea that what they present is a raw

register of reality. The production of documentaries frequently employs a cinematographic language that claims to interfere as little as possible with the subject portrayed: as McLane explains, “any manipulation of images or sounds is largely confined to what is required to make the recording of them possible, or to make the result seem closer to the actual than inadequate technique might” (McLane, 2012, p. 3). The format of documentary films is constructed to support the notion that these films work as a window into real-world events, which Patricia Aufderheide (2007) defines as “claims to truthfulness”; according to the critic, techniques such as actual sound, images filmed on location, and appeals to figures of authority are used to convince viewers that what the film displays is an authentic report on reality.

When commenting about the format of early documentaries, Aufderheide (2007) notes that long, uncut scenes, and a slower pacing were used to create the impression that the viewer was looking to an untouched reality, while the use of handheld, moving cameras placed the audience in the middle of the on-screen action and contributed to a sense of urgency. The use of narration could denote a god-like authority to the film, as an omniscient disembodied voice told the audience the truth about what it saw – while the lack of narration could lead the viewers to believe that they were being shown all the facts, and therefore any conclusions they might draw from the images on screen would seem more factual, because they were untarnished by the judgment of others (Aufderheide, 2007). Thus, the conventional format of documentary films is crafted to instill the audience with the confidence that what it sees is objective and reliable. As a result, viewers may consume documentary films with the expectation that what they show is true; the viewers may not approach this media with the suspicion that they might be influenced or deceived.

This initial assumption has since been challenged, as the form of documentary films and techniques used to create them inevitably interfere in how objective such films can be in recording "reality". In fact, McLane (2012) points out that the approach of most filmmakers to this genre is to interpret actuality, persuading the audience to empathize with the subject – and further, encouraging the viewer to take action in regards to the issue portrayed by the film. Even if documentaries are created under the premise of displaying the truth, the process of making the film involves making choices: selecting what is worth showing, deciding which scenes are included or excluded from the final cut, and adding soundtrack, are a few of the many decisions which may influence the audience's perspective towards the events reported on-screen. Aufderheide (2007) makes note of these elements and explains that "there is no way to make a film without manipulating the information. Selection of topic, editing, mixing sound are all manipulations" (Aufderheide, 2007, p. 2). In light of that, the critic explains that documentary filmmakers use the same strategies employed in the making of fictional films; further, one can argue that the boundaries between reality and fiction are feeble and flexible, and certain narrative structures contribute to making a story, which might be only partially true or completely made up, seem believable to those who access it. As Aufderheide demonstrates,

> Reality is not what is out there but what we know, understand, and share with each other of what is out there. Media affect the most expensive real estate of all, that which is inside your head. Documentary is an important reality–shaping communication, because of its claims to truth (Aufderheide, 2007, p. 5).

If the claims to truth in documentary films can have such a strong hold on audiences, more interactive media can arguably take these reality-shaping effects further. The concept of reality being created by the communication and relations between people – especially, to use

Aufderheide's definition, what people share with one another – is the main premise of Alternate Reality Games. According to the definition of Antero Garcia and Greg Niemeyer, "ARGs can be broadly understood as digitally mediated games that transpire within the 'real,' physical world" (Garcia; Niemeyer, 2017, p.10). Often, playing an ARG consists of searching for clues across different online platforms and solving puzzles that unveil a narrative. The narratives attached to the games frequently involve fictional mysteries, secret organizations, or otherwise corrupt activity which the players set out to investigate.

As Jeffrey Kim *et al*. (2009) describe, these games aim at creating a storyline that can infiltrate real life; to achieve that effect, the game designer – sometimes called "puppet master" within ARG communities – scatters information across the digital space, in websites, social media, and perhaps even physical locations around the players. The critics explain that "game designers hide pieces of content that players need to assemble into a coherent story and solve the problems the story presents" (KIM *et al*. 2009, [n.p.]). The invitation for the players to actively explore their surroundings is the main game mechanic, and also the format through which the narrative is presented. Moreover, there is an essential communal aspect to the game mechanic that can be perfectly described by the definition of collective intelligence outlined by Pierre Levy and explained by Henry Jenkins: "none of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills" (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 4). ARGs depend on the convergence of media and people, on the sharing of information, and on social interaction.

The game which possibly originated the genre, named by players as *The Beast*, offers an example of this dynamic. Created in 2001 by Microsoft to promote[2] Steven Spielberg's *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, the game began with

a cryptic credit on a trailer to the movie which read "Jeanine Salla, Sentient Machine Therapist". An internet search for the name Janine Salla then led players to a network of websites dating to the year 2142 A.D. which debated the philosophical and technical issues of artificial intelligence and sentient machines (McGonigal, 2003). An increasing number of players created online communities to gather clues, which circulated mainly through websites and emails, but also through phone calls, faxes, television, newspaper ads, and in-person events. Additionally, *The Beast* aligned the game's internal plots to the external calendar, using dates as clues in emails and faxes sent by the game's characters, and articles posted to in-game news sites were synchronized "so that plot developments corresponded precisely with the passage of time in the players' lives" (McGonigal, 2003, p. 3-4). Through these elements, Jane McGonigal (2003) explains, the "alternate" reality emerges: the web of clues creates a layered reality in which the physical and virtual spaces inhabited by the players exist both within and outside the game.

The concept that ARGs can create a new layer of reality is echoed by Garcia and Niemeyer (2017), who claim that the investigative movement on the part of the players extends the narrative experience, as the rules of the game superimpose a new organization over the spaces frequented by the players. The critics claim that the exploration of online databases, which ARGs encourage, is a tool for the players to re-mediate the world around them and rearrange both physical and virtual spaces. But perhaps the most pervasive form for the fictional story ARGs to infiltrate reality is through experience: Garcia and Niemeyer (2017) propose that this genre is primarily defined by the transformative experiences it grants the players, as there is little remaining after the game has been completed. Even if the videos, forums, links, and accounts that provide the game with its mediatic elements are still available online, the narrative experience of one who actively participates in the game while it develops, taking part in solving the

puzzle proposed by the game's story, is certainly distinct to that of a person who is simply presented with the sequence of events of the plot.

These divergent possible experiences could be related to different degrees in the game's claims to truthfulness: while the first group of people may stumble upon the clues for the game unsure whether they have encountered an actual sinister situation, the second group likely knows that what they are witnessing is fictional, as they might experience the narrative through a video or an article dedicated to gathering and organizing the clues of the game or reviewing the story. About the process of playing *The Beast*, McGonigal (2003) comments that the websites which constituted parts of the game functioned as any other real website would: their interface held advertisements for fictional companies, pop-up windows, and internal links leading to subpages. These were, in fact, carefully crafted real websites, even if the content they held was entirely fictional. However, McGonigal (2003) emphasizes, there was no indication within these pages that they were part of a game; the critic highlights that "aesthetically, technologically and phenomenologically speaking, there was no difference at all between the look, function or accessibility of the in-game sites and nongame sites" (McGonigal, 2003, p. 3).

Moreover, one of *The Beast*'s clues – or another point of entrance into the game – was a flashing scene in a trailer to the movie *A.I.* that displayed the phrase, "This Is Not A Game" (TINAG). The unyielding denial that the game is fictional remains one of the main features of the genre – one that could, according to Garcia and Niemeyer (2017, p.12), differentiate ARGs from the broader genre of pervasive gaming. It is worth noting that the release of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) only three years prior to the promotional campaign for *A.I.* had employed similar strategies to publicize the film: posters reported the actors missing, a website was set up using the format of interviews to talk about the alleged disappearance of the students, and

further, a full trailer was released in the form of a Discovery Channel documentary to grant the semblance of reality to the supposed found footage (Zanini, 2019, p. 22). ARGs seem to have followed in the steps of false documentaries and found footage films as a fictional story presented as non-fiction.

Considering the ever-present claim that "this is not a game", it can be observed that ARGs infiltrate players' experience of reality and make claims to truthfulness through conventional formal elements of its media. Much like documentary films could use a still or moving camera to evoke on the audience the similar sensation of glimpsing into the unaltered facts and being present amidst the action, ARGs capitalize on the interfaces of different platforms to instill the audience with the confidence that it is experiencing the truth. Although the events portrayed by the ARG may not be true, the players' interaction with the subject and with one another creates an experience with real effects, as McGonigal (2003) explains:

> In this sense, it is reasonable to argue that nothing about this virtual play was simulated. The computer-driven alternate reality the Beast created was make-believe, but every aspect of the player's experience was, phenomenologically speaking, real. Hacking into the in-game coroner's office's fictional Web report, for example, was identical in practice to the process of hacking into a nongame coroner's office's Website (McGonigal, 2003, p. 3).

The possibilities of internet interaction have certainly evolved since *The Beast* premiered. Just as the format of documentary films utilizes certain conventions to keep the audience's attention and facilitate their claims to truthfulness, the recent ARG format leans heavily into the persuasive potential of social media. The elements mobilized by ongoing ARGs to feign authenticity may evoke conventions utilized by documentary films that help to "disguise the assumptions that makers bring to the project, and make the presentation of the particular facts and scenes seem both

inevitable and complete" (Aufderheide, 2007, p. 12); however, some of these conventions – such as the appeal to the authority of experts and specialists – have shifted, as the main focus of reliability come from the person who creates the content.

As Henry Jenkins explains, the expanded access to the internet and the possibility of distributing content in-mass has altered our understanding of authorship, thus necessarily altering the perception of what kinds of authority authors should hold (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 179). In the second section of this article, the debate proposed by Jenkins (2006a) will come into play during the analysis of the selected corpus. Now, this study furthers the discussion on the intersections of fiction and reality by turning to the concept of Possible Worlds.

Pervasive gaming and possible worlds

ARG communities use certain terms to describe specific elements of the game; one of the more broadly used terms, which refers to following the clues that serve as starting points to the game, is "falling down the rabbit hole". Recalling Lewis Carrol's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the concept implies that by following the clues to the game, the player shifts spaces and enters a world with different rules (Kim *et al.*, 2009). In addition, the idea of a rabbit hole also expresses the enthralling experience of investigating the mystery and the overwhelming number of puzzles, websites, social media profiles, and hyperlinks involved in the process. However, as previously pointed out, the "alternate" reality of an ARG does not imply a separation between the game space and the player's surroundings; rather, the game is a grid superimposed over the players' digital and physical space. This aspect, along with the games' claims of being non-fictional, has led some players to applying the gaming rules to real events; McGonigal (2003) reports that the community which had

gathered to play *The Beast* regrouped in the aftermath of the attack to the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th, 2001, attempting to solve the – now very real – mystery.

This, McGonigal (2003) suggests, was a result of the players developing a "stereoscopic vision" – that is, the perception that they would need to read two different worlds at the same time: the game world and the real world. For that group of people, something in the experience of an ARG had made it possible to forget and to debate the reality boundaries of an actual event (McGonigal, 2003). The experience aspect of ARGs is, in Garcia's and Niemeyer's (2017) analysis, what sets the genre apart from other pervasive gaming. While pervasive games can be characterized as narratives which augment reality and perceptions of space through digitally mediated tools, ARGs offer a broader engagement with the augmented world, having at its core the investigation of the narrative. Considering the main elements of Alternate Reality Games described so far, it may be possible to link this genre to the concept of possible worlds. Originated as a strategy to solve semantic problems in the realm of philosophy, possible worlds theory is grounded on "the idea that reality – conceived as the sum of the imaginable rather than as the sum of what exists physically – is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct worlds" (Ryan, 2013, [n.p.]).

As Marie-Laure Ryan (2013) explains, the theory of Possible Worlds positions the "actual" or "real" world at the center of a system composed of many alternate realities. According to the critic, this concept holds some important consequences for literary theory, as it assumes the real world can be a point of reference to the creation of fictional storyworlds, but does not limit fiction to an imitation of reality. Rather, it considers that fictional worlds may diverge freely from the "actual world". It seems interesting to discuss ARGs under the light of Possible Worlds because

this model puts to question the reasons or properties that make one world the "actual", while the others are only "possible". One interpretation would suggest that there is a fundamental difference in ontological status: the actual world exists independently, while the others are produced by mental activity, *e.g.* storytelling, imagining, and dreaming (Ryan, 2013). A second interpretation proposes that the difference between worlds is referential – that is, the actual world is the one where "I" exist. This line of thought, called "modal realism" implies that every world is feasible through the perspective of its inhabitants. As the critic explains, "all possible worlds are real in the sense that they exist independently of whether or not a member of AW imagines them, but only one world can be actual from a given point of view" (Ryan, 2013, [n.p.]).

When applied to the analysis of ARGs, the perspective of modal realism aids in the understanding of how this genre confuses the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. As previously established, ARGs create a fictional space that pervades players' real spaces, resulting in transformative experiences. The narrative of an ARG may suggest a possible world that shares several points of reference with the actual world – to the point that some may find it difficult to spot where the game ends and actual events begin.

The case of AshVlogs

AshVlogs is an ongoing ARG which began in 2018 and quickly engaged communities of players dedicated to solving the mystery behind the YouTube channel which grants the game its name. The storyline for this ARG is established across multiple YouTube accounts, as well as Instagram, Snapchat and SoundCloud accounts; it features the vlogging channel of Ashleigh, a young Australian woman who makes videos about her life, her friends, and her usual activities. However, eerie occurrences

both in the audiovisual material and in the world around her occasionally interrupt the flow of Ashleigh's stories: distortions on the audio or sound on one of her videos, uncommon sounds coming from her neighbor's apartment, and a car that seems to park in front of her house a bit too frequently. These events escalate, leading to the alleged disappearance of Ashleigh and to the implication that her channel had been taken over by a murderous cult. The game consists of the investigation of this supposed cult's actions, motives, and most importantly – the fate of Ash and other possible victims.

The first video posted to AshVlogs, on April 17th of 2018, shows Ashleigh introducing herself and her channel, hinting at the content of her future videos; it is recorded on an interior space, presumably her living room, with a stationary camera. With a runtime of less than two minutes, this video holds the first strange occurrences that disturb the narrative of Ashleigh as an aspiring vlogger: after she concludes the video by saying "claim to fame", the image is slightly distorted, just as she reaches to stop the recording. This may seem off to the viewer who is familiar with the vlog format for a couple of reasons: first, although the video is filmed in one take, with no jump cuts, the moving text which appears while Ash speaks proves that the video has been edited to an extent. Ash even mentions that she has started using a professional editing tool. If that is the case, then why have the last few seconds not been cut? Second, the phrase "claim to fame" has no apparent context, which is odd but not overtly alarming at this point.

Another element, however, disturbs the narrative: a link to a mysterious video, left unmentioned in the description box, accompanied only by the word "click". In the current YouTube interface, the description box is a space below the video and its title where the person who posts to the platform may use text to register additional information about the video,

link to other social media accounts, or otherwise communicate with the viewers. This space is external to the video itself, and it could be overlooked by one who does not scroll down the screen on their device; in being so, the viewer may or may not interact with the information left by those who upload.

This is the first entrance point into the game. Clicking the link in the description box of Ash's first vlog leads to an unlisted video – meaning, something that has been uploaded to the channel, but only those with a link can access it – titled "VID 20171006 005018". This runs at mere nine seconds and is recorded on what appears to be a phone camera. The person holding the camera briefly shows a laptop screen, then pans the camera from side to side, revealing the environment around it: a dark, abandoned house, littered with trash and rubble.

The next video posted publicly to AshVlogs shows Ashleigh's adventure to an abandoned mill. The vlog format is sustained, alternating between footage made by the girl of herself and of the environment she explores, and recordings of Ash talking to the camera about the events of the day she visited the mill, set in the same living room as the previous video. Once again, a link is posted to the video description, but not ever mentioned by the vlogger: it leads to another unlisted video, titled "VID 20170409 151909". Its contents are, again, rather unsettling: with a runtime of thirty seconds, it shows, through glitched video and audio, an observer's perspective of Ashleigh on her path to the mill. The actions and environments displayed are recognizable from the video uploaded publicly, but this time Ash is not the one filming. She is shown from a distance while absorbed in her own activities. It is clear she does not know she is being recorded by another person; the footage is done through the leaves of trees and bushes, which suggests that the person with the camera is concealed from the girl's view.

With this second unlisted video, a pattern emerges and is sustained throughout a portion of the game, providing another clue to unravel the narrative: the titles for the unlisted videos are dates. The sequence of letters and numbers are recognizable as the standard names of video files – possibly, the dates in which these recordings have been made. To one who is familiar with the YouTube upload system, these titles indicate that the person who posted the videos had not edited their names – as the name of the file will automatically appear as the title for the uploaded video unless the user alters it. This assumption led many players to the conclusion that the unlisted videos had been taken in 2017, and that they were not posted in chronological order: the first unlisted video dating from October 6th 2017, and the second from April 9th 2017. Moreover, it roused the suspicion among the players that, within the storyworld, Ash was not actually the one running the channel. This aspect also shows that, like *The Beast*, *AshVlogs* aligns its timeline with the player's chronology.

The third publicly posted video is somewhat more ominous than the first two; sixteen seconds long, it shows Ash's face – presumably recording herself – as she tells the audience that her neighbor's baby has been crying, and she is not able to sleep. Katie, the neighbor, had been introduced to the viewers in one of the previous uploads as Ash briefly talked to her through the "paper thin" walls of their apartment complex. Ashleigh expresses her frustration with the noise motioning her fingers like a gun directed at her own head. Scrolling through the video's comment section reveals that many users were concerned about the baby's cries; however, there is no link to unlisted videos in this one. The next eleven videos alternate between portrayal of completely ordinary activities in Ash's life and vlogs riddled with unsettling details; these sometimes accompanied by more unlisted videos, with increasingly cryptic titles.

The clues to the hidden plotline of the game are continuously placed among the videos: one unlisted video spells out a code in a distorted voice; another, presents corrupted audio from one of Ashleigh's videos which had not yet been posted to the channel. Yet another shows an unidentifiable person carefully packing an item in a box with a strange symbol, which Ashleigh later receives, and opens in one of the main videos to reveal a device that seems like an external storage unit. It is at this point that the narrative build-up reaches its climax. The eleventh video posted publicly is titled "c2f.exe" – recalling Ash's phrase in the first video, "claim to fame", and the ".exe" indicating a program that can be installed in a computer.

The players had been given several hints that Ash was being stalked, and that she might be in danger – if, that is, she was ever in control of the channel. The video is set up in two cameras: one stationary camera shows Ash and her friend Al; that perspective alternates with the recording of Ash's phone, which is used to record a computer screen. The video shows the vlogger and her friend plug the storage device she had received onto an old desktop computer, and run the only program it contains: c2f.exe, which carries the strange symbol on the box as an icon. As soon as the file is opened, a loud, high-pitched noise is emitted from the computer and the following pop-up messages appear on the girls' monitor: "Congratulations! 2500 buyers and counting ash."; "much more popular than the others"; "i think they might be jealous". Then, several images of injured bodies spam across the screen, as the girls attempt to stop it, until a final pop-up appears, which reads "I'm outside. I'll be seeing you soon".

The computer then restarts automatically. Shortly after, the perspective of the stationary camera shows an incoming call on Al's phone from a private number; then there is movement outside the house, and Ash and Al stand up to shout at the people surrounding them. At this point, any

dialogue becomes inaudible, being replaced by a song until the video ends; meanwhile, the subtitles of the video, if activated, display the message: "ashleigh. you never finished making this one. it's okay. i will do it for you. we know everything about you. your friends. your family. where you eat. shit. fuck. sleep. we're in your review mirror. this turned out to be a nice little collab. the drip wears him. and like the last ones. you will too".

After that, the channel ceased to be AshVlogs – being renamed "i_know_where_she_is". There are other six public uploads to the channel, each increasingly more disturbing in content and hinting at the fate of Ash and the machinations of the twisted group that had stalked her and others. These videos carried even more hints, leading to livestreams, Google Drive folders with downloadable content, and other YouTube channels. The message left in the captions of "c2f.exe" also contains several new clues and paths for the players to follow. The threads to *AshVlogs* are too plentiful to summarize, and the story still appears to be in development, with the latest addition to the *AshVlogs* subReddit being posted on December 2023; the main community of players has gathered on a private Discord and seems to remain active.

Moreover, the main videos in *AshVlogs* also leave hints that connect AshVlogs to other YouTube channels that expand the storyworld; for example, the Australia-based RackaRacka[3] channel, which mentions the character Ashleigh in a series of videos. The link between the two channels is intensified in a vlog called "Someone wants my sister dead…". This upload starts with the pointed disclaimer: "the following video is not a skit". In it, the vlogger reports on several strange interactions he had experienced in those previous weeks, including a cryptic sequence of numbers left in his comment section that would spell the phrase "she is in the floor" when decoded.

The vlogger running the RackaRacka channel also mentions he was supposed to make a video with Ashleigh – "to collab" –, but she had stopped responding to his messages and had sent him a drawing as an apology. The next upload by RackaRacka is named "Face to face with a KILLER *police called* (Ash Vlogs)" and consists of an active investigation of Ash's channel. He claims Ashleigh has messaged him, asking to meet in a forest at night. The story of AshVlogs continues, as RackaRacka takes his friends to explore the location where the meeting with "Ash" was supposed to take place – livestreaming the whole process with a handheld camera. In a format extremely reminiscent of *The Blair Witch Project*, the vlogger finds an abandoned tent within the forest marked with the same symbols that branded the package Ashleigh had received. The description box to this upload reads: "Police have been contacted. They have all this info. If you know who this is – PLEASE contact me asap. This isn't a skit". Shortly after, the AshVlogs account began to leave ominous comments on RackaRacka's videos, moving the story forward and leaving further traces for players to investigate.

Having set the tone and dimension of the *AshVlogs* ARG, this study now turns to a more detailed analysis of the mechanisms employed by the game to establish its claims to truth.

Claim to truth

As indicated in previous sections, the execution of ARGs is only possible because of the participatory culture and media convergence. The concept outlined by Henry Jenkins describes convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences" (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 2). It refers to a cultural shift characterized by consumers' willingness to actively search for new information across dispersed media

content for entertainment. Meanwhile, Jenkins highlights three main trends which define participatory culture:

> 1. New tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content;
> 2. a range of subcultures promote Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media production, a discourse that shapes how consumers have deployed those technologies; and
> 3. economic trends favoring the horizontally integrated media conglomerates encourage the flow of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 135-136).

These tools not only expanded the possibilities of media consumption and participation, but also allowed for more varied forms of authorship, consequently broadening the understanding of who could be imbued with authority. The ability to produce independently, without larger commercial attachments, allowed for more democratic cultural expressions: anyone may record themselves, their voice, and their lives with great ease. By taking on the formal conventions of a "vlog" as a means of storytelling, *AshVlogs* explores the premise that media production is within anyone's reach. The audience is presented with a young woman who talks directly to the camera; she tells about her neighbors, her friends, her job, she calls herself Ash – and, although there are a few ways to verify a person's identity, the audience may not be inclined to doubt Ash's stories simply because so many people produce similar media every day. Arguably, any person with a social media account who shares a few aspects of their lives online has been in an equivalent position.

Thus, as Zanini (2019) explains, "filming has ceased to be a professional's prerogative" (Zanini, 2019, p.20). *AshVlogs* plays with the ready availability of resources for producing media; the early videos uploaded to the channel are of average image quality, using either one or two camera angles. These videos might have been recorded on a phone in a tripod, or

on a laptop's webcam; Ashley's surroundings are ordinary rooms in a small apartment, and she often records alone. The audio too is imperfect, exhibiting echoes from the environment around the vlogger – which is fixed once Ash reports she has bought a microphone. These elements indicate that the ARG in question is appropriating features of the "vlog" format and evinces Jenkins' observations about participatory culture; it is worth noting that many of these characteristics are akin to the codes and conventions that grant documentaries and mock documentaries, such as found-footage films, their aura of realism. Zanini (2019) identifies that the presence of the internet is an important element in reinforcing the sensation of reality in found footage films, and a similar effect can be observed in the selected ARG.

These observations indicate that *AshVlogs* in fact uses many conventions already explored in other forms of media that aim at blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction. I would argue that, besides the genre specific elements, the claims to truth in *AshVlogs* are constructed through what Chris Rojek (2016) calls "staged authenticity". If authenticity is to be defined, according to Hill's (2007) terms, as something original, true, or genuine, staged authenticity is an artificial environment that contributes to the dissolution of distance or emotional barriers in a social exchange. Rojek (2016) outlines this concept when discussing the para-social relationships; staged authenticity creates an accelerated sense of intimacy between media creators and spectators.

The notion of para-social relationships was first brought up by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl in 1956 in relation to the one-sided relationship between audience and performers. The critics' analysis of radio and television found that these media allowed the worlds of fact and fiction to meet in a continuous interplay, consequently creating a pervasive sense of closeness between the spectators and actors. This

relationship is, however, one-sided, and carefully crafted through technical and narrative devices. Although the members of the audience might feel like they know the person on-screen thoroughly, what they witness is a persona. The critics explain that,

> In addition to the management of relationships between the persona and performers, and between him and his audience, the technical devices of the media themselves are exploited to create illusions of intimacy. (...) All these devices are indulged in not only to lure the attention of the audience, and to create the easy impression that there is a kind of participation open to them in the program itself (...) (Horton; Wohl, 1956, p. 218).

Still, these feelings of intimacy and closeness are experienced in the same order as the network of actual social relations – further blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality (Horton; Wohl, 1956). Since the development of para-social relationships was first observed in media that invites passive engagement, such as television, it is possible to speculate that more interactive media would amplify this effect. In ARGs there is, in fact, a place for the audience to participate in the development of the narrative. Furthermore, *AshVlogs* mobilizes the format and conventions of social media, especially the technical devices that create the illusion of intimacy and staged authenticity, to further its claims to truthfulness. Ashleigh is relatable: she is charming and funny, she exposes the struggles of her daily routine. Rojek expounds that "the same channels of communication that supply us with data about the lives of the famous and the glamorous, provide information about ordinary people from whom we are separated by the distance of physical space" (Rojek, 2016, p. 38). By using the vlog conventions, *AshVlogs* invites the audience to trust Ashleigh, to develop a sense of closeness with her social media persona, thus granting a sense of authenticity to the story.

The audience's reaction can attest to the effectiveness of this strategy; although users who are familiar with the format were quick to spot the inconsistencies within the narrative and could easily expose the use of conventions, others seemed to express genuine concern for Ashleigh. In 2019, a user named Mrmcg55 posted to a Reddit forum dedicated to investigating AshVlogs, asking "Is this a 'game' or is this real? Someone actually got kidnapped etc?"; in 2021, user Roshanzee posted to the same forum, saying "the fandom wiki was pretty awesome... but i only want to know that the girl is alive or she is safe or not??". In May of 2022, the forum received yet another comment by user Firm-Try-862, who said "Is AshVlogs an ARG or is this real? I think its real because, its lots of odd videos. When RackaRacka make this videos on Youtube, about 2 years ago this videos seems the like for me real. What do you think?". These are just a few examples of the many people who seek confirmation that what they are witnessing is just an elaborated story, and not the morbid events in the life of a real person.

Final considerations

This work sought to explore a few aspects that construct the semblance of reality within Alternate Reality Games. By observing the conventions used in documentary films to convince the audience that what it sees on the screen is a glimpse of untouched reality, it can be argued that ARGs follow in the footsteps of mock documentaries, such as found footage films, to establish their claims to truthfulness. However, its interactive communal elements and mobilization of collective intelligence are unique to the genre, constructing pervasive experiences to those who partake in the game. Such experiences can be explained by the theory of Possible Worlds, for the mechanics of the game may have a transformative effect on the players' perspective of their surroundings. The ever-present affirmation of "this is not a game" is sustained within the storyworld of

ARGs, which make claims to truthfulness through conventional formal elements of its media, capitalizing on the interfaces of different platforms to engender an aura of realism. Essentially, ARGs portray fictional events which lead to real social interaction and create unique experiences.

When considering the particular case of *AshVlogs*, the game's claims to truthfulness are not only elaborated through conventions such as the use of specific camera movements and audio editing, but also by the staged authenticity provided by the vlog format. The use of social media evokes a level of trust in the narrative which the person in front of the camera delivers, for it engages the audience's empathy and creates a sense of closeness between creator and spectator. It is worth noting that the ARG in question calls for active participation of those who engage with the narratives, using technology that enables the players to appropriate and share media content. The social and communal aspect of ARGs is crucial for its storytelling to be effective, and it also seems to be a foundational part of the pervasiveness of these fictional stories into the physical and mental spaces of real people.

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Como citar este artigo de acordo com as normas da revista?
PEREIRA, Gabriela Pirotti. I Subscribed to a Missing Girl's YouTube Channel and You Won't Believe What I Found: A Study on Alternate Reality Games. *Texto Digital*, Florianópolis, v. 20, n. 1, p. 212-237, 2024.

Contribuição de autoria
Não se aplica.

Financiamento
Não se aplica.

Consentimento de uso de imagem
Não se aplica.

Aprovação de comitê de ética em pesquisa
Não se aplica.

Histórico
Recebido em: 22 fev. 2024
Aprovado em: 26 mar. 2024