Alternate Reality Games

An essay by Michel Lamoré for Have Fun and Play!

Introduction

While TV commercials might be a very common way of advertising products, it is not a very effective one. People who watch TV are able to change channels, mute the sound or stop paying attention. When people do decide to watch the commercial, one viewing is not enough, as they won't get the message the first time. According to Herbert E. Krugman, people will decide whether or not to buy the advertised product only after the third viewing. A much more effective way for people to learn about and becoming interested in your product is to offer them an active experience. One way of doing this is by making them play an ARG: an Alternate Reality Game.

What are ARGs?

Interactive narratives

ARGs are interactive narratives that use the real world as a platform to tell a story. They differ from computer games in the sense that the characters in the game are not controlled by artificial intelligence, but by the game's designers, known as the puppet masters, who tailor the responses of the in-game characters to the actions of the player. In this kind of game, the player has to collect clues in order to solve puzzles and plot-based challenges. When a puzzle is solved, the player will be rewarded with new info that helps to progress in the game. The experience of the game will be different for each player, depending on their actions and ability to solve the puzzles, but in the end all players will see the same solution. Oftentimes, several forms of media are used to invite people into the game and distribute clues amongst the players, but the Internet is generally the central binding medium.

Joining the game

There are various ways to get people to join an ARG. This first contact with the game is known as the rabbit hole. One example of a rabbit hole is secret or subliminal messages in publicly released content, e.g. the URL of a strange website in a trailer. Another example of a rabbit is leaking information, for example by "accidentally" sending out a private email to potential players of the ARG. As opposed to traditional advertising, joining an ARG is always optional, and doing so is an active choice by the player. This makes it an effective form of advertising, as you are sure participants want to know what you are going to tell them.

Credibilty

Actors

An important aspect of ARGs is the fact that the puppet masters want the players to think the story has actually happened. Participants must believe the story is real and should only discover they are playing a game after they are involved in it for some time. In order to fool the players, actors are often used, who play the role of one of the characters in real life. Next to that, the characters in the game will also get an online existence: they will get their own page on social networking sites to reinforce their believability.

The press

Another way to make the stories seem real is the usage of press. By having the story show up on a news website or in a newspaper it is more credible, because these sources are deemed more reliable than for example a website that just appears out of the blue. Moreover, when several sources are reporting a story it is more likely to be true than when just one source is doing so. As ARGs become more widespread, it gets more and more difficult to fool the press into thinking the story is true and reporting it. The challenge for the puppet masters is to have enough people who play along with the story to make it seem sound, and to avoid any references to the company who has created the ARG.

Collaboration

Players will usually not be able to solve the clues on their own, but have to work together in order to get the next assignment. One way of achieving collaboration is by selectively distributing clues, so not all players get every clue. Another way to achieve this is by geographical distribution of your clues, so people from different parts of the country must work together in order to get all clues. The advantage of making ARGs a collaborative experience is that there is much talk about the ARG, and users will give up less easily because they are doing it together. What's more, making ARGs collaborative ensures that the players get an active, fun experience that they will link to the product the ARG is meant to advertise in the end.

Examples of ARGs

Sinterklaas

Although it might not be strictly an ARG as it doesn't follow all the rules outlined above, Sinterklaas is probably the most well-known ARG to Dutch people. In this ARG, players are lead to believe there is an old man, called Sinterklaas, with dark-skinned assistants, knows as Zwarte Pieten. He comes to the Netherlands from Spain every year to celebrate his birthday. This man will reward the player with gifts accompanied by poems on his birthday, if a couple of conditions are met. Firstly, the players must behave nicely towards their parents. Secondly, players must sing songs for Sinterklaas inside their houses, preferably when sitting in front of the fireplace. When players don't behave nicely towards their parents, it is said that Sinterklaas will take them to Spain in a gunny sack, although this doesn't actually happen.When the player finds out he or she is in fact playing a game, the player is asked to keep quiet about it towards people who don't know Sinterklaas doesn't exist yet, and is asked to collaborate in making presents, writing poems, creating Secret Santa's (known as surprises in Dutch) and dressing up as Sinterklaas or a Zwarte Piet.

War of the Worlds

War of the Worlds was a radio drama directed and narrated by the filmmaker and actor Orson Welles in 1938. The story was based on H.G. Wells' novel of the same name. Orson Wells simulated news bulletins, suggesting there was an alien invasion by Martians in progress. Although listeners had been told in advance that the radio drama was based on a novel rather than depicting a current event, certain listeners believed the alien invasion to be real, leading to panic. It was calculated that of the six million people who heard the broadcast, 1.7 million believed it to be true, and 1.2 million were "genuinely frightened".

I Love Bees

I Love Bees was an ARG intended as a viral marketing campaign for the shooter video game Halo 2, exclusive to the Microsoft Xbox console. The rabbit hole for this ARG was a URL in the trailer for Halo 2: the URL www.ilovebees.com that appeared instead of www.xbox.com for half a second. People who decided to visit this website were greeted by what at first glance appeared to be a website of a beekeeper that had been hacked. People who stayed on the website for longer eventually discovered a countdown "to wide awake and physical".

When the countdown was completed, the website showed a list of GPS locations, times and answers to questions. On these GPS locations phone boxes were located. On the specified times these phones would ring, and the person on the other end of the line would ask questions that had to be answered as instructed on the website. When the task was completed correctly, pieces of dialogue and backstory for Halo 2 were released. Other phone calls allowed players to interact with the characters of the Halo universe. Those who played the game until the end were invited to play Halo 2 in a cinema before its release.

The marketing campaign was a huge success: over the course of three months, more than three million people visited ilovebees.com, with 500,000 people returning each time the website was updated, and the campaign won numerous awards for its innovation.

Sources

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