

International Journal of Cultural Studies

<http://ics.sagepub.com>

Alternate reality gaming and convergence culture: The case of Alias

Henrik Örnebring

International Journal of Cultural Studies 2007; 10; 445

DOI: 10.1177/1367877907083079

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://ics.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/10/4/445>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *International Journal of Cultural Studies* can be found at:

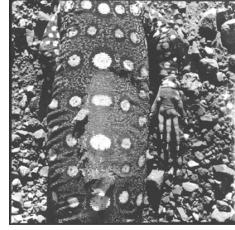
Email Alerts: <http://ics.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://ics.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://ics.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/10/4/445>



Alternate reality gaming and convergence culture

The case of *Alias*

● Henrik Örnebring

*Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism,
University of Oxford, England*

ABSTRACT ● Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) are a form of internet-based mystery game in which participants are immersed in a fictional world and engage in collective problem-solving. This article studies three ARGs connected to the TV series *Alias* (ABC, 2001–6), two of them launched by the network ABC as part of the marketing of the TV series, the third produced by fans. Previous research on ARGs has not sufficiently problematized the fact that many ARGs are marketing tools. While ARGs can be analysed as part of a wider context of convergence culture and fan culture, such an analysis must take into account the underlying commercial logic of popular culture production. Despite the differences found between industry-produced and fan-produced ARGs, they still share a framework of consumption that conforms to corporate goals of marketing and brand-building as well as fan audiences' goals of pleasurable interaction with fictional worlds. ●

KEYWORDS ● *Alias* ● Alternate Reality Games ● convergence culture
● fan culture ● fictional worlds

Introduction: what is an Alternate Reality Game?

Let us imagine you are a curious viewer of the first season (2001–2) of the TV show *Alias* (ABC, 2001–6). You decide to search the web for 'Rambaldi' and

‘Credit Dauphine’, two elements of the fictional world of *Alias*, to see if there are any real-life inspirations for these fictional creations. To your surprise, your search leads you to the websites www.followers-of-rambaldi.com and www.credit-dauphine.com (both pages are now inactive), both of which for all intents and purposes treat the fictional Italian renaissance inventor Milo Rambaldi and the fictional international banking organization Credit Dauphine as if they were real. The Followers of Rambaldi web page contains a brief biography of Rambaldi and a set of his sketches – many of them remarkably similar to the prop-sketches used in the TV series. The Credit Dauphine web page contains email addresses to members of Credit Dauphine staff – including some of the fictional characters of the TV show (sydney.bristow@credit-dauphine.com and arvin.sloane@credit-dauphine.com, for example).

If you study the Rambaldi sketches on the Followers of Rambaldi web page, you might discover a hidden message in binary code in one of the image files. If you feed this binary code to a chatbot (i.e. a computer program designed to mimic human conversation in an online chat setting) hidden on the Followers of Rambaldi web page, the chatbot will respond by sending you a copy of a confidential memo and a satellite map of Casablanca. These things will, in turn, provide more clues that will lead you to other web pages and more opportunities to interact with the fictional universe of *Alias*. Events and things mentioned in the episodes of the TV series itself will also provide clues. Bit by bit, these clues form a separate narrative set in the fictional world of *Alias*. You have entered an Alternate Reality Game (ARG).

The ARG phenomenon: a definition and brief description

McGonigal (2004: 9) defines an ARG as ‘An interactive drama played out in online and real spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which dozens, hundreds or thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or problem ... that would be absolutely *impossible* to solve alone’.

An ARG begins when players find or are directed to an entry point into the mystery (commonly a web page) and the first set of clues (this entry point is known as a *rabbit hole* or *trail head*). Players then alert other players through email or web forum messages and play commences. Play is collective and when someone finds the solution to a puzzle or the meaning of a clue this is generally posted online for all participants to see, so that everyone can progress through the narrative.

The ARG phenomenon is fairly recent. It is generally accepted that the first ARG was *The Beast*, produced in 2001¹ by Microsoft as part of the marketing campaign of the Steven Spielberg movie *A.I.* *The Beast* was set in the fictional universe of *A.I.* but did not make use of any characters or narrative events from the feature film. *The Beast* was soon followed by more ARGs, including the first *Alias* ARG, designed to coincide with and market the first season of the TV show.

In the few years since 2001, the ARG phenomenon has become more *common* (it has so far been used to market, among other things, computer games, cars, clothes and other TV series, and there are many ARGs that are 'grass-roots-produced' by fans and thus do not directly market a particular product), the players more *organized* (several online communities now cater to both ARG players and organizers), more *global* (after having been limited solely to US-based games, ARGs have since been launched in the UK, Germany and India, among other countries), and the industry more *professionalized* (key members of the original Microsoft team involved in the production of *The Beast* later formed their own company, 42 Entertainment, now one of the dominant players in a small but emerging ARG design/creation market).

This article analyses three ARGs based on the TV series *Alias*: two of them produced by ABC, the network that aired the show, and the third a fan-produced ARG called *Omnifam* (named after a fictional organization that features on the show, an international aid organization that also serves as the front for an intelligence network).

ARGs in context: convergence, culture, commerce

The ARG phenomenon has gradually been attracting academic interest since the appearance of *The Beast* in 2001. The first studies and articles seem to have appeared in 2003, Taylor and Kolko (2003) and McGonigal (2003a, 2003b) being the key examples. McGonigal has since gone on to publish widely on ARGs, and has also been involved in producing, organizing and writing for ARGs and many other participatory/pervasive game forms both as an employee of 42 Entertainment (she was the lead community designer for *I Love Bees*, a 2004 ARG produced to market the Xbox game *Halo 2*, see IGDA ARG SIG 2006: 61) and as an independent. A selection of further writings include McGonigal (2003b), McGonigal (2005), McGonigal (2007) and a PhD thesis, McGonigal (2006), arguably the first sustained academic treatment of the wider phenomenon of pervasive or ubiquitous gaming (of which ARGs can be said to be a part). McGonigal analyses ARGs using a framework based on contemporary theories of performance and play, as well as work on collective intelligence and participatory culture (see McGonigal, 2006 and 2007 in particular). Other research on ARGs often does not deal exclusively with ARGs but uses ARGs as an example of trends like media convergence, cross-media entertainment, trans-media storytelling etc. Examples include Dena (2005), Jones (2005), Losowsky (2005), Ruppel (2005), Mittell (2006) and Jenkins (2006a).

It is clear that ARGs are part of a wider context of media convergence (in particular textual convergence) – Jenkins' collective term for these trends is *convergence culture* (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b). The theoretical starting point of this article is a critique of this concept. Jenkins argues against viewing con-

vergence as a primarily technological process and instead points to the centrality of the circulation of media content and texts across different media platforms. He also highlights the importance of the active participation of the consumer and the interplay between top-down processes of convergence (i.e. media conglomerates developing texts as 'properties' across media platforms) and bottom-up processes of convergence (i.e. audiences interacting with and using media texts in unpredictable ways, sometimes contrary to producers' intentions) (Jenkins, 2006a: 3f, 17ff, see also Jenkins, 2006b: 155).

One of Jenkins' examples of this kind of convergence culture is the trans-media, multi-platform storytelling surrounding *The Matrix* film series (1999–2003), with an entire world being built through not only three feature films but also a series of animated short films, computer games, comics and other material.² Jenkins notes that many references in the feature films were incomprehensible unless audience members had spent time consuming other *Matrix*-related texts (games, comics, etc.), and that watching the films also yielded clues relevant to the *Matrix* narratives presented in other media (Jenkins, 2006a: 102ff). Jenkins goes on to describe how this represents something new in the area of popular culture narratives:

The old Hollywood system depended on redundancy to ensure viewers could follow the plot at all times, even if they were distracted or went out to the lobby for a popcorn refill during a critical scene. The new Hollywood demands that we keep our eyes on the road at all times, and that we do research before we arrive at the theater. (Jenkins, 2006a: 103–4).

Jenkins argues that in the case of *The Matrix* universe, there is no one central text, or *ur-text* if you will: the project was conceived as a trans-media phenomenon, and all texts taken together create the 'master narrative', i.e. the feature films did not necessarily assume narrative centrality (in fact, one of Jenkins' main points is that narrative is decentralized in a convergent media environment; see Jenkins, 2006a: 113f).

I would argue that convergence culture does not work to dissolve the boundaries between texts and create trans-media narratives as much as it creates new opportunities to market a specific text or set of texts (such as a feature film, a computer game or a TV series) through other texts – i.e. there is still a 'hierarchy of meaning' among texts, where there is a clearly identifiable *ur-text* (in this case, the *Alias* TV series) that is marketed through other texts (books, comics and ARGs). The books, comics and ARGs might well refer to characters and events from the fictional universe of the TV series, but flows in the opposite direction (i.e. the TV series taking up narrative threads or using characters from other media texts based on the same fictional universe) are much rarer.

Jenkins' claims that the 'power' over texts in this new culture ultimately rests with audiences (or 'consumers', the term Jenkins prefers to use throughout the book) stand out as rather celebratory. This tendency towards the celebratory is also visible in much of the previous research on ARGs. Many

researchers implicitly or explicitly view ARGs as an exciting new medium, a genre that blurs the boundaries between producer and consumer and that fosters a more participatory popular culture. This enthusiasm is visible in Taylor and Kolko, for example:

By pushing boundaries of the genre, the game [*Majestic*, the pay-to-play ARG launched by Electronic Arts studied by Taylor and Kolko] in turn pushed the boundaries of players, and in that it was a startlingly successful cultural text. It brought to the forefront persistent questions about the nature of knowledge, community and identity in the digital age. (Taylor and Kolko, 2003: 519)

Jenkins also presents a very positive view of the potential effects of ARGs (without presenting much empirical evidence to support his claims):

ARGs teach participants how to navigate complex information environments and how to pool their knowledge and work together in teams to solve problems. [...] A well-designed ARG reshapes the way participants think about their real and virtual environments. (Jenkins, 2006a: 126–7)

McGonigal, who arguably presents the most in-depth and sophisticated analysis of the phenomenon, also has an overall positive perspective on the phenomenon (being quite open about it as well):

A good immersive game [McGonigal's preferred term for ARGs] will show you game patterns in non-game places; these patterns reveal opportunities for interaction and intervention. ... In conclusion, I choose not to see pervasive players' performed belief as a kind of paranoia or dangerous credulity, but rather as a conscious decision to prolong the pleasures of the play experience and to apply the skills acquired in gaming to real life. (McGonigal, 2003b: 22)

And furthermore:

Search and analysis games [again, another term for ARGs and similar games] are poised to become our best tool for helping as many and diverse a population as possible to develop an interest and gain direct experience participating in our ever-more collective network culture. (McGonigal, 2007: 38)

However, there is relatively little academic concern with how ARGs function as *marketing tools*, and critical acknowledgement of the fact that most high-profile ARGs are produced for marketing purposes is limited at best. Maintaining the integrity of the fictional universe in which the ARG is set is normally viewed as very important (indeed, one of the informal taglines of the ARG subculture is *This is not a game*, highlighting the requirement of suspension of disbelief while playing) and ARGs used for marketing purposes are not commonly presented *as marketing*. For example, the ARG *Last Call Poker* was believed by many to be part of the marketing for an online gambling site, but turned out instead to be part of the marketing of *Gun*, a Wild West-themed computer game (Thompson, 2005).

Industry-produced ARGs are part of a larger sub-type of marketing known as *viral marketing* or *buzz marketing*, where encouraging consumer purchase is viewed as secondary to generating talk about and recognition of the advertised brand (see Kirby and Marsden, 2005 for an overview of this type of marketing). Generating buzz and attention for the 'original' media text is still very much the goal of industry-produced ARGs. Their primary purpose is not to create new opportunities for interaction, networking and audience participation in mediated narratives, but simply to create an enjoyable experience that will build the franchise brand in the minds of media audiences.

To be sure, media convergence is opening up new possibilities for interactivity, but it is difficult to ignore the fact that much of the interactivity on offer is produced by the 'usual suspects' of transnational media conglomerates, and that audiences are addressed primarily as consumers of cultural artefacts. The only scholar to discuss the commercial character of the convergence/participatory culture of which ARGs are a part is Jenkins, but he does not view it as at all problematic and he touches upon it only briefly in his conclusions:

Right now, we are learning how to apply these new participatory skills through our relation to commercial entertainment – or, more precisely, right now some groups of early adopters are testing the waters and mapping out directions where many of us are apt to follow. These skills are being applied to popular culture first for two reasons: on the one hand, because the stakes are so low; and on the other, because playing with popular culture is a lot more fun than playing with more serious matters. (Jenkins, 2006a: 246)

Again, the commercial nature of convergent phenomena like ARGs is generally not viewed as problematic. While I do not deny the boundary-blurring characteristics of ARGs, as well as the opportunities for interactivity on many different levels present in all ARGs, I do argue that researchers need to pay more attention to how ARGs fit into the economy of popular culture. Playing and participating in an ARG is evidently a pleasurable activity, and might well have the effect of encouraging participatory culture – but simultaneously ARGs also fit well with cultural industry goals and strategies of brand building and creating a loyal consumer base. Indeed, the ARG producer 42 Entertainment presents this as one of its central insights on its own web page: 'People thoughtfully drawn in – by story, by community, and by buzz – become a powerful and loyal audience that will drive others to the experience' (42 Entertainment, 2007)

The *Alias* ARGs, fan culture and 'quality TV'

The three ARGs based on the TV series *Alias* are an illustrative example of how both industry- and fan-produced secondary texts function within a shared

framework for generating textual meaning. Fiske describes the various forms of fan-cultural production (fan fiction writing, fan video creation, etc.) as 'filling in the syntagmatic gaps in the original narrative' (Fiske, 1992: 39), i.e. producing texts that explore issues, themes, characters or elements of the back-story that are not explored in the original text. Following this, one can argue that fans perform a kind of cultural labour, producing texts that develop elements not covered by the original text that more often than not conform to producers' basic intentions (indeed, fandom's frequent obsession with 'canonical' information seems to work as a guarantee that any fannish exploration into uncharted textual territory will be congruent with the basic facts and themes of the fictional universe in question; see also Fiske, 1992: 36).

Gwenllian Jones has also commented on this shared framework of meaning and points out that fan culture in itself exists in between commercial and non-commercial culture:

Fandom is a profoundly liminal occupation, one that takes place neither within nor outside commercial culture, creative but also derivative, a celebration of consumerism as well as a maverick mode of consumption. (Gwenllian Jones, 2003: 164)

And further:

[Instead] fandom needs to be understood as a liminal, fetishistic and highly engaged consumer culture that is both born of and fully implicated in the cultural processes it supposedly 'resists'. (Gwenllian Jones, 2003: 165)

As an example, Gwenllian Jones and others (e.g. Jancovich and Lyons, 2003a; Nelson, 1997; Thompson, 1996) point to how many TV series from the 1990s onwards have been created, marketed and maintained using modes of address and textual strategies designed to invite fannish readings and to create the conditions for the growth of a fan culture around the series (Gwenllian Jones, 2003: 166; see also Harris and Alexander, 1998; Hills, 2002; and in particular Brooker, 2001 for a treatment of the almost-seamless blending of commercial and non-commercial narrative extensions).

The most important of these strategies is the deliberate creation of syntagmatic gaps and areas for narrative exploration outside the 'main' texts, a phenomenon termed *hyperdiegesis* by Hills, '... the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text ...' (Hills, 2002: 137). I have previously argued that the TV series *Alias* is very much part of this new kind of 'cult' or 'quality' television (Örnebring, 2007 forthcoming). And 'quality television' can in turn be interpreted as a deliberate strategy on the part of the television industry to attract a particular audience segment (i.e. well-educated, high-income young urbanites; see Jancovich and Lyons, 2003b: 3) – a segment that can be invited to a loyal, fetishistic mode of reception.

Indeed, *Alias* is just one of several TV series that have or have had an ARG connected to them. Other examples include *Push*, *Nevada* (ABC, 2002), *ReGenesis* (The Movie Network, 2004–), *Lost* (ABC, 2004–) as well as the made-for-TV movie *Fallen* (ABC, 2007 forthcoming).

The *Alias* ARGs offer an interesting opportunity for comparison, as the two first *Alias* ARGs were industry-produced and an example of media producers and marketers engaging in narrative extension in a convergent media environment, whereas the *Omnifam* ARG was wholly grassroots-produced and represents a form of fannish textual production that more closely resembles those described by Fiske (1992), Jenkins (1992, 2006a, 2006b) and others. The *Alias* ARGs thus provide examples of both ‘corporate convergence’ and ‘grassroots convergence’ as described by Jenkins (2006b: 155ff). But on the other hand, most narrative extensions (be they industry- or fan-produced) function in a shared framework where producers use specific modes of address and textual strategies to invite particular modes of reading (based on syntagmatic gaps and hyperdiegesis) and particular groups of readers to loyal participation in a trans-media ‘world’ (or ‘brand’). Thus, the fan-produced and industry-produced ARGs will possibly perform the same cultural function: building the narrative space of an existing media franchise/brand.

The purpose of this study is to offer a more critical assessment of the notion of ‘convergence culture’ through an analysis of the three ARGs based on the TV series *Alias*. The questions asked in the case studies are these: to what extent are the industry-produced and fan-produced *Alias* ARGs similar, and to what extent are they different? Can we, following Jenkins, interpret these ARGs as a sign of the ‘collapse’ of the producer/consumer distinction and thereby the collapse of existing industry–audience power relations?

Some notes on method

There are several important methodological issues at stake in studying ARGs. The first is archival: ARGs exist for the most part on the world wide web, a very ephemeral medium. The first *Alias* ARG ran concurrent with the first season from *Alias*, from autumn 2001 to spring 2002. All original web pages associated with the game are now long gone. I have had to rely on various archive sites to reconstruct the ARG, most notably the walkthrough and ARG summary hosted at Unfiction (Unfiction, 2003a). The second *Alias* ARG ran concurrent with the first half of the second season of the show (autumn 2002) and the original web pages are also gone (for the most part). The most complete summaries of that ARG are hosted at Unfiction and at Deaddrop.us (Deaddrop, 2002a; Unfiction, 2003b). The *Omnifam* ARG is more recent. It ran from the early summer to the winter of 2005. There is also a wealth of information at the archived *Omnifam* forum at the Unfiction Forums (Unfiction, 2006). In the case of the *Omnifam* ARG, I have also been able to contact two members of the PM (Puppet Master) team. I conducted a phone

interview with one of them (the lead designer) and the other answered my questions via email. These interviews gave me some background information on how the ARG was constructed and run. Furthermore, the *Omnifam* PM team have archived the forum they used for internal discussion and planning before the ARG, and this forum thus provides insights into the ARG construction (Deaddrop, 2005).

The researcher thus has to try to reconstruct the ARGs studied using online resources and archives that may be incomplete. Overall, if the archive sites are cross-referenced with the contents of designated forums for players of the game and web groups, such as the *Alias* Web Puzzle Yahoo! group (aliaswebpuzzle, 2006), the listed sites seem to give at least a reasonable picture of the nature and character of the ARG in question. It is possible that the finer points of the narrative that unfolded online will elude the researcher, but these archive sites in many cases represent the only way to study ARGs retroactively.

It should also be pointed out that the nature of the ARG genre itself requires a high level of attention and involvement, especially in solving the puzzles, in turn creating a need for detailed archiving of websites and other clues (audio files, .jpg images, etc.) as a basis for playing the game. Many of the sites mentioned above provide very detailed summaries of the various stages of the games, including copies of emails and files sent by the PMs, and screenshots of web pages that have since disappeared.

The *Alias* ARGs: brief descriptions

The first *Alias* ARG (at the time it was running it was referred to as a 'web puzzle', because often as it was referred to as an ARG) began in October 2001 and ended in March 2002. It ran concurrent with the first season of the TV show and will be referred to as the *Season 1* *Alias* ARG. The second *Alias* ARG ran mainly from August 2002 to November 2002, with some brief game extensions running until March 2003, and will for obvious reasons be referred to as the *Season 2* *Alias* ARG. In terms of scope and length, the first *Alias* ARG was more extensive than the second, and so this analysis deals mostly with the first season *Alias* ARG. Some of the writers on the TV show were involved in scripting and producing both the first and the second season *Alias* ARGs (Deaddrop, 2002b).

The fan-produced *Alias* ARG became known as the *Omnifam* ARG and ran from May to December 2005, when it ended without having come to a full resolution of the narrative. The PM team had seven members, with an additional one or two persons being involved in the preparation for the ARG but who later dropped out. One of the PM team was the lead designer and the one who took the initiative to produce the *Omnifam* ARG. The lead designer and some other members of the PM team had earlier worked together on the ARG *SDX*, a smaller and more limited ARG also set in the *Alias* fictional universe that ran from June to September 2002. Two of the

members of the PM team describe themselves as dedicated *Alias* fans, whereas two other members of the team had not watched *Alias* at all before they got involved with the *Omnifam* ARG.

The three *Alias* ARGs: comparison and analysis

For the purposes of this comparison, I will refer to the Season 1 and Season 2 *Alias* ARGs as *industry-produced* and the *Omnifam* ARG as *fan-produced*. The differences between the ARGs are mainly highlighted using this industry-produced/fan-produced axis. However, throughout the analysis I will also discuss to what extent these differences are subordinate to underlying *similarities* based on the notion that fan production is a kind of ‘work’ that fits within the same framework of marketing-through-hyperdiegesis and transmedia-narratives-as-synergistic-world-building, as do industry-produced narrative extensions.

I have two main points of comparison. First, I will look at how all three ARGs relate to the *fictional universe* of *Alias*, based on my previous discussions of narrative extensions, quality TV, fandom and hyperdiegesis. Secondly, I will compare the *narrative format* presented by the different *Alias* ARGs, i.e. how the stories are told and how the narratives of the ARGs are linked to the overall narrative presented in the *ur-text* (the TV series).

Other ARGs, notably *The Beast*, will be briefly used in the analysis for comparative purposes as well. Statements about the comparative narrative complexity and level of interactivity in the different *Alias* ARGs will be somewhat meaningless if they are compared only with each other. Some elements take on meaning only in relation to the genre of ARGs as a whole.

Fictional universe, backstory and intellectual property issues

On a basic, descriptive level, one of the obvious differences between the industry-produced ARGs and the fan-produced ARGs lies in their respective relationship to the fictional universe of *Alias*.

The Beast was fairly loosely tied to the fictional universe of the movie *A.I.* in that *The Beast* hardly made any use of proprietary characters or elements from the movie. In contrast, the Season 1 and Season 2 *Alias* ARGs were very closely related to the fictional universe of the TV series. The trail heads for the Season 1 *Alias* ARG were the web pages mentioned in the introduction of this article, <http://www.followers-of-rambaldi.com> and <http://www.credit-dauphine.com>. The Season 2 *Alias* ARG broke the immersive experience by having the trail head as part of the official ABC site for the show (ABC, 2002; site still active at time of writing), i.e. the trail head was presented in a context that clearly told audiences that it was fictional. The trail head consisted of participants signing up as ‘Internet operatives’ of the CIA, later being contacted by in-game characters from the TV show.

Both ARG trail heads referred to elements of the fictional universe that recurred or were at least mentioned in nearly every single episode of the first and/or second season of the show (Milo Rambaldi, Credit Dauphine, key characters). The ties to the original fictional universe are decidedly ‘one-way’, though: the Season 1 and Season 2 *Alias* ARGs did not provide any insights into the backstory that could not also be gleaned from watching the show, and neither did they provide much of an opportunity for fans and participants to interact with the full fictional universe of *Alias*, providing more backstory and filling in syntagmatic gaps. The rich narrative interplay between texts in different media described by Jenkins in relation to the *Matrix* universe was not present here (Jenkins, 2006a: 93ff).

In contrast, the extension of the backstory was one of the main features of the *Omnifam* ARG. The main element of the fictional universe of the TV show that was used in the *Omnifam* ARG was the so-called ‘Rambaldi mythology’. This term refers to the part of the *Alias* backstory that deals with the works of fictional inventor Rambaldi: his artefacts, his prophecies and his writings. His inventions frequently have supernatural characteristics, among them the promise of eternal life to those that can correctly understand and interpret his works. The Rambaldi mythology also provides an ideal basis for an ARG due to the prevalence of puzzles, riddles and clues within the mythology. When Rambaldi and his artefacts appear on the TV show they are always accompanied by puzzles and clues that the characters have to solve. The puzzles and riddles in the *Omnifam* ARG were very much in line with the fictional universe as presented in the TV show (Rambaldi as an eerily visionary inventor, the notion of genetic information being passed down through the ages, the use of Rambaldi artefacts as puzzles, clues and narrative devices etc.). The ‘Rambaldi mythology’ is precisely the kind of textual element that provides numerous syntagmatic gaps for fan viewers to fill in.

This focus on backstory in the *Omnifam* ARG was to some extent a necessity rather than a creative decision, as characters and plotlines from the TV show were, and still are, protected by intellectual property law. However, my interviews with the PMs as well as the archived PM discussions and chat transcripts show that while the risk of transgressing ABC copyrights was a concern during the preparation phase of the *Omnifam* ARG, the PM team also wanted to use the Rambaldi mythology as a basis for the ARG at quite an early stage, because this part of the backstory was one of the things that had attracted members of the PM team to the show in the first place (personal interview with lead PM; also see Deaddrop, 2005).

Using Jenkins’ terminology, the strategies used by ABC in producing the Season 1 and Season 2 *Alias* ARGs seem more ‘old Hollywood’ than new, i.e. using a licensing logic where texts related to or based on the original text/fictional universe are largely redundant and offer no new information about characters or plot developments (Jenkins, 2006a: 105). The *Alias* ARGs are clearly ‘add-ons’ to the fictional universe presented in the TV series, subordinate to the main text.

Narrative format and structures in the industry-produced *Alias* ARGs

The narrative of the Season 1 *Alias* ARG followed the narrative of Season 1 of the TV series: starting from episode four of the first season, events in the TV series provided direct clues for the ARG. A dedicated participant of the ARG had to watch the TV series in order to get the clues necessary to solve the puzzles and proceed through the game. Dedicated participants had to at least keep close track of the events presented in the TV series, if not follow the series directly. For example, in the fifth episode of the first season two of the characters were forced to memorize a set of binary code. If that binary code was entered online into a chatbot reachable via one of the game sites, the bot responded by giving out a URL that in turn provided a link to another game site (where players could log into for a limited time using the login/password Sydney/Bristow – the name of the lead character on the show), that in turn gave access to a secret message sent by character Arvin Sloane (another major character on the show).

The overall narrative of the Season 1 *Alias* ARG changed mid-season. The clues and puzzles of the ARG intensified and revealed a fictional plot by the TV series ‘bad guys’ that was being opposed by an online organization based on the conspiracy-theory web page ‘Rulerfrog’ (<http://geocities.com/rulerfrog>, now inactive). For the rest of the game, the ARG followed a loosely structured narrative in which players fought alongside the forces of good (as presented in the TV series) in order to stop the latest plan by antagonist TV show character Arvin Sloane. The game and the narrative ended when players, by solving the last puzzle and set of clues, were led to a message from Arvin Sloane ordering his underlings to abort the current mission, as it had been compromised by the activities of the ARG participants.

The Season 2 *Alias* ARG was not directly linked to the Season 2 TV show narrative, and the TV shows did not provide clues for the ARG. This was likely due to the fact that the Season 2 *Alias* ARG was much less developed than the Season 1 *Alias* ARG, as the Season 2 *Alias* ARG was largely run on a ‘hobby’ basis by two writers of the show and had no separate budget (Deaddrop, 2002b). The Season 2 *Alias* ARG had an episodic structure with six ‘missions’ that were connected to each other through a (very) loosely structured overarching narrative dealing with the hunt for a medieval encryption method known as the Maimonides Enigma. In contrast to *The Beast*, the first and second season *Alias* ARGs offered no opportunity for participants to change the outcome of the game.

The Season 1 *Alias* ARGs closely followed the events of the TV show and used the TV show to dispense clues. The ARG was clearly part of the marketing campaign of the show and one of its key objectives was to get people to watch the show. This might seem self-evident, but note that *The Beast* ARG did not use the film *A.I.* to dispense clues to the ARG, nor did it use characters, events or places from the film in the ARG narrative. In fact,

as I have mentioned earlier, most commercially-produced ARGs rarely even mention the actual product they are marketing until the very end. Thus, a commercial ARG does not necessarily have strong narrative links to the text or franchise it is marketing. But part of the reason for the strong link between ARG narrative and TV series narrative in the Season 1 *Alias* ARG could be simply one of history: when the Season 1 *Alias* ARG was created the ARG genre had not yet found its shape, and it is thus no surprise that ABC approached it with ‘old Hollywood’ logic.

However, there might be less of a difference between ‘old’ and ‘new’ Hollywood production and marketing logics than Jenkins suggests. The object of the media industries is not in the first instance to get audiences to interact and participate, but simply to get them to consume the texts on offer. Creating possibilities for participation is just a good strategy to ensure audience engagement with a particular fictional universe and continued consumption of texts related to that fictional universe. But providing more ancillary texts that offer audiences a slightly different take on the fictional universe, even if they are largely redundant (as was the case with the Season 1 and Season 2 *Alias* ARGs), might be a strategy that is just as workable: an elaborate game-universe like that presented in *The Beast* was not deemed necessary in the case of *Alias*.

Narrative format and structures in the fan-produced *Alias* ARG

The *Omnifam* ARG had an intricate plot that unfolded through an episodic structure. The first episode was designed to familiarize participants with the narrative premise and also to make it possible for participants to enter the game after it had started by ‘re-playing’ the first episode and then ‘catching up’ through the following episodes. The *Omnifam* ARG consciously tried to emulate the episodic structure of serial TV narratives, perhaps a part of the trend identified by Hills as TV fandom being ‘... increasingly enmeshed within the rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting ...’ (Hills, 2002: 178). Many ARGs created since have an episodic structure of some kind, and some include subplots in addition to the main plotline.

The episodes were presented as different but related missions that the ARG participants were drawn into. In this, it was similar to the Season 2 *Alias* ARG, but the narrative aspects were more marked and the game clearly experienced as an unfolding narrative by its participants (as opposed to the second season ARG). The PMs had originally planned to have the ARG narrative build to a climactic ending through six episodes, but in the end only three episodes were played out before the game ended. The three episodes played out over a period of six months.

The overall narrative of the *Omnifam* ARG began with participants signing up as volunteers at the *Omnifam* website. This led them to a further series of tests and puzzles, and players were then given a mission to find and retrieve a missing data card. When all puzzles were solved some participants

were sent an actual datacard in the mail and the next mission followed. Gradually, the plot of the ARG was revealed: a research lab and CIA front called Methusalabs are using genetic information encoded by Rambaldi (and copied on to the datacard retrieved by the players) as a basis for their experimentation on a child, all in order to develop an immortality drug. Originally, several possible endings for the ARG narrative were planned by the PM team, but instead the ARG came to an end after episode three, in which the players received original Rambaldi notes from an in-game character and also learned that TV series character Arvin Sloane was somehow involved with Methusalabs (even though Sloane did not appear in the *Omnifam* ARG, for reasons discussed in preceding sections). There were no direct narrative linkages between the *Omnifam* ARG and specific episodes of the TV series.

However, while the *Omnifam* ARG engaged mostly with the backstory of the *Alias* universe in its narratives (thus being more similar to the kinds of trans-media, co-created narratives described by Jenkins), its narratives did not *transgress* the framework provided by the fictional universe in any important way: the storyline about a CIA-sponsored research lab working on an immortality drug would not have been out of place in the TV series (indeed, later *Alias* episodes touched on similar themes). The *Omnifam* ARG in fact presented a story that was very faithful to the fictional universe as presented in the TV series. As in many instances of fan culture, there are self-imposed limits to exploring the syntagmatic gaps and hyperdiegesis of the original fictional universe: some elements are 'suitable' for further exploration and others are not (cf. the negative reaction from some fans to other fans' writing same-sex erotica fan fiction, as noted in Jenkins, 1992).

Conclusion: *Alias* ARGs as convergence culture

While Jenkins' view of the purported 'collapse' of the producer/consumer distinction is that it represents a shift in power away from traditional media producers towards active, participatory media audiences (and essentially celebrates ARGs and other narrative extensions in the convergent media landscape as signs of that new empowerment), I would argue that the power to set the limits of narrative still rests very much within the cultural industries.

When Jenkins contrasts corporate convergence and grassroots convergence, it is based on what he sees as a fundamental conflict between corporate culture and folk culture (Jenkins, 2006a: 135ff). In a convergence culture, fan audiences increasingly feel that they have (or ought to have) some measure of *ownership* of a text, and that they should be allowed to create secondary texts that further explore their favourite fictional universes. This sense of ownership of media texts among fans has been identified by, among others, Fiske (1992) and Baym (1999).

Despite the original characteristics of the ARG genre itself, the commercial *Alias* ARGs represent a very traditional form of narrative extension:

delivering content based on an original media property (viewed as a fictional world for marketing purposes) across a different media platform, with the intention to stimulate consumption of the original text as well as to be consumed on its own. The narrative is tightly controlled and the opportunities for interaction limited. Even though many industry-produced ARGs since have narratives that are more open-ended and offer more opportunities for interaction, this is far from always the case when it comes to ARGs based on existing media properties (which are often more circumscribed and redundant than Jenkins would care to admit; see for example Mittell's comments on the TV series *Lost* and its ARG, *The Lost Experience*; Mittell, 2006).

Similarly, the fan-produced *Omnifam* ARG is clearly related to existing, established forms of fan textual production, filling in syntagmatic gaps and focusing on exploring the backstory of the original text. Thus, despite their differences, commercial and non-commercial ARGs based on existing media properties still follow a similar logic of fan consumption. The potential tension between fan desires and corporate control can easily be resolved through a kind of self-censorship (as when the *Omnifam* PMs decide to not use any proprietary characters and locations for the ARG). And it is clearly the case that the narrative extension of the Rambaldi mythology in the *Omnifam* ARG is based on a sense that this is 'explorable' territory and that fans have a right to expand their favourite fictional universe. Both the industry-produced ARGs and the fan-produced ARG in this case perform the same cultural function: extending the narrative of an existing media property in ways that conform to corporate goals of marketing and brand-building as well as fan audiences' goals of pleasurable consumption. It seems likely that the popular culture industry will continue to be successful in its symbiosis with fan culture, and that the shared framework of appropriate modes of fan consumption and engagement with texts will mitigate against *too* creative treatments of existing fictional universes.

Notes

1. ARGs have roots older than that, for example in the 1994 Pink Floyd album/cross-media project *Publius Enigma*, text-adventure computer games of the 1980s and even the urban treasure hunts arranged by some turn-of-the-century newspapers. While the issue of the history and precursors of the genre is an interesting one, there is not space to go into it within the scope of this paper. Losowsky (2005) lists some generic precursors in his paper, as does Alexander (2005) on his blog.
2. Interestingly, Jenkins never mentions that *The Matrix* universe also generated a fan-produced ARG named *Metacortechs* (also known as *Project Mu*), taking its name from the corporation for which Keanu Reeves' character Neo works in the first *Matrix* movie (see SpaceBass, 2003).

References

- 42 Entertainment (2007) 'How We See Things', available at <http://www.42entertainment.com/see.html> (accessed 19 March 2007).
- ABC (2002) 'Alias Online Adventure', available at <http://abc.go.com/prime-time/alias/adv.html> (accessed 19 March 2007).
- aliaswebpuzzle (2006) 'Alias web puzzle Yahoo group', available at <http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/aliaswebpuzzle/> (accessed 19 August 2006).
- Alexander, Bryan (2005) 'Antecedents to Alternate Reality Games', in *Infocult 5* October, available at http://infocult.typepad.com/infocult/2005/10/antecedents_to_.html (accessed 21 August 2006).
- Baym, Nancy (1999) *Tune in, Log on: Soaps, Fandom and Online Community*. London: Sage.
- Brooker, Will (2001) 'Living on *Dawson's Creek*: Teen Viewers, Cultural Convergence and Television Overflow', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4(4): 456–72.
- Deaddrop (2002a) 'Forum Index > Alias Season 2: The Trail', available at <http://www.deaddrop.us/modules.php?name=Forums&file=viewforum&f=16> (accessed 19 August 2006).
- Deaddrop (2002b) 'Chat Transcript with Alias Technical Consultant Rick Orci', available at <http://www.deaddrop.us/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=49> (accessed 19 August 2006).
- Deaddrop (2005) 'Forum Index > Omnifam', available at <http://www.deaddrop.us/modules.php?name=Forums&file=viewforum&f=26> (accessed 19 August 2006).
- Dena, Christy (2005) 'Texts, Worlds, Realms and Channels: Towards a Taxonomy of Polymorphic Works', presentation at *SCAtharsis Monthly Seminar Series*, University of Melbourne, 17 August.
- Fiske, John (1992) 'The Cultural Economy of Fandom', in Lisa A. Lewis (ed.) *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, pp. 30–49. London: Routledge.
- Gwenllian Jones, Sara (2003) 'Web Wars: Resistance, Online Fandom and Studio Censorship', in Mark Jancovich and James Lyons (eds) *Quality Popular Television*, pp. 163–177. London: BFI.
- Harris, Cheryl and Alison Alexander, eds (1998) *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*. Cresskill: Hampton Press.
- Hills, Matt (2002) *Fan Cultures*. London: Routledge.
- IGDA ARG SIG (2006) '2006 Alternate Reality Games Whitepaper', posted 27 November 2006 at <http://igda.org/arg/resources/IGDA-AlternateRealityGames-Whitepaper-2006.pdf>, International Game Developers Association home page (accessed 16 March 2007).
- Jancovich, Mark and James Lyons, eds (2003a) *Quality Popular Television*. London: BFI.
- Jancovich, Mark and James Lyons (2003b) 'Introduction', in Mark Jancovich and James Lyons (eds) *Quality Popular Television*, pp. 1–8. London: BFI.

- Jenkins, Henry (1992) *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Jenkins, Henry (2006a) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jenkins, Henry (2006b) *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jones, Steven E. (2005) 'This Medium will Metastazise: Video Games and Textual Studies', paper presented at *MLA Annual Conference*, Washington DC, 29 December.
- Kirby, Justin and Paul Marsden, eds (2005) *Connected Marketing: The Viral Buzz and Word of Mouth Revolution*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Losowsky, Andrew (2005) 'Alternate Reality Games and a Future of Narrative', paper presented at *Science Fiction(s): A Study Day on Science Fiction Film, Television, Literature and New Media*, University of Nottingham, 19 August.
- McGonigal, Jane (2003a) "'This is Not a Game": Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play', in A. Miles (ed.) *Melbourne DAC 2003 Streamingworlds Conference Proceedings*, pp. 116–25. Melbourne: RMIT University.
- McGonigal, Jane (2003b) 'A Real Little Game: Performance of Belief in Pervasive Play', paper presented at Collective Play colloquium at UC Berkeley, 3 March 2003, available at <http://www.avantgame.com/MCGONIGAL%20A%20Real%20Little%20Game%20DiGRA%202003.pdf> (accessed 16 March 2007).
- McGonigal, Jane (2004) 'Alternate Reality Gaming: "Life Imitates ARG"', PowerPoint presentation to MacArthur Foundation Board of Directors, November 2004, available at <http://www.avantgame.com/McGonigal%20ARG%20MacArthur%20Foundation%20NOV%202004.pdf> (accessed 14 March 2007).
- McGonigal, Jane (2005) 'SuperGaming: Ubiquitous Play and Performance for Massively Scaled Community', *Modern Drama* 48(3): 471–91.
- McGonigal, Jane (2006) *This Might Be a Game: Ubiquitous Play and Performance at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. PhD Thesis. Berkeley, CA: UC Berkeley. Chapters 1–4 available at <http://www.avantgame.com/dissertation.htm> (accessed 16 March 2007).
- McGonigal, Jane (2007) 'Why I Love Bees: A Case Study in Collective Intelligence Gaming', article published at http://www.avantgame.com/McGonigal_WhyI LoveBees_Feb2007.pdf in February 2007 (accessed 18 March 2007).
- Mittell, Jason (2006) 'Lost in an Alternate Reality', *Flow* 4: 7, <http://jot.communication.utexas.edu/flow/?jot=view&id=1927>, University of Texas at Austin (accessed 18 March 2007).
- Nelson, Robin (1997) *TV Drama in Transition: Forms, Values and Cultural Change*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Örnebring, Henrik (2007 forthcoming) 'The Show Must Go On ... And On: Narrative and Seriality in *Alias*', in Stacey Abbott and Simon Brown (eds) *Secrets and Spies: Investigating Alias*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Ruppel, Marc (2005) 'Triggers and Traces: Cross-Sited Narratives and Medial Materialities', paper presented at *Society, Literature and Science Conference*, Chicago, 10–13 Nov.

- SpaceBass (2003) 'Metacortechs/Project Mu', ARG archive entry, posted 1 September at <http://www.unfiction.com/games/2003/09/01/metacortechs-project-mu/> (accessed 18 March 2007).
- Taylor, T.L. and Beth E. Kolko (2003) 'Boundary Spaces: *Majestic* and the Uncertain Status of Knowledge, Community and Self in a Digital Age', *Information, Communication & Society* 6(4): 497–522.
- Thompson, Brooke (2005) 'Last Call for Last Call Poker', 30 November, article available at http://www.argn.com/archive/000346last_call_for_last_call_poker.php (accessed on 3 October 2006).
- Thompson, Robert J. (1996) *From Hill Street Blues to ER: Television's Second Golden Age*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Unfiction (2003a) 'Yahoo Club: Alias Web Puzzle FAQ', available at <http://alias.unfiction.com/s1/> (accessed 19 August 2006).
- Unfiction (2003b) 'ALIAS Web Puzzle FAQ', available at <http://alias.unfiction.com/s2/> (accessed 19 August 2006).
- Unfiction (2006) 'ARG: Alias: Omnifam', available at <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/viewforum.php?f=132> (accessed 19 August 2006).

Other sources

- Personal interview with lead *Omnifam* PM, conducted via telephone on 11 October 2006.
- Email interview with member of *Omnifam* PM team, conducted 7–9 November 2006.

● **Dr Henrik Örnebring** is Axess Research Fellow in Comparative European Journalism at the Reuters Institute, University of Oxford. He was previously Senior Lecturer in Television Studies and Programme Convenor of the Television Studies programme at Roehampton University. His main research interest is media history and new media technologies, and he has previously published work on the history of journalism, the history of broadcasting and the history of TV genres. *Address:* Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, 13 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PS, England. [email: henrik.ornebring@politics.ox.ac.uk] ●