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### Narratological Experiments in Cinematic Alternate Reality Games

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# **Narratological Experiments in Cinematic Alternate Reality Games**

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## 1

Locating the Cinematic Alternate Reality Game on the ARG Spectrum

At one time, the term “cinema” connoted an entire experience – that of sitting in a dark theater to watch a film on a “big screen” – more than it did just a medium, but, increasingly, people associate it with the moving image abstracted from its exhibition setting. This change in meaning largely began with the television, by way of which the moving image annexed people’s homes and became more immediate as well as less ceremonial; the context of the medium was transformed, leaving the essence of the moving image as the only constant between theatrical and home cinema. Since the television, this expansion of cinema across locations has only accelerated, seeing moving images occupy computer and mobile device screens. Professor Vincent Amiel articulates the essence of this next, new type of cinema and how it marks another change in what cinema is because of its exhibition, noting that “personal screen” cinema “...allows images to appear, and to modify, transform, or follow one another, thus turning upside-down our habit of distinguishing the frame from the background,” (Amiel 45). Today, one must often navigate an interface while viewing moving images, and so, both literally and metaphorically, the migration of moving-image media to personal screens, especially through the Internet, has relegated the responsibility of “distinguishing the frame from the background” to viewers. Because of this relegation, the Internet makes the cinematic experience exponentially more sprawling than it historically has been; narrative construction passes through two layers of authorship on the Internet – the original filmmaker’s layer and the curating, interpreting audience’s layer.

At the peak of its potential, online cinema accounts for an unprecedented amount of viewer activity while remaining fundamentally cinematic, or moving-image-based, and

subsequently retaining (even enhancing) the immersive qualities of the medium. Online cinema can reach such heights as it frequently, by way of its exhibition location, adopts a fragmented, serialized structure that gives viewers more room to connect disparate pieces of narrative and obscures the construction of fiction. This particular format on this particular platform can, for the first time in a long time, generate belief in fiction – make the unbelievable believable. Internet users who make it their business to know about them often refer to such ideal works of online, quasi-interactive cinema as “alternate reality games”. These games, or ARGs, however, can manifest through many mediums that are in no way like cinema, and so it is necessary to specify that the online, viewer activity-intensive cinematic narrative is, specifically, a “cinematic ARG”. The purpose of this project is to not only define the cinematic ARG in the context of other types of ARGs as well as the theatrical film genres from which it draws, but also to affirm the importance of exploring cinema through it, the newest frontier of the medium. The cinematic ARG is a laboratory for experimentation in storytelling, one in which designers and viewers can truly occupy the narrative world and can craft the narrative under combined authorship. What they produce is a chronicled, cinematic chemical reaction – often unique, often unpredictable, and sometimes inspiringly complex. Cinema needs more of these projects, and people need to know more about them.

Though they have primarily enthralled niche groups throughout the last few decades, ARGs have occasionally found their way into the critical discourse of media and narratology in that time; the fact is, however, that these intermittent emergences in scholarship have only defined the ARG in broad terms, or in a manner oblique to cinema. It is, therefore, essential to define the entire terrain of ARGs and then triangulate the cinematic ARG within it, so as to justify the latter’s status as a legitimate genre within an expansive set of mediums. Professors

Antero Garcia and Greg Niemeyer view it as a product of and contributor to “...new media’s ubiquity... [as] that’s the way the twenty-first century wants to tell stories,” (Garcia, Niemeyer 2). The “new media” ARG is reliant on screens and digital images of all kinds – not necessarily the moving images of cinema, as evidenced by Janet Murray’s discussions of the cyber-narrative, or “multiform story” (Murray 29), a genre that includes “...text, images, sound... moving pictures, and control of a laptop display...” (66). When the online, new media experience includes writing and still imagery alongside moving imagery, the co-authored narrative need not always be a cinematic one. In fact, as noted by Patrick Jagoda and his co-writers in their description of a 2014 ARG titled *SEED*, which comprised “...video, radio, handwritten letters, text messages, social media, theatrical sets, and live-action performances...” (Jagoda et al. 32), ARGs can encompass much more than digital media and integrate many mediums into a single experience. The ARG is undoubtedly too large a territory to consider monolithically (a concept that will soon be further explored); it is necessary to differentiate the narrative modes that exist within that larger set of mediums, beginning with what is the ideal, enhanced version of film in the cinematic ARG.

Thorough dissection of different kinds of ARGs is an essential next step in the world of ARG criticism because most scholars of the subject have spent their time defining these games in broad strokes. So as to affirm their existence above all else, academics of new media have explained what technology ARGs utilize, how they encourage participation, and what psychological effects they can have on players. Dating back to 1997, before ARGs had broken into popular culture or regularly found their way onto the Internet, Janet Murray, the Senior Research Scientist for Educational Computing Initiatives at MIT, explored the mechanics of the “cyber narrative” in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. As multimedia interactivity has become the

narrative mode of choice for many people in the time since, Murray's ideas about immersion and player agency have remained foundational to ARG discourse, paving the way for other scholars to write on the ways ARGs can immerse players via online or in-person interactions with each other and with game designers. Professors Antero Garcia and Greg Niemeyer's 2017 collection of essays, *Alternate Reality Games and the Cusp of Digital Gameplay*, inspects those qualities of ARGs, accounting for all the potential places and ways these games can function. The anthology also describes ARGs' cultural impact – much the same way that Jane McGonigal, Director of Game Research and Development at the Institute for the Future, explains the benefits of ARGs from both personal and societal perspectives.

All of these scholars' purposes are to legitimize ARGs as enriching works of art and to justify their study – they will all inform this critical project, but in order for it to do something more specific in legitimizing a particular kind of ARG. Now that the general public has enjoyed multimedia and participatory narratives for a good couple of decades, it is not just logical but in demand for creators and critics alike to afford more attention to each specific ARG type, not least of all the cinematic ARG. For a targeted investigation, this project will assimilate scholarship on found-footage horror, documentary, and puzzle films (the genres whose formal elements cinematic ARGs most often use) into the aforementioned authors' writing on all ARGs. The found-footage horror and documentary scholarship of Professors Adam Charles Hart, Cecilia Sayad, Barry Keith Grant, Bruce Kawin, Bill Nichols, and of Soviet documentarian Dziga Vertov, will clarify how cinematic ARGs satisfy the necessary characteristics of ARGs by employing documentary and horror film conceits. Scholarship on puzzle film and audience participation by Professors Warren Buckland, Henry Jenkins, and Steven Willemsen will do the same for cinematic ARGs' inclusion of visual puzzles. On the whole, this project will continue

the last few decades' study of ARGs by diving deeper into one particular type of them – to celebrate the cross-section of ARG and cinema by analyzing how it works.

Highlighting the cinematic ARG within the broader domain of ARGs means ascertaining where its place on that landscape is and why. The first step in making these deliberations is, of course, fashioning a topography of ARGs – knowing about all the aforementioned, possible components of ARGs in relation to each other. To effectively manage this feat is surprisingly simple, as all of those components are subsumed under two fundamental qualities of the ARG that are, sensibly, present in its name; the umbrella term that is “ARG” constitutes a spectrum at one end of which is its “alternate reality” portion and at the other of which is its “game” portion. One may consider the two ideas labeled by those titular terms in a number of ways – the “alternate reality” feature might also be the ARG’s capacity for “immersion” (Murray 97), and the “game” of the experience could be the allowance of “player agency” (126). Such terms are typically interchangeable because the alternate reality, immersion, or perhaps “belief generation” of the ARG is generally the consequence of the designers’ guidance of the project, while the game, player agency, or interactivity, is, naturally, solidified by the audience’s own influence over the experience. Immersion is underpinned by designers’ authorial agency, whereas interactivity is akin to that of the audience, which, at a glance, illustrates why the two listed sets of artistic concepts lie at either end of a spectrum. Immersion and interactivity are diametrically opposed, meaning that when an ARG’s narrative style moves in the direction of one, it inherently moves away from the other. Giving players significant authorial agency allows many creative voices entrance into a single narrative, whereas belief-instilling immersion comes from a level of narrative cohesion that requires fewer authors, or possibly just one, in order to be achieved. There is a theoretically infinite number of possible ARGs which allow for different total amounts



of designer and player agency, in the way that there are infinite points along a spectrum – and new media products’ singularity hearkens to the fact. Gary Hall asserts that people should not engage with new media, a category into which ARGs fall, as “...a general category... [but instead as] specific instances of media technologies...” (Hall 253), and the artworks produced by those technologies must be considered with equal specificity.

With this point in mind, one sees that “ARG” does not constitute a genre or a medium, but an entire range of possible mediums and genres; an open-world, unregulated ARG is one such possibility, and the more cohesive cinematic ARG is another. Navigating multimedia terrain in a unique way, and subsequently finding placement on the authorship spectrum, is something that every ARG does – and that place is always a function of how much agency designers and viewers each have in constructing the ARG’s story. The myriad mediums that compose the USC campus ARG *Reality Ends Here*, in which, according to USC Cinematic Arts professor Jeff Watson, students do “Card play, media production, and online engagement... yielding hundreds of projects,” (Watson 199), indicate how wide the range of ARG materials can be. When a vastly multimedia ARG like this one provides players with its many methods of interactivity, the cohesion and complexity of its story can suffer. The only narrative that underlies every part of *Reality Ends Here* is an introduction about an art production competition (199) – there is no intrigue and no change in circumstances over time. Such an ARG, for these reasons, sacrifices immersion in a realistically-nuanced plot for more impactful player activity and lies close to the player-agency end of the ARG polarity; a cinematic ARG, whose story unfolds almost exclusively in online videos and all of whose player activity is mediated by a screen, has a more immersive story but limits players’ authorial power.

Of the polarity's two ends, that of interactivity is what most distinguishes the ARG from other modes of narrative – it is a prospective addition to storytelling that excites contemporary consumers and which creators have already incorporated into multiple mediums (as evidenced by “choose-your-own-adventure books” and video games). Many ARGs at the outermost limits of experimental narration emphasize player agency as much as they can without completely breaking down the walls of the story. The previously-noted *SEED* ARG, in its time, included a number of different communicative and narrative mediums, including text messages, hand-written letters, and real-life interaction among players, all of which subtract from the limitations that other kinds of ARGs often put on player activity. When the game enables players to say and do whatever they want, in person and within the story universe, it ensures that player agency is not simply “activity”. Murray contrasts the two, stating that player activity may “...have effect [in the story], but without allowing actions themselves to be chosen and without relating to the players’ intentions,” (128). Some ARGs might augment viewer activity without doing so equally for viewer agency. *SEED* and *Reality Ends Here* permit players with as much agency as they can under the restrictions of their stories. They try to avoid a “top-down design posture” (187), and *Reality Ends Here* hardly depends on a “single master narrative” (199) at all. The benefit of such freeing narrative structures is clear – audience engagement is likely to increase with a self-made story. Designers’ choice to leave narration unregulated, or devolve the responsibility of regulation to players, however, unavoidably reduces narrative unity, as the multiplicity and diversity of authors within an audience inevitably broadens the range of story elements present in an ARG. Murray uses an analogy to explain this phenomenon, stating that, “...greater individual freedom in ballroom-style folk dancing means that the group as a whole has less coherence than at a square dance,” (Murray 127). The enhanced agency of players in ARGs that allow in-person

communication among those players and direct expression of their authorial voice through many different mediums accounts for players' own desires more than other kinds of ARGs.

The corollary of that relatively unrestrained player agency is that it always detracts from the cohesion of any "master narrative" that designers have implemented, making said narrative almost nonexistent or, at least, significantly less believable. *Reality Ends Here* exemplifies the former outcome with very little overarching plot, while *SEED* does the latter; *SEED* had a complex plot, but the agency it gave its players encouraged them to plan a break-in of a private building (Jagoda et al. 47), risking the plot's collapse when designers needed to keep such an incident from occurring. If the designers were unable to justify stopping the break-in with reasons realistic enough to the ARG's story, they broke their players' immersion – a direct result of their allowing players so much authorial power in the first place.

ARGs do not have to make such sacrifices, though; if designers have an artful vision for a designer-centric ARG and manifest it successfully upon its production, the completed work will exemplify the advantages of leaning toward the designer-autonomy end of the ARG spectrum. Given 21st Century sensibilities that revolve around consumer satisfaction and personal liberty, the possible gains of designers' retention of most authorial agency in an ARG universe may seem unsatisfactory, but they are, in reality, invaluable. The degree of narrative cohesion elicited by a single authorial voice (that of an agreeing group of designers) is significant insofar as it augments an ARG's immersion, as the extent of cohesion, or continuity among disparate narrative units, is proportionate to the believability of the story. Heavily designer-guided ARGs direct player participation to "specific roles, for which players must come up with specific characters whose masks they put on in the fictional universe," (Murray 112) or fill roles already conceived by designers. One sees examples of this guided participation in *Marble Hornets*

(Wagner et al. 2009) and *AlanTutorial* (Resnick 2011), which will serve as cinematic ARG case studies throughout this project – the visual, coded clues littered throughout both series, which viewers must decipher to make sense of the narratives, encourage viewers to become digital cryptographers. They must fill that specific role, or else their participation will not affect the unfolding of the ARG's story; hence, said participation is almost entirely guided.

Through these methods of constraint, designers limit, but do not eliminate player agency, and allow players to immerse themselves into a pre-constructed world – more so like a film viewer can, but still with some genuine ability to participate in the story. Murray argues that “When we enter a fictional world... We do not suspend disbelief so much as we actively *create belief*,” (110), and attributes this impact of entrance into fiction to many kinds of art. In truth, though, it is the specific effect of a sufficiently immersive ARG to generate belief in participants. To truly “enter” a fictional universe requires being able to enact one's will within it, hence stipulating that players have some degree of agency – as well as a creative direction clear enough to fashion a story worth “believing in”. When an ARG reaches this threshold of cohesion in spite of its multiplicities of storytelling modes or mediums and of players who risk breaking the designers' gameplay boundaries, player engagement “...runs deeper than the suspension of disbelief... [Because] the story in such an ARG... is not limited temporally or spatially,” (Hook 61). In other words, viewers do not necessarily walk away from the videos in these ARGs under the impression that the game has ended; “...the players are always playing,” (63), and the “alternate reality” of the ARG seems authentic enough for players to simply consider it a new reality or contained within the real world. Even if, under such circumstances, a player is not affecting the ARG's story at a given moment, he is aware that other players could be, and so the purpose of the “temporally and spatially unlimited” game is mostly to have a psychological

impact on a player – to keep him immersed in the story at all times. When an ARG can catalyze players' immersion at these levels of depth and breadth, it has enacted what is called the "This is Not a Game" (56) approach to storytelling and gameplay – a sensibility that allows stories and games to avoid their typical entrance requirement of suspending disbelief.

Using such an approach simply avoids explicitly signifying the boundaries of the fiction to viewers, suggesting to viewers that the ARG's narrative and real-world events are equally authentic. Should one stumble upon a video uploaded by *LonelyGirl15* (2006) or *LouisePaxton* (2007), uploaded early in those YouTube channels' lifespans, one would see conventional video-logs of two young women's lives, not knowing those videos spiraled into long and terrifying narratives. The fact that the lengths of time between uploads in these series' diegetic worlds correspond to the lengths of time that have passed in the real world lulls viewers into thinking that their stories are genuine. Even when *LonelyGirl15* introduces a religious cult that its protagonist joins ("A Change in My Life") and *LouisePaxton*'s protagonist is threatened by a stalker ("Stalker Video 1"), the series' continued obedience to real-time representation haunts viewers with the possibility that the anomalous circumstances are, indeed, still real. Compared to traditional cinema, these kinds of ARGs concede extremely little about the fictional status of their contents.

If there are different benefits to player-centric and designer-centric ARGs, and unregulated, unmediated methods of interactivity produces the former type, the question becomes what the latter tends to look like, in concrete descriptive terms. Because player and designer autonomy are diametrically opposed on the ARG authorship spectrum, more limited player participation is the order of the day for designer-centric ARGs. Such a condition comes alongside not a myriad of mediums, but the unconventional use of one or two mediums that

usually do not enable audience participation at all, such as cinema. An ARG can take a written form (again, noting the “choose-your-own-adventure novel”), and theoretically could be an offshoot of many individual mediums, but some of the most effectively immersive designer-centric ARGs have been cinematic ones, like *Marble Hornets*, *AlanTutorial*, *LonelyGirl15*, and *LouisePaxton*, whose stories comprise almost nothing but videos uploaded to YouTube.com. In addition to presenting narratives in “real time”, this style of narration “dramatizes the border” (Murray 105), or apparatus, of storytelling by acknowledging the presence of cameras and the Internet platform within the narrative. All of the listed cinematic ARGs employ a typical conceit of online videos, like the “vlog” or the video tutorial, to obviate the questions of why there is a camera in the diegesis and why each shot is framed how it is – questions which traditional fiction cinema unavoidably, if unconsciously, elicit in viewers’ minds. Avoiding such questions connects viewers to a story much more closely. The Internet’s allowance of navigation from video to video (and to forum discussions of videos) also ensures that players retain a limited, but recognizable amount of agency – enough for the online, cinematic ARG to live up to its status as an ARG. When the filmic content of the series is non-linear, experimental, and includes cryptographic puzzles, the viewing process itself becomes active participation, as well, because viewers retain the agency to do what they will with the fragmented material provided to them by designers – to interpret it however they want. Cinematic ARGs, then, favor designer agency over player agency on the ARG authorship spectrum, for they rely on designers’ guidance for the generation of a highly immersive, but still interactive story. The cinematic ARG, in fact, is the ideal type of ARG as well as the ideal mode of cinema because it manages to make cinema as interactive as possible without demolishing a structure that enables, or even bolsters, immersion.

In justifying the study and creation of cinematic ARGs, it is as essential to define them as extensions of their film-genre predecessors as it is to do so in comparison to other kinds of ARGs. The components of the cinematic ARG, while indicative of designer and audience agency within the story universe, are also appropriations of horror, documentary, and puzzle film trademarks in an online setting that enhances their engagement of viewers. A combined horror and documentary aesthetic, again, constitutes an immersive strategy that designers employ while puzzle-film elements are what designers include to facilitate viewer activity within the ARG. Horrifying tone, documentary format, and embedded puzzles are the building blocks of all the previously-mentioned cinematic ARGs, and are synthesized most completely, perhaps, in *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial*. These two texts in particular will exemplify many principles of cinematic ARG production from here on in this analysis.

Utilizing the specific genre of “found-footage horror” that *The Blair Witch Project* (Sánchez, Myrick 1999), *Cloverfield* (Reeves 2008), and *Paranormal Activity* (Peli 2007) popularized, some cinematic ARGs seem best able to generate belief in viewers with that fusion of horror and documentary. This subgenre’s formal realism, as well as the straightforward honesty of its exhibition alongside people’s nonfictional displays of their lives online, capture viewers by instilling fright in them, but also immerse viewers by making the fiction of the ARG’s story plausibly deniable. This combined realism of form and exhibition context give the cinematic ARG “authenticity”, or the appearance of being actual documentary. Even if a cinematic ARG does not manage to instill honest belief of its story in viewers, it can frighten them with nagging doubts of its fakeness – better than a theatrical film ever could – by presenting its story exactly as it would look if it were, in fact, true. Designers constantly guide the experience with this realistic and uniquely filmic narration to which viewers can respond as

they please, “challenging player agency and creating a chameleon-like media experience that does not recognize the limitations of the magic circle of immersion,” (Hook 61). In other words, players stay active within the cinematic ARG universe, making certain choices for themselves, but never break through the narrative walls that the designers are continuously erecting – confirming and reconfirming via “interplay” (Jagoda et al. 47) between players and designers that the story is real. Emphasis on designer authorship creates a coherently responsive narrative, which evokes an unprecedented authenticity in the worlds of cinema and ARGs. *LonelyGirl15*, for instance, despite never officially concluding, conducted a serialized cinematic narrative that referenced and reacted to audience activity for years. In 2006, this devotion to realism had never been seen, and when viewers eventually realized the story was fictional, thousands of them were so astonished and frustrated that they systematically rated every YouTube video in the series with a “dislike”.

Again, though, the formulation of designer agency, here, in creating ever-moving but never-breaking parameters for interplay, alludes to the necessity of some player activity in a cinematic ARG universe, which materializes through tropes of the puzzle genre. Again, these puzzle elements retain their fundamental qualities from theatrical puzzle cinema, but expand on what viewers can do, in terms of interpretive and cryptographic work, to solve the puzzles presented by the videos in a cinematic ARG series. In many regards, enhanced viewer agency via puzzle-solving simply contributes to immersion, allowing viewers to participate in narrative construction without destroying the foundation that designers have lain, making the “alternate reality” seem all the more real; the appeal to puzzle cinema, though, gives viewers something to do while they are immersed. That activity is a positive for cinematic ARG viewers, in that it allows them to hone their interpretive and cryptographic skills, but it also benefits the ARG



narrative itself, rendering it an organic, harmonious experiment in storytelling in which one party provides a puzzle, another tries to solve it, and the latter's success in solving could have narrative consequences. *Marble Hornets* displays such possibilities in its offering of codes and riddles that, if solved, provide clues about certain characters' real identities – the discovery of which is central to the series' plot. A viewer can try his hand at solving these puzzles as much as the series' major characters can, and if he succeeds, he can theoretically notify the designers (acting as characters in-universe) and augment characters' knowledge of narrative events for future video installments. The found-footage horror and puzzle dimensions of the cinematic ARG, then, are manifestations of designer and viewer authorship; designers guide viewers through a frightening, realistic world, and viewers try to solve puzzles along the way to make sense of it. It will be helpful to continue considering those complementary (and oppositional) sides of the experience through generic frameworks so that it is clear how the cinematic ARG is using cinema innovatively.

All the different facets of these ARGs – horror and documentary, which evoke realism to immerse the viewer, as determined by designers' authorship, and puzzles, which activate viewers' agency – may seem to compose a convoluted kind of hybrid genre. Truly, though, they do lend themselves well to one another and combine quite seamlessly in their online, serialized form – to the point that a fair number of them have been made in the last twenty-five years by filmmakers at multiple levels of professionalism. *The Blair Witch Project* was preceded by an online marketing campaign – the first extremely popular ARG that was largely cinematic. The campaign laid a trail of breadcrumbs in the form of diary pages, character descriptions, and an entire fake documentary, constituting a multimedia experience from which viewers could glean information about the actual film before its release. The ARG's designers "...fed information

into threads on Internet forums... plastered missing person posters around college campuses... and uploaded b-roll stills onto the film's website... to give 'an air of legitimacy' to the digital mythos," (Stewart 1). Upon the film's release, "...some viewers presumed... the main characters were actually missing or dead," (1), and it became clear that ARGs based around cinema could be deeply affecting works of art. *The Blair Witch Project's* ARG paved the way for others that revolved around theatrical films and television shows. A group of ARG designers advertised *Cloverfield* with a context-less teaser trailer that depicted the Statue of Liberty's head careening down a New York street and a website that contained clues about "Tagurato" and "Slusho", two fictional companies in the film's universe (Smith 1). Though not specifically "horror" or "puzzle", the television show *Lost* (Lieber et al. 2004) played to those genres' qualities as well when it "...dabbled in ARGs..." (1) during the 2000s. The former frequently built ARGs for its viewers between seasons, in one case allowing them to infiltrate and investigate the mysterious "Dharma Initiative" organization (a staple of the show) by taking recruitment tests and interacting with the ARG's designers virtually (Andersen 1).

These three examples of ARGs based around cinema are all marketing campaigns for mainstream, high-budget works of film; the first noteworthy examples of the genre came from the upper echelon of the film industry, then, and it was as a result of their popularity that the cinematic ARG entered broader culture, becoming a regular project for amateur filmmakers in the late 2000s. The number of cinematic ARGs made for YouTube around that time, whether in completion or not, is significant and difficult to record precisely – it is at least in the hundreds, if not the thousands, as those successful marketing campaign ARGs and some popular independent ARGs on YouTube were extremely impactful on "niche" Internet horror enthusiasts and filmmakers. In order to paint an accurate picture of the cinematic ARG, but one that highlights

its potential to raise the medium of cinema to new heights, the analysis to follow will focus on the aforementioned ARG YouTube series *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial*, but will also touch on certain less noteworthy cinematic ARGs and the reasons for their limited success.

*Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial* represent the pinnacle of achievement for cinematic ARGs made for the Internet by amateurs, as both gained enough of a following to amass over a hundred-thousand views on nearly all of their videos, and their stories were actually finished by their designers. *Marble Hornets* revolves around a mythological entity known as the “Slenderman” (though the characters in the series never refer to it as such, and instead as the “Operator”), and, in its time, was groundbreaking enough to inspire dozens of other “Slenderman ARGs” – *EveryManHybrid* (2010), *TribeTwelve* (2010), and *DarkHarvest00* (2010) being the best-known in their own right. The incitement of the plot of *Marble Hornets* is the Operator’s intrusion in the life of a college film student named Alex Kralie while he makes a film with the same name as the webseries. Alex is driven to extreme paranoia by the Operator’s stalking, as he becomes irritable with his cast and crew, and begins recording himself with one of his cameras at all times; Alex lends the tapes that such vigilant shooting produces to his friend Jay, who sifts through the footage, uploads anything of note regarding Alex, the Operator, or anyone else involved to YouTube, thence beginning the ARG on YouTube (“Introduction”).

Soon after the first video in the series, Jay ventures into Alex’s old world and re-investigates the wrath of the Operator, prompting Alex to renew his effort to dispose of everyone associated with the monster and stop its “curse” from spreading to anyone else (“Entry #52”). The videos in the series were posted at intervals that evoked a sense of “real-time” for viewers as narrative events unfolded between 2009 and 2014, and that sense was bolstered by supplementary Twitter posts from Jay and Tim which provided context for how they recorded or

recovered the footage they uploaded, also in real-time ("@marblehornets"). As most cinematic ARGs do, *Marble Hornets* almost always utilizes a found-footage conceit in its videos, rendering the series horrifying in mood and authentic in presentation. As Jay re-enters the world of the Operator, though, he instigates other figures' participation in the story – figures whose faces are hidden behind masks and who only directly communicate through their own, anonymous YouTube uploads on the account “totheark”. These perplexing videos are the backbone of *Marble Hornets*' puzzle dimension, maintaining a frightening tone but more importantly offering viewers codes and clues that help them solve the prevailing mysteries of the series. In summation, *Marble Hornets* is a cinematic narrative whose events are guided primarily by the series' designers, but which enables viewers to attempt the same detective work that the characters do and communicate with those “characters” (the designers who act as them), thus having a say in story progression. From this point forward, *Marble Hornets* will provide examples of many successful strategies for both immersing viewers and making them story agents – strategies that future cinematic ARG designers would do well to employ.

The other aforementioned cinematic ARG, *AlanTutorial*, shares a number of *Marble Hornets*' characteristics, but, while encouraging viewer activity a bit less, manages to reach an even higher threshold of authenticity through its content and form. The series is the result of a differently-abled man's foray into making “tutorial videos” and posting them online, as was popular practice in 2011, when the series began (and remains so today, to an extent). This man, Alan, uploads tutorial videos that are of little practical use to anyone, as he has trouble stringing words together and only has access to the limited amount of tutorial material in his caretakers' house. Initially, the series appears to achieve nothing but a cheap laugh at this character's expense, but occasionally, Alan's reaction to a particular object is seemingly out-of-character

(“How to Pick Up a Blue Chair”), and strange circumstances befall him after he locks himself out of his house and is kidnapped by a phantom organization whose members are never actually revealed. Once these anomalies begin occurring, *AlanTutorial* reveals itself to be a fully-fledged cinematic ARG – it includes visual symbols for viewers to track and decipher, is frightening to watch, and is plausible as a series of events transpiring somewhere in the world in real-time. *AlanTutorial* is, perhaps, the quintessence of this final ARG quality – more so than *Marble Hornets* is – because it crafts a horrifying story without relying on any explicitly supernatural elements like the Operator, and portrays narrative events in the exact, non-aestheticized way they would appear if the series was not fictional. Though the events of *AlanTutorial* are unlikely to have really happened, and thus do not make viewers feel complicit in any real-world misfortune, they are wholly within the realm of possibility (and are presented with as much authenticity as possible), making viewers feel a special compulsion to continue watching the series. *AlanTutorial*, then, falls even closer to the designer-guidance end of the ARG spectrum than *Marble Hornets* does, but it bestows enough storytelling power on viewers for the series to retain its status as an ARG; it provides viewers with significant interpretive work to do as they glean meaning from out-of-place objects (“DIY weatherize hole tutorial”, “T [tutorial]//”) and grants them the ability to interact with “Alan” over Twitter (“@alantutorial”). The genuine plausibility of *AlanTutorial*, though, puts it on par with *Marble Hornets*’ sprawling, aesthetically-realistic story and thorough enabling of viewer agency. Both series are model cinematic ARGs that should inform others made in the future, and as this analysis moves into specific investigation of how horror, documentary, and puzzle elements function within the genre, the two ARGs will serve repeatedly as case studies.

As full viewings of *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial* would confirm, and as scholars have generally come to agree, the ARG, cinematic or not, can engage its audience more deeply and elicit its interaction in a greater number of ways than other, more traditional kinds of media ever could. The ARG encompasses many mediums and includes the minutiae of the real world, or its “alternate reality”, in its story, creating “...disunities of form, content, and concept...” (Watson 192) for the purpose of fashioning “a unity where the time and space of the narrative are in sync with the time and space of the [player],” (192). No other genre, medium, or set of mediums has been able to achieve such an effect at this point in history – to legitimately turn a fictional story into a lived experience. Choose-your-own-adventure novels, for instance, allowed readers a degree of control over a previously immutable experience at the time of their inception. Elsewhere, text-based computer games that date back to the 1960s, like *Zork*, turned simple inputs and outputs into narratives in which players could “...move through dungeon rooms... look for objects that could be manipulated... solve riddles, and fight off evil trolls,” (Murray 74), adding a story to user activity. Essentially, the ARG optimizes whatever mediums compose it, heightening their capacities for audience captivation and interactivity, meaning that the cinematic ARG, specifically, is a more powerful type of cinema. The genre gives viewers the ability to take some control of the cinematic experience, like a choose-your-own-adventure novel does for a written one, but also capitalizes on the very presence of player agency, as well as the inherent immersive qualities of cinema and the authenticity provided by online exhibition, to suggest that fictional events are actually real.

## 1.1

### Thinking Through the Ethics of Cinematic ARGs: How and Why they Must be Made

Those who write critically on ARGs have agreed that it is, indeed, that affecting of a genre, but where new media scholars have struggled to come to a consensus is whether or not the unmatched audience engagement of ARGs is especially beneficial or dangerous to society. It should go without saying that ARGs have the potential to affect the world both positively and negatively, and that the exact nature of their impact has to do with how, exactly, designers and players use them. Jane McGonigal formulates three questions whose answers determine the ethicality of a given ARG. The first of those questions is, “When and where do we need an alternate reality?” (McGonigal 145); keeping this one in mind when producing an ARG should ensure that such a project does not obscure the seriousness of a situation that is of great importance in the real (not alternate) world. The second question is, “Who should we include in our alternate reality games?” (145) – crucial to consider so that an ARG only involves those who have received a sufficient initiation to the game and have chosen to participate in it. The final question is, “What activities should we be adopting as the core mechanics of our alternate reality games?” (145), and is just as important to keep in mind as the previous two, so that what ARG participants learn, through “hands-on” experience, is enriching. The ethical quandaries of ARG production that will be discussed from here will all have to do with these questions.

Any ARG can reach this standard, but cinematic ARGs’ odds are, if anything, stacked in favor of doing so. A potential ethical pitfall of the ARG, and undoubtedly a genuine possibility when participants are taking an alternate reality very seriously, is the risk of involving people who have not chosen to participate in the story and causing them distress. When one person’s powerful immersion affects a non-immersed person’s life or forces him to believe something

false, the ARG's world has enveloped that second person unwillingly. According to McGonigal, there can be no successful ARG (or any kind of game) that makes participation in its story involuntary as willing involvement is a stipulation for games in general (21). The previously-mentioned *SEED* ARG, which leans toward the player-agency end of the ARG polarity and is therefore rather free-form, arguably broke this rule of gameplay when its players staged a public protest for the release of a political prisoner in the ARG's universe. "Onlookers emerged from their offices to gawk at the unusual spectacle... [as] the event most likely appeared as an actual public demonstration [to them]," (Jagoda et al. 31-32), evidence of the fact that without sufficient guidance, there is the risk of an ARG's story disruptively spilling over into the real world. The *SEED* players initially planned this protest outside a building to be a "riot" during which they would "...bang on the windows, blockade the building, and sneak inside," (47), and it was the ARG's designers who managed to "...shift the tenor of the idea towards 'protest' without removing the players' agency to redirect the narrative," (47). It must be said that free-form ARGs like *SEED* are hugely enriching to their players, allowing them to hone skills, establish bonds with each other, and become acquainted with problems that may somehow affect the real world, but all ARGs unfold most safely under the supervision of designers, and those more player-authored ones are often at greater risk of forcing participation. Narratives being written by many different people are inherently harder to control.

Voluntary participation is something that the cinematic ARG lends itself quite well to assuring, as it clearly regulates what viewers and designers can do, and it demarcates precisely where the game exists. These ARGs are YouTube serials with supplementary Twitter posts and some room for viewers' communal interpretive work on forum websites, meaning that all participants' activity is mediated by the Internet and its distancing characteristics. Whereas



*SEED* threatened to disturb non-players because the game called for direct interactions among players and with designers in real life, a cinematic ARG like *Marble Hornets* protects the uninitiated public from any in-universe activity that might seem threatening. Not only does the primary use of cinema distance the events of such an ARG from any potential viewers by mediation with a screen, but the primarily text-based communication of the Internet also ensures that interactivity among participants is virtual, unable to directly affect anyone who has not knowingly entered the ARG's world. All plot development and every instance of viewer activity takes place on the Internet in *Marble Hornets* and other cinematic ARGs. The screen can be representative of events taking place in the real world, but it is a virtual world nonetheless, and it therefore protects people from harm; everyone knows that confusing or unpleasant material from the Internet cannot injure one's actual body, so someone who unwittingly stumbles upon a cinematic ARG knows, at least, that he is not at any physical risk.

Beyond the actual mediums that facilitate a cinematic ARG's gameplay, the genre's typical format makes entry into the alternate reality a choice on the part of each viewer. Often, people refer to the discovery of an ARG as "falling down a rabbit hole" (Garcia, Niemeyer 15), or the discovery of a particular unit of the ARG's narrative. To serve its purpose, the rabbit hole must appear mundane enough to be realistic but also intriguing enough to incentivize seeking the rest of the story (15). Excellent examples of this balance are, again, *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial* videos, whose authentic found-footage aesthetic imbues them with that mundane realism, but whose disconcerting contents entice viewers into continuing to watch the two series. In a sense, entry into the ARG universe may not seem voluntary at all, but coerced; indeed, it is possible for viewers to feel compelled to continue "down the rabbit hole" once they begin the descent, but the initial decision to expose oneself to a cinematic ARG's material is always, at

least, one's own. Most likely, the viewers choose to click on a video – under no circumstances do they experience direct intrusion on their lives from other participants. Furthermore, the cinematic ARG's fragmented (serialized) structure sees new viewers fall down rabbit holes incrementally, only learning enough about the fictional world to become irreversibly immersed over the course of multiple narrative units and giving them ample time to stop pursuing the story if they so choose. For these reasons, insofar as the ethical encouragement of participation is concerned, the cinematic ARG is an ideal genre – it permits viewer activity, but virtually, in order to minimize the possibility of real-world consequences like forced exposure to narrative events.

Of course, the general “safeness” of cinematic ARGs' online exhibition may suggest that the format and platform regulate storytelling too much – that they unnecessarily constrict viewers' abilities and fail to provide an enriching participatory experience. One cannot deny that cinematic ARG viewers are technically doing less than the players of other ARGs (hence why they should still be referred to as “viewers” rather than “players”) but the specificity of viewers' agency in a cinematic ARG's universe in no way means that it does not exist. Watson argues that online ARGs tend to “limit replayability, accessibility, and sustainability... and neglect to empower participants,” (Watson 187), and while he is correct to note those limitations, the cinematic ARG still does, to an extent significant enough that they are partially responsible for narrative construction, empower viewers. The cognitive work constituted by pondering over videos, working with codes, and restructuring non-linear narratives is not significantly less empowering to players than the unrestricted gameplay of more player-centric ARGs is. These mental activities, as well as the prospect of communication with designers posing as in-universe characters on social media sites, enable cinematic ARG viewers to become minor characters of their own.

Collectively, viewers play the part of “the audience” to which Jay and Alan, in *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial*, respectively, address their videos – an implied set of characters in any cinematic ARG – and to fill this role is to satisfy certain storytelling responsibilities, like deciding what certain codes mean or telling other characters what the audience has discovered. These ARGs encourage viewers to do “discovery work” (McGonigal 30), which, in essence, allows them to “...relish the chance to be curious about anything and everything,” (30) as they investigate settings and characters. The activity delegated to cinematic ARG viewers, therefore, is to their own benefit – it helps them to hone skills in cognition and cooperation. Of course, the intrapersonal gains of participating in a cinematic ARG naturally become the gains of society as a whole. Cinematic ARGs are “...cultural probes that... introduce subversive techniques into everyday life... and extend conversations across institutional, disciplinary, and social boundaries,” (Jagoda et al. 38). In other words, these games serve as theoretical and practical 21st Century teaching tools – cinematic ones as much as player-oriented ones, as much as the latter might see players behave in more varying ways, outside of the virtual world of the Internet. Cinematic ARGs can educate players by giving them firsthand involvement in “Subverting... power hierarchies through play [or storytelling],” (38), a mirror of real-world political activism, and can also push them to “Create... communities among players,” (38), an opportunity to achieve a goal through cooperation. The collective interpretation of story elements on forum websites obviously strengthens interpersonal union with teamwork, an experience that ideally provides all participants with equal opportunity to decode, solve, and discover as narrative events unfold. Ethically speaking, the cinematic ARG is not only the optimal member of its broader assortment of genres for keeping its “magic circle of play” (Garcia, Niemeyer 13) safely distant

from the public, but also for preserving the educational and experience-building qualities that benefit society as a whole.

A final, less concrete dimension of the cinematic ARG's ethical significance, though, is also its most important. Filmmakers at all levels of professionalism owe it to the medium within which they work to test its boundaries and expand it, attempting to conjure all that it theoretically makes possible, and the cinematic ARG is the new frontier of cinema – the most critical region for such exploration. Truthfully, an ARG of any kind is “...experimental [in] nature...” (Jagoda et al. 33), and constitutes “...‘an art-science of giving rise to new developments,’” (Qtd. in 33); outside of just cinematic ones, ARGs end up as one-of-a-kind studies in improvisation. The cinematic variety stands out against other ARGs, though, for broadening the scope of what specifically *narrative art* can be. *Marble Hornets*, *AlanTutorial*, and their kind are all unique narratological experiments. The “...‘need to account for’... the difference and specificity of much new media,” (Hall 253) applies not just to the different types of ARGs, but to each individual cinematic ARG as well, for each one takes a visibly unique narrative trajectory – and that trait of uniqueness is what makes cinematic ARGs so valuable as objects of design and study. For the cinematic ARG, uniqueness comes from inimitable moment-to-moment allocations of authorial power among designers and viewers – the exact success of viewers’ continual attempts to seize authorship from designers (who, of course, retain most of that power) measured over time. Nigel Thrift refers to contemporary society as an “‘experimental economy’” (Qtd. in Jagoda 33), but the term describes the often improvisatory nature of cinematic ARG writing quite well. An economy of authorship, or experimentation, is up for control as every cinematic ARG unfolds, but unlike in the real world, conflict over control of the economy is a productive activity, one that leaves behind a unique set of narrative footprints. In *Marble Hornets*, when “Jay” struggles

to decode a message from a “totheark” video and goes to Twitter for assistance, his and the audience’s eventual decryption recontextualizes future videos in the series, and when Alan claims in an *AlanTutorial* video that he would take his own life if he did not receive 1,000 YouTube subscribers (“how to make a terrarium”), the audience’s success in getting him that number theoretically determines the next video’s contents. These interactions between designers and viewers permanently mark the narrative experiment, putting the audience’s signature on certain moments and leaving behind a record of exactly how different authors influence the story. If designers manage to sustain the immersive spell of their fiction, they account for the interpretive progress or narrative decisions made by their audience in each new video they release, leaving behind a seamlessly collaborative series.

The fact that these interactions are permanently recorded is an added bonus exclusive to cinematic or other designer-centric ARGs. All the results of the experimental narrative, in fact, remain in some form even after the story has ended, always available for study and for future spectators to experience, even if they can no longer participate. Free-form ARGs typically intend for the “...experience [to] become the product,” (Hook 59-60), meaning that the “product” is quite intangible and leaves nothing behind after its story concludes, but cinematic ARGs are in constant production of a text – a serialized cinematic work that is the remnant of the concluded ARG. Though *LonelyGirl15*, for instance, was an “experiential product”, in which viewers could determine whether or not the two main characters met with another character (“The Test”) and could impact the story in other ways throughout its run, the series remains online today, the results of such decisions and their improvisational results plain for all to see. The completed cinematic ARG serial, in isolation, should shield players from any “answers” that previous viewers have reached and subsequently maintains all of the ambiguities necessary for a

complete, unrestricted viewing experience. The cinematic ARG, then, like a film, is a stand-alone work of visual art that may always be viewed, but also a crystallization of experimental narration. Cinema has never existed in this way before, and it is filmmakers' obligation to conduct the experiments that the new laboratory of online cinema makes possible.

In the new media age, when anyone can make what is technically "cinema" at any time, it is reasonable to feel concern over what will become of the moving image, but the cinematic ARG stands as evidence of the fact that said concern need not necessarily be warranted. If the Internet is used consistently as a platform for more like *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial*, then cinema will be safe and sound in the midst of new media. Devotion to cinematic ARG production among filmmakers is an immediate need, as these particular works, while enjoying occasional booms on a small scale, "...have not seen the kinds of growth in popularity that other forms of interactive media have seen over the past fifteen years," (Qtd. in Watson 192). The reason, certainly, for the dearth of cinematic ARGs even after the popularity of *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial* is that, despite lending themselves well to amateur creation with their found-footage aesthetic and online exhibition, they require long-term dedication on designers' parts and can fail in any number of ways. The aforementioned Slenderman ARGs that *Marble Hornets* inspired, for instance, played out questionably at best – a fate that has befallen cinematic ARGs more often than not up to this point in time. For cinematic ARGs to attain real prevalence in broader culture, potential designers and viewers alike must have a better understanding of how they work and of how their narratives can go wrong, hence the more detailed examination of their components that this project will carry out. Hopefully, such analysis can improve cinematic ARGs made in the future and enhance prospective viewers' appreciation for them.

The following chapters will, collectively, delineate the inner workings of these games and explain their effects when they are (and are not) successfully executed. Chapter 2 will address all things immersive about the cinematic ARG – the found-footage and documentary aesthetic of its videos, the authenticity of its online exhibition, and the role that designers fill in making it immersive. At stake in this chapter is the fact that cinematic ARGs do not just immerse viewers to the extent that found-footage horror films do, but in such a great capacity that they can actively instill belief of fiction in viewers rather than just facilitate suspension of disbelief. Chapter 3, as a complement, will elaborate on the limited but crucial ways that players can seize control of the storytelling throughout a cinematic ARG. The chapter looks at the puzzles that viewers must solve and the interactions they have amongst themselves and with designers, probing the ways viewers construct a cinematic ARG's story, in their heads, as well as manifestly, in videos. The final chapter inspects a number of cinematic ARGs that flawed or “unsuccessful” in order to devise a set of rules for cinematic ARG creation; in outlining what not to do when creating one of these series, some additional rules of thumb for cinematic ARG production come into focus.

## 2

Transforming Immersion into the Active Choice to Believe with an Aesthetic of Authenticity

The cinematic alternate reality game, a specific category of ARG that comprises a cluster of points in close proximity on the authorship spectrum described in the previous chapter, by no means eliminates the interactive dimension of ARGs, but takes greater advantage of designer-facilitated, immersive components than ARGs less reliant on cinema do. The ARG designers' ability to guide players through a primarily cinematic experience allows them to maintain the integrity of the "This is Not a Game" approach, which functions as the ARG's principal immersive tool. The cinematic ARG's dedication to immersion via denial of its own fictitiousness requires, instead of suturing viewers to a fictional diegetic world, creating an aesthetic of authenticity that connects viewers to the real world like a documentary does. Part and parcel of the cinematic ARG's documentary treatment, however, seems to be the horror genre; in combining horror and documentary sensibilities, this kind of ARG reproduces the effects of found-footage horror films. The real magic of this conceit, though, is its expansion of found-footage horror's immersive capabilities – possible largely because of the cinematic ARG's online exhibition platform. For cinematic ARG viewers, the serialization and fragmentation enabled by such a platform augments a believable sense of powerlessness in the face of the dangers that lurk in otherwise mundane settings (an impression that found-footage horror films leave on viewers).

The formal construction of cinematic ARGs and the context of its exhibition can make it seem authentic, even in spite of the supernatural horrors these series sometimes depict, for the same reasons that legitimate documentaries seem to be. According to documentary theorist Bill Nichols, the immersive ability of nonfiction film is great enough that it actively "...instills belief



(to accept its world as actual),” (2), in viewers, instead of simply making viewers “...suspend disbelief (to accept its world as plausible),” (2). Nichols does not explicitly claim that active belief is a more powerful form of immersion than suspension of disbelief is – merely that the two forms are different – but it is the case that active belief surpasses suspension of disbelief, and the frighteningly-authentic presentation of the cinematic ARG stands as evidence of why. This discussion of belief is not intended to suggest that a cinematic ARG necessarily makes viewers think that the events it depicts are “real”, but instead, that its application of documentary treatment to an online exhibition platform creates a narrative sprawling enough and seemingly realistic enough that viewers might invest themselves in it *like* it is real. That wish to invest oneself, or the desire for long-term participation in a story, is indicative of the unparalleled immersive power of the cinematic ARG. An ARG does not force viewers to believe, but it encourages them to *choose* to believe; hence, mention of the word “belief” from this point refers to a choice to believe – one brought on by immersive tactics so powerful that viewers wish to treat an alternate world as if it is the real world.

Cinematic ARGs’ belief-generating capabilities originate from the games’ intuitively authentic intersection of documentary and horror. Only atop foundational knowledge of how documentary and horror combine within the theatrical found-footage genre can an understanding of how the ARG exhibition format expands on it be built. An exploration of authentic horror elucidates the nature of viewers’ response to it – crucial for understanding how the usage of found-footage in a cinematic ARG can produce a transcendent affect. Horror in film that spectators take to be resultant of an actual occurrence, according to Professor Bruce Kawin, forces them to “...witness a [real] event without being able to affect it, for it is not only an image, but also an image from the past,” (204), and to behold such an image is frightening

because it arranges for “Our compassion and outrage to be aroused but unable to find resolution,” (204). Where fiction film may thrust horror upon viewers, documentary can “...come close to horror with a camera,” (205); only the latter encourages awareness of the camera and its operator’s proximity to something grotesque or unsettling, prompting viewers to ponder the circumstances and aftereffects of any given shot’s production in a horror documentary. In doing so, the horror-documentary subgenre transcends the boundaries of the film frame, closing viewers’ imagined distance between the image and themselves more swiftly than a fictitious alternative ever could. The logic of making captured images explode outside of their frame is the exact underpinning of Nichols’ claim that documentary immerses viewers by actively instilling belief in them, or prompting them to choose to believe. A horror documentary need not dislodge viewers from the world their body occupies and transport them to a new one in order to be affecting – it must only, in the words of Professor Cecilia Sayad, “...loosen’ the borders of the frame,” (Sayad 46) enough to connect its imagery to the world in which viewers already live.

If horror documentary performs the maneuvers necessary to connect to viewers, then it confronts them on their own “turf” and emboldens them to “...accept the frightening and repulsive aspects of reality, or... try to comprehend them,” (Kawin 205). The ways that cinematic ARG designers use a horror documentary treatment to guide an audience through the viewing experience, then, is what makes that experience so thoroughly immersive. Though designers seize a degree of authorial influence that viewers might have otherwise enjoyed in order to ensure that their cinematic ARGs’ horror-documentary sensibilities are cohesive and constant, viewers’ resultant guidance through the ARG pushes their immersion reaches an unprecedented apex. Viewers confront a full battery of unpleasant questions – questions whose

consideration requires deep engagement with, connection to, or immersion within the ARG's universe.

Performing these “maneuvers” necessary for guidance, or sculpting one's cinematic project with the proper formal elements for achieving an immersive effect, does not just mean engaging the audience, but doing so through unparalleled evocation. There exists a number of particular modes of documentary within the already-specific subgenre that is horror-documentary, each of which endeavors to engage viewers by following its own personalized set of formal codes. Kawin references films that, in addition to depicting horrific things, fall in Nichols' category of “expositional documentary” (Nichols 33), but films and ARGs like *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick, Sánchez 1999) and *Marble Hornets* utilize the formal elements that instead correspond with found-footage horror, or what Professor Adam Hart calls frightening “verité documentary,” (Hart 153). This formal design proves powerfully immersive enough to make viewers want to believe the fiction it circumscribes.

Found-footage horror emerged in feature film-form with *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato 1980) and *Man Bites Dog* (Belvaux 1992), but “*The Blair Witch Project* brought the genre into the mainstream,” (Sayad 44), and quite explosively. From that point, its popularity increased consistently, until 2007 saw *Paranormal Activity* (Peli) become one of the most profitable films of all time and spawn its own franchise, while films like *Cloverfield* (Reeves 2008) and *[•REC]* (Balagueró 2007) were commercially successful in their own rights. Importantly, one bit of fallout from this found-footage horror mainstream plateau was, from the mid-2000s to the early 2010s, the influx of amateur dabbling in the genre. Unfunded filmmakers leaned into found-footage horror by way of the Internet, which was the only platform many of them had, and uploaded cinematic ARGs there. *Marble Hornets* is one example of the phenomenon – one that

inspired a number of other “Slenderman-centric” ARGs after mere months – as is *AlanTutorial*, with its own unique use of the found-footage genre. The projects that have employed this *verité*, found-footage horror treatment, especially those on the Internet, have proven that it is the aesthetic of authenticity, and not the authenticity of subject matter, that determines how truthful a film can seem to people. Cinematic ARGs have seen that formal treatment alone inspire viewers to believe in a fictional story – a feat that no other kind of horror documentary has achieved in the age of the Internet. This genre, more than any other, has changed people’s perception of documentary, establishing the very idea that authenticity can be faked with an “aesthetic” and dismissing the notion that authentic formal construction and authentic subject matter are self-evidently reliant on each other.

Historical evidence of this change in perception of documentary is traceable across scholars’ and documentarians’ writing, from the older to the more contemporary. Some of the earliest documentary theorizing was done by Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov; many of his ideas remain relevant to a discussion of found-footage films and ARGs, but such works have also forced reevaluation of his presumed relationship between formal construction and truth in filmmaking. Vertov, with his newsreel films, endeavors to “...make viewers see in the manner best suited to his presentation of this or that visual phenomenon” (Vertov 16), explaining a cameraperson’s protocol for capturing events authentically by completely respecting content with form. He describes the ideal cameraperson as “...in constant motion, drawing near, then away from objects, crawling under, climbing onto them... moving apace with the muzzle of a galloping horse,” (17). For Vertov, in his ideal proletarian and intrinsically “true-to-life” cityscape, authentic content dictates the movement of the camera; he takes for granted that

cinematographic form will become authentic only under such circumstances – when the content it signifies is honest and non-fictional.

Nichols's more recent theories of documentary, however, take into account that "Documentaries adopt no fixed inventory of techniques... [and that] alternative approaches are constantly attempted," (Nichols 21), suggesting that an authentic formal treatment may not always be as rigidly in service of subject matter as Vertov supposes. Approaches to authenticity include stylistic choices such as, "...Voice-of-God commentary, interviews, location sound recording, [and] cutaways... that illustrate... a point made within the scene," (26). All of these formal techniques, among others, are more independent of subject matter than Vertov's authentic following of a horse is. Current theorists, like Nichols, claim that conveyance of the truth is possible in multiple ways, following a post-structuralist conception of truth at the extreme end of which is the complete separation of authentic appearance and actual validity. The distinction between older and newer documentary theories indicates, essentially, that a cinematic mask of veracity can be worn by a fake plot, as epitomized by found-footage horror. While the prospect of malleable truth in film can be worrying and have incomprehensible political implications, the cinematic ARG achieves it in a way that can instead maximize benefit for viewers by engaging them with an enriching narrative more powerfully than fiction cinema is typically able to. ARGs like *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial* harness the disjunction between truth and aesthetic not to manipulate, but to excite and instruct with incomparably engaging stories.

Knowing that found-footage horror situates fictional material within a verité documentary treatment – and consequently establishes the same connection between viewer and subject matter that "real" horror documentary does – provides a basis on which to examine, specifically, how formal found-footage construction produces that connection. In order to appear "authentic", a

found-footage horror film's formal elements must indicate that the footage in question is in no way "lying" to viewers. This strategy for representing honesty occurs, foremost, cinematographically, with the use of nothing but point-of-view shots (the camera's POV, often closely positioned to the cameraperson's presumed POV) which openly express the fact that a film is the result of an amateur filmmaker's recording with a handheld camera. The spectatorial experience of such a film is, as a result, "...built around a camera that is constantly searching and is always inherently inadequate to the task," (Hart 75). A shot that appears to be composed amateurishly acknowledges the technology that captured it as well as its own incomplete, subjective conveyance of information, undermining fictional cinema's usual attempts to obscure the presence of the camera and make the viewer feel omniscient. As Hart affirms, found footage "...generally indicates a sort of impotent viewing..." (76), but the omniscience of most fiction films is an illusion, whereas the incomplete knowledge provided by the searching, handheld frame is bluntly honest about the limited extent of human perception. In found-footage horror, handheld cinematography ensures that, "...like the characters with whom our vision is aligned, viewers know there is always something outside the frame to which they are not privy," (75), forcing them to search for threats from a believable position of vulnerability. In Professor Barry Grant's words, the found-footage frame insists that viewers, more so than they would when watching classical cinema, "look into the 'depth' of the image," (Grant 165) to inspect the periphery of the frame and look past "imperfect" exposure, depth of field, and composition in order to search for threats.

Feeling vulnerable is more relatable, and hence more authentic, than feeling invincible; this truth is what gives the found-footage conceit its immersive scariness. More particularly, withholding visual information makes a *verité* documentary treatment seem more truthful than

classical horror cinema, not less so, because it eliminates the appearance of artful construction that might diminish the “realness” of a classical horror experience. However unrealistic the threat in a found-footage horror film actually is, the verité style purposely fails to expose the threat in a manner that would reveal the implausibility of its existence, permitting viewers to choose to believe it exists. If its cinematography is executed “properly”, found-footage horror will depict as much of its (literal or figurative) monster as it can get away with. The “incompleteness” embedded in found-footage horror cinematography makes the audience’s terror more complete than any other kind of horror imagery could. Omission of the less believable details that characters are unlikely to capture on camera, given the extraordinary circumstances surrounding them, promises that there is significantly less disbelief for viewers to suspend and much more room for active belief generation.

The searching camera and its forthright communication of its own fallibility are essentials of all found-footage horror, from films like *The Blair Witch Project* to ARGs like *AlanTutorial* and *Marble Hornets*. In the former, the diegetic cameras that have rendered its images, wielded by student filmmakers, warrant the shakiness added to the frame, the failure to capture every source of sound, and the often completely-black image. In fact, while main characters Heather, Josh, and Mike get ominous rock piles, symbolically-arranged sticks, and a creepy, dilapidated house on film, they never once record any evidence of the Blair Witch herself. The film’s refusal to allow even a glimpse of its major narrative threat is not simply a lack of visual payoff – it assures the viewer that, if the supposed Blair Witch really did kill three film students, *The Blair Witch Project* is exactly what it would have looked like on the students’ cameras. Equally minimalistic depiction of narrative danger defines *AlanTutorial*, which implies that its protagonist, Alan, is abducted by a sinister organization after being lost outside of his home for

an extended period of time, but never reveals the inner-workings or members of said organization. Alan initially handles the camera in a constant search for captivating tutorial subjects, but this handheld frame becomes horrifying after Alan's kidnapping, when it reveals vague manifestations of the organization's distant, omnipotent constraint of Alan, like unsettling scribbles on walls ("Disk Tutorial") and rotating, appendage-like shapes in darkness ("tt"). As evidenced by the *Paranormal Activity* films and, at times, *Marble Hornets*, the "searching camera" need not always be handheld. When the camera is stationary on a tripod in the former, or has been lain down by the cameraperson in the latter, the composition of the frame becomes static, minimizing the amount of space the camera can search, perhaps, but maximizing the time it can search a particular area. Searching still occurs – viewers are merely more responsible for peering into the image in order to conduct it themselves, rather than allowing the mobility of the frame to guide their search. In the cases of all the films and ARGs mentioned, though, the camera cannot display dangerous entities in full because it is "authentically" restricted to the cameraperson's hands or static camera mounts – it amplifies viewers' awareness of and belief in danger by reducing their ability to make sense of it.

While amateurish cinematography augments the authenticity of found-footage horror most immediately, the components of sound and editing do so as well, further emphasizing the diegetic technology's inability to manage the threat of an antagonist. To craft an aesthetic of authenticity via editing in found-footage horror, one must cut not with deference to the logic of a given scene's drama, like in a classical film, but instead with respect to the logic of the cameraperson's mind. Rebecca Coyle, in a discussion of *Cloverfield's* formal construction, notes that "...editing is restricted to moments when the camera is dropped, switched off or fast-forwarded as part of the action," (Coyle 222), all of which are deemed edit-worthy situations by



Hud, the film's cameraman character. This particular rationale for cutting is what results, typically, in the long takes that provide enough time for handheld cinematography to expose viewers to threats. Off-screen sound, the corollary to found-footage cinematography's reliance on off-screen space, also reinforces an authentic aesthetic, as does unclear sound. Lack of diegetic sound-recording equipment in found-footage films and characters' disregard for projecting their voices to the camera make audio less distinct and subsequently more genuine-sounding. The role of this authentic sound, Coyle theorizes, is to "...traverse the psychological and intellectual terrain of the film's characters and cast doubt on the impending future," (qtd. in 228). Purposely-imperfect audio diminishes the amount of information viewers hear until it is analogous to the realistic insufficiency of what characters in the film hear, removing yet another way that viewers could have otherwise "captured" danger with the filmic medium.

Generally, an amateurish aesthetic contributes to both a film's authenticity and its horror because it does not obscure the fact that a film's content is not conducive to viewers' complete understanding; viewers, like characters, can try to make sense of a threatening entity by capturing or seeing it on film, but can never know enough to permanently protect themselves from harm. In addition to opening the possibility of interaction (as will be discussed later), the found-footage horror ARG exacerbates viewers' senses of uncertainty, danger, and horror beyond what is possible for a found-footage film, making immersion more encompassing and the psychological need for interactivity all the more pronounced. Believability and fright reach new apexes when found-footage horror takes a cinematic ARG's format, as the narrative fragmentation enabled by online, multimedia exhibition blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction until it almost ceases to exist. The cinematic ARG does not just, in Sayad's words, "loosen the frame's borders", but removes them entirely, and viewers' horror, whether in the

forms of “compassion and outrage” that Kawin describes or panic, disgust, or sorrow, flourishes beyond what more traditional works of horror cinema can evoke.

Authentic uncertainty in cinematic ARGs’ narratives can arise, first, from the presence of multiple narrators. If one of these games includes different characters who are all in possession of their own cameras, platforms for video exhibition, and motivations, a cinematic ARG can take advantage not just of viewers’ confusion about what they see in front of the camera, but also of their confusion over the intents and identities of the characters behind cameras. In a conventional found-footage horror film, different characters may wield the camera at different times, but that fact is always coded. Whether it includes a shot of the cameraperson’s face and body as they first pick up the camera or their voice is the loudest part of the soundscape because they are closest to the camera’s microphone, a theatrical found-footage film assures viewers of the identity of its cameraperson. In *Cloverfield*, for instance, it is self-evident that Jason hands the camera to Hud early in the film’s runtime, and that Hud records until he dies and Rob picks up the camera; these moments are captured, visually, on the diegetic camera. The first two *Paranormal Activity* films make it similarly obvious whether it is Katie, Micah, Christie, Daniel, or Ali recording.

On a number of occasions in *Marble Hornets*, however, footage of an encounter with the Operator (canonic name of the series’ Slenderman-esque entity) might be all the more disturbing because there are no means of figuring out who captured it – for the protagonist, Jay, as well as the audience (“Entry #29”). At other times, footage filmed with Jay’s camera might lull viewers into a sense of security until the person recording reveals himself to not be Jay at all (“Entry #41”). In these cases, the ARG is disturbing for its narrative uncertainty. Not knowing the identity of these particular videos’ creators and not being able to contact them leaves viewers, as Kawin says, having “...witnessed an event without being able to affect it,” (Kawin 204). The

ARG's designers are able to weave such complications into their series because of its broadcast on the Internet; uploading to YouTube over a period of time necessitates serialization, and serialization, in turn, allows narrative gaps to reduce context at the beginning of each new video. Not knowing who the author of each video is, viewers experience not just constant fear of seeing the ominous and unknowable "Operator" when they watch *Marble Hornets*, but also the anxiety of potential conflict between characters who can all communicate with their cameras.

Unity of narration is further destabilized in the series by a second YouTube channel, "totheark", whose diegetic owners are unknown and whose intermittent uploads could as easily be the mocking of a looming antagonist as the benevolent, if cryptic communications of characters on Jay's side. Videos on the channel are unsettling in a formal sense due to their distorted audio and visuals, but are also narratively so because viewers cannot know who made them or what purpose they serve without doing considerable cryptographic work, and even afterward, they remain largely ambiguous. The fragmentation encouraged by an online exhibition, then, troubles viewers' knowledge of the series by omitting contextual information, including who is filming at a given moment, who is uploading a particular video, and, even more importantly, what these individuals' intentions are. This lack of knowledge is, of course, frightening, but having to figure out who is responsible for recording footage is also a distinctly authentic requirement of a narrative comprising multiple characters with hidden identities – it reinforces the film world's horror through realism. Viewers would expect an age in which everyone has access to film equipment and the Internet to produce a less curated narrative – a story that does not deliver a single, unified message, but a complex dialogue among many characters. Even if the use of this format is at the expense of viewers' easy understanding, it is more believable, and the content of the narrative is, subsequently, more horrifyingly uncertain.

Online exhibition allows a cinematic ARG to withhold narrative information for the sake of horror in another way – by purposely failing to distinguish what parts of its story are more and less significant, demanding that viewers sift through disjointed narrative units (videos) in order to amass sufficient knowledge of the ARG’s story. Parsing fragmented, often non-linear segments is obviously crucial to the gameplay of ARGs, but to engage with a work of cinema in that manner is an immersive process in itself, and thus one that must be discussed in this chapter. *Marble Hornets* quite effectively displays the immersive power of having to construct a story out of disparate parts, as its videos are mediated by a protagonist who is largely a stand-in for viewers; he can affect the story more than viewers can, of course, but he spends much of his time reacting to the footage he uploads, just like the viewers for whose benefit he uploads it. Jay is a conduit for viewers and makes an exemplary case for the affecting, disturbing power that active interpretation of disparate narrative units has. For much of the series, he sorts through unmarked video cassette tapes in an effort to construct a timeline of the events they document and deduce what they might omit. Jay is akin to an ideal viewer for much of the series, as he, in accordance with the typical found-footage horror protagonist, is not omniscient, but always admits what he does not know, both in his videos’ opening and closing title cards and on his diegetic Twitter account, through which he speaks directly to the audience.

However, toward the end of *Marble Hornets*, constant hotel-jumping to avoid antagonists, trying to find more tapes, and piecing together of footage take their toll on Jay’s mental health, to the point that he no longer knows what he does not know. While the decline of Jay’s faculties occurs partly because of an instance of extended exposure to the Operator (“Entry #72”), he displays a general paranoia starting before that moment, around the time of Entry #69, suggesting that it is, in fact, caused by following the procedure of story construction so

militantly. At the onset of his paranoia, he uploads a video of an event whose footage directly refutes his recollections of that event in other videos (“Entry #70”), and after discovering that his investigative partner, Tim, has lied to him about something, he refuses to believe that Tim is anything but an enemy (“Entry #75”). The difference between the decline of Jay’s mental health and viewers’ experiences, though, is that Jay lives through the ARG, while viewers have it mediated through a screen for them, distancing them from permanent trauma while giving them a poignant-but-safe semblance of it through online detective work.

Some of Nichols’ writing on documentary addresses how viewers’ own construction of narrative can augment the authenticity of the material they are interpreting, and therefore heighten the immersion of their viewing experience as a whole. When discussing the “poetic” mode of documentary, he states that there are aesthetic alternatives to “... the straightforward transfer of information,” (Nichols 103), that can seem equally, if not more, truthful, implying that when information is not outlined in a straightforward way and viewers must tease it out themselves, the apparent authenticity of cinema persists or even grows. In the case of a cinematic ARG, the fact that narrative information is hidden and not lying out in the open for viewers undoubtedly makes the story seem more believable to them, enhancing their fear beyond what a theatrical found-footage film could provoke from them. Jay serves as a reminder of how immersive the sensation of investigation can be – enough to overwhelm, and the fragmentation of online exhibition allows an ARG to play at that sensation without actually endangering viewers’ wellbeing.

Another method of authentic story presentation, which foregrounds the horrifying uncertainty of an ARG’s narrative, is the situating of anomalous, terrifying events within the mundanity of everyday life. This strategy is another that the cinematic ARG borrows from

found-footage horror films, so an analysis of how the latter employs it is necessary before looking at the ways the former intensifies it. According to Grant, found-footage horror takes special care to “...depict the monstrous in mundane spaces,” (Grant 173), an approach that introduces everyday circumstances to connect with viewers as directly as possible, and then reveals a horrific danger that is all the more invasive for its proximity to that which is relatable. Obviously, the depiction of the mundane is another kind of appeal to an authentic aesthetic (not in a cinematographic sense but through *mise-en-scène* and narrative elements), bolstering realism and horror by placing a threat amidst what used to be familiar. Virtually every popular found-footage horror film of the last twenty years makes use of the tactic. Viewers of *The Blair Witch Project* get to know its three main characters as film students who joke around in hotel rooms before any supernatural-seeming events transform their average lives into extraordinary ones, while the *Paranormal Activity* films are set in, arguably, the comfortingly-unremarkable setting of suburban homes. The reason for this mundanity trend in found-footage horror, in Sayad’s words, is that the postmodern population has a morbid fascination for seeing “...the walls separating art from everyday life... demolished,” (Sayad 48). The word “demolished” suggests that the appeal of seeing horror represented within the familiar is in the suddenness of the former’s intrusion upon the latter, as horrifying elements are all the more effective if their presence is abrupt. Of all the recent found-footage horror films, *Cloverfield* facilitates the surprise of horror’s reveal amongst mundane situations most masterfully, as it meanders through a nearly 30-minute sequence of young adults at a house party before its tentacled monster begins tormenting New York without having provided any warning of it during that sequence.

However, even *Cloverfield*’s exposure of the horror lurking beyond everyday events does not manipulate mundanity quite well enough to orchestrate a complete, terrifying surprise, and

that fact serves to highlight the reasons that a cinematic ARG, with its online exhibition setting, can all but perfect such manipulation. Once it plays through actual footage captured by a camera, *Cloverfield* gives away nothing about the monster that will imminently invade its other characters' lives, but before the story even fully begins, a title slate declares that the footage has been recovered by US government agents, inducing a sense of looming danger. An ad campaign, which ironically took place on the Internet, also acknowledged the horror that would eventually plague the banality of the movie's opening sequence (Smith 1). These standards of introducing (with title cards) and advertising a theatrical film preempt horror by making viewers expect it before the film even begins. Sayad, who justifiably celebrates found-footage films' plausible appearance, concedes that *Paranormal Activity* must conform to theatrical exhibition protocol and "...include a 'The characters and events are fictitious' title card at the end of its runtime," (Sayad 52). *Paranormal Activity 2* attempts, in fact, to escape the standard procedure to preserve its appearance of authenticity by separating its final image from its credits with thirty seconds of blank screen – in the hope, surely, that some spectators will leave the theater without seeing that someone directed and produced the film. No such diminishing of belief need occur when watching a cinematic ARG online, as the Internet has no such standards of film exhibition. *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial* have no opening or closing credits and no admission that their depicted stories are fake.

The series' online broadcast allows them to deepen viewers' immersion further than theatrical found-footage films can, as an online, cinematic ARG's serialized structure (borne out of the inherently fragmented nature of Internet posting) can authentically buttress moments of horror with the sinisterly mundane. For audiences who watched *AlanTutorial* or *Marble Hornets* as their creators published videos, they lived through the series, keeping up with a video each

month on average and dozens of posts on the protagonists' respective Twitter accounts, but even for those who watch these series after they end, videos and Twitter posts still provide a sense of the time over which they were originally published. Each video and tweet, particularly those which do not indicate that anything "wrong" or different is going on in the protagonists' lives, is a stand-in for up to weeks' worth of time. Posted over the course of years, these components of an ARG's story collectively represent all the mundanity of characters' lives, rendering horrifying moments all the more surprising, affecting, and believable once they occur. When *AlanTutorial*'s protagonist Alan finds himself trapped outside his house ("Locked Out Of Room Tutorial"), the moment has been preceded by thirty-five other banal tutorial videos, uploaded over the course of a year and a half; this apparent dedication to making tutorials suggests that Alan is a real person whose life has suddenly undergone an unsettling change. For *Marble Hornets* viewers, similarly, Jay's tweets about weeks-long migrations from hotel to hotel augment the surprise and terror of subsequent encounters with Alex, Brian, and the Operator once they are uploaded in videos to YouTube. The found-footage horror film provides viewers with a curated experience, in which the less important moments of the fabula (characters' story) are omitted from the syuzhet (narrative structure), but ARGs insist that viewers remember these so-called less important moments – or, more accurately, redefines them as important by using them to illustrate characters' lives more comprehensively. Additional emphasis on the mundane, permitted by the ARG's Internet exhibition, forces viewers to keep in mind the uneventful portions of characters' lives, preserving the realism of its story and also buttressing the impact of the moments in their lives that are, indeed, extraordinarily frightening.

The ability for the Internet to present information, cinematic or otherwise, with a greater semblance of authenticity might even go beyond the serialization and fragmentation it



encourages in the web series format – there is, arguably, a guise of authenticity upheld by online material because people subconsciously consider the Internet to be generally trustworthy. There seems to be an averageness, or perhaps a “mundanity”, to the Internet user and the subject matter of their postings that permits others to believe that a given user has neither the means nor the inclination to lie on the Internet, a presumption that makes an ARG’s “this is not a game” assertion all the more effective. The apparent honesty of an Internet user leads to a discussion not of a formal authentic aesthetic, but a pretense of personal credibility. The “democratization” of the Internet and relatively cheap film equipment has produced an online world in which everyone (the “average” person more than anyone else) is happy to upload videos they have recorded themselves. The accessibility of the Internet as a film exhibition setting persuades users that other users are average people who have no deceitful motives for posting videos; hence, most media takes a documentary label, in some capacity, as soon as someone posts it online, and cinematic ARGs can disguise themselves with that label to blend in with the mundane.

The public’s unconscious presumption of online media’s credibility is not as terribly misguided as it might sound. The fact that the Internet has become quotidian has greatly affected the “content” posted there. What John Caldwell affirms about the kinds of material conducive to a television broadcast, in his writing on the western world’s transition from theatrical cinema to television, becomes even truer, in many respects, when applied to Internet material. Caldwell alludes, in a sense, to the credibility of television in comparison to traditional cinema when he mentions that “...film (far more than TV)... is constantly judged... vis à vis its potential for artistic distinction,” (Caldwell 92), suggesting that the genres of film are more stylized and, certainly, more often fictional than those of television. Caldwell states, in accompaniment, not only that “...films and series that comment on other films, filmic trends, and film history have

been a dominant tendency on the small screen since the 1940s,” (93), but also that “Television has traditionally been seen as more research oriented than film,” (94).

The penchant for commentary, research, or, in other words, documentary, is an even more obvious quality of the Internet; YouTube is home to considerable evidence of the fact. Data all over the Internet substantiate the claim that the website hosts very little fictional, narrative material. Instead, the most commonly produced and consumed videos inhabit the genres of product reviews, tutorials (Alan’s channel is all the more banal, at first, for its focus on this type of video), vlogs, unboxing videos, (“12 Best”, “10 Most Popular”, “13 Most Popular”), and other similarly non-fictional, non-narrative categories. What this data reveals is that the Internet’s ubiquity has spawned a user-base that comprises mostly “average” people and that the subject matter and styles of most postings are correspondingly “average”. The mundanity that encourages belief and evokes horror for ARG viewers, then, begins long before they even begin watching, as if a given ARG uses every minute viewers have spent online to lure them into a false sense of security before their tumble down a “rabbit hole”.

By utilizing handheld cameras and the Internet as ways of accentuating its pretense of credibility (to a greater extent than found-footage horror films are able to for their own), the cinematic ARG appeals to another type of horror, rooted in its subject matter and means of production. Both found-footage films and cinematic ARGs – the latter in particular – address the fear that so-called average people have over being separated from the technology that has become foundational in their lives. To evoke anxiety over that separation, they first highlight the advantageousness of the human-camera partnership. The advantage that humans would gain from their use of cinematic technology was, in fact, foretold and encouraged by Vertov, who called for an “emancipation of the camera,” (Vertov 14), that would improve upon “...the

imperfections and shortsightedness of the human eye,” (14). In accordance with Soviet ideals, Vertov wanted, broadly-speaking, the harmonious combination of human and machine – a union that found-footage horror films like *Paranormal Activity* represent as having occurred eighty years after Vertov’s call to action. Micah all but proves the existence of the demon tormenting him and Katie by extending his own sight with his camera, which he can set up on a tripod while he sleeps and “see through” after the fact. During the camera’s nighttime vigils, its night-vision capabilities (a feature also employed in *Cloverfield* when Hud records inside the New York subway system) serve as another enhancement of Micah’s own, imperfect human vision.

That viewers watch a found-footage film through these camera abilities and others, like the zoom function, is the manifestation of what Grant considers “...identifying with the camera and its particular point of view,” (Grant 154), as opposed to identifying with a human character’s perspective. Hart references Grant’s conception, calling the camera-human connection “...almost Vertovian, intended to account for those moments in which the camera’s view is detached from the vision of a cameraperson,” (Hart 77). This detachment suggests that a found-footage film viewer’s identification is not exclusively with the person holding the camera, but that it oscillates between cameraperson and camera itself, across moments that the camera’s unique abilities are used and moments they are not. In the found-footage horror film, then, identification is hybrid and flexible, depicting the relationship between the camera and its human user as complementary and advantageous to that user.

The only reason it is difficult to dub the dynamic “harmonious” is that a supernatural or extraterrestrial threat is constantly on the verge of disrupting its harmony; the presence of a demon or alien quickly turns an expedient relationship with the camera, for the human character, into a dependent one, which, if severed, elicits disaster. For Micah and even for Katie, the titular

paranormal activity, when mediated through their cameras and seen the day after it occurs, becomes digestible and observable as opposed to intolerably terrifying, which it always is for them at the time it occurs. One notices the usefulness of the camera in *Marble Hornets* as well, whenever the Operator approaches the cameraperson. On such occasions, visual distortion interferes with the image – perhaps a backhanded attack on the Operator’s part against the cameraperson’s means of “capturing” him, but once rendered in the digital video file, the distortion functions as a tool for viewers, as it signals the presence of the threat before it is perceptible to the human eye. Once characters discover the practicality of the camera, though, it ends up a troubling necessity to use it, which is most clearly conveyed in *Marble Hornets* when Jay realizes that “Alex wanted to have a camera on himself at all times,” (“Entry #3”).

Again, though, in the cinematic ARG, the camera is not the only shield against threats on which characters must rely; the Internet as a publication platform has an even higher status as useful and necessary for Jay and Alan in their respective series. For both characters, in their own ways, broadcasting their footage (and their voices on Twitter accounts) becomes their only reason for living. In defense of his ceaseless documentation of his own turmoil to Tim, Jay puts it as such: “In case something happens, I want people to know,” (“Entry #59”). The seemingly well-intentioned motive eventually consumes Jay so completely, however, that he begs Tim in frenzied shouts not to take his camera, insisting that he “needs it” (“Entry #77”), when Tim ties him up as a precautionary measure. Though Tim takes the camera, he ostensibly precludes Jay’s ability to upload footage to the Internet as well, in what is a time-sensitive situation at that moment in the narrative. Jay’s panic over losing his broadcast platform is representative of how fragile reliance on technology in the Information Age has made people; the Internet, in large part, is Jay’s only aide in communicating his crisis to the world – if Alex, Brian, Tim, or the

Operator “disconnects” him, he loses everything. The same is even truer of Alan in *AlanTutorial*, whose life revolves around uploading tutorial videos to YouTube initially, and who is later imprisoned in a tiny white cell with nothing to do but record things with a camera and upload the resultant footage online. If the organization detaining Alan were to strip him of his camera, he, too, would have no means of communicating anymore – to anyone. In these ways, the cinematic ARG harnesses the inherent credibility of a ubiquitous exhibition platform to explore people’s dependence on it, striking fear into viewers’ hearts over being disconnected from it.

In essence, the horror-puzzle hybrid genre that is the cinematic ARG maintains something of a hybrid identity even within its horror component, which contains both horrifying subject matter and a documentarian formal aesthetic. Horror inscribed within documentary, which is collectively one half of the cinematic ARG and in harmonious opposition to the puzzle half (to be outlined in Chapter 3), constitutes the genre’s immersive core. The aesthetic of authenticity, as the cinematic ARG uses it to engender a specifically horrifying believability, summarily becomes the backbone of the genre – something that refines it into a singular experience with a coherent, affecting narrative. On a spectrum of ARGs, this “cinematic” version retains greater immersive ability than those with rather greater interactivity do. Yet, the reason ARGs like *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial* spark the “desire to believe” more powerfully than found-footage horror films, which are more singular for their comparative formal unity, is that they use a fragmented structure to supersede the boundaries of formal unity while still reaching a threshold that guarantees narrative cohesion. The act of pushing against unity in the stylistic sense without eliminating it in the narrative sense is a tool that tightens the screws of immersion; it casts a wider net over the fabula to create a more encompassing syuzhet, but not one wide enough to destabilize its cohesion. To represent, or even imply, a greater proportion of story

events with disparate plot units is to increase viewers' sense of a cinematic work's authenticity and, subsequently, strengthen their connection to its fictional world – so much so that the world may not feel fictional anymore. Cinematic ARGs set new benchmarks for viewer immersion with this strategy, as well as the acknowledgement of uncertainty in cinematography, sound design, and editing, by transforming conventional immersion into an active decision to believe – a desire to not just experience, but live through the anxieties produced by the aesthetic of authenticity.

## 3

Pushing the Limits of Viewer Activity into Experimental Territory

Everything about an online, cinematic alternate reality game that transcends theatrical cinema's ability to immerse viewers is, on its own, a theoretical positive, as heightened immersion evokes a desire to interact with a fictional world – a desire which must be satisfied for that immersion to really lead anywhere. The ARG's "This is Not a Game" aesthetic, which renders the cinematic experience more plausibly real than a traditional fiction film has ever been, does elicit enhanced viewer engagement, but said engagement requires an outlet. A cinematic ARG that pushes viewers to such a level of investment must reorient its own parameters in order to contain resultant viewer activity; only inasmuch as viewers can affect a cinematic ARG's story – more than they can a theatrical film's – is unmatched immersion significant and measurable. Although a cinematic ARG does not prioritize viewer activity over its designers' ability to regulate narrative events, like a more roleplaying-intensive ARG does, its limited, guided viewer participation is what truly locates it at a position of harmony between viewer and designer autonomy. The cinematic ARG may not make viewer and designer authorship equal, but it perfectly balances them. Viewer interaction with the ARG designers, their narrative, and even other viewers, is both the result of and perfect counterpart to the belief-enabling immersion that the designers are largely responsible for enabling.

This chapter will explore the viewer activity that complements all the previously-discussed immersive qualities of the cinematic ARG, first by analyzing the characteristics of puzzle cinema that it adopts, and then by extending those puzzle elements into the territory of gameplay. To formulate "enhanced viewer activity" as gameplay is essential because cinematic ARGs improve on the participatory elements of puzzle cinema specifically by making the

viewing experience even more, although still not entirely, game-like, ultimately facilitating personal and societal enrichment. The insertion of viewer participation (with the potential for genuine narrative consequences) into the moving-image domain makes the cinematic ARG a laboratory in which humans' cognitive ability and investment in higher purposes can be tested and studied.

At the most basic level, manifestations of viewer activity in cinematic ARGs are the results of, but still separate from, any and all immersive characteristics, and so it is crucial to define them from the ground up. While horror film conceits and documentary-esque realism render a cinematic ARG immersive, as the previous chapter explained, features of puzzle cinema, embedded in the ARG's narrative, give viewers things to do. The puzzle genre, which one might argue is a step away from classical Hollywood cinema and toward the much more sprawling field of experimental cinema, is, in truth, more comprehensively defined by what it does not do than what it does, but scholars have managed to jointly affirm some of its tendencies. Film scholar Warren Buckland summarizes the genre as one that "...introduces new cognitive concepts into film studies... [by exploring] progressive, regressive, recounted, and fragmented storylines," (Buckland 9). Much of the narrative formatting that, as discussed in the last chapter, augments a cinematic ARG's potential to be authentic and horrifying serves as the base of its puzzle ingredients; the serialization that makes a cinematic ARG seem to play out in real-time also makes its narrative units feel disjointed and keeps them from being reliant on logical, temporal causality.

As demonstrated by some of the genre's most popular films, virtually all puzzle cinema is founded on narrative fragmentation, the likes of which is also the crux of the cinematic ARG. *Memento* (Nolan 2000) takes the form of amnesic non-linearity to recount protagonist Leonard's



pursuit of the man who murdered his wife because he, himself, has amnesia, for one example. *Mulholland Drive* (Lynch 2001), additionally, relates Betty and Rita's search for Diane Selwyn as a wandering dream-story full of other, seemingly unrelated vignettes because the protagonist's dream constitutes the bulk of the film, *Run Lola Run* (Tykwer 1998) adopts a circular narrative to allow Lola three attempts to collect 100,000 marks. The effect of such "complex", or unconventional, structures is to emphasize the fact that a film is "...a mental representation the spectator constructs during his or her experience of the film's plot," (7).

Notably, all films require viewers to construct the narrative events they parse into a coherent story by paying attention to "...schemata, cues, and inferences," (qtd. in 7), a catalogue of comprehension tools devised by David Bordwell; the complexity of puzzle films, however, demands a relatively high degree of attentiveness to see their stories as coherent. According to film historian Thomas Elsaesser, puzzle cinema spectatorship "...involves constant retroactive revision, new reality checks, displacements, and reorganization of temporal sequence, mental space, and the presumption of a possible switch in cause and effect," (Elsaesser 21), which denotes a significant relegation of storytelling responsibility to viewers. *Marble Hornets*, *AlanTutorial*, and similar cinematic ARGs, whose order of the day is narrative fragmentation that withholds information from spectators, more than satisfy those puzzle film criteria for enhanced viewer activity, making the cinematic experience more collaborative, more sprawling, and more enriching than any moving-image media has before.

Perhaps the trademark of puzzle cinema most easily observable in the cinematic ARG is non-linearity – an unconventional temporal ordering of narrative events. In both the puzzle film and the ARG that borrows from it, non-linear storytelling helps to strike the all-important balance between filmmaker guidance and viewer production of meaning that defines an optimal

work of cinema. *Memento* stands as one of the most culturally impactful examples of a theatrical film that is a “puzzle film” specifically because it is non-linear, which, in the words of Stefano Ghislotti, “...hinders some basic functions of memory,” (Ghislotti 88). The film intercuts scenes from two distinguishable plot threads in alternating order, one of which is marked by colored visuals and unfolds in reverse temporal order, the other of which appears black and white and occurs in “proper” temporal order. Ghislotti speaks to the near-mathematical thought that goes into constructing and reconstructing such a plot, notating the film’s scenes and placing them into a formula which reads, “ $C1(e) + BW1 + C2(e-1) + BW2 + C3(e-2)$  [and so on]... Where BW = black and white sequences and C = color sequences whose flow of events (e) moves backward (e-1, e-2, etc.)” (94-95). This narrative formula is an immediately-graspable representation of the work that viewers must perform to construct a coherent story out of a non-linear plot. It “...shows how deeply viewers’ memory is involved in cinematic narrations,” (88), and how, exactly, viewers confront the “...confusion... precipitated by muddling, overlapping, and exchanged story segments,” (94). Said confrontation, and the difficulty it adds to making sense of *Memento*, ensures that viewers are sympathetically aligned with the amnesic Leonard, who must work through his own thoughts in similar ways. This expressive subjectivity that evokes such confusion in viewers could never be achieved by standard temporal ordering, and it directly results in a collaborative story-building effort between filmmakers and audience – as well as a more accurate understanding of a psychologically-compromised person.

Again, the very same non-linearity of story representation characterizes cinematic ARGs, but the fragmentation inherent to ARGs’ serialized format exacerbates the need for Ghislotti’s style of “formulaic” story construction by jumbling and withholding more narrative information than a theatrical puzzle film’s unified format does. *Marble Hornets*’ syuzhet, or the presentation

of its story, is very disorderly, for instance; the guiding principles of its plot disclosure are not as simple as *Memento*'s alternation and reversal, or even *Mulholland Drive*'s sudden explanation of previously-omitted details. It begins "in the past", in 2006, returns to "the present", in 2009, proceeds until 2011, returns to a period of 2010, then progresses to 2014, with intermittent returns to 2006 and 2010 – the non-linearity is almost staggering because the only guiding narrative principle is Jay's decision-making as he continues discovering footage recorded at different times. Because the series takes advantage of the serialized structure intrinsic to online uploading, its storylines reach this degree of entanglement, creating a "...rhizomatic structure... of hotspots and network nodes," (Elsaesser 23) for viewers to navigate. For the duration of the series, videos jump perplexingly back and forth in time while Jay's discovery of footage and general focalization are often secondary, providing the bare minimum in continuity across videos. Jay's abilities as an investigator, furthermore, are imperfect, meaning that the ARG's non-linearity does not simply constitute an unconventional ordering of story events, but also purposeful incompleteness. Viewers' activity often involves conceiving of entire portions of the story and then placing them correctly on the series' timeline, as the series' fragmented structure omits certain details even if they are essential to viewers' comprehension – moments that characters did not record what was happening with their cameras. Gaps in the story can be small, like whatever missing incident makes Jay "...go from being apologetic to violent," ("Entry #82") before he attacks Tim ("Entry #78"), or can be entire swaths of the story, like most of the contents of the wandering, hooded character's existence.

The same narrative breaks define *AlanTutorial*, whose plot is, in fact, only non-linear inasmuch as it is non-continuous; what exactly results in Alan's being restricted to a tiny, white room ("simple tape tutorial (easy)") and why the room eventually becomes inhospitably filthy

(“V-2014-83-4324”), among other things, are up to the viewer to determine. While viewers must often make a “...comprehensive hypothesis about the form,” (Ghislotti 93) of a cinematic ARG, in order to figure out when footage was recorded, they more often have to make hypotheses about actual content that the ARG keeps mysterious. In allowing viewers to determine not just when its narrative events took place, but also what exactly took place at various times, cinematic ARGs approach storytelling harmony between viewer and designer.

This withholding of story content, which goes beyond merely concealing the true temporal order of events – occurs in a number of ways, one of which can be through the focalizer of a cinematic ARG’s narrative. Subjective focalization, or narration from individual characters’ perspectives, permits viewers to know only as much as those characters do, obscuring information about who the uploaders of certain videos in a series are and tightening the knot of plot threads which viewers must unravel. It is undoubtedly possible for theatrical puzzle films to manage this feat as well; *Mulholland Drive*’s extensive dream-sequence, for instance, makes it seem as if actress Rita’s and director Adam’s stories are focalized by an implied, omniscient narrator, when, in fact, actress Diane focalizes their storylines in a dream she has. However, this setup provokes an assumption about who focalizes the narrative – one which the film undermines upon revealing that much of its story is, in fact, a dream. When a theatrical puzzle film initially allows viewers to construct parts of its story for themselves, specifically by withholding information about the identity of the focalizing character, it typically facilitates this kind of revelation later on. Another example of that phenomenon arises in *The Sixth Sense* (Shyamalan 1999), in which the details of the protagonist, Malcolm’s, identity (the fact that he is dead) only become known to viewers after a sudden “twist” in the film’s plot. According to Daniel Barratt, this film and others like it evoke “twist blindness” (Barratt 62) in viewers, by manipulating their

attention and memory. In his words, "...our first impression of a person or situation 'primes' us to label that person or situation using a certain type of schema which biases the way in which we interpret, and attend to, subsequent information," (67). Generally, a puzzle film can only keep a character's identity a secret if it either does not permit that character to focalize narrative information (as any film can do) or misleads the audience about the character, only to abruptly reveal the truth and force viewers to quickly reconstruct what they thought they knew about the film's story. That reconstruction does, of course, stand as viewer activity, but it is rarely prolonged, as viewers can only do it after the film's twist blindsides them; the film must keep viewers in the dark, unable to fully engage in story construction, until it is convenient.

The cinematic ARG, conversely, allows viewers to wonder continuously who focalizing characters might be, broadening the need for story construction (in this case, by way of deducing characters' identities) to the entire duration of the plot. The reason a cinematic ARG can produce and sustain such a need for this detective-work is that the online platform, by its very nature of democratizing speech, allows multiple characters to have authorial voices without needing to reveal much about themselves in the story. An ARG posted to YouTube can include multiple characters who use different YouTube channels, or even videos posted to one channel that are titled and visually coded in unique ways, in order to clearly mark the presence of different focalizers while keeping their identities secret. Whereas a theatrical film would likely induce unwanted confusion in viewers if it constantly oscillated between different characters' points of view without showing who those characters were, a cinematic ARG's serialization discourages assumptions of omniscience from entering viewers' heads. Within the series, there are multiple kinds of videos with different emblematic qualities, so spectators understand that multiple focalizers are present and spend time reasoning out who they all are.

Of theatrical puzzle films, Elsaesser notes that they can "...foreground issues of narrative and narratology [with tools such as]... unusual point of view structures," (Elsaesser 18). However, a cinematic ARG's attribution of its narrative units to different characters' authorship without revealing much about those characters does not simply disrupt suppositions about whose perspective viewers access and at what time, like *Mulholland Drive* does. Cinematic ARGs can amplify the unusualness a point of view structure such that it is not a unified artistic expression, but an entire dialogue, many of whose participants viewers must identify. Some characters in *Marble Hornets*, like the masked man and the hooded man, keep their identities secret from other characters and spectators, but retain great narrative influence by uploading videos to the "totheark" YouTube channel or even occasionally to the main "Marble Hornets" channel. One of viewers' major objectives as they watch the series, then, is to tease out information about who those characters might be – things they reveal about themselves purposely and cryptically in their uploads or things they unintentionally give away about themselves. In the case of this series and others, the format integral to online broadcast, fragmented and dialogic, has a puzzle-film sensibility regarding uncertain authorship, and then expands on it beyond what theatrical puzzle films have done. ARGs like *Marble Hornets* base their stories entirely on viewers' continual puzzling over who uploads which videos – they do not simply trick viewers into making assumptions about plot that are eventually undermined. The former approach encourages viewers to take genuine responsibility for deciphering the details of a story, highlighting the cinematic ARG's provision of creative agency to both its audience and its designers.

The puzzle film and ARG can catalyze spectator activity by other means – requiring that viewers engage in cryptography, see through deception, and do other detective work. Again, theatrical puzzle films can facilitate this type of activity, but in a more limited capacity than

cinematic ARGs are able to, as they only incite viewers to “decode hidden messages” as a bonus side-task secondary to narrative comprehension rather than as a genuine stipulation of narrative comprehension. This exact mode of viewer activity, and for that particular purpose, is another characteristic of puzzle cinema that Elsaesser discusses; he uses the term “lookies” to denote “Easter-egg-like” visual clues in films, and claims that they upgrade the viewing experience to “...a mind-game, played with movies,” (Elsaesser 13). Professors Allan Cameron and Sean Cubitt write on this kind of “...complex series of communications... [of which] viewers must keep track ... (152) as it appears in the “...police procedural and gangland cunning, coded messages, double crosses, and mistaken identity,” (Cameron, Cubitt 152) of *Infernal Affairs* (Lau, Mak 2004). When the main characters of the film, Yan and Ming, aptly glean information from clues and codes, viewers might be able to do so alongside them. Undoubtedly, encouraging viewers to do this work goes a long way toward enriching their viewing experience, but the limitations of that enrichment are clear in that the cryptographic activity the film incentivizes viewers to do can, at best, answer the question, ““Can you keep up [with the film’s story]?”” (155). In its theatrical format, “[The film] tests the viewer’s cognitive abilities... [and] spectatorship thus becomes a type of information management,” (155). These conditions of the viewing experience are beneficial in their own rights, but they do not add any stakes to viewers’ investigative work; failure to manage information sufficiently does not put comprehension of the film’s story at risk.

The cinematic ARG’s great accomplishment is managing do just that – put significant narrative comprehension at stake during viewers’ efforts to decipher numerical and linguistic codes as well as the meanings of “lookies”. *AlanTutorial* includes multiple visual symbols whose repeated presence begs viewers to attribute meanings to them. One of these symbols is

noteworthy for the effect it has on Alan and the odd settings in which it appears on occasions after its introduction. The blue chair, which first causes Alan a degree of distress far greater than what viewers have seen before when he tries to pick it up off the floor in his house (“How to Pick Up a Blue Chair”), appears anomalously in the woods eighteen months later (“DIY weatherize hole tutorial”), and haunts Alan to the point that he draws its likeness on the wall of his cell when he is imprisoned (“slow news day”). The chair’s repeated presence over years’ worth of narrative and the strange circumstances of its appearances load it with a hidden meaning that has much to do with Alan’s problems; it insists that viewers infer what it represents and glean something significant about the plot from it. Obviously, designating the responsibility of story construction to viewers leaves no definitive answer to interpretive quandaries like this one, but one possible explanation of the blue chair is that it symbolizes the death of Alan’s mother, and that its subsequent appearances after the first imply a corresponding loss of innocence (“*AlanTutorial: Explained*”). Another visual that appears late in the series all but requires spectators to give it significance. This object occupies Alan’s almost unrecognizably filthy cell in the ARG’s final three videos and looks vaguely akin to a pair of rotating human legs (“T [tutorial]//”). Determining the nature of this object is of consequence because, in the final moments of the series, it is the focal point of viewers’ interest in the messy, but unstimulating cell that has contained Alan for a year – it promises to explain something crucial, if metaphorical, about why such strange circumstances have befallen Alan.

*Marble Hornets* achieves a similar level of viewer activity through more conventional cryptography – mostly by way of its “totheark” videos. These short, borderline-experimental films are posted on the “totheark” YouTube channel as responses to certain *Marble Hornets* entries and present coded messages to the audience. Decryption of the messages involves things



as simple as converting numbers to alphabetical letters (“Regards”) and using the first letters of various words to spell something (“Version”), to things as complex as running abstract audio through a spectrogram and reading words spelled by the signals (“Decay”). A prevailing theory even suggests that these videos are color-coded as a rule – that those of them with old, black-and-white footage indicates communication with a particular character, red imagery signifies a video posted by a certain character, and red-and-blue stereoscopic imagery designates videos posted by another character (“*Marble Hornets: Explained*”). Like the “lookies” of *AlanTutorial*, these codes all but require decryption by viewers, as they compose crucial patterns of information that elucidate character motivations and identities whose unknowability otherwise perplexes viewers. In short, the detective work that comes alongside a viewing of these ARGs gives viewers a degree of autonomy over story construction that theatrical puzzle films cannot. Comprehension of codes is a stipulation of story comprehension, and viewers find themselves undertaking such challenges almost reflexively when they arise in a cinematic ARG.

The recently-cited “Explained” videos that a fan of *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial* has produced actually allude to a final manifestation of viewer activity within the realm of a cinematic ARG – interactivity with other viewers. Reception of moving-image media has always been a communal practice, as evidenced by the “...water cooler conversations... [for which] television provides fodder,” (Jenkins 26), but as Professor Henry Jenkins argues, “...for a growing number of people, the water cooler has gone digital,” (26). He primarily discusses the online groups that have attempted to spoil the television program *Survivor* (CBS 2004) by figuring out the order in which a season’s contestants vote each other off the show, essentially pitting viewers’ story construction against that of producers and turning reception of the show into an ARG. These kinds of fan communities “...are held together through the mutual

production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge,” (27), meaning that they locate a basis on which to bring diverse people together (the desire for knowledge). Collectively, these people can generate an aggregate amount of knowledge that none of the individuals in a community could have otherwise amassed.

Sharing information, of course, is exactly what happens at the traditional water cooler conversation about television, but the migration of media reception to the digital domain – the place of cinematic ARGs – has not only increased the number of people present for discussion, but also rendered discussion more immediate and more intense. When reactions to moving-image media are online, they can become instant, thorough analyses that construct the story of *Survivor* or *Marble Hornets*. An infamous *Survivor* spoiler, Dan Bollinger, has gone as far as to examine satellite photographs of a remote island used to set a season of the show, revealing “...specific buildings in the production compound,” (33) and many plot points of the season in question. Jenkins explains how the acts of “...gathering and processing information,” (28-29) allow fans of *Survivor* to participate in a “...contest with producers... [Which] in part creates the show’s mystique,” (25). Because viewers of a television show or cinematic ARG have access to the first ever global, if virtual, meeting place, which is always open and lively with discussion, they now have the ability to construct a film’s story themselves, before the filmmaker can do so. Online, viewers can be an ideal, synergistic audience.

Because cinematic ARG designers make their series with the intent that they be investigated closely, a series like *Marble Hornets* (for all aforementioned reasons) provides an even greater number of mysteries for viewers to solve, and even more opportunities for communal participation, than *Survivor* does. Again, the ARG’s original exhibition location, YouTube, tends to be one location for knowledge-sharing. After an ARG has concluded, viewers

may post “Explained” videos, in which they articulate their understanding of the series’ story, and in these videos’ comments, other viewers affirm, refute, or modify the poster’s and each other’s beliefs. When a cinematic ARG’s story is still unfolding, however, one is likely to find viewers doing industrious detective-work on other websites, such as the Unfiction forums (whose *Marble Hornets* pages are no longer available in 2020) and the *Marble Hornets* Reddit page (which still exists). On the latter, particularly in response to the enigmatic “totheark” videos, discussion abounded in a collective effort to tease out messages from code. Users rearrange and replace letters and symbols (“ToTheArk – Null”), try to understand distorted audio (“totheark – Quadrant”), and speculate about the objects and characters meant by vague referents in superimposed text (“Conversion”). The interpretive progress made during all of these activities is only possible because many minds contribute to it. Communities will always cluster around a person who has entered Graeber’s notion of the “temporary autonomous zone” (qtd. in Garcia, Niemeyer 7), due to a seemingly-correct deduction, but the opportunity for anyone to obtain such a position is equal on discussion sites, and so intelligence among investigators is nearly always cumulative. The analysis possible in communal online settings is another pillar of viewers’ own storytelling capabilities within a cinematic ARG – their power is combined as a result of it.

So far, this chapter has meant to say that the cinematic ARG uses puzzle-film narrative approaches, or provokes viewer participation in the form of story construction, to an extent that supersedes what even the most complex theatrical puzzle films elicit. The true extent of said viewer activity only becomes apparent, though, when one inspects the cinematic ARG specifically through the framework of gameplay. Some previously-cited scholars already consider puzzle films games, such as Elsaesser, who refers to them as “mind-game films”

(Elsaesser 13) because they strike a balance between classical cinema and “...the interactive video-game or computer simulation game,” (22). However, the cinematic ARG is not simply open to consideration as a game – it demands to be thought of as one. Obviously enough, the ARG’s extension of viewer activity has necessitated that the word “game” appear in its very name, and analysis of the core components of games demonstrates why. Jane McGonigal writes on games and their benefits at length, foremost defining them; she outlines four criteria which, if satisfied by a situation, establish that situation as a game. She claims that, “...all games share four defining traits: a goal, rules, a feedback system, and voluntary participation,” (McGonigal 21), and by measuring facets of the cinematic ARG from all its various dimensions against those requirements, one confirms that a cinematic ARG is more game-like than any other cinematic experience could be.

Three of McGonigal’s four stipulations for games are readily apparent in a player’s experience of the cinematic ARG – crucial to and indicative of why the genre is largely game-like, and, perhaps, slightly more foundational to it than they are to theatrical puzzle cinema. One of the four requirements is voluntary participation, which the cinematic ARG fulfils perhaps more observably than any other despite its deceptive use of “rabbit holes” to lure viewers into the world of the game. Once a player stumbles upon a cinematic ARG, they encounter little to no coercion to continue investigating it, as the mediation of the digital screen keeps any incentive to participate from being invasive; no matter how captivating the game is, players always make the choice to navigate its videos and websites, and are never affronted by real-life gameplay without warning. Once immersed in the game, players become aware of the next gameplay characteristic – a goal to pursue in the ARG universe, which “...orients participation and gives players a sense of purpose,” (21). To extract whatever information the ARG’s vague, fragmented narrative

leaves uncertain is always the game's goal. Within the story of *AlanTutorial*, for example, there are micro-level mysteries to solve, such as the meanings of the blue chair and the rotating objects in Alan's cell, but players will all have a united objective in figuring out the series' most fundamental questions – why Alan initially lives the way he does, who imprisons him, and what the series means to say about Alan's life overall. Locating the rules of a cinematic ARG, the third touchstone of gameplay, is less intuitive, but taking into account McGonigal's definition of the term reveals how rules do, indeed, exist in cinematic ARGs. McGonigal describes a game's rules as whatever conditions "...limit options for reaching the goal and thus unleash creativity by fostering strategic thinking," (21); as the goal of a cinematic ARG is to discern meaning, the code and ambiguity that hinder investigation are limiting conditions – the requirement of detective-work is, essentially, the "rule of the game". In perfectly satisfactory ways, the cinematic ARG fulfils these three prerequisites of gameplay, pushing the boundaries of what a cinematic experience can entail for viewers on their own.

The final of McGonigal's requirements, though, the feedback system, is the area in which the cinematic ARG fashions something completely unattainable for even the most complex theatrical puzzle film. The goal and rules of an ARG, which concern decoding messages in order to construct a story, qualify how much viewers have to lose over the prospect of unsuccessful cryptography, but it is the feedback system that illuminates what they stand to gain in legitimate, if theoretical, influence over the story. What a cinematic ARG manages to do with feedback best illustrates its ideal integration of viewer agency into a filmic experience that is still largely governed by designers. According to McGonigal, a game's feedback is the set of responses it gives players' inputs – what truly makes a game interactive, and what pushes players into "...a 'flow-state' [that allows them to] work at the very limits of their ability," (24). Most

significantly, though, adding feedback to a cinematic experience gives viewers an amount of hypothetical control over the ARG's story. The possibility of feedback is the result, or the reward, of all the cryptographic work players do throughout a cinematic ARG, and it functions as added incentive to continue doing it as well.

Many cinematic ARGs' most memorable and engaging moments are those in which players' input has, or at least maintains the appearance of having, a genuine effect on the story. Designers may force their audiences' collective decision-making in any number of ways, but when that semblance of audience agency is on display, the harmony of balanced player-designer authorship is accentuated, players' enrichment increases, and even their immersion is reinforced. In *TribeTwelve*, a cinematic ARG revolving around the Slenderman that plays out questionably for a number of reasons, has a monumental redeeming quality in a live-stream video that takes place about halfway through its run. Protagonist Noah plans to commit suicide in the video and, during its original broadcast, commenters urge him not to until something anomalous occurs (off-screen; viewers only find out what happened in a later video) and changes Noah's mind ("Livestream 2012"). Naturally, the designers' plan was never to let Noah follow through with his suicide, but the live-stream set-up gives viewers a semblance of power in helping him determine his actions. A similar moment in *LonelyGirl15*, discussed in Chapter 1, sees viewers decide if the series' major characters will meet someone who claims to want to help them, but could be deceiving them as well ("The Test"); though the designers likely had a plan to ensure that the audience voted in favor of meeting the stranger, there was room for viewers to, seemingly, have an impact on the story. The feedback – the designers' reactions – to these decisions solidifies both ARGs as living, responsive texts.

Simply put, the fact that cinematic ARG players have the ability to communicate with designers, who act as a character from the ARG they have created, turns them from viewers into minor characters within the diegetic world. Should a player notice a crucial bit of information before anyone else does, that player can contact one or more of the “characters” (the ARG designers who are playing them) via Twitter or other digital communication service on which those characters have established themselves and notify them of the discovery. Admittedly, during *Marble Hornets*’ and *AlanTutorial*’s runs, conveyance of information from player to major character was limited; fans with Twitter accounts would explain the cypher to a “totheark” code to Jay (“@marblehornets”) or try to tell Alan he was in danger (“@alantutorial”). Importantly, though, the actual degree of impact players ended up having in these two series and others is not representative of why the feedback system is a revolutionary feature of the cinematic ARG. Again, it is merely the presence of a feedback system that is vital, not the frequency of its operation – the promise of feedback alone enables significant participation for cinematic ARG viewers, placing real stakes behind their activity. If a player is able to cull enough information from videos to construct a complete narrative before an ARG’s story ends, that player has, by definition, figured out a solution to the protagonist’s problems and can ostensibly remove him from harm’s way with a simple message. Whether or not the designers of the ARG in question take that information into account as they progress their story, the players have collectively beaten the designers at their own game. In such a situation, they exert authorial control in a way that they never could when watching a theatrical puzzle film, which is not a continuing story that can contain any kind of feedback system based on contact between viewers and filmmakers.

Henry Jenkins' articulation of fan communities' interaction with *Survivor* showrunners remains useful in clarifying how cinematic ARGs, for the similar kind of interactivity they catalyze, stand as groundbreaking narrative experiments in balancing viewer and designer authorship. Jenkins' aforementioned conception of *Survivor* as a "...contest between viewers and producers," (Jenkins 25) alludes to the quasi-competitive nature of ARG players' and designers' parallel missions to build the ARG's story first. In the words of *Survivor* producer Mark Burnett, as cited by Jenkins, showrunners "...keep fans on their toes and stay one step ahead... [While fans] consider it a challenge to try to gain information before it's officially revealed – sort of like a code they are determined to crack," (qtd. in 25-26). In the realm of spoiling, which is principally what constitutes an ARG's player activity, viewers endeavor to construct the same story that the creators do, but if they can "finish construction" via correct interpretation before the creators can broadcast an entire story, they have taken a cinematic work of art that the creators began and ended it themselves. Such a process makes a cinematic ARG not just an instructive exercise in facilitating for designers and in investigation for players, but a fascinating object of narratological study. These games are manifestations of perpetual interplay between players and designers; the former constructs a story out of the components provided by the latter, and then the designers offer new material based on the choices viewers have already made. Each cinematic ARG is the result of a unique "chemical reaction" between designers' and players' authorial choices – distinct like the exact course of a particular play-through of any game, but permanent in the cinematic (and message-board based) residue that people can study after the reaction has concluded.

This chapter has noted that the effect of real-time, hybrid-authored cinematic works on their viewers is "enrichment", and the exact meaning of that word must be dissected, now that



cinematic ARGs' methods of facilitating viewer activity have been outlined. For *Survivor* viewers, spoiling "...gave them a new game to play just as they had started to tire..." (54) of the show itself, and in that sense, communal viewer activity can "...represent an extension of the pleasure built into the series," (56), whether the series is one made for television or an Internet ARG. McGonigal speaks to that same psychological effect, stating that gameplay, the likes of which the *Survivor* spoilers or ARG audience enacts with story construction, is "...invigorating... an opportunity to focus our energy with relentless optimism... the opposite of depression," (McGonigal 28-30). At its core, viewers' activity, and their subsequent ability to provoke implicit or explicit responses from creators, is a practice that fulfils, instills contentedness, and stabilizes the mind. This enrichment, it must be restated, does not have to be the result of successful detective-work, spoiling, or provocation of designer response; it is elicited by the mere attempt at story construction under circumstances where an audience has the theoretical ability to interact with the creators. In and of itself, the act of investigating a narrative, when it could hypothetically impact that narrative, is beneficial – meaning that the act can have no manifest results and still be so. Artist Miklos Kiss and Professor Steven Willemsen go as far as to say that even a failed attempt at constructing a story can serve as a form of freedom from the Enlightenment, or "...from being rationally contained in accordance with modern Western scientism," (Kiss, Willemsen 58).

This potential benefit of viewer activity with real stakes holds true in the cases of solvable cinematic ARGs and spoilable television series alike. In the case of a reality game show like *Survivor*, though, there is a downside to story construction if it reaches those who do not want to know about it, breaking McGonigal's gameplay rule of voluntary participation for all. When the game involves discovering information that a series will later reveal in much more

dramatic fashion, "...every viewer... runs the risk of learning more than they want to know," (Jenkins 56). The ARG, conversely, manages to remove the negative connotation from "spoiling", accounting for viewers' inclination to build a story around ambiguous narrative by making it necessary, and in turn ensuring that there is no concrete, dramatic reveal whose "spoiling" could leave viewers feeling cheated. Inasmuch, then, as it enables the very act of story construction (with real stakes in the story), giving players a sense of purpose, and largely eliminates the possibility of spoiling narrative information unsatisfactorily, the cinematic ARG has a positive psychological effect on players.

The benefits of being a fully-active audience member are not limited to internal fulfilment; story construction is also an instructive experience in which participants help themselves by helping others, and by consequence, achieve something collectively beneficial. A cinematic ARG can experiment with new, empowering political structures under safely restrained circumstances and, generally, teach people the value of selflessness. According to Jenkins, competing against the original creator of a cinematic work to finish its story first "...is empowering in the literal sense in that it helps participants to understand how they may deploy the new kinds of power that are emerging from participation within knowledge communities," (29). Viewers of *LonelyGirl15*, in 2006 and 2007, learned to think about and act on these ideas. They aided the series' characters in their mission to dismantle an organization that raised girls in order to harvest their bodies for special nutrients; by making forum posts (on *LonelyGirl15.com*) and video responses, the audience thought through various ways to take down a monolithic threat. Ideally, as Jenkins invokes philosopher Pierre Lévy to explain, exercising such political power within an alternate world can inform real attempts to "...break down the divisions and suspicions that currently shape international relations," (qtd. in 29) because participants in a

knowledge community act benevolently, share information, and operate as a single entity.

Cooperation is the protocol of communal ARG navigation, clearly indicating that the interactivity-with-stakes that a cinematic ARG facilitates is politically practical and ethically enlightening.

A related benefit of viewer activity within the ARG experience arises in McGonigal's writing, this one being the encouragement to "Feel like a part of something bigger than oneself," (McGonigal 95), or, in short, to feel awe. To strike awe into ARG players' hearts "...does not just *feel* good; it inspires them to *do* good," (99) – it compels them to satisfy a meaningful objective, to serve a cause outside their own desires, and to do so with other people's input. In the context of *AlanTutorial*, the audience deduces narrative information to save Alan, the fictional character, in whose realness viewers may have chosen to believe, or who may, at least, be a realistic substitute for a person who could exist and require help in the future. The cryptography viewers of *Marble Hornets* complete, furthermore, might not be too dissimilar from that which actual detectives do, particularly in the "Information Age", if *Infernal Affairs* is any indication. The effect of gameplay within the cinematic ARG, in essence, is to teach by controlled, experimental experience as much as it is to evoke inward gratification.

In certain ways, the cinematic ARG might even enrich people internally, and society collectively, when players fail to make breakthroughs in story construction. There is not only a feeling of fulfilment inherent in failed attempts to "win a game", but "failure" also provides more extensive opportunities to hone skills over time. McGonigal addresses the intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits of failure, stating that games, including ARGs, allow for "...spectacular and entertaining," (66) kinds of failures that "...remind the players of their own agency," (66). In other words, failures in the ARG universe can motivate players' continued efforts to succeed.

Failure, consequently, is a paradoxically satisfying outcome in the experimental setting of the ARG, as players can demonstrate their own valiant investigative work to themselves as they, for instance, try to become adept at deciphering the puzzles in “totheark” videos. Kiss and Willemsen speak to this same possibility; they reference the “failure-improvement cycle of gameplay” (Kiss, Willemsen 69), which usually encapsulates the personal gratification of success after repeated failure, but can even see “...ongoing lack of understanding and constant feeling of inadequacy... become a driving force that keeps viewers invested in comprehending the story,” (69). Essentially, failure to construct a cinematic ARG’s story, whether ended by eventual success in doing so or not, can be reward enough to players as they progress through the series. Moreover, every occurrence of failure functions as a learning opportunity – a developmental step for players as they refine skills that can be in equal measures satisfying to possess and useful to others when applied to real scenarios.

Nearly any gameplay “challenge” – and that presented by a puzzle film not least of all – can serve as a gratifying learning experience for the person who undertakes it. Cinematic ARGs measurably expand on the interpretive challenge of puzzle cinema, though, allowing the audience to alter the story, if they successfully construct it before designers do. In the same manner that the cinematic ARG’s online platform enhances the ARG’s horror and documentary-based immersive dimension beyond the capacity of those parent genres, it turns puzzle cinema viewers’ after-the-fact story construction into a legitimate chance to affect the story as a character within its universe. Enhanced viewer agency is the result of a fragmented format’s relegation of story-building and discernment of characters’ identities to viewers, as well as the real-time unfolding of events that is intrinsic to such a format, which makes continuing interplay between audience and designers possible. It is important to keep in mind that, although this

augmented viewer activity has been described as producing a harmonious balance between audience and designer, that balance does not literally represent an equality of power between two authorial voices. In reality, what constitutes an ideal stability between designers and audience is overall guidance from the former with limited but serviceable ability endowed to the latter, so that the artistic work remains coherent enough to be immersive and visual enough to be considered cinema. This harmonious balance, which, ironically, comprises two unequal components, is that which the cinematic ARG alone, among all postmodern cinematic projects, strikes. Strictly cinematic works (while enriching for their own reasons) have not proven able to incorporate viewer activity to the same extent, while experiences that are rigidly game-like are less able to retain narrative and cinematic qualities – not well enough for a participant to feel significantly immersed or to “choose to believe” in its fiction. Even other kinds of ARGs, which are more like fully-regulated art or closer to unstructured games, sacrifice those same qualities. The cinematic ARG facilitates viewer participation that has genuine influence, and does so without precluding the possibility of narrative cohesion; the result is a work of cinema that is, itself, a narratological experiment, and also permits its audience to experiment with their own talents.

## 4

The “Don’ts” of Cinematic ARG Design and Conclusion

Having closely inspected the best of the cinematic ARG – the ideal synthesis of horror documentary and puzzle film that *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial* represent – the questions of why the genre has not risen to greater prevalence, and why so many cinematic ARGs are unsuccessful, remain. Enough flawed attempts at cinematic ARGs exist online, ready for postmortem, that one can make certain conclusions about what causes such a work to fail. As subjective as the label of “unsuccessful” seems, there are categorical reasons that it can apply to a cinematic ARG, including the failure to garner an audience, designers’ leaving the series incomplete, and the narrative’s descent into incoherency. It is important to keep in mind that, whatever the reason for failure is, it is as singular as the ARG whose failure it has caused, and does not break a hard-and-fast rule for designing cinematic ARGs. The production of any ARG is always akin to navigating a city, as designers and viewers alike take their own, particular route through the terrain of the story as they collectively construct it (Garcia, Niemeyer 2-3) – a consequence of this narrative approach is that the nature of a story’s possible collapse is entirely dependent on the unique strings of choices that led up to it. Any reason for an ARG’s failure is, itself, unique; however, much like it is possible to group similar kinds of ARGs together under the term “cinematic ARG”, it is possible that multiple reasons for cinematic ARGs’ failure could be similar enough to have a particular, underlying cause. It is, hence, productive to analyze unsuccessful cinematic ARGs for the purposes of devising a tentative set of “What Not to Do” guidelines that might assist in the creation of a successful series and, more generally, help to conceptualize the challenges prospective ARG designers must confront.

Given the lengthy discussions of semi-cooperative, semi-conflictual authorship that have gone into this inspection of cinematic ARGs thus far, one may be primed to contemplate the danger of allowing too many creators to participate in a story's construction. Even cinematic ARGs, which purposely limit the agency of audience participants, are at risk of being overwhelmed by a multiplicity of authors. This fate befell one of the earliest recorded online ARGs, *The Wyoming Incident* (2006), which is not a wholly-cinematic ARG, but whose story does begin with an (in some circles) infamous work of film and includes other moving image-based narrative units. The ARG began with a recording of a broadcast hijacking that supposedly occurred on a local news station in Wyoming – it was uploaded to Google Video in 2006 (“TWI: Mystery ARG”). To discuss the video, an Unfiction Forum thread was made, and that thread became the hub for activity within the ARG for a while; multiple users who monitored it began participating in the story, claiming they knew of other versions of the broadcast hijacking video, whether on YouTube or personal DVDs that belonged to friends, each of which contained certain images that were unique to that particular version.

As each of these new videos was introduced alongside a backstory to its discovery that often encouraged research of other auxiliary texts, the ARG quickly included narrative contributions from multiple participants, and the volume of different plot threads increased further when a user posted a link to a “cubing forum” (a coded term for serial killing) whose contents did not immediately appear related to the videos. As the story unfolded from that point, characters continued to be added and spoken for by various users, new concepts were endlessly introduced, and terms too vague to be decoded, like “being ‘it’” and “being a vessel”, were repeatedly referenced by whoever occupied the temporary autonomous zone of authorship at a given time. Because there were years-long periods with no activity on either the Unfiction thread

or cubing forum, after which sufficiently credible story agents picked up where others left off, it is impossible to say, even over a decade after its commencement, whether or not *The Wyoming Incident* is still a running ARG. One reviewer describes the experience of the ARG as one with “No closure, no explanation, [and] no reveal of a true mastermind, [which effectively renders it] still an active game,” (“TWI: Mystery ARG”).

*The Wyoming Incident* became an unsatisfactory story because the sheer number of plot points it asked its audience to follow were detrimental to its coherency. Track those various plot points back to their origins and it becomes obvious that this online ARG’s incoherency is the result of too many people’s retention of authorial agency. Conventionally, a cinematic ARG follows a particular Internet user’s, or perhaps a select group of users’, experiences, and other participants’ authorship constitutes their reception of the material that those designers use to build the bulk of the narrative. In the case of *The Wyoming Incident*, too many members of the audience overstepped the boundaries of online ARG conventionality, introducing their own material to the story (often in the form of videos – not insubstantial text or backstory), seemingly without consulting other authors. The result was an ARG without a clear line of continuity running through all of its narrative units.

Realistically, someone who peruses the forum threads that outline the story might not even know which posts to consider “canonical”; such an uncertainty could add another dimension of intrigue as well as more storytelling responsibility for the audience, but when it plagues every possible plot point of an ARG, all cohesion falls apart. What *The Wyoming Incident* demonstrates is that every ARG needs particular figures in their universes who will “...guide the flow of information back to a head corporation through the tentacles of invisible centralization,” (Garcia, Niemeyer 4). Cinematic and online ARGs rely on such figures not least



of all – their viewers should not be able to pick up storytelling slack as effectively as unregulated, open-world ARG players can. When no guiding figure emerges throughout the unfolding of a cinematic ARG and the subsequent power vacuum forces viewers to propel the story by themselves, or when viewers commandeer the ARG before its designers even have a chance to focus it in a single direction, it will likely become too aimless to have clear narrative and thematic purposes. This potential problem is just one that designers must obviate with deft authorial moves, gently encouraging participants to work within the envisioned story parameters without providing so much guidance that the experience regresses to a non-ARG state.

At the outermost level, the flaws of *The Wyoming Incident* manifested in the meandering pace and unclear direction of its narrative; these undesirable qualities are, in fact, the exact ones that come to define most unsuccessful cinematic ARGs – just not always because of a multiplicity of authors. The same apparent storytelling blunders can occur even when a single designer (or a united group of them) remains the principal author of an ARG for its duration, namely when designers do not enter the production process with a cohesive vision of their own, and when unexpectedly positive reception of their ARG convinces them to prolong it beyond an ideal concluding moment. Cinematic ARGs that have fallen victim to these pitfalls are *TribeTwelve* (2010), one of the relatively popular “Slender Man ARGs” inspired by *Marble Hornets*, and *Jack Torrance* (2011), a series that consists of strange film reels and VHS tapes originally discovered at an estate sale – and has nothing to do with the character from *The Shining* (Kubrick 1980). Both of these cinematic ARGs, while obviously not of “bad quality”, categorically, seem to suffer from lengthy gaps between uploads that are not clearly motivated by their plots, and have no sense of when to let themselves end. Again, the designers’ ostensible failures to fully plan their stories before uploading videos to YouTube and their insistence on

continuing to upload so as to capitalize on the numbers of viewers they had amassed were likely to blame for those flaws.

As far as *TribeTwelve* is of concern, the series begins with video documentation of the Slender Man – it appears in the background of the first six videos in the series (“Submission #1-6”), videos which clearly utilize the Slender Man ARG formula pioneered by *Marble Hornets* – and then spirals into a story loaded to the hilt with mysterious characters, secret organizations, supernatural artifacts and locations, and timeline jumping. Those early videos in the series do not exhibit original ideas, and all subsequent ones render the series temporally complicated, outrageous, and melodramatic due to their abundance of bizarrely unique elements, suggesting that the series’ designers were inspired by *Marble Hornets*, and eventually realized they needed to expand their story far beyond that of *Marble Hornets* in order to not imitate it. Of course, to make such a statement is to speculate, as one cannot know what *TribeTwelve*’s designers have thought as they produce their ARG, but their insistence on weaving strand upon strand of existential complexity together as the series continues to this day certainly reveals an incoherency of vision all its own. Not to mention, these complexities strain the carefully-constructed aesthetic of realism that breathes life into the cinematic ARG, likely to the point of negating its power. What begins as protagonist Noah Maxwell’s seeing his own doppelganger (“Live Stream Incident”) and becomes whispering diaries (“Crawlspace”) accompanying the years-long degradation of Noah’s faculties is, surely, narrative convolution catalyzed by designers’ uncertainty about the story they wanted to tell. The ultimate result of such convolution and uncertainty is a series that unfolds quite similarly to *The Wyoming Incident* – with no resolution to the plot in sight and new installments at infrequent, sometimes random intervals (there has been about a year between each new *TribeTwelve* video between 2016 and 2019). The

results of inconsistent creative visions are similar, then, from ARG to ARG, but inconsistency of vision can arise as much in a single author's mind as it can when too many authors craft a story.

The other aforementioned ARG, *Jack Torrance*, suffers in cohesiveness for many of the same reasons *TribeTwelve* does, even with a seemingly single, unified authorial presence. In this series' case, there is no overabundance of supernatural elements that makes its story incompatible with the realist aesthetic of cinematic ARGs, but the eerily plausible video clips that compose it have too little context to string them together into a comprehensible narrative work. The first 31 videos in the series are labeled as Super 8 Reel footage or VHS cassette fragments, and their contents range from a close-up of a person in an ominous mask ("Fragment 34f"), to a shot of a motorized dummy in a chair ("Fragment 65x"), to footage that is almost completely unintelligible, save for a texture that looks like hair and a few brief impressions of a tree ("Fragment 6t"). Over the course of these videos' uploads (which spanned over three years), the only given background to their existence, as per those videos' descriptions, was that the owners of the "Jack Torrance" YouTube account had found them on reels and tapes at an estate sale. Such little context obscures the ARG's attempt at serialization, muddling what one would assume is an attempt at continuity across videos.

Arguably, the less context and continuity, the more plausible the premise of the series is – the footage that the YouTube channel owners found is ominous, and they would like to learn more about it whether it alludes to some great conspiracy or not. Obvious serialization, in other words, might detract from the realism of what might just be creepy footage that conceals nothing horribly sinister. However, the possibility that there is no secret, no drama, and no continuing story behind the channel's disparate videos troubles its status as an ARG; as little room as there is to deny the authenticity of its premise, it risks providing no payoff to viewers' attempts to

penetrate its mysteries – there could be nothing to actually solve, just the suggestion that there is. As is true of *TribeTwelve*, there are often long periods of time between *Jack Torrance* uploads as well, indicating themselves, perhaps, that the series’ designers are not entirely dedicated to a scheduled plan and sporadically revive their works as they have new ideas. The irregular upload schedule, in any case, further destabilizes the unity of *Jack Torrance*’s narrative, compounding the fact that it is difficult for viewers to track the story, locate any stakes to it, and participate in any way. As an experimental, fragmented cinematic work, *Jack Torrance* is admirable, but as an ARG, it does fall victim to incoherence.

Each of the potential pitfalls of cinematic ARG production discussed so far has had largely to do with designer error – failure to maintain a clear vision over the course of a project and failure to guide participation in a way that benefits a story are the results of human imperfection. Concerns for cinematic ARG creators are not limited to their own ability to manage a sprawling narrative, though, as there are even more subjective dilemmas for them to contemplate during ARG production. These dilemmas are, namely, the ethical quandaries that ARGs frequently pose, which have been referenced intermittently throughout this analysis. Returning to *SEED*, the ARG which nearly provoked its players to break into a building that was not part of the fictional universe and thus broke McGonigal’s rule of ensuring that all who are impacted by an ARG have volunteered to participate in it, one can see that an ARG is at risk of being too immersive for its own good. Whereas *The Wyoming Incident*, *TribeTwelve*, and *Jack Torrance* all fail to reach certain benchmarks of cohesion and immersion, others are, in fact, so well put-together that they risk making viewers feel complicit in the misfortune of characters (who might seem like real people) or even causing harm to people unaware of the game. That latter danger resulted, most infamously, in a tragedy involving the stabbing of a 12 year-old girl

by her two 12 year-old friends. Though it is unconfirmed if any cinematic ARGs had a hand in precipitating the event or if online horror stories involving the figure were exclusively to blame, the perpetrators of the crime claimed to have been governed by the Slender Man when committing the act (Yang, Dooley 1). Again, no ARGs have been cited as inspiration for the stabbing, but the Slender Man's general prevalence online has undoubtedly been broadened by his presence in many cinematic ARGs, and one might therefore be justified in supposing that those ARGs, in an indirect and unforeseen way, helped to provoke the incident. When the threats of cinematic ARGs and the subject matter they introduce to public consciousness are so significant, an entirely new issue of ethics in cinematic ARG production arises. It becomes necessary for designers to create an ARG that is both an engaging experience and one in which any audience can safely immerse itself.

To harness the immersive power of the cinematic ARG without convincing spectators that the fiction is unequivocally true is an incredibly difficult balance to strike – a more difficult prospect than the already challenging feat of creating a cinematic ARG that is structurally sound. The process is reliant on making judgement calls in order to properly leave “ludic markers, [or] keys to distinguishing between items which form part of the game and, and those outside it,” (Hook 65) throughout one's series. Not only do ludic markers ensure that the “magic circle of ARG gameplay” (61) does not expand to the point of including involuntary participants, they reassure voluntary participants that an ARG's narrative is not undeniably real – if subtly and subconsciously, so that belief generation is still a possibility. A ludic marker can be something simple, like the choice to set one's ARG in a specific year in the future (65), which reminds players that the story is fictitious without breaking their immersion, but crucial narrative elements and complex representations can serve as ludic markers too, not least of all in cinematic

ARGs, and it is challenging to establish those particular markers properly. For *Marble Hornets*, the very decision to focus the series on a supernatural entity is delicate as a ludic marker as it threatens to break viewers' immersion from the beginning and may well do so for some. Because there is little of the paranormal outside of the Operator's presence and influence in the series, though, *Marble Hornets* is neither safely unrealistic nor uncomfortably realistic. One can say the same of *AlanTutorial*, as the unlikeliness of Alan's being kidnapped and left in solitary confinement is a ludic marker of its own, but nothing in the series is entirely implausible (in other words, supernatural), and therefore, its immersive qualities are particularly powerful without being dangerously so. The inclusion of effective ludic markers over the course of a cinematic ARG, then, is another difficulty for designers; to not include enough is, in a way, an achievement of truly boundless immersion and respectable for that reason, but it also puts viewers' emotional wellbeing at undue risk if the ARG's fiction is indistinguishable from reality.

Insufficient indication of fictitiousness is arguably exemplified by *Louise Paxton* (2007), a YouTube ARG that predates all others discussed in this analysis so far. The series follows the titular character, Louise, who has just moved to a London flat from her previous home in the city of Norwich, and soon discovers that someone is stalking her. For such an early cinematic ARG, it has a keen awareness of how to optimize the genre – its premise is perfectly plausible as well as frightening, actors' performances are admirably authentic, and some of its videos have nothing to do with the main stalking plot (which cleverly reinforces the idea that the stalker and the videos about him are an intrusion on Louise's life). The series does, truthfully, mark itself as fiction by its end, as it explicitly reveals the stalker to be a ghost of some kind in its final few videos. Because the first insinuation that otherworldly forces are at work in the series occurs so close to its conclusion, though, in a video where Louise's house key moves of its own accord

(“Really Weird. June 15th 07”), the ARG has left itself no ludic markers over the course of 33 other videos. In that time, Louise has already experienced great suffering at the hands of a very real-seeming threat, and the dilemma of whether or not to see if she needs help, which viewers are likely to face as they watch the majority of the videos, is an ethical conundrum whose existence the series’ designers perhaps should have tried to prevent with more ludic markers earlier on. Judging by some of the comments on videos from the first three-quarters of the series, such as those on the video which depicts a large handprint on Louise’s window (“Stalker? May 25th 07.”), or those on Louise’s reaction to seeing her bedroom destroyed (“Terrifying Night Part 3. June 4th 07.”), a number of viewers were becoming increasingly concerned that the series’ events were real as they continued watching. To, in this manner, convince people too thoroughly that they are bearing witness to acts of intimidation, torture, or other misfortune is, indeed, a sign that a cinematic ARG may have “gone too far”. Works like *Louise Paxton* epitomize the immersive capacity of the cinematic ARG. Series with a dearth of ludic markers demonstrate how the genre has been, thus far, the only cinematic treatment able to propel the medium to a convincing semblance of authenticity. These types of cinematic ARGs are flawed, ethically, but only because they are such shining examples of cinematic experiences that they render the medium too powerfully immersive.

It seems that, though each cinematic ARG is a unique cinematic mode with its own intricacies and potential problems, examples of the genre can be either too incoherent and excess-laden to be effective ARGs, or too tightly constructed to remain completely within the ethical boundaries of a game. When such an ARG does maintain a cohesive narrative structure, though, and also checks off enough boxes of ethical storytelling (subjective as it may be claim that one has), the results are enriching, engaging works like *Marble Hornets* and *Alan Turing*.

That these particular series nimbly land on the perfect mark, just a little shy of absolute designer autonomy on the designer-viewer ARG agency spectrum, has simply been the stance of this particular analysis. What one sees as a model – the maximization of viewer (inter)activity without subverting the cinematic ARG’s ability to generate belief in viewers – is the false promise of spectator agency for others. The ideal of *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial* is not an ideal for everyone, as series like them arguably “...treat their core audiences as monadic ‘collective detectives’ rather than groups of diversely motivated... individuals,” (Watson 193), limiting spectators’ authorial power to a point at which their activity is not enriching for everyone. For Watson and a non-negligible group of postmodern cinema viewers, cinematic ARGs “...are ultimately not deeply generative textual systems, but rather vehicles for delivering curated story materials,” (193), as they rarely allow viewers to influence their plots in a way that the designers had not considered at the outset. Even if viewers have the ability to alter the course of an ARG’s story in all the ways discussed during the previous chapter, any alteration they make is enabled or reined in by designers (when a cinematic ARG is successful, that is), and is therefore not entirely a product of their authorship.

This critique of the genre was common in response to *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Slade 2018). The *Black Mirror* film is about as straightforward an example of a cinematic ARG as one can imagine – it allows viewers to conduct the behavior of a young Atari game-maker as he tries, fittingly, to complete a choose-your-own-adventure game before a deadline. Insofar as viewers can select between two or three actions for the protagonist, Stefan, to take at those times the film deems it appropriate for viewers to have such options, *Bandersnatch* is, indeed, interactive. However, that kind of viewer authorship clearly falls into the category some call compromised or false, as the creators of the film not only rein every possible choice that viewers can make into



the story, they account for the exact narrative ramifications of each choice long before viewers even had the opportunity to make it. Hence, there is no direct “interactivity” between creator and viewer, or any simultaneous construction of a story by both parties; instead, the parameters of the film are only as wide as the creators decided to make them at the start. This foundation for interactivity was unsound for many, and the film’s reception from critics was mixed. A *Variety* review found that “...More or less whatever choice you make... Stefan struggles in solitude with completing the game, and begins to descend into mania,” (D’Addario 1). To a *Hollywood Reporter* reviewer, “...not all of the multiple endings are satisfying or coherent,” (Goodman 1), and the labor of returning to the film to make the “correct” choice after accidentally ending the film early leaves one feeling like nothing more than “a good monkey” (1). All of these perceived downsides of the film are evidently borne out of the authorial limitations of the choose-your-own-adventure premise. Although serialized, real-time cinematic ARGs escape some of those limitations in their enabling of direct interplay between designers and viewers, every narrative decision made or reinforced by viewers is still, in a sense, reviewed and canonized by designers. This characteristic of the genre, which some do understandably consider a shortcoming, is, admittedly, an intrinsic one. It is impossible to will such a limiting quality away, and therefore, it is something that should not be ignored in productions and analyses of cinematic ARGs.

If there is a very real argument to be made that the interactivity permitted by cinematic ARGs is illusory, and if so many of these series are prone to issues in cohesion and ethicality, then the question of why they are worthwhile investments in time, both to create and watch, must be readdressed. What, exactly, is the value of trying to synchronously maximize immersion and viewer agency if it can only sometimes be done well, if the dangers of flawed cinematic ARGs can be serious, and if the agency viewers enjoy even in well-executed cinematic ARGs is

relatively minimal? The answer to this question has much to do with the broader context of cinema's history – the point that the art form has reached on its own timeline and where it could go next. The world has entered an age of fragmented, multimedia moving-image storytelling in which the cinematic medium has largely migrated from its traditional theater exhibition setting to a variety of other interconnected places, and this transition has only become truly identifiable in the last couple of decades. The cinematic ARG, subsequently, is a genre that has only existed in that short time; even if it has journeyed across peaks and valleys of popularity already, it is a fledgling genre born at the tail end of cinema's current lifespan. The uniqueness of each cinematic ARG is such that the genre as a whole has only been tapped for a small fraction of its possible resources. The answer to the question of cinematic ARGs' value, then, is that the genre is too young for one to make any sweeping statements about it, which necessitates further exploration. If such exploration takes place in the future, it seems likely that more *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial*-like series will emerge – that new designers would reach the ceiling of cinematic ARG potential with increasing frequency, perhaps raise it as well, and that their projects would become less and less susceptible to the risk of flawed design. Taking these projections into account alongside all of the previously-discussed benefits of successful cinematic ARGs (personal fulfilment and practical, hands-on education), one recognizes that, in the long term, continued experimentations in the genre would "...always have the side effect of improving our real lives," (McGonigal 126).

It is by no means the intent of this analysis to claim that all productions of cinematic ARGs and all viewings of them have been to the advantage of those involved. The broad ideas it should impress upon readers, though, are twofold: firstly, that the best work the genre has to offer is an experience of cinema heightened beyond what traditional cinema delivers in

believability, interactivity, and enrichment, and secondly, that filmmakers and film viewers have an obligation to explore the frontier of their medium so that it is hospitable for those who eventually find themselves there. In all honesty, this second assertion has enough conviction behind it that, even if the first was untrue, cinematic ARG experimentation would be worthwhile. Even if every cinematic ARG was destined to be “flawed” in some significant way, gleaning that very information by trial would be of the utmost importance; hence, it stands to reason that those cinematic ARGs that have been called flawed are valuable, fascinating objects of study in their own right. As difficult as it can be to hold such sprawling projects together and as unpredictable as their societal ramifications are, every person who has undertaken the responsibility of conducting an experiment through cinematic ARG production has done a service to the art of film. All cinematic ARG designers commit themselves to a cause whose nobility this analysis has endeavored to capture in two conceits that feed into one another – individual experiments whose collective execution maps the uncharted territory of 21<sup>st</sup> Century cinema. If these “scientific” and “cartographic” processes gave rise to groundbreaking works of film like *Marble Hornets* and *AlanTutorial* with increasing frequency, which is more than a mere possibility, then the reasons for new cinematic ARG designers to begin their work are exponentially more numerous. It is with the hope that someone has been inspired to conduct his own narratological experiments – with imagination, eagerness, a thirst for horror and cryptography, and enduring respect for his audience – that this analysis concludes.

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