



## Time and Narrative

### Cultivating Public Space, History, Research and Design with Transmedia

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ON THE MORNING of November 22, a journalist in Kitchener-Waterloo, Canada broke a story presenting new evidence in a cold case which had baffled police for nearly a hundred years. Her report was based on an interview with a middle-aged local woman named Janneth C. Smith whom she tracked down through Facebook and contacted by email. Lisa Drew excited her audience with historical artifacts and old news-clippings from Smith's family that suggested a solution to the century-old mystery: — the abrupt and total disappearance of Toronto theatre magnate Ambrose Small in 1919 after cashing a cheque for one million dollars, leaving his baffled wife, secretary, and empire of numerous theatres. Police investigations into the high-profile case, rewards offered, clairvoyants interviewed, came to nothing.



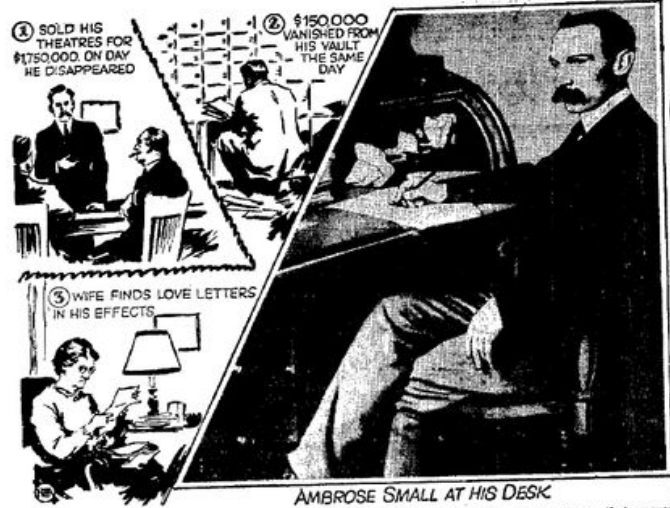
Owing to his role in Michael Ondaatje's novel *In the Skin of a Lion*, Small never vanished from public imagination. An intriguing character, wealthy and powerful, his theatres concealed secret apartments within their walls. As the sensational report ran on 570 News, Facebook searches for Janneth C. Smith surged into the hundreds of thousands.

# Banked A Million, Then Vanished Chapp By No

## 13-Year Hunt For Theater Czar Futile

Colonel Raymond Robins, friend of President Hoover, has mysteriously vanished, joining the ranks of 50,000 persons who disappear annually in the United States. This is the title of a series of six mystery classics of real life—those who never came back.

By ROBERT TALLEY  
NEA Service Writer  
(Copyright 1932 NEA Service, Inc.)  
On the very day that he disappeared, Ambrose Small, Toronto's "lost millionaire," sold his chain of Canadian theatres for \$1,750,000, deposited in his bank a check for the \$1,600,000 down payment and retired from the business he had entered 25 years before as a \$10-a-week ticket taker.  
He vanished on Dec. 2, 1919. That was nearly 13 years ago. Though a \$20,000 reward was offered by his wife and a worldwide search was conducted no trace of the missing millionaire ever was found.  
Canada's theatre mogul left behind him an enigma as baffling as any shadowy mystery-drama ever enacted in any of his numerous theatres. Even today some of the Dominion's best detectives, who



① SOLD HIS THEATRES FOR \$1,750,000. ON DAY HE DISAPPEARED

② \$150,000 VANISHED FROM HIS VAULT THE SAME DAY

③ WIFE FINDS LOVE LETTERS IN HIS EFFECTS

AMBROSE SMALL AT HIS DESK



WAS HE

MURDERED IN HIS THEATRE

AND HIS BODY BURNED IN THE FURNACE

OR DID HE RUN AWAY

Madison, Wis., 6,000 in the United States, Norm... candidate for U... day urged Wis... defeated in the... candidate last... to the socialist... he said they bel... Thomas struc... ver and John I... can nominate fo... senate.  
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There was just one problem with the viral news story. The anchor had unwittingly reported a transmedia fiction. She had gone down a 'rabbit hole' created by my 2A architecture students, to attract players for the Alternate Reality Game that they had designed as their term project. The students, of course, were elated, having just discovered at first-hand the role of the imagination in how history is made.<sup>1</sup>

To familiarize my students with the value, complexity, and presence of history, I wanted to create an active learning environment, foster voluntary research initiatives, frame a workflow that would reward the group's diversity — using collaboration connected with peer learning, and community involvement. We would leverage digital media to entice players, though ultimately their game would play out in physical, public space.

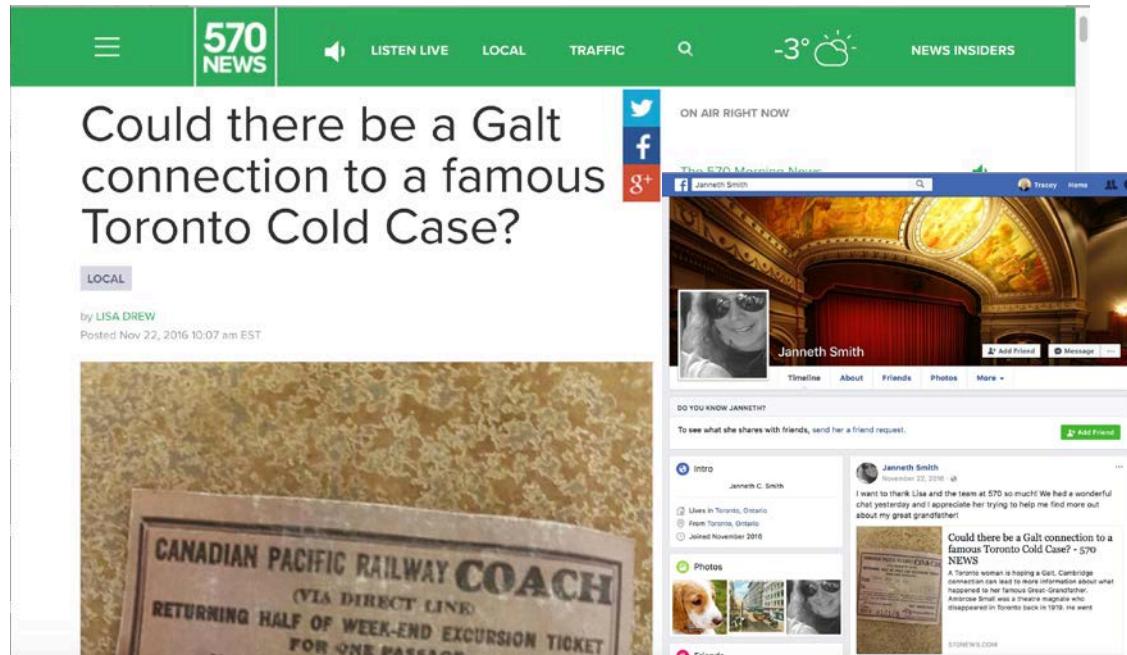
Considering these parameters, I researched a fascinating art-form, quite new on the world stage: Transmedia composes stories by combining different arts-platforms and information-channels, each carrying unique pieces of information. While transmedia can take any form, each has its element of appropriateness, whether packages sent by 'snail mail,' geolocation tags, QR codes, or texting, so that events, plots, locations and characters can be developed in a depth not possible through a unitary medium.

Designers use transmedia to create immersive play, which has many architectural parallels, in particular the Alternate Reality Game or ARG: a hybrid art-form straddling the line between fiction and non-fiction. An ARG is an interactive networked narrative that uses the real world as a platform and

<sup>1</sup> Architectural education no longer best serves public interest. The recently built environment tells you we are not making the world a better place to live. Traditional studios, where each student produces an academic design in relative isolation, to be pinned, juried and assigned a numeric grade, are no longer the most effective way to educate architects. And while the news is not all bad, like many of us I experiment with alternative pedagogical models which not only acknowledge that the world outside the studio has transformed radically, like society itself, but also address contemporary problems of creativity, knowledge, and making and their impact on society. I'm by no means alone, and the mission isn't new. 1968 was fifty years ago. Our entire social context has changed. It is increasingly urgent that as educators we bring a critical scalpel to our own pedagogy, how we structure curricula and projects. We shouldn't restrict our ideas to schooling precedents. Better: unearth cultural forms that encourage attunement and engagement, independent creative research, motivation, peer learning, and collective intelligence. Engaging and learning from contemporary, popular culture is vital, because it's where we will find the problems we face as well as the inspirations that we need.



employs transmedia storytelling to deliver a story that may be altered by players' ideas or actions. The form is defined by intense player involvement with a story that takes place in real time and evolves according to players' responses.<sup>2</sup>



Rather than creating an alternate reality, a well-designed ARG "immerses the world of the game into the everyday existence and life of the player."<sup>3</sup> ARGs are related to treasure hunts and detective stories, and their core mechanics include collaborative problem-solving and storytelling. "Unlike standard games ... alternate reality games have no defined or implicit rules for playing them ... and generally no pre-known objectives or winning conditions."<sup>4</sup> Players retrieve scattered, incomplete pieces of a story, requiring strangers to join forces and organize information. They play to discover moments or episodes in this not-fully-predetermined story, and advance the plot. The team administering the game, known as "puppetmasters," intentionally leave "white space" for players to fill in. All in real time, they respond to players' speculations and actions, adjust the narrative and dynamically calibrate content. Our puppetmasters were my class, who quickly intuited the parallel of their 'open structure' to the role of design in the public realm.

ARGs aim to immerse "the world of the game into the everyday existence and life of the player."<sup>5</sup> In traditional games, a 'magic circle' distinguishes play from the 'real world,' but "Pervasive games inhabit a game world that is present within the ordinary world, taking the magic circle wherever they go."<sup>6</sup> This

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia, Alternate Reality Game

<sup>3</sup> Dave Szulborski, This Is Not A Game, A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming. 2005.

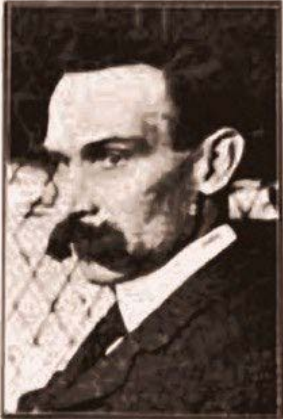
<sup>4</sup> Szulborski, This Is Not A Game.

<sup>5</sup> Szulborski, This Is Not A Game.

<sup>6</sup> Markus Montola, "Games and Pervasive Games," p. 12 in M. Montola, J. Stenros, and A. Waern, Pervasive Games, Theory and Design, Taylor and Francis, 2009.

conceptual shift in play space reflects the metaphoric dissolution of hard boundaries, and their replacement with gradients or multiple radial centres, such as we see in contemporary urbanism, or even the transition away from tectonic thinking in architectural theory and practice. Without the magic circle's strict limits, game elements infiltrate everyday life, and, as Jane McGonigal argues, potentially start a trajectory of revitalization. "A good immersive game will show you game patterns in non-game places; these patterns reveal opportunities for interaction and intervention. .... to apply the skills acquired in gaming to real life." (McGonigal, 2003b: 22)

Alternate Reality Games offer ideas for hacking architectural education and public space. We played on Galt's townscape. The class sketched out a game code-named □ with a fictional plot based on the Ambrose Small case, to be embedded in public spaces, within local confines. I linked two goals: 1. foster the students' conscious attunement to the world around them, and 2. use artful play to enhance the public realm, inspired by historical research. I briefed them to focus on architecture as a theme, and public space as a social goal, and asked them to search for places containing a seed of 'resistance' to any prevailing trends that made their world a worse place to live, try to analyze the resistance, and amplify it through their interventions.



**Ambrose J. Small**

## Missing from his home in this city

Description: Age 53, 5 ft. 6 or 7 ins.; 135 to 140 lbs. Blue eyes, reddish complexion. Brown hair and moustache, streaked with grey. Hair receding on temples. Is very quick in his movements.

Mr. Small, who was well known in theatrical circles in the United States and Canada, was owner of Grand Opera House, Toronto, and was last seen in his office at this theatre on afternoon of December 2nd, 1919.

When last seen he was wearing a dark tweed suit and dark overcoat with velvet collar and a soft felt hat.

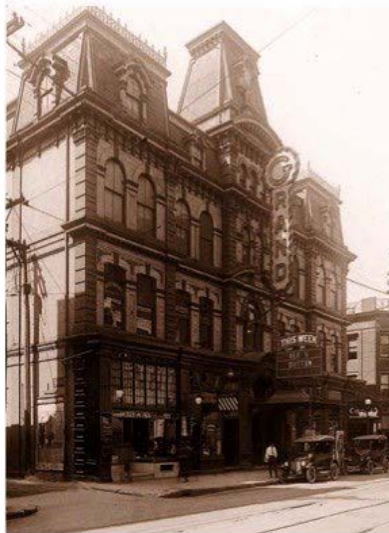
The above photo, although taken some time previous to his disappearance, is a good likeness, except that for a considerable time he had been wearing his moustache clipped short.

Wire all information to the undersigned.

**POLICE HEADQUARTERS  
TORONTO, CANADA**  
October 1st, 1928.

**D. C. DRAPER,**  
Chief Constable.

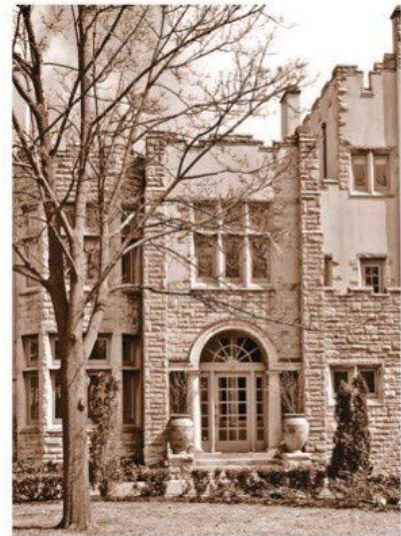
Toronto Police had a hard time drumming up information that would lead them to Small's whereabouts



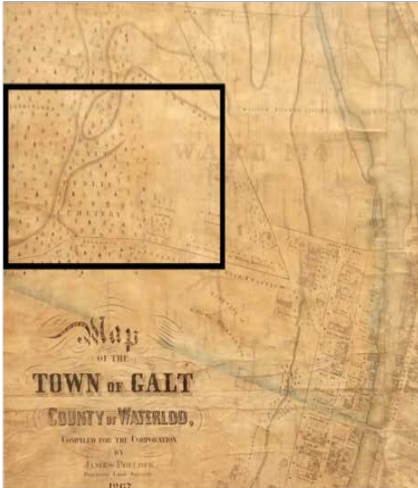
Ambrose Small was last seen at the Grand Opera House in Toronto



Did his wife have something to do with the disappearance?



Small may have been buried near a house in Rosedale.



*Town of Galt, 1867*



*Galt Public Cemetery, 1867*

We aimed to open up elements of the built environment, to exploit poetic ambiguity, resourcefully using features of the real world doubling as game apparatus, — public space, built and natural settings, and events. With the participatory process incorporated into the design, students could learn to anticipate and field various public responses, and incorporate new ideas.

None of us had ever played an ARG, but my students arrived equipped with an advantage. As “digital natives,” they kept in their pockets a small futuristic device, that they already used to play, to research, communicate, design, navigate, document, schedule, and edit: a smartphone. Web 2.0’s hive-mind is integral to the Millennial identity. They already knew creative and collaborative technologies, crowd-sourced information, and used social media daily to solve problems together.

Groups and individuals roamed Galt’s historic centre and its ragged periphery with a fresh eye: looking for sites that were public, of potential interest, especially underutilized and ‘resistant.’ They scouted and mapped war memorials and monuments, fountains, and buildings, parking lots, abandoned warehouses, factories, houses, parks, an outdoor bandstand, and a graveyard, along with a network of pedestrian paths. They naturally worked in transmedia, sharing their information in Google Docs, as well as on a class-only Facebook group where they could post video links, images, and hold running conversations. Their maps were physical, computer draughted, real models, and satellite images from Google Earth. Some new mapping used photography. Many students researched online, while others did detective work on foot, and still others sought out libraries and archives to speak directly with archivists, geographers, and librarians, finding and reproducing historic maps, and regional history books, which they read — voluntarily.

My overall course aimed at understanding the nature of history, and its fundamental role for creative imagination. I wanted my students to grasp the roles of research and interpretation in design and fabrication of analogous artifacts, messages and events, and to learn how they discerned meaning.

The students would collectively begin the process of game design and expand the plot. Then, they would form themselves into groups according to their own interests and abilities, to focus on making the communicative elements. When each person feels they have an important role, and are engaged in a challenge they enjoy, common issues of motivation in group work don’t apply. Their project would be actively supported by weekly in-class discussions and informal presentations by any students who had



new material they wanted to bring to the class, as well as by films and lecture themes designed to inspire them.



*Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Museum for a Small City Project, Interior perspective, 1941-43, MoMA*

To help students conceptualize and contextualize knowledge, I organized my lectures around themes, one being the fragment. In class we discussed the paradigm shift in world-view from the Medieval 'closed world' to the 'infinite universe' of the Baroque, and the corresponding shift in modes of representation (and perception) from whole and unified to fragmentary and incomplete, whether we look at Modernity's paintings, geography, museology, or literature. Over centuries, the ways we tell stories have shifted from singular master-narratives to multiple micro-narratives, and from central perspectives to eccentric viewpoints, peripheries where horizons shift. In Modernity, history's role took a new shape, as the human imagination played a critical role in re-organizing found-objects and elements from the past into a narrative that was coherent, though not necessarily complete, unique, or accurate.

Discussions of works of art and architecture provide fruitful grounds for teaching critical thinking skills. We can look at art of the last century, changes Picasso and Braque made through Cubism, anti-narrative or non-linear experiments in literature and cinema, and finally, at the powerful role that 'the fragment' has played in the art of building, from medieval spolia in Rome, to Mannerist enquiry into constituent linguistic or structural elements (e.g. Giulio Romano and Sebastiano Serlio), Romanticism

(e.g. John Soane and Joseph Michael Gandy) and modern (Surrealism) and contemporary architecture in which buildings are collaged, atomized, or dismembered. My teacher, architectural philosopher Dalibor Vesely dwelt extensively on fragments and their redemptive potential in his 2004 book *Architecture In The Age Of Divided Representation: The Question Of Creativity In The Shadow Of Production*, where Chapter 7 is titled "The Rehabilitation of Fragment."<sup>3</sup> Transmedia storytelling complemented this historical material, because it is a contemporary art form based on the fragment.

Besides fragment, topics to frame the lectures included alchemy, light and matter, perspective, word and image, embodiment, and iconography. We also investigated and defined the nature of history, its creative dimension, and its relevance for architecture design and practice. History is a story we collectively compose from evidentiary fragments.

I advised the class that maybe nobody would play their game, but to focus on design. Now, as architects know, you don't force members of the public to "play your game." The trick is to engage people's attention, provide an inviting opening in the surface of reality through which something deeper can be glimpsed. In gaming, this signpost, called a "rabbit-hole," indicates a metaphorical portal transporting you from the transparent everyday world into a parallel and 'newly strange' world, vividly populated with provocative meanings, challenges, and rewards.

An ARG needs multiple entry points. So my students were discovering ways for designers to communicate with the public. Game design offers a fascinating forum for discussing human spatial behaviour, how people respond to elements in buildings and the public realm, or the curated landscapes of parks, woods, and cemeteries. We tested how to signal and cue people to move, and draw their attention, by making minimal, resourceful, economic interventions.

Since the ARG 'doubles' the world, a popular player slogan is: "This Is Not A Game." Alternate Reality Games confirm that audiences are no longer satisfied with being passive, but are participants and co-creators, hungry for active engagement and interactive social public space. People can be more than consumers, they are collaborators with goals, players with roles. It's a wake-up call for the way that we design and build architecture and cities.



In the film, *The Matrix*, the Wachowskis repeatedly reference *Alice in Wonderland*, and Morpheus (Greek god of dreams) invites Neo to “wake up” and see his world’s underlying truth. You can ignore the call (take the blue pill) and go back to your tedious, alienated life. Those players who “follow the white rabbit” and “choose the red pill” are also those who, in the words of the X-Files, “want to believe” — in a rich and meaningful universe.

The game’s desired outcome is to return the public’s interest to the mystery of the real world, through engagement. As John Cage said wonderfully, the purpose of art is “not to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake [us] up to the very life we’re living.”

Transmedia and ARGs make diversity a common advantage: the fact that people have different opportunities, interpretations, knowledge, experiences and perceptions enriches the collective. My students — of every ethnic background, culture, religion, and gender identity — intuited that, even integrated multiple viewpoints into their creations, for example overlaying “many voices and whispers” in the films.

One of the early ARGs famously sent out different clues in Sanskrit, German, and Russian, to obligate players to collaborate. In another game, clues were pre-recorded messages called in to phone booths all over the United States, identified by GPS co-ordinates embedded in a site. To cover this vast area, the players needed to form a collaborative social network, and work together to solve a problem “that would be absolutely impossible to solve alone.”<sup>7</sup>

You may already be starting to realize the vast potential of this cultural form, not just for art and design, but applied to solve serious, real world problems. ARGs such as *World Without Oil* and *Tomorrow Calling* produced brain-storming, outside-of-the-box creative thinking.<sup>8</sup> The game is a model-in-progress for engagement, knowledge circulation, and collective intelligence, with the potential to lift us out of the environmental mess that we are in, create stronger and more authentic social cohesion — if we are brave enough to embrace unorthodox educational strategies.

I watched my class improve in media literacy, using critical thinking, as well as in communications and public speaking. They grew aware of the power of group problem-solving. The fun connected with the game’s creative challenges created engagement and motivated students to take initiatives and investigate different ways to carry out research.

The project’s capacity to support differentiated learning environments, coupled with the power of peer learning was very effective in fostering skills. Students acted independently, gathered and analyzed data, and used their knowledge to act in the material world.

In our ARG, messages to the players used media of construction, architecture, historic monuments, and public space. But students also designed and fabricated stickers, posters, maps, boxes, police reports,

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7 Jane McGonigal, “Alternate” 9.

8 Jane McGonigal has written and spoken extensively about the transformative potential of games. She is the author of the New York Times Bestseller: *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better, And How They Can Change the World*. “Where, in the real world, is that gamer sense of being fully alive, focused, and engaged in every moment? Where is the gamer feeling of power, heroic purpose, and community? Where are the bursts of exhilarating and creative game accomplishment? Where is the heart-expanding thrill of success and team victory?” Jane McGonigal, p.3-4, *Reality is Broken*, Penguin Books, 2011.



short films, projections, installations, sound recordings, a website, Instagram, Facebook, and Gmail accounts, and a Youtube channel filled with videos.

#### PATHWAYS



#### EXISTING PORTALS



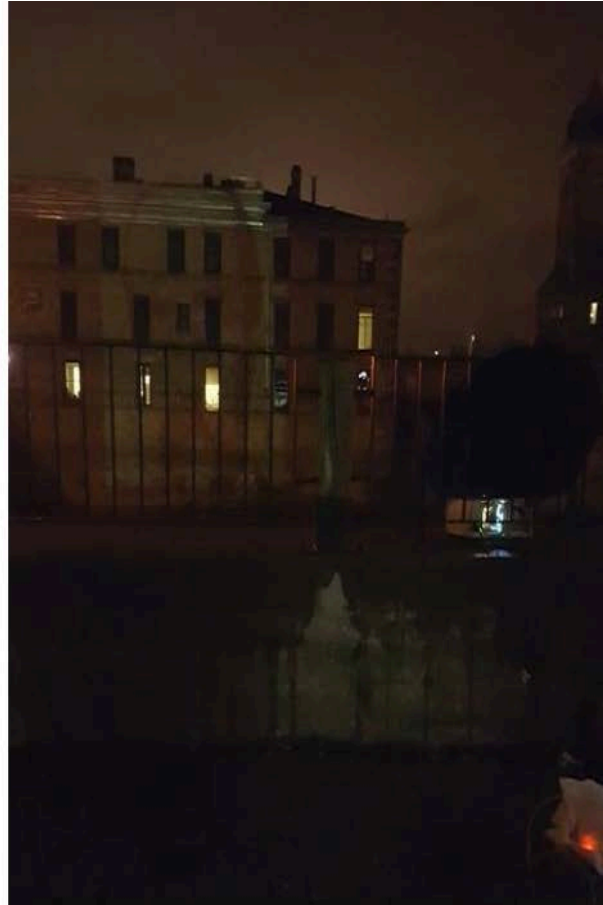
One group brewed a historically accurate, local, period craft beer from the Prohibition era whose labels were clues. Bottles of beer were introduced anonymously at a gathering, and the social spread of the bottles propagated messages. Glass recycling then became a way to track how the bottles had spread around town.

These are examples of student work, but in this kind of project the creations are neither didactic, nor spectacle-oriented. Like playing the game, the wonder isn't object-driven, but process-driven. It's project-based learning, the relations between things, the timing, seizing opportunity, events happening in real time, tuning in, interacting, the sense that "everything is connected."

I endeavoured to support all the students in becoming autonomous learners, building confidence and creativity. Since our ARG was a first shot, I expected many mistakes and failures, but a high learning curve. So I based the evaluations on game theorist John Forbes Nash's ideas about decision-making in complex systems: Participants build knowledge collectively, in the interest of optimizing their own, individual experiences. So, everybody in the class got the same grade, with potential for bonus points. Finally, I asked students to self-evaluate in writing, describing what and how they had learned, and to commend colleagues whose participatory qualities had impressed them, citing their observations. This was more than community-building; they appreciated qualities valued in their peers, that in the future they might foster in themselves: leadership, personal character, collegiality, ethics, hard work, vision, rigour, initiative, generosity, perspicacity, multi-tasking, conflict resolution, determination and tenacity, specific technical skills, ability to improvise, resourcefulness, inventiveness, communication.

Many students noticed they had trained their ethical ability to see and think from the perspective of the Other: player / inhabitant / visitor / member of the public; new types of honed perception and critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, experience of meaning in the environment, ethical awareness, appreciation for diversity in collaboration, and a fresh understanding of history, sensitivity and attunement to the background, with a resulting sense of wonder.

Making the analogy from transmedia storytelling to architecture: drawing on extended context around your site, integrating architectural components and construction with other media, can convey local and regional history through unique information conveyed in elements, qualities, and spaces. This is nothing new, of course; it builds on Kenneth Frampton's 1983 discourse on Critical Regionalism, but ever more relevant for the contemporary world.



Thanh Tran translated his experience of fabricating objects for the players to find: "I think architecture is about story-telling, and the architect creates objects, artifacts or buildings in which stories are embedded."

In USC professor Jeff Watson's book, *Reality Ends Here*, he explains how,

*'environmental game design can impact communities of learners. In this sense, the discussion contained herein speaks to what John Dewey identifies as the "intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education." This relationship has long been understood as being crucial. As Socrates suggests in Meno, teaching is distinct from the mere transfer of facts: rather, it entails creating the conditions necessary to assist learners in their own "discovery of truth."'*

Watson emphasizes how crucial it is to integrate education into the world of 'real life,'

*'As Dewey notes, writing in 1938, "it is the task of the educator to recognize surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worth while."'*

The human imagination has a profound capacity to change the world. My students persuaded the public to look closely at everyday things, and become aware of something compelling and resonant beneath the surface. Yet first they had to cultivate wonder in themselves, which motivated them to learn and create.

Ultimately, students described a special experience, as a result of anticipating meaning in everything: Although makers, not players, they found their world everywhere enriched with meaning. Rajashree Iyer sums up her experience of critical attunement:

*"Throughout the course of this class and its Alternate Reality Game, I found myself approaching things through a different perspective. Suddenly, every little noticeable action or odd happenstance had me thinking ... "there's a story here that I need to piece together." I started to imagine that every one of these odd occurrences — some of which may not have been odd at all, just unnoticed by me up to that point — were a small piece of a narrative whose medium was the real world."*

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