

Designing an Adventure: University of Southern California's Experiment in Using Alternate Reality Games to Educate Students and Inspire Change

Authors : Anahita Dalmia

Abstract : There has been a recent rise in 'audience-centric' and immersive storytelling. This indicates audiences are gaining interest in experiencing real adventure with everything that encompasses the struggle, the new friendships, skill development, and growth. This paper examines two themed alternate reality games created by a group of students at the University of Southern California as an experiment in how to design an adventure and to evaluate its impact on participants. The experiences combined immersive improvisational theatre and live-action roleplaying to create socially aware experiences within the timespan of four hours, using Harry Potter and mythology as themes. In each experiment, over 500 players simultaneously embarked on quests -a series of challenges including puzzle-solving, scavenger-hunting, and character interactions- to join a narrative faction. While playing, the participants were asked to choose faction alignments based on the characters they interacted with, as well as their own backgrounds and moral values. During the narrative finale, the impact of their individual choices on the larger story and game were revealed. After the conclusion of each experience, participants filled out questionnaires and were interviewed. Through this, it was discovered that participants developed transferable problem-solving, team-work, and persuasion skills. They also learned about the theme of the experience and reflected on their own moral values and judgment-making abilities after they realized the consequences of their actions in the game-world, inspiring some participants to make changes outside of it. This reveals that alternative reality games can lead to socialization, educational development, and real-world change in a variety of contexts when implemented correctly. This experiment has begun to discover the value of alternate reality games in a real-world context and to develop a reproducible format to continue to create such an impact.

Keywords : adventure, alternate reality games, education, immersive entertainment, interactive entertainment

Conference Title : ICGBLSG 2020 : International Conference on Game-Based Learning and Serious Games

Conference Location : Boston, United States

Conference Dates : April 23-24, 2020