The Alternative Reality Game (ARG) blurs the line between reality and fiction, game and real life, online and offline, creating an immersive experience for its participants. Alex Moseley, University of Leicester, has been researching its use for higher education.

A girl is standing next to the statue of John Betjeman in London’s St Pancras station, apparently in deep concentration. If we step closer, we see that she has her telephone pressed up to her ear - listening intently. A further step, and we can just hear an urgent-sounding voice on the other end of the telephone: ‘...you must find me her name in order for me to go on: ring 0203 then the first word of the poem on the floor followed by an 8. Do it quickly.’ The girl looks up, turns away from us, and walks forwards, counting her steps carefully.

This kind of suspicious behavior in the capital might normally indicate some MI6 activity, or maybe the shady dealings of the underworld. In this case though, the extreme concentration shown by our protagonist is all focused towards finding the next clue or snippet of information in an Alternative Reality Game or ARG: a fairly recent phenomenon which blurs the line between reality and fiction, game and real life, online and offline, creating an immersive experience for its participants. The snapshot above is part of a real-life challenge laid to players of Penguin/Six to Start’s We Tell Stories ARG (www.wetelltories.co.uk) - by watching carefully during an online multimedia story, players picked up a telephone number which led them to a further clue pointing to St Pancras, from where they were directed out and to the British Library, to collect information which would become useful later in the game.

There are several aspects which make ARGs a compelling subject for higher education. Firstly, as hinted in the passage above, they induce extreme levels of engagement and motivation in some of the players (levels we dream of within our subject teaching!). Secondly, they have a strong communal aspect - with players working together in teams or en masse to solve difficult or geographically/intellectually widespread problems: in an early ARG, I Love Bees, players across the world managed to answer a series of pay phone calls spaced four minutes apart, and relay a message on each time. Jane McGonigal, a pioneer in the field of ARGs and lead community designer for I Love Bees, explains ‘these massively distributed puzzle pieces were tracked down and documented by individuals, but compiled and analyzed by the group’ (McGonigal in ‘Why I Love Bees’ in Salen (ed), p. 206 – see below).

And thirdly, in contrast to other online immersive environments such as Second Life or massive multiplayer games like World of Warcraft, ARGs can and have existed simply with a few basic web pages and some scraps of paper: their...
Games a compelling subject for higher education

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impressed with the community and engagement aspects, plus my own increased hunger for learning (I'm now an expert in subjects as diverse as colour gels for stage lighting, and nautical signalling flags), that I started researching it.

From detailed interviews with forty of the most engaged players (one likened it to 'getting yourself hooked on intellectual crack cocaine'!) I found several key features of the ARG which might be useful in higher education to bring some of the high levels of motivation and engagement to my own context: problem solving at various levels, progress through the game and rewards (players were rewarded with gifts for solving a certain number of puzzles, for submitting the best video, and so on), the story/plot, a regular delivery of new challenges, the large active community, and the influence the players had on the game outcomes (in an ARG there is no fixed path or ending; the designers respond to the players' actions to develop the story line beyond a core skeleton). The freedom to use a level of technology suitable to your own resources is also a big feature for any University environment.

A few researchers and practitioners have seen the benefits of these features, and have piloted or run ARG-type activities with undergraduate students.

At Manchester Metropolitan University, the ARGOSI project (http://playthinklearn.net/argosi.htm) led by Nicola Whitton created a fully-fledged ARG to induct new students into the cultural and topographical life of the city and university, sending students chasing around Manchester collecting pieces of a mysterious plan. At the University of Brighton, another full ARG based around student induction developed by Katie Piatt, asked students via mysterious posters around campus to solve the mystery of 'Who is Herring Hale?' - a challenge which involved all manner of strange activities, not least the sight of a team of students walking around Brighton with spoons strapped to their heads. Both projects attracted a small but fervent following.

At my own institution, the University of Leicester, I took some elements from ARGs, and mixed them with an existing academic course, to produce The Great History Conundrum: a problem-solving game/activity which teaches historical research skills. A combination of puzzles sent by email (from simple to fiendish), competition (students were aiming for a grand prize, in addition to raising their own assessment scores with each puzzle) and communal working (discussing solutions and research methods online) led to a highly engaged, highly performing cohort with increased critical understanding of key concepts.

On a UK-wide scale, Channel 4 have recently launched Routes (www.routesgame.com), an ARG aimed at the late teens in association with the Wellcome Trust, to raise awareness of genetics – it uses video diaries and characters on Facebook and MySpace to explore the mysterious death of a geneticist in Mexico.

My most recent interaction with ARGs was, however, in the charity sector, where I was part of a team of volunteers who designed and ran Operation: Sleeper Cell in aid of Cancer Research UK. Based around a spoof spy theme, this first ever charity fundraising game put players through a series of online and real life challenges to raise funds and awareness, whilst racking up points to compete against each other in teams. Seeing a full ARG from the design side was a thrilling but highly demanding experience!

So, if you happen to be looking for ways to engage and motivate your students, or simply want to fill in every waking moment for the next few months, you could do worse than looking to an Alternative Reality Game...

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For further information:
Overview of ARGs: www.argology.org
Cross-sector conference on ARGs in education and charity: conference.operationsleepercell.com