Alternate reality games (ARG) and fandom involvement in Taylor Swift's narrative universe

Juegos de realidad alternativa (ARG) e implicación del fandom en el universo narrativo de Taylor Swift

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Abstract

The study aims to determine which elements of singer Taylor Swift's alternate reality games (ARGs) are integrated into her communication strategy and narrative universe. To achieve this, it proposes extrapolating the characteristics that ARGs possess according to specialized literature and applying these variables from the Swift Universe as a successful ARG model applicable to commercial brands. The results demonstrate that the ARG fulfills 19 out of 20 defined characteristics, and its communication strategy revolves around a narrative universe that has expanded across numerous platforms and networks over the years.

Key words

Narrative universe, Taylor Swift, alternate reality games, ARG, personal brand.

Resumen

El estudio tiene el objetivo de determinar qué elementos de los juegos de realidad alterna (ARG) de la cantante Taylor Swift se integran en su estrategia de comunicación y su universo narrativo. Para ello, se plantea detectar las características que poseen los ARG según la literatura especializada y extrapolar estas variables del *universo Swift* como modelo de éxito de ARG aplicable a marcas comerciales. Los resultados demuestran que el ARG cumple con 19/20 características definidas y que su estrategia de comunicación pivota en un universo narrativo que se ha expandido en multitud de plataformas y redes durante años.

Palabras clave

Universo narrativo, Taylor Swift, juegos de realidad alterna, ARG, marca personal.

1. INTRODUCTION

Alternate reality games, or ARGs (Alternate Reality Games), are fragmented, complex, and gamified narratives (Rojas, 2020) that combine elements of the real world and virtual elements to create an immersive and highly participatory game experience (Piñeiro-Otero & Costa, 2015). This typology derives from audiovisual, interactive, and transmedia narratives that have developed "strategies and mechanisms to encourage collaboration, participation, and involvement of audiences" (Gifreu, 2017, p. 7).

In this context, the manuscript aims to investigate the relationship between the narrative universe of the American singer Taylor Swift and alternate reality games (ARGs). This is done to determine which elements of this interactive storytelling technique are integrated into the 360º communication strategy and the construction of the Swift universe and are associat-ed with the personal brand of one of the most influential and popular artists in the music and entertainment industry today.

2. BACKGROUND AND STATE OF THE ART

An ARG is a narrative that "requires a great deal of cooperation from participants and articulates activities inside and outside the media space" (Scolari, 2013, p.265). It is also categorized as transmedia because it is "a story composed of a series of fragments that may be disintegrated in different media; which must be reconstructed by users" (Villén, 2017, p.125-126), as if it were a puzzle. The ecosystems where the narrative develops significantly impact the plot and offer interesting options for the player to enter and participate, especially in those online, as they are "spaces capable of constructing stories that expand fictional worlds" (Villén,

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2017, p.120). These require the construction of narrative universes where "other elements such as gamification, transmedia marketing or the creation of mixed narratives come to life" (Freire-Sánchez *et al.*, 2023, p.21).

According to Montola (2010), alternative reality games originated in Life Action Role Player, traditional board role-playing games that appeared in the 1970s and are characterized by users adopting a role under certain conditions and playing characters in a fictional world. They also point to video games as their origin (Montes, 2010), especially the adventure games created by Ron Gilbert, such as Maniac Mansion (1988) and Monkey Island (1990), a type of video game based on exploration and puzzle-solving in an interactive environment. Paradoxically, according to the acronym and their origin, these games are based on the principle or axiom: This is not a game, as their elements mimic reality and are perfectly integrated into the universes in which they occur. This means that the ARG does not look like a game and that the players forget that they are playing.

Thus, the line between reality and fiction is blurred. ARGs do not fully adhere to the definition of a game; however, due to the intentionality of the design that shapes them in terms of the relationship that is established between the dynamics and mechanics that govern it and the aspiration to win and reach the end of the question, it maintains similarities and characteristics. However, it should be noted that gamification is, to paraphrase Werbach (2012), the use of game elements and game design techniques in non-game contexts, and it is also considered a driver of ARGs. Huotari and Hamari (2012) claim that this technique transforms non-game environments into more interactive and fun spaces. Ramirez (2020), on the other hand, points out that gamification "has to en-

tertain, engage, build loyalty and enhance the experience" (p.26). This puts the focus on generating passion, motivation, and participation.

The internal structure and the elements that constitute gamification, both mechanics and dynamics, are largely extrapolable to ARGs, hence their common denominator. On the one hand, the most common mechanics that can be present in both techniques are the accumulation of points, levels, incentives with prizes or gifts, the existence of leaderboards, the proposal of challenges, missions, and challenges that are achievable and motivational. On the other hand, as far as the dynamics are concerned, we talk about, among others, the aspiration to improve the status offered, the search for rewards, and the pursuit of the feeling of achievement and competition (Contreras, 2018).

The idea behind an ARG - whose narrative usually revolves around searching for a missing person, stopping a catastrophe, or solving an enigma - arises in very early forms of entertainment, such as treasure hunt games or mystery books (Lungo & Melon, 2016). Likewise, the first cinematic embodiment of an ARG is considered to be in the film The Game (Fincher, 1997). However, it was not until 2001 that alternative reality games took shape as such and officially materialized in the first ARG in history, with The Beast, created by Elan Lee in 2001 and developed by Microsoft and Warner Bros. to promote the film A.I.: Artificial Intelligence (Spielberg, 2001). The ARG lasted over three months and generated millions of interactions in forums and online communities, as seen in its platforms and RRSS.

Therefore, it is not surprising that new proposals emerged that immediately gained popularity among users due to the results obtained from the implementation of ARGs in promo-

tional actions and their potential for application in other fields (Estanyol *et al.*, 2013). This was the case of Majestic (2001), Perplex City (2005), and I Love Bees (2004); the latter was part of the advertising campaign for the video game Halo 2 (Bungie, 2004). Some ARGs are on the Guinness World Records list, such as Why So Serious? (2007), which was designed by 42 Entertainment to promote the film The Dark Knight (Nolan, 2008) and was active for fifteen months, during which more than ten million people from 75 different countries participated (Piñeiro-Otero & Costa, 2015).

The ARGs evolved and magnified in size, hand in hand with new technologies and communication channels up to the present day (Rojas, 2020; Ruíz-García, 2022). Although there are certain discrepancies among theorists regarding the temporal division of the history of ARGs (Ruíz-García, 2022), experts agree that the boom occurred in what they consider the second wave, with proposals such as Jejune Institute (2011), Cicada 3310 (2014) and The Black Watchmen (2014).

The IGDA (International Game Developers Association) identifies five general typologies of alternate reality games (Martin *et al.*, 2006). Firstly, promotional games are the result of marketing strategies. They are characterized by establishing links between the brand and its followers, which makes them believe that the game has been designed for them. Due to their high media impact, promotional games generate conversations and content that become advertising content. They are also characterized by the high interaction, emotional intensity, and immersion they offer their players.

Secondly, there are product or service games. These ARGs are products; therefore, something in return is required to participate. An example

of this typology is Majestic (2001). Another typology is the single-player ARG, designed for individual solving of clues and puzzles, which goes against the defining principles of ARGs and is, therefore, more of a surrogate for alternate reality games. In contrast, base games, created entirely by brand fans, can be considered ARGs in their entirety. These may be wholly original or a continuation of an existing idea from the brand's narrative universe. Finally, we find educational games designed as a proposal for a new learning model (Kapp, 2012) due to their collaborative character.

The typologies identified by the IGDA are not exclusive. In other words, more than one category can be present in an ARG. It should be added that ARGs are mainly based on three pillars: the narrative component, the action mechanics, and community interaction (De Beer & Bothma, 2016; Aldegani & Caballero, 2022). The narrative that integrates an ARG is atomized (Scolari, 2013); that is, it is presented fragmented in a series of pieces that players must find and unify to create a coherent narrative thread that makes sense of the story (Stewart, 2006). At the same time, these pieces are determined by a series of encrypted clues designed to be deciphered by the users.

The story that is presented and eventually shaped, as in any narrative, unfolds on a time axis, but the players' interaction develops the narrative thread's structure. This means it is a spontaneous narrative arising from interaction and what the individuals determine (De Beer & Bothma, 2016). Furthermore, it will continue based on the player's progress and not on what the creator wants. All this is done to encourage and generate a specific obligation to resolve the clues and problems from a group decision. The aim is to enhance the user experience and the link between the player and the game.

Moreover, in the narrative of an ARG, there is direct contact between characters and players (Rojas, 2020), which makes the user empathize deeply with the story and become part of it, also due to their essential role in the course of the story. Even so, even though individuals are playing, they are not shown in the game and the interaction with the characters as just another character or through an avatar; instead, they "retain their identity and do not pass through a threshold between real life and simulation" (Sicart, 2014, p.60). In this way, the action mechanics of alternate reality games are based on the search for clues and the determination of the position/protagonism that these take in the ARG story; therefore, it is sustained by discovery and secrecy (Scolari, 2013). According to Stewart (2011), the game is more relaxed if no one knows what they are doing or why. Moreover, although initially, the correlation between all the pieces of the narrative is practically null, they are all a determining factor in the discourse of the plot.

On the other hand, ARGs take place in both a simulated and an everyday world (De Beer & Bothma, 2016), combining the media and the extra-media (Scolari, 2013). Indeed, ARGs are more dynamic if they reach viewers through as many different conduits as possible because narrative expansions are not limited to a particular medium but "depend largely on the technologies that are available in the specific temporal context in which they are developed" (Aldegani & Caballero, 2022, p.45). These channels and formats can include virtual reality, augmented reality, and geolocation.

Structurally, in an ARG, the beginning is known - once it is discovered - and what the purpose is, but the end is not known because it can change; it is regenerative. The game begins with a dynamic of searching for one or several clues (trails) scattered through different media that "can appear encrypted in paratexts, websites, blogs, videos, emails, SMS, audios, texts or objects from the real world to capture the attention of the largest possible audience" (Villén, 2017, p.125). Once these materials and the entry point to the game, called rabbit hole or trailhead, have been detected, the player decides whether or not to enter the ARG.

From that moment on, as they progress in the search and solving of clues, users spontaneously and naturally establish a knowledge of what the game field is, what their roles are, and what actions they can perform. ARGs do not always establish a clear register that structures and organizes their stages; therefore, it can be considered that the player will not understand the structure that has led them to the end of the game until the game is finished. Likewise, the game's rules and how they affect the narrative are established mainly by the players as the game unfolds (McGonigal, 2011). This turns out to be one of the elements that differentiates them, to a large extent, from gamified proposals.

This mechanic that sustains ARGs is possible thanks to the figure of the puppet masters, who are responsible for producing, regulating, and guiding the game. Experts such as McGonigal (2006) or Kim *et al*. (2009) play a crucial role in ARGs; they establish themselves as the point of connection between the players and the narrative. Puppeteers design the clues that players will encounter, and that will motivate them to continue playing. Consequently, they are constantly listening to what the players are saying, agreeing, and determining the resolution or continuity of the narrative thread to determine the channels and clues that will give succession to the story and reach the final objective for which it has been designed (Janes, 2015).

This active role makes it clear that the figure of the puppeteer requires a lot of creativity and adaptability, as the players may not act as expected. As Schell (2008) argues, games are about following the rules and breaking them. It may be that users do not find certain clues or that the difficulty of these clues slows down the game and, consequently, the course of the narrative. According to Rojas (2020), "ARGs teach designers when to hold the strings of the game like puppeteers and when to let go" (p.7). The involvement is so high that "new experiments have taken the puppeteer and turned him into a character within the narrative, who leaves cryptic messages to the audience intended to connect him to the story" (Rojas, 2020, p.7).

Regarding fandom interaction, it should be noted that "a game only exists when it is played" (Hunicke, 2004, p.429), which implies the need to make the ARG want to be played. Under this premise, alternative reality games move, especially games that are born, live, and end depending on the player's will to continue playing. The search for the link of complete dependence that is established between game and player is the engine and the explanation of everything that happens in an ARG and, therefore, a basic principle that guides them in their development and success is that "the participants are the stars" (Scolari, 2013, p.268). Each challenge and each clue has to get "the player to intervene and perform actions beyond a mere interpretation exercise" (Aldegani & Caballero, 2022, p.45). The user has to search, think, and fully immerse (McGonigal, 2011) naturally and deeply (De Beer & Bothma, 2016) in the narrative. They have to internalize everything thrown at them and accept that the elements of the game merge with their reality.

It should be pointed out that when we speak of a player, we should not simply think of them as an individual acting alone but as a user who is part of a collective configured with a common identity. This identity captures the most essential traits of the members of the collective, which creates a shared and coordinated self-awareness and modus operandi (Turner, 2010).

ARGs thus create communities where the feeling of belonging is persistent and solidified. Without these interconnections, they could not be fully developed since, due to the multi-media and narrative expansion that arises - which moves both in real life and online life - it would be impossible to solve the enigma by oneself. Therefore, the very generation of clues itself is based on the intention that it should result in a collective, cooperative, and participatory experience (Scolari, 2013; Stewart, 2011), where the effort is coordinated (Jerret *et al*., 2017) and the resolution of each clue that gives continuity to the story depends on the use of collective intelligence (Hook, 2017).

As for the characteristic of collective intelligence, it refers to what Jenkins (2002) calls hive-mind and, according to Lévy (2004), to "an intelligence that is distributed everywhere, constantly valorized, coordinated in real-time, leading to an effective mobilization of competences" (p.20). This intelligence of many, unified in a single line of thinking, is related to the emerging participatory culture that has been solidifying over time due to the synergy of three trends described by Jenkins (2006): the new tools and technologies that enable co-creation, the subcultures that promote the Do It Yourself discourse, and the media ecology.

New tools and technologies allow consumers to save, annotate, appropriate, and distribute the content found in the media. From the behaviors from which this participatory culture

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derives, it is evident that the interaction and connection between users, especially in ARGs, is based on communication and information technologies. Initially, the first virtual communities of alternative reality games lived in blogs and chats; nowadays, social networks are considered the backbone of ARGs, as these digital social experiences mainly take place. Finally, it is worth highlighting the validity and topicality of ARGs, as Ruíz-García (2022) states: "They are ludonarrative experiences that are alive and present, minority, although with an effervescence fueled by new uses and new technological forms that enliven and reproduce them" (p. 385).

As far as fandom's contribution is concerned, it is worth mentioning that ARGs are used for the phenomenon of transcreation and transauthorship, which, to paraphrase Papadaki and Volakis (2022), is produced by the characteristics of the current transmedia environment that cause synergies between many production companies and cultural industries with the users' creations or the original creators of the alternate game.

As can be seen, studies on ARGs and the transmedia and interactive narrative universes that form the ecosystem in which they develop are very prolific and offer a very multifaceted vision of the state of the question. As mentioned above, the study's main objective is to investigate the relationship between the narrative universe of the American singer Taylor Swift and the ARGs. In this way, it aims to determine which elements of this interactive storytelling technique are integrated into the 360º communication strategy and the construction of the Swift universe. It is associated with the personal brand of one of the most influential and famous artists in the music and entertainment industry today.

Singer-songwriter, producer, director, and actress Taylor Alison Swift is one of the biggest American stars in the world. In her 17-year career, she has released ten original albums and four re-recordings. Since her early days, Swift has been committed to expanding the musical experience beyond simply listening to her songs; she engages her fans, known as Swifties, in the imagery she has built up after the release of a new album. For this reason, it is appropriate for us to extract the main characteristics that have defined the recent history of ARGs according to the existing literature and to check whether the 'Swift universe' and its relationship with its fandom could be considered an ARG, even if it has not been defined as such.

3. METHODOLOGY

To determine which elements of singer Taylor Swift's alternate reality games are integrated into her communication strategy and narrative universe, an interdisciplinary analysis methodology used by other authors such as Castelló-Martínez (2020) or Vidal-Mestre *et al.* (2023) is proposed. This methodology has made it possible to extract the main characteristics of the existing literature to date on ARG games and to establish the state of the art (McGonigal, 2011; Stewart, 2011; Scolari, 2013; Villén, 2017; Kim *et al.,* 2019; Rojas, 2020; Ruíz-García, 2022, among others). The following table summarizes these main characteristics that allow us to analyze the Swift universe:

Table 1

*Summary of the characteristics
of an ARG extracted from the literature review*

Base	Characteristics	Referents
Narrative	Fragmented narrative.	Jenkins, 2006; Scolari, 2013
	Dynamic narrative and co-created with the players.	De Beer y Bothma, 2016
	Story integrated with the game and the players.	Aldegani y Caballero, 2022
	It is developed on a temporal axis.	Scolari, 2013
	Direct contact between characters and players.	Rojas, 2020; Aldegani y Caballero, 2022
	Players keep their identity.	Sicart, 2014
	Creation of a transmedia narrative universe.	Freire-Sánchez et al., 2023
Action mechanics	It is based on the discovery of trails.	Stewart, 2006; Ruíz-García, 2022
	Rabbit hole.	Stewart, 2006; Villén Higueras, 2017
	Combines both online and offline worlds.	Scolari, 2013; Aldegani y Caballero, 2022
	There is no structure to guide the game.	Stewart, 2011
	Roles are established spontaneously.	Aldegani y Caballero, 2022
	The players mostly set the rules.	McGonigal, 2011
	There is a puppet master.	Kim et al., 2009; Rojas, 2020

Base	Characteristics	Referents
Fandom	Participation and collaboration.	Scolari, 2013; Ruíz-García, 2022
	Voluntary and natural immersion.	McGonigal, 2011; De Beer y Bothma, 2016
	Coordination among players.	Jerret et al., 2017
	Sense of belonging and group identity.	Jenkins, 2006; Turner, 2010
	Hive-mind. Use of collective intelligence.	Lévy, 2004; Hook, 2017
	Social and mainly digital experience.	Kim et al., 2009

Note: Own elaboration.

4. RESULTS

To analyze the 'Swift universe,' on the one hand, the publication of each of her works has been separated into what the artist has called different 'eras.' Each one maintains a particular aesthetic and has its own identity, thanks to linking the LP to a specific color and objects, among other resources. But they all follow the same narrative thread, which gives continuity and expands or changes the course of the story she has been creating album after album.

On the other hand, it has meant that everything that encompasses being in each of her eras, with their respective events - such as the release of a music video - as well as the journey and leap between them, has come about as a result of a process of collective discovery of clues and deciphering of cryptic messages by the fans. Fans become brilliant detectives who dialogue with each other to discover and

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understand the clues, called Easter eggs, intentionally left by Swift; they also create their theories. The singer listens to what the fandom collectively decides and thinks and, based on these guesses, is inspired and sometimes even directly follows up on the cryptic game.

She mainly did this in his early days as a singer because she wanted people to pay attention to her lyrics. So, she decided to incorporate grammatically unjustified capital letters into some of the words in the lyrics of the songs found in the CD booklets. This way, if people paid attention and put all the capitalized letters together, a word or phrase was formed that explained what the song or album was about. However, it was with their album *Reputation* (2017) that the game went to another level, and its development expanded to many more channels, which meant that, nowadays, this dynamic expands along an infinite number of communication channels that can take shape in different ways.

The tracks, which present different difficulty levels, are present in both virtual and digital space. They can be found in places that, by their very nature, make sense and allow them to be hosted, such as video clips. But they can also be found in places that, to the naked eye of any individual, would pass completely unnoticed; being part of the swiftie world educates you to pay attention to things like, for example, the color of the nails she wears or the conditions of purchase of her merchandise. On occasion, the Easter egg has even been in the mention or commentary on the artist by a brand or other famous figure who initially seems to have no direct relationship with the American but who turns out to be linked to her in some way.

The rules and guidance as to what is considered valid and feasible in terms of where to find the clues have been shaped and established naturally, based on what the singer herself has explicitly determined and said; it is also based on observation and knowledge of what Taylor Swift would and would not be able to do; and what has been collectively established as feasible within the fandom, based on theories created and resolved, along with learning from trial and error.

This has resulted in fandom developing inside jokes and, at low levels, its own jargon. While initially clues were given in relatively short time frames, today, they can be given well in advance, such as three years. But it is worth mentioning that the dynamic works thanks to the existence of a third figure directly linked to the singer, known as Taylor Nation (TN); this "nation" consists of a small group of people who are part of Taylor Swift's management team, whose identity and number of users is unknown to anyone in the fandom. This group acts as a bridge between the artist and her fandom, mainly in charge of interacting with them and keeping the game running.

The release on 21 October 2022 of the American singer's tenth and most recent original album, *Midnights*, is a clear example of how this dynamic interactive narrative is implemented.

Midnights is a thematic masterpiece, presenting the stories of thirteen sleepless nights spread throughout the artist's life. It beautifully weaves the idea of insomnia and the myriad of thoughts it brings, creating a compelling narrative. The album's seventies aesthetic adds another layer of depth, with objects like a vintage telephone or a disco ball becoming symbolic. The clock, a central element associated with the album, further enhances its thematic coherence.

Both Taylor Swift and Taylor Nation had given signals of the existence of the album's idea, symbolism, and concept since 2019, following the release of her seventh album, *Lover*. In ad-

dition, to fuel the existing theories of fandom, both had for months signaled when she would announce the LP's existence - 28 August 2022 at the VMAs gala at midnight - and the date of its release.

Also, in the months leading up to the release date, and specifically in the week leading up to it, there was an abundance of Easter eggs and online calls for swifties to reveal information about the title, song themes, and music videos that would be released in the future for certain singles. These included Midnights Mayhem With Me, Midnights Manifest, and #CountdownToMidnighTS.

Midnights Mayhem With Me was one of the most complex communication actions that took place. In it, the artist revealed the titles of the songs that made up the album and the collaborations on it. It was a mini-series made up of thirteen chapters lasting two to three minutes, which were published on her TikTok profile always at midnight, but not every day or with a pattern that fans could guess. Thus, they could not know when they would see the next one. This action had thousands of fans worldwide, keeping an eye on the artist and making them analyze the chapters' content. They would check everything from her clothes and accessories to how she picked up the phone and wore her hair up. All this was done to develop theories that would make sense of previously found clues and create new ones that would reveal information about the album.

Following the completion of this series, the artist released the Midnights Manifest. This calendar summarized, by way of clues, all the events that were to take place from 20 to 27 October in the fandom and were vital to understanding the content of the album. On 20 October, there was a live broadcast on Amazon—during the third half of an NFL football game—of a compilation trailer of the LP's music videos.

In addition, this trail of events served as a bridge to the final countdown with #CountdownToMidnighTS and brought the clue game into the real world. With the collaboration of Spotify and the clues left by Taylor Nation online, during the three days leading up to the album's release, digital clocks following Midnight's aesthetic appeared in iconic locations around the world—such as New York's Times Square—revealing lyrics from the songs as the clock struck midnight.

The swifties would discover, night after night, the locations of the clocks. Once the lyrics were revealed, the fans who were physically on-site would share them with the entire online community to jointly discuss their meaning and the song they were associated with. They would, in turn, get confirmation from Taylor Nation, who would interact with them to let them know if they were on the right track or not.

5. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The primary purpose of this research has been to analyze the communication of the singer Taylor Swift, intending to determine whether the hypothesis that she incorporates alternative reality games in her communication strategy is fulfilled. To do this, we retrieved the table of ARG characteristics according to the specialist literature on the subject. This then allows us to see which elements are fulfilled in its narrative universe.

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Table 2

Characteristics of ARGs drawn from the literature review that are fulfilled in Taylor Swift's narrative universe.

Base	Characteristics	It's true in the Swift universe
Narrative	Fragmented narrative.	✓
	Dynamic narrative and co-created with the players.	✓
	Story integrated with the game and the players.	✓
	It is developed on a temporal axis.	✓
	Direct contact between characters and players.	✓
	Players keep their identity.	✓
	Creation of a transmedia narrative universe.	✓
Action mechanics	It is based on the discovery of trails.	✓
	Rabbit hole.	X
	Combines both online and offline worlds.	✓
	There is no structure to guide the game.	✓
	Roles are established spontaneously.	✓
	The players mostly set the rules.	✓
	There is a puppet master.	
Fandom	Participation and collaboration.	✓
	Voluntary and natural immersion.	✓
	Coordination among players.	✓
	Sense of belonging and group identity.	✓
	Hive-mind. Use of collective intelligence.	✓
	Social and mainly digital experience.	✓

Note: Own elaboration.

Based on the results obtained from the comparison, Taylor Swift's communication—which some researchers have described as choreographed engagement (Ryan and Edlom, 2023)—incorporates practically all the characteristics that define ARGs. Specifically, the results show that the ARG meets 19/20 defined characteristics. Its communication strategy pivots on a narrative universe that has been expanded across many platforms and networks for years.

The only element that is not entirely fulfilled is the existence of an initial clue, clear and perceived by all the players since the game dynamic she proposes moves on a very broad time axis in which several clues can coexist simultaneously. Therefore, in the case of the game proposed by the artist, the fans themselves detect the clue that could possibly initiate or, at least, indicate a new game. This is motivated by a previously non-existent pattern, a change in the singer's behavior, or something unusual in the dynamics or the communication that was taking place up to that point.

At the level of new components or considerations detected that Taylor Swift performs differently or that expand on what is stipulated in the bases that define an ARG, one should consider, firstly, the broad durability of the game. Secondly, the agreed, but also spontaneous, collaboration of brands and media figures configured to launch the clues and as alternatives to give continuity to the narrative thread. Thirdly, the very process by which the game comes to life, which has been the motive for the study of this work, is communication.

The artist does not normally create a playful game as such but rather, on many occasions, uses the communication she carries out for non-game purposes—whether to praise the work of a colleague, thank fans for attending

her concert, or accept an award—to incorporate the easter eggs that give continuity to the game that, in parallel, is developing in her universe and in that of her fandom.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The application of alternative reality games to achieve non-game objectives can be very extensive. Moreover, ARGs can be very effective with the right approach and management of their development. Some of their most common uses are in marketing and advertising (Estanyol *et al.*, 2013), entertainment (Huotari & Hamari, 2017), or education (Kapp, 2012).

Therefore, the list of benefits and positive purposes achieved with these types of games is complex and extensive. They can influence user behavior, build user loyalty, or educate them; they generate a good brand image, foster a sense of belonging to the group, help satisfy innate human needs, raise ethical or controversial debates, foster community building, enhance certain emotions, stimulate critical thinking, encourage creativity, etc.

This communication strategy carried out by the American artist, which incorporates practically all the elements and characteristics of the ARGs, could be considered a perfectly structured model that can be extrapolated to other commercial brands. For all these reasons, we consider it an example and a reference for interacting with the fandom, which emerges as an active, generative, and necessary part of expanding the universe and all the fragmented contents that, like a puzzle, are interwoven in an experience as immersive as it is complex, as deep as it is volatile and as original as it is creative. A well-designed ARG does not have a closed-end, and the limit will not be predefined by the narrative or the media and platforms but will depend on the users themselves and the interest of the universe created so that it can be prolonged over time. Suppose brands now want to spend time with users/consumers. In that case, ARGs are a strategy that can lead to a more advanced level with greater possibilities than branded content or conventional advertising. It is undoubtedly a much more gamified experience and fits perfectly with the spirit of choreographed engagement with fans (Ryan & Edlom, 2023) that has always characterized Taylor Swift's personal brand.

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