

Bringing the story to life ARG *Krindlekrax!*

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In this article Angela Colvert describes how she and her Year 6 class brought a story to life for some Year 5 children in the same school as together they created an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) based on the book 'Krindlekrax' by Philip Ridley.

Introduction

'Urgent help is needed if we are to save London from the beast which prowls beneath our streets...'

So begins the mysterious e-mail from someone who calls himself Darren the Dragon Hunter.

You read on. Darren tells you that he has experienced 'strange happenings' in Lizard Street, where he lives, and that he has noticed 'worryingly similar incidents' near your school. He explains that he needs your help, urgently. He wants you to help piece together the evidence. What would you do? The Year 5 (Y5) children to whom the e-mail was read had many questions that they wanted answering. Was this real? Surely they would have heard something on the news? The only lead they had was a link to the Lizard Street website at the end of the e-mail.

The adventure started here. This e-mail and the experiences that followed were planned and designed by a class of Year 6 (Y6) children and me, their teacher. Together we created an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) for the Y5s: a quest in which they would be required to work together to solve problems and unravel the mystery of 'the beast'.

Unlike console or computer games, in ARGs the game world is created through a combination of on- and off-screen media and is constructed and shaped through dynamic dialogue between designers and players. To create and play an ARG, therefore, the designers are not required to develop programming skills, nor negotiate gaming software. Instead the players and designers of ARGs are able to construct the game through the creative and inventive use of everyday communication technologies such as websites, phone calls, webcams and letters. Many of the challenges posed by these games are difficult or impossible to solve independently and require collaboration between participants.

They are sometimes referred to as types of scavenger hunt, in which the players must work together to find clues and information to solve the mystery that emerges whilst playing the game. This problem-solving occurs both online and offline, and ARGs often involve players in networking via social software.

Whilst working in a large south London primary school, I undertook two field studies over two years as part of my PhD research into the potential learning opportunities afforded by the process of designing and playing ARGs. I was interested in exploring the ways in which the children might develop their critical understanding of the media through which the games were shaped and played.

In both the first and second year I worked on termly multimedia literacy projects with the children in my Y6 classes. I challenged them to design a game for the Y5s based on carefully selected novels written by Philip Ridley: *Krindlekrax* (2005) in the first year and *The Mighty Fizz Chilla* (2006) in the second year. The children were invited to bring the story to life for the Y5s by setting a trail of clues and problems that, if discovered and solved, would lead them to a strange beast on its way to the school. This article provides an illustrative outline of the process: the planning, making and playing stages.

Planning

This project was cross-curricular with a particular focus on developing the children's literacy skills. It was carefully planned in order to meet the requirements of the National Curriculum since the design of the ARG shaped the majority of the curriculum for two terms. Although the medium term planning was very detailed, I ensured that there was enough flexibility in the lessons for the children to direct and determine the sequence of learning opportunities. The children and I were co-designers of the game and the planning process felt collaborative and fluid.

Regular weekly planning meetings and discussions helped to engender a culture of reflexivity and ensured that we were continually evaluating our progress and planning the next steps together. Throughout the project the children were encouraged to develop and share their understanding, expertise and ideas in discussion with others in the class, both online and offline. In this, they used the same communication technologies to plan and design the game as were then used to play it.

The project was top secret in nature as in order for this game to work, any Y5 visitors to the classroom never suspected Y6 were involved with, or knew anything about a place called Lizard Street! The Y6 children only revealed themselves as the designers of the ARG experience in the final moments of the game. The planning and scheming was therefore done in private. The Y6 children were given an area of the classroom as their Secret Work Area which they were in charge of organising for the duration of the project (see Figure 1).

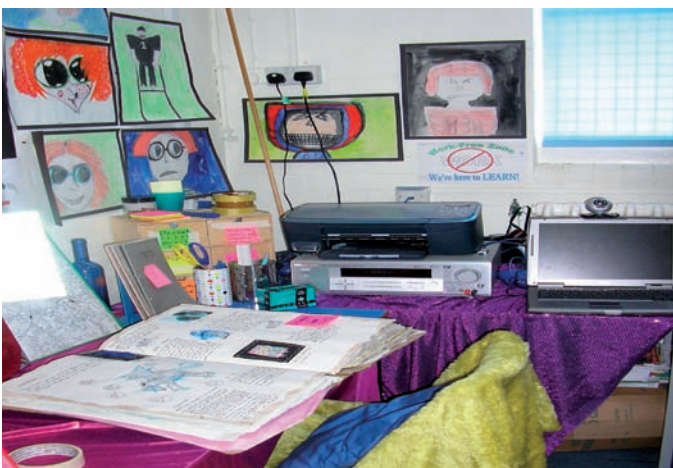


Figure 1: The secret work area

This space was shielded from view by tall, free standing notice boards. The boards were used as planning tools and the children organised and displayed their ideas as they developed in order that others in the class could comment on them (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Planning boards

The children also had the opportunity to share their ideas online on the project message boards both in and out of school time.

During the planning process the Y6s had to empathise with the Y5s who were to embark on the quest to find this beast Krindlekrax. What information would the players need to capture the creature? How would they know that such a creature even existed? How would the players feel during game play? The Y6 designers then had to decide how and when the Y5 would find the answers to their questions. They considered ways in which they could use different modes and media to communicate the information that the players would need to complete the game successfully. The Y6s predicted that the players would be curious and suspicious after receiving the initial e-mail and, as the Y6s wanted to make sure the experience felt believable for the Y5 players, they decided to try to make the websites, films and artefacts that they created as realistic as possible.

Prior to planning this project I had been fortunate to have participated in the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education's (CLPE) The Power of Reading Project (www.clpe.co.uk), which advocates the engagement with high quality texts by teachers and children over extended periods of time. My planning approach to the ARG project was influenced by my experiences with the learning sequences the CLPE had developed. Indeed it was through my involvement with this project that I first encountered Philip Ridley's novel *Krindlekrax* (2005).

Krindlekrax is the story of a young boy, Ruskin Splinter, who becomes the hero of Lizard Street in his home town when he saves the residents from the huge crocodylian monster that lives in the sewers. I decided to choose the novel as the basis for the ARG project for a variety of reasons, one of which was its quest like structure, a structure which the children could adapt when designing their game.

Making

In bringing the story to life, the children demonstrated and extended their understanding of Ridley's novel by developing and shaping their own imagined world through their inventive use of websites, films, artefacts and message boards. Everyday technology was used to create the illusion of a real life mystery which could be solved by the Y5s through employing detective skills and undertaking research.

Whilst making this ARG the Y6s experimented with the communicative potential of the modes and media through which the game was made and played. Lizard Street, the setting of the novel, and the fictional characters who live there were given online identities by the Y6s through carefully constructed web pages.

Community message boards on the online forum were set up in order to make it possible for the Y5s to contact the residents of Lizard Street to ask for help, whilst maintaining the anonymity of the Y6 designers who would respond in role. Intriguing film footage of giant footprints was created and posted online, suggesting the size of the creature on the loose, and webcam footage hinted at the whereabouts of a

useful book called *Dragons of the World*. This tome was later delivered to the Y5s in a package sent through the post and was instrumental in revealing the identity of the beast. In this way, information was distributed across different modes and media both online and offline.

Although the Y6s developed Ridley's characters and some of the novel's thematic content in their ARG, they also invented storylines of their own. For example, in the novel the beast never leaves Lizard Street whereas the Y6's web pages suggested that the creature was heading towards the school. Similarly, the theft of the *Dragons of the World* book recounted in an online news story and its subsequent concealment in a hotel room depicted in webcam footage were fictional events of their own making. Indeed Darren the Dragon Hunter, who sent the initial call for help to the Y5s, was invented by the designers in order to enable Y5s to communicate all their findings and hypotheses with one central character who could advise them on the next steps, if necessary.

Internet safety

Internet safety was an integral part of the Y6 curriculum in the school and during the project pertinent issues were addressed and discussed during class meetings in addition to the children receiving input from outside agencies such as the police.

Parents were also informed about the message board and safety precautions were discussed with them.

The Y6s understood that they had a responsibility towards the Y5 players to create an experience which was enjoyable and rewarding.

We addressed issues surrounding the content of the game and the way in which the Y5s might interpret it emotionally and intellectually. The Y6s wanted to create an engaging and believable experience for the Y5s but were aware that the quest for the beast would be embarked on in a playful manner and the Y5s interpretations would need to be moderated and directed by the class and me.

Websites

If the Y5s responded to Darren the Dragon Hunter's plea and followed the web link contained in the e-mail, they would arrive at the Lizard Street homepage. From here visitors would find links to numerous pages (all designed by the Y6s) including Lizard Street news, tourist information and community pages. We used the London Grid for Learning (Lgfl) (www.lgfl.net/) web space and templates to create the home page for Lizard Street (see Figure 3).

The Lgfl platform also provided an easy way to set up message boards which were password protected. All the other websites in the project were created using Microsoft Office Publisher, as this enabled the children to be inventive with their designs whilst also providing a simple framework for those less confident with creating hyperlinks and layouts. The children did not need to learn any specific programming skills and could concentrate on the content and modes through which they chose to communicate.



Figure 3: The Lizard Street homepage

The Lizard Street Community Pages consisted of a variety of personal web pages which were all about the residents of Lizard Street. They were designed to appear as though they had been created by the residents themselves and required that the Y6s design in role as the characters. Some of the children created websites for the protagonist of Ridley's novel, Ruskin Splinter, in order that he might be introduced to the Y5 players. Ruskin is a boy with few friends and is regularly bullied by another boy in the street, Elvis Cage. Ruskin is small and lacks muscles but nevertheless, it is this unprepossessing looking boy who saves Lizard Street from Krindlekrax. In our ARG Ruskin would help the Y5s to track down and capture the beast if they asked him to.

One pair of Y6 designers recognised that the webpage offered an opportunity for Ruskin to conceal his true identity and invent a new one for himself. They decided that his website would represent his 'dream world.' Writing in role as Ruskin the children used Ruskin's words from Ridley's novel on the homepage, 'I am brave and wise and wonderful and handsome covered in muscles with a voice like thunder.' Whereas in the novel these words are spoken by the character privately in front of the bathroom mirror, on the website they become a public performance of identity (see Figure 4).

Another pair of Y6 designers decided to indicate Ruskin's position as an outsider through his love of jazz. As well as including sound files, the website contained a caption

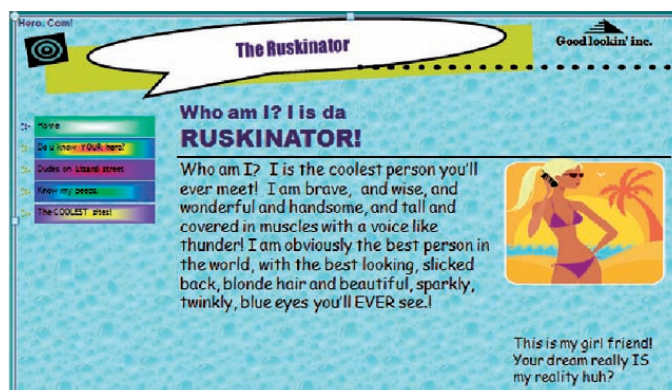


Figure 4: Ruskin Splinter's personal webpage

underneath a fictional CD cover which read 'This is the cover of my favourite CD. I'm the only one in the school who likes it' (see Fig. 5).

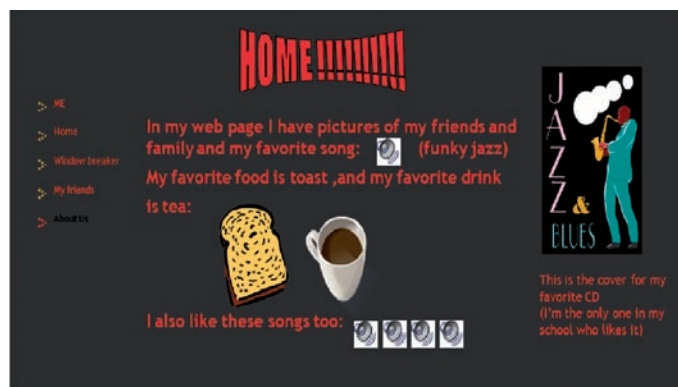


Figure 5: Another of Ruskin's web pages

Here the Y6 children generated musical preferences for Ruskin that helped to construct his character online in addition to providing links to his favourite websites. Ruskin's websites also linked to the web pages of others on Lizard Street thereby indicating his connection to the other residents, his friends.

The Lizard Street homepage contained a link to community discussion forums. On these message boards the Y6s wrote in role as Ruskin and other characters from Lizard Street. The message boards were an important part of game design and play, as it was through these that the players could communicate with the Y6 designers (who would be writing in role as characters from the novel). The online forums enabled the Y5 players to ask for information or clarification from the residents of Lizard Street and communicate their findings with Darren the Dragon Hunter, and the Y6s were able to guide the players and assess the Y5s' understanding of the media and messages.

However, in order for the forums to appear authentic they needed to look busy and full of comments before the Y5s encountered them. The designers believed that if the forums appeared to be used regularly by the residents of Lizard Street then the players would be more likely to use them. To this end the Y6s engaged in dialogue with each other online, writing in role as the characters prior to game play. In one message board forum, the children engineered a bullying incident between Ruskin and Elvis. Ruskin posts an initial message which reads:

Don't ask if I'm gonna say hello cause I'm not! I hate life! Don't ask me why but it's something to do with a dragon/crocodile. I hate my mum cause she mad about toast and tea, I hate my dad cause because of him I don't get enough sleep, I hate sparky cause I can't be his friend, I hate EVERYTHING! This world is a huge onion that makes you cry. I HATE IT!

To which Elvis swiftly and cruelly replies:

Hi Poor Ruskin, Are you to upset that your poor useless mum and dad are USELESS! They are such LOSERS! Sorry little helpless poor Ruskin that you and your parents can't ever be famous but do us all a favour, don't share your slobber with us please! From Your Hero Elvis

Breaking message board rules?

This online role play did not break any of the message board rules we had established together but did provide a useful starting point for a discussion about cyber bullying.

By writing in role the children continued to develop ideas and themes present in Ridley's novel, and by constructing the characters' identities online in this way they hoped to entice the Y5s to contact them to ask for help and advice.

Film footage

It was important that the players knew who to contact for information about the beast, but the Y5s would also need to gather information about the creature in order to have a good chance of catching it. During the regular planning meetings the children demonstrated their understanding of the way film could be used in the game to give the Y5s important information they would need. In an early class discussion, Max explained how the Y5s could discover Krindlekrax:

Max	We could have blurred and shaky tape of people being attacked by the crocodile.
Teacher	O.K. blurred and shaky tape. Why do you think it would be important to have it sort of blurred and shaky?
Max	Erm because so that they don't erm if it was shaky it would look like the person was running or something and erm blurred so they don't find out too much. You might have a person in the footage next to Krindlekrax and if they saw it properly then they'd know it wasn't real.

Much of the filming for the project was improvised, and one snowy day Max shot some footage in the playground. A small group of his classmates created giant monster footprints in the snow (see Figure 6) as he recorded events in a Behind the Scenes video, complete with voice over. As the action unfolds he narrates:

'Here we are making footprints of the crocodile. Amongst the many footprints of the children Bigfoot has entered or should I say...Krindlekrax.'

This first film was used by Max's group to share their creative exploits with the rest of the class on their return.



Figure 6: Making prints in the snow

The group also anticipated that the Y5s might be interested in how the game was made so it would be shared with them after they had completed the game.

Once the footprints had been made in the snow, a second film was created. This was the footage they intended the Y5s to find on the internet. This time two of the Y6 children in the group improvised a commentary as they directed the small handheld camera at the prints in the snow. In excited tones they improvised a short dialogue

Rhea	(Holding the camera to show a close up of marks in the snow) It seems like a scurry. It looks like erm... look at its claws again and va pa [the paws?] the fox. (Moves camera so you can see the full trail and back to a close up) It must have come this way and er... I don't know? What do you think?
Tim	It might have ate the fox. It might have ate the fox and no one knows.
Rhea	Let's get a close up. (Gets closer and feels the snow with her hand. She opens her hand to show hand span against the marks.) Look how BIG they are!
Tim	Woah!

This footage was designed to give the Y5s hints about the size of the creature. The footage contained only close-ups of the snowy prints, thereby obscuring the identity of the Y6 children behind the camera (See Figure 7). Max's initial intention to have the footage appear 'blurred and shaky' was adhered to and was intended to give an authentic feel akin to a chance encounter captured on a mobile phone.

However, some of the filming was more carefully planned and less spontaneous. The children created some fake webcam footage which showed a group of suspicious looking characters booking into a hotel in Lizard Street (see Figure 8).



Figure 7: Marks in the snow

They were carrying a strange book which they appeared to be arguing over before hiding it in the hotel. During filming the Y6s disguised their faces with realistic masks and created backdrops using green screen equipment the school had borrowed from the Lambeth City Learning Centre. This time the footage seemed to capture the actions of thieves, unaware that they were being filmed. The Y6s planned to send this footage on a DVD through the post to the Y5s during game play. On receiving the DVD, the Y5s would be able to ascertain the whereabouts of the old book and after contacting the residents of Lizard Street they would send it through the post.

Artefacts

During this game the Y5s would need to use information from offline as well as online sources to solve the mystery and capture the beast. The Y6 designers collected and designed a variety of artefacts that could be discovered during play (see Figure 9); these artefacts might be stumbled upon by chance or asked for by the players. Some would simply be planted in the school grounds by the Y6s and others would be posted to players directly. Some might appear briefly on a website or in film footage. These artefacts included a sharp tooth from Krindlekrax's mouth



Figure 8: Webcam footage

They collected information and posted it online so that it was accessible to the group as a whole. They also used the message-boards to communicate with the residents of Lizard Street, thereby gleaning useful clues and artefacts. In addition to this they wrote letters to Darren the Dragon Hunter to inform him of their progress and created film footage of themselves at work. These message-boards, letters and films were all accessible to the Y6s, enabling them to understand how the Y5s were responding to and interpreting the ARG. This was an exciting experience for the players and designers alike as they began to shape the experience together.

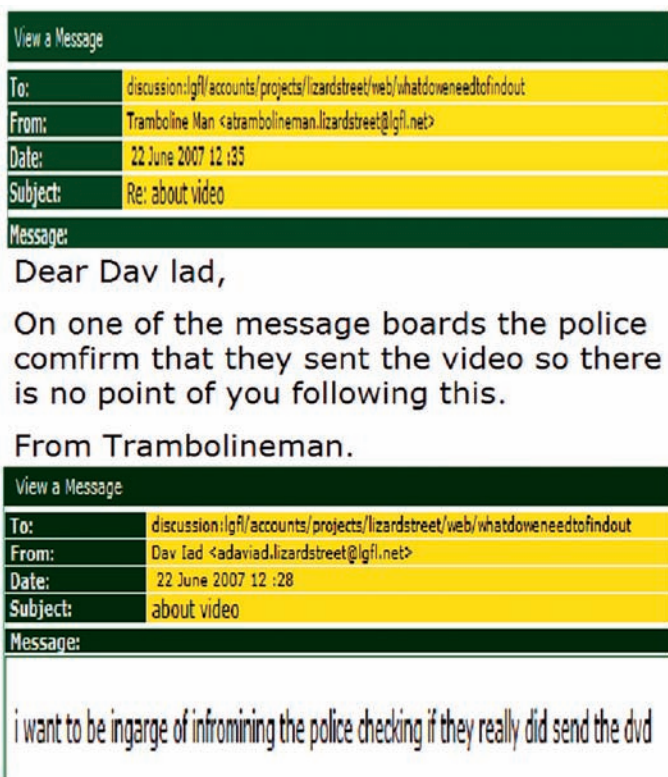


Figure 12: Y5s discuss strategy with each other

The Y6s helped to direct the Y5s to the information they needed by writing in role as designers and fictional characters. The Y5s directed the game-play through their actions, suspicions and lines of enquiry.

At the very end of the game the Y6s awarded the Y5 players with specially designed certificates of achievement. The closest the Y5s got to seeing the beast at close quarters was in some blurred film footage of the sewers, captured once they had fed it a potion which would tame it and render it harmless.

The exciting and challenging process of tracking down the beast and collaborating with classmates to solve the mystery of its identity and whereabouts was one that the Y5 players would remember a year on as in Y6 they would go on to make an ARG of their own.

What did we learn?

What is so powerful about developing literacy skills through the authoring of ARGs is that the modes of telling and playing the game have real-world applications. Yet in the playful adaptation of their use, in creating and responding to a fictional world, the children develop and demonstrate a sophisticated and critical understanding of the media practices and texts with which they are engaged.

My research demonstrates that ARGs represent an innovative means for children to explore and develop their understanding and experiences of learning and literacies across media.

In this project, the students made good use of their existing knowledge of games and the use of various media and narrative conventions. Through the active production of ARGs, they explored the relationships between these forms, in new ways.

Acknowledgement

I'd like to thank the staff, children and parents at Rosendale Primary School for their participation and support during the project. Without them this exciting learning experience would not have been possible.

Children's books

Ridley, R. (2005) *Krindlekrax*. Puffin. ISBN 9780141311531.

Ridley, R. (2006) *Mighty Fizz Chilla*. Puffin. ISBN 9780140385106.

Web sites

www.argle.net.

For more information on this project and access downloadable resources visit Angela's blog 'Alternate Reality Gaming and Learning in Education.'

www.clpe.co.uk.

To find out more about the CLPE Power of Reading Project.

www.lgfl.net/

The London grid for learning.

www.ukla.org.

To download a learning trail about writing in role online visit the UKLA website.