In addition to the initial funding to develop and pilot the game, the project was awarded extension funding for additional dissemination work in collaboration with the MMU LearnHigher Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) in Information Literacy and The Centre for Research in Library and Information Management (CERLIM). This involved the production of a manual and workshop, which enables teams at other universities to reuse and more easily develop their own ARGs reflecting their locality and areas of curriculum interest. The following outputs are currently being produced for course teams or other groups with an interest in running an ARG of their own:

1. A handbook/resource kit enabling other teams to develop and run ARGs in their local area. This focuses on:
   a. How to redesign the ARGOSI narrative, orientation and socialisation tasks for a different city.
   b. Developing challenges and resources for additional learning outcomes.
   c. Technical implementation options.
   d. Guidance and recommendations for facilitating games of this type.
2. A workshop for teams wanting to implement the ARGOSI model.

As part of the extension funding, workshops are currently being delivered to five other CETLs (Manchester, Liverpool Hope, London Metropolitan, Leeds and Bradford and Bournemouth) following a ‘train the trainer’ model. The aim of these workshops is not only to encourage development and deployment of the ARG, but to build further banks of learning outcome sets that can be reused elsewhere. The ARGOSI project responds to many of the weaknesses in the ‘traditional’ induction process for new students. Induction is typically an extremely intensive first few weeks where students are overloaded with information from across the University. This information often lacks any real context because their studies have not really begun. The HEA funded Shock Absorber project indicates that, “being overwhelmed by induction” along with isolation are some of “the most common causes of student drop out in the early stages of undergraduate programmes.” (MMU, 2007). Many social activities are heavily alcohol-focussed, according to the University of Leeds:

“student culture resolves around drinking. Pubs, clubs and house parties were forums for social interactions and networking, providing students with a means to create their own social capital … Drinking to meet people often starts in first year, when many students are trying to establish themselves within a new group of friends.” (Carpenter et al, 2007).
Induction also appears to provide a distinct lack of city orientation and instead merely focuses on the social aspects. MMU Freshers' week website emphasises this stating that, "Freshers week is usually based around a series of social events such as discos, live bands, parties ... and a Freshers Week Ball." (Freshers-week.com, 2008) This kind of social activity may not appeal to every type of student, particularly mature and international students. An ARG provides an alternative forum for students not only to study serious learning outcomes but also to create networks and familiarise themselves with the city and university campus. The ARGOSI project delivers induction information over a gradual time period avoiding information overload. It encourages students to establish friendships and work within communities in order to accomplish challenges within the game and discover the secrets that underlie the story.

ARGs are a relatively new area with little common practice or techniques for developing and running such games when applied to the field of education. The first ARG took place in 2001, when the game ‘the Beast’ was launched to market the film ‘AI’. Although the game only ran for three months, an intensely engaged community who used and adapted the format continued way beyond the games conclusion (see http://www.cloudmakers.org/). An ARG delivers a narrative that unfolds over time, as players solve challenges so more plotline is released to them. Gameplay typically encourages collaboration, in fact Kim (2008) asserts that, “two features of a successful ARG are compelling story-line and collaborative game play”. ARGs tend to rely on viral marketing to promote them and often this is absolutely essential to the game. Other examples of successful ARGs include:

- Perplexcity’ (http://www.perplexcity.com/) a commercial UK-based game that was launched in 2005, in which players had to purchase physical sets of puzzle cards that could be solved and the answers input online. Cards were of varying difficulty from those that could be solved alone in minutes to ones that needed thousands of players worldwide tackling a problem simultaneously. Players had to finish a fictional ‘cube’ that had been stolen and buried somewhere on earth (associated with a real £100k prize) by buying cards and solving puzzles.
- ‘Year Zero’ (http://www.42entertainment.com/yearzero/) a game to promote the album ‘Year Zero’ by the band ‘Nine Inch Nails’, launched in 2007, where 3.5 million people took part. This included codes hidden in tour t-shirts linking to secret messages and telephone numbers, flash drives found in toilet cubicles at gigs, clues hidden in the album music itself, messages delivered through distributed mobile phones
- World without Oil (http://worldwithoutoil.org/), which ran over 32 days in 2007 exploring a hypothetical scenario in which the world’s oil resources ran dry, designed as a game to raise awareness. It was a game used to raise political issues and influence players and effectively created narrative through player-created artefacts.

ARGs for education allow users to learn in a gaming environment providing challenges, context and purpose, while creating engagement and mystery to draw the player into the game. They encourage collaboration as often challenges cannot be completed individually either because they need such a diverse skill set or because they physically need more than one person to complete. They are lo-fidelity in that they tend to use established web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, wikis, and social networking sites, and encourage users to engage with a range of technologies. Their basis in the real-world and use of ‘actual reality’ enables aspects such as orientation to a city, and links to organisations like local tourist information and major landmarks to be incorporated, making the most of both the real and online worlds.

The ARGOSI project launched an ARG called Viola Quest in September 2008. The ARGOSI structure has three elements (see Figure 1). It provides a narrative, challenges and a community for students to progress through induction.

![Figure 1](image)

In terms of narrative there is an overarching storyline, allowing major challenges to be released at various regular plot points. Underneath this main storyline are customisable sub plots that allow the incorporation of more serious learning outcome sets (see Figure 2).
The main narrative for Viola Quest is centred around the mystery of Viola Procter, a first year student at MMU who has a puzzle to solve. Originally she sets up a blog to do this but Percy Root, a librarian based in Manchester, discovers the blog and sets up a website to help Viola in her quest and also to set some puzzles of his own. Percy’s puzzles are the customisable sub plot of this main narrative, which offer a mechanism for delivering the library learning outcomes. The quest starts when Viola discovers a strange letter whilst nosing around her Gran’s attic. The letter talks about a great secret, which was hidden in a map and divided into six pieces and given to each member of a secret society at the time of major UK industrialisation. With the letter she also finds a map piece (see Figure 3), which is used as the entry point to the game.

![Figure 3](http://playthinklearn.net/argosi.htm)

The narrative supports engagement by encouraging students to complete a pattern (find pieces of a map), discover a truth (find out what the secret society were hiding) and journey with a character (uncover the mystery with Viola). Set in Manchester and with references to the linen industry the narrative links to the local environment and local history. It also links to local organisations, for example, clues were left at the tourist information centre and the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry.

The challenges that scatter the storyline and sub plot occur both online and offline. Although some can be completed individually, working as a group makes many of them easier and several of the challenges need collaboration to be completed. The challenges purposefully vary in difficulty. Making all the challenges too easy could put people off and this could happen equally if they were all too difficult. The sub plot challenges are linked to the more serious InfoSkills learning outcomes, for instance one learning outcome expects students to be able to use the library catalogue to find specific items. The challenge relating to this gets players to manipulate the library catalogue to find specific items and add up the class numbers of these items for the solution. The challenges offer a range of ways for the user to provide evidence of completion, including simply entering answers into a website, as well as the creation of artefacts such as photographs, stories, or videos.

Community elements were encouraged through a forum set up on the challenge website and through collaborative challenges. The community element of the ARG incorporates the social elements that occurred both online through the forums and offline through meeting up. The community arises with a shared goal in mind, for example, when there was a difficult challenge numerous people contributed to the forum either to ask for help or offer advice to others.

ARGOSI has produced an ARG engine, a set of reusable ARG components including the narrative, graphics and challenges and guidelines for use. The ARG engine is open source software (which will be freely available from the ARGOSI web site [http://playthinklearn.net/argosi.htm](http://playthinklearn.net/argosi.htm)) that creates an interactive web site for managing aspects of running an ARG. The software can be freely modified and deployed to any compatible server. It provides easy challenge management, offering the ability to deliver challenges, evaluate answers (either automatically or by hand, e.g. photographs) and show which challenges are available and which need to be completed. User management shows who is signed up, allows profiles to be created and presents a leader board. There are discussion forums available and personal messaging so players can contact each other individually. There are two levels of access: user and administrator. Users can sign in, post to discussions and complete challenges; administrators can create and manage challenges, set up and manage forums. All areas of the site can be viewed before a player has signed on.

ARGOSI offers an engaging environment to encourage students to build communities as well as tackling relevant learning outcomes from their studies. It has the potential to aid retention and contribute to student satisfaction. Those students that played ARGOSI became extremely engaged, contributing to forums and competing to complete challenges first. However, take up of the game was fairly low overall and not enough of those who signed up became keen players (although this conversion rate of around 5-10% is fairly typical of ARG engagement). Timing for the ARG is extremely important: Viola Quest was launched during Freshers’ week and struggled to compete for student attention. To combat this, the library is currently exploring the potential to run the ARG pre-entry. The ARG used viral marketing to promote the game (which is typically how ARGs are marketed) but many students did not understand what to do with the initial promotional postcard. They also struggled with understanding the motivation behind the game and it is clear there needs to be better indicators of how it would help with their studies or a prize at the end of the game, and these aspects are being considered for the next iteration.

Despite these initial issues there is definitely exciting potential in using ARGs in education. An ARG can offer wider student support, directly linked to subject curricula and assessment and cover a longer time frame. ARGs could have a role
to play in pre-entry and transition periods for new students. Viola Quest certainly offered a more activity-based and fun way of delivering learning outcomes for many of the students who took part.

For more information, see http://playthinklearn.net/argosi.htm or contact Rosie Jones r.j.h.jones@mmu.ac.uk or Nicola Whitton n.whitton@mmu.ac.uk

References


