

TOMORROW CALLING – A game *for* the future

‘Elevator Pitch’

Tomorrow Calling is a game like no other. Combining a rich array of media, such as digital earth technology, websites, audio files, blogs, video and email, participants are thrown into a compelling alternate reality, where their actions will actually affect real-world outcomes.

It has been designed with several learning intentions in mind. Firstly it intends to promote and demonstrate features of digital earth technology, by immersing participants in goal-oriented challenges that encourage familiarity with digital earth software to complete. Additionally it provides a scalable viral marketing framework to increase digital earth usage, especially for educational and environmental purposes. Secondly it aims to educate people about pressing environmental issues and sustainable development, inspiring people not only to reflect on these issues, but also to act accordingly. And thirdly it aims to promote the potential of 'web 2.0' features, for collaboration, content sharing, research and entertainment.

Taking the format of an Alternate Reality Game (ARG), a relatively recent genre, Tomorrow Calling participants are never actually informed that they are playing a game. At every stage, the challenges, characters and websites all appear to be real. This personal immersion in a narrative that ARGs encourage is a potentially powerful and valuable asset. Instead of players just passively viewing a narrative unfolding on-screen (like with a movie), this game requires the players to play themselves, embodying themselves fully in the fantasy scenario, providing fully situated meaning. Citing Turner and Morrison's experience (2005) of creating an ARG as a pedagogic tool,

an ARG 'targets and implements a way to engage students with theoretical concepts by giving them a practice-based and relevant pathway with which to engage'. With this potential for player involvement in mind, we have designed Tomorrow Calling to encourage educational digital earth use and both reflection and action on climate change issues

As the player progresses, an intriguing narrative unfolds. The player is initially sent an email from a company that appears to have received digital contact from a future relative of theirs. On accessing this message, the player is warned that the world in 2083 is a grim place, with hyperbolic temperature rises causing widespread damage to the environment and suffering for humanity. Players are then directed to various sources of information in which more of the story unfolds, and throughout which players are required to take an active role in exposing. Without ever explicitly being about learning or activism (deliberately), players work their way through the story by solving problems using Google Earth, interacting with characters, finding clues and eventually posting evidence of their own positive environmental actions. The game is designed as a first 'episode', and finally players are motivated to pass the game on to others, with the incentive that the next part of the story will only be published once a certain number of people have completed the real-world environmental action.

With the combination of complex problems, a compelling story and a bit of old-fashioned mystery, you have the recipe for an innovative, appealing and instructive game.