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Practical Applications of Technology for Learning
e-Magazine

THIS WEEK: Design Strategies

ARGs Leverage Intelligence: Improving Performance Through Collaborative Play

By Brandon Carson, Dolly Joseph, and Enzo Silva

Kim Ng, the chief executive officer, who is also your boss, collapsed just a few hours ago after a day of intense business negotiations. You have less than thirty minutes to get to her office to retrieve her briefcase, decode the combination, and access critical files needed to continue the negotiations.

You will need to coach a member of the negotiation team via the phone on specific information in the files. Note there are competing teams trying to close the same deal, so you need to be sure you can effectively communicate your company's position to seal the deal. Your team members on the other end are relying on you to be able to translate Kim's notes.

Although this scenario might read as a script from a TV drama, instead it is the task facing a player engaged in an Alternate Reality Game (ARG). In this ARG, participants compete against each other by engaging in real-world and virtual activities designed to teach and reinforce business negotiation skills. ARGs can be defined as "immersive, massively multiplayer experiences that unfold in the course of people's real lives for days, weeks, or months" (McGonigal, 2008).

ARGs enable players to engage both in physical and virtual environments to learn skills, perform tasks, collaborate with peers to earn an achievement, and share information. ARGs can create experiences that facilitate collaboration and add greater authenticity and interest to training interventions. Well-

Some skills are harder to learn than others, and a good design must not only facilitate the learning, it must also maintain the motivation to learn. Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) can be an excellent way to meet this challenge! This week's feature explains how to create an ARG, the team you need to create it, and gives a case study to round out your knowledge of this valuable strategy.

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designed ARGs combine activities that take place in public spaces, multimedia, and social networking to create real-world learning experiences such as the one mentioned above.

Businesses can use ARGs to facilitate cooperative learning experiences, which enable collective intelligence – a "shared or group intelligence that emerges from the collaboration and competition of many individuals" creating vital and relevant learning experiences. Jane McGonigal, a leader in the field, states that, "ARGs train people in hard-to-master skills that make collaboration more productive and satisfying." Furthermore, playing ARGs allows individuals' skills to be identified and utilized effectively, and it allows individuals to quickly test, reject, or accept possible solutions. (McGonigal, 2008). ARGs in a business setting can allow players to assume different roles than the ones inherently dictated by their job titles, and let previously unidentified group dynamics and soft skills emerge.

Games for learning

ARGs are a particular form of game. The use of games designed specifically for learning can increase engagement and motivation. Sales, leadership, and technical training often use such games. Research is in a nascent stage, but it is thought that purposefully-designed games, blended with carefully-constructed learning objectives, can improve learning outcomes.

Games in general must contain attainable goals, rules, consequences, and competition. The majority of team-based games contain structured play (play with rules and goals). ARGs, unlike many other game types, can merge structured play and unstructured play (play devoid of rules or goals). (See Figure 1.) Elements may be evident in ARGs when players interact spontaneously to determine roles, tactics, and/or

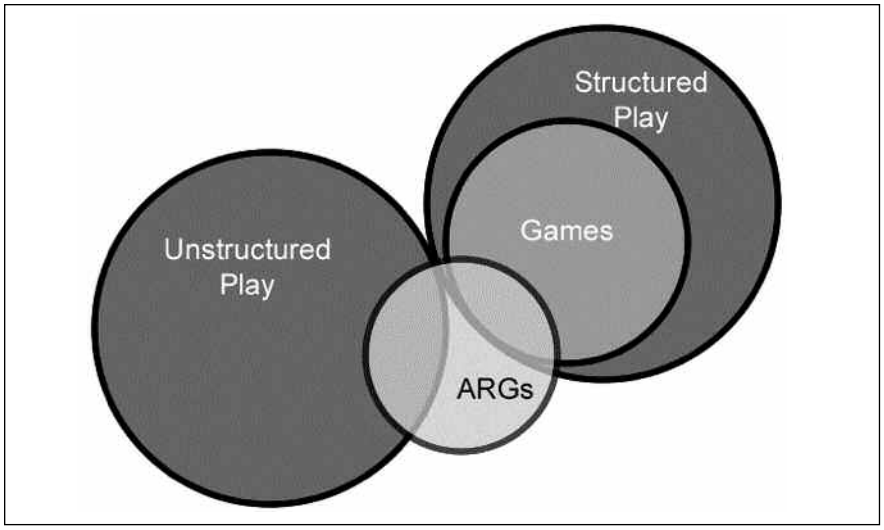

Figure 1 ***ARGs bridge the gap between structured and unstructured play.***

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actions to take. Hence, players have the ability to help drive the game, build its ultimate structure, plot, and assets, and even dictate and recruit participants.

ARG examples

ARGs vary in size and scale, from those that are played over several months with participants in the millions, to more focused experiences lasting weeks or days with smaller numbers of players. Game designers can also create ARGs that facilitate product marketing, training, and specific community-driven initiatives. Examples include:

The Beast

"Evan Chan was murdered. Jeanine is the key."

This sentence, and slightly different variations, appeared in movie trailer credits and on promotional posters for Steven Spielberg's movie *A.I.* The sentence also enticed people worldwide to slide down the "rabbit hole" and join *The Beast*, an ARG designed by a small team at Microsoft to promote the movie. The ARG was launched approximately three months prior to the movie's release and had players visit many fictitious Websites, listen to phone messages, and conduct in-person conversations with actors playing game characters – all to uncover new clues and pieces of the story in their investigation of Evan's mysterious death.

Players created online communities, such as the Yahoo group *The Cloudmakers*, so they could work together to uncover clues and solve puzzles surrounding the murder. The community groups often influenced the ARG designers to consider incorporating novel elements in the game as it was being played, including in-game direct mentions to these groups, players, and some of the content they created. *The Beast* was arguably one of the first well-known ARGs to prove that collective intelligence is indeed something that can be leveraged for a common goal during an ARG.

World Without Oil

In *World Without Oil*, a 2007 ARG created to call attention to a possible near-future global oil shortage, players had to figure out how to live in a world with extreme shortages of oil. The *World Without Oil* ARG launched on April 30, 2007, and concluded on June 1, 2007. It gathered over 1,500 in-game player stories during those 33 days, in the form of blog posts, online videos and images, and voicemails. Players made decisions about how to modify their lives to compensate, and documented those experiences on the ARG site. Players formed teams to collaborate on finding innovative solutions to help deal with the "crisis." Part serious game, and part collaborative play, this ARG demonstrated that role-playing could indeed motivate people to work together to solve "real-world" problems (or at least uncover ways to adapt to life-altering events).

Year Zero

ARGs have been successful in the entertainment industry as marketing and promotional devices. 42

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Entertainment designed the *Year Zero* ARG for a recent Nine Inch Nails (NIN) album release. At NIN concerts, clues were hidden in merchandise; fans would later enter those clues on a Website in order to receive cryptic messages. As fans discovered more subtle clues on t-shirts and other memorabilia, they began to form social networks to share the clues, and to talk about what all the clues meant. Not all the activities were virtual. USB drives were stashed in public restrooms in concert halls. The drives contained messages that often required collaboration among players to decipher, facilitating goal-oriented interactions between fans both online and in real life.

Designing ARGs for learning

Many ARGs have large numbers of players, with the play spread out over several months. A new trend in ARG design for learning, often referred to as "Mini-ARGs" (mARGs), has seen the rise of more spontaneous, short-term experiences designed around specific goals and objectives. Often designed for smaller, more targeted audiences, mARGs often require fewer design resources. They can be as compelling as longer-running ARGs, but may be a better fit for training events such as conferences and workshops since, by design, their duration is shorter.

ARG design elements

As with any successful training program, the design phase is crucial to a successful outcome for an ARG. One can apply many of the traditional instructional design processes, such as components of the ADDIE model; however, there are some non-traditional aspects to consider. Since an ARG usually evolves as it is played, traditional game design cycles may not be completely applicable. It is important to be able to monitor the game play and quickly adapt the design based on player inputs. Below are some key elements to consider when beginning the design of an ARG:

- **Audience Analysis.** Identify audience traits including age, gender, job description, cultural aspects, and other demographic considerations including team dynamics.
- **Learning Objectives and Goals.** Identify the learning objectives. All activities within the ARG should support the acquisition of these objectives. Link objectives and goal statements to the specific business needs. Having a clear goal in mind will help ensure a focused design.
- **Compelling Story.** Create a story arc containing a beginning, middle, and end. A compelling story, combined with good writing, is a key element in a successful ARG. Creating meaningful characters, and roles that players can easily relate to through their own value system, is extremely important. Incubate "collective intelligence" by leaving gaps in the story. These provide players the ability to interact with each other, and to work together to evolve the story with their own actions.
- **Game Components.** Design the various game structures and components. The following list contains common ARG play elements:
  - *Clues and Puzzles.* ARGs often involve deciphering clues and puzzles in support of solving or understanding some mystery or task. Clues can be delivered both in real life and in virtual formats, using online puzzles, physical objects that need to be found (using location coordinates or mobile geocaching), downloadable cards to print, or by using real players to disseminate the clues.
  - *Game and Activity Timelines.* Game timelines and checklists provide organization for players and users.
  - *Leveling, Ranking, and Scoring.* Include these components in order to offer feedback to the players, and to engender competition among individuals and teams.
  - *Game Websites and wikis.* Websites, wikis, forums, or social networks are often used as virtual gathering places for participants to register to play, share information, form teams, discuss strategies, and debrief each other on game tactics. Fictional Websites can host clues and puzzles, display game artifacts, and contain unfolding game story elements.
- **Multimedia Assets.** Produce any rich-media elements needed for the physical or virtual environments. Design the media elements with the purpose of reinforcing the story by producing them at the appropriate fidelity. In some instances, it may be OK not to have "professional" quality audio or video.

ARG design team for learning

Regardless of the size of the ARG, the design team should include the following members. Some roles can be performed by the same person:

- **Puppetmaster(s).** The puppetmaster, or game designer, is the person who designs and runs the game. This person is responsible for evolving the narrative, ensuring that player changes to the narrative are successfully integrated or discarded, and for helping to ensure that successful outcomes occur through play and participation.
- **Instructional Designer (ID).** The ID is responsible for determining performance objectives based on the results of the analysis that determined the need for the intervention. Many IDs also perform the analysis. The ID also ensures that all components of the intervention adhere to its original

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goals. The ID and the Puppetmaster will need to work closely together to align the play elements and the learning objectives. Depending on the size and complexity of the ARG, Puppetmaster and ID duties may be completed by the same person.

- **Content or Subject Matter Expert(s).** The Subject Matter Expert (SME) provides the content that the Puppetmaster and ID use to design the play and learning components. SMEs are responsible for describing or documenting how tasks are to be performed, and for providing the performance objectives used to construct the play and learning activities.
- **Media Designers.** A team of graphic artists, audio/video specialists, or other media talent may be required to produce the required media objects. The production of the Websites, blogs/wikis, cards, artifacts, or other components, may require the leveraging of various skill-sets to produce all the needed game-related media.
- **Programmer(s).** Web programmers, or more advanced Flash programmers, may be required to produce interactive online media.
- **Writer(s).** The writers should be well-versed in the art of narrative. Since story is a primary component in an ARG, crafting a well-written story is key. Consider hiring a freelance writer or novelist to join the team.
- **Editor(s).** An editor is recommended to help ensure that cohesiveness and consistency is present in the story and game-play elements.

Other design tips

- Integrate content and game play. Avoid the "Story > Puzzle > Story" trap indicative of many ARGs.
- Design casual play for beginning activities. Lure in players with easy entree into the game and build complexity and compelling storylines. Make it simple and easy initially – a casual engagement that will draw players in and encourage them to go deeper on their own.
- Focus on the system being dynamic and flexible. Create simple rules that are easy to understand.

Design risks

Unlike traditional games, there is no "pause" button in ARGs so the design should be flexible enough to mitigate any real-life "risks" that may occur. With physical activities in the design, players are always available to be playing, even as they stroll down the street. In that context, there are no simulations, or restarts available – so there is an immediacy to the play at that level. Beware of common play "risks" that may include:

- **Demotivated target audience.** ARGs designed for learning are likely to have a smaller target audience than a big-budget movie-themed ARG. It may be a challenge to get players involved in the game unless they know there's something in it for them. Be prepared to send alternative "rabbit-hole" clues, and/or request executive involvement to help encourage employees to get started.
- **Accidental non-player involvement.** Physical objects may be subject to non-player interference.
- **Public safety issues.** Be aware that wrapped packages in public spaces may cause public safety concerns. Properly plan for activities that occur in public areas: are permits of any kind necessary or is compensation required for other events in the area?
- **Design adaptability.** Design the ARG to easily adapt to the flexibilities of diverse play situations. Length and intensity of the game, player lulls, outsiders joining the game, narrative changes, and moderated activities may mean the game evolves in unexpected ways. Expecting and embracing these changes is key.
- **Confusion, ambiguity, obfuscation.** Prepare strategies for occasions when players lose focus, or do not know what to do next.
- **Lack of clear feedback, rewards, and progress.** Design accessible rules and timely feedback with consistent and predictable updating.

Duke's Quest for Knowledge – A case study

Each year, the leadership team at Sun Learning Services (SLS) gathers for a three-day "conference" to recap the previous year's business results, set priorities for the upcoming year, and align those priorities with Sun's overall business goals. The event is hosted by the Chief Learning Officer (CLO), and includes formal presentations, informal discussions, and team-building activities.

Conference attendees include SLS executives from all the regions in the world, as well as other invited guests. The majority of the attendees are the executives that manage and drive Sun's learning businesses, including sales, strategic development, and classroom delivery. Although many attendees fall within the same age group, wide cultural and language differences do exist. Each executive is responsible for the business only in their region – resulting in infrequent collaborations and rare face-to-face interactions. While the conference is a top priority, it does fall near the end of the fiscal year, when budgets and reports are being finalized.

In 2008, a miniARG was one of the conference team-building activities, and served as an introduction to new innovations in learning. The miniARG was de-

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signed to begin one month before the conference, with culminating events occurring during the conference. The game had three primary goals:

- To increase the leadership team's competency with emerging social networking utilities
- To encourage the use of social media utilities such as wikis, blogs, mobile devices, and social network sites in their education marketing, and
- To provide SLS instructional designers the opportunity to pilot an ARG in a global context, and to evaluate the results.

Furthermore, the instructional designers also had the following secondary social goals:

- Facilitate discussions about new technologies and their influence on learning trends within the play experience.
- Encourage the participants to engage with one another online prior to the live conference at the Sun headquarters in California.

Story and concept

The concept combined elements of "old" and "new" to help build a contrast between current and emerging trends in learning. The story begins in the early 20th century as Archibald Duke, a radical scientist and self-appointed "futurist," documented his predictions about technology. Duke's associates considered his predictions ridiculous, and the work of a deranged mind. He was eventually institutionalized and died in an insane asylum. Prior to being committed, Duke hid some of his documents in a briefcase which he stowed away in his attic. In the present day, Duke's grandson, Jonathan, finds the locked briefcase. Decoding the lock and opening the briefcase becomes the first task for the ARG players.

Gameplay continued from this point with weekly milestones for each team to achieve. Players explored and used Websites containing Flash-based puzzles and games, and a Facebook group for discussion. They received cryptic messages from Jonathan via e-mail. Since some of Duke's "predictions" included the rise of modern-day "social-learning utilities," some of the game activities offered the players an opportunity to use social networking to solve puzzles and ex-perience working collaboratively using the technology they were learning about. Teams earned points by solving the weekly challenges, and each team was assigned the task of creating a presentation, to be shared during the final conference, on what they had learned about social media during gameplay. The team with the most points would be declared the winner and receive the actual "briefcase" containing old Mr. Duke's documents, a film roll with a message from him, and gift cards for the team to spend or donate. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2 *Players received a virtual replica of Archibald's briefcase. After solving a series of numeric and cryptic puzzles, they realized the numbers were a combination to open the briefcase. The briefcase stored mysterious documents, notes, and drawings from old Mr. Duke which were clues to the next game milestones.*

Takeaways

Initially there was a significant lack of engagement from players. Part of the issue was timing – it was the end of the fiscal year when the players were busy aggregating their financial data and preparing their reports. The design team reacted by ensuring the teams were aware of their time-based assignments via a Facebook group, which served as a collaboration hub where the players could interact with one another and with Jonathan himself. Jonathan would then communicate with the players directly via the Facebook group. Messages from the CLO also helped the players be-gin to engage.

Given the Facebook group, and the game rules, incentives, and goals (all of which came to participants in e-mails), more than 70% of the target audience ended up participating online. The final presentations, which involved every player, included what each team learned about social media while playing the game, and teams detailed how they would begin to integrate new forms of learning into their business models. The combination of the pre-conference work and the interactivity driven by the game's narrative made it possible for the players to familiarize themselves with the overarching concepts of social learning, build new relationships with colleagues they may not have known before joining the game community, and engage in a socially-driven learning experience that helped enable them to find creative ways to present their ideas about the future of learning.

Summary

Alternate Reality Games can serve as excellent tools to encourage collective intelligence, collaborative play, and distributed storytelling in an educational environment. ARGs also help to build collaboration, increase communication, and raise awareness about products and causes.

Design cost is limited only by imagination – design teams that utilize free technologies and leverage

existing social networks have proven to be quite effective in creating interactive environments where players collectively create stories and play.

You can learn more about ARGs, how they work, possible themes, player dynamics, and many more aspects of the genre by actually playing an ARG. Visit the ARGNet Website (http://www.argn.com) to find links and discussions about currently running games. If you are interested in learning more about how mini-ARGs are being used in learning contexts, access the Laboratory of Advanced Media Production (LAMP) at the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) wiki.

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Leveraging the e-Learning Advantage in Healthcare

Healthcare is a major area of growth for e-Learning in the near future. Between the demands of healthcare insurance reform, Electronic Medical Records, and an aging population, large numbers of healthcare providers will be looking for training. This article shows you how to be ready to meet the demand!

In e-Learning, as in most corporate learning modalities, we are singing the same old song: no time, no money, and no interest in training. But wait! This time it's different! We're talking about healthcare now, and this year there are still lots of all those reasons not to train in this growing sector of the economy.

So, how does a healthcare learning professional capitalize on the advantages we have today to help build tomorrow?

You can do it easily with the technological training tools we are already using. With the wide dispersal of information available through e-Learning technologies, we can leverage the available time, money and interest to improve the future for our patients and our providers.

Leveraging the time

Hospitals, medical offices, clinics, and long-term care facilities find themselves downsizing and right sizing, just like most other businesses in this economic climate. At the same time, they are gearing up for the onslaught of the healthcare needs of an aging population. That means now is the time to deliver training, while we are in a sort of remission period between the go-go years of prosperity when we spent more freely on necessary and discretionary healthcare, and the lean years ahead when fewer dollars will have to go much further to serve the expanding senior population.

In an economic downturn, it is inevitable that people have less discretionary income. Even critical spending decisions, such as doctor's visits and non-essential surgery, are subject to increased scrutiny. The result is fewer paying patients, and fewer paying patients means less work for healthcare providers.

Healthcare is not immune to the downturn. Hospitals are laying off staff. Some organizations or departments are merging, even closing, at an increasing rate. As in other industries, when the downturn hits the staff it is time to do something counterintuitive and increase training. When you have fewer people, remaining workers are retooling and repositioning to fill in the gaps. Organizations have to do more with less people and less money. And you need to address morale.

Effective training increases the productivity of remaining staff. But if there are fewer dollars in the system, there is less money in the system for training, too. The key is to find the most cost-effective way to deliver training, and to maximize the potential of the human capital still under the organizational roof.

Train now. Benefit later.

Leveraging the money

Stimulus money abounds, especially in healthcare where $19 billion is circulating in the system to bring electronic health records online across the country. When we have achieved the vision of total EMR (Electronic Medical Records), every person in the U.S. will have a cradle-to-grave record of their medical history, including site of care, diagnosis, treatment, outcome, and payment, and this information will be available at every medical provider in the country. It has been the goal of the federal government to bring about end-to-end electronic health records for several decades, and now Uncle Sam is putting his money where his mouth is.

Economic incentives and disincentives are in place to accelerate the pace of the uptake of IT in doctor's offices and hospitals throughout the country. If you are one of an estimated 45,000 Medicaid physicians, there is an average of more than $60,000 waiting for you in stimulus funds to help bring your office fully online. If you practice in a rural area, you'll benefit from billions in telecommunications infrastructure improvements so you can connect to the rest of the system.

The pace of change has been set by the timing of the incentives, which begin in 2011 and end around 2016, depending on the provider, practice setting, and type of IT system. The timing of disincentives is also setting the rate of change, so that Medicare physicians, of whom there are hundreds of thousands, will see their Medicare payments reduced if they aren't online by their deadline.

For trainers, this means that you have a ready-made market to help healthcare providers and organizations meet these deadlines by providing e-Learning solutions for health IT vendors and their customers. The money is in the pipeline right now to bring electronic health records online throughout the country, which means there has never been a better time to develop and implement training programs so healthcare providers and organizations can qualify for this funding while the incentives are in place and before the disincentives begin.

Leveraging the interest

The administration in Washington has a laser focus on health reform. The details may take years to work out, but changes in our health system are inevitable, especially those related to the uptake of

electronic health records. When it comes to a fully implemented, end-to-end, interoperable IT solution for the health system, it is a matter of when – not if.

While the bright light of Washington politics is shining on health reform, it is a great time to create and deploy IT solutions and all the training that they require. We will probably never again encounter a time when the interest in controlling costs, increasing access to care, and improving quality will be in the center of our national agenda as much as today.

Healthcare is one of the booming engines of the economy, and the survival of this sector of the economy is an important part of our national recovery. With healthcare making up close to 18% of our total GDP, and the demographics trending toward more seniors needing more care, the healthcare solutions we create, and the way we implement them, will be vital to our national economy and personal health for many decades to come.

Your training solutions around the uptake of electronic health records, quality initiatives, and payment systems, in addition to the traditional training programs for disease management and medical treatments, will help providers and patients make necessary changes.

Health system change one module at a time

Health system change will happen no matter what comes out of the Washington legislative mill this year. All those changes will require training for many years to come. Experienced e-Learning developers know that they can accomplish a lot of change and education quickly and cheaply with the effective use of technology.

You already know how. Use:

- Webinars – a great way to deliver synchronous learning without the cost of travel. Exchange opinions and experiences, deliver up-to-date content, and create dialogue with well-managed and informative Web-based seminars. Get peers online for quick hit, high-level dialogue about important changes, or push information down the food chain by getting employees and partners together online.
- E-Learning modules – Well-designed, Web- or computer-based instruction can deliver critical information to all the learners in an organization in digestible chunks. Audio and visuals including Flash content, video, embedded Podcasts, product and process demonstrations, and measurable, interactive testing make e-Learning far superior to static educational materials. You can make your point strongly, and memorably, by providing interaction with creative content delivered to the learner's work or home computer. E-Learning module training solutions are easy to deliver, low-cost per use, and you can make it fun, too. Importantly, in the intense world of medical care, busy physicians, pharmacists, and nurses can access Web-based training and information at their convenience.
- Social networks – Twitter, LinkedIn groups, Second Life worlds, blogs, and similar Web-based so-cial applications all provide instantaneous and virtual experiences that keep learners connected to what is going on – in real-time. Virtual hospitals and medical offices are used for provider training, and to ease the patient experience. Learners can contribute to the content in social exchange environments.

E-Learning techniques are especially friendly to the newest entrants in the workforce, the recent college grads who grew up with the ubiquitous computer. Web-based and interactive content is a quick way to engage their interest, and they are already up the learning curve as contributors. As for the over-50 learners, there are educational funds available to bring them along the technology learning curve so you can deploy e-Learning modalities to everyone.

Professional trainers and content developers, and especially those steeped in the e-Learning culture, are uniquely equipped to provide structured, interactive training to facilitate all the facets of health reform that will require new ways of thinking about medicine, and new ways of achieving quality in a cost effective way. The technological resources are at our disposal to accelerate the pace of health reform, and those who develop and use them can be part of the solution. The quicker, cheaper, more effective solution, that is.

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Peggy Salvatore is developing Health System Ed, an e-Learning program for healthcare workers to advance the implementation of electronic health records. The program is based on nearly a decade of writing managed care Web-based training programs. She also writes e-Learning programs on general business topics. Her background includes extensive research, analysis, and writing for professional journal articles, white papers, and executive background briefings on a broad range of health policy issues including privacy of patient records under HIPAA, and the Y2K conversion for a national pharmaceutical industry consortium. Peggy holds an MBA with a concentration in strategy and economics.

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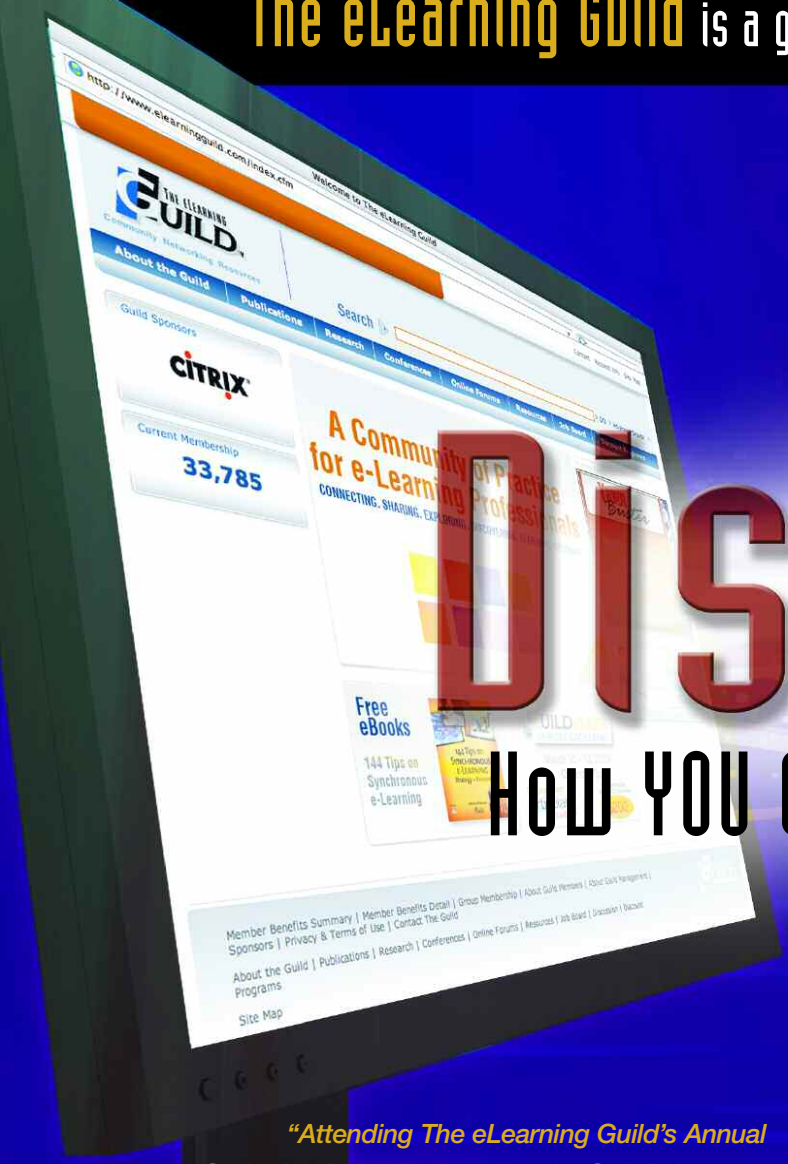

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