

Gamers Telling Stories: Intersections of Games, Narratives and Lives

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Abstract

This paper describes and discusses textual player productivity in online communities surrounding the online game World of Warcraft, and looks especially at the way narratives are formed and exchanged in the cross-field between game, community and player. I specifically analyze two examples of player-created narratives at a guild forum website. Guided by Paul Ricoeur's thoughts on the relationship between identity and narrative, I argue that by looking at the way players create and exchange narratives, we can learn about the importance of narrative as a fundamental framework for meaningful experience and interaction in our lives, online as well as offline.

Introduction

Online communities are an integral part of gaming today. Obviously, online multiplayer games such as the immensely popular World of Warcraft (Blizzard, 2004) are heavily dependent on social groupings and player communication in-game, which might explain the large amount of external community activity such as web-based forums (and sometimes real-life conventions and meetings). This paper offers a study of the way narratives and identities are formed and exchanged in the crossfield between game, community and user, and ends with a discussion of some of the ways we might grasp this phenomenon theoretically. In my view, while the concrete experience of playing a game certainly differs from that of reading a novel, the way that players make sense of the experience, as can be observed on the web, shows that fiction and storytelling indeed play a very important role.

The empirical examples are derived from a three-month period of participatory observation specifically on the web forums of one particular World of Warcraft guild, consisting mainly of adult and more or less casual players. I argue that the focus on narrative creativity is a fruitful approach to describing and understanding the process of sensemaking in the game experience as such. Guided by Paul Ricoeur's thoughts on the relationship between identity and narrative, I argue in this paper that by looking at the way players create and exchange narratives, we can learn about the importance of narrative as a fundamental framework for meaningful experience and interaction in our lives, online as well as offline.

Theoretical and methodological position

Game studies today can be seen as dominated by three interacting and mutually informed perspectives: The sociological/ethnographical, the theoretical/aesthetical, and the technical/design-oriented. As stated in the introduction, I present in this paper a study of play-

ers' textual, narrative productivity in relation to World of Warcraft. Within the emerging field of game studies, a distinction is often made between studying players and studying games (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 2), with influential works in the field ranging from e.g. Taylor's ethnographical and sociological study of players' behavior in the game EverQuest and the culture around it (Taylor, 2006) to e.g. Juul's theoretical work on defining what computer games are and are not (Juul, 2006). In other words, studies of players and game culture are often carried out within ethnographical and/or sociological traditions, and studies of the meaning and design of games are often done from theoretical, semiotic and textual perspectives.

My approach can be seen as belonging – in a broad sense – to the tradition of cultural studies, which works from a blend of methodologies derived from both the humanities and the social sciences. An important point within cultural studies is that research methods are never objective, and that as such, no method can claim to have access to the “truth” of the research object. The theoretical and methodological focus that is chosen will always reflect a certain view on reality, and will also influence the result of one's studies (Saukko, 2003). Although I am stressing that the focus of my analysis is not the game, but the players' stories about the game, my analysis in the following naturally rests on certain assumptions about what games are and therefore how they can be studied. In one way, my theoretical perspective on the game-external textual productivity about the game is tied up with a view on games as texts that can be read and interpreted. Moreover, applying Ricoeur's philosophy of interpretation and narrative operations to these player activities is only possible when viewing games (or at least, this particular game) as having a narrative, representational and emplotted form to be “read”. At the same time, when viewing gaming as an activity rather than a text to be read, the stories that players tell are still just as interesting to study as interpretation and communication of those actions. Ricoeur's theories on the relationship between identity and narrative imply that we understand our own identity through storytelling and emplotment, both our own storytelling and that of the cultural texts we meet (Ricoeur, 1991).

Jesper Juul writes in “Games Telling Stories? A brief note on games and narratives” that speaking of games in narrative terms “is not neutral; it emphasises some traits and suppresses others” (Juul, 2001). As mentioned above, I do not see a problem with this “non-neutrality”, as it is unavoidable, but Juul's statement also implies that narrative and computer games are domains that can be compared to each other as to distinct domains. I would rather say – with Ricoeur – that narrative can be seen as a significant frame of understanding the game experience, both when it is being played and when it is being negotiated and talked about. The game is the artefact, but the narrative is the language for making sense of this artefact.

Gamers telling stories

Creative player productivity

Creation of fiction and art based on original cultural works has always been a defining practice of fans and fan communities (at least according to Jenkins, 1992). With the advent of the World Wide Web and not least the more recent web media and tools, both creating, sharing and accessing this fan fiction has become easier, which has clearly led to a great increase in the distribution and production of the phenomenon. Furthermore,

the continuous social contact, sharing and discussing necessary to maintain the fan community is greatly facilitated and enhanced through the new technology. In fact, fan fiction communities online can be seen as a perfect example of the media convergence, social software, cultural 'remix' and mixing of spaces and worlds associated with the Web 2.0 phenomenon. The stories I am studying in this paper could be seen as a kind of fan fiction, with the writers seen as "fans" of World of Warcraft producing stories set within the fictional world of the game and featuring characters from the game. However, although it is difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between fans writing fiction and gamers telling stories, there are some aspects of the latter which sets it apart from fan fiction writing.

In a recent article, Hanna Wirman problematizes the automatic association of media user productivity with fandom (Wirman, 2007). Wirman refers to media theorists such as John Fiske and Henry Jenkins all placing productivity as one of the very central characteristics of fan activities, but she argues that "playing is always about productivity and playing is supported by many productive activities that take place outside the game world, fan productivity is very difficult to pinpoint among these activities" (Wirman, 2007, p. 377). In other words, while it would be tempting to group the textual productivity of video game players together with fan activities around other media forms such as television and literature, gaming seems to encourage more – and much more varied – textual productivity than these.

Wirman presents a handy categorization of different types of player productivity in relation to games. First, there is construction – e.g. modding, making skins or altering the game software, which is a kind of productivity aiming to alter the original game. Second, there are the new texts that players create about games for different purposes, and these texts are grouped under two categories: a) Instrumental productivity – in the form of texts which somehow help in advancing in games and offer tools for more effective play, such as walkthroughs, resource databases, web forums etc., and b) Expressive productivity – activities which do not directly support playing or exist as essential parts of games, such as machinima, stories, screenshots and fan fiction (Wirman, 2007, p. 380f). Players can then be divided into types who are more interested in the mechanics and technical aspect of the game, and players who are interested in the narrative, characters etc. of the game – representing two opposite player types, the "power gamer" and the "role player". The role player seems to come closest to the traditional media fan because of his/her engagement with the narrative of the game, but it would seem that players who produce a lot of text about their gaming experience and the game itself is a too large and varied group to be called "fans", and also do not seem to identify themselves as fans (Wirman, 2007, p. 382).

Wirman acknowledges that the distinction can be problematic, because "games are also used as tools for other purposes than playing or even to purposes related to other fandoms (Wirman, 2007, p. 381), referring to e.g. advertizing and machinima. Relating the instrumental and expressive productivity to certain 'types' of players is, in my view, also problematic. While the distinction between these kinds of productivities and their outcomes is helpful in categorizing the different texts produced by players, it would seem that in many cases, or at least in the case of online World of Warcraft communities, players produce both kinds of texts, and classifying them as either/or sometimes also depends on the perspective. I have been looking particularly at the writings at one guild forum website, and have found so far that 1) most players write different types of text, and 2)

there is narrative process at play in both instrumental and expressive types of texts.

“The continuing story of...”

On the guild forum website¹ I have been studying for a shorter period of time, around thirty guild members (out of circa 200 in all) are active posters and participants in discussions and chats. Generally speaking, the players who are most active on the website also seem to be the most committed players in-game – they are the ones who are seen online most often and participating in guild chat. The forums are divided into two spaces: a public forum (accessible to all) and a “Members Area” accessible only to logged-in users. Beside the recruitment thread, where interested players can apply for membership, the public forum contains “The [Guild] Files” (with the subtitle “Read about the travels of the [Guild]”), which has postings recounting events and situations from the game. These can be grouped into two general modes of storytelling: historical recounting and fictional representation. The “Members Area” has subdivisions regarding news/announcements, general discussion about the game, off-topic chat, etc. Narrative modes are also at play in this area, but usually in a more episodic and dialogic form. In the following, I will look at three examples of storytelling at the guild forum website.

A typical example of historical narrative in the publicly accessible “[Guild] Files” area is the account of an in-game raid² using screenshots from the game interchanged with text. In this case, I will focus on the textual markers and the narrative progression. Sometimes, the account is quite straightforward, as in the second “chapter” of the recounting of the guild’s progression through a particularly long and complex instance, entitled “The [Guild] comes to Karazhan! Part II”. It is a short tale depicting the guild group’s second battle in the instance, beginning with the characters resting and assembling to get ready, then closing in on their enemy target, failing at first, but then collecting all their powers and finally defeating him. The story ends with an epilogical sentence pointing at the next challenge awaiting the team. As is often the case in this guild, the account is humorous in tone: “So with the Dread steed Midnight and her rider Attumen having been dispatched, the [Guild] crew have a quick rest before assembling for the fight to Moroes. And with that coming together we finally realize just how tall [CharacterA] actually is!” The names Midnight and Attumen refer to the previously defeated opponents in the instance, Moroes is the next “boss”³, and the other player referred to as tall is of the Night Elf class, taller than most other classes in the game. This last sentence is a response to the first screenshot showing the group standing together, getting ready for the fight, but the interesting thing here is the use of the pronoun “we”, indicating that this is a narrative not only *about* a collective experience, but also framed as a kind of collective memoir. The narrator appears once in the text in what can be called a meta-commentary on how to tell the story: “If i said that tries 1,2,3,4,5 & 6 did not go to plan then i would be understating the obvious :-(”. Here, the narrator identifies himself, but mostly because of the particular construction of the sentence. Generally, the narrator is assigned with the task of telling the communal story.

¹ For the sake of anonymity, the guild’s name is here referred to as [Guild], and likewise, names of players, game characters etc. are also pseudonymized.

² A raid is a party of 6-20 players grouping together in order to complete so-called “instances”, special group missions that are often structured as a string of smaller, interlinked missions.

³ “Boss” or “mob” is game-term for opponents (both as groups and individuals).

The next sentence continues in this collective vein: "We slowly beat our way to the Table of Moroos and begin to bait him by breaking various bits of cutlery and spilling all his undead food :-D". Here, the ironic humor is nested in the idea of the players' characters breaking cutlery and spilling food (accentuated by the grinning smiley), which are not possible (inter-)actions in the game, but is probably referring to what it looks like from the second screenshot (Fig. 1):

(Fig. 1. Screenshot from "The [Guild] comes to Karazhan! Part II). Copyright: Blizzard)

Here, the narrative interestingly departs from a simple recounting of events that took place to a fictionalized level, and an imaginary world is constructed which is different from the historical world where the actual event of the players coming together in-game to fulfill this mission took place. The gameworld represented in this way by the narrator tells us that the cutlery and food which have no function and cannot be interacted with in the gameplay is still perceived to be an integral part of the space in which the fight takes place, and this can be seen as an acknowledgement that the fictional space built around the main activity of killing opponents in the game plays a role in making sense of the gaming experience.

As an example of a more fictional narrative mode is "The continuing story of [PlayerB]", which is part three of a larger story about this particular character's experience in the game world – just as the "historical" narrative above was part of a series about the progression through a particular instance. This is a short tale narrated in the first person, based on the completion of a quest – killing the ghost of one Morgan Ladimore/Mor'Ladim (Fig. 2).

(Fig 2. Morgan Ladimore screenshot from "The continuing story of [CharacterB]". Copyright: Blizzard)

The fight is the center of the story, but not because of any suspense as to the outcome of it. Rather, the fight is the climax in the formative narrative of [CharacterB], a human of the Rogue class, having attained some experience but still "young" in game-levels. The character-narrator is settling into his role as a rogue, which is a class associated in several MMORPGs with attributes such as deception, theft, corruption and independence, and he immediately introduces the theme of his narrative: "Justification of murder seems to have been very easy for me, as i strain to raise myself above the ordinary and attain notoriety. Killing to gain a local reputation alone has been enough motivation for me in many cases, The gold and other rewards also help. But on the lonely roads and camps at night, i see the spirits of those i have slaughtered". The story takes place in the zone Duskwood, which is, as the name implies, a dark place with a menacing atmosphere, where most of the enemy population are ghosts, skeletons, and Undead. In the game, players are guided to this zone after reaching circa level 20 (out of 70), so this is a point in the game where some experience has been reached and the character is beginning to have more abilities, but is still in the formative stage. Thus, Duskwood, as a zone and a stage in the game progression, is used in this story as a motivation to introduce an emotional conflict when

feelings of remorse are beginning to torment the until now cynical rogue character.

The character's doubts are diminished, however, by the rationalization that the killing of the undead is an act of mercy because they are "poor wretched souls re-animated by evil to do their bidding". So, the victory of the rogue is ensured by his "rage at the evil that had risen inside this man against his rage at life itself", just as "my training was heaped on my shoulders and guided my body in ways his broadsword could not contend with". Thus, the fight against Mor'Ladim is represented fictionally as a kind of crisis narrative, beginning with a protagonist having doubts about the meaning of his existence and the justification for his actions, but comes to reaffirm his cynical attitude through the introduction of the merciful murder: "I killed him with rage, which turned to compassion, which turned to cold determination". This story is, of course, satirically framed, as is evident from the overly dramatic tone (including the parting words: "The undead through out this world and any other, should note my face as it will be the last they see") and also from the ensuing comments posted by other guild members. Nonetheless, this story depicting what is basically a simple killing quest of out of hundreds in the game shows that by representing a game event in a narrative and fictionalized mode as seen here, many aspects of the gaming experience, such as level progression, the graphic representation of the gameworld, and the player's relation to the character played, can be expressed in very few sentences. In other words, the story of this quest as well as the "historical" account of instance above might as well have been centered around the gameplay tactics and the progression of the fight represented through statistics and points won, but the narrative mode of recounting provides a means to express and interpret the gaming experience.

Finally, I also want to mention a third example from the forum website, "Doomguard (Completed)", which is another fictionalized account of an in-game experience – a completion of an instance and the learning of a new spell – and is an interesting example of the intersection of perspectives often seen in these stories. First of all, this text is placed in the Members Area rather than the public [Guild] Files, under the category "Assistance Required?", which is where guild members post requests for or offers of help in instances. The placing of the story here might seem odd, but it is posted as a continuation of an earlier post, where the author requests help for the Doomguard instance. In this context, the story seems to be a gesture of gratitude towards the guild members who have helped, while also constructed as a sort of pastiche of an epic hero's tale in the first person perspective. Thus, the text begins with a biblical reference/rephrasing: "As I journey into the valley of death I fear nothing, for death is my constant companion", associating it with the great ancient myths and tales. As such, the text is dominated by phrasings such as: "Alone I ventured forth and blasted my way through them, their cries of anguish ringing in my ears as they fell". However, the style is deconstructed by at least two events in the text: The first is a reference in the beginning to "my old guild", which can be seen as the narrator identifying as the player, not the in-game character, thus marking the complex intersection of subject positions relating to the game experience; and secondly, the text is interspersed with embedded links that are not visible unless the mouse is placed on the word. The links all lead to encyclopedic explanations of characters and places mentioned at the WoWWiki site. For example, the final sentence of the story refers to the hero's reward: "I learnt / Ritual of Doom", which is an in-game spell specifically for the Warlock class. "Ritual of Doom" also consists of an embedded link to a description of this spell at WoWWiki. In a way, the story is a typical example of hypertext fiction, gi-

ving the reader the option to follow paths to what can be seen as paratextual elements, "outside" of the core narrative, but can also be seen as an integrated part of the text as a whole, thereby shifting the meaning of the story at the guild forum back towards factual referencing and informative posting – and in that way also containing both the instrumental and the expressive functions of textual player productivity that Wirman writes of. This feature discreetly associates the subjective, fictionalized account of a game experience with factual knowledge of game elements and structure, indicating that the online gaming experience is characterized by a continual intersection of subject positions and context relations.

Conclusion: Storytelling as identity construction and interpretation

There are two main, and interweaved, points to conclude from this study, which calls for further work on this topic. The first is the case of the narrative as a way to construct identity, in this case both for the individual player and for the guild community. As such, the stories analyzed above are part of a continuing practice of identity construction. Secondly, there is a difference in genre between the stories above – tending towards more historical, fictional or hypertextual formats – which shows different approaches to relating to the game experience, while at the same time using the same narrative tools to express this sensemaking process.

For Ricoeur, the difference between fictive and historical narrative lies in the referential dimension of the narratives "truth claims" as the configuring activity of the narrative, i.e. the emplotment, is the same for both. As an example of the interweaving between fiction and history and their mutual imitation (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 186), Ricoeur refers to the events held as significant in a historical community: "These events, which are said to be 'epoch-making', draw their specific meaning from their capacity to found or reinforce the community's consciousness of its identity, its narrative identity, as well as the identity of its members" (p. 187). Although what is referred to here a larger historical community such as the modern European population, the idea of narrative identity can also help us to understand how the narrative activities of a gaming community are constituting the "self-constancy" of identity of both the player and the community.

In this paper, which presents a preliminary study, I have tried to show that we can see games as part of a cultural continuum, or complex, of interrelated fictional representations engaging users (readers, gamers, viewers, etc.) to interpret and integrate their experiences with the cultural forms into their lived identities. In my view, while the concrete experience of playing a game differs from that of reading a novel, the way that players make sense of the experience as can be observed on the web shows that they are engaged in stories – be it of the game itself or of themselves as players of the game. And studying these stories can maybe bring us closer to describing the gaming experience as part of lived experience in general.

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