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Albrechtslund, Anne-Mette Bech

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Gamers Telling Stories

Understanding Narrative Practices in an Online Community

Anne-Mette Albrechtslund

Aalborg University, Denmark

Abstract / In this article, I introduce a theoretical framework, based on the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, for grasping how and why members of online communities construct narratives in their communications with one another. This is exemplified through a study of how players from one particular game, *World of Warcraft*, make sense of their gaming experience, and how they build and uphold a community identity by telling stories online. I argue that in studying and conceptualizing these types of texts through the proposed theoretical framework, we can gain insights into the process of the formation of meaning and the building of identity and community in an online setting.

Key Words / community / fandom / gaming / identity / internet / narrative

Introduction

Online groupings based on shared interests such as media fandom have been an integral aspect of internet use, even before the coming of the World Wide Web in the 1990s. The motivation for the study presented in this article is to consider how textual and cultural strategies in online communication result in identity formation and community building; I have studied this through a specific online gaming community. Unsurprisingly, computer gaming has inspired a lot of user activity online, resulting in a variety of different sites and services. 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 also explain the high textual productivity of associated web forums and sites. This study is based on texts sampled as part of an ongoing process of participatory observation on the web forums of one particular *World of Warcraft* guild, consisting mainly of adult and more or less casual players.

This article offers a study of the way in which narratives are constructed to express identity in the cross-field between game, community and player, and it discusses some of the ways we might grasp this phenomenon theoretically. I argue that there are many insights to be gained into the gaming experience and the building of community from

textual analysis of writings on the web, and, more specifically, that the narrative practices which can be observed in many of these texts can be read as identity-building strategies. Introducing the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) as a theoretical framework for the relationship between understanding, narrative and identity as a means of studying and conceptualizing narrative writings on the web, I argue that by looking at the ways in which 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. According to Ricoeur, we use narratives to answer the question of who we are, and these narratives are continually influenced by the other narratives and fictions that we encounter throughout our lives. The question of the distinctiveness and special features of web writings in relation to this practice of meaning-making through narrative will be discussed in the final section of the article.

Online Communities and Fandom

The 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, more recent web media and tools, the creation, sharing and accessing of fan fiction and fan art has become easier, and this has clearly led to an increase in the distribution and production of these phenomena. Furthermore, the continuous social contact, sharing and discussion necessary to maintain the fan community is greatly facilitated and enhanced by new technologies. In fact, online fan fiction communities can be seen as a perfect example of the media convergence, social software, and cultural 'remix' associated with the Web 2.0 phenomenon.

Nancy Baym's work on fans' online communication has followed the development on the web from the tight-knit communities of the 1990s to the 'egocentric social networks' such as Facebook (boyd, 2006) which characterize internet use today. In a 2007 article, Baym argues that, although there has been a development towards more network-based online practices, communities are still thriving on the web, as before, in the form of dedicated message boards and websites, and, in a new development, distributed across the many social network sites currently available. This means that the object of study is not necessarily bound to a particular place or site on the web and, therefore: 'it is no longer clear that going to a site is an appropriate strategy for studying community on the internet' (Baym, 2007).

This applies in some degree to the case studied in this article. While there is one home website which comprises the guild forums for the members of this particular community – the site of the texts studied here – the activities within the online game-space of *World of Warcraft* are, of course, the guild's *raison d'être* as a community. The stories told on the forums more often than not directly reference events taking place in-game, and the style of communication on the forums is developed with the tone of in-game guild chat. In my overall study of the textual strategies for community building in this guild, I have also observed in-game communication, but, since the purpose of this article is to show how gamers tell stories about their game experience as part of a community and as an identity-building strategy, I focus here on the texts written on the guild forums.

Players as Fans?

The stories I am studying in this article might be seen as a kind of fan fiction, with the writers as 'fans' of *World of Warcraft* who produce stories set within the fictional world of the game and featuring characters from the game. However, although I am not attempting here to make a clear-cut distinction between fans writing fiction and 'mainstream' gamers telling stories, there are some aspects of the latter which sets it apart from fan fiction writing.

In a recent article, Hanna Wirman (2007) problematizes the automatic association of media user productivity with fandom. Wirman refers to media theorists, such as John Fiske (1992) and Henry Jenkins (1992), who identify productivity as one of the central characteristics of fan activities, but as she argues: '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: 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 other categories.

Wirman presents a useful categorization of different types of player productivity in relation to games. First, there is construction: 'modding' for example, making 'skins' or altering the game software, which is a kind of productivity that aims to alter the original game. Second, there are the new texts that players create about games for different purposes. These texts are grouped under two categories: (a) instrumental productivity, in the form of texts which offer tools for more effective play, such as walkthroughs, resource databases, web forums and so on, and (b) expressive productivity, that is, activities which do not directly support playing or exist as essential parts of games, such as machinima, stories, screenshots and fan fiction (Wirman, 2007: 380–1). Players can then be divided into types who are more interested in the mechanics and technical aspects of the game, and players who are interested in the narrative, characters and so on of the game; these represent two contrasting player types, the 'power gamer' and the 'role player' respectively. 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, constitute too large and varied a group to be called 'fans'; indeed, they do not seem to identify themselves as fans (Wirman, 2007: 382).

Wirman acknowledges that the distinction can be problematic, because 'games are also used as tools for other purposes than playing or even purposes related to other fandoms' (2007: 381), referring here to advertising and machinima, for example. Relating an instrumental and expressive productivity to certain types of player 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 the online *World of Warcraft* communities that I have been observing, the same players produce both kinds of texts, depending on the situation.

Narratives in and around *World of Warcraft*

An extremely popular online game with around 10 million subscribers worldwide, *World of Warcraft* (2009) is the focal point of a huge number of dedicated websites, ranging from larger resource sites, such as *WoWWiki* (n.d.) and *Thottbot* (n.d.) – not to mention the official Blizzard site – to more journalistically-oriented sites, such as *WOW Insider* (2003–2009) and the many forum websites set up by game guilds.¹ The many writings about the game on these sites often have narrative qualities. These include the recounting of events in-game (which are often parodic), well-known happenings or characters, both in-game and on the associated websites (for example, ‘the Alamo teechs u 2 play DURID!’ posting on the game’s official message boards² that have gained legendary status), walkthroughs, guides, various types of fan-art creations, ‘guild drama’, tales of the early beginnings of the game, myths (about upcoming game expansions, for example) and much more.

Narrative activities are certainly abundant in the context of the *World of Warcraft* guild that I have been studying. My investigation is still ongoing at this point, but after a year observing the activities on the guild’s forums and participating in guild chat, it has become quite clear that storytelling plays a major role in communications about the game. Guild chat consists, of course, mostly of shorter messages, banter, questions/answers and so on, which do not evolve into actual storytelling; but every so often narratives form in players’ chat about experiences in the game (with pick-up groups, and when more experienced players are prompted to reminisce on their own beginnings in the game).

Narrative plays a major role on the web forums of the guild; examples include the recounting of in-game events, derivative fictionalized narratives that are often centred around a player character, stories about players’ gaming history and how they came to *World of Warcraft*, the stories behind character names, memories from the early days of the guild, and, of course, stories from the players’ offline lives. Often, the recounting of in-game events can have a humorous or satirical edge, where a sequence of events, accompanied by screenshots, can sometimes have an almost subversive feel to them (for example, undressing characters or exposing them to all kinds of spectacular death scenarios). In other cases, the tales of game events relate to the completion of difficult challenges. So what does all this narrative activity tell us about the game itself, and about the gaming experience? As stated in the introduction, Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy on narrative and identity is proposed here as a theoretical framework for understanding these activities; and in what follows, I outline the central ideas of his theory.

The Mimetic Process, Narrative and Identity

According to Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy, interpretation and communication always take place through symbolic mediation, in other words, through the use of language, especially metaphoric language. In *Time and Narrative I–III* (1984–1988, translated from the original French *Temps et récit*, 1983–1985), Ricoeur relates this to the Aristotelian concept of ‘mimesis’ – an imitation or representation of something we know, which is not just a transcription, but a depiction that provides a new way of understanding ourselves and the world. Ricoeur draws on this concept of mimesis and on Aristotle’s understanding of representation as a dynamic practice (1984: 52). Aristotle’s conception

of mimesis is as a positive action, and as a natural way for humans to construct and therefore to understand their temporal existence.

Ricoeur develops his theory from the concept of mimesis in order to explain the mediation between narrative and temporal existence. He describes the mimetic process as cyclic (reminiscent of a hermeneutic circle), consisting of three operations: Mimesis I is the pre-understanding or pre-figuration of the reader towards the world, which includes a familiarity with the elementary rules of narrative composition and of the temporal structure of an action. Mimesis II relates to the poetic configuration itself, the narrative 'emplotment' or the work itself, where the facts/events are arranged into a structure. It has a mediating function between pre-understanding and the third representative stage: Mimesis III refers to the act of refiguration, where the reader actualizes, recreates and transforms the configuration of the narrative on the basis of the operations of mimesis I and II (1984: 52ff.).

Following this, the meaning of a text is not bound to the representation or plot itself, but rather to the interpretative process of the reader confronted with the text. It is more a process of discovering or inventing than of uncovering or decoding. In this way, the meaning of a story is completed by the reader, and is thus the result of a meeting between the world of the reader and the world of the text (1984: 71). A substantive point in Ricoeur's work is that the construction of narrative is a way to resignify the world, to both interpret and to transform the actions taking place (1984: 81).

Ricoeur distinguishes between fictive and historical narrative, but his point is that the mimetic process just described is an operation common to both. The difference between fictive and historical narrative lies in the referential dimension of the narrative – its 'truth claims' – since the configuring activity of mimesis II is the same for both (1984: 64). As an example of the interweaving between fiction and history and their mutual imitation (1988: 186–7), Ricoeur refers to the events held as significant in a historical community; an example would be the way in which the Jewish people have built a sense of collective identity by building narratives around specific events in their shared history which are held to be 'epoch-making'.

In this line of thinking, narrative plays a crucial role in how we make sense of ourselves. We need the dynamic features of narrative to address the temporality of our existence; this is a conception of identity not as something essential or abstract, but as a narrative complexity that can grasp the changes and shifting relations in a life. The subject thus becomes both a reader and the writer of their own life; 'the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself' (1988: 246). In other words, we understand our own identity through storytelling and emplotment, both through our own storytelling and that of the cultural texts we meet (Ricoeur, 1991).

Following this conception of the role of narrative in our lives, it can be argued that by looking at the stories that players tell, and the different ways in which they tell them, we can learn about how players make sense of the gaming experience through negotiating, interpreting and 'refiguring'. The idea of narrative identity can offer a framework for understanding how the narrative activities of a gaming community constitute the 'self-constancy' of identity for both the player and the community.

Methodological Considerations

While the study presented here focuses on players' textual productivity in relation to *World of Warcraft*, that is, communication about the game rather than the game itself, the issues regarding the study of players and games often discussed within gaming studies are relevant here. Discussions about how to study computer games have been a natural part of the process of establishing game studies as a research field, and 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. Within game studies, a distinction is often made between studying players and studying games (Mäyrä, 2008: 2), with influential works in the field ranging from T.L. Taylor's (2006) ethnographical and sociological study of players' behaviour in the game *EverQuest* and the culture around it to Jesper Juul's (2005) theoretical work on defining what computer games are and are not.

Studies of players and gaming cultures are often carried out within an ethnographical and/or sociological tradition and studies of the meaning and design of games are often conducted from the theoretical perspective of semiotic and textual analysis. Juul's article of 2001, 'Games Telling Stories?' (the title of this article clearly alludes to his title) is an early example of one of the foundational discussions within the field of game studies, where the decision as to whether games tell stories or not 'should tell us how to study games and who should study them' (Juul, 2001). Juul acknowledges that games and narratives are often connected, but he wants to disassociate the two in the quest for a definition of computer games. He writes that, while players can of course tell stories about game sessions and games can contain narrative elements, games do not tell stories in themselves and therefore should not be studied from a narratological perspective. This statement makes a categorical distinction between the game, the gaming experience and the game player. However, this distinction also depends on the interpretation of what constitutes the meaning of a game. In my view, in order to look for meaning, it makes sense to investigate the *relation* between the player and the game.

Rather than seeking a formal definition of the computer game, I approach it here as a practice which constantly defines and redefines what a game is. This approach is influenced by the predominant tradition within internet studies, which focuses on the study of social and cultural practices and defines phenomena as continually shaped by these practices. This is an evident strand in the field from the work of early internet researchers such as Howard Rheingold (2000 [1993]) and Sherry Turkle (1995), to studies undertaken today by writers such as danah boyd and Nancy Baym.

In one way, my theoretical perspective on the textual productivity about a game, outside the game, is tied up with a position that games are 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 as a text to be read, the stories that players tell are still just as interesting to study as the interpretation and communication of those actions.

Juul writes that speaking of games in narrative terms 'is not neutral; it emphasizes some traits and suppresses others' (Juul, 2001). As mentioned earlier, 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 distinct domains that can be compared to one another. To answer the question of Juul's article – do games tell stories? – if we follow the ideas of Ricoeur, we can at least say that narrative can be seen as a significant frame for understanding the game experience, both when it is 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 that artefact.

Gamers Telling Stories

I present here three examples of stories told on the forum website associated with a *World of Warcraft* guild, of which I have been a member since April 2008. Guilds are completely player-generated and vary greatly in size, ambition, and demographics. Guilds have a leader and, usually, officers who have the authority to decide on important issues such as the recruitment and eviction of members. Often, guilds explicitly label themselves after their preferred playing style; such as raiding guilds, casual guilds or role-playing guilds. The guild I am studying here recognizes itself as a casual guild, with many members stating that they primarily enjoy being in this guild because of the social atmosphere. This is clearly in accordance with the guild 'ethos', as stated in the recruitment forum: 'The [Guild] is a laid-back, casual guild, with emphasis on the social aspect of WoW and providing a pleasant game environment. Our goals are not so much measured in levels per day as in the fun we have while playing' (posted in January 2007, when the guild was formed). It is this ethos that seems to be consistently reaffirmed in the stories told on the forums.

While I have played and participated just as any other member, I have been explicit about my research intentions since joining the guild. The fact that I am observing and documenting the activities of guild members on the forums raises some methodological and ethical issues that influence the presentation of my study. In order to intrude as little as possible into the community I have entered, I have anonymized all names and avoid referring to the forum URL, game servers and other identifying details. A guild such as this is a quasi-intimate community, where most members gladly share private information about themselves and their lives. There is generally a high level of trust in the guild, and I do not wish to compromise this by drawing public attention to the semi-private space that is the guild forum website. Therefore, the quotations in this section of the article are both anonymized and without reference. As this might cause some problems for the reader's understanding of the context of these stories, I will give a detailed description of the content of the stories.

On the guild forums around 30 guild members (out of about 200 in all) are active posters and participants in discussions and chats. Generally, the players who are most active on the website also seem to be the most committed players – they are the ones who are most often seen online 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 recount-

ing and fictional representation. The 'Members Area' has subdivisions such as: news, announcements, general discussions about the game, and off-topic chat. Narrative modes are also at play in this area, but usually in a more episodic and dialogic form. I will look at three examples of storytelling on the guild forum website, focusing here on the types of texts on the site that are formed as coherent stories. I have categorized them loosely here by distinguishing between an account of a collectively experienced event in the game (historical narrative), a fictional tale based on actions carried out in the game, and a story which combines both these modes of storytelling while adding paratextual elements. These stories represent different modes of narration in the context of this guild, but they all contribute to forming and upholding a coherent narrative identity of the community.

Historical Narrative

A typical example of historical narrative in the publicly accessible [Guild] Files area is the account of an in-game raid,³ using screenshots from the game interspersed with text. Most often this type of account is quite straightforward, as in the second 'chapter' of the recounting of the guild's progression through a particularly long and complex instance, titled 'The [Guild] comes to Karazhan! Part II' (posted December 2007). It is a short tale, depicting the guild group's second battle in this instance; it begins with the characters resting and then assembling to get ready; they then close in on their enemy target, they fail at first, but then collect all their powers and finally defeat him. The story ends with an epilogue which points to the next challenge awaiting the team.

As is often the case with this guild, the account is humorous in tone: 'So with the Dreadstead Midnight and her rider Attumen having been dispatched, the [Guild] crew have a quick rest before assembling for the fight to Moroos. 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 this instance, Moroos is the next 'boss',⁴ and the player referred to as tall is one of the Night Elf class, who are taller than most other classes in the game. This last sentence is a response to the first screenshot, which shows the group standing together and getting ready for the fight, but the interesting thing here is the use of the pronoun 'we', which indicates that this is a narrative not only *about* a collective experience, but that it is 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 :-(' [frowny face]. Here, the narrator identifies himself, but largely through the particular construction of the sentence. Generally, the narrator is assigned with the task of telling the communal story.

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' [laughing face]. Here, the humour rests on the idea of the players' characters breaking cutlery and spilling food (accentuated by a grinning smiley), which are not in fact possible interactions in the game, and refers to the second screenshot, which shows the group of players standing on top of a large dinner table with cutlery and food scattered around.

Here, the narrative interestingly departs from a simple recounting of events that took place on 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 fulfil this mission took place. The game-world represented in this way by the narrator tells us that the cutlery and food, which have no function and cannot be interacted with in normal game-play, are perceived as an integral part of the space in which the fight takes place; 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.

Fictional Narrative

In 'The continuing story of [Character B]' (posted July, 2008), which is part three of a larger story about this character's experiences in the game-world, the narrative mode tends even more towards the imaginary and the fictional. This is a short tale, narrated in the first person, based on the completion of a quest: the killing of the ghost of one Morgan Ladimore, a non-playable character with a tragic back story of war, madness and suicide.

The fight is the centre of the story, not because of any suspense as to the outcome, but because it is the climax in the formative narrative of [Character B], a human of the Rogue class who has attained some experience but who is still 'young' in game-levels. The character-narrator is settling into his role as a 'rogue', a class associated in several MMORPGs⁵ with attributes such as deception, theft, corruption and independence. The character 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 of Duskwood, which is, as its name implies, a dark place with a menacing atmosphere, where most of the enemy population consists of ghosts, skeletons, and the Undead. In the game, players are guided to this zone after reaching level 20 (out of 80), 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 as a stage in the game progression, is used in this story as a motivation to introduce emotional conflict where feelings of remorse are beginning to torment the rogue character who has been cynical up to this point.

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'. 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 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 a merciful murder: 'I killed him with rage, which turned to compassion, which turned to cold determination'.

The story is overly dramatic in 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') with obvious satirical effects (judging from the comments in the forum thread – for example, one member responds: 'Did you have a troubled childhood? there is a lot of rage there . . .') in comparison to the general humorous tone in the forums. Nonetheless, this story, depicting one simple killing quest out of hundreds in the game, shows that by representing a game event in a narrative and fictionalized mode, many aspects of the gaming experience, such as level progression, the graphic representation of the game-world and the player's relation to the character played, can be expressed in very few sentences.

Fictional Hypertext Narrative

Finally, I want to present a third example from the forum website, 'Doomguard (Completed)' (posted August 2008), another fictionalized account of an in-game experience – a completion of an instance and the learning of a new spell – as an interesting example of the intersection of perspectives often seen in these stories. First, 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. 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 a Doomguard instance. In this context, the story seems to be a gesture of gratitude towards the guild members who have helped, while also coming across as a pastiche of an epic hero's tale in the first person. The text begins with what seems to be a sombre literary rephrasing: 'As I journey into the valley of death I fear nothing, for death is my constant companion', so associating it with ancient myths and tales. Furthermore, the text is dominated by archaic 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 at the beginning to 'my old guild', which can be understood as the narrator identifying himself as the player, not as the in-game character, thus marking the complex intersection of subject positions in the game experience. Secondly, the text is interspersed with embedded links that are not visible until the cursor is placed on the word. The links all lead to encyclopaedic explanations of characters and places mentioned on the WoWWiki website. For example, the final sentence of the story refers to the hero's reward: 'I learnt / Ritual of Doom', an in-game spell specific to the Warlock class of characters. 'Ritual of Doom' is also an embedded link to a description of this spell at WoWWiki.

In a way, this story can be seen as a typical example of hypertext fiction, giving the reader the option to follow paths to paratextual elements 'outside' the core narrative, but it can also be seen as an integrated part of the text as a whole, thereby shifting the meaning of the story on the guild forums back towards factual referencing and informative posting – and so it also contains both the instrumental and the expressive functions of textual player productivity of which Wirman (2007) writes. This feature discreetly associates the subjective, fictionalized account of a game experience with a factual knowledge of game elements and structure, indicating that making sense of the online gaming

experience is characterized by a continual intersection of subject positions and context relations.

Creating Online Community Through Stories

These three stories might as well have been centred on game-playing tactics and the progression of the fight, represented through statistics and points won, but the narrative mode also provides a means of interpreting and expressing the experience of playing the game. In spite of their differences in style, the stories all contribute to expressing and upholding an identity of the community, both in the form of writing a collective history and as personal narratives reflecting on the shared ethos of the guild. This is not to say that this group would not be a community if they did not have the game-external web forum, if they only communicated through in-game chat and messages, or that narrativity would not still play an important role in upholding the identity of such a community. An analysis of the conversations taking place in guild chat might also benefit from the theoretical perspective presented here, as Ricoeur's ideas of narrative identity and the dynamic mimetic process are general concepts meant to describe the hermeneutic process of (self)-knowing as such. One could find modes of storytelling and cultural references in the in-game conversations that would also point to the continuing formation of the community's identity.

However, the mediating layer of the web forums provides a unique opportunity to express the core values and self-image of the community, thus helping to make the identity of this virtual community somehow tangible. As Howard Rheingold pointed out in his ground-breaking work *Virtual Communities. Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (2000 [1993]: 53): 'In virtual communities, the sense of place requires an individual act of imagination'. The stories are the results of these acts. Furthermore, the opportunity to read and to immediately react to each other's stories is also unique to the online setting; the community's identity is not only made tangible, but its expressions become a social endeavour, as the forum website is designed (as is typical for social media sites) to afford discussion and participation between all members.

Conclusion

The role of narrative in constructing a sense of community and of collective identity seems to be clear in the case of the guild and the examples presented here, but the question remains how the application of the Ricoeurian framework can contribute to research already undertaken within the field of online communities, fandom and gaming. While Ricoeur's theories of course pre-date the internet and do not deal directly with the phenomenon of the productivity of readers of genres such as fan fiction, his ideas on narrativity as an important human strategy for making sense of experience and identity can help to expand the theoretical vocabulary in describing the relationship between identity formation and the productivity and creativity especially afforded by the web.

It can be argued that the new media context within which games are negotiated and played means that the third operation in the triple mimesis, the refiguration, can be seen as gaining more concretization than ever before. The textual productivity on the

web that *World of Warcraft* triggers, including the different kinds of narratives sketched out in this article, means that the operations of mimesis III often become written narratives in their own right. This active refiguration, invention and creation that the reader in Ricoeur's theory constructs, is again interpreted by other members of the gaming community through their own mimetic process of sense making.

The perspective on identity presented in this article is constructivist and, thus, sees identity as continually redefined in a network of discourses, practices and situations. The way in which people present themselves and communicate on the web seems to illustrate the constructivist notion of identity very well, as Turkle (1995) has explored in her work on 'life on the screen'. Especially relevant here is her assertion that because we, as bodily beings, are represented in cyberspace (primarily) by our own textual descriptions, we are able to constantly change the 'composition' of the identity we are performing (Turkle, 2004). As mentioned earlier, a substantive point in Ricoeur's philosophy is that the construction of narrative is a way to resignify the world, to both interpret and to transform the actions taking place (1984). As an important part of the process of meaning-making, narratives can be seen as constituting identities – both for the community and of the individual player. Narrative identity is not a stable identity, but is continually under construction and continues to redefine itself. When we communicate on the web, this narrative way of constructing meaningful identity, as Ricoeur understands it, becomes even more concrete because of the predominantly textual representation of ourselves in cyberspace.

The theoretical framework presented and demonstrated in this article can contribute to building bridges between the different perspectives that are predominant in research into online communities, gaming and fandom. Studies into these phenomena often either focus on how people relate to each other in online (as in gaming) communities (employing methods from the social sciences as seen in Baym's work of 2007 and Taylor's 2006 book), how people in online settings relate to the media texts they create communities around (the more text-oriented tradition as represented by, especially, Jenkins [1992]), or how we can understand what computer games are and do (as represented in the game studies tradition by Juul [2001, 2005]). Applying a theoretical perspective inspired by Ricoeur may enable us to see the complex connection between practices and texts and explore this as it is played out in the continuum of an interpretative process.

Notes

- 1 The game is designed to afford and accommodate the formation of 'guilds', in-game associations of players who collaborate to make various aspects of the game easier. A player can only be a member of one guild at a time.
- 2 Originally posted on the game developer's official message boards, and reproduced on Wowwiki.com: <http://www.wowwiki.com/Alamo> (consulted October 2009).
- 3 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.
- 4 'Boss' or 'mob' is a game-term for opponents (both group and individual).
- 5 Massively multiplayer online role-playing games.

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Anne-Mette Albrechtslund is a PhD candidate at the Department of Communication and Psychology at Aalborg University, Denmark. Her PhD project on online gaming communities is partly funded by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities. She holds an Advanced MA in Comparative Literature from the University of Southern Denmark.

Address Kroghstræde 1, room 3.010, DK-9220 Aalborg East, Denmark. [email: ama@hum.aau.dk]