

# Understanding Narrative Practices in an Online Community

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the way narratives constructed as identity formations in the crossfield between game, community and player, and discusses some of the ways we might grasp this phenomenon theoretically. I argue that there are many insights to be gained about the gaming experience and the building of community from the 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) regarding the relationship between understanding, narrative and identity as a theoretical framework for studying and conceptualizing narrative writings on the web, 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.

## Foundations for the study

### Narratives in and around World of Warcraft

An extremely popular online game with around 10 million subscribers worldwide, *World of Warcraft* is the focal point of a vast amount of dedicated websites, ranging from larger resource sites such as *WoWWiki* and *Thottbot* (not to mention the official Blizzard site) to more journalistically-oriented sites such as *WOW Insider* and the many forum websites set up by game guilds. The many writings about the game at these sites very often have narrative qualities. These include recounting of in-game events (often parodic in nature), well-known happenings or characters both in-game and at the associated websites (e.g. the “Alamo teechs u 2 play DURID!” posting on the game’s official message boards that have gained legendary status), walkthroughs, guides, various types of fan-art creations, “guild drama”, tales of the early beginnings of the game, myths (e.g. about upcoming game expansions) 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 period of about 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 the communication about the game. Guild chat consists, of course, mostly of shorter messages, banter, questions/answers etc. which do not evolve into actual storytelling, but every so often narratives form in players’ chat about experiences in the game (e.g. 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, examples include recounting of in-game events, derivative fiction-style narratives that are often centered around a player character, stories about players' gaming history and how it led 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 have a humorous or satirical edge, where a sequence of events accompanied by screenshots can sometimes have an almost subversive feel to them (e.g. undressing characters and exposing them to all kinds of spectacular death scenarios). But in other cases, the tales of game events relate to the completion of difficult challenges and such. 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 suggested here as a theoretical framework for understanding these activities, and I will outline the basic ideas of this in the following.

### **The mimetic process, narrative and identity**

According to the hermeneutic philosophy of Ricoeur, interpretation and communication always take place through symbolic mediation, in other words through the use of language, and especially metaphoric language. In *Time and Narrative* (1984-88, translated from the original French *Temps et récit*, 1983-85), 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 representing as a dynamic practice (1984, p. 52). Aristotle's conception of mimesis is as a positive action, which is a natural way for humans to construct and therefore understand their temporal existence.

Ricoeur develops the concept of mimesis in order to explain the mediation between narrative and temporal existence. He describes the mimetic process as a cyclic one (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 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 being arranged into a structure. It has a mediating function between the pre-understanding and the third representative stage: Mimesis III, which 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.

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 uncovering or decoding. In that 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 (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 71). A subsistent point in Ricoeur's work is that the construction of narrative is a way to resignify the world, to both interpret and transform the actions taking place (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 81).

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* trigger, among these the many kinds of narratives sketched out in the above, means that the operations of mimesis III often become written narratives in their own right. This active refiguration, inventing and creating that the reader in Ricoeur's theory unfolds, is again interpreted by other members of the gaming community through their own mimetic process of sense making.

These narratives can be seen as constituting of identities – of the community and of the individual player. Narrative identity is not a stable identity, but is continually under construction and continues to redefine itself in this way. When players tell stories about their experiences with the game, they take part in a narrative construction of identity. Ricoeur distinguishes between the fictive and the historical narrative, but his point is that the mimetic process described above is an operation common for 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, p. 64). As an example of the interweaving between fiction and history and their mutual imitation (1988, p. 186), Ricoeur refers to the events held as significant in a historical community, e.g. how the Jewish people have built a sense of collective identity by building narratives around specific events in their shared history which are held as "epoch-making" (1988, p. 187).

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 – that is, this is a conception of identity not as something essential or abstract, but as a narrative complex that can grasp the changes and shifting relations in a life. The subject thus becomes both a reader and the writer of its own life, meaning that "the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself" (1988, p. 246). In other words, we understand our own identity through storytelling and emplotment, both 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 looking at the stories that players tell and the different ways 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 are constituting the "self-constancy" of identity of both the player and the community.

### **Methodological considerations**

Discussions about how to study computer games have been a natural part of the process of establishing game studies as a research field. Within 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. T.L. Taylor's ethnographical and sociological study of players' behavior in the game *EverQuest* and the culture around it

(2006) to e.g. Jesper Juul's theoretical work on defining what computer games are and are not (2005).

Consequently, 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. Juul's article from 2001, "Games Telling Stories?" is an early example of one of the foundational discussions within the field of game studies, where deciding 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 defining 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 themselves and therefore should not be studied from a narratological perspective. This seems to be a rather biased statement which makes a categorical distinction between game, game experience and the game player. However, this distinction 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.

One way to grasp the connection between player experience and the game itself is to think of games as cultural objects that are part of a network traversed and shaped by many things. In this perspective, games are seen as always standing in relation to something else, and as part of a process of interpretation and cultural appropriation. Rather than seeking a formal definition of the computer game, I approach it here as part of a practice which always defines and redefines what a game is. This approach is influenced by the predominant tradition within Internet studies which focuses on studying social and cultural practices and defining 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 (1993) and Sherry Turkle (1997) to studies undertaken today by e.g. danah boyd and Nancy Baym.

Jesper Juul writes 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 distinct domains that can be compared to each other. To answer the question of Juul's article – games telling stories? – if we follow the ideas of Ricoeur as presented in this paper, we can at least say 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.

## **Conclusion**

Player-produced stories can be seen as examples of how narrative practices are part of a community-building and identity-forming strategy carried out among members of an online group. As such, the stories told within the community are part of the construction of a narrative identity in Ricoeur's terms. The stories are also examples of players acting

as “readers” of the game constructing new stories based on what they have experienced played out in the game. This can be seen as a concretization of the operations of Mimesis III, the point in the mimetic cycle where the subject takes the world of the text (the game) into its own world and translates his or her interpretation into practice and therefore to a possible resignification of the world. 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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