

Developing story: Understanding narrative practices in online gaming communities

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Abstract

This paper offers a discussion of the creative processes of gamers producing, exchanging and negotiating narratives in the context of the extremely popular online game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004). I describe some of the many ways that narratives arise, especially in player-created forums dedicated to in-game guilds, and I introduce Paul Ricoeur's theories on narrative, mimesis and identity as a way to understand the underlying mechanisms and the importance of these narrative activities in creating meaning and forming identity in relation to the game.

Keywords: computer games – narrative – game culture – hermeneutics – aesthetics

Introduction

Discussions about how to study computer games have been a natural part of the process of establishing game studies as a research field. Today, the narratology/ludology debate may be considered a thing of the past (see e.g. Juul, 2005, and Frasca, 2003), although the question of how to study games still remains a topic of discussion caused by various disciplinary (theoretical and methodological) outsets. Today, game studies can certainly be seen as a research field in its own right but with many different disciplinary approaches. In a recent blog post, game researcher Jesper Juul writes: "The new conflict in video game studies is between those who study players and those who study games" (<http://www.jesperjuul.net/ludologist/?p=457>). Of course, the sentence is probably not meant to be taken too literally, being formed by the typical spontaneous and relatively informal language of blogging, but the word "conflict" seems to suggest that these two approaches are in strong opposition. In my view, studying the player and studying the game are not necessarily two opposite ways of approaching games – granted, they might call for different methodological tools for analyzing, but if the aim of the study is to understand the meaning or the experience of a game, then this is situated in the relation between the player and the game.

One way to grasp the connection between player and game 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. In this paper, I try to outline a theoretical framework for grasping how players make sense of their gaming experience in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) seen from the perspective of cultural and aesthetic

interpretation, and I describe the narrative practices in relation to the game. A crucial point known within the cultural studies tradition is that the choice of a specific research approach changes the reality we look at (Saukko, 2003, p. 9), and it is important to be aware that there is a danger in claiming to somehow have the access to the "truth" of the object. My perspective is shaped by my background in literary studies which makes me see – and use – computer games as cultural and aesthetic artifacts first and foremost, and this shapes the focus of my study.

Narratives surrounding World of Warcraft

What especially interests me here is the various different types of storytelling that are at play in the context of computer games, and what this narrative activity tells us about the players' understanding of the meaning of their game experience. In other words, I argue that by looking at the stories 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" (in Ricoeur's sense). I will return to this later, but first I want to outline the various kinds of narratives that can be observed in relation to *World of Warcraft*.

An extremely popular online game with around 10 million subscribers worldwide (according to MMOGCHART.COM), *World of Warcraft* is the focus 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), over more journalistically oriented sites such as WOW Insider to the many kinds of forum websites set up by game guilds. Narratives of all kinds abound at these websites – narratives that are all related to the game itself in one way or another. These include recounting of in-game events, (often parodic in nature) happenings or characters in-game (e.g. the infamous Leeroy Jenkins) or at the surrounding websites (e.g. Alamo's "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 and myths (e.g. about upcoming expansions) and much more.

Whether the game itself can be considered a narrative is debatable – and I will not venture further into this debate here – but it might be safe to say that there is narrativity at play in many ways, but certainly not in the fixed sequential form of a typical literary narrative. There is a grand-scale back story (the "Wow lore") to the game, and all game elements are more or less connected to this story, just as the different character "races" are linked to each other and their home environment through the greater narrative. Playing the game, however, is not the same as reading the story. But looking at it in another way, when observing the way players talk about the game, especially in the more intimate guild forum websites, it appears that narrative is a prominent mode of communicating about the game, and therefore, it seems, of making sense of the gaming experience.

Narrative activities are abundant in the context of World of Warcraft guilds. I base the following on my own experiences in one and through looking at various other guild forums. The investigation is in its preliminary stages at this point, but after a shorter period of observing the activities on guild 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 most often of shorter messages, banter, questions/answers etc., but there is certainly often a narrative element in players' chat about experiences in the game, e.g. with pick-up groups, and the more experienced players are often prompted to reminisce on their own beginnings in the game.

Narrative plays a major role on the web forums, examples including 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 (at least in my guild, but it can be observed on others as well) 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 from game events relate to completions of difficult instances and such. So what does all this narrative activity tell us about the game itself and about the gaming experience? I will try to explain this in the following by applying the theoretical perspective of Paul Ricoeur's philosophy on narrative and identity.

Mimesis and narrative

In *Time and Narrative* (1984-88, from the original French *Temps et récit*, 1983-85), Ricoeur draws on Aristotle's concept of "mimesis". Mimesis is a word from the ancient Greek which translates approximately to "imitation" and is used by Plato and Aristotle in relation to the poetic arts, but since the early Middle Ages, the word has been understood broadly as "representing something animate and concrete with characteristics that are similar to the characteristics of other phenomena" (Gebauer & Wulf, 1995, p. 29). In relation to mimesis as literary representation, Ricoeur builds on Aristotle's understanding of representing as a dynamic practice, but acknowledges that Aristotle is focusing on the creation of plot more than on the context and reception of the poetic work (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 52). But he tries to base his idea of mimesis on Aristotle's conception of it as a positive action that is a natural way for humans to construct and therefore understand their temporal existence. Ricoeur's thesis is that the meaning of the literary narrative is to be found in its intermediary position between a pre-understanding and a reception or "application". In this, he goes against a more semiotically oriented approach that – according to Ricoeur – only looks at the inner workings of the text: "For a semiotic theory, the only operative concept is that of the literary text. Hermeneutics, however, is concerned with reconstructing the entire arc of operations by which practical experience provides itself with works, authors and readers" (p. 53).

Ricoeur develops on the concept of mimesis in order to explain the mediation between narrative and temporal existence, founded in a belief that actions are always symbolically mediated. He describes the mimetic process as a cyclic one (reminiscent of a hermeneutic circle), moving in three layers: 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 "emplotment", where the facts/events are being arranged into a

structure. It has a mediating function between the preunderstanding 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. This is the intersection “of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality” (p. 71).

Following this, the meaning of a text is not bound to the representation or plot itself, but rather 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 story, or the meaning of a story, is completed in the reader, so to speak, and is thus the result of a meeting between the world of the reader and the world of the text. As these two horizons fuse together, there is a potentially transfiguring or transforming effect on the experience of the reader, since “[a] text is not something closed in upon itself, it is the projection of a new universe distinct from that we live in” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 26). In that sense, the context, experience and cultural assumptions of the reader are also important parts of the creation of the narrative as a whole.

Ricoeur writes that there are two kinds of narratives: the fictive and the historical. He does not want to call the poetic configuration “fiction” because the word is often used “first as a synonym for narrative configuration, second as an antonym to historical narrative’s claim to constitute a ‘true’ narrative” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 64). For Ricoeur, the difference between fictive and historical narrative lies in the referential dimension or the narratives “truth claims”, but the configuring activity of mimesis II is the same for the two – as indeed the whole mimetic circle can be seen as an operation common for both fictive and historical narrative. 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.

Understanding the narrative practice of players

Ricoeur’s theories on mimesis, narrative and identity can provide a theoretical framework for understanding the narrative practices of players that I sketched out in the above. I will argue that the idea of the triple mimesis and its ensuing consequences for the interpretation of the game as a cultural object and practice can help illuminate the experience of the game. If we look at the game itself, understood as the world of *World of Warcraft* with its specific history and culture, in the perspective of the triple mimesis, we can view the meaning of the game as a result of the meeting of the world of the game and the world of the player. The player – just as the reader of literature, or the viewer of film – participates in a creative process of sense making. Games are certainly not narratively structured in the same way as films, but I would argue that the cyclic process of the triple mimesis is

also at work in the players' appropriation of the game, to the extent that the game is experienced as a fictional world to which one must attribute meaning.

The new media context within which games are negotiated and played means that the third operation in the triple mimesis, the refiguration, gains a concretization that Ricoeur could probably not have imagined. The widespread activities on the web that games trigger, among these the many kinds of narratives sketched out in the above, means that the operations of mimesis III – the active refiguration, inventing and creating that the reader in Ricoeur's theory unfolds – often become narratives in their own right to be interpreted by other members of the gaming community through their own mimetic process of sense making. These narratives, as mentioned above, also constitute identities – of the community and of the individual player. Narrative identity is not a stable identity, but is continually under construction and “continues to make and unmake itself” in this way. When players tell stories about their experiences with the game, they take part in a narrative construction of identity, since, in Ricoeur's words, “the practice of narrative lies in a thought experiment by means of which we try to inhabit worlds foreign to us” (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 249).

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