

The Social Dimension of Collective Storytelling in *Skyrim*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the social dimension of collective storytelling around a particular ludic object. We study the action role-playing game *Skyrim* (2011) through a mixed methodology that integrates the humanities and the social sciences. Based on extensive analysis of player generated videos, we demonstrate that the social dimension plays an all-important role in the shaping of storytelling by the *Skyrim* fan community. Finally, we conceptualize this social dimension in terms of communities of practice.

Keywords

User Generated Content, storytelling, fan productivity, interdisciplinarity

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the social dimension of collective storytelling around a particular ludic object, the action role-playing game (aRPG) *Skyrim I* (2011). Our choice of object was motivated by the popularity of the game and the abundance of materials produced by the fan community.

Our object of study, *Skyrim*, is an action roleplaying game (aRPG), an inherent problematic category due to its hybrid nature. Action role-playing games can be placed as a subcategory within the role-playing games genre, but they incorporate typical elements of other games such as action-adventure. A distinctive feature of these is real-time combat (instead of turn-based). Specifically, *Skyrim* is an aRPG based on epic fantasy. This kind of videogames inherits features from ancient MUDs² (as a derivative form of RPG) and are inspired by classic tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* or *HeroQuest* (Taylor, 2006) as well as epic fantasy literature. Other games within this category of aRPG's are: *Baldur's Gate*, *Champions of Norrath* or *Dragon Age*. We set out to analyze a wide range of

Skyrim player-produced videos and categorized them according to the varied rhetoric intention of the creators (walkthrough, guide, commentary, parody, etc.). It became apparent pretty early that all storytelling strategies, no matter how different their intention, had a common social dimension that had gone unnoticed in the field of game studies. We characterize this social dimension theoretically and venture a conclusion that integrates the idea of player storytelling productivity with an understanding of how communities of practice are generated in this very specific context.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: PLAYERS TELLING GAME STORIES

There is already a long and fruitful tradition of examining player productivity in the field of game studies. Inspired by Henry Jenkins pioneering efforts in the investigation of fan production (1992), many authors have looked at the different ways in which players extend the act of playing into meaningful acts of creation (for example Buckingham, Carr, Burn and Schott, 2005 or Wirman, 2009). Others have looked at more specific productive genres, such as walkthroughs (Consalvo, 2003), machinima (Jones, 2006) mods (Sotamaa, 2003) or narratives (Albrechtslund 2010). Generally, the focus has been on the transformation of consumption practises and their development into creative production (Flowers 2006, Sotamaa 2005, Consalvo 2003), with yet other authors pointing at the problematic aspect of these transformations (i.e. Kücklich, 2005).

All these authors share a common understanding of the game as the originator of creative praxes that go beyond the act of playing. Others go even further and look at play itself as an act of creative production, as Celia Pearce has proposed with her concept of “productive play” (Pearce 2006). Finally, Aleksander Knorr has convincingly argued that game productivity can be characterized from the point of view of sociocultural appropriation (Knorr 2007).

Inspired by this previous work we set out to cover an area of player activity that hasn't yet been explored in depth and is gaining more and more volume online: the creation of player videos in YouTube3. Players upload game diaries, walkthroughs, commentary, tutorials, tourist guides... all sorts of materials that typically contain video footage from the game (sometimes modified) and the commentary (voice over) of a player. Our first step was to try and classify the different kinds of videos into general categories, following Wirman (2009), who distinguishes between instrumental and expressive “game related fan productivity”. Her figure illustrates this division, which is shared by most authors in one form or another:

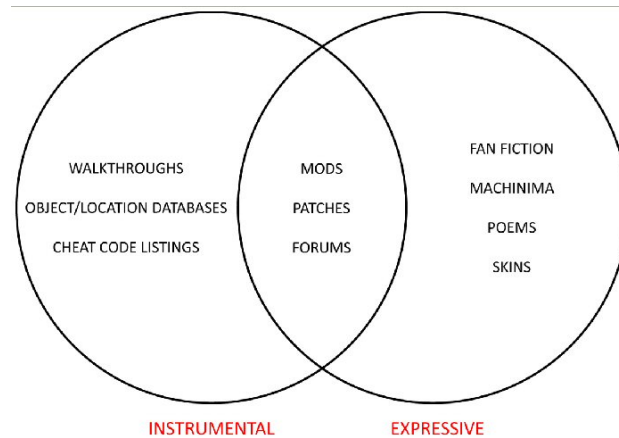


Figure 1: Kinds of productivity by Hannah Wirman

However, it soon became apparent in our analysis of *Skyrim* videos that the distinction between instrumental and expressive production broke down in many instances. We found that YouTube player video storytelling had a socially performative dimension (Langellier and Peterson, 2004) both in terms of identity and transformation of the community.

A BRIEF NOTE ON YOUTUBE AS A COMMUNITY

We would like to briefly consider the nature of the platform where this kind of player interaction occurs. Is YouTube a community or just one of the means/platforms by which the *Skyrim* community expresses itself? Nancy Baym has pointed to the difficulties of applying an old concept of community as tied to a specific site/platform. Now communities are often distributed in a quasi-coherent networked fashion and yet share a palpable sense of unity, of everybody understanding the conventions (Baym, 2007), as our study also shows. This is supported by a recent study by Rotman, Gobleck and Preece (2009), where they concluded that despite the fragmented nature of the relationships in YouTube, users do not care about the actual structure. For them, the personal communication they take part in are sufficient to generate a *sense* of a community (2009: 48). In our view, the community of *Skyrim* players doesn't reside in any one specific platform or virtual world, but is loosely articulated around the fora where discussion about the game occurs. The sense of belonging comes from having played the game and having developed an attachment to it, much as books or films interpretive communities/fan communities are formed.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

Traditionally the social dimension of storytelling has not attracted much interest. We advocate a multidisciplinary approach in the field of gaming as proposed by Bryce and Rutter (2003); in this case an integration of a narrative approach with tools from the social sciences. As introduced above, our case studies are the texts (videos and comments) generated on You Tube around the action role-playing

Skyrim.

Our approach is mainly analytical and qualitative. We cannot aspire to statistical representativeness but we have tried to ensure representation from a structural point of view (Ibañez 1979) by using a sample of items (in this case videos produced by subjects) that accurately reflect the whole group (universe) which is being studied, of course, being aware of the limitations. The first step was preliminary non participant observation (Spradley 1980, Vallés 1998) inspired by categories of productivity proposed by authors like Consalvo (2003), Wirman (2007) or Albrechtslund (2010). We categorized all texts as belonging to two possible areas: instrumental⁴ or expressive (Wirman 2009), with the categories of “Player Diaries” most clearly being a hybrid of the two. Similar categories have also been proposed by other authors; for instance, instrumental productivity is understood by Albrechtslund as: *“texts which offer tools for more effective play”* (2010, 114), such as databases, walkthroughs or tutorials, whereas she defines expressive productivity as: *“activities which do not exist or directly support playing as essential parts of games”* (2010, 114) such as machinima, fan fiction or stories. Following this, we defined five more subcategories (see Figure 2 below) within each of them and we started to collect data using an intentional sampling (Ortiz, 2004), trying to represent the most significant texts as well as aiming for structural representation. Soon, we detected some problems connected to the use of traditional categories of productivity, due to the concept being unable to deal with the multidimensional reality of the videos observed as we elaborate below.

The data analysis of 35 videos in English (n=21) and Spanish (n=14), and 8.271 comments was realized combining techniques of analysis of storytelling and sociohermeneutical analysis (Alonso, 1998) aspiring to a structural representation (Ibañez, 1979) through the selected sample. Sociohermeneutical analysis finds that the social is inseparable from the symbolic dimension.

FORMAL ANALYSIS OF THE YOUTUBE SKYRIM VIDEOS

As introduced above, we established two general categories with five subcategories each according to the content of the videos analyzed (See Fig. 2), plus a category that was both instrumental and expressive: the Player Diaries, which clearly have a hybrid function in that they are both the personal story of a player and a sort of recommendation of an ideal path of play, commented with a high degree of emotion for the most part⁵. Even though there are some grey areas or videos that can overlap across the two categories, this division was operative and managed to cover the spectrum of analyzed materials, so it could also be used in connection to YouTube game production of other games.

| Instrumental Production | Expressive Production |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Player Diary | |
| General Walkthroughs | Parodies |
| Experience/Level | Machinima |
| Items and resources | Aesthetics and Secret Places |
| Bugs/Glitches (useful) | Mods |
| Skills | Identity/Emotional implications |

Figure 2: Types of creative production.

We had expected to find a higher dose of creativity on the right hand side of the column, in the area of expressive production. Our hypothesis was that the authors of expressive YouTube *Skyrim* videos would use aesthetic strategies similar to those of classical storytelling or narrative production. Here we list a few strategies that we encountered within the categories of Parodies, Landscapes, Secret Places, Easter Eggs and Identity/Emotional Implications, by way of illustration:

- poaching with the conventions of the game (“Episodio 1 – Empezando”⁶).
- parodic intertextuality (“Lady Gaga – Marry the Night”⁷).
- meta-reflective strategies, in this case a clash between the game and real world (“Arrow in the Knee Goes Real in Athens”⁸).
- joy of the sublime, in this case in the landscape (“Why Skyrim is so Beautiful”⁹).
- attention to identity/emotional aspects (“How to Marry your Gay Nordic Lover in Skyrim”¹⁰).

What characterizes all these expressive strategies is that they have a collective dimension; they tap into the Skyrim's community shared *repertoire* of genres, texts and structures (Tosca, 2003). However, what we hadn't expected was that most of the same strategies would be present on videos assigned to the left hand side of the column, instrumental videos. Even though the explicit intention of these videos is to inform, they made use of the same rhetoric devices to spice up their narration. A few examples are:

- parodic intertextuality (in walkthrough “Skyrim: Guia Encantamiento”¹¹)
- poaching with the conventions of the gam (in guide “Character Creation Guide”¹²).
- aesthetic joy (here in the technical aspects “Sound of Nature, Greatsword Sheaths Scabbards & LOTR Anduril Mods”¹³ or “Mods Analysis/Comparison”¹⁴)
- imitation of television-speaker style mannerisms and jargon (in walkthrough “Guia Skyrim, Como Empezar Desde Cero”¹⁵)
- meta-reflective strategies (for example in the videos about earning gold quickly,

where comparisons to getting rich in the real world abound: working vs stealing)

- humour (in many of them, for example in “Bugs bugs bugs”¹⁶)

If the same narrative strategies are used, the distinction between instrumental and expressive production breaks down. Even the most instrumental of productions was interlaced with aesthetic appeal forms that engaged the other players as an interpretive community (Fish, 1980). Complex intertextual strategies require a shared knowledge of the game and other sociocultural contexts. So our next step was to look at the explicit dialogue around the videos, as manifested in the comments and author responses, in order to find out how the community interprets and validates this content.

Skyrim is an individual game, but the channel through which this kind of interaction occurs (YouTube) transforms the experience of players into a collective and reticular experience. As noted by Consalvo: “*fans can make connections between media content and larger social, cultural, and political issues not directly referenced, and they also enjoy creating their own media content responding to, complementing, or even challenging their initial media consumption*” (2003, 326). YouTube becomes a place where reinforcements and differences emerge, a place where we observe a mutual shaping of agency (Latour 2005, Lasén 2012), where storytelling is built jointly by different human and technological actors (*Skyrim*, the video’s author, YouTube and the community of users). We have observed different processes of construction, modification and collective bargaining of the narrative, where storytelling is subjected to a breakdown and reassembly in the network. These processes deconstruct the original storytelling and through narrative interactions (produced via comments) reconfigure the narrative reality. Also we have observed a struggle for discursive hegemony in the field that is manifested through two main channels: support or rejection through an explicit answer via comments, or using the button ‘I like’ available in YouTube channel). Indeed, every comment, every response, each reinforcing each discrepancy contributes to the social construction process of storytelling.

Reinforcement examples: “*THANK YOU! I shall make sure that i remember that!*”, “*Great game Thanks for the Video keep them Coming!*”, “*Please make more!*”, “*I have gone to other three walkthroughs and they all chose to play as a girl for some reason. I'm happy your playing as a man!*” “*Best Walkthrough ever my man*” “*you should make your own intro for all your videos!*” “*I like your videos betterone other guy who has uploaded Skyrim-videos talk and scream like a girl all the fucking time :) Pisses me off!!*”, “*10,000 likes!*” “*great video man you are entertaining to watch!*”, “*My Third comment muahahahahaaaaaaaaaaww : anyway i really enjoy this walkthrough; could u make The vids longer?*”

As this excerpt suggests, reinforcement is seldom neutral (understood as just a thumbs up) as the expressions used reveal a more complex relationship between the

sender and the receiver. The video-author above receives praise for being “manly” and not “screaming like a girl” in his walkthrough commentaries, utterances which, however problematic their ideological implications might be, indicate a shared idea of what kinds of communication styles are acceptable. Viewers are critical of style and social subtext so that the reception turns into a conversation, which makes these very different from traditional textual walkthroughs. In addition, traditional walkthroughs are much more descriptive, organized, static and instrumental (in the classical sense of instrumentality as goal-oriented). However, as we shall see below, video walkthroughs are often a totally different phenomenon, we could even say that they are not classic walkthroughs at all, but micro-tutorials, micro-narratives with the very visible mark of the narrator.

These short stories together contribute to supporting the collective imaginary of the *Skyrim* community. Brief tutorials based on specific experiences with the game arise from both personal initiative and specific demands of the community. A process of dialogue and negotiation among different agents can be traced. Storytelling flows beyond the boundaries of an own video review, generating response videos (both as reinforcement or critical), and new videos that satisfy the demands of the community.

Discrepancy examples : *“Pls, just dont make more tutorials”, “So don’t watch it!!!”, “shit guide”, “please don’t torture me with these videos” , “you should make more exciting videos, sometimes you’re a bit boring”, “I can’t understand the existence of your walkthrough, why?????” “What the hell man”, “your voice is irritating me. Focus more on what’s important”, “explain yourself better please. CONFUSE!!!”. “I think it’s best blacksmith improve”.*

Discussion examples: 1) *“Hi I was wondering if I needed permission from Bethesda to post videos of skyrim. If you could reply ASAP that would be a great help.Thanks”*. In response: *“no, you dont need permission because bethesda doesnt care if you post videos from their companys game, they actually encourage people uploading vids cause it gains popularity for the game”*. In response: *“Thanks a lot that clears up a lot of confusion!”*. 2) *“should I buy skyrim or saints row 3”*. In response: *Are u kiddiinnggg meee!!!*. 3) *“I prefer fallout :D”*. In response: *“Looser!!!”*. In response: *“fallout is not as good as the elder scrolls”*.

Finally, instrumental productivity has traditionally been associated with an efficient style of play (Wirman 2007, Albrechtslund 2010). We hope to have demonstrated here that instrumental productivity is more complex than these authors suggest. This complexity also points to the fact that the pleasures of playing are many, and that even traditional “hardcore” players or “achievers” are interested in expressive strategies both as video authors and as receptive community.

FROM STORIES ABOUT GAMES TO COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The reception community around the instrumental *Skyrim* (or any other game for that matter) player videos is not reduced to sharing knowledge about the content of the game *per se* (the story, the interface, the gameplay) or even meta-frames around the game (genre) (Tosca, 2003). Reception is always marked by the social contexts in which players are immersed in (Tosca, 2009), like the imitation of the style of television speakers in commenting some of the videos, or the references to the social reality of their country of origin. Such as in “Un regalo para mi mujer”¹⁸ where the author makes a parody of domestic abuse to provoke irate female players that had criticised his chauvinism in other videos. In this respect, Knorr’s observation about reworking as an instance of appropriation resonates strongly with our empirical evidence: “Appropriation’s decisive dimension is the transformation of the relationships between the objects in question and the members of the appropriating group” (Knorr, 2007: 11)

A good example of how a game story reveals the values and tensions of a community of practice (Wenger, 2002) is the dialogue around a tutorial posted by a player (MrMaarten333) “How to Get Rich”¹⁹, where the very useful information is interlaced with offensive comments against women, old people, enemies, etc. The video gets 145 dislikes over only 73 likes, not because of the quality of the information, but because of the unacceptable style of the speaker. The community strikes back, as one female gamer does in this comment:

“by the sound of your voice i can tell you are either a fugly ginger (only this guy) or a lonely immature little bastard that has _ a mangina so which one are you and do not say that you are good looking by the sounds of your voice you have a gross sinus issue and yes i am a girl that plays skyrim”(fallenangelmonster 1)

At which the video author replies:

“@fallenangelmonster I I'm blond with blue eyes so I'm ,ot a ginger, I'm not a _ bastard either I was born after my parents married, about my voice thats because I have a crappy mic About you, I think you are the ugly kind of girl that thinks because she plays video games is super cool and hot but in reality is fat ugly and a whore that fucks every guy that wants to fuck (sadly enough not a lot) so stfu!”

Exchanges like this show very tangible gender tensions (stereotyping, offensive characterization, etc.) unfortunately not exclusive for this game²⁰. Our point with this example was not to discuss gender, but rather to demonstrate that storytelling is performative, not only of one’s own identity (as a player, as a man, or woman, etc.), but also transformative of the community in which the storyteller is integrated. As Langellier and Peterson argue: “the constitution of a person as a storyteller or an audience is a contextual feature of a particular material, social, and cultural situation. Storytelling is performative in that possibilities for our participation are marked out in advance, so to speak, by the discourse and by our material conditions” (2004: 4) In this case, any storytelling act is a performance within the limits marked by the context: the understanding of the game *Skyrim* shared by the community,

who will respond with approval or disapproval. But at the same time, any storytelling act contributes to shape that very shared understanding and opens for the possibility of a response in an act of cultural reflexivity.

It is not our intention to downplay the importance of the personal dimension of this creative activity. In line with other studies about the motivation behind online productive practises (Ito et. al. 2010) quite a few of our video-makers were explicit about the creative activity being satisfactory for their own self realization. Even more, the positive reception and dialogue with the viewers was interpreted by themselves as a boost for their self-esteem. As Albrechtslund has argued, player's stories shouldn't only be characterized as creative expression, but "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" (Albrechtslund 2010: 123). She builds upon Turkles constructivistic notion of identity and Ricoeurs (1991) idea of the crucial role of narrative on our understanding of the world and our own identity.

The *Skyrim* YouTube videos are the personal stories of the players as they make sense of their playing experience and want to share it with others. Even when they set out to be helpful only, objective and instrumental, they involve their own selves and challenge the community they are a part of. An analysis of these videos as storytelling performances beyond their instrumentality, as well as of the community responses to each of them, has revealed both the conventions shared by the community, the tensions given by a broader context and the divergences that make each contribution original.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have looked at the role of the social dimension in the production of texts and storytelling in relation with YouTube *Skyrim* player videos. We claim three important findings that in our view reformulate the classical characterization of player productivity:

- the strict division of player productivity into two separate camps: instrumental and expressive is misleading and hides the aesthetic aspect that is present in every creative production as objects on both sides of the border share the same storytelling strategies.
- player storytelling has a social dimension that manifests in the choice of aesthetic strategies that appeal to the shared repertoire of the community, both in expressive and instrumental videos.
- the collective nature of the storytelling performance of the studied videos and their comments indicates that interaction with the community can be an end in itself.

These three ideas point in the same direction, namely that the interaction of the

Skyrim's fan community on YouTube, beyond the purely ludic aspect, generates authentic spaces for socializing and interaction. It becomes a community of practice where the social dimension emerges with power (Wenger, 2002). There is no fixed location, nomadic communities of practice are in constant motion. Unlike traditional practice communities, these are more diffuse, blurred and dynamic. Wandering communities that travel the roads of a complex network of videos and comments. They intertwine practices, identities and meanings. You Tube's videos metaphorically operate as the figure of the bard who travels between villages and communities transmitting stories. Narratives and storytelling articulate and weave the different nodes of the community contributing to create one fan culture and identity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Skyrim* is the fifth installment of the series *The Elder Scrolls*.
- 2 Multi User Dungeon. Text-based role-playing games.
- 3 This is not *Machinima*, a recognizable cultural genre that has merited studies of its own (such as Jones, 2006). *Machinima* uses the game engine to create a cinematic production. Here, there is no cinematic production but fragmented commentary on the game or its practices.
- 4 Consalvo (2003) uses the term *utilitarian*.
- 5 See for example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvRwFDO12Sw&feature=related> (accessed Jul.2012).
- 6 Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRn5RaBJ9qI> (accessed Jul. 2012).
- 7 Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZJmjKQjR9k> (accessed Jul. 2012).
- 8 Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AaqfoHudOPI> (accessed Jul. 2012).
- 9 Available at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch? V=Ywj945BEOzk&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?V=Ywj945BEOzk&feature=related) (accessed Jul.2012).
- 10 Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Wgk5Sf8BqU> (accessed Jul. 2012).
- 11 Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gb9oU46diKo> (accessed Jul. 2012).
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- 16 Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ci6i-CaEnDQ> (accessed Jul. 2012).
- 17 It reminds us of Bourdieu's field concept (1979).
- 18 Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B81VP6ZidHo> (accessed Jul.

2012).

19 Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbJksP9ztbI&feature=related> (accessed Jul. 2012).

20 On a side note, none of the videos we found had a female narrator, which says something interesting about the *Skyrim* community as well and the vocality of its members.

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