

(Re)Branching Narrativity: Virtual Space Experience in Twitch

Ilgin Kizilgunesler¹

¹University of Manitoba, Winnipeg MB, CANADA
kizilgui@myumanitoba.ca

Abstract. Twitch, as an online platform for gamers, has been analyzed in terms of its commercial benefits for the increase of game sales and its role in bringing fame to streamers. By focusing on Twitch's interactive capacity, this paper compares this platform to narrative games, playable stories, and mobile narratives in terms of the role of the user(s) and their virtual space experience. Drawing on theories by Marie-Laure Ryan and Rita Raley, the paper argues that Twitch assigns authorial roles to the users (i.e., the streamers and the subscribers), who branch the existing narrative of the game by determining the path of the setting collectively. By doing so, the paper proposes Twitch as a space, which extends the immersion that is discussed around multiple forms of interactive narrativity.

Keywords: Twitch, interactivity, co-creativity, immersion, meta-game.

1 Introduction

Digital narrativity remains an evolving series of art forms, which primarily cluster around the essentiality of an interactive narration in relation to the achievement of an immersive experience. The basic components of this immersion including its emotional and spatial ramifications, and the role of the user within this experience are analyzed by scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan in "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories: Toward a Poetics of Interactive Narrative" [1] and Rita Raley in "Walk This Way: Mobile Narrative as Composed Experience" [2]. Whereas Ryan classifies certain aspects of narrative games and playable stories, along with specific features of the quality of immersion provided by each, Raley provides a thorough description of mobile narratives as a genre and the levels of participant interaction with the environment as a text. While defining the presence of the user, these articles focus on the role attributed to the user such as the "observer", "the participant", or "the experienter" [2]. Although each article indicates essential elements in reading or reinterpreting narratives in virtual or augmented reality forms, their common ground is to situate the participant in such a place that the immersive effect could be extended. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to explore the extension of this immersion with the co-creative aspect that is assigned to the participant in Twitch through the illusion of space. Twitch, has been analyzed in terms of its role in promoting game sales [3], and forming a celebrity culture within gaming communities [4]. Furthermore, Twitch has also been inspected for the analyses of user behaviors

[5], as well as for the connection between the scale of the broadcasted material and popularity of channels [6]. Alternatively, this paper offers a theoretical approach, while arguing that Twitch assigns authorial roles to the users, who branch the narrative on their screen by determining the path of the setting with the streamer, the game, and the subscribers triangle.

2 Twitch and Co-authorship

As an online platform, Twitch is where game streamers and fan communities meet during a live broadcast of the players, who simultaneously both play the game and interact with their audience. While the streamers participate in this interaction with an extended microphone, their online audience engages in this activity with an online chat screen, which is visible both to the streamers and to the audience. Although generally the streamers appoint a moderator for their chats, who can either be a moobot or a nightbot which is designed to send links periodically to the followers for the upcoming broadcasts, the moderator's duty is usually to let the streamers know about technical problems in order to maintain the quality of the streaming, or to ban those who send inappropriate and discontented messages, temporarily; timeout, or permanently. Apart from the occurrence of this facility, neither a moderator, nor a streamer has authorial control over the content of the instant messages. Even though their content ranges from the expressions of fascination towards the streamer to the unrelated random utterances, there is a wide usage of this platform for exchange of real time collaboration between these two agencies while playing the game. Through this collaboration, the online audience comments on the streamers' play, shares ideas or suggests paths according to the evolvement of the story, all of which have direct and indirect effects on the sequences in the development of the branching narrative, which Ted Nelson sees as a primary function of a participant [2]. Although the participant does not inhabit a physical space, which complicates the notion of the exploration of the text through physical movement, Twitch resembles GPS-and SMS-enabled mobile narratives in terms of "mode of engagement" [2], as it provides an interaction with the others instead of inviting isolation and individual exploration. In addition, Twitch also maintains epistemic and temporal immersions in Ryan's terminology [1]. Epistemic immersion, in Twitch, is kept when "non-interactive narrative of the past is embedded in an interactive game" [1]. In other words, the computer game is embedded into the interaction between the audience and the streamer. As for temporal immersion, Twitch substitutes narrative games and playable stories, which fail to extend the duration of suspense since "when players can determine the path through their choice of action; the uncertainty is lost" [1]. With sustainability of these immersions, therefore, the prolonged immersion, which was seen primary in interactive narrative by Ryan and Raley, is achieved in relation to the role of the participant. Defined as a desire to know for the future, suspense remains steady in Twitch owing to the actions of avatars, which are improvised at the time of action by the streamers and the audience and therefore, cannot be predicted by a single user.

Even though Twitch does not follow a predetermined linearity, it creates a chain between a narrative game and a playable story by taking the former as basis and turning it into the latter. In terms of Ryan's scheme, the narrative meaning of the computer game overtops the users' actions, which lead to the observation of the story's development. By taking its roots from the narrative meaning, Twitch then circles back to its origin through a connection between these two types of interactive narrative.

3 Conclusion

Twitch offers a virtual space, in which the story of the game is simultaneously re-branched on the basis of participant interaction(s). Even though the participants do not physically co-exist in real space with each other, they remain involved in the setting by developing a shared memory, resulting from a collaborative interaction during gameplay. Ryan explains the notion of re-branching narrative in relation to meta-fiction in her book *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* [7]. She points out that in some literary works the utterances of the narrator within the main text form a fiction on its own; "creating a 'fictional fiction'" [7]. She then questions the fictionality of this concept by asking: "Can a fiction really contain islands of nonfiction or does a so-called authorial intervention create a new layer of role-playing?" [7]. Considering the fact that Twitch is already defined as a part of "meta-game (including the surrounding media and fan cultures)" [8], and owing to the exchange of live messages between the streamers and subscribers, the users in Twitch contribute to the textual aspect of the game by breaking the fourth wall. As opposed to the traditional aspect of branching narrative, therefore, the layering within the narrative results from a detachment from the fictional boundaries of the text. Furthermore, Twitch, as a live streaming platform, brings multiple definitions of interactivity together, which occurs as another significant factor in terms of reading its immersivity. Susanne Eichner refers to "three traditions of interactivity research" [9] in *Agency and Media Reception*, which "[stem] from sociological concepts of interaction, ...communication and media studies, and ...computer science" [9] respectively. Twitch encompasses all of these various modes of interaction by providing a "social action ...based on reciprocal and interrelated awareness" [9], "text-recipient communication" [9], and finally through HCI (human-computer interaction). With combining these features, it introduces a structure, which promises a possible transformation of TV talk shows in connection to the gaming talk shows, where guests and hosts broadcast a talk show via Twitch without sharing a space but simultaneously being in the same setting.

Conclusively, owing to its structure, Twitch presents a space for the users, where they can participate in the gaming environment on a collaborative basis, taking a part in the development of the story. This paper offers a theoretical approach to this environment based on the theoretical overview existing in multiple forms of interactive narrativity. This analysis might further be developed into a

content analysis based on a comparison between the sequential progression of gameplay and exchange of messages between the audience and streamers.

References

1. M. Ryan.: From Narrative Games to Playable Stories Toward a Poetics of Interactive Narrative. In *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 1 no. 1, pp. 43-59. (2009).
2. R. Raley.: Walk This Way: Mobile Narrative as Composed Experience. pp. 1-12.
3. D.J. Lang.: User Gameplay Videos Driving Sales. In *Chronicle - Herald*, (2016, Jul 14). <http://uml.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.uml.idm.oclc.org/docview/1804242288?accountid=14569>, last accessed 2018/02/03.
4. D. Heaven.: Twitch Turns Bedroom Gamers into Internet Superstars. In *New Scientist*, (2014, June 4). <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22229724-600-twitch-turns-bedroom-gamers-into-internet-superstars/>, last accessed 2018/02/03.
5. G. Nascimento., M. Ribeiro., L. Cerf., N. Cesario., M. Kaytoue., C. Raissi, T. Vasconcelos, and W. Meira.: Modeling and analyzing the video game live-streaming community. In *Proc. of IEEE LA-WEB*, pp. 1-9. IEEE, (2014).
6. J. Deng., F. Cuadrado., G. Tyson., S. Uhlig.: Behind the Game: Exploring the Twitch Streaming Platform. In *Network and Systems Support For Games (NetGames)*, pp. 1-6. IEEE, (2016, Jan 14). <http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/7382994/?reload=true>, last accessed 2018/02/03.
7. M. Ryan.: *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, pp. 93-95. (1991).
8. D. Carr, et al.: Doing Game Studies: A Multi-Method Approach to the Study of Textuality, Interactivity and Narrative Space. In *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, pp. 19-30, (Feb. 2004).
9. S. Eichner.: *Agency and Media Reception*. Springer VS: Potsdam, pp. 54-57. (2013).