

Twitter Storytelling as a New Literacy Practice

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the Twitter feed for the launch of *Mass Effect 3* in order to explore the ways digital media reshape how we tell stories and share experiences. In particular, this feed highlights four important features of new media storytelling: the structure of the medium informs the crafted fictions of the story; these stories rely on both the “real” nature of the Twitter medium as well as the fictional context of the narrative world; the story exists within the “real world” of the reader by being enmeshed with their everyday stream of other writing and reading; and readers have opportunities to participate and actively engage with the story in new ways. Together, these features represent a new literacy and a new way of framing our understanding of storytelling.

Keywords

Literacy; transmedia; social media; performance; discourse

Introduction

This paper argues that the growing number of fictional stories told through social media site Twitter represents a new form of literacy practice. This new literacy is enmeshed in our everyday lives in unique and interesting ways because of the real-time nature of the medium it uses. Stories exist side-by-side with other writing grounded in the mundane world, and readers must navigate between the two types of posts. These fictional stories can take several forms. Some are stories contained within a single 140-character post. Some are more robust stories which use Twitter as a medium for distribution. Still others are stories told by many authors using a shared hashtag. This analysis focuses on a single story arc, the Twitter feed for the launch of *Mass Effect 3*, which crosses all these boundaries and more. This particular example is important for four reasons: a) it appropriates the structures and conventions of Twitter itself as a frame for the story rather than simply using it as a distribution method; b) it represents a mixture of “real” and “unreal” contexts to tell the story; c) it was originally produced in real time as if the story were happening in the real world, a key conceit of the narrative; and d) it created a space for users to participate in the story and create supplemental side stories. Together, these features highlight the unique nature of Twitter fiction and demonstrate the potential for rethinking and expanding how we tell stories through the evolving digital tools of the 21st century.

Methodology and Findings

This analysis primarily uses Gee’s discourse analysis toolkit (2012) to examine the language and structural cues of the launch feed. In particular, much of what makes the *ME3* feed so interesting is the interplay between the story (which tells of an alien invasion of Earth) with the technology of Twitter (character-limited posts, real-time publishing, technical jargon). The story was told from the point-of-view of a news reporter from the fictional in-game Alliance News Network. The reporter posted Twitter messages “as if” she witnessed the invasion herself, and was written in first-person present voice to provide the appearance of live reporting of the events. The feed used the conventions of Twitter in the posts: shorthand, bit.ly links to other articles, hashtags. During the events, the reporter was injured and posted a message with a number of typos, apologizing for typing with “brnd hands [sic].” These writing choices provided the appearance of authenticity, of being “in the moment” reporting. Where other stories

may use the 140-character limit as a necessary restriction, or simply spread a story across multiple posts, the *ME3* launch feed uses the structures of Twitter and the medium itself as part of the fiction (a reporter using a social media tool to tell the news).

This blurring of real and fictional is a central tension in the feed. As part of the larger fictional world of *Mass Effect*, the feed follows the rules established in other related media, from the names and characters of the world to the events that happen. The story it tells is a kind of “teaser” to the *Mass Effect 3* game, where the player begins with the invasion in progress. The feed is a representation of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2009) in that it is one part of a larger whole that occurs across several different channels. More interestingly, though, is that the feed was a fictional story told within the “real world” constraints of Twitter. The story used through the @AllianceNewsNet handle, included the #solcomms hashtag, even used bit.ly links – all markedly 2012-centric conceits for a story supposedly occurring in 2186. Even the Twitter site itself is a strange juxtaposition of the “real world” nature of the feed and the anachronism of the events it supposedly tells. Much like videogames themselves, the feed blends two worlds: one fictional, one real (Juul, 2005; Taylor, 2006).

Just as importantly, the original story was as much a performance as it is a narrative. As it was originally told, the posts spanned several days and gave the impression of happening in the moment; as the invasion became more violent and Earth’s situation more precarious, the pace of the posts quickened and the writing became more frantic. While the first few posts were separated by a span of several days, the posts increased in frequency so that they appeared every few minutes. By the time of the story’s “climax,” posts appeared every 30 seconds or so. This is particularly important for this type of story: because of the conceit of “live” news reporting, the feed used the timing of posts to maintain that fiction. But it also highlights the “everyday” nature of the feed; posts appeared alongside other writing which populated a reader’s stream, so that “news” of an alien invasion was interspersed with jokes, restaurant recommendations, links to funny articles, or other mundane posts from their other social connections. Readers were forced to distinguish between the fictions of the story from the reality of their other feeds.

Finally, readers were invited to not simply experience the story but to actively engage with it. The inclusion of the #solcomms hashtag provided a channel for readers to comment and correspond with each other. Some readers created their own stories, even including pictures they modified which purportedly showed the aliens invading their hometown. Readers had the opportunity to creatively participate in their shared experiences, a key feature of 21st century digital literacies and participatory cultures (Markham, 1998; Baym, 2010). Furthermore, the stories and conversations readers created added to the meta-story, the “big S” Story (following Gee, 2003) that includes all the various ways people talk about and share ideas about the story the feed tells and the game portrays.

Conclusions

The *ME3* Twitter launch feed is a densely layered set of meanings and experiences made possible through 21st century digital media; it is an example of new ways of thinking about and experiencing the world. But it is also about how we share and access stories in multiple contexts and through multiple lenses; it is about how we tell fictional stories in truthful ways, and ways in which the truths of the stories are bound to the fictions of the everyday world. It demonstrates important principles of using context to inform content. It highlights a new kind of literacy which intersects our everyday lives through digitally mediated tools like Twitter, where the everyday and the fictional exist side-by-side and not as discrete spaces. Finally, it highlights new challenges—and new opportunities—to create, distribute, and share information in networked, real-time digital media; we must think deeply about the benefits of constant information as well as the ways this information can be used and misused within its just-in-time nature. This particular story represents a new form of literacy in which stories are bound up in the everyday, where authors and

readers alike must negotiate through the conventions and constraints of new digital media, and where readers have opportunities to co-create their own stories alongside the “main” narrative.

References

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