

# Transforming Game Narrative through Social Media: Studying the Mass Effect Universe of Twitter

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the world of social media as a tool for interactive narrative in video games. From the perspective of fan fiction, this paper looks at ways games can be transformed through *Twitter* as a narrative tool. We perform a textual analysis on selected characters' Twitter accounts drawn from the *Mass Effect* series. We show a number of findings having to do with how authors balance their character's identities, *Twitter* as a narrative tool despite its unique constraints, the mutability of narrative time in this medium, and the ways authors create and navigate impossible situations created because of the conflict between their authorial intent and what occurs in the games. We argue this participatory and interactive form of narrative is a factor game designers must acknowledge and understand as social media continues to evolve and the boundary between consumer and producer deteriorates.

## Keywords

Interactive narrative, social media, *Twitter*, video games, fan fiction, transmedia

## INTRODUCTION

Game designers have strived for ways to make their stories more interactive. Nonetheless, it has remained an elusive dream to many as the combinatorial explosion of managing myriad branching story threads limits the extent to which this feature can be utilized. Reiner (2013) explained how games, such as the *Walking Dead* (Telltale Games 2012), *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware 2012), *Assassin's Creed 3* (Ubisoft Montreal 2012) and *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), have evolved from replicated cinematographic techniques to creating stories increasingly influenced by players decisions. Though, as he pointed out, designers are still skimming the surface of what games have to offer, and thus far there are clear limitations. Decisions in these games require the designer to have thought up what consequences effect later decisions in a game, what additional resources

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need to be created due to each decision path, and how a decision fits into the game universe (e.g., in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady Studios 2009), players knock enemies unconscious instead of killing them in line with the Batman narrative, but if options are unlimited, the player could kill enemies potentially as Batman).

One solution to opening up story in the game universe is user generated content. Games, such as *LittleBigPlanet* (Media Molecule 2008) and *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) utilize players to create the stories by providing a platform in which to tell them. Haak (2012) described what makes sites like these and even more mainstream sites like *YouTube* and *Machinima.com* successful are the massive amount of content produced and the relationship between consumers and producers of this content. Graft (2012) mentioned how user-generated content satiates players' hunger for more content, strengthens the in-game community of players sharing with each other, and encourages player ownership in a game—all of which are important for MMOGs of which this article wrote. User generated content works for open platforms and extending persistent game universes, such as for MMOs, but are harder to implement for standard, single-player, single perspective games.

### Participatory Narrative

Another approach is participatory narrative, which is the subject of this paper. An example of this approach from the exchange below occurred in *Twitter* where players have taken on personas from the game *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2010).

*Niv\_Aseef @AriaTLoak... Close, but not quite there. \*Eyes her.\**

*AriaTLoak @Niv\_Aseef. You think so? It's not even close for me. We'll get Omega back, though. Don't worry your pretty little quarian head over it.*

*AriaTLoak @Niv\_Aseef... and Niv, take care of yourself out there on Rannoch.*

Participatory narrative opens the narrative process from the linear, prescribed nature of storytelling to incorporate the creative potential of the narrative's audience in constructing that narrative. It is a democratic approach to storytelling and fulfills Manovich's (2001) producer/consumer duality for games as new media. Those who play the games, consuming that media, can also play a part in its production. Thomas (2007) suggested this form of narrative draws communities together in "affinity spaces," a term borrowed from James Paul Gee. She asserted participating in this narrative generation is rewarding from the standpoint of literacy development as well as relationship cultivation. Thomas (2006) elsewhere explored how authors in fan fiction spaces—one example of participatory narrative—explore the nature of character, voice, authorship, and identity through narrative authorship more akin to role-playing than traditional storytelling.

Participation has been a popular topic for studies of games and interactive narrative. For example, Frasca (2001) analyzed Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed," looking for ways to apply such an idea of critical reflection through performance. He proposed a variety of games for dealing critically with social issues otherwise difficult to deal with explicitly. This critical engagement extends beyond the game to get players participating in a larger discourse. Baumer and Magerko (2010) viewed participation through the lens of improvisation between actors. They found storytelling was founded upon the making and acceptance of scene advancing utterances. Narrative then becomes an emergent property of social interaction. Magerko (2013) described this as an issue of agency in the story—

e.g., who has the ability or authority to affect change in the narrative space. Studying role-playing game masters, he uncovered five strategies of these masters, including instruction to players, inverse instructions tempting players to find a way to overcome some obstacle, details about a focal object, motivations for characters, and spontaneous conflicts between characters.

### **Twitter and Social Media for Transmedia Storytelling**

As mentioned already, we are curious as to how this aspect of community fan fiction, improvisation, and storytelling applies to *Twitter* and social media in general. While there is little theoretical precedent explicitly connected to social media describing this phenomenon, researchers have hinted at this development already. The idea of transmedia storytelling was put forth to describe this phenomenon by Jenkins (2006), where storytelling unfolds over multiple media. *Mass Effect* is an interesting example of transmedia in itself because of the games, comics, and movies developed around this story. Incorporating social interaction through social media is a logical next step. Stotler (2011) described how a transmedia approach was used by a group of renaissance festival participants, including the development of a website, forums, Twitter account, and other related technology. Participants, using these media for recruitment and fundraising, were extending the narrative from the festival into these digital spaces, allowing for immersion and escapism for participants and recruits, yet still serving group management functions.

There are a growing number of games having *Twitter* accounts. Many game studios have accounts, but even a number of characters do as well for games including *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2007, Bioware 2010, Bioware 2012), *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North 2008), *Portal* (Valve Corporation 2007, Valve Corporation 2011), and *Eve Online* (CCP Games 2003). We chose to evaluate *Mass Effect*, since it has shown the richest and most complete set of characters in *Twitter*. This represents a remarkable and important extension of the diegetic space of game narrative. *Twitter* brings a new level of interactivity and sociality players cannot experience through the game alone.

While little research has focused on game content in social media, researchers have studied the use of *Twitter* to design games. Järvinen (2009) described how designing social games requires a new skillset focused on interaction, sociality, and service as well as game design. Such shifts mirror shifts in the use of such media by players as well. LeBlanc (2011) described how social games are dramatically different than and divergent from traditional games following Uses and Gratifications Theory. For players, the focus becomes personal identity and maintaining relationships. Likewise, this social game allows players of games like *Mass Effect* to fully engage and perform their game with others.

While promise exists, some feel social media is actually a threat to storytelling. Macintyre (2009) cautioned against the immediacy social media engenders and the cacophony of information as opposed to well-edited narratives ready for consumption. The condensed message sharing of *Twitter* is well-formed for sharing easy to consume bytes of information at a time, though he argued it is an impoverished medium for constructing a narrative. Harner (2011) asserted *Twitter* as a tool for storytelling suffers from issues of information relevance and information overflow. From the perspective of journalism, these problems threaten the construction of authentic narrative. However, from a fictional perspective, the engagement authors and followers have with such stories is exactly the goal, whether the story is fabricated or otherwise.

Pratten (2011), on the other hand, argued the key to any form of storytelling involves understanding the medium. He contended traditional authorship cannot flourish in *Twitter*. He asserted authors must invite participation, leverage shared history of tweets, maintain vigor in tweeting activity, and rely on multiple *Twitter* streams to reveal that story.

In this article, we wish to engage this discourse and test not only whether *Twitter* can act as a medium for storytelling, but in what ways it can extend a narrative begun elsewhere. First, we explain our procedure, which uses textual analysis of a subset of the *Mass Effect Twitter* universe characters to study narrative structure in this medium. Next, we uncover the findings we made from this data. Finally, we explore the significance of this community and their data, as well as what this means for the process of game design focusing on gaming communities.

## PROCEDURE

We performed a textual analysis of selected characters and tweets. The first step was selecting which characters to sample. There are well over 75 different characters represented, including multiple accounts for certain characters, fan-made characters present only in *Twitter*, and disabled characters no longer posting or present. There was representation from every type of character from all three games, including playable (e.g., Shepard), main (e.g., Tali), support (e.g., Chakwas), enemy, and side characters encountered as part of a mission or in the game at large. There were even characters mentioned in passing though not met (e.g., Garrus's father).

From this list, we selected Garrus, Tali, Wrex, and Legion from the main characters; Joker and Dr. Chakwas for support characters; Saren for enemies; and Blasto, the Hanar movie star Spectre, and the Mad Prophet for incidental characters. We selected these characters because of their importance to the story, unique ways of conversing, and representativeness to the narrative diversity within the games. No Shepard character was chosen because we felt the postings of such a character would be more likely to represent each player's particular way of playing the games (since gameplayers could determine the character arc for Shepard), rather than the characters strictly authored by Bioware.

Once characters were chosen, we used <http://www.snapbird.org> to collect as many tweets from the characters as possible. The Twitter API limited the retrieval of the most recent 3200 tweets for any account, limiting our data sample for the study. With the data we had collected, we systematically sampled between 13-25 tweets from each of the characters. In addition, we included a few other interesting ones as we read through them. This led to our analysis of 215 tweets in total. While focusing on these tweets, we frequently analyzed a number of tweets surrounding each of the samples and when possible searched for conversation streams between characters, since another limitation of the tool was its lack of preservation of conversation streams.

Our textual analysis focused on aspects of language use, focalization and themes, reference to game events and dialog, interaction with other *Twitter* accounts, tweet context, and authorial intentions. Table 1 lists the topics we analyzed for each sampled tweet.

**Table 1. Codes used for data collection**

<b>Game Reference</b>			
Could tweet be found in game?	Direct quote? When?	Event Reference in game? When?	
<b>Language Used</b>			
Type of Statement	Main verb tense	Level of narration	Perspective
Tone	Active or Passive Voice		
<b>Twitter interaction</b>			
Interaction with game characters	Interaction with non-game characters		
<b>Main ideas and narrative summarization</b>			
Focalization/Themes	Intent/Purpose	Context/Summary	

Our analysis focused on the way characters crafted stories, how they interacted with others, how they referenced and built from narrative constructs in the games, and how they accommodated *Twitter* as a medium.

## FINDINGS

The data gathered showed a remarkably structured narrative world constructed by many authors. At a high level, we looked at the frequency of different categories of *Twitter* use. This data can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2: Data collected describing narrative nature of tweets**

Total tweets: 215	Direct Quotes Tweets: 7 (3.2%)	Game Event Reference Tweets: 25 (11.7%)	
Tense Used			
Past: 15 (7.0%)	Present: 148 (68.8%)	Future: 10 (4.7%)	Multiple: 27 (12.6%)
Level of Narration Used (Dialog Only, Narration, Meta-commentary, Outside game)			
Dialog Only: 133 (61.8%)	Narration Elements: 61 (28.4%)	Meta-commentary: 5 (2.3%)	Outside of game: 14 (6.5%)
Perspective			
First-person: 191 (88.8%)	Omniscient: 15 (7.0%)	Outside of game: 7 (3.3%)	
Voice			
Active: 171 (79.5%)	Passive: 33 (15.3%)		
Twitter Account Interaction			
Reference Mass Effect Character: 176 (81.8%)		Reference Non-Mass Effect Account: 13 (6.0%)	

From this frequency data, authors in the *Mass Effect Twitter* universe took on the persona of the character, not as narrator (very often) or themselves. They also tried very hard to maintain the illusion that when logged into that account they would respond to tweets as if they were that character based on the character's unique history, psychology, and relationships with others from the game. The authors responded to the narrative discourse in a way the character would similar to an improvisational actor.

Two other interesting components stood out. First, it was clear the authors understood the *Mass Effect* story in general when taking on these characters, but they did not often make explicit references to game events. They frequently would make more implicit references, but a good deal of what the authors wrote about was the shared history these authors were developing with each other in *Twitter*. Secondly, there were very few direct quotes from the game and many of these came from the Mad Prophet account whose repetition in the game matched his prophetic role and the author's strategy in *Twitter*. So, while the game remained a source of inspiration for these tweets, much of the discourse strayed away to new and different adventures for these characters.

Second, there were a very high number of interactions between *Mass Effect Twitter* accounts, but very few interactions with anyone outside the *Mass Effect* universe. Again, this reinforces the idea the authors of these accounts intended to engage in fan fiction directed toward other participants, not spectators. Another possibility is that the characters were engaged *primarily* by other character's accounts. According to MentionMap (<http://apps.asterisq.com/mentionmap/>), which records which *Twitter* authors an account mentions, the nine characters we studies mentioned other *Mass Effect* characters 92.7% of the time when mentioning another account on average. It should also be noted these mentions were nearly always included as part of a discussion as opposed to direct mentions to fans. This means, when authors included others, they tried to include them in the narrative they were creating directly.

### **Phenomena within the discourse of the Mass Effect Twitter universe**

There were a number of remarkable phenomena emerging as players struggled to balance the history prescribed by the game, the tweets from other accounts, and the intentions individual authors wanted to follow through their portion of the narrative.

#### ***Psychology/Behavior Construction & Identity***

One of the unique aspects of engaging in this narrative space was how authors had to take on the voice of characters—characters someone else had written originally. This means the authors needed to know important events in the *Mass Effect* universe, the unique history of the character being represented, and the unique way of speaking and interacting with others by this character.

Some characters needed to provide perspective on game events not otherwise given in the game, requiring authors to synthesize what they know with what they think the character's perspective would be. This first tweet demonstrated Tali's perspective on how Wrex single-handedly destroyed a thresher-maw on his own, a fact referenced in the *Mass Effect 2* (Bioware 2010).

*Twitches\_Shepard* @Tali\_Zorah So, @Tali\_zorach, @\_Urdnot\_Wrex\_ was telling me that you're a bard of sorts. Know any good Wrex stories?

*Tali\_Zorah* @TwitchesShep @\_Urdnot\_Wrex\_ ... Wrex stories?

***Twitches\_Shepard** @Tali\_Zorah @\_Urdnot\_Wrex\_ Yeah! I wanted to know more about his exploits, but it seems he's too old to remember them as well as you can.*

***Tali\_Zorah** @TwitchesShep @\_Urdnot\_Wrex\_ ... though... there was this one time, on the elevator... with a thresher maw...*

...

***Tali\_Zorah** @TwitchesShep @\_Urdnot\_Wrex\_ -- into its mouth and blew it up from inside!*

***Twitches\_Shepard** @Tali\_Zorah @\_Urdnot\_Wrex\_ he jumped into its mouth?! Why not, I dunno, throw something less MORTAL in, like a mini-nuke? How did he do it?*

***Tali\_Zorah** @TwitchesShep @\_Urdnot\_Wrex\_ He's Wrex. I don't really ask how. I was too busy staring in shock. And covered in maw guts.*

This next tweet from Saren to Spectre Nihlus demonstrated Saren's perspective on being indoctrinated. This internal perspective was never shared with the player in the game.

***SarenArterius** @Spectre\_Kryik I was influenced. Not controlled. -pause- Sovereign suggested bringing you. I disagreed.*

Characters also needed to maintain and work around the unique histories of each character. These characters, because of genetic characteristics (e.g., Joker's Vrolik syndrome) or unique abilities, were incorporated into the narrative and referenced when appropriate. They might become a way of establishing interaction with other players or could be part of a larger story arc, though in our cases they were usually not referenced in more than one tweet at a time. In this tweet, Dr. Chakwas offered medication because of anticipated migraines suffered by Kaidan because of his L2 biotic implants.

***Chakwas** @Kaidan\_Alenko Would you like some preemptive medication for a migraine before you go, Kaidan?*

Not only would such a tweet build on the narrative structure in place, but it also served a similar purpose as it would in real life: thoughtful concern for another person and an opportunity to develop a relationship with other characters.

Along similar lines, Wrex shared an interaction with Aria through their Omnitools—hence the double-quoted formatting below—referencing their shared long lifespans.

***\_Urdnot\_Wrex\_** @AriaTLoak "After three centuries, it's safe to say you taught me that lesson damned well, asari."*

There was also a unique style of interaction each character had from the game. Authors would try to replicate this in the tweets they wrote. Although not always appropriately applied, authors did use this style as a way to increase authenticity of their tweets. Below, Legion's author used all capitals to represent the synthesized voice of the geth platform. It also made reference to Garrus in the same manner of "last name-rank" Legion used to represent Shepard-Commander when addressing a character. Finally, the author used Legion's standard "building consensus" line to show Legion's pondering of the Garrus's position.

***DataUnavailable** @GarrusVakarian ... IS VAKARIAN-VIGILANTE  
SUGGESTING THE USE OF MASS GENOCIDE FOR THE PURPOSE OF  
GALACTIC HARMONY? BUILDING CONSENSUS...*

Another example of style usage is from Dr. Chakwas maintains two styles of interaction: a standard, analytical style and an intoxicated style of speech when she drank.

***Chakwas** @CDR\_JShepard ..... I'm not get'ng into fights w'th  
krogers.*

Authors would also need to find ways to demonstrate activity through tweets. Common activities included drinking together, fighting Reapers forces, playing videos games together, performing character-based work (e.g., patient care for Dr. Chakwas, medical research for Mordin, piloting ships for Joker, and so forth), and activities around developing relationships. These activities helped reify these characters and provide context for dialog. In one case, Saren even sneezed as a way to show activity and action in this language-based medium.

***SarenArterius** -sneezes- ...*

Many players also had to create intentions to give purpose to their actions. These intentions could be drawn from the game, but they more often were the result of the author taking on some mission or tact. Wrex chose to protect a fan-made asari child he found named Faena, and everywhere he went she would accompany him (usually through a Twitter mention). The Mad Prophet, for example, throughout his tweets was trying to get a date with Tali. He even went so far as to threaten someone he saw as a threat to these advances (purposefully inverting one of his character's quotes from the game).

***Mad\_Prophet** The end times will come for @Niv\_Aseef not with a sigh, but with  
a BANG.*

Authors who wanted to take on a *Mass Effect* persona had to negotiate this shared game narrative already present along with others' expectations of the characters and balance these expectations with their own creative intentions in writing their stories.

### ***Twitter as a medium for narrative generation***

*Twitter* is not a traditional narrative medium. It has been designed to send messages, not stories. Those intending to use *Twitter* for such a storytelling purpose can do so, but must heed the advice of Pratten (2011). The keys in this medium are relationship building and conversation as well as relying on a history of narrative threads. But, this medium, being an open environment, would lead to unplanned situations authors would need to react to as well. Each author through the process of constructing this narrative learned what was needed to build a coherent character narrative.

The *Mass Effect Twitter* universe was first and foremost conversational in nature. Given that character's tweets interacted with other characters in 81% of the tweets we sampled demonstrated that fact. This conversational aspect led to three types of interactions between authors: messages and responses, conversations, and—infrequently—single-broadcast messages. The first was fairly common when sending two-way communication between two (or less commonly more) authors as in this example of Mordin joking with Dr. Chakwas.



**MordinSolus\_PhD** @Chakwas Notice. Pathogens released into air supply. ...  
Addendum. Previous statement was fabrication.

**Chakwas** @MordinSolus\_PhD I haven't the faintest inkling of what I would do  
without you, Doctor.

**MordinSolus\_PhD** @Chakwas Calculating possibilities. ... .. Suffer from  
stress.

The second takes place as a full conversation as demonstrated above between Tali and Shepard above. There would be demonstrated turn-taking between tweets as authors would give each other opportunities to contribute to the joint narrative. This would also include providing one's own description of actions they were doing in the space through use of some linguistic delimiters (e.g., \* or -) to describe narration, but these narrative duties were shared between authors, impacting them willingly or not.

**GarrusVakarian** @CDR\_JShepard @SarenArterius -grabs Saren's arms and  
starts making him do the Thriller dance as well, marching alongside him-

This is uncommon for most fan fiction where someone needs to take on the role of narrator. But, the majority of tweets in our case were not narration, but rather character dialog.

These conversations helped to shape the main storylines and would often involve multiple authors. One author might recruit another character for a mission that would then take a number of tweets to resolve. Occasionally, new recruits were brought in to respond to the situation reading the tweets already written and building on that shared history (e.g., Dr. Chakwas would frequently be brought injured characters from skirmishes). The following is the start of such a mission between Saren and Nihlus.

**SarenArterius** @Spectre\_Kryik -rubs his forehead slowly- ... Nihlus. We are not  
going to go see strippers.

**Spectre\_Kryik** @SarenArterius Too late, we made a deal. You can't go back on  
your -word-. Where is your honor as an Arterius, whatever that means?

**SarenArterius** @Spectre\_Kryik I said I would go for a drive with you, not visit  
a.. strip-club! -grimaces-

...

**Spectre\_Kryik** @SarenArterius - life! ... But fine, if that doesn't interest you,  
they also have a very impressive illegal trade in weapons going out

**Spectre\_Kryik** @SarenArterius - the back door. Weapons and, this is the fun  
part, slaves. -Now- you're interested, look at your stupid face.

**SarenArterius** @Spectre\_Kryik -does indeed look more interested at the  
prospect of work- ... where did you get this information?

**Spectre\_Kryik** @SarenArterius ... \*fidgets\* I've been... keeping contact with the  
girl who drops off our packages from Jane, and... she sees things...-

The role of mentions (using the form @account\_name) was important in helping to structure these activities between authors. It would be used for communicating directly with another account. It was also used to help group relevant participants together in the activity—whether a storyline was directed at that character or not. This could include group members, travel companions, or others to whom a conversation may concern.

Lastly, and less frequently, authors would post a broadcast message to his/her followers. It could be part of the narrative created or a re-tweet someone else made.

The last issue faced by authors was responding to the way others would construct the narrative. As Baumer and Magerko (2010) found, improvisational actors would find ways to incorporate the utterances of other into an ongoing narrative, regardless of what was said. Occasionally, when responding to tweets, authors would need to deal with unexpected situations gracefully and in character, as this interaction between a Sten Qunari, a character from *Dragon Age* (Bioware 2009), interacted with Tali.

**Tali\_Zorah** @StenQunari -jerks- Keelah! Where did you.. wh-who...?!

...

**Tali\_Zorah** @StenQunari... do you talk?

**StenQunari** @Tali\_Zorah Yes. >:/

...

**Tali\_Zorah** @StenQunari .. .nice to meet you... Sten. Are you with.. the others who came here recently?

**StenQunari** @Tali\_Zorah >:/ Yes.

**Tali\_Zorah** @StenQunari ... ah. -looks at the elevator door- ... what... floor are you going to?

**StenQunari** @Tali\_Zorah \*Large sword on his back.\* >:/ ... Bridge.

**Tali\_Zorah** @StenQunari... we're... on the bridge now. -opens the doors for him- ... nice... steel sword?

### **Narrative Time**

Descriptions of narration have always broken narrative time into its two components. The first is story time, which describes the timespan of recounted events (e.g., how long did it actually take the story to unfold). The second is the time of the telling, which describes time in terms of when the story is recounted. The first component is linear, from the beginning of the event to its end. The second component is itself linear (or in the case of interactive games, we might call it hyperlinear), but this telling acts as a filter in a non-linear fashion to story time, whether we are reordering events as in the case of stories told *in media res* (e.g., from the middle), compressed-time events (e.g., a montage), or expanded-time events (e.g., soliloquies or slow-motion).

The expansion of this narrative in *Twitter* (or perhaps into any external *persistent* media) causes a breakdown in this narrative relationship. When do the characters of this *Mass Effect Twitter* universe reside in terms of time? They lie partly inside and partly outside the normal mode of storytelling.

The real issue is this shared history of narrative (Pratten 2011), which creates a persistence environment where these characters reside. The authors of these characters need to respond not just to each other, but changes to the games' narrative as new versions and new media are published expanding on who these characters are. Although

most accounts were created after the second game was released—January 26, 2010, Kaidan Alenko was created at the end of 2009 and has needed to incorporate all three games into his narration. A more specific example was the intimate relationship formed between EDI and Joker in the final game. This was told in the story time of the game and also needed to take effect immediately in the way these characters interacted with each other in *Twitter*. There is more than one author and telling of events for these characters. This separation from the native medium also leads to interesting paradoxes explored in the next section.

Finally, we wanted to share an issue intersecting narrative time and narrative generation in *Twitter*. A peculiar incident happened for Saren's author. He was having a conversation with Shepard when suddenly he started being attacked by Jack. Yet, he maintained his conversation with Shepard interspersed with tweets about fighting Jack. This shows the unique timeless quality of the medium and the potential for telling threaded stories leveraging a system of directing messages to various accounts, such that Saren can essentially be in two places, or times, at the same time. Below, we recount a sample of these tweets and their timestamps.

*SarenArterius @BeyondSubject0 -cracks his neck- I've heard you're strong, human. Let's see it.*

*7:31 AM Aug 2nd, 2012*

*SarenArterius @CDR\_JShepard -growls- I should evict him.*

*7:37 AM Aug 2nd, 2012*

*SarenArterius @BeyondSubject0 -mandibles twitch- Very well. -zooms towards her, a strike aimed at her stomach-*

*7:39 AM Aug 2nd, 2012*

*SarenArterius @CDR\_JShepard What?*

*7:41 AM Aug 2nd, 2012*

*SarenArterius @BeyondSubject0 -brings his free arm up, blocking her first with a grunt- Not bad. -steps back, then drops, trying to catch her leg to try -*

*7:48 AM Aug 2nd, 2012*

*SarenArterius @BeyondSubject0 - and trip her with a well-placed kick-*

*7:48 AM Aug 2nd, 2012*

*SarenArterius @CDR\_JShepard ... you say 'when', not 'if', I noticed.*

*7:52 AM Aug 2nd, 2012*

*SarenArterius @BeyondSubject0 -is thrown back from the nova, but manages to tuck and roll to his feet, growling a bit. His own biotics flicker to life --*

*7:57 AM Aug 2nd, 2012*

### **Counterfactuals and Paradoxes**

Certain paradoxes and counterfactuals occurred in the *Mass Effect Twitter* universe. These were largely due to the game itself being an interactive narrative, which can lead to any number of slightly different possible final alternatives of the story. Yet, *Twitter* authors have their own intentions; they want to express themselves through these characters, and occasionally their intentions run counter to the stories already told in the games.

Paradoxes and counterfactuals occurred for a number of reasons in authors' tweets, including the complexity of intimate relationships between characters, whether characters were invited to join the Normandy crew or not, the death of players in the game who now have *Twitter* accounts, as well as game events being represented along one trajectory in *Twitter* when the game could have been represented along many.

One paradoxical example was in the relationship the player, as Shepard, could form intimate relationships with a variety of characters from the game. In *Mass Effect Twitter* universe, Garrus is clearly in a relationship with Shepard, even though this is just one in a number of possible combinations. While the following tweet is morbid from human standards, from the militant, turian perspective, it would be quite intimate.

**GarrusVakarian** @CDR\_JShepard *Most certainly not, Shepard! It's just, if I had to die at someone's hands, I'd prefer they were yours.*

Characters that died in the game were popular *Twitter* choices and also counterfactual to the narrative universe. Ignoring that many of the characters possibly *could* have died throughout the game, there are at least 12 assuredly, dead characters who have *Twitter* accounts. The author using Mordin, who died in *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware 2012) except in very specific circumstances, creatively incorporated his/her character's death into the narrative. The account no longer services Mordin, but rather a virtual intelligence incorporating Mordin's personality ([https://twitter.com/MordinSolus\\_PhD](https://twitter.com/MordinSolus_PhD)). A paradox also arises for the character Sidonis, a character who betrayed Garrus. Garrus's loyalty mission allows Shepard to either let Garrus kill Sidonis or warn Sidonis about Garrus. In *Mass Effect Twitter*, since Sidonis is not dead, Garrus must operate along the storyline where he survived.

**GarrusVakarian** @ForgiveSidonis *Yeah, I am. You know, if Shepard hadn't been there... -shakes his head, still pacing- You should've told me you were here.*

...

**GarrusVakarian** @ForgiveSidonis *Don't talk to me like we're friends, Sidonis. -practically hisses his name while his mandibles twitch a few more times-*

Another rich example of a counterfactual situation is in the following tweet from Legion to Tali about her father. In the game, Tali's loyalty mission involved attempting to rescue Tali's father only to find out he was doing horrible experiments on geth like Legion to control them. Tali's father, though, was killed by geth due to these experiments. Once the threat had been neutralized by Shepard, the player had the option to reveal what her father did against Tali's wishes. Anyone who played the second game would be aware of her father's treachery, but because of the collective intelligence of the geth, awareness of this would spread quickly through their systems. In this case, it is unlikely Legion would be so gracious toward her father.

**DataUnavailable** @Tali\_Zorah *WE SEE. IN THIS CASE, WE WISH YOUR FATHER GOOD HEALTH, AND WE ADVISE GOING TO VISIT HIM A FEW MORE TIMES IN THE NEAR FUTURE.*

A very odd paradox, unique to the medium, was that single characters would often have more than one account created about them. To keep narrative consistency, authors could either ignore the existence of the other characters (e.g., the author is the Saren for *his/her* group), or in some cases, they could treat the other character as if it is their own character.

Below is a tweet of Saren and Nihlus exploring the wards on the Citadel using four different accounts.

***SarenArterius** @Nihlus\_Kryik @SpectreArterius @Spectre\_Kryik ... -follows them around the wards, not reacting to anything nearby-*

Finally, we wanted to acknowledge metadiegetic and external references made through these accounts. Metadiegetic tweets in some way revealed the telling of the story. In the case below, Garrus retweeted this tweet from a Mass Effect developer, which then appears in his own Twitter history.

***truffle** I love working on Mass Effect 2 DLC because adding in new functionality to a shipped game requires a lot of creativity!*

We also looked for examples where characters break out of their *Mass Effect* universe and acknowledge the real world in some way. Below is an example of the author of Saren's account acknowledging Memorial Day and celebrating it through the guise of Saren.

***SarenArterius** ... a human holiday honoring veterans? ... at least they have one right.*

### **Transmedia**

Although we focused on *Twitter* for this study, we saw the intersection of many other media for creating these narratives. *Youtube* was referenced in certain circumstances often showing clips from the game, which the authors would then refer to as they constructed their narratives. These clips would become focal points around which discussions and conversations could occur. Another important media was a website called *Formspring*, where authors could share perspectives on questions asked to them in character. These responses on *Formspring* would often automatically be shared through *Twitter*. Since *Formspring* questions could be anonymous, this seemed to be the primary way these characters would interact with non-characters. Finally, a dedicated wiki was used to provide profiles for characters, particularly fan-made ones, extending the narrative beyond *Twitter* (e.g., [http://metwitterverse.wikia.com/wiki/Mass Effect: Twitter-Verse Wiki](http://metwitterverse.wikia.com/wiki/Mass_Effect:_Twitter-Verse_Wiki)). All of these media were necessary for telling the full story—it becomes untenable for such narrative generation to exist solely in one medium.

## **CONSEQUENCES FOR GAME COMMUNITIES**

The following is an exchange between the main *Mass Effect* *Twitter* account and several *Mass Effect* characters.

***ShamanEve** @masseffect Waiting for DLC where I breed my army of tiny krogan babies.*

***masseffect** @shamaneve Sorry to say...this does not sound cute*

***\_Urndot\_Wrex\_** @masseffect @ShamanEve You have some backward as hell ideas about what's "cute" then.*

***masseffect** @\_urndot\_wrex\_ @ShamanEve Wrex! Uh...didnt see ya there\*cough\*what was meant was..armies...YEAH armies!Not cute. Krogans though. Totes cute.*

*\_Urdnot\_Wrex\_ @masseffect @ShamanEve Her -children- would be "cute".  
Not all krogan.*

*masseffect @\_urdnnot\_wrex\_ @ShamanEve T\_T*

*LtJoker @masseffect @\_urdnnot\_wrex\_ @ShamanEve Wrex, you're making the  
mysterious voice from the sky cry. It's like you quad-punched god.*

*masseffect @ltjoker @\_Urdnot\_Wrex\_ @ShamanEve THIS HURTS ME*

This exchange between the public *Mass Effect* brand shows at least implicit support for the narratives these characters are telling and fan fiction by passionate players of the games. While it is unlikely these players asked permission to use these characters, Bioware has given its blessing for this participatory narrative generation to some extent.

*Mass Effect* was massively popular because among other things it had a great storyline allowing players to take part in the storytelling process by making important decisions through their play (Reiner, 2013). This extension to *Twitter* then should seem natural for players who want to fully engage with the story and engage with other fans socially.

We would urge game designers to conceptualize players not just as consumers, but as potentially committed and passionate members of an online community who share their love of the games with each other. This community is free marketing for not only a single series, but potentially all a game studio has to offer. This community can generate a reflexive passion about a game. Reutter (2011), examining the ways fans posted to *Twitter* about their favorite games, similarly urged that the play experience extends beyond playing the game itself. Thinking, talking, and writing about the game should be designed for as well.

This assertion holds not just for fan fiction, such as what was studied here, but all forms of online community opened up by the power of social media. Wikis are popular for communities to teach each other how to play various games. Metacritic (<http://www.metacritic.com/>) has become the standard for online communities to rate games. Giant Bomb (<http://www.giantbomb.com>) has become popular also for reviews and ratings as well as wikis for learning, but also for categorizing game components and providing semantic information to each game. There are many examples already, even though social media is still in its infancy. Game designers and publishers are going to need to find new ways to reach out and engage with their audiences through this media beyond the game itself.

From a narrative design standpoint, we would urge game designers to allow and even encourage fan fiction as Bioware has done. There is definitely a risk of losing authorial control over a game's narrative, but do the rewards outweigh the risks? We would argue they do. By opening up the story world, designers allow players to delve deeper into what makes the story so compelling, drawing players closer to the game content. It also extends the shelf-life of the game itself as many of these accounts are well over 1000 days old. Replayability of a game is an important aspect of a game design, but through such fan fiction the story can outlive the game.

## CONCLUSION

This study sought to understand interactive narrative by looking at its extension and transformation through social media. *Twitter* offers potential for a turn-taking dialog based narrative. Through an extensive review of *Mass Effect* character tweets made by

fans of the game this study demonstrates the great potential for games that seek to enhance the interactive quality of games through social media. Players desire to extend their game experiences and it is in the designer's best interest to allow them to, particularly socially.

Future game designs need to prepare for ways in which players might interface with the game through social media. With a growing list of games being represented on *Twitter*, this interfacing will not just include describing the game, but using and engaging with the story itself. Supporting players in this endeavor will endear them to the games we create.

### Twitter Tools Used for Data Collection

<http://www.twitter.com>

<http://snapbird.org>

<http://www.whendidyoujointwitter.com/>

<http://apps.asterisq.com/mentionmap/>

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