

Title: Fans as *Homo Narrans*: How User Participation in Transmedia Collective Storytelling Shapes Dream SMP Fan Identities on Twitter

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Background:

Online fandom, a typical form of participatory culture common on social networking sites (SNSs), has received increased academic attention recently. The rise of SNSs has exerted significant influences on the cultural landscape, especially through scalable sociality in which different scales of social engagement and degrees of individual expression coexist (Miller, 2016). Through SNSs, online participatory cultures have contributed to the shifting power dynamics between cultural producers and consumers (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Beer and Burrows, 2010). By engaging in cultural prosumption, users are empowered to transform themselves from the passively receiving audiences into the “active, critically engaged and politically significant” publics (Livingstone, 2005, p. 18; Jenkins, 2018). Fans and fandoms are perhaps among the most convincing examples of this transformation to active publics. Researching SNSs-based online fandom communities thus offers a unique and profound perspective into the contemporary social mentality and digital-cultural life.

Among the many communal practices manifested in online fandoms, transmedia collective storytelling is one practice that captures the uniqueness of such participatory membership. Humans are, according to Fisher (1989), *Homo narrans*; collective sense-making through narrational practices is universal to human communities (Bietti et al., 2018). In online communities of fans, participatory storytelling is often transmedial.

Transmedia storytelling (TS) is the expansive dispersion of content through various channels and materials to create a coherent cultural experience (Jenkins, 2007; Scolari, 2009; Ryan, 2016). Although Jenkins (2003) coined the term to describe top-down industrial productions like the Star Wars franchise, many scholars have embraced a broader definition of TS that includes user-generated content (Scolari et al., 2014). Bottom-up TS challenges the traditional narrator-listener relationship by embracing collaborative models of authorship against imbalances in discursive power (Hunter, 2011; Seymour, Roth, and Flegel, 2015). Yet, individuals do not enjoy absolute narrational freedom as participatory members. Varying degrees of negotiated readings between personal interpretations and communal agreements take place prior to narrative outputs (Hall, 1973). Most commonly, appropriations of canon such as fanfictions and fanart follow communal interpretive norms despite variations in creative intervention. Constraints of collective storytelling still overshadow individual creativity.

Storytelling provides a pathway for in-group identification and the construction of participatory identities, which suggests the feasibility of studying fan identities through transmedia collective storytelling. As *Homo narrans*, the stories people share in a group serve as the "interpretative framework" for constructing collective identities (Bietti et al., 2018, p. 12). Notably, fans are in a more dominant position in their identification with communities of fandom. Instead of passively accepting an imposition of established types of identity, fans actively create and pursue "DIY citizenship" through participation in collective storytelling (Hartley, 2005, p. 111). This link between storytelling and fan identities could be meaningfully explored through their online manifestations, as the

SNSs offer not only platforms for fandom connectivity but also windows for fan identity display.

To garner insights, this study zooms in on the Dream SMP fandom. Dream SMP is a “private, whitelisted survival multiplayer (SMP) Minecraft server” featuring the content creator “Dream” and others invited (*Dream SMP*, n.d., para. 1). It is best known for the YouTube videos and Twitch lives of these gamer-streamers’ largely impoverished roleplay in the Minecraft server. Since April 2020, roughly around the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has attracted an active global fan base mainly consisting of teenagers and young adults. The fandom makes active use of Twitter to discuss the plots, interact with content creators and fans, and curate profiles on user account pages to display participatory personas. Dream SMP fans on Twitter rely substantially on TS as means of participation, such as posting fanart and writing micro-fanfictions through tweet threads.

In summary, transmedia and collective storytelling has become one of the most distinctive means of participation in online fandom communities. Networks of scalable sociality provided by SNSs have facilitated the engagement of global media prosumers in participatory cultures where collective narratives unfold. During story-telling processes of negotiated readings and creative appropriation of canon, participants of fan culture explore their roles in the fandom and relations to other community members, constantly shaping and re-shaping their understandings of themselves as fans. For exploring this phenomenon, a case study of the Dream SMP fandom on Twitter could be insightful.

Objective(s):

This study attempts to understand how Dream SMP fans practice transmedia collective storytelling by engaging with the fandom on Twitter (RQ1) and how the fans locate their fan identities through participation in the collective storytelling process (RQ2).

Method:

The research questions are addressed through thematic analysis (TA) of 200 tweet threads and 20 interviews. First, the researcher employs TA to capture the heavily context-based and multimedia materials retrieved from Twitter. A dataset of 200 tweet threads posted between April 1st, 2021 and April 1st, 2022 are collected by theoretical sampling based on relatedness to the RQs. Upon collection, textual and audio-visual materials are broken into codes and classified into categories, accompanied by asides highlighting key information and comments contextualizing the content for iterative examination. Data collection and manual coding of the data are conducted simultaneously to identify how users engage with storytelling in tweet threads and how users fashion and express their fan identities in these participatory practices.

Second, the researcher will conduct interviews with Dream SMP fans. Participants will be recruited via convenience sampling by means of push technology offered by Twitter, i.e., announcement tweets from a personal account of the researcher and retweeting of the announcement, aided by strategic use of hashtags and hyperlinks to increase chances of exposure to the targeted population. Recruited participants will be contacted and sign consent forms via email and directed to Skype or ZOOM for video interviews. The interview will include questions regarding observations and experiences of collective storytelling (e.g. Have you interacted with fanart posts? Do you feel

motivated to interact again?) and questions on understanding of communally situated fan identities (e.g. How do you know that you have become a fan? What makes you feel acknowledged by other SMP fans?). Results of interviews will be analyzed using similar methods of manual coding in TA with special attention to the use of constant comparison method for achieving cohesive interpretations.

Results:

As this is yet an ongoing project, highlights in temporary findings are summarized in the following.

First, the retweet function connects participation in storytelling to a conscious presentation of fan identities. Retweeting helps spread and continue the thread of story developed in the post without much effort to add personal contributions. Meanwhile, since the retweeted post will be displayed on the user's main page, it becomes part of a deliberate curation of an identity showcase. Retweeted posts could be seen as a kind of special virtual object that embodies and exhibits distinctive online personas situated within the fandom community. Participating in storytelling by retweeting entails self-reflection on how one wishes to be seen by others as a fan.

Second, the creation and circulation of fandom memes, a process of retelling stories that reinforces interpretative norms and narrative frameworks, could effectively enhance a sense of belonging to the fandom community. The use of such memes in interactions with outsiders of the community signals self-acknowledgement of the fan identity and further integration of the identity into the concept of self.

Third, the affective experience of storytelling could lead to strong identification with the characters and hence character-motivated fan identity. Many storytelling participants

focus on discussing and re-designing qualities of the characters such as appearance and personality rather than the scenarios and events, which may be explained by the satisfaction of psychological needs through projection in fictional figures, results in the development of character-centered fan identities rooted in empathy or affection for the characters or the content creators roleplaying the characters.

Additionally, a vocabulary list of fandom slang is being developed as a research side product, which offers interpretations of the Twitter fandom vernacular for future references.

Future Work:

Due to the exploratory nature of this project, its capability to generate systemic theories for external validation is limited. Future studies may build on this work to search for more generalizable storytelling and identity-making patterns across fandoms.

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