Once Upon a Time on Twitter

Storytelling and Narrative Elements on a Social Media Platform

Jesper Persson Högdahl
Abstract

In this thesis the structure and usage of narrative within a social media platform is explored, with Twitter as the chosen social media network. Narrative and storytelling within a social media sphere such as Twitter primarily focuses on bringing a certain characterization and voice to a user account with story and narrative generally coming in second place. By studying and comparing real-life cases of storytelling on twitter I have come to the conclusion that a narrative structure that combines a good character with a well-executed characterization is the ideal way of using Twitter as a platform for storytelling.

Keywords: Narrative, Storytelling, Twitter, Social Media, Web 2.0

1. Introduction

The art of telling a story is one that has always been relevant and that has evolved in performance throughout the course of time and alongside the introductions of new mediums, from books and theatre to radio and cinema to television and video games. A narrative is basically the framework for the story itself, a framework that directs how the story is told which means that the shape of the narrative might differ between platforms and channels. Stories and the narratives that come with them have steadily evolved to fit with each new medium and media channel introduced (Ryan, 2004).

Thus storytelling naturally found its way onto the Internet, and more importantly onto Web 2.0 (O’Reilly, 2007). With Web 2.0 came the rise of social media services and connectivity, with all your services connected to one another and a major amount of services for all kinds of purposes. One of these purposes naturally being storytelling.

Web 2.0 generally isn’t as much about showing something as it is about sharing something as one of the key aspects of Web 2.0 have turned out to be sharing and communication (O’Reilly, 2007).

Despite this it is not really the art of storytelling that changed with Web 2.0 and the new forms of media introduced by it. The traditional elements of storytelling are still there but what have rather changed are the channels, the format it is presented in and the engagement of the receivers. A story in a Web 2.0 setting today might consist of a blog giving a first person perspective of a story with the commentary section working as a way for readers to immerse themselves and participate in the story. This may in turn be complemented by a twitter account where the story is expanded through in-character musings and observations in-between blog posts.

In this thesis the usage of narrative and the art of storytelling on a social media platform will be studied. The focus will be on how the strengths of a social media channel such as Twitter can be utilized to tell a story and how they can be used to support a narrative structure that at the same time manages to be engaging for the receivers. At the same time as
the narrative and story needs to be told in such a way that it makes the weaknesses of the channel as insignificant as possible.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to study how storytelling is used on a social media platform and how narratives can be adapted to the medium. Twitter will be used as the example of a social media channel used for the purpose of supporting a story. I choose Twitter as the main channel for the study because it offers a very direct way of reaching out to the receivers as well as an opportunity for communication between the producers and receivers. In terms of narrative it also allows for interesting usage of multiple user accounts as part of the story and therefore offers the possibility of showing different sides of the story as well as it allows for interplay between different characters within the narrative and enables the receivers to choose how they will experience the story as it unfolds. Also factoring in was the fact that Twitter has a clear limitation with the 140 character limit for each message, meaning that the narrative has to be adapted to fit the limitation and cannot depend on large amounts of text for each update of the story.

The major focus of the paper will be on how a narrative is structured around the possibilities and limitations of the channel. How is storytelling utilized on Twitter in terms of perspectives and the actual telling of the story and how is a story segmented to fit the limitations of words and the longevity of each update. Also taken into a small account is the overall purpose of the narrative, if it is just to tell a compelling story or if there is further motivation for the story and the choice of platform, i.e. marketing or transmedia storytelling.

It is in my opinion an interesting topic and an interesting field since it is largely unexplored and can offer an interesting new way to tell stories as well as reach out to an audience.

2.1 Research Question

How is and how can Twitter be used as a platform for storytelling and what strength does it have as a channel for storytelling? And how does a narrative develop and unfold on a social media channel such as Twitter?

3. Related Research

In New Digital Storytelling Alexander (2011) exemplifies how new forms of digital media and technology have affected storytelling and how narratives have adapted to the new mediums and channels that have been introduced. Amongst these new mediums are Web 2.0 and Social Media. One of the most substantial concepts he has about storytelling within these new environments and about Web 2.0 and Social Media in particular is the idea of audience participation and a different way of immersing the audience. Channels that allow for the receivers to communicate with the sender or otherwise affect the story, whether through the use of a comment function, hashtag or direct message, can often lead to an increased interest in the story as the audience will feel like a participant rather than an observer. He also exemplifies what kind of story and what kind of structure that fits with different types of
channels. For example the way a blog is structured might lend itself better towards a story told in the fashion of a diary, while a story told through Twitter might benefit from a more direct “live” perspective.

Alexander doesn’t so much present strict guidelines for storytelling within new media formats but rather shows examples of how storytelling can be used in accordance with newer mediums and how the different channels can be used by themselves or in combination with each other. The book is more about the storytelling and narrative capabilities of the new digital media channels and understanding the platform in order to make it and the narrative work together in the best possible way.

Regarding platforms and channels and the measure of success involved with social media there are various theories that relate to the subject. In Measuring User Influence in Twitter (Cha, Haddadi, Benevenuto & Gummadi, 2010) the author presents three variables for determining the success of a Twitter account. These three are indegree, retweets and mentions. Indegree is the amount of people that follow an account, Retweets is the number of times a tweet has been forwarded by other users and lastly mentions is how many times other users mentions the names of a particular account in tweets.

It all calls back to the idea of something called “influentials” (Cha et al., 2010), a part of traditional communication theory. Influentials are people with an already considerable amount of fame whose position makes them prime candidates for persuading others of certain things, such as selling something for example.

The substantial outcome of the paper (Cha et al., 2010) is that indegree represents the popularity of a user but does nothing to indicate influence or engagement of the audience in the same degree as retweets and mentions does. This is because retweets and mentions demands engagement from the audience, even if just amounts to clicking at “Retweet” on a new entry.

4. Method

The method that will be used for this thesis is a case study. A case study can best be described as taking a real-life project or product that covers or involves the subject and observe it. The general structure of the study is that of a method that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its given context (Baxter & Jack, 2008). You look at something has been done within the field and how knowledge about the subject has been applied, why it was made, if it was successful or not and what can be learned from it. This is a rather good fit for the subject at hand as well as the purpose and research question of this thesis. Also since the subject of the thesis is fairly unexplored it felt like a case study approach would be the best suited research method, as there are several examples of storytelling within the defined context. And of course the context here is Twitter.

Given that there are already several real-life cases but very little research on the subject, utilizing the existing examples of storytelling on Twitter felt like the best way to conduct research on the topic. The cases will provide the data that is relevant to the purpose and to answer the research question. Therefore I did not feel the need to utilize a more qualitative study with interviews, even if I recognize that they would be very valuable for a more in-
depth understanding of the subject and definitely would have been a welcome addition in a study with a longer time frame. In the absence of doing your own case, of building your own Twitter based narrative as the backbone and case of analysis for the thesis, a study of pre-existing cases within the context felt like the best and most effective way to answer the research question.

The case can be described the unit of analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008), as in the data that eventually will lead to the conclusion and results of the study. They make a case for knowing the subject matter as well as having a clear restriction of the purpose to prevent the research from veering from its original topic and purpose.

In addition the study conducted for this thesis utilizes a type of case study that can be called a single case study with embedded units, as there are more than one unit within the case being observed and studied in order to find similarities and patterns within storytelling in this particular context. The entire point of the embedded units approach is to draw comparisons between the different cases in order to get a more holistic view of the subject. The choice of a single case with embedded units came from the feeling that one story driven account within the context would not be enough to exemplify how narratives is and can be used on Twitter. Therefore four different case units spread over five different accounts was selected. There could be an argument made that not even four units is enough to show the narrative capabilities of Twitter and the storytelling opportunities the service provides, but the amount of course had to be limited due to the time frame of this thesis. In the same vein the collection of the data was limited to a time period of 30 days.

There could also be an argument made that the study also uses an approach known as an Instrumental approach, which that the case itself isn’t the main point of the study but rather has a supporting role in facilitating an understanding about the subject. In this situation this means that the cases themselves are there to facilitate a better understanding about storytelling on Twitter.

I monitored the collective content of one month for each account, although not in every case the concurrent month. The data from three accounts were collected retroactively due to the accounts havening had a limited time-frame or a lack of activity during the concurrent month. As to how and what data was collected, I recorded each update from each account, as a way to see what the content of the account was and how it was presented, if and update was in-character, what it told and how it fit with the overall concept of the Twitter account. In addition I also recorded if and how many times an update had been retweeted or favourite, in order to see how popular the account was and how widespread it was on the channel.

4.1 Analytical Framework

Five different user accounts on Twitter has been chosen as examples of how narrative and storytelling can work on new media channels as well and how well they are utilized and for what purposes. These cases are Talons (appendix 1), Omega Cerberus (appendix 1), Occupy Westeros (appendix 4), Judge Dredd (appendix 2) and Paige Guthrie (appendix 3). The Talons and Omega accounts were both part of a marketing initiative for a downloadable expansion pack for the video game Mass Effect 3 called Omega and both accounts are based upon organizations featured heavily within the content of the game. Occupy Westeros is a fan
driven account based on and centred around the popular TV-series Game of Thrones and the books the show in turn is based upon and it was chosen because it is very popular and offers a glimpse into fan created content rather than a directly brand managed account. The Judge Dredd account is based on the long running comic book character of the same name that appear on a weekly basis in the British comic book 2000 AD and the account became active around the time that the movie Dredd, based upon the character was released on DVD and Blu-ray. Lastly the Paige Guthrie account is based upon the secondary comic book character Husk from Marvels X-Men franchise, the account was launched as a part of a marketing initiative for the comic book Wolverine & the X-Men and coincided with the character leaving the comic book was supposed to serve as a way for allowing fans of the character to keep following her although she was not featured within a comic book. Of these accounts only the Occupy Westeros and Judge Dredd accounts remain active as of the time of writing, the Talons and Omega accounts worked on a limited timeframe and thus was only active during the 24 hours leading up to the release of the downloadable expansion pack on Nov 27 2012 after which they became inactive. The Paige Guthrie account on the other hand has remained inactive since March 2013 but the character has since reappeared in the X-Men comics. Of these accounts Occupy Westeros has been active the longest, going back to at least 2011 while the Talons, Cerberus and Paige Guthrie account becoming active during the fourth quarter of 2012 and the Judge Dredd account becoming active on March 26 2013 although it was created before that date.

I choose these accounts partially because I was already following them on Twitter and had a prior knowledge of them all. Also they were all connected to a larger brand and thus shared some similarities with each other. They did of course all also contain some form of a narrative as a central part of the account itself and did so in a similar enough way to be easily compared to each other, but still dissimilar enough to not yield the same results. It should however also be pointed out that these accounts does not represent how all storytelling is done on Twitter but rather how it can be done on Twitter.

These five accounts will be analysed using four different distinctive sets of criteria: character, story, audience participation and exposure. These criteria have been selected from related research, utilizing new media narratives, character and audience participation (Alexander, 2011) as well as a measure of indegree and retweets (Cha et al.,2010)

Character addresses the user part of the accounts. It deals with what kind of character does the account have, how is the character presented in the content and whether or not the content manages to deliver what the established characteristics promises.

Story concerns the storytelling abilities of the account, if it has a story, how it develops and how it holds up over time. Parts of this criteria incorporates a little bit from a classical three-act structure (setup, confrontation, resolution\(^1\)) to see if any of the narrative elements of the chosen accounts fits with that particular narrative structure.

Audience participation is often mentioned as a huge part of both new media and cross-media services, therefore it is a natural criterion for storytelling with Twitter as the platform. Measurements for audience participation include interaction with other users such as conversations, hashtags for topics and also narrative participation.

\(^1\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three-act_structure.
Lastly exposure concerns a sort of success ratio for Twitter accounts. This criterion takes into account the various ways to measure success in terms of exposure. By taking into account indregree and retweets (but skipping mentions, as they were harder to measure) of the entire twitter feed alongside the amount of retweets and favourites during a period of 30 days.

Both the narrative and character criteria are based on the writings of Alexander regarding storytelling on Web 2.0 platforms and new media channels, how a narrative can be structured around the strengths of the medium, how to characterize the "user" and the updates. The character section also takes into account the characteristics from the already established characters utilized within the chosen twitter accounts. Since there is already an established character to build upon it feels like a necessity to stay true to that character in order to the translation to a new medium and the original character justice.

Audience participation and exposure is in turn somewhat connected as retweets (Cha et al., 2010) are a part of audience participation and helps spreading the content on Twitter. At the same time audience participation as described by Alexander entails interaction between sender and receiver to various degrees, something that feels easily implemented for a narrative developed for twitter and other social media channels. Exposure at the same time feels connected to indegree as well as a regular update frequency and the spread generated through retweets and favourites. And since most of the chosen accounts are supposed to be part of a marketing initiative for a product the amount of exposure and the success that the account is meet with is of crucial importance.

These four elements represent not so much a clear map for how storytelling on Twitter should be done but rather showing elements that could and should be considered regarding narratives on Twitter. A story needs a narrative and it needs characterisation, if not actual characters. And since Twitter at its core is a social media channel a closer relationship and communication with the receivers could and should perhaps be a natural part of the account, if not a part of the narrative. And lastly, since in most of the cases the success or exposition aspect of the account feels like a necessary addition, a small structure for measuring success and exposition was added, with the data generated by looking at retweets, followers, update frequency and the activity and user interaction within a period of roughly 30 days. During the 30-day period, which for most of the accounts studied consists of the first month of activity of the twitter feed, the amount of user interaction such as retweets and favourites of the posts have been measured.

5. Case Analysis

5.1 Talons & Cerberus

The accounts belong to a 24 hour marketing initiative for Mass Effect: Omega, the second single-player DLC for Bioware’s Mass Effect 3 that was released in November 2012. The story of the DLC concerns the player aiding in liberating a space station that has been conquered by an evil corporation.

The accounts, called Talons and Cerberus Omega represent two sides of the battle. Talons are the good guys, the resistance movement fighting for liberation and freedom while
Cerberus is the Evil organization that has taken over (they also serve as antagonists in Mass Effect 3). The Talon section of the campaign has their twitter feed portrayed as a communication channel for the resistance and is filled with tweets about a sabotage mission against Cerberus. Meanwhile the Cerberus section is portrayed as the news feed/propaganda that communicates with towards the ordinary citizens. Cerberus is therefore filled with tweets that assure the citizens that they have the upper hand as well as classic propaganda.

5.1.1 Character
From the side of the Talons the narrative includes three characters communicating within the twitter feed with letter as a “callsign”, there are H and T, whom are coordinating the whole operation and N who are right in the thick of the fighting. The character N is also undoubtedly a Nyreen Kandros, a major character in the Omega expansion pack and one of the most heavily promoted aspects of it.

The Cerberus side of the narrative on the other hand does not have any real character involved but instead uses a cold and authoritative voice as a defining characteristic of the updates. The content of the twitter feed has a propaganda feel to it and features military recruitment messages, demonizing of the resistance, and cover ups for their military losses, amongst other things. The activity on the feed finishes with a statement from the Cerberus leader on Omega that addresses the supposed terrorist activities of the Talons and their leader, which gives us the only actual, named character in the Cerberus half of the narrative.

5.1.2 Story
The Talons and Cerberus accounts are the ones that actually have the most direct narrative of the five different twitter accounts. Both of them were a part of a marketing initiative for an expansion pack for the video game Mass Effect 3 called Omega. The story of the Omega expansion centres on the liberation of an occupied space station, where both the Talons and Cerberus have a central role. In the game the Talons act as the resistance movement, fighting to liberate Omega (as the space station is called) from the Occupying forces of Cerberus, a paramilitary organization that served as antagonists in the main Mass Effect 3 game.

The two accounts naturally works in opposition to one another and feature a certain degree of interplay between each other. The Talons twitter feed takes the role of a communication channel for the resistance while the Cerberus account takes the appearance of a propaganda filled news channel. The narrative within the twitter feeds cover the resistance making a strike against the Cerberus forces with the Talons movements being tracked within their feed and the countermeasures of the occupying forces being tracked in the other twitter feed.

In fact most of the actions described in one of the feeds are generally meet with a reaction in the other one, thereby creating a more cohesive narrative about two sides in an opposing conflict. This can be compared to an example (Alexander, 2011) in which a hashtag helped to create a collection of tweets that gave some sort of narrative of a War of the Worlds style alien invasion though individual observations of the attacks.

It also seems like twitter based storytelling isn’t one that lends itself to a descriptive language within the narrative as both the Talons and Cerberus updates are sparse on details. The Talons uses a structure based around brief messages, full of information about objectives.
and opposition, which fits with the communication channel persona of the account. In the same vein Cerberus uses a more bombastic tone fitting with the propaganda filled news channel the feed portrays, complete with insurance of the success of their troops and the righteousness of their cause. Something that of course clashes with the Talons update feed, which gives a completely different view on Cerberus, their supposed success and exactly how righteous their cause is.

The Talons and Cerberus accounts probably have the clearest narrative and story of all the selected twitter accounts as they actually have a start and an ending to their feed. The setup for both accounts boils down to establishing the format of the twitter feed (communication channel and news channel respectively) and the character of the user account (resistance and oppressor). The confrontation and rising action comes when the Talons set out on their mission and Cerberus moves to stop them, it consists of attacks and counter-attacks, sealed passageways with codes that need to be broken, victorious engagements and covered-up losses. It finally reaches the resolution with the Talons successfully carrying out their plan and assuring the public that the fight for Omega will go on, while Cerberus licks it’s wounds, manufactures cover-up stories for their losses and affirms their control of the station and the righteousness of their cause with a speech.

5.1.3 Audience participation
A part of the interplay between the two accounts within the narrative is that in a few instances the Cerberus feed sprouts incoherent nonsense, which is supposed to be coded messages (see appendix 2). This is where audience participation comes into the picture. As the codebreakers that is referred to in the Talons feed is actually the users that follow the account. They were supposed to decrypt the nonsensical message and deliver it to the Talons, to allow the characters within the narrative to continue with the story and successfully achieving their goal.

5.1.4 Exposure
As of the moment of writing the Talons account has 40 tweets, 1596 followers and follows no other users. Cerberus on the other hand has 33 tweets, 1459 followers and also does not follow any other user. In a 30-day period the Talons had 164 retweets and 136 favourites while Cerberus had 330 retweets and 89 favourites. Something that is worth adding is also the fact that both accounts were only active for about 24 hours in total.

5.2 Judge Dredd
The twitter account is based on the comic book character Judge Dredd from the British anthology comic book 2000 AD, a character whom has been the most popular character in the comic since his debut in 1977. The character of Judge Joe Dredd is a future law-man in a fascist police-state who is Judge, Jury and Executioner combined into one, with authority to arrest, sentence and if necessary, execute a criminal on the spot.

The twitter account follow the mold of being the personal account of Judge Dredd, with the majority of the tweets being presented as a first-person account in the voice of Dredd.

The creation of the account itself coincided with the release and intial success of the DVD and BluRay versions of the 2012 motion picture Dredd 3D in early 2013. A movie that got fair
reviews but failed to make an impact on the box office and became labeled "box office failure". The film was however greatly recieved by critics and fans alike and has in certain cases been labeled as a future cult film. The creation of the Judge Dredd account can therefore be seen as a reaction to the character getting catapulted into a wider public consciousness again.

5.2.1 Character
The Judge Dredd account doesn't really have an active storyline driving it and acts more as a sort of role-playing account with all the tweets that are not simple new updates being written in the gruff, no-nonsense voice of the character of Judge Dredd. Therefore a lot of the tweets consist of statements following the law abiding and semi-fascist worldview of the character and responses to followers warning them of impending prison sentences. The character of Judge Dredd himself is very well established by this point, as the character and the world he inhabits has been making a weekly comic book appearance for over 30 years by now. Something that makes the voice of the character easy to capture and recognizable for the fans and followers.

However the updates frequently break character when it tweets or retweets news about upcoming Judge Dredd comics and other related products. This at periods of time takes a larger part of the focus of the account, putting the characterisation of Judge Dredd in second place.

5.2.2 Story
Judge Dredd does not really have a unfolding storyline at all and is instead all about the voice of the character. The updates of the Judge Dredd feed that are not simple comic book related news tend to be absolutely in-character with the established personality of the title character, whether it is a simple remark or a harsh answer to a question/mention by a follower.

Since the Judge Dredd account does not include anything that has a narrative in the traditional sense and therefore does not contain anything with a semblance to a narrative structure.

5.2.3 Audience participation
The account of Judge Dredd does contain a fairly high degree of audience communication, if not audience participation. A lot of the initial content of the twitter feed is Dredd responding to messages from other regular users. The responses is of course made in-character and usually consisted of a harsh warning or a threat of a prison sentence delivered in a no-nonsense voice that is completely in line with the character of Judge Dredd. Thus, the audience participation bit within the twitter feed generally consists of regular users being insulted by one of their favourite comic book characters.

5.2.4 Exposure
As of the time of writing the Judge Dredd twitter has 101 tweets, 1022 followers and follows 4 other users. During the first month of activity on the account it got 150 retweets and 46 favourites.

5.3 Paige Guthrie
This is the account of the Marvel Comics character Paige Guthrie (or Husk), a superhero character that is associated with the X-Men comic book franchise. The account is a part of a marketing initiative for the comic book Wolverine & the X-Men under the banner of the @JeanGreySchool. The comic book in itself is centred around a school for mutants with superpowers and several of the leading characters of the comic book has real-life accounts on Twitter that is gathered together under the @JeanGreySchool banner. The character of Paige Guthrie though differs from the other fictional Twitter users as the character had just left the comic book when the account was activated.

The character is currently not featured in any comic book, therefore making twitter the primary medium for an established comic book superhero.

The account is of course an in-character account from a first person perspective and the primary topic of the “narrative” have unfortunately been about the character trying and failing to find a new job as well as littered with references to other currently on-going comic books from Marvel.

5.3.1 Character
Paige Guthrie feed mainly follows the same pattern of first-person-in-character tweets combined with some sort of underdeveloped storyline. The character exited from a supporting role in a Marvel comic due to something akin to deteriorating mental state (in-universe explanation), which can be seen within the twitter feed through angry outburst and the inability to find steady employment. However the supposed storyline within the twitter feed also suffer from slow story progression, since the first tweet from approximately six months ago the story so far encompasses only a series of failed job interviews and thinly veiled promotions for other Marvel comics, which coupled with an infrequent rate of updates makes the account somewhat of a disappointment. Because it centres on a character whose only current channel of exposure is Twitter it feels like the narrative is very poor and that it does not live up to the potential of the character and account.

5.3.2 Story
The Paige Guthrie account actually has a supposed unfolding narrative, which is the story of the newly jobless, mutant superhero Paige who is in search of a new job and a way to get her life together. How well the account actually succeeds in creating a narrative and telling the story is another question. The Paige Guthrie account was basically supposed to be a way for fans of the character to follow her even though she made her exit from the on-going comic she was a regular cast member of.

A way to continue her story and let her have her own adventures despite not appearing in any of the monthly Marvel titles at the time and could be seen as an interesting approach towards telling the story of an already established character. But the Paige twitter account suffers from low activity and a sparse update frequency. The storyline as it is now features Paige continually searching for and failing to get a new job, while referencing other comic books published by Marvel. It should also be worth noting that since the user account started to update less and less the character has reappeared in the main Marvel comic books as a villain.
The twitter feed of the Paige Guthrie account also contains clear traces of a narrative structure. The character, her characteristics and situation are explained within the first few updates. This in turn is followed with a rising action as the main character ventures out into the world to search for gainful and steady employment. Which itself takes form in a few tweets that documents a hopeful approach for a chance of employment, a rejection and a disparaging comment about her current situation or a snarky comment aimed at Marvel Comics various superhero teams and franchises (see appendix 4).

5.3.3 Audience participation
There is not much audience participation or audience communication to be found at all within this particular twitter feed. There are no answers to tweets from other users or any other participatory elements included in the feed. At most there are references to other comic books as well as the @JeanGreySchool, the twitter marketing initiative that the account is a part of.

5.3.4 Exposure
As of the time of writing the twitter account of Paige Guthrie has 27 tweets, 1102 followers and follows 22 other accounts. During a period of thirty days (the first 30 days) the content of the account was retweeted 21 times and favourited 8 times. As of the time of writing the twitter feed of the account has not been updated at all since March 19, which might lead one to believe that it has been dropped due to a lack of interest.

5.4 Occupy Westeros
Occupy Westeros is fan based twitter account that based upon the Game of Thrones TV-show by HBO, that currently is on its 3 season. Game of Thrones is a fantasy show that is in turn based upon the book series A Song of Ice and Fire by George R.R. Martin. The story of the show and books is about feuding and warring nobles in a classical faux medieval fantasy setting called Westeros, complete with kings, queens, knights, fair maidens and supernatural creatures. The show and books are known for their gritty aesthetic, engaging characters and a brutal tone where no character is safe from death.

As the account name implies the twitter channel marries the aesthetics from the show with a mentality borrowed from the Occupy Wall Street movement. This combination is managed with a lot of tongue-in-cheek humour added to the mix.

The narrative angle of the channel is that of the poor and starved common people of the fantasy setting that takes the role of the 99%, which are organizing protests in the capital, with the feuding nobles taking the role of the rich 1%. They vary the humour-laden narrative of the hapless protesters with comments about current episodes and updates that combine the fantasy world of westeros with current real world happenings via the use of hashtags.

5.4.1 Character
The Occupy Westeros twitter uses a great amount of humor within its individual tweets and alternate between updates within its own narrative and updates that simply comments on news about the TV-show, albeit still in character.
The character of the account is as already mentioned the poor, downtrodden common people of the fantasy land capital, Kings Landing. In the setting they generally get the worst of the deal when the rich and entitled characters play the titular game of thrones, i.e. when they are feuding and warring against each other. This then goes hand in hand with the Occupy movement’s, at the surface, rich vs. poor attitude with the commoners being the 99% and the nobles the 1%. Thus the character of the account employs a hefty amount of humorous spite against the ruling class and the downright evil characters that reside within it, alongside a never ending amount of protests turning into riots that generally fail (unless the story within deems they don’t). The voice of the twitter feed is drenched in sarcasm and the opinions it have of the show characters generally follow that of the majority of the associated fandom, such as downright hate against the villains, loathing towards disliked characters, sympathy towards the heroic characters and sarcastic comments towards the plethora of stupid decisions made throughout the story.

The account also makes references to current real-world events filtered through a lens relating to Game of Thrones, first and foremost with the entire concept of the account character being based on the Occupy Wall Street movement. In addition the also had the #WesterosOlympics which ran during the 2012 summer Olympics with updates mixing sports references with Game of Thrones references (see appendix 4).

5.4.2 Story
The narrative of Occupy Westeros is harder to define. Largely because the account is not supposed to be an official promotion channel for the product (and if it is, it is not explicitly stated anywhere) but is instead created and managed by fans. Which gives the account and the twitter feed more freedom to create the character and voice of the tweets.

Occupy Westeros also utilizes humour to much higher degree than the other four users exemplified, which of course shows clearly in the various narrative threads woven into the feed. The main narrative focus of the account is the struggle of the poor and oppressed lower class and is told through suggestions of new subjects to protest against and how awfully wrong the subsequent protest goes and the numbers of dead protesters (since the de facto law enforcers carry swords instead of truncheons and pepper-spray), as well as the general lack of food and hygiene mixed with spiteful comments towards the noble characters of the Game of Thrones saga. All of course presented with a fair amount of humour and sarcasm, highlighting how awful the poor people must have it in the fictional land of Westeros and doing so in a very funny way.

During the period of time that the show is on-air the strictly narrative tweets generally gets less focus for the benefit of more strictly episode centric updates, during the time that the TV-series is off-air they slip back a little into the overall narrative of their struggle against the upper echelon of the fantasy world depicted in the show.

In a sense of traditional narrative the account can be very hard to define, since the narrative of the struggle against the oppressive monarchy remains fairly static during the lifespan of the feed. The storyline of the protest generally contains a few tweets, first introducing the subject of the protest, followed by the whole thing going to hell and turning into a downright riot, before it ends up in death and destruction, whether the protest was successful or not. This could be seen as a micro version of the three-act structure, with the
setup, confrontation and resolution only spanning a handful of tweets. The success of the story elements also generally depends on how events unfold within the narrative of the show. For example when a riot broke out within the story of the show the Occupy Westeros account reported one of the very few successful "protests" of the feed history.

They also have the use of hashtags for addressing a few specific topics during a certain period of time. For example they had an election for the King of Westeros before the second season, a season that focused on a war between five different kings. In the twitter feed each king was presented as running his own election campaign, not dissimilar to a Presidential election campaign. Thus each contender had their own political platform, favourite subject, religious views and campaign slogans, with the advantages and disadvantages of each being king being taken in consideration, highlighting the differences and characteristics between each of the characters contending for the crown. Of course this being a mainly humorous account, the disadvantages of each king took most of the focus.

5.4.3 Audience participation
Present on the feed is a high amount of interaction with other Game of Thrones related in-character users on twitter, which range from casual comments on certain tweets to full blown conversations, all while staying in-character.

Due to the popularity and success of both the TV-show and the books there are several other twitter accounts that take their names and content from established characters, both big and small, within the mythos and mostly focusing on delivering content in-character, examples these can be found under the #FakeWesteros hashtag.

Hashtags are another part of the Occupy Westeros twitter feed that features an amount of audience participation. By marking the topic of several tweets with a specific hashtag it allows other users to contribute to the topic. Generally these hashtags concern some kind of humorous observation related to Game of Thrones.

5.4.4 Exposure
As of the moment of writing the channel has 4268 followers, 2596 tweets, follows 358 other users and is updated at a fairly regular basis, especially during the period of time that new episodes are being aired. At a basic level they average 1 tweet per day, not counting the day and day after a new episode has aired (during the last three months at least). During a period of 30 days, the first month that the third season of the show was on-air, the content of the twitter feed was retweeted 1175 times and favourite 623 times.

6. Discussion

6.1 Character
I would say that one of the most defining traits of all five of these accounts is the focus on characters and characterisation. Even the twitter feeds that don’t have an exclusive main character posing as the user of the account still has a certain amount of characteristics involved that invokes an archetypal image to the receiver. The ones based on an organization all have clear aspects involved that could be considered a character in itself, aspects that are
familiar to the followers in what they represent: a totalitarian ruling body, a rebel faction and a disgruntled, protesting lower class.

First and foremost the Paige Guthrie and Judge Dredd accounts share the similarity of being using a single character that has been established within in their respective fictional universes for decades. Both are first person accounts of characters with quite some history within the comic book world and both accounts uses the “voice” of the character as a central aspect of each update.

However, Judge Dredd is a character that has a weekly appearance in his own comic for over 30 years while Paige Guthrie is at best a B-list character within the sprawling X-Men franchise. A character that has had sporadic appearances within Marvel’s comic books during the last 15-20 years and has not exactly had a starring role in any of them since the 90s. That is a difference that can be noted in the handling of the two accounts. It feels like Judge Dredd as a character is more well defined, even on twitter, than the character of Paige Guthrie, whom only has the attributes of: slightly crazy and unemployed as the main characteristics. Of course this could just be an observation from a very subjective point of view, as I personally am more familiar with Judge Dredd than I am of Paige Guthrie.

Talons and Cerberus differs from the other accounts in that they not only have a character for the user but also for the twitter feed itself. Each tweet from both accounts have a certain characterisation to it, a certain character to how the tweets are written and structured as well as a certain role in supporting the narrative. These are as already mentioned that of a communications channel and a news broadcasting system, that both serve to further the plot and add some character to each account. The communication channel, complete with code-names and quick updates about targets and objectives serves as a way to show that the Talons are resistance fighters, a military unit on a dangerous mission to liberate their home. While the news broadcast uses bombastic messages that assures the citizens of their supposed success and the righteousness of their cause and methods, something that feels very akin to popular culture representation of propaganda from a totalitarian state.

The Talons and Cerberus accounts utilizes the channel not only as a platform for reaching out but also to create a characterisation that takes advantage of the restraints and benefits of Twitter itself, since news broadcast and communication between military units does not necessarily need to use more than 140 characters at a time. In this case the structure of Twitter as a channel lends itself very well to create a character not only of the user but also for the updates. Instead of simply using the channel as the personal Twitter account of a specific character.

6.2 Story

All five accounts are closely related to a particular brand, even though not necessarily related to a conscious marketing effort. They all make references to things that fans would recognize throughout the tweets. For example the Mass Effect related accounts makes references to ingame content such as enemy units or storyline based concepts, while the Paige Guthrie account references other Marvel products and the Occupy Westeros feed is basically built upon combining references from Game of Thrones with ones relating to the Occupy Wall
Street movement. In the latter’s case it has also meant that the focus has steered a bit from the protest-centric side of the tweets as the Occupy movement has waned a bit in the eyes of the public and does not have as large presence in the media as it had on its peak.

In terms of the narrative abilities of the channel and how those lend themselves to the telling of a story there are a few points that can be learned from these examples. Of the five different accounts there are three who actually have a storyline developing within them: Paige Guthrie, Talons and Cerberus. And of these three, two basically shares the same narrative, but different point of views and presentations of it.

The Paige Guthrie account suffers from a seeming lack of disinterest due to the general lack of activity on the account, which hinders the narrative from continuing. The narrative threads within the twitter feed was also repetitive and ended up focusing more on making references to new comic books rather than addressing the issues surrounding the character. Of course that could very well be the point of the account from the sender’s side, but it still feels like a missed opportunity in what could have been done as a superhero story on a different medium.

The Talons and Cerberus accounts on the other hand has a clear narrative and they have the luxury of representing different point of views of the same basic story. They are each other antagonists and each of them works to subdue and hinder the actions of the other, thus making it a narrative that could easily be experienced from each side exclusively but also adding the benefit of getting the full story through both twitter feeds.

The Judge Dredd account on the other hand is the one with the least narrative elements involved. Instead the updates of its twitter feed that are not simple comic book related news tend to be absolutely in-character with the established personality of the title character intact, whether it is a simple remark or a harsh answer to a question by a follower. However it would also seem that the in-character tweets are getting less and less frequent in comparison to the tweets and retweets concerning news about the comic. But it is not that some sort of narrative structure or elements could not be a part of the twitter feed. Since the character of Judge Dredd is essentially a police officer an approach not dissimilar to the Talons account could be taken towards incorporating story into the feed. A narrative could be structured around the communications between Dredd and other Judges, during police operations, arrests, requests for backup, authorizing lethal force and so forth. This would keep in line with the character of Dredd as well as with the world he inhabits, while still getting a more on-going narrative involved with the initiative to put the character on twitter.

6.3 Audience participation

Audience participation is often seen as an integral part of cross-media productions and maybe especially so on social media platforms. Alexander mentions several examples of new media storytelling that utilizes a participatory nature as part of the narrative progress. Of the five accounts that have been chosen there are generally some degree of audience participation involved, even if it is within a limited state.

The Talons and Cerberus accounts is probably the ones that utilizes it in the broadest way, even if it can be seen as somewhat limited due to the short length of activity of the accounts.
They allow their followers to take a more active role within the narrative as the role of the "code breakers", an appealingly vital part of the resistance movement and in continuing the narrative. The use of code breakers also necessitates that a regular user follows both parts of the narrative as it is the Talons that need the codes decrypted but Cerberus is the one that supplies them. This is of course a good way to provide immersion for the receivers and to make them feel more involved.

The other account does not utilize audience participation to the same degree as the Talons and Cerberus ones do, but instead focuses more on audience communication.

The twitter feed of Judge Dredd includes a lot of communication with fans and followers, mostly single replies to a directed message but at times also longer conversations. These tweets does not generally boil down to anything more than a few harsh comments from Dredd's side and feels like it is just offering an opportunity for fans to be insulted by their favourite comic book character.

Paige Guthrie is an account with a very similar concept as the Judge Dredd account but does not really feature any kind of audience communication or participation. It does however have a little more narrative focus and could therefore have done away with audience interaction to focus on the story. Or it could just be the lack of activity of the account.

Occupy Westeros utilizes a fair degree of audience participation and communication within its twitter feed. They invite followers and other users to contribute to certain topics by using hashtags, which gives regular users the opportunity to participate with their own sarcastic, Game of Thrones related messages. Occupy Westeros also communicates with other users in character through mentions and messages directed at the account itself, which can lead to longer conversations. However the vast majority of these user-to-user interactions are directed at other users within the #fakewesteros sphere. Meaning that it is two fictional users conversing with each other in-character. These conversations usually compromises of references to the show as well as the character and characteristics of the respective users.

6.4 Exposure

In terms of success on the platform there is indegree, retweets and mentions (Cha et al., 2010). Within this paper data have been gathered regarding the first two aspects while the third one turned out to be harder to gather data about and was left out due to time constraints.

Looking at those criteria the Occupy Westeros account is the one that has met the most success, but of course it is also the one that has existed the longest time of all five. Occupy Westeros has at least a year and a half head start on the other four, the latter whom all have been active in way less than a year. Occupy Westeros is also the only account that is fan based and therefore might have less restrictions regarding the content of the updates and retain more of an artistic license as the twitter feed does not directly reflect on an associated company or a brand. Occupy Westeros generally also have a way better update frequency compared to the other accounts, at least the two that did not update within a certain time frame. The Talons and Omega accounts does of course differ from the others on this point as they were only meant to be active during a time frame of 24 hours.
The timing of the appearance of the accounts is also curious to mention. The Occupy Westeros account probably appeared sometimes during or after the first season of the TV-show and when the Occupy movement was a hot topic. The Talons and Cerberus accounts of course appeared shortly before the Omega expansion pack they were meant to promote. The Paige Guthrie account appeared shortly after the character exited the Wolverine & the X-Men comic and the Judge Dredd account shortly after the release and initial sales success of the motion picture Dredd 3D on DVD, as in: when the character got catapulted into public consciousness again.

7. Conclusion

So, at the end of it all, how do you utilize a narrative with Twitter as the main channel of communication? And what kind of storytelling and structure can be used and what benefits come from the particular platform?

As most of the accounts were created in a marketing initiative to promote their respective products, there is also the question of whether they succeeded or not? A question that is hard for me to actually answer, since I have no knowledge of the expectations or plans for the twitter accounts that the respective senders might have had.

From the perspective of a story being told and a narrative unfolded however there are some points that could be considered a success or a failure. The Talons and Cerberus accounts managed very well to build up an unfolding narrative with a clear beginning, middle and end, and managed to do so in a way that utilized the platform in an interesting and creative way.

Occupy Westeros has clearly also reached some kind of success, looking at the amount of followers, tweets, retweets, favourites, activity and longevity of the account. The amount of humour present within the content of the twitter feed probably has some small part of this, as well as having a well created and executed characterisation.

The Judge Dredd account does not really contain any clear narrative elements at all, and instead seems to focus somewhat on characterisation of the tweets. It is also hard to say how successful the account has been, seeing as it has not been active for very long.

The Paige Guthrie account can be seen as somewhat of a disappointment and a missed opportunity for exploring narrative on twitter. It utilizes an established character, currently not appearing in any other medium and it clearly had an idea of using storytelling and a clear narrative within the channel. Instead it became more concerned about promoting other comic books, and even though it still did it in character it also became more and more inactive. It could be that other characters that are involved in the @JeanGreySchool marketing initiative proved more popular and got more attention, possibly due to the fact that they actually make monthly appearances in a comic book and Paige Guthrie is a fairly obscure character within the franchise to begin with.

Then what does Twitter in itself have to offer as a channel and platform for storytelling? First and foremost it is a well-established and well-populated service and therefore providing the potential to reach a large audience. The narrative development that can be observed seems to be one focused on shorter observations or comments about a situation rather than
focusing on more descriptive scenarios. Even the accounts that do not utilize the platform as a character's personal Twitter account follow this shorthanded way of storytelling. Even if it at times becomes more in line with telling rather than showing in regards to the narrative and story. This feels like a natural adaptation to the 140 characters per tweet limit of the service.

The general focus of the different account seems to be on single characters or easily recognized organizational archetypes, which would suggest that the narrative strengths of the Twitter service mainly are of character studies, in the same way as the studied accounts focus on the character and the personality of the account rather than on a defined plot. With the possible exception of Occupy Westeros, the selected accounts all try to find what could best be described as the “voice” of the character, with varying results.

Also since most of the accounts does not seem to be implemented with a clear ending in sight, but instead aims to be continuing accounts, just like a regular twitter account, there could of course be a problem with developing a clear and well defined narrative that does not have a clear ending.

And since the narration within Twitter often comes from a first-person perspective (regardless if it is fictional or non-fictional) it seems like a natural development of storytelling on that platform to employ that kind of characterisation. It can use characters own insights and observations to drive a plot forward and even incorporate interaction with other users as an integral part of the narrative, either through regular conversations, hashtags or by actively spurring other users to help out with a plot point.

The structure of the storytelling can also be aligned with the limitations of the channel as updates can also be presented within a certain character, for example the communication channel of the Talons account or the news broadcast of Cerberus. Another narrative structure that can be taken from those two accounts is the usage of several Twitter accounts to tell one narrative. Thereby offering different points of view of the same story while simultaneously allow for the receivers to customize and choose which parts of the narrative they wish to partake in and thus maybe get different users to experience the story in different ways.

So in the end, a successful narrative for Twitter could do well in utilizing a connection to a particular brand, a healthy amount of humour and a regular update frequency alongside a clear idea of the purpose of the account and a well-crafted characterisation to carry the narrative. One could argue that none of the accounts presented are fully perfect example of a Twitter based narrative, but rather that they represent various ways it could be done and that could be built upon to create a captivating and truly immersive narrative on a social media channel such as Twitter.

It would seem that a clear purpose of what the account is supposed to deliver is absolutely necessary. If there is a defined narrative and story with a start, middle and ending, focus on that instead of mixing it up with other things. If there is not a clear storyline involved with the user feed focus instead on the characterisation of the user and the voice of the feed and keep that consistent throughout every update, regardless of the content. If a news post does not fit the tone of the character maybe it should not be posted and instead be put on a regular news based twitter feed. And of course have a well-defined and thought out character that people will find engaging and entertaining, so that other users can help with spreading
content and creating exposure in order to heighten the awareness of the feed and what is being marketed, in other words a classical use of word-of-mouth marketing. Also making the receivers feel like they can personally partake in the content and maybe influence bits of it through audience participation and communication would help to make the narrative and character more engaging at the same time as it utilizes one of the basic premises and strengths of social media services.

8. Future Research

So what research could be done within the subject of storytelling on new media channels? As new media channels and platforms spring forth it is always interesting to observe all the various purposes they end up getting utilized for, and storytelling largely feels like one subject that always is on the forefront of new services, at least the ones that opt for a more community like structure, such as Twitter, YouTube and so forth. The development of narratives for these relatively new platforms open up for new ways of structuring narratives, telling stories and reaching out to an audience.

Secondly an actual case study concerning a story developed with and structured with the chosen platform in mind would be a great way of exploring the nature of storytelling and narratives on these types of channels further. And in the meantime also study what storytelling is used for in these cases, if it is for promotional purposes or simply to tell a certain story in a certain way?

An example of what could be done, a way of structuring a narrative on twitter and test the storytelling abilities of the channel, would be to take a famous story and re-tell on a new media platform. As an example, we could take The Three Musketeers by Alexander Dumas\(^2\), a story that most people have heard of and that conjures a certain imagery in people, regardless if they are familiar with the actual story and characters or not. In doing this one could tell the story with various users for the different characters, and introduce them as the story goes on. You could start with D’Artagnan, just like the story does and continue with introducing other characters as viewpoints as they gain importance to the story, following up the young protagonist with the titular musketeers well as Cardinal Richelieu, Milady Winter, Queen Anne and so forth. The character accounts and their part of the story could also be used to highlight the different personalities and flaws of the characters, D’Artagnan is young and brave but also he is strong and impulsive, Athos is noble and secretive as well as prone to excessive drinking, and Monsieur Bonacieux is foolish and cowardly and so on. The different accounts could then be used to tell the story not only in their own words but also through interaction, building conversations between characters and possibly also confrontations of different natures.

Adapting a well-known story to another medium than its original one is a common thing, especially with books to film or TV, so why could not the same be done with this kind of channel in mind? Translating a well-known work of literature as The Three Musketeers to a Twitter based narrative is not in any way impossible and could prove to be an interesting experiment to learn about the narrative strengths and weaknesses of the channel.

\(^2\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Three_Musketeers
References


Talons & Cerberus

Figure 1: The user profile for Talons

Figure 2: The user profile for Cerberus

Figure 3: The Talons requests aid of other users
Figure 4: The code that needs to be decrypted. Example of interplay between the two accounts.

Figure 5: Regular update concerning the narrative from Talons point of view.

Figure 6: Regular update concerning the narrative from Cerberus point of view.
Appendix 2: Judge Dredd

Judge Dredd

Figure 1: The user profile for Judge Dredd

Judge Dredd @JudgeDredd
This is the OFFICIAL Twitter account for the ultimate lawman of the future from the pages of @2000AD!
Mega-City One • 2000adonline.com

Figure 2: In-character tweet

Judge Dredd @JudgeDredd
april 6
This is the law, citizens. Accept no substitutes, or you’re looking at some cube time.

Figure 3: News tweet

2000 AD Tweet Droid @2000AD
maj 21
Signed up to the 2000 AD weekly newsletter yet? Join up now for chance to win a book signed by Ron Smith! eepurl.com/pFyqD

Figure 4: Retweet from other account

2000 AD Tweet Droid @2000AD
maj 22
More #classic2000ADovers and it’s time for the original "superbrat" pop star, Zenith, drawn by Steve Yeowell! ow.ly/l/2afru

Retweetad av Judge Dredd
Visa foto
Paige Guthrie

Figure 1: The user profile for Paige Guthrie

Paige Guthrie @paige_husk
S.H.I.E.L.D. interview didn’t go as well as I had hoped. Turns out when they said I was a "person of interest" they didn't mean for a job.
Visa

Paige Guthrie @paige_husk
Booked a job interview with S.H.I.E.L.D. Wish me luck.
Visa

Paige Guthrie @paige_husk
Job search: struck out at a school and a hospital. Maybe I should aim a bit higher. S.H.I.E.L.D. still exists, right?
Visa

Figure 2: Tweets using the narrative

Paige Guthrie @paige_husk
There’s a new Defenders team that's all ladies? WHY WASN’T I ON THAT! I still need a job!!!
Visa

Figure 3: References to other comics
Appendix 4: Occupy Westeros

**Occupy Westeros**

Figure 1: The user profile for Occupy Westeros

![](image)

**Occupy Westeros**

@OccupyWesteros

"Fuck Joffrey, Fuck the Queen" God bless you, Sandor Clegane

#SecondSons

Visa

Figure 2: Episode commentary

![](image)

**Occupy Westeros**

@OccupyWesteros

maj 15

Join our protest of the lack of male role models in Westeros! Every man in this country is either a moron or a Lannister! Demand better!

Visa

Figure 3: Announcing a topic to protest

![](image)

**Occupy Westeros**

@OccupyWesteros

juli 28

#WesterosOlympics: if you lose, you die. If you win, you die. If you don’t compete, you die. If you die, you may come back as a snow zombie.

Visa

Figure 4: Example of the usage of the westerosolympics hashtag