A polyphonic approach into the 'dark side' of making video games

Johanna Weststar, Management Department, Saint Mary's University weststar@smu.ca
Amanda Peticca-Harris, School of Human Resource Management, York University amandah@yorku.ca
Steve McKenna, School of Human Resource Management, York University smckenna@yorku.ca

Introduction

The video game industry within North America is booming and successful games are highly lucrative, with examples such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* grossing more than $775 million in its first week on the market (Rose, 2011). High profile successes are creating a stereotypical image of the gaming industry. The industry appears to be a stable, fun, and hip way to get paid to play games. However, this image of the industry overshadows an alternative perspective: that the gaming industry is battling with exploitative working conditions and dissatisfied workers.

This paper considers the video game industry and how it is represented through social media blogs and tweets. It aims to disentangle the polyphony of voices communicating through different stories about what it means to work in the gaming industry. The multiple voices found within the blogs and tweets weave a complex and contested narrative about the carnivalesque way in which video games are made, poignantly illustrating the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Using the work of the Russian literary theorist and philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, 1993), and particularly his notions of monologic and dialogic stories and narratives (McKenna, 2010), the paper seeks to understand what these voices are communicating within the anecdotes, stories and descriptions contained in blogs and tweets. This paper is well-situated within

Conference *Subtheme #24 Organizations as Phenomena of Language Use: Interconnecting Discourse and Communication*, because it uses components of literary theory associated with Bakhtin (1984, 1993) to connect the monological dimension of what is communicated (the micro-level world of the blogger) with the dialogical dimension (the industry, socio-political, ideological and other voices) which are communicated through the blogs and tweets.

In the following we offer a brief sketch of the video game industry followed by an overview of our theoretical lens and methodological approach. We then outline conceptual findings taken from our thematic analysis of the blogs and tweets and discuss the associated implications within the video game industry. These issues will be much more fully illustrated in the full paper.

Background

Video game developers are the graphic artists, animators, computer programmers, game designers and producers who create video games for console, personal computer, and mobile platforms. They are highly skilled, mobile, non-unionized knowledge workers who are members of a project team. The industry has maintained the non-conformist feel of the dotcom era and created an image of a fun culture where innovation and creativity are high and you can get paid to play games (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2005; Deuze, Martin & Allen, 2007; Ross, 2003).

In practice, however, the industry is highly secretive, competitive and largely risk-averse. Top tier console games can cost over $30 million to produce, yet less than 10% of video games shipped break even (IGDA, 2004: 42). Under the project management regime used in this

industry, where the *iron triangle* of constraints (budget, schedule and scope) are paramount

drivers in the lives of project team members (Chasserio & Legault, 2009; Legault & Bellemare,

2008), video game developers face intense and exploitative working conditions. Issues of

sustained working hours ('crunch'), unlimited and unpaid overtime, poor work-life balance,

musculoskeletal disorders, burnout, unacknowledged intellectual property rights, limited

crediting standards, non-compete and non-disclosure agreements, and limited or unsupported

training opportunities are increasingly documented (Deuze, Martin & Allen, 2007; Dyer-

Witheford & de Peuter, 2006; IGDA, 2004; Legault & Weststar, 2010; Schumacher, 2006).

<u>Overview</u>

Our contribution to the extant literature on the 'dark-side' of the gaming industry applies

the ideas of the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin who suggests that

many voices are communicated through narratives and stories. All of these voices are a 'truth'

of some kind about the narrator and about the context within and about which a narrator tells the

story. Bakhtin (1984) identifies this process as polyphony, a multi-voicedness. He suggests that

a story is not just an account of the world communicated from the author's point of view; it is an

interplay of multiple voices that reflect not only the narrator, but also the broad context in which

the narrator exists including other characters and wider society. A story or narrative therefore

consists of a monologue (a narrator's view of their world) and a dialogue (other voices that can

be perceived within the story). These various voices, telling multiple stories, intersect and clash

with one another within the grand narrative or dialogical landscape (Belova, King & Sliwa,

2008).

Bakhtinian analysis has been applied to organizational studies (e.g. Boje, 1995; Hazen, 1993; McKenna, 2010; Sullivan & McCarthy, 2008) to demonstrate how multiple voices within organizations construct the meaning of and 'truths' for, the experiences of organizational members and organizational practices. This paper continues this line of research and thought and is concerned with using Bakhtin's (1984, 1993) polyphonic frame to understand what stories are being communicated within the video game community in relation to personal experiences, organization practices and industry norms. We utilize Bakhtin's ideas (1984, 1993) to illustrate how an industry acts as a discursive space replete with monologic and dialogic interconnectedness that enables the identification of multi-vocality at micro, meso and macro levels.

<u>Methodology</u>

The data analyzed for this study consists of three narratives about the video game industry that were posted by their authors on the Internet. The first narrative is entitled "The Human Story" and was posted using the free online blogging software livejournal under the tagline 'ea_spouse' on November 10, 2004. The blog discusses the working environment at an Electronic Arts studio in Los Angeles during the making of the *Lord of the Rings* video games. The second narrative is entitled "Wives of Rockstar San Diego employees have collected themselves" and was posted January 7, 2010 on the Gamasutra Blogs webpage under the tagline 'Rockstar Spouse'. This blog discusses the working environment at Rockstar: San Diego during the making of *Red Dead Redemption*. The third narrative is a set of over 45 consecutive tweets posted on Twitter under the tagline 'veracious_shit' on January 22, 2010 and 11 more posted between September 3, 2010-July 5, 2011. The subject of these 56+ tweets is the development

process of the game *L.A. Noire* by Team Bondi Studio in partnership with Rockstar Games. In the discussion that follows these narratives will be referred to as EA Spouse, Rockstar Spouse, and Team Bondi, respectively.

These narratives were selected for two reasons. The first is that each created a considerable stir ('went viral') in the video game industry that spread to media outlets. EA Spouse was the first exposé of the game industry and targeted one of the largest publishers. The blog went live in the middle of a class action law suit by video game developers against Electronic Arts. It was discovered much later that EA Spouse is Erin Hoffman, the wife of one of the lead plaintiffs in the class action suit. The EA Spouse blog received 4658 comments on livejournal alone. The entry was re-posted across the Internet and was largely responsible for sparking a 'Quality of Life' movement in the industry. Rockstar Spouse was posted in a very mainstream space (for the game industry) and received 159 comments on that site and more through re-posting. It spurred the International Game Developers Association to issue a statement to Rockstar: San Diego Studios about appropriate balance in work hours (IGDA, 2010). The Team Bondi tweets sparked an investigation by an Australian freelance journalist and the resulting articles were later widely distributed (McMillen, 2011a; 2011b).

The second reason for choosing these narratives is that they each represent a peripheral voice that is communicating discontent with the state of work in the video game industry. Beginning with EA Spouse, we can see how a marginalized voice through the internet and social media becomes a powerful force for stimulating change. The medium magnifies the voice, or to follow McLuhan (1964), the medium influences how a message is perceived. As the blog 'takes off' we see the gaming community (media, executives, and gamers) responding to these marginalized voices.

The blogs and tweets were analyzed using NVIVO 9 qualitative data analysis software. Each author coded the three narratives independently for emergent themes under three parent coding nodes: monological, dialogical, and voice. The authors then shared their coding grid and discussed the similarities and differences in their classification schema. More than 90% of the material was coded identically and any differences were discussed and resolved.

Based primarily on *a priori* theoretical reasoning the themes and voices identified in the coding were graphically mapped to visually demonstrate the interconnectedness of the stories. First, the interrelationships between themes were mapped separately for monological and dialogical levels. The relationships to specific actors and voice as identified by the codings were also mapped. These two maps were then collapsed to show the connections between the monological and dialogical themes and the applicable actors at each level.

Findings

The analysis of the blogs and tweets demonstrates multi-voicedness within the game industry. In the case of EA Spouse, the monological narrative is a story of the life of EA Spouse, Erin Hoffman's husband and his development team. EA Spouse communicates the choices and processes involved in her husband's employment with Electronic Arts and then gives a detailed account of the deterioration of working conditions over the life of a project. The blog from Rockstar Spouse presents a similar narrative, though it is presented as a *collective voice* from a group of concerned spouses from the Rockstar San Diego studio. The tweets from 'veracious_shit' in the Team Bondi case present a different kind of voice. The tweets act as a narrative of an individual who seems to have some claim to insider knowledge about the development process of *L.A. Noire* by Team Bondi Studio and about the President of the

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company, Brendan McNamara. The tweets provide a narrative about a set of events that gives a voice (ventriloquates) to McNamara. In all three cases, these authors are narrators, but also marginalized characters within the game industry communicating concerns (whistle-blowing) that are monologic in relation to their personal situation, but dialogic in that they give voice to issues to do with the video game industry and the societal and ideological context in which it operates.

Conclusion

This paper argues that high profile successes are one story communicated within the video game industry's narrative. However, using the ideas of Bakhtin (1984, 1993) the study shows how multiple voices and plots illustrate the marginalized story of exploitative working conditions. This work contributes to an understanding of multi-vocality in the 'edgy' video game industry. It seeks to explore the 'dark side' of this industry, which otherwise remains hidden beneath the rhetoric of 'interactive entertainment' and the 'knowledge economy', through the use of Bakhtin's (1984, 1993) work related to polyphony in narratives. In doing so it considers the relationship between communication at an individual and micro level and what it might mean at an industry and societal level.

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