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Methods for Analyzing Let's Plays: Context Analysis for Gaming Videos on YouTube

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, Xenia Zeiler

Abstract

Let's Plays, gaming videos distributed on video platforms such as YouTube, became immensely popular during the last years. As a new research field they offer a huge new pool of research data for the study of video games/gaming and religion. But how to adequately analyze these data? We here propose a matrix for the initial section of analyzing Let's Plays, namely context analysis which then of course needs to be followed by content analysis. Based on the six wh-questions as applied especially also in the classical historical-critical method, we here propose a structured, step by step procedure analyzing specified and clearly defined components. Each step in this context analysis takes up one specific component of the Let's Play and provides context information for it. As such, we present and discuss a sequence of steps which is applicable not only in the study of Let's Plays and religion, but in research on Let's Plays in general.

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Keywords: context analysis, Let's Play, gameenvironments, Beyond: Two Souls, YouTube

Introduction

In July 2015, the German press reacted with astonishment and partly harsh critic as a young man (not a journalist) interviewed the German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel. What had happened? The YouTuber LeFloid every Monday and Thursday publishes a video in the video series named LeNews, in which he discusses the recent news as presented in TV. These videos are quite successful and are watched by 800,000 – 1,000,000 persons per video, especially by teenagers. So, it is not surprising that LeFloid's channel at the moment of writing this article, on 25 September 2015, is ranked in the Top 5 of all German YouTube channels, having more than 2,7 million subscribers.

This development – linked with the rising phenomenon that the traditional TV news are almost not watched at all by the younger generation anymore – lead to the exceptional interview “Das Interview mit Angela Merkel - #NetzfragtMerkel”ⁱ. In it, LeFloid referred to questions which were posted by the YouTube community with the hashtag “NetzfragtMerkel”.

This case clearly shows the rising importance of YouTube channels and videos published therein not only for the mediatization of political content, but in general, for the public discourse. As part of these videos, which are posted not only on YouTube but on other (streaming) video broadcasting sites such as Twitch or MyVideo as well, we can identify the so-called Let’s Plays, which became immensely popular during the last years and are one of the most popular video genres. We define Let’s Plays as:

“Let’s Plays’ are – increasingly and widely popular self-recorded gaming videos in which the respective gamers, the ‘Let’s Players’, comment on their journey through the game as well as on various aspects of it.” (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe, Zeiler 2014, 17).

Let’s Plays have growing economic importance and relevance in the transformation processes of media usage, and as such they are a new research field which offers a huge new pool of research data for the study of video games/gaming and religion. These data allow to extend the research and analysis of games (and their possible religious content) to the respective recipients, that is people playing these games and people watching Let’s Plays, giving us access to their perspectives, which become visible in the Let’s Play videos as well as in comments on these videos.

While analyzing Let’s Plays, we have to distinguish between three different levels:

- a) the **game**, which is played by the Let’s Player in the video,

Technological tools to support archiving and analyzing data sets - be they video, audio, or textual - rapidly develop at present and constantly change. While new technical tools are more or less regularly introduced, especially when it comes to quantitative analysis, we also find the case that older ones are no longer available, that software which thitherto was free of charge begins to charge for its use, etc. Especially because of these permanent shifts, in this article we make no claims to be complete in naming specific software and/or other technical support, but only mention examples.

This article begins with remarks on archiving which is a prerequisite of all research. This section especially makes aware of and discusses strategies for the specific challenges posed when archiving Let's Plays and their environments. Next, the article discusses our proposed matrix, consisting of the individual components, for context analysis of the three different levels which need to be distinguished when researching Let's Plays (game, Let's Play, and comments). This section of the article is structured in the following way: First, each component, i.e. each step of the context analysis, is named and explained, and second, the respective component is directly illustrated with concrete information from a case study. This step by step manual or matrix for contextualizing Let's Plays enables the researcher to get (1) a grounded overview and (2) a deeper insight into important basic information. This background information will thus not only provide the indispensable thorough background on the research material but also support reflections on which research questions may be successfully applied to the material used.

As our case study to illustrate the components of the context analysis, we selected a specific Let's Play published on YouTube. The highly popular YouTuber and Let's Player PewDiePie played the game *Beyond: Two Souls* and published a series of Let's Plays, out

of which we here refer to the gaming video named “MANLY TEARS! - Beyond: Two Souls - Gameplay, Walkthrough - Part 12”ⁱⁱⁱ.

	Game	Let's Play		Comments		
Prerequisite: Archiving	Archiving	Archiving		Archiving		
Context Analysis	Game design and development	<i>Let's Play</i>	a) Platform b) Channel c) Playlist d) Video	<i>Comments</i>	Quantity	
	Release dates and global distribution				Language(s)	
	Costs and sales				Time period	Time frame, date, frequency
	Systems and its requirements				Topics	Particularities and characteristics
	Age rating				Statistics	
	Reception, rankings, awards					
	Play and game mode(s)					
	Game controls	<i>Let's Player</i>	Person	<i>Commenters</i>	Quantity	
	Media reception and pre- or sequels		Network		Relation of the numbers of comments and commenters	
Specifics	Media repertoire					

Figure 1: Matrix for Context Analysis of Let's Plays

To gather and structure information on contextualizing specific video games, Let's Plays, and comments levels for gaming videos, we are in the process of installing an open access space on the website *gamevironments*^{iv} to be jointly fed by researchers working in this field. Context information on any case study could thus be made available and

(re)used by the researcher community in all cases where such context information is needed.

While context analysis always remains standardized and as such unmodified irrespective of the research question(s), the next steps of analyzing Let's Plays of course need to be chosen according to what is asked in detail in the respective research. Existing analytical approaches are numerous and diverse and may involve various analytical techniques, also when it comes to questions regarding Let's Plays and religion. For instance, depending on details of the research question(s), approaches involving coding techniques, thick description, or film analysis may be of use for certain studies, as much as network analysis may support other studies.

This article forms the first part of a planned series of articles presenting Methods for Analyzing Let's Plays. Following the detailed discussion in this article of context analysis as the indispensable first step of any Let's Play analysis, future articles will subsequently highlight and illustrate precise analytical approaches (such as thick description, coding, network analysis, etc.) including concrete and practical analytical steps, discussed again using one game as an example. Look out for these articles in the following regular issues of *gamevironments*!

Prerequisite: Archiving

Contextualization, the initial step forming the first part of the analysis, necessarily begins with data archiving. In the academic discourse it is without doubt, that the material of analysis has to be archived so it can be accessed and verified at any time. But, a particular problem of digital media research in general and of the research of *gamevironments* (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe, Zeiler 2014) in particular is the

archiving of web and video gaming content. Archiving material of any kind usually implies a general problem, namely the transformation of data by reproducing it: "The archivization produces as much as it records the event." (Derrida 1996, 100)

As already mentioned, we have to distinguish between three different levels, which all have their own challenges and procedures when it comes to archiving.

Game

In order to archive game-related content it is not sufficient to only archive the respective game. Due to the fact that technical equipment constantly changes it is essential to archive this technical equipment as well, for example the specific console or the specific computer. In both cases we have to consider the fact that additionally, the respective software (for example the specific version of the adobe flash player) as well as the respective operation systems have to be secured.

Let's Play

Next, research on Let's Plays needs to archive the respective Let's Play itself, that means the videos as well as the channels and video platforms which host it. Whereas videos as such can be archived relatively easily, by using specific software tools, it is not sufficient to limit the archiving to the videos only. Also the channel on the respective video platform has to be archived, due to the fact that it presents the contextual frame in which the video is embedded. Without this, the access to the selected channel's background information, such as network, links, and recommendations, cannot be guaranteed. We have to keep in mind that web pages may change at any time and data may get irretrievably lost. Due to the fact that there is no standardized archiving for Internet sites such as video platforms, it is an urgent and necessary task to develop the

Next to that and taking the multimedia character of the medium into account, it is not enough to save just the video or textual elements but to store all related data, that means also interactive multimedia applications and the dynamic structure (for example links) as well as invisible contents and structural elements for the browser (for example page sources). This requires not only extensive storage space, but the necessity to provide long-term archiving.

While archiving these data we face three processes:

- a) the migration, namely the transfer of information to a new platform,
- b) the transfer of information into a new, standardized file format, and
- c) the choice of the storage medium.

Especially the issue of the storage medium to retain the data requires a special long-term archiving methodology. It is now within the responsibility of science to develop preservation strategies for web material, to secure the Internet discourses and information as part of cultural heritage. Rapid technological change, for example in the field of the computer industry, leads to a rapid obsolescence of media and data formats, a fact which constitutes an acute threat to the long-term usability of digital objects.

To sum up: when archiving Let's Play material, we have to keep in mind the necessity to (1) archive all the data of the respective channel, for example audio-visual material, textual elements including their interactive structure, and meta tags, and (2) prevent the archived material from potential loss.

Comments

Archiving all comments for a Let’s Play may turn out to be a challenging task, depending on the platform and the number of comments. Some popular Let’s Plays not only have an extremely high number of comments, but also this number and possibly the order of individual comments continuously changes, as new comments are added. Precisely because of this growing and shifting set of data it is imperative to archive the comments at the very beginning of your study. Different platforms of course offer different archiving tools. But the embedded tools even for displaying and more so for archiving the comments on gaming videos on many popular websites, such as YouTube, are insufficient when the number of comments reach a certain limit. As very high numbers of comments on Let’s Plays increasingly seem to be the trend, it is now necessary to develop new software for accessing and archiving - new research data also require new technical solutions.

YouTube poses specific challenges when it comes to archiving, and in some cases even simply accessing, comments on Let’s Plays (or any video uploaded on YouTube). As one single Let’s Play may have more than 30,000 comments, YouTube does not display all of them. While it is generally possible to reload the comments page and gain access to older comments, this function only works to a certain point. The sheer amount of data seems to get in the way of accessing all comments. Thus, the entire data of the comment level for intensively discussed Let’s Plays may only be securely accessed when asking YouTube itself for access.

Also, we need to keep in mind that comments may be administered, i.e. posts may be deleted by the person with administration rights for the respective channel, for various reasons. For instance, the total number of comments given for the case study taken as an example in this article, *MANLY TEARS! - Beyond: Two Souls - Gameplay, Walkthrough*

- *Part 12*, on the time of taking a comment level sample on 2 July 2014 was given with 29,106, while at the time of writing this article on 25 September 2015 it was displayed as 26,977.

1. Level - Context Analysis of the Game

Game design and development

Besides the chronological and geographical setting, one of the first questions is generally the one regarding the author. *Who* created the research object and - in a next step - *why*? In case of video games the *who* it is more difficult to answer, due to the fact that very many people are engaged in the production process and thus influence its design and concept. Thus, we need to consider people such as author(s), developer(s), producer(s), designer(s), and their role in the design and production process. It get's even more complicated as within the usual process of games production, a game is not created as a whole but in different parts, by different companies in different countries. This complexity leads to the fact that (only) persons such as the chief designer are specified, whereas of course mostly whole teams work in the background. Nevertheless, for context analysis it is sufficient to know the main designer(s). Additionally, context analysis should reveal possible networks of producers, designers, authors, etc. and former cooperation in game productions. Concerning the *why*, context analysis is based mainly on information from published or self conducted interviews. Here, the blurring border between context analysis and content analysis becomes apparent.

Example from the case study:

Beyond: Two Souls was published by Sony Computer Entertainment. It is one of the biggest video games companies worldwide which published, among other things, games like *The Last of Us*, *Final Fantasy XIV*, *X*, and *VII*. The game was developed by the

French video game developer Quantic Dream, which was founded by David Cage, who is the director of Sony Computer Entertainment. He himself wrote and directed it. Lorne Balfe, Hans Zimmer and Normand Corbeil were responsible for the composition. The Canadian composer Corbeil, who was responsible for the soundtracks of *Heavy Rain* and *Fahrenheit*, died during the time of development, so *Beyond: Two Souls* was dedicated to him. Balfe succeeded him and worked together with the German composer Zimmer, famous for his work in the films *The Lion King*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Gladiator* or *Interstellar*. Both already worked together for different games such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, and for different bible films. The chief designer was Christophe Brusseaux, the lead game builder was Sophie Buhl, supported by Julien Colas and Simon Wasselin. Guillaume de Fondaumière, since 2004 part of Quantic Dream as the chief operating officer in charge of administration, finance and business development, produced the game. He was assisted by Charles Coutier, as well as by the associate producers Alexandre Plissonneau and Jérôme Vu Than. All already worked together in the production of the video games *Heavy Rain* and *Indigo Prophecy*.

Release dates and global distribution

Another basic context information concerns time and place of the game, that means its production and genesis, the release, and its distribution. To put it in the classical W-questions: *When* and *where* was the video game designed and produced? Just like for the study of texts or other material, the historical context is important to evaluate socio-cultural conditions as well as references to specific conditions and situations in which the game was planned and developed. Video games, just like texts, of course also consequently refer to their specific time or period. Additionally, we need to know a game's global distribution, especially if we are interested in the gamers and in the analysis of gameenvironments (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe, Zeiler 2014).

nominated for respectively it succeeded in. This information may indicate not only a game's general level of popularity, but also specifics and characteristics which it was praised respectively criticized for.

Example from the case study:

Beyond: Two Souls was overall very well received by both reviewers and gamers. While IGN criticized the gaming experience as too passive and the plot as too confused^{viii}, in general it was highly praised especially for its audio and visual quality, achieved through an unique and innovative motion capture technique, and for its complex and detailed narrative.^{ix} The game was consistently ranked around 70%, for example it received 72,04% from Game Rankings^x, and a metascore of 70 from metacritic^{xi}.

The game was nominated in several categories for several awards, for example in the categories Best Original Music, Artistic Achievement, and Best Performer in the BAFTA Awards 2014, or in the category Best Original Score for a Video Game or Interactive Media in the International Film Music Critics Award (IFMCA) 2013. None of these nominations resulted in an award.

Game genre

For a context analysis, one of the essential information to be given is the gaming genre. It may indicate the form of narrative (for example adventure), of aesthetics (for example graphic novel), etc. In most cases, producers themselves publish information on this, but at times also gaming journals, game reviews or discussions by gamers offer detailed material.

Example from the case study:



Beyond: Two Souls is an interactive action-adventure video game. It stands out as it crosses the genres of film and video game, a crossover facilitated by the innovative motion capture technique applied throughout the game. Because all game scenes consist of full motion video, it belongs to the game genres of so-called interactive movies.

Play and game mode(s)

Depending on the play and/or game mode(s), a game of course can accentuate certain aspects in the gameplay - for example, multiplayer modes often accentuate cooperation skills, unlike single player modes which often emphasize strategy skills. Also, contextualization needs to include the possible different perspectives in a game (for example first-person perspective or third-person perspective), as different perspectives for example support different identification possibilities.

Example from the case study:

Beyond: Two Souls can be played in singleplayer modus and in the so-called dual mode newly introduced by the developer Quantic Dreams, a kind of coop multiplayer which allows two persons to play the game in cooperation, by playing one main game character (Jodie and Aiden) each. The dual mode allows either Jodie or Aiden to play at a time; both characters cannot be played simultaneously.

Game controls

Details of the game controls very much govern the freedom of a player’s movement and the degree of difficulty in gameplay. What is possible (and what not), how characters may move (or not) is predefined by game control presettings, which is why this information necessarily belongs in the contextualization of a game. Also, the level of

immersion for the people playing a game may be intensively influenced by the mentioned presettings - immersion is among other things of course affected by the fact which character can be played, and in which way.

Example from the case study:

The game's controls allow for the main character Jodie's free movement with the left analog stick. Interaction possibilities throughout the game are mainly marked with a white dot, pointing out to the player where interaction is possible/needed. Also, written instructions on the screen guide through the gameplay. The second main character Aiden's movements are constantly announced and visually marked by blue light halos, and like Jodie's movements are in many cases guided through written instructions on the screen.

Media reception and pre- or sequels

The narratives of some games are based on novels or films. Also, especially successful games may be taken up by other media genres than games after their release. The information on both, on eventual media predecessors and successors of a game, is relevant to understand a game's genesis and influence. Of course, it also testifies for the general popularity of especially a game's narrative. In order to allocate the content and construction of the respective video game it is furthermore necessary to know if the game is developed in a series. If the game has a prequel, the researcher needs to know the (narrative or other) references to this previous game.

Example from the case study:

The game stands alone as it does not have a game prequel or sequel. Its narrative is not based on or is later taken up in a literary or filmic version.

Specifics

Some games get attention especially for specific details and/or characteristics. These may concern technical aspects, production specifics, audio, visual, or gameplay innovations, the game narrative, etc. Especially technical novelty elements or controversial narrative elements may lead to heated debates among gamers and highly contribute to a game's fame (and sales figures).

Example from the case study:

The most important feature, making the game outstanding in the global game market, is its use of a new motion capture technique which pushed the game beyond the boundaries of established video games. In this technique, actors are equipped with multiple sensors not only on their body but also on their face, which then capture the facial and body movements. The result is a unique, highly discussed and praised visual and audio quality which reminds of film and places *Beyond: Two Souls* between the genres of interactive film or visual novel and video game.

A specific characteristic also is that voices by popular actors were integrated, such as Willem Dafoe (*Platoon*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Antichrist*, *Spider Men I-III*) as Nathan Dawkins, and Ellen Page (*X-Men: The Last Stand*, *Inception*) as Jodie Holmes. Additionally the ingame characters were visually modeled after these actors.

2. Level - Context Analysis of the Let's Play

In general, we have to distinguish between two different elements when it comes to context analysis of the Let's Play level: Let's Play and Let's Player. Contextualizing the Let's Play offers basic information especially on the video content and on playing the

game. Additionally, it provides an insight in the frame in which the Let's Play is published. A context analysis of the Let's Player offers us background information about the person playing the game and producing the video. Even if the later research question primarily focuses on one of both layers, the context analysis has to include both.

A) Let's Play

Regarding the element of Let's Plays, we have to contextualize the platform, the channel, the playlist, and the videos.

Thus, the *where*-question must be answered on four levels:

- a) the video platform,
- b) the YouTube channel, which is published on a specific video platform,
- c) the playlist, which is published on the respective YouTube channel, and
- d) the videos, which are published in the respective playlist.

a) Platform

Self-recorded gaming videos, e.g Let's Plays, are mostly published on video platforms such as YouTube^{xii} or MyVideo^{xiii}. Here a large quantity of videos can be found, which are grouped in different channels. Additionally, most well-known Let's Players have their own website, which hosts these videos as well. The owner of a website can be identified on search websites such as betterwhois.org, which search for registration informations from all Internet domains.

Example from the case study:

The YouTube channel by PewDiePie is <http://www.youtube.com/user/PewDiePie>.

- 5. information from other subscribed channels, if the respective YouTubers have subscribed this channel as well
- 6. links to the media repertoire such as Twitter account, Facebook account, etc.
- 7. a proposed video, which is selected by the Let's Player
- 8. selected videos from different playlists.

Example from the case study:

The context analysis depends on the chosen platform, even though most platforms have a similar design. Naturally, this context analysis refers to all YouTube videos. The adjustments of YouTube for our case study were: PC, operating system Windows 7, Firefox 40.0.3, language setting: English, country setting: worldwide, non-restricted mode.

At the time of writing this article, on 25 September 2015, 2,503 videos in 248 playlists were published on the YouTube-channel PewDiePie. The channel has a verified name. The video "10 Billion Montage"^{xv} starts running automatically when accessing the channel, as it is proposed by PewDiePie himself. In the category "discussion", 1,538 comments plus replies can be found. The channel doesn't feature any other channels, so the category "channels" is without information.

c) Playlist

In the respective YouTube channel the videos are mostly grouped in so-called playlists, mostly with a specific topic or game genre, for example "PVP-videos" (Player-versus-Player) or "fun-videos". They have titles and can be subscribed by the registered viewer.

Example from the case study:

The playlist “Beyond: Two Souls” can be found on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhMptotuYeM&list=PLYH8WvNV1YEksqETY8aOdO OE3PHsKZ20e> and contains 17 videos, ranging from 15 to 50 minutes each. The title indicates that all videos in this playlist are Let’s Plays of the game *Beyond: Two Souls*.

d) Video

Within the playlists you can find the specific Let’s Play video. Each video has its own comment field. The viewer can rate and comment on these individual videos.

Example from the case study:

The selected video with the title “MANLY TEARS! - Beyond: Two Souls - Gameplay, Walkthrough - Part 12”^{xvi} is published in the playlist “Beyond: Two Souls”^{xvii}. It takes 26:40 minutes and has - at the time of writing this article - 3,344,417 views, 110,461 likes, and 1,215 dislikes. In the field for further information you can find

- the publication date,
- the link to part 1 of the respective playlist,
- the link to the subscription of the channel,
- links to two other videos, which might be interesting for the viewer, namely Let’s Play videos of the video games *The Walking Dead* and *Heavy Rain*,
- the links to PewDiePie’s Facebook and Twitter accounts,
- links to his merchandising products,
- the following information: “Please: Respect each other in the comments. Thanks for all your support bros, rating the video and leaving a comment is always appreciated!”,
- and a typeface:

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Time period

Besides the question *where* the video was published, of course the question of *when* is important. Again, one has to take into account the different levels, namely the YouTube-channel itself, the playlist and the respective video.

Example from the case study:

Whereas the YouTube-channel PewDiePie started on 29 April 2010, the first video with the title "Minecraft Multiplayer Fun" was published on 2 October 2010. The playlist "Beyond: Two Souls" was published just shortly after the game itself was released in Europe, starting on 8 October 2013 and ending on 24 October 2013. The respective video went online on 19 October 2013.

Topics

Considering the *what*-question, it is important to know what the main contents of the respective YouTube-channel are. Is the selected video an exception or is it typical? Are there other genres besides Let's Plays?

Example from the case study:

Most videos and playlists are Let's Plays of horror or action games and include blockbusters such as *GTA V*, *Mortal Combat*, *The Witcher 3* or *The Last of Us*. After 2011, so-called vlogs - the abbreviation for video and blog/weblog - were published as well, for example „Fridays with PewDiePie“^{xviii}.

Statistics

The analysis of the numbers of the views and subscriptions gives the researcher a glimpse into the relevance and popularity of the respective Let's Play. The different levels have to be considered again. Thus, we have to ask for the numbers of subscribers including their chronological development, and the number of views concerning the playlist as well as the respective video. It is thereby important to distinguish between the subscription numbers and the views. It is as well necessary to consider the difference between views and viewers. Due to the fact that YouTube displays only the number of views, we cannot equate them automatically with the numbers of viewers. Additionally, we have to reflect that the number of views does not mean that the videos are watched completely by each viewer clicking on it.

But also the rating of the respective video plays an important role: the viewers can rate via the buttons "I like this" or "I dislike this", in addition to their personal feedback via comments. The biggest problem with statistic data is to get them. Whereas it is relatively easy to look for the ascription and view numbers, as well as for the assessment by the viewers on the basis of the published numbers, it becomes quite problematic to identify data for more than the specific point in time when the researcher is looking for it. Only a few minutes later, the numbers can be quite different. In this context various software tools are of great help, but not without problems. One of the most important tools is provided by YouTube itself, namely YouTube Analytics (YTA). It offers the

account was called PewDie – ‘pew’ to sound like a laser gun, and die for death” – but when he forgot the password he was forced to create a new account, so added the ‘pie’.^{xxviii} He dropped out of his studies of Industrial Economics and Technology Management to concentrate on his YouTube activities. According to the Wall Street Journal he earns four million dollar a year.^{xxix} His influence even on games is noticeable in various acknowledgments, for example in the *McPixel* level in the video game *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, designed in his honor, and in a NPC named after him in the video game *Party Hard*. Aside from his records of being the most subscribed YouTube channel worldwide, Kjellberg received many awards for his work in the PewDiePie Let’s Plays, for example the Starcount Social Star Awards in the category “Most Popular Social Show” (Singapore 2013), and the “Teen Choice Awards” in 2014.

Network

The component network refers to the links the respective Let’s Player has on his/her channel and beyond. This may be other YouTubers or Let’s Players as well as so-called YouTube networks. These networks were founded to connect several channels, to market them collectively, and to thus gain higher contact rates. Their aim is to help YouTubers to build up an audience through cross-promotion within the network, and to support them in public relations and the promotion beyond the platform. Especially for new and smaller YouTubers these networks are of high importance. Examples for bigger networks are Maker Studios, IDG Germany or Mediakraft Networks, which are specialized on gaming. Nevertheless, these networks are not without criticism.

Example from the case study:

The YouTube channel PewDiePie is related with channels by jacksepticeye^{xxx}, Markiplier^{xxxii}, VanossGaming^{xxxiii}, Smosh Games^{xxxiii}, CutiePieMarzia^{xxxiv}, and Smosh^{xxxv}.

With the exception of his girlfriend's channel CutiePieMarzia, all mentioned channels are channels of Let's Players. Additionally, the channel is signed under the network Polaris, which is a sub-network of the Maker Studios. Maker Studio was bought for 500 millions dollar in 2014 by Walt Disney.^{xxxvi}

Media repertoire

In line with Hasebrink and Popp (2006) we understand media repertoires as the Let's Player's selection of media he/she uses next to the Let's Play, which in most cases is connected to the media repertoire. Thus, we have a lot of social media interactions, such as linked Facebook, Google+, and Twitter accounts, or associated webshops, where Let's Players offer fan merchandise, for example T-shirts or caps with the respective logo. These interlinked media offer much information, such as descriptions and advertisements for the published video, or further discussions, within the fan community as well as within the Let's Player community. Additionally, Let's Players answer questions from their audience (for example on ask.fm), offer playlists including their favorite music (for example from spotify or soundcloud) or publish pictures (for example by Instagram). In most cases, a direct link is given to a live-streaming platform, where the Let's Player occasionally offers live-streams, which is advertised on Facebook and/or Twitter. In a context analysis, however, it is only possible to collect data of the media repertoire as such, namely of what the media repertoire consists of. The question of how the Let's Player uses the media repertoire depends on the research question and should be included in further content analysis of the respective sample.

Example from the case study:

The YouTube channel PewDiePie is interconnected with a huge amount of other social websites. As mentioned above, <http://www.pewdiepie.net> is the main site, which

connects to every other site. Additionally, the YouTube channel PewDiePie features the same content. Both sites offer links to the Google+ account, which is necessary to run a YouTube channel. The Google+ profile has over one million followers.^{xxxvii} The linked Facebook account PewDiePie is even more successful, with over 6,5 million likes.^{xxxviii} Interestingly, the Twitter account^{xxxix} with equal numbers of followers is operated under PewDiePie's real name, Felix Kjellberg, and maintains nearly 3,000 photographs and videos. Since 2011, an Instagram account is available, at the moment with 5,5 millions followers, containing only 371 photographs, mostly depicting PewDiePie himself.^{xl} A merchandise shop can be found on the main site, offering products ranging from T-Shirts, sunglasses, caps, and towels to posters backpacks.^{xli}

3. Level - Context Analysis of the Comments

The comment level by definition of course differs from both previous levels in a number of ways. It contains mainly plain textual material, at times also graphics such as symbols or emoticons or interactive elements such as links, but only very seldom video or audio material. The comment level for a Let's Play video comprises of at times tens of thousands of single comments, posted by nearly as many individual commenters, making this level not only a quantitatively speaking very voluminous but also qualitatively speaking highly complex and multilayered set of data.

A general contextualization of the whole comment level thus is both useful and retrievable only for some basic information, such as the number of comments or the main language of the comment discussion. More specific contextualizing aspects, such as the use of web jargon or symbols, emoticons and acronyms, or national respective regional backgrounds of commenters, depend on details of the planned research and should be included in the context analysis of the respective sample of comments.

Contextualization needs to differentiate between comments and commenters. While contextualizing commenters offers basic information especially on the persons behind a comment, the section contextualizing comments obviously focuses on the statements themselves. Research questions may focus on either comments or commenters, but a contextualization of the comments level needs to include both.

A) Comments

Quantity

The number of comments – not to be confused with the number of commenters – offers initial basic quantitative context. It denotes how many comments have been posted for a Let's Play. The number of total comments on a Let's Play is evidence for the popularity of a certain Let's Play, and a high number may also indicate a controversial topic in the Let's Play or in the comment discussion. The number of comments constantly and, in the cases of popular Let's Plays, rapidly changes and may reach a very high number.

Example from the case study:

All available comments on the Let's Play analyzed here summed up to 29,976 comments at the time of writing this article, on 24 September 2015.

Language(s)

The component language(s) of comments offers information on the precise language or languages which are used in a comment discussion. Of course, languages may be and in practice are sometimes mixed in the discussion (or even in one single comment).

Information on the language(s) of comments is essential context, as the choice for language use is not necessarily straightforwardly dictated by the language of the Let's

function for comments. But, if the number of comments is very high - as it is in our case study - the current display functions for comments on YouTube enable access only to a restricted number of these comments. They then do not enable access to very many older comments, including their posting dates. This restricted access also prevents to retrieve information on intervals between older posts or their frequency. Nevertheless, the full range of context information as suggested here can be retrieved in the case a Let's Play is not very heavily commented upon.

Example from the case study:

The extremely large number of comments for this case study allows to retrieve information only on when the last comment was posted, namely two days before writing this article on 24 September 2015. This information for example documents the Let's Play's popularity in the sense that even almost two years after its upload on 19 October 2013, it is still commented upon.

Particularities and characteristics

In case there are particularities and characteristics in the comments discussion, this should be indicated in the context analysis. The comment level may be dominated by a certain theme or topic, the discussion may be exceptional intense or even heated, etc.

Example from the case study:

Even a first glance at the contents level it instantly reveals a particular focus on one topic. During the Let's Play, in a crucial and very emotional moment in the narrative, PewDiePie loudly sneezes. This is commented upon intensively and in a way dominates the whole comment level. Numerous comments refer to this sneeze, as in "omg!!idk why..but when pewds sneezed near the end of the video it made me jumpXD not cool",

“Your sneeze scared the shit out of me”, “SHIT PEWDS !! THAT DAMN SNEEZE WAS A FUCKING JUMP SCARE”, or simply “Dat Sneeze” or “bless you!”.

B) Commenters

Quantity

The number of commenters offers initial basic quantitative context. It denotes how many persons commented on a Let’s Play. The number of total commenters on a Let’s Play can offer evidence for the popularity of a certain Let’s Play, or may indicate a controversial topic in the Let’s Play or in the comment discussion. Also, the number of commenters is of course needed to then relate respectively compare the numbers of commenters and comments, contextualizing how many persons repeatedly engage in the comments discussions. The number of commenters, just as the number of comments, constantly and, in the cases of popular Let’s Plays, rapidly changes and may reach a very high number as new commenters join. Reliable data on this can be acquired only from the hosting platform YouTube itself.

Example from the case study:

The number of commenters for this case study cannot be retrieved from YouTube, as older comments (and with this commenters’ names) cannot be accessed with current display settings.

Relation of the numbers of comments and commenters

It is necessary to differentiate between the number of comments and the number of contributing commenters, and to relate them. This contextualizes how many persons repeatedly engage in the comments discussion. Both the number of comments and commenters constantly and, in the cases of popular Let’s Plays, rapidly changes and may

reach a very high number. Each newly added comment, of course, creates a new ratio of the number comments versus commenters. Reliable data on this can be acquired only from the hosting platform YouTube itself.

Example from the case study:

The relation of the numbers of comments and commenters for this case study cannot be established, as the number of commenters cannot be accessed with current display settings for YouTube comments.

The context analysis as proposed here provides us with a very detailed and founded sum of information on various contextual facts and figures regarding our researched Let's Play. On this basis, the researcher now is able to make an informed decision how to proceed with the research material, and to define research question(s) as well as to select the respective sample(s) and method(s).

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