

Communal Ritual Play: Repetition and Interpretation of Game Narratives Across Communities

Bjarke A. Larsen, Nic Junius, Elin Carstensdottir

University of California, Santa Cruz
{balarsen,ecarsten,njunius}@ucsc.edu

Abstract. Storytelling has always been a communal activity and video games are no different, yet, work on designing story experiences that emphasize the communal elements of storytelling have typically focused on the creation of stories, not communal interpretation of existing ones. This paper draws on communal storytelling rituals from theater and mythology to explore how games and interactive narrative can utilize narrative through communal interactions. From this, several design patterns can be extrapolated from existing games that create communal storytelling rituals. We use *Destiny 2*, *Final Fantasy XIV*, and *Elden Ring* as primary examples to discuss three narrative design patterns for online communal ritual storytelling. These three design patterns are 1) giving players incomplete information, encouraging repetition, 2) not helping players, encouraging community, and 3) building for player expression, encouraging player-stories. All three patterns utilize aspects of rituals and theater to encourage storytelling of their respective games, through encouraging repetition and communal aspects. Games are often repetitive in nature, and harnessing community to strengthen the narrative through this repetition can be a powerful tool to create engaging narratives for players while still relying on repetitive gameplay loops. Designing for communal ritual play is thus a strong way to utilize the advantages of repetitive games and communal narrative.

Keywords: communal storytelling, ritual, interpretation, myth, theater, repetition, games

1 Introduction

Since the beginnings of oral traditions of mythology and ancient theater, storytelling has been a communal activity. Stories in video games are no different. They engage communities as well as individuals, yet, when communal storytelling has been incorporated into narrative design, it has focused on the *creation* of stories as a communal activity [38, 57, 58, 85]. The reading or playing of an existant story of games played by communities instead of individuals, such as the play experience of *Terminal Time* [61], remains an underdiscussed topic. Drawing on communal storytelling rituals from mythology and theater, we instead focus on the ways communities of players collectively understand and engage with stories.

Communal play and rituals can teach us how to design narratives around the repetition that is exceedingly common in games as well as find ways to encourage players of multiplayer focused games to engage with their narratives. Current games with less traditional single player narrative structures and plots (such as *Destiny 2* or *Elden Ring*) utilize design patterns that encourage communal storytelling instead. These patterns can be extrapolated to create more experiences where the storytelling approach strengthens a community and narrative together, creating more powerful stories that connect people to each other as well as to the work of the narrative.

The single player narrative experience is well researched in interactive storytelling and games [1, 5, 6, 26, 43, 47, 52, 60, 66, 76, 84]. One ongoing strand from this direction of research focuses on better understanding the ways players' relationships to games change over repeated playthroughs [42, 46, 63, 64], showing the power of narrative understanding through repetition. The work in this area has largely focused on singleplayer experiences, in the choices of games to analyze and the emphasis on each player's distinct, personal reinterpretation [42, 46, 63, 64]. Interpretation, however, is not exclusively an individual act and entire communities can engage in the practice while playing games, collectively creating new meaning out of (re)experiencing the same story. Not all games are equally suited for this kind of communal retelling and interpretation and certain design patterns lend themselves better to it than others.

To understand the narrative design patterns that encourage collective interpretation of games, we propose *communal ritual play* as a lens to analyze narratively-oriented, multiplayer games. Such a lens allows us to expand the work of studying the ways narrative designs create modes of storytelling that encourage players to engage in interpretation into the ways these designs and approaches encourage the collective sharing and interpretation of in-game experiences. Furthermore, this lens enables us to more deeply understand the way multiplayer narrative design draws players into engaging with these games' stories which are often multimodal and feature hidden or otherwise non-obvious elements, frequently requiring a collective effort to discover in the first place. When narrative elements are used in these multiplayer games they are often told through fractions of a story when experienced a single time, requiring repeated playthroughs or engagement with a community, or sometimes both, to begin understanding the full story being told. Additionally, we focus on *ritual* as the mode of play as rituals, like many multiplayer games, are built for the express purpose of repeated enactment of events and the narrative of multiplayer games rarely exists as a single linear story. These design patterns strongly help foster a community's interpretation of a narrative, yet are rarely connected directly to narrative experience.

To construct the lens of communal ritual play, we turn to theatrical performance practices and literature around ritual and myth. From these, we can form an understanding of what is compelling about revisiting stories which can then be applied to existing multiplayer games, which have communities built around their interpretation. Theatrical performance practices work within the

constraints of the play script, which provides a framework for telling a specific story, while performers form their own interpretations of the roles to find novelty and bring the narrative to life [13, 56, 74]. Likewise, storytelling traditions from mythology are strongly tied to ritual and retellings [26, 49], as communities would retell and re-enact myths continuously, to both expand their understanding and convey their meaning to the society [34, 48, 72, 78]. By drawing from ritual, myth, and performance practices, we can expand our understanding of how people collectively interpret stories from a small group of specialists to much wider communities of varying expertise levels engaging in this form of novelty seeking and interpretation.

In this paper we describe three narrative design patterns using the lens of communal ritual play: *Incomplete Information*, *Not Helping the Player*, and *Building for Player Expression*. To synthesize these patterns, we first identified games with active communities discussing their play and storytelling experiences. Next we searched through public discussions to find repeated topics about game elements with *high player friction*, defined as requiring discussion with at least one other player to be understood. Finally, we constructed categories by grouping these discussions based on commonalities in subjectmatter and play experience. We use the following games as exemplars to discuss these design patterns: *Destiny 2* [15], *Final Fantasy XIV* [81], and *Elden Ring* [31]. Our aim in defining and illustrating these patterns through examples is to allow for more deliberate narrative design of game elements to encourage communal storytelling in repetitive experiences.

2 Related Work

Reinterpretation through repetition is a phenomenon that has been studied in relation to digital games [42, 46, 63, 64], discussed as part of performance practices [13, 56, 74], and ritual and mythological studies [34, 48, 51, 72, 78]. Common to these is communal rituals as a storytelling practice. Communal storytelling is also seen in games, to understand how the creation of stories can be a communal activity [38, 57, 58, 85], something also well known in table-top roleplaying design [24]. Yet, this focus on collaborative *creation* is not the only aspect of communal ritual play, as through a synthesis of ideas from theatrical performance and ritual and mythological studies, a different lens emerges, of considering a collective interpretation of authored stories.

2.1 Replay and Rewind

The work focusing on replaying stories in games has primarily focused on the way individual players interpret singleplayer games and how those games facilitate reinterpretation of their stories [42, 46, 63, 64]. Mitchell and McGee describe the phenomenon of players of interactive stories transitioning between “reading again to reach closure” and “re-reading after closure” where they move from looking for catharsis in the story in the former to reflecting on their relationship with the

story in the latter [64]. When investigating the experiences of players revisiting storygames, Mitchell et al. expand on the idea of reading for closure to encompass both the experience of closure with the narrative and with the game systems, to describe ways players lose interest in replaying a game once the balance between both types of closure is lost [63].

Unlike Mitchell et al.’s focus on player closure, Kleinman et al.’s taxonomy of rewind mechanics describes the way designers facilitate the replaying and re-contextualization of the story for the purpose of evaluating games which recontextualize themselves through their mechanics [46]. In a similar vein, Junius et al. propose the concept of theatricality present in games with looping structures specifically designed to recontextualize a game’s narrative and invite a player to reinterpret their relationship to story elements within the game [42]. Expanding upon this definition of theatricality, Karth et al. add the notion of story volumes to explain the ways game narratives can be restructured while keeping the same *type* of story and guide players into interpreting the rules governing the storylines [44]. Where communal ritual play diverges from these existing approaches is in its emphasis on the act of reinterpretation as *collective*, even if it still shares the recontextualization focus of rewind mechanics and theatricality.

2.2 Performance

Communal ritual play draws from performance practices to build its lens as theater, from early in its history, has a focus of recontextualizing and retelling stories for different audiences [10]. As performance often operates within the constraints provided by a script, these practices focus on the need to find novel and unique ways of portraying and interpreting a character, lest the performer(s) or audience become bored [56, 74]. Nō theater uses the metaphor of a flower as the central aesthetic of performance, something that continuously creates novelty and requires active care to maintain [74]. The novelty seeking described in Nō is an interpretive act, and importantly, a task for each actor to consider on their own [74], similar to the approaches to analyzing replay in games discussed in section 2.1, while also making its practice distinct from more recently developed theatrical practices.

Performance’s relationship to the texts it uses to tell stories has undergone numerous re-examinations as new approaches have developed, with some practices viewing the text as dictating every aspect of a production [56, 74] and others viewing it as simply another element to be incorporated [9, 13, 41, 53]. When the text of a script is de-emphasized, it invites experimentation in performance and interpretation, finding views of roles, themes, etc. that may have otherwise been missed [13]. This freedom of interpretation informs communal ritual play as, like the work in section 2.1 describes, repeated replaying of sections of multiplayer games will change players’ relationship to the game’s narrative components and move them beyond simply trying to experience a singular version of the story.

The popular western acting practices of the Method of Physical Actions [56] and the Viewpoints [13] heavily emphasize that performance, novelty seeking,

and interpretation must be understood as collective acts. The Method of Physical Actions maintains that every action performed on the stage must in some way motivate a reaction from another character, even if the actor is alone [56]. Additionally, while the rehearsal process fixes some elements of the performance, it is the entire cast's job to explore the spaces between those fixed elements [56], sharing similarities to the way story volumes have been described [44], with the addition that exploring the possibility space is a collective responsibility. The Viewpoints shifts the focus of performance even further towards the collective, not only de-emphasizing the text but also the role of the director, to find an interpretation of a text and performance completely unique to each production [13]. More than anything the Viewpoints is intended to foster collaboration between actors to explore how they can discover actions on stage by indulging in possibilities rather than being restricted under some central authority, including the text of a play [13]. This is still framed within the rather small bounds of a theatrical production and though theatrical performance's understanding of finding novel interpretations within constraints helps to explain the creativity to be found in repetition, by itself it is insufficient to construct the communal part of communal ritual play.

2.3 Myth and Ritual

Early sociologists and myth scholars such as William Smith, E.B. Tylor and Frazer [2, 29, 78] discussed the connection between ritual and traditional mythology. In what has been named the "myth-ritualist theory" the function of myth was seen to make sense of ritual, as a way for societies to explain their customs [78]. Another view is seen in Campbell: "ritual is simply myth enacted" [17, 75]. As Segal [78] notes, the various interpretations differ on whether they consider myth or ritual primary and the other secondary, yet, ritual has long been closely tied to religion and mythological storytelling. See Nagy for a modern interpretation of the myth-ritualist position [68].

Ritual, furthermore has been directly connected to play. Huizinga directly discusses play as a kind of ritual [37], also seen in Wagner [83]. Rettberg [72] discusses how there is a ritual quality to the repetition of play, comparing it to rituals of life such as weddings and funerals. This echoes Krzywinska [48], Geraci [34] and Larsen and Carstensdottir [50, 51], who discuss the ritual and mythological quality of MMOs by treating the communal experience of playing a game as a kind of myth. Asimos [4] and Rusch [75] have a more expanded view on how contemporary games can be seen as mythology. Harrington [35] and Cragoe [24] furthermore discuss the connections between mythology and games, and how we play and talk about games can be viewed as a socially constructed and part of larger contexts. Drawing on myth, as a communal storytelling practice that relies on ritual, would be a valuable resource to understand ritual play in games and how it connects to storytelling.

As discussed by structural sociologists, myths can "*teach us a great deal about the societies from which they originate*" [55]. Scholars like Dorson [25], Levi-Strauss [54, 55], Bronislaw [59], Campbell [18] or Jung and Eliade [34, 78]

have all contributed to the modern understanding of myth as useful to building and interpreting communities. And while this has later been challenged and reinterpreted in postmodern scholarship [8, 36, 45, 78] (also seen in game studies [27, 28, 35]), the connection between mythology and ritual and play are still valuable insights for games because of their repetitive, ritual nature.

Through this lens, we will see how mythological, communal storytelling experiences arise through ritual repetition of play. Thus, by looking at how rituals are formed in games, and how the communities understand, interpret, and maintain these rituals (for themselves and others), we can understand something about how the community interprets the game they are playing. Our view on ritual is informed by Junius et al. [42] and Rettberg [72] as a recurring, repetitive activity that is given contextual, social, or cultural significance, turning mundane activities into more meaningful ways to relate to the world. Rituals in games are informed by the design of the game, its affordances and design constraints, but also in subversion to them, as communities discover optimal strategies and new ways to play unintended by the developers, and thus seeing how the player rituals are formed in relationship with the design of the game is crucial to understanding how design impacts the ritual play of community.

3 Narrative Design Patterns for Communal Ritual Play

The following three narrative design patterns showcase communal ritual play through examples from the following games: *Destiny 2* [15], *Final Fantasy XIV* [81], and *Elden Ring* [31]. Each of these patterns focuses on a different way designs encourage players to form communities around narrative experiences created through ritual play, either through providing players with *incomplete information* (3.1), *avoiding helping them* (3.2), or *letting them express themselves* (3.3).

3.1 Incomplete Information

The design pattern of incomplete information emphasizes not providing a single player with all the information they need to comprehensively understand the game across a single playthrough. Rather, the complete experience is obtained through repetition, wherein players experience new pieces of content, different ways to solve similar problems, or find hidden objectives, making the multiple repetitions a somewhat new experience each time. Players are often given a material reason to re-experience the same content over and over, such as getting new rewards, or new narrative information. Each repetition has set goals and expectations with the potential to uncover a new perspective on the content, much the way new productions of existing theatrical scripts, including historical and ancient texts, are performed today [12, 19, 74]. This potential for a revelation is what creates the ritual experience, yet within that there is room for flexibility and play because the performance of players collaborating is in focus. The repetition gives leeway for designers to not give a player all the information

in a single attempt, as it can be expected they will repeat the ritual multiple times. The existence of secrets or hidden objectives (see *hiding information*) also gives an incentive for players to re-experience it as they know they might find something new. While this approach might contradict traditional game design wisdom, withholding information with intention can help lay the groundwork for players to engage in communal ritual play.

Distributing information across multiple players or repetitions Seasonal activities in *Destiny* have ritual and repetitive affordances, as they can be done over and over again for rewards, yet the dialogue a player hears can differ. There are many permutations of voice lines that can play at the end of the activity, usually short 30-second dialogue interactions between relevant characters, conversing about current events, providing context, background or humorous insight. The only way to experience the entire story volume¹ [44] is to do the activity multiple times, view video of others completing it, or talk with other players about what they heard. Furthermore, across a season, new dialogue will appear that you could not have heard in the early weeks, reflecting changes in the story. Thus, a player will have to repeatedly engage with the seasonal event, leading to a ritual experience. This model of new dialogue through repetition is also used in *Hades* to great effect [42].

Destiny also has an example of distributing information across players rather than repetitions. During the "Corridors of Time" event [32]—a giant, community based 5000-piece jigsaw puzzle—each player would get a unique piece of the puzzle, at random. Thus, in order to complete the jigsaw puzzle, the community had to coordinate to gather all the pieces from thousands of players. This is a clear example of distributing information, since no player could hope to complete the jigsaw puzzle by themselves. ARGs² have also used similar patterns for similar effect.

Hiding information *Elden Ring* has many secrets hidden in its world. It will rarely make its objectives clear to the player, or only provide cryptic hints on how to complete quests, and sometimes leaving it entirely up to the player to discover. The end of the "Frenzied Flame" questline requires the player to remove all their clothing to be able to enter a door, and there is only one cryptic clue from one NPC to indicate this. Yet, players can leave messages to each other, and this can be used to provide hints directly in the game. Failing that, there is of course out of game information, guides and word-of-mouth. This is a clear design pattern because of how intentionally it is done across *Elden Ring*. It expects no player to solve everything by themselves and instead learn information from the community. *Elden Ring* also has several "illusory walls", walls that appear

¹ See section 2.1 and [44].

² Alternate Reality Games, see [39].

impenetrable until struck. The only way players can know about these is if another player leaves a hint in front of them.³

Destiny, too has many open secrets by design. A great example is "Public Events", 5-10 minute repeatable events that appear in the open world. Every Public Event has an initial, straightforward goal, e.g. to collect a certain amount of a resource or defend a point. However, every Public Event also has a "Heroic", secret objective, which is never explained in the game. An example is the "Glimmer Extraction" event, where the normal objective is to defeat enemies at 3 separate points. However, if you also blow up a non-assuming generator at each point, the public event will change to have a different objective altogether. This will also complete the event and give you better rewards. However, the only way to know this is a part of the game is to stumble into it accidentally, or—what is more likely—see another player do it. This is an example of how knowledge is shared through the community through repetition. Even something as simple as following the example of other players in the world is achieved because the events have hidden objectives and are repeatable. This kind of knowledge sharing is key to a game community like Destiny's, where these kinds of secrets become small nuggets of shared folk knowledge that can travel across all players organically.

Destiny also has many secret missions, where the developers will deploy a new mission in the game without notifying the players about this. Players will notice there is a new enemy, puzzle, or object leads to a new narrative beat or mission. This is then often quickly posted about on Reddit and Twitter and Discord servers and prominent community members begin to play it on Twitch, thus spreading the new, exciting secret like wildfire, without the game itself ever bringing attention to it.

Repetitive Group Activities relying on Teamwork and Communication

Some activities, such as dungeons or raids, both in in Destiny and Final Fantasy XIV require teamwork, and/or trial and error. These difficult end-game activities are often designed with difficult mechanics that do not explain themselves to players, but it is up to the group to figure out how they work and overcome the challenge. No part of the games design or UI tutorialize these mechanics to players, but they are nevertheless vital to understand in order to complete the experience. When new players are introduced to these activities, then, it is common practice for the experienced players to take them through it and explain the mechanics (or "sherpa" them, as it is known in the Destiny community). And when a new player has been taught it, if they then join another group of new players, it falls to them to pass the knowledge on.

This is thus the ritual of these activities, as each players' role becomes clear through play and communication, and through the repetition the roles are strengthened, enforced and passed on to new community members. Across all parts of this pattern is the fact that the information gathered by a single playthrough of an experience does not encompass the whole, and one must

³ Another infamous example from the same developer is how Dark Souls [30] hides a secret area behind two consecutive illusory walls.

rely on continual engagement either through repetitive sequential actions or in parallel (by other players) to understand the full breadth of what the game's experience has to offer.

3.2 Not Helping the Player

Another way games can encourage players to be in community with each other is to intentionally inconvenience or trouble them, making it harder to accomplish their goals by themselves. This design pattern focuses on the obfuscation of necessary information, creating friction around basic actions or narrative material. By *not giving guidance to optimal paths* or *distributing the backstory across many fractured instances* it makes it more difficult for an individual player to understand what to do and what is going on. This is not necessarily because the information is secret, such as in the first design pattern (3.1), but rather because the game provides inadequate guidance on how to understand its systems or narrative. By presenting narrative elements to players in pieces and out of order, overwhelming the player with too many disparate pieces of information, or *forcing players through shared difficulties*, one player is not expected to understand the entire experience by themselves, akin to the nature of a play script requiring multiple perspectives and interpretive specialities to collectively transform a script into a finished theatrical work [12, 13, 19, 74]. This is where a player begins relying on the community to map out and collectively understand the connections between each disparate element, as well as optimise strategies for how to play through the game, communally making sense of the mythology of the game.

Not Giving Guidance on Optimal Paths Elden Ring purposefully does not guide players in how to approach its world or story beyond some very basic explanations for mechanics and highlighting where to go to progress the story and open up new areas. At the game's launch, numerous players went directly to the game's first major dungeon and hit a wall in the first main boss of the game, having ignored the area in the opposite direction to the dungeon. This common experience led to the wisdom of "go south" [31] being passed around the community both in and out of game as the region at the southmost end of the map was designed to help players level up and get better tools to tackle the dungeon with.

Many items in Elden Ring are hidden around the world, and both in Destiny and Final Fantasy, items can require multiple, long quest chains to acquire. Thus it is unlikely a new player will simply acquire all the items they need to play most effectively through a normal playthrough, and they will thus use information gathered from other players about how they should go about gathering the materials and items they need in order to progress.

This also functions through giving an individual player more options than they can easily comprehend by themselves, and avoiding to tell them which of those options is the most optimal for their current situation, instead leaving them to figure it out on their own, or asking their friends.

The (Back)story is Fractured Gameplay secrets is not the only element that players need to rely on others to understand. Destiny has millenia of backstory, and furthermore has 9 years of actual history, with events dating back to 2014, many of which are no longer accessible in any way inside the game. This means that if you want to know what happened in the story of the "Red War", which happened in 2017, you will have to rely on other players, either through descriptions or recordings, or so on. This often shows itself through watching recap videos like those by prominent "lore" YouTubers like My Name is Byf [16] or Myelin [67], to understand the past and present story.

And even if you are paying attention, the story itself is difficult to understand, obfuscated through layers of perspectives and metaphors. Outside the immediate cutscenes and dialogue, the story is told through "lorebooks", served in piece-meal chapters that require repeated activity completions (see *distributing information*), and are often told through the perspective of a character, and some of these books have proven themselves to be wrong or willful attempts at misleading the players. It is thus up to the community, collectively, to make sense of the story of Destiny.

This is similar to the story experience of Elden Ring, which is also told in fractured pieces, out of order, and it is up to the community to make sense of it. This heavily relies on *confusion*, giving the players questions and leaving gaps in the narrative, letting players piece patterns out of incomplete or fractured information. This helps build community because it is through people coming together with their disparate pieces of knowledge, ideas and theories that a more complete picture is formed. The worlds of Destiny or Elden Ring are too vast for any one person to keep in their head easily, and thus it relies on the building of a community to comprehend.

Forcing Players Through Shared Difficulties Compared to Destiny, players of FFXIV have a very different relationship to the main story. The main narrative is all present in 2023 in a form almost identical to how it was in 2013⁴. This means a new player will have to play through story content ranging from 2013 to now in order to be able to see the newest story scenarios their experienced friends are seeing. This is made worse by the fact that the early story is considered too long, slowly paced, and not rewarding by itself [40, 70]. However, people are still very much being recommended to play through the "bad parts" to "get to the good stuff" in the later expansions, because the earlier events serve as important setup. Experienced players love seeing new players make it through the story [40, 71], and the community in general is very cognizant about not spoiling the experience for newcomers but letting them experience it for themselves, although they are also very aware what a slog it can be to get through.

This leads to a rather specific community relationship towards the story. As a player of FFXIV, you *know* everyone has been through the same gauntlet to get

⁴ Small alterations have been made, some superfluous quests have been removed and one optional questline has been made mandatory, but it is structurally almost identical. See https://ffxiv.consolegameswiki.com/wiki/Main_Scenario_Revisions.

to the current experience, regardless of when they started, and this communally shared experience is part of the bonding of that community. The entire main story is thus a completely *shared* experience for all players, and every member of the community has that shared background of knowing that they too trudged through a slow grind and made it out the other side. It becomes a rather different kind of ritual, a rite of passage, a mythological origin story all players share—echoing the actual origin story of the game itself [69].

While this was likely not the intended experience, it is clear that the developers are adamant about *keeping* the story experience this way, contrasting to many other MMOs like World of Warcraft or Destiny that have either entirely restructured or removed their initial campaigns as newer content has surpassed it in quality. Thus, while this is a very different way of achieving it than the other examples, this too can be seen as an example of not helping the player and thus creating communal ritual play through collective experience of hardship. This method can be quite dangerous as it can repel new players to whom it seems daunting without proper support (often entirely provided by other people). However, on the other side, the shared experience can strengthen a community and bring them closer to each other and the narrative.

3.3 Building for Player Expression

Player expression is a powerful tool to let players experiment and make their own narratives or fun, such as seen in The Sims [62] or Minecraft [65]. In a communal setting, however, player expression can take on a new life and grow beyond an individual player’s choices. How players act and dress and customize their characters can become a part of the legend and ritual of playing within the community. This design pattern focuses on letting players’ deviant play [23] be used for narrative purpose. By letting players express themselves, use suboptimal strategies or equipment, perform unoptimally or breaking the rules, they can shape their own identity through their play and define their relationship to the game’s world and narrative by making concrete decisions about who they are in manners reminiscent of the way actors and productions draw out themes through performance [13, 19, 56, 74]. In communities, these identities then become reinforced in relationships with other people, and through the repetition of play. A game can create folk heroes by letting players help each other, through messages or cooperative play in repetitive trials, where any players’ deviance will stand out in subversion to the expected monotony, creating myths. Creating systems for even deeper player expression, such as player-made crafting is a powerful way to allow this expression as well, and can have great communal benefits, letting players create their own ritual experiences and new ways to engage with the fictional worlds.

Folk Heroes Many multiplayer games have their own legendary community members, who become well known for one thing or another, either in of fame or infamy. The most well known of these across all multiplayer games is likely

”Leeroy Jenkins”, who became so well known he became a fictional character in World of Warcraft [11,77]. Elden Ring’s most well known hero ”Let Me Solo Her”, became well known as a person able to defeat the game’s hardest boss alone, wearing nothing but a loincloth and a pot on his head, which he proceeded to do, repeatedly, as others summoned him for aid [21,79]. The player expression comes through in his strange yet exceedingly confident attire and name, and this was no doubt part of his spreading appeal. Destiny, too, has many local heroes or community members known for various parts of the game, often known for exceptional feats such as ”soloing”⁵ raids or dungeons, or being exceptionally knowledgeable about the lore [16,67].

FFXIV has not just those known for completing hard challenges like well-known raid teams or individuals, but also people known for other, more silly endeavours. The streamer ”RubberNinja” became widely known for eating eggs on stream one day [20], as he was gifted a box of eggs and proceed to eat them. Others kept giving him eggs and the stream stayed live with no other content than him eating eggs for several days, prompting the inclusion of an ”eating eggs” emote in the game. Destiny, similarly, has introduced elements into the game based on community actions [51]. FFXIV is also an example of the developers themselves not shying away from becoming folk heroes in the game, as several members of the development team have formed a band that plays the game’s songs live on stage at fan conventions and celebrations [3]. There is more room for developers to experiment with accentuating interesting player stories through affecting the game or officially supporting it, empowering and encouraging these stories further [22], as also seen in Destiny [14,33,51].

The combination of repetition and player expression is what allow the myths to arise. None of these stories would have become legend if they had only happened a single time and never been retold or re-experienced. Let Me Solo Her became well known because of his persistence. RubberNinja likewise for the length of time he was willing to commit to a repetitive act. The game creates a gap for a larger challenge to be overcome, a fruitful void [7] that players can take upon themselves to fill. It is thus through the repetitions of these ritual activities, that nevertheless allow some form of expression (for example letting players enter raids meant for six people alone or wearing nonsensical outfits) that make them famous.

Crafting and Creating Finally, one would be remiss to not mention the many ways player expression can be shaped through player-made activities. FFXIV is the greatest example of this. Players can own and customize their own houses, and some sub-communities spend great effort finding ways to bend the rather limited interior decorating toolset to their will. This housing system is also a playground for a variety of player-run scenes, such as sprawling night club, theatre, or fashion show communities [73,82], the performance of play becoming literal theatrical performance or roleplay, inviting reinterpretation on what playing the game can be. These often do exist on a ritual basis, as night clubs and

⁵ Completing an activity meant for a group alone.

theatres might only be open on certain times. An even grander example of this is "Lunarcon" an player-run convention that exists entirely inside the game [80].

This is all possible because of a flexibility of design of the game. By putting few restrictions on what a "house" can be, players are free to shape the space how they want, turning it into everything from cottages to aquariums [86]. The community then creates their own rituals about these.

4 Conclusion

This paper discussed storytelling in online digital games through the lens of communal ritual storytelling, where multiple players create communal storytelling experiences out of repetitive rituals. The lenses of replay and theater performance was applied to understand how players will change interpretations of a story through performing repetition, and the lens of myth was applied through its comparison with ritual, seeing how we can draw upon narrative meaning within a ritual event. The games *Destiny 2*, *Final Fantasy XIV*, and *Elden Ring* were used as examples to discuss three design patterns, *Incomplete Information*, *Not Helping the Player*, and *Building for Player Expression*, which all utilize ritual play and communities to enforce the storytelling of their respective games, through encouraging repetition and communal aspects. These design patterns serve as a first step towards better incorporating narrative in communal game experiences. Games are often repetitive in nature, and harnessing community to strengthen the narrative through this repetition can be a powerful tool to create engaging narratives for players while still relying on repetitive gameplay loops, by intentionally introducing friction into the design and encouraging the community to come together or share stories. Designing for communal ritual play is thus a strong way to utilize the advantages of repetitive games and communal narrative. Future work in this area will focus on more concrete design applications, investigating both the positive and negative applications of communal ritual play for narrative game experiences as well as further discussion of the effects of these design patterns on the form of the textual narrative.

References

1. Aarseth, E., Smedstad, S.M., Sunnanå, L.: A multidimensional typology of games. In: DiGRA Conference (2003)
2. Ackerman, R.: *The myth and ritual school: JG Frazer and the Cambridge ritualists*, vol. 13. Psychology Press (2002)
3. Aoi, L.: Ffxiv meme ascends to official status in special live performance at digital fan festival. <https://automaton-media.com/en/news/20210517-840/>. Accessed June 22nd, 2023 (2021)
4. Asimos, V.: Playing the myth: Video games as contemporary mythology. *Implicit Religion* **21**(1) (2018)
5. Aylett, R.: Narrative in virtual environments-towards emergent narrative. In: *Proceedings of the AAAI fall symposium on narrative intelligence*. pp. 83–86 (1999)

6. Aytemiz, B., Junius, N., Altice, N.: Exploring how changes in game systems generate meaning. In: DiGRA Conference (2019)
7. Baker, V.: The fruitful void (2005), <http://lumpley.com/index.php/anyway/thread/119>
8. Barthes, R.: *Mythologies*. 1957. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang pp. 302–06 (1972)
9. Bass, E.: Visual dramaturgy: Some thoughts for puppet theatre-makers. *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance* pp. 54–60 (2014)
10. Bierman, J.: Aristotle or Else, <http://tragedy.ucsc.edu/>
11. Blizzard Entertainment Ltd.: *World of warcraft* (2004)
12. Bogart, A., Gay, J.: The art of collaboration: On dramaturgy and directing. In: *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, pp. 213–216. Routledge (2014)
13. Bogart, A., Landau, T.: *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*. Theatre Communications Group (2005)
14. Bungie: Lore tab of the electronica ghost shell. Lore entry on Ishtar, <https://www.ishtar-collective.net/entries/electronica-shell>, as well as in *Destiny 2*. It describes Guardians (players), and how frequently they dance. (2017)
15. Bungie and Activision: *Destiny 2* (2017), as of 2019, Activision is not affiliated with *Destiny* (<https://kotaku.com/bungie-splits-with-activision-1831651740>)
16. is Byf, M.N.: My name is byf's youtube channel. <https://www.youtube.com/mynameisbyf> (2011–Now)
17. Campbell, J.: *Pathways to bliss: Mythology and personal transformation*, vol. 16. New World Library (2004)
18. Campbell, J.: *The hero with a thousand faces*, vol. 17. New World Library (2008)
19. Chemers, M.: *Ghost Light*. Sothern Illinois UP (2010)
20. Colp, T.: Final fantasy 14 player is eating thousands of eggs on stream with no plans to stop. Polygon article. <https://www.polygon.com/22590564/final-fantasy-14-online-eggs-rubberninja-stream-twitch>. Accessed June 22nd, 2023 (2021)
21. Colp, T.: Gamer of the year 2022: Let me solo her. PC Gamer article. <https://www.pcgamer.com/gamer-of-the-year-2022-let-me-solo-her/>. Accessed June 22nd, 2023 (2022)
22. Compton, K., Grinblat, J., Kim, N., Short, E., Short, T.X.: A toolkit for encouraging player stories. <https://polarisgamedesign.com/2022/a-toolkit-for-encouraging-player-stories/> (2023)
23. Corneliussen, H., Rettberg, J.W.: *Digital culture, play, and identity: A World of Warcraft reader*. MIT Press (2008)
24. Cragoe, N.G.: Rpg mythos: narrative gaming as modern mythmaking. *Games and Culture* **11**(6), 583–607 (2016)
25. Dorson, R.M.: Mythology and folklore. *Annual Review of Anthropology* **2**, 107–126 (1973)
26. Eladhari, M.P.: Re-tellings: the fourth layer of narrative as an instrument for critique. In: *International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*. pp. 65–78. Springer (2018)
27. Ford, D.: The haunting of ancient societies in the mass effect trilogy and the legend of zelda: *Breath of the wild*. *Game Studies* **21**(4) (2021)
28. Ford, D.: That old school feeling (indeterminable year, after 2020)
29. Frazer, J.G.: *The golden bough*. Springer (1922)
30. From Software: *Dark Souls* (2011)
31. From Software: *Elden Ring* (2022)

32. Gach, E.: Destiny 2's wild corridors of time puzzle ends with lackluster reward. Kotaku article, <https://kotaku.com/destiny-2s-wild-corridors-of-time-puzzle-ends-with-lack-1841112237>. Accessed June 22nd, 2023 (2020)
33. Gach, E.: They brought back destiny's loot cave, but not the loot. Kotaku article. <https://kotaku.com/they-brought-back-the-loot-cave-but-not-the-loot-1845638914>. Accessed on 30th of April 2021 (2020)
34. Geraci, R.M.: *Virtually sacred: Myth and meaning in world of warcraft and second life*. Oxford University Press, USA (2014)
35. Harrington, J.: 4x gamer as myth: Understanding through player mythologies. In: *DiGRA/FDG* (2016)
36. Hirschman, E.C.: *Movies as myths: An interpretation of motion picture mythology. Marketing and semiotics: New directions in the study of signs for sale* pp. 335–74 (1987)
37. Huizinga, J.: *Homo Ludens*. Random House (1956)
38. Jacob, M., Zook, A., Magerko, B.: Viewpoints AI: Procedurally Representing and Reasoning about Gestures. In: *Proceedings of DiGRA* (08 2013)
39. Javanshir, R., Carroll, B., Millard, D.E.: A model for describing alternate reality games. In: *Interactive Storytelling: 11th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling, ICIDS 2018, Dublin, Ireland, December 5–8, 2018, Proceedings* 11. pp. 250–258. Springer (2018)
40. JoCat: So i wanna talk about how it took me 300 hours to like ffxiv (and how you can too in far less time). YouTube video essay. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LM08VrEs6k>. Accessed June 22nd, 2023 (2022)
41. Jones, B.: Puppetry, authorship, and the ur-narrative. *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance* pp. 61–67 (2014)
42. Junius, N., Kreminski, M., Mateas, M.: There Is No Escape: Theatricality in *Hades*. In: *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (2021)
43. Juul, J.: *Half-real: Video games between real rules and fictional worlds*. MIT press (2005)
44. Karth, I., Junius, N., Kreminski, M.: Constructing a catbox: Story volume poetics in umineko no naku koro ni. In: *Interactive Storytelling: 15th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling, ICIDS 2022, Santa Cruz, CA, USA, December 4–7, 2022, Proceedings*. pp. 455–470. Springer (2022)
45. Kjellgren, A.: Mythmaking as a feminist strategy: Rosi braidotti's political myth. *Feminist Theory* **22**(1), 63–80 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700119881307>
46. Kleinman, E., Carstensdottir, E., El-Nasr, M.S.: Going forward by going back: re-defining rewind mechanics in narrative games. In: *Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (2018)
47. Koenitz, H.: Towards a theoretical framework for interactive digital narrative. In: *Joint International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*. pp. 176–185. Springer (2010)
48. Krzywinska, T.: Blood scythes, festivals, quests, and backstories: World creation and rhetorics of myth in world of warcraft. *Games and Culture* **1**(4), 383–396 (2006)
49. Larsen, B.A., Bruni, L.E., Schoenau-Fog, H.: The story we cannot see: on how a retelling relates to its afterstory. In: *International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*. pp. 190–203. Springer (2019)

50. Larsen, B.A., Carstensdottir, E.: Wrestling with destiny: Storytelling in perennial games. In: International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling. pp. 236–254. Springer (2021)
51. Larsen, B.A., Carstensdottir, E.: Myth, diegesis and storytelling in perennial games. In: Interactive Storytelling: 15th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling, ICIDS 2022, Santa Cruz, CA, USA, December 4–7, 2022, Proceedings. pp. 634–650. Springer (2022)
52. Laurel, B.: Computers as theatre. Addison-Wesley (2013)
53. Lehmann, H.T.: Postdramatic theatre. Routledge (2006)
54. Lévi-Strauss, C.: The structural study of myth. *The journal of American folklore* **68**(270), 428–444 (1955)
55. Lévi-Strauss, C.: Structuralism and myth. *The Kenyon Review* **3**(2), 64–88 (1981)
56. Levin, I., Levin, I.: *The Stanislavsky Secret*. Colorado: Meriwether Publishing (2002)
57. Long, D., Gupta, S., Anderson, J., Magerko, B.: The shape of story: A semiotic artistic visualization of a communal storytelling experience. In: Proceedings of the AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Interactive Digital Entertainment. vol. 13, pp. 204–211 (2017)
58. Long, D., Jacob, M., Magerko, B.: Designing co-creative ai for public spaces. In: Proceedings of the 2019 on Creativity and Cognition. pp. 271–284 (2019)
59. Malinowski, B.: *Magic, science and religion and other essays*. Read Books Limited (1954)
60. Mateas, M.: A preliminary poetics for interactive drama and games. *Digital Creativity* **12**(3), 140–152 (2001)
61. Mateas, M., Domike, S., Vanouse, P.: Terminal time: An ideologically-biased history machine. *AISB Quarterly, Special Issue on Creativity in the Arts and Sciences* **102**, 36–43 (1999)
62. Maxis: *The sims* (2000)
63. Mitchell, A., Kway, L., Lee, B.J.: Storygameness: understanding repeat experience and the desire for closure in storygames. In: DiGRA 2020–Proceedings of the 2020 DiGRA International Conference (2020)
64. Mitchell, A., McGee, K.: Reading again for the first time: a model of rereading in interactive stories. In: Interactive Storytelling: 5th International Conference, ICIDS 2012, San Sebastián, Spain, November 12–15, 2012. Proceedings 5. pp. 202–213. Springer (2012)
65. Mojang: *Minecraft* (2011)
66. Murray, J.H.: *Hamlet on the Holodeck, updated edition: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. MIT press (2017)
67. Myelin: Myelin’s youtube channel. <https://www.youtube.com/@MyelinGames> (2014–Now)
68. Nagy, G.: *Greek mythology and poetics, vol. 2*. Cornell University Press (1992)
69. Noclip: Final fantasy xiv documentary part #3 - "the new world" (2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONT6fxiu9cw>. Quote in question is at 16:15, spoken by Michael Christopher Koji Fox
70. Pint: I enslaved my final fantasy 14 guild... YouTube video essay. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onrX5ZURtek>. Accessed June 22nd, 2023 (2021)
71. Pint: The secret behind ffxiv’s best players... YouTube video essay. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJPKVDZy1vU>. Accessed June 22nd, 2023 (2022)
72. Rettberg, J.W.: *Quests in World of Warcraft: Deferral and repetition*, chap. 8, pp. 167–184. MIT Press (2008)

73. Reuben, N.: All the realm's a stage: Exploring final fantasy 14's incredible virtual theater shows. <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/all-the-realms-a-stage-exploring-final-fantasy-14s/1100-6477641/>. Accessed June 22nd, 2023 (2020)
74. Rimer, J.T., Yamazaki, M., et al.: On the Art of the Nō Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami; Translated by J. Thomas Rimer, Yamazaki Masakazu. Princeton University Press (1984)
75. Rusch, D.C.: 21st century soul guides: Leveraging myth and ritual for game design. DiGRA Nordic Subversion, Transgression, and Controversy in Play, University of Bergen, Norway (2018)
76. Ryan, M.L.: Avatars of Story. University of Minnesota Press, 111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290, Minneapolis (August 2006)
77. Schreier, J.: The makers of 'leeroy jenkins' didn't think anyone would believe it was real. Kotaku article describing the meme. <https://kotaku.com/the-makers-of-leeroy-jenkins-didnt-think-anyone-would-b-1821570730> Accessed 5th of June 2022. Upload of the original video can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLy0j_QD4a4 (2017)
78. Segal, R.A.: Myth: A very short introduction. OUP Oxford (2004)
79. Selway, J.: Elden ring - who is let me solo her? Gamerant article. <https://gamerant.com/elden-ring-let-me-solo-her-klein-tsuboi-famous-player/>. Accessed June 22nd, 2023 (2022)
80. Shenpai et al.: Lunarcon. Convention run inside Final Fantasy XIV. See <https://www.lunarcon.net/>. Accessed June 22nd, 2023 (2021–Now)
81. Square Enix: Final Fantasy XIV (2013)
82. Vitelli, J.: Final fantasy xiv's club scene is all the rage. <https://primagames.com/featured/final-fantasy-xivs-club-scene-is-all-the-rage>. Accessed June 22nd, 2023 (2022)
83. Wagner, R.: The importance of playing in earnest. *Playing with Religion in digital games* pp. 192–213 (2014)
84. Wardrip-Fruin, N.: Expressive processing. Cambridge: MIT Press. Weiberg, B.(2002). *Beyond Interactive Cinema*. Retrieved April 9, 2009 (2009)
85. Winter, R., Salter, A., Stanfill, M.: Communities of making: Exploring parallels between fandom and open source. *First Monday* (2021)
86. Zheng, J.: The heartfelt story of the eorzean aquarium, a full-scale ffxiv fish exhibit. <https://www.fanbyte.com/games/features/the-heartfelt-story-of-the-eorzean-aquarium-a-full-scale-ffxiv-fish-exhibit/>. Accessed June 22nd, 2023 (2022)