

The *Twitter* Game

Game Mechanics of *Twitter*

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Many people use social media as a kind of game, but the individual *Twitter* (2006) player doesn't even notice that they are playing. The reasons for this are that the setting (framed by the *Twitter* bird) and the surface don't look like a game and many 'play' so seriously that "this certainly can't be a game".

However, the motivational mechanisms of using *Twitter* are all too often similar to games, ranging from simple single-player games with links, retweets and tweets to epic multiplayer games with long epic battles of insults, arguing in endless threads – and all this every day! It is a kind of social media '*EVE Online* game' (*EVE Online* 2003). It uses all kinds of narrative mechanics: from simple text, images, animations, links, interactive surveys to clever rhetorical tricks but also simple insults and plain provocations. Keeping up appearances is paramount. Facework as a skill of constantly maintaining the face (Goffman 1967) becomes a dominant strategy for the individual *Twitter* users. Their aim is to receive the respect they think they deserve. Establishing and sustaining a preferred social identity during interactions is so important that its techniques underlying this process become completely lost in the magic circle of social media games – something that is very common in games.

Of course, *Twitter* users pursue different goals and directions. Is it ultimately just about the fun of getting attention from other people? Or is there more? From a more playful point of view we might draw an analogy from the taxonomy of player types developed in the Bartle Test (Bartle 1996). In MultiUserDungeons (MUDS) there are four different types of players: socializers, explorers, achievers and killers. The group of socializers is mainly interested in meeting, getting to know each other, doing something together. The explorers are looking for new information, new ideas, new territory. The achievers want to solve all kinds of

challenges. And the killers take up rivalry, want to win, want to be the best and crave maximum attention. These four different player types emerge on *Twitter* when narratives and assertion-driven statements come into play.

‘TWITTERGAME’

Twitter is a game and therefore has a game mechanic that motivates and drives the *Twitter* player. But how is this game mechanic built and designed? Most games use simple motivational mechanisms such as challenges, options, selections and rewards or punishments via the system. Whoever gets involved in this system is pulled deeper and deeper into the game and, in the best case, ends up in the flow of this social media game. The challenges are designed so that they are neither too easy nor too difficult. To ensure this, games usually have simple rating systems, so that the players can be easily rated and the reward or punishment can be easily operationalized.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

The first focal point of narrative activity – often real-world references are used here – can begin with the profile picture and the accompanying text. The character profile itself offers more than most games: Avatar or real name? Avatar or real image? Personally chosen background image? Text about yourself with possible references, perhaps a web address and location? And if necessary, you can also attach a post as *pars pro toto*. Additionally, there is automatically generated information like followers (trophies) and a view of the timeline. Thus, there is a wide choice of optional narrative mechanics just in the profile area. This means you create a fictitious character even if you use your real name. Others will only know of you what you tell them. This gives you the opportunity to carefully construct an image of yourself that focuses on a special activity of your life, on an opinion, an economic or political view or, for example, your preferred cultural interests. You create a public image for yourself that amplifies certain traits and activities but also reduces your character to something that is tailored for the social media streams and mostly targets a specific audience. It is no wonder the *Twitter* profile is advertised as “your personal landing page” and as being most important for “your personal brand”. A *Twitter* profile may indeed work like a personal brand. When you follow someone, they have to make the decision on whether to follow you back in a few seconds.

Figure 1: Three examples from Swiss Twitter users.

Clear name, job name, etc.	Clear name, job title, stylization “Jean d’Arc of press freedom”.	No clear name, a back-ground image on a general theme: clowns (in prison).
The narrative begins with a text in the picture area: an introduction with a grand ‘thesis’ about liberalism. The profile picture shows a striding man with a mask, referring to another narrative. Various activities and university references and an attached tweet indicate the direction of the project.	Statement about smoking and a self-portrait as background image.	The text refers to a politician (Blocher) and his program: “We are mean [...] and eat idiots and extremists of all kinds for breakfast.”

Source: *Twitter*, screenshots August 8th, 2020 (Bauer)

Of course, there are many other profiles and completely different ways to use the profile picture. But what mechanics does the ‘Twittergame’ use?

NARRATIVE AND ASSERTION-DRIVEN MECHANICS

The mechanics most frequently used in social media are assertion-driven mechanics. They occur in a composite form, especially in narratives paraphrased as “The right-wing scene has the solution for all things”, “The market solves all problems”, “Together we are strong”, “Nature is good”, “America the great”,

“Freedom is the most important thing”, etc. It is an endless list of pretentious assertions.

It seems at first that assertion-driven mechanics might come from a scientific context. In the subsystem of science (cf. Luhmann 1997), these assertions take the shape of hypotheses which are then evaluated, or in other words, corroborated or falsified by the scientific community. For this purpose, there are different formats – from Master to PhD theses, from papers to books, and from lectures to conferences on specific topics. Scientific hypotheses are always discussed on the basis of the difference “true/untrue”, accepted into science or rejected (and even suppressed for years). The resulting knowledge is then stored in books for the long term and further disseminated in education. The formats range from short articles to books.

The picture is very different for narrative and assertion-driven mechanics in social media battles on platforms like *Twitter*: Here, everything is renegotiated almost every day. Nothing is older than yesterday’s tweet, nothing falls apart faster. What is not in the timeline, is no longer reproduced in the system. Furthermore, there is no verification of the various assertions. In fact, they are mostly just ‘verified’ by individual communities in their own narrative or assertion-driven thinking. This makes them perfectly suitable for social media. They can only be answered with yes/no and are therefore ideal for evaluations. For the follower of a narrative, it is then also clear whether or not an assertion supports the narrative. Thus, it is not surprising that many conspiracy theories are actual narrative mechanics and contain many assertions that are adaptive and adaptable to a situation.

Twitter favors assertion-driven mechanics and narratives with only 280 characters of basic text. Consequently, every tweet is already an assertion and functions as a micro mechanic based on its content, what it refers to and whatever comments it provokes.

What we have here is a community that uses narratives, develops its own logics, partly also its own concepts and its own language. “Freedom”, for example, has a different connotation for a liberal than for a democrat. The word “liberal” alone is used differently by various communities: as comprehensively liberal, as economically liberal, as socially liberal. It is interesting to note that all these increasingly radical “liberal” narratives were once part of a narrative of the “liberal” that was supported by left and right. This collapsed when it became clear that our planet does not have enough resources for everyone. Consequently, the Paris Climate Convention was revoked and a better future for all buried (cf. Latour 2018).

JOURNALISM OF ASSERTION – ESCALATION AS MECHANICS

An entire branch of journalism shows how well assertion-driven mechanics and their complex forms, the narratives, function. Here, assertion-driven mechanics are used to fill news portals or newspapers. Nothing is easier to write than an assertion: just gather the pro-arguments and leave out all counter arguments or trade-offs. Moreover, this is easy to monetize: an assertion-driven text not only invites the supporters of the assertion-driven narrative to read it (“What are the reasons given?”), but also the opponents of the assertion (“What is their point? What are their reasons?”).

In the following example, the title suggests that Montessori schools create geniuses, an assertion that literally went around the world.

IN THE SCHOOL OF GENIUSES

Figure 2: Article in Swiss paper states that Montessori is the “school of geniuses” since people like Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg attended it.



Source: Tagesanzeiger, screenshot (Bauer)

The mechanics of assertion-driven journalism is thus the opposite of weighing up and including all points of view in order to allow the reader to form their own opinion. Clickbait can be easily instigated with pro and con texts – preferably spread over days. Logically, the clicks, likes and comments also give rise to increasingly radical opinions. Whether an assertion or hypothesis is true or false is not important, because every assertion can gradually get more support, so it may become plausible one day. They are only “pending judgments” or “floating narratives”. But unlike in news portals or forums, the discussion does not end in one location as a single commentary but can be shared exponentially via the channels of social media platforms and spread further via timelines and notifications.

NARRATIVE AND IDENTITY

The mechanics mentioned above can also be found in social media – especially since some of the articles reappear as tweets. But social media games go a step further, because the assertion-driven narrative is linked to the personality of the user. Just like in journalism (with the exception of political reporting), the most important factors are the sale of news, advertising, subscriptions or user data – the topic, however, is rather a means to an end. And so even marginal topics can be skillfully dealt with and brought into the mainstream.

One can even go as far as to ask the question: Do the followers of a narrative in social media create a social field in the sense of Bourdieu's (1987) Field Theory? Or a system in the sense of systems theory where certain narratives even explicitly exclude others? Is the 'Twittergame' – at least in its political variant – a field and system game? The individual players want to keep their own system alive at all costs, but it permanently falls apart through new tweets and news. Therefore, it is also their own identity that is up for negotiation. Because more than any other players, those engaged in *Twitter* understand that only constant reproduction can keep their system alive and weaken others.

MOTIVATIONAL MECHANICS – CHALLENGES

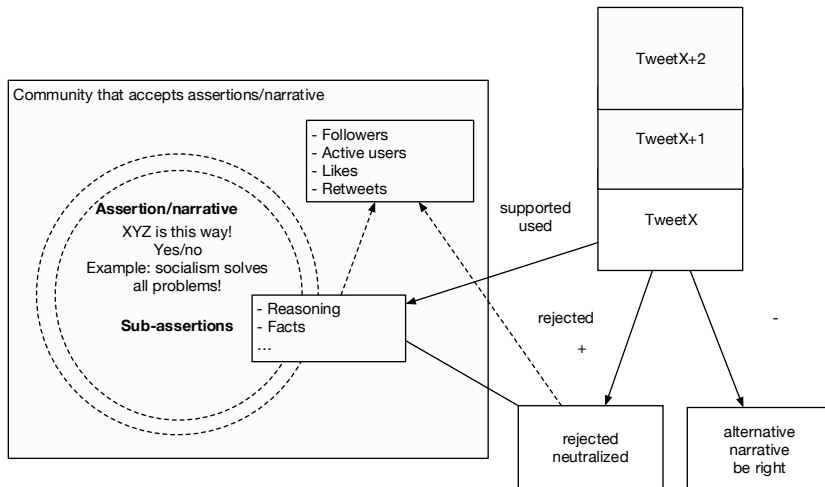
The challenge in the social media game follows a certain logic: maintaining one's own narrative (or assertions) against all odds in order to maintain one's own identity or job. And unlike in the scientific system, where a scientific community wants to find the truth (and is paid to do so) and truth is the transcendental signifier (cf. Luhmann 1997), in social media everyone fights against everyone else for followers, supporters, arguments, counter arguments, or simply for power. These are systemic struggles or struggles for narratives and their subordinate assertions.

Of course, every assertion and every narrative are constantly threatened, no matter how good it is and how many supporters it has. And the threat in social media consists of ever newer messages and facts spreading like wildfire, whether they are tweeted journalistic texts, new facts, new assertions, new narratives or new comments, new links and connections.

The constant supply of new challenges is therefore ensured. If this is not enough, then everyone can of course write their own comments to stave off the disappearance of the topics, the assertions or their own narrative. Luhmann might say: it is the fight against the disappearance of their own system, or pre-

sumably even more aptly with Bourdieu here, people fight for their own field or the field that provides them with monetary, symbolic or social capital.

Figure 3: A tweet can confirm your own narrative/assertion and be included (+), neutralized or left as a correct point (-).



Source: René Bauer

To draw a comparison with the game universe: Like in *Tetris* (1989), it is raining information, and tweets and assertions have to be accommodated and classified for the player's own community as well as for or against the 'enemy narratives'. In *Twitter* as in *Tetris*, things have to be cleaned up and put in line.

PROTECT THE TREASURE: THE NARRATIVE AND ITS ASSERTIONS

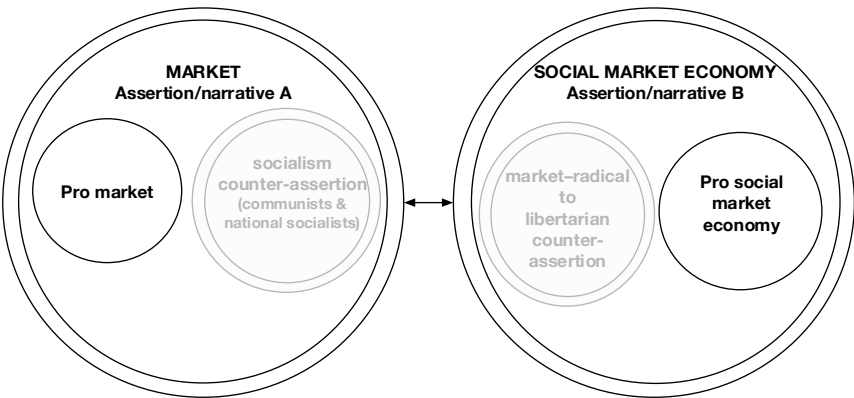
At first glance things look very simple: widen your field, find new users, convince others, reject all hostile tweets. All this earns you points in your own community, strengthens the narrative, respectively your field.

But most narratives today are already much more complex. They have long since mirrored their competitors' narratives within themselves and built entire constructs to neutralize them. The counter-assertions with all the trimmings are embedded and tell you why they are void and that only one's own assertion is

the right one. And in every argument, the reasoning grows and with it the possibilities how this narrative can react to others.

This means that the multiplayer game that is *Twitter* only appears clear and simple to the individual in their own narrative. The multiplayer aspect makes the game rather complex. In the following example, two self-contained systems fight each other: radical market advocates turn against social market economy advocates.

Figure 4: The respective view of the other narrative. The counter-assertion narrative is already included each narrative.



Source: René Bauer

The next figure (5) is an example of how such narratives shape and adapt a specific perception of the world. The Nazis become Socialists via a quote and a picture of the economist Friedrich A. Hayek.

In the eyes of radical market proponents, Hayek’s ideas form a perfect open and closed core for a narrative. The free market is everything and ultimately ‘decides’ (about truth as well). Through an unregulated market anyone gets the chance to be successful (regardless of differing possibilities and capital). This often results in a closed pseudo-Darwinian reasoning which assumes that ‘economic selection’ will lead to the best product, company or society (economization). A free-market economy appears as a ‘natural’ continuation of evolution and has supposedly always been around. Objections and responses from newer economic findings are thus disregarded. This increasing closedness becomes all-encompassing when anything else but the market is labeled as non-market and therefore as ‘socialist’.

Figure 5: A quote built into a tweet and authenticated by a picture of the author.



3:56 PM · Oct 5, 2019 · Twitter for Android

Source: Twitter, screenshot (Bauer)

Of course, such narratives can also be completely closed and therefore applied to every context. The logic of a narrative then overlays the world with its complexities and offers simple assertions for highly complex contexts. In this way, the world itself becomes a narrative – from the narrative of “the West”, for example, to the views of an American president, and fully fledged, absurd conspiracy theories.

GAMEPLAY OF THE *TWITTER* GAMES

What concrete possibilities do *Twitter* players have in the battle for their narratives? How do they fight? Or in other words, how and where do the players make decisions?

The first thing that stands out is the possibility to generate content directly, for example as a new tweet or a reply. In their tweets, however, players often make use of everything that *Twitter* provides in order to generate intertext: from inserting external articles, images and references to adding hashtags or addressing the other party directly.

Table 1: A Twitter player has the following options for action with tweets.

Action types	Direct impact	Indirect impact
Tweet		
compose tweet	Tweet with content appears. A plus for an assertion or a narrative.	All followers see the tweet and have a chance to react.
reply to tweet	Tweet with content appears for everyone below the tweet. A plus or a minus. The Tweet also appears in the timeline/notifications and is a direct invitation to act.	The whole narrative community is involved and informed via the timeline. Exponential distribution is possible.
Integrate tweets into your own tweets	Cross-references and integration of a thread. Can also be used to ridicule others.	The original tweeter and their community are also included. Often used for counter-narratives.
address specific individuals in your tweet @	Direct link. Appears in the notifications.	The individual must react more or less (to notifications). Often used in hostile narratives.
assign a tweet to a specific trend via hashtags #	Tweet becomes visible in a larger environment (trends) and reaches completely different communities.	Tweet is put into a certain context and classified. For example: #capitalism. Sometimes also used as a provocation. Exponential distribution possible.
embed screenshots in your tweets	Feedback in the <i>Twitter</i> universe is prevented. Only your own community will know about it.	Made visible only to your own community. Disables general exponential distribution.

Since players have to expose themselves when writing tweets, there are many other possible actions at their disposal that need far less justification than a tweet. They can use ‘private’ likes to show support, they can just do retweets to reiterate an idea or they control their own feed of information with actions relating to those of other users.

Table 2: And these are a Twitter player's additional options for action.

Action types	Direct impact	Indirect impact
Likes		
liking	Saves the tweet, supports the tweeter, makes the tweet available to your own followers.	Can be used as pinpricks for comments on tweets, because it is also shown to the original tweeter (notifications). Exponential distribution possible.
Retweet		
retweets/retweets with comments	Support of the tweeter, the tweet and its community/narrative. Distribution in your own <i>Twitter</i> network. With comment: concretization.	Exponential distribution possible.
User actions		
follow user	User support, visible in notifications, tweets appear in the timeline.	Accumulation and increasing potential distribution. But also a problem of complexity and confusion.
mute user	Tweets no longer appear. But the muted user does not notice anything.	Less exponential distribution.
block user	Tweets no longer appear, therefore the worst punishment for another user. Also visible in threads.	Suppression. Encourages narrative communities with little contact to the outside world.

MULTIPLAYER: ENDLESS STREAMS OF PROVOCATION

Whoever dives into this game has to swim all the time and therefore must be constantly motivated. *Twitter* does not provide a protected environment with habitats in which you can create your narratives in an undisturbed atmosphere. It is a tool that fights for its existence and its daily survival – and the community does the same. Every minute, every hour, every day, every week and every month is about existence and survival, about not becoming the dreaded boring

platform it might turn out to be without all the silly, idiotic and radical provocations.

Likes, retweets and followers are the easiest and most objective reward and punishment systems in the ‘Twittergame’. However, this is only half the truth. The ways in which to be rewarded are manifold and sometimes much more individual. For the socializers, it is important to maintain the community. The achievers win on points when new arguments supporting their narrative emerge. Killers, on the other hand, enjoy nothing more than beating their ‘opponents’ with a news item. Every individual and every group have their own resources and capital which they don’t need to share with other narratives and their communities.

Social media games are especially explosive through the embedded ‘social’ distribution mechanisms such as the timeline and notifications. These simple sorting and messaging functions spread narrative mechanics exponentially into other (opposing) narratives. This is where cybernetics turned into software unfolds its true explosive potential: it creates an infinite number of provocations and contradictions in ‘opposing’ narrative communities. And the conflict grows and is radicalized simultaneously in all narrative communities.

Thus, sets of multiplayer game mechanic waves of provocation and escalation endlessly roll to the shores and fulfill themselves anew every day: they grow larger, more radical and become faster and faster.

SOCIALIZE TECHNICAL POSSIBILITIES!

The constant modifications of the medium *Twitter* show how much and how fast the ‘Twittergame’ changes – at least in its designed mechanics. For example, the maximum number of characters was altered from 140 to 280 to enable more detailed information and longer opinions. And the possibility for a user to restrict replies was introduced in order to help stop abuse.

It is never quite clear whether the intended effects will be achieved or whether the community will use the technical possibilities differently. A longer tweet also allows for a longer rant. A targeted restriction of replies may be used to silence critics. This is what social media games are all about – users tend to ‘socialize’ them for their own needs. The ‘Twittergame’ is purposefully used and abused when it is adapted to suit its users’ narratives.

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