NETFLIX

An Example of Digital Storytelling on an Institutional Level?

Examining *Netflix*' provision and production of content regarding
the characteristics of digital storytelling

Master Thesis
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11th of February 2015
11.485 words

ABSTRACT:

Digital storytelling arose in the course of the digital revolution as a new way of storytelling and is nowadays practiced in various contexts by individuals and institutions all over the world. Even though the academic field researches different aspects of this storytelling technique, its use on an institutional level has not much been studied yet. This is why, this master thesis will examine the video streaming company *Netflix* regarding its provision and production of content. In the course of this analysis, the original *Netflix* series *House of Cards* will serve as an illustrating example.

The research will be centered around the research question: *How is digital storytelling used on an institutional level in the case of Netflix and how can its characteristics be recognized in the company's provision and production of video content, specifically regarding its first original series House of Cards?* At first, the backgrounds of television in the digital age and digital storytelling are introduced by defining four desires of the users that relate to the shift towards the Internet as well as four characteristics of digital storytelling which both serve as a central guideline in the following. Then, *Netflix* provision of stories is examined by paying attention to its development, business model, website and personalization service. After this, *House of Cards* is studied with the help of a textual analysis to elaborate on *Netflix*' production of content.

It turns out that digital storytelling mainly occurs in *Netflix*' provision of content. The case of *House of Cards* shows that digital storytelling does not have much influence regarding the production of content. As a result, no remarkably new cinematic structure is created yet.

KEY WORDS:

Digital storytelling, Digital storytelling on an institutional level, Video on demand, Streaming, Personalization, Serial storytelling, *Netflix*, *House of Cards*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, television is changing. Technical developments as, for instance, the Internet, broadband, satellite and fiberglass cable as well as laptops, tablets and other portable TV devices offer new ways of accessing and watching television. This means that watching television is not restricted to a schedule with programs of a certain length that can only be accessed on a classic TV set anymore. Instead, the content is available everywhere and at any time and the options of accessing it are increasing (Einav and Carey 2009, 115-116). In the *Cambridge Business English Dictionary* the term *digital age* is defined as "the present time, when most information is in a digital form, especially when compared to the time when computers were not used" (Cambridge University Press 2015). The digital age is connected to the digital revolution, i.e. the change from the mechanical and analog to digital technology; a development that was mainly caused by the invention of the Internet and the computer. This change in technology had a great impact on the field of storytelling. Stories have been told for ages and it does not come as a surprise that aside from the classic way of storytelling, where a person tells a story to an audience, many other forms exist nowadays. One of them is the so-called *digital* storytelling – a way of storytelling that was enabled through the digital revolution.

Writer and teacher Bryan Alexander states that digital storytelling can in general be described as "telling stories with digital technologies" (Alexander 2011, 3), which is a rather broad definition. The term arose in 1993, when the first workshop on digital storytelling was held in California. Within a year, the number of workshops increased – mainly due to the efforts of Dana Atchley and Joe Lambert, who also founded the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) later on (Hartley and McWilliam 2009, 5f). According to the CDS, "a digital story […] is a personal story, […] free from any interference from media professionals. It is a work of individual creativity" (Watkins and Russo 2009, 270).

Digital storytelling is increasingly practiced in different contexts so that it does not come as a surprise that it has been the topic of several academic articles and books. Although it has been examined in the context of education (McWilliam 2009) or in relation to the narrative power of visual effects in film (McClean 2007), the focus on the personal use of digital storytelling is still the most dominant (Alexander 2011, Hartley and McWilliam 2009, Lundby 2008). As a result, digital storytelling is often more specifically defined as the telling of *personal* stories with digital technologies, which usually happens in a potentially public form (Couldry 2008, 42).

In the context of this, the question arises how, apart from this personal, self-representative approach, digital storytelling is used on a higher, more institutional level. The academic literature mentions that digital storytelling is indeed practiced by institutions, such as

universities, schools, museums, libraries, broadcasters and organizations (Hartley and McWilliam 2009, 4-5). Still, this only refers to public and governmental institutions. To my knowledge no research on digital storytelling in relation to a private, commercial-oriented company has been done so far. It is therefore the aim of this research to extend the existing theory on digital storytelling and its practice on a personal level through examining it on a non-governmental, institutional level. In order to do this, a concrete case shall be discussed.

In search of a practical application of the academic literature on digital storytelling, one can identify a large, fast-growing, digital company: *Netflix*. This company is suitable to serve as the illustrating example of this research about the non-governmental, institutional use of digital storytelling for two reasons. First, *Netflix* is a private, commercial-oriented company. Second, its role as a video-streaming service contains the *provision* and the *production* of stories. According to media scientist Knut Lundby, the word *story-telling* does not only include the creation of a story but also the process of sharing it with others (Lundby 2008, 3). As *Netflix* provides and produces stories, it can be stated that storytelling is part of the company's activities. On top of that, as a streaming service, *Netflix* operates on a digital level. Thus, the company's work can be assumed to be a practical example of the academic theory on *digital* storytelling. In this thesis, I will explore in how far this assumption is true, i.e. if and in how far characteristics of digital storytelling can be found in *Netflix*' provision and production of stories in order to examine in how far digital storytelling is used in this specific case.

Founded in 1997, *Netflix* started as a DVD rental service. Today, it is the leading subscription service provider for on-demand Internet streaming of movies and TV shows and offers its service in more and more countries worldwide. Subscribers of *Netflix* have to pay a monthly fee in order to get unrestricted access to the provided content. Next to the distribution of videos, *Netflix* started to produce its own original content. In 2013, this resulted in *House of Cards*, *Netflix'* first original series, which is an adaption of the same-titled BBC miniseries from 1990.[1] For the first time, a series was not produced for a television channel but for a streaming service (Klarer 2014, 3) – a development that puts *Netflix* in a special position in the field of television. It can be stated that "[t]he development of Internet, the growth of mobile devices, and the new habits of consuming audiovisual products […] have led to the creation of new business models" (Ojer and Capapé 2013, 575). Here, *Netflix*' is a good example as the company based its business model on the changes of the digital age. For instance, the provided content can be accessed through various devices as tablets, smartphones and gaming consoles. Apart from that, *Netflix* does not want the audience to depend on fixed time schedules. Therefore, the

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[1] *Netflix* provided its first exclusive content in 2012 with the series *Lilyhammer*. Still, this series aired in Norway before it was distributed in the U.S., which distinguishes it from *House of Cards*.

entire first (and later on the second) season of *House of Cards* was made available online all at once, which can be regarded as an innovative way of distribution.

This research will focus on *Netflix* as a company as well as its first original series *House of Cards.* In the course of this, the use of digital storytelling on a non-governmental, institutional level shall be examined. The current state of research concerning *Netflix* usually only focuses on particular aspects of the company. This research will react to that and study *Netflix'* development, business model, website including user interface and personalization service as well as its original series *House of Cards* to achieve a broad examination of the company as a whole in order to find out about its adaptions to the digital shift and use of digital storytelling.

In the course of this, the following research question will be central: *How is digital storytelling used on an institutional level in the case of Netflix and how can its characteristics be recognized in the company's provision and production of video content, specifically regarding its first original series House of Cards?* Some sub-questions will help to answer this research question. 1) *What are the characteristics of digital storytelling?* In order to analyze *Netflix* and *House of Cards* regarding digital storytelling, at first, the characteristics of this storytelling practice need to be defined. 2) *What is the business model behind Netflix?* When examining *Netflix'* provision and production of stories regarding digital storytelling, it is necessary to study the general background of the company. Hence, its development shall briefly be introduced and its business model shall be analyzed in order to find out about the motives and intentions of the company. During the analysis of *House of Cards* it will then be examined in how far the company's background influences the series. 3) *How does Netflix' personalization service contribute to the company's use of digital storytelling?* As it will be pointed out later on, *Netflix* depends on the amount of subscribers. As a result, the company provides its content in a personalized way to the user – an aspect that has to be taken into account when examining the provision and production of video content regarding digital storytelling. 4) *What is characteristic for the production and release of House of Cards?* When analyzing the use of digital storytelling within the series, its external circumstances, such as production and release, have to be considered as well. 5) *What is specific for so-called "serial storytelling"?* Just as a lot of other series, *House of Cards* is characterized by serial storytelling. This storytelling practice shall therefore be introduced before examining specific elements of the series regarding digital storytelling. The next section will indicate in more detail how the research will be conducted by introducing its structure and methods.

2. STRUCTURE AND METHOD

To begin with, the topic will be approached through a theoretical framework that elaborates on the challenges of television in the digital age as well as on the characteristics of digital

storytelling. In the course of this, four desires of the users that relate to the shift towards the Internet as well as four main characteristics of digital storytelling will be defined. Both aspects will serve as a central guideline during the analysis of *Netflix* and *House of Cards*.

The first part of the research will then focus on *Netflix* and its *provision* of stories, i.e. the original video content, and the role digital storytelling plays in this context by conducting a source analysis. A source analysis examines one or more sources regarding its/their content by taking into account the context, the author and the circumstances of origin. The resulting information is often related to other sources to achieve a broader context. Analyses, such as source analyses, are central to media studies. They are "not just a description or dissection of a phenomenon or object" but focus "on a *question* about [a] specific *object* in relation to a wider *phenomenon*" (Verhoeff 2014, 4). The advantage of a source analysis is that it reveals information on a certain topic in order to answer a specific question or to prove assumptions and ideas. This comes with the disadvantage that apart from facts the sources often include the author's personal opinion. Hence, it always has to be evaluated in how far a source is written from an objective or a subjective perspective. Moreover, a source analysis is very theoretical. As a result, it usually serves as the basis for academic research. With the help of a specific case it can be related to the practical field.

In this research, the source analysis aims to elaborate on the economic background and intentions of *Netflix* in order to find out about the use of digital storytelling regarding the provision of content. Here, I chose to examine in particular the company's development and business model as well as its website along with its user interface and personalization service. In its structure, the source analysis will be based on these aspects. To conduct the source analysis, I have selected important keywords such as: business model, development, (digital) television, future of online television, streaming service, video on demand, personalization (software) and original content. I used these keywords (often in combination with the term *Netflix)* during my search in the catalogue of the Utrecht University Library and its search engines for articles, papers and journals, on Google Scholar and Google Books, the ACM Digital Library and JSTOR. In this way, I have collected a variety of academic and economic articles, newspaper articles as well as publications and interviews by *Netflix*' employees. As Professor of Journalism Bonnie Brennen explains in her book *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies*, "[q]ualitative researchers try to gather all the evidence that they can find and they like to immerse themselves in all relevant materials related to their research" (Brennen 2013, 21). Through searching carefully and extensively I gained a profound insight into the topic. However, some of the sources I found were purely technical (e.g. about the technical background of providing video content online) or dealt with topics I did not want to discuss in my thesis (e.g. interactive (social) television). Consequently, I had to select those

sources that contain information on the aspects I want to explore, namely the company's development, business model and website including its interface and personalization service. In the next step, relevant information was extracted from the sources and structured according to these aspects. The structured results will be presented in the chapter about *Netflix*. In this way, the source analysis will help to explore the self-projection of the company as well as its thoughts on the behavior of its users and the consumption of video content, which in turn are the basis for the company's working concept and way of providing stories.

The next section will focus on *Netflix*' use of digital storytelling regarding the *production* of stories, i.e. its original content. This part of the research will examine the series *House of Cards* with the help of a textual analysis. In the context of a textual analysis, the word *textual* does not only refer to written texts but is used to "describe more than a printed document, textbook or a written cell phone message" (Ibid., 193). When conducting a textual analysis, a chosen object of study is at first observed and described and then interpreted as well as related to a broader context. As Brennen points out qualitative researchers do not only "describe their observations, experiences and/or textual readings. Context is a central part of the interpretive process, and researchers must place their interpretations within the relevant historical, cultural, political and/or economic contexts" (Ibid., 22). The importance of the context and aim of a textual analysis are reinforced by the fact that there is no standardized way on how to conduct such an analysis. This is also addressed by the social scientists Marie Gillespie and Jason Tonybee who emphasize that the meaning of a text is influenced by its context of production and the way it is used, i.e. analyzed and interpreted (Gillespie and Toynbee 2006, 3). As a text consists of a variety of elements and details, it is necessary to choose some specific aspects of the text for the analysis as not all of them can be carefully studied and interpreted.

In the case of *House of Cards* "[s]ocial practices and cultural traditions" shall be considered to "provide important context […] throughout the process of analysis" (Brennen 2013, 22). In the course of this, the circumstances of its production and release will be introduced first as they provide background information about the broader context of the series and thereby ensure that the series is not examined as isolated and self-standing (Ibid., 199). In a textual analysis, "particular 'texts' or 'cultural artifacts' (i.e., a pop song or a TV program) consciously or unconsciously link themselves to larger stories at play in the society" (Reed 2015). It is necessary to study the production and release as they influence the content and structure of *House of Cards* and thereby also affect the audience' perception of the series. As *House of Cards* is based on serial storytelling, this storytelling practice will be introduced as well before conducting the actual textual analysis. This information and the results from the source analysis about *Netflix* (which also reveals information on the series) will contribute to the

context of *House of Cards* during the textual analysis. In this way, the series can be examined from a broader perspective.

With the help of the desires of the user and the digital storytelling characteristics, the actual textual analysis will investigate the way of storytelling in *House of Cards* and relate it to the series' context, i.e. the circumstances of production and release. To conduct the textual analysis, the series has been watched as a whole first. In the course of this, I have chosen the aspects I want to investigate. These aspects are: the pilot episode, the story arcs, the episodes' length, the recaps and teasers as well as the cliffhangers and connections between the episodes and the technique of the aside. I chose these aspects as they reflect the series' storytelling structure. Then, different parts of the series, as par example, the opening and closing scenes, have been watched again in order to analyze these aspects. The results of this examination have been related to the digital storytelling characteristics and the four desires of the users. This will structure the chapter about digital storytelling in *House of Cards* later on.

The strength of a textual analysis is its opportunity of providing evidence about a certain aspect. When examining, for instance, if *House of Cards* contains cliffhangers or not, an analysis of its closing scenes will reveal the relevant information. A disadvantage of this method is its missing standard procedure. This leads to the fact that a part of the analysis is done before the actual analysis starts, i.e. specific aspects are chosen in advance – a process that influences the actual analysis as certain characteristics are already excluded from it. As a textual analysis is a complex examination, not more than one *Netflix* series can be analyzed in the course of this thesis. Due to the thesis' limitations, the analysis would otherwise become insufficient in its depth, which would counteract the method's purpose. Therefore, a comparison between *House of Cards* and other *Netflix* series is not possible at this point.

In the conclusion, the results from the analyses of *Netflix* and *House of Cards* will be summarized in order to answer the research question and to give a concluding comment on the use of digital storytelling on a non-governmental, institutional level. Besides, possible topics for future research and the limits of this research will be pointed out.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since *Netflix* is a platform that provides video content from television online and on demand, it is closely related to television. Therefore, some general information on television in the digital age as well as on digital storytelling will precede the actual case study of this thesis. At first, I will point out how the digital revolution and the dominance of the Internet influence television and which new desires on the part of the users arise in this context. Then, central characteristics of digital storytelling will be defined.

3.1. TELEVISION TODAY

As stated at the beginning, the digital age impacts television. Technical developments create new ways of watching television so that television is not restricted to a static program schedule only accessible via a classic TV set anymore. As the options of access are increasing, the content becomes more and more available everywhere and at any time (Einav and Carey 2009, 115-116).

According to scholar and educator Phil McRae "[t]elevision is not 'television' anymore. It is a complex and rapidly evolving medium that is moving from a space defined by *broadcast* to one struggling for *interactivity*, *mobility* and *digital convergence*". The advancing digital technologies cause transformations in content and form of television. This results in new innovations as online video content, mobile devices and interactive digital television (McRae 2006, 1). McRae remarks that there is a drift away from television towards the Internet. With the help of a psychoanalytic approach he defines four desires of the user: the *desire to control entertainment,* the *desire for interactive entertainment,* the *desire for community* and the *desire for truth* (Ibid., 6-7). These desires represent four possible reasons for the above-mentioned shift towards the Internet. As McRae explains, the user wants to have control over the medium, engage with it in a more interactive way, participate in a community and search for information and truth (Ibid., 10). In order to allow control and community formation, a personalized user experience is needed – an aspect that is also central to digital storytelling as it will be pointed out later on. When examining *Netflix* and *House of Cards*, these four desires will be taken up again to show in how far the company reacts to them.

Providing video content via the Internet gives the opportunity to "send metadata about that content plus related content in different formats" (Kitson 2010, 7). Hence, television can use the Internet for its purpose and the audience can experience the content in a more complex and richer way. This is also discussed by Joe Budd, teacher and journalist, who states that "television is adapting better to technological change than any other media business" (Budd 2010, 1). In his article, Budd refers to the American writer George Gilder who argued in 1990 that traditional television would be dead at the end of the 20th century due to technology developments. Budd claims that television is not dying but changing its channel. Professor of communication studies Amanda Lotz agrees with Budd and argues that television is not dying but "changes in its content and how and where we view have complicated how we think about and understand its role in the culture" (Lotz 2007, 30). Through adapting its content to computers and more and more mobile devices (as tablets and smartphones) television has become mobile and gone online (Budd 2010, 2). In the course of this, Budd explains that today it is a standard for many TV shows to invite the viewer to a website for further information and

material (Ibid., 11-12). These adaptations are not only a reaction to the technical developments but also allow new business models.[2]

Media scientist Chuck Tryon uses the term *platform mobility* to describe the "ongoing shift toward ubiquitous, mobile access to a wide range of entertainment choices" (Tryon 2013, 4). Tryon explains that this shift does not only include technical developments but also economic, political and social changes, as for instance the promotion of cell phones, which results in an increasing desire for a mobile connection. Due to the growing mobility, persistence and interactivity, the users can control their viewing experience much more than in the past (Ibid). Apart from leaving comments and sharing contents, they can interact with the video content through moving back and forth, starting, stopping, replaying etc. This granted control is also central when using video-on-demand services, as for example *Netflix*. These services allow the users to browse through a large collection of videos in the way they prefer, i.e. on demand, and notwithstanding their current location.

In this paragraph I have elaborated on the current situation of television including the challenges and competition of the Internet. Briefly, it has been shown how television can adapt and use the Internet for its purpose. It turned out that this is often related to the development of websites and the provision of online video content, as for example through video-on-demand services. As digital storytelling plays an important role in this context, it will be introduced in the next section before examining it in relation to *Netflix* and *House of Cards* later on.

3.2. DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Due to their various functions, e.g. entertaining, sharing experiences and traditions or educating, stories have been told in all cultures. The way of telling a story has been influenced by technical developments, which had an impact on the existing tools a storyteller could use. Even though the traditional linear storytelling is still dominant, stories are by far not only told in this way anymore (Nack 2010, 15). Here, *digital* storytelling shall be discussed and defined in its characteristics.

First of all, as the term *digital* storytelling already indicates, this storytelling practice takes place through digital means. It arose with the introduction of computers and the Internet. The space and possibilities of digital storytelling expanded through the rise of personal home pages, blogs and social networking sites (Lundby 2009, 176). Digital storytelling can be regarded as a "modern expression" of storytelling that produces "multimedia stories" (Rule 2010, 56).

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[2] For example, the German broadcaster RTL uses its online platform to provide the latest episodes of its series *Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten* some days before they are broadcast on television. If people want to watch them they have to pay for it (Ibid., 5). What kind of business model *Netflix* developed in this context will be examined in more detail in chapter 4.1.2.

Still, the digital character is not always easy to define as the boundaries between digital and non-digital storytelling can be rather blurry. One reason is that a lot of *analog* storytelling is transferred into a *digital* form nowadays. For example, television shows can be accessed via mobile devices and web browsers, music is playable on digital devices through its mp3 format and books are typed on a computer before they get printed (Alexander 2011, 15).

Furthermore, digital storytelling is often described as *personal* and *self-representative*. This mainly relates to the work of Joe Lambert, Nina Mullen and Dana Atchley who developed a workshop program on the topic in the nineties and founded the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in California (Center for Digital Storytelling 2015). Based on Lambert's idea that diverse types of stories from an individual's life can be transformed into a multimedia story (Lambert 2013, 19), the CDS workshops are designed to help and support non-professionals with the development and production of their personal stories. Hence, the CDS approach focuses on digital storytelling as a personal and self-representative way of storytelling. Due to the complexity of the CDS and its workshops this personal-oriented approach spread and dominates the academic literature ever since. The term digital storytelling is therefore usually used and understood as a reference to the definition and curriculum of the Center for Digital Storytelling (Alexander 2011, 40).

Thirdly, digital storytelling is *interactive* and *participatory*. According to consultant and specialist in interactive media Carolyn Handler Miller, interactivity is the main aspect that distinguishes digital storytelling from traditional storytelling. In her book, Miller pays attention to the resulting consequences of interactivity for the creation of a story and its perception by the audience (Miller 2004, xiii). She states that "if you are experiencing an interactive form of content, you are directly involved with the material; you are a participant. You can manipulate, explore, or influence it in one of a variety of ways" (Ibid., 56). Interactivity is not just a passive perception but an active process, a two-way exchange. This means that the content and the audience react and respond to each other (Ibid.). In this context, Alexander explains that, in the past, a story used to go from A to B to C, having a beginning, a middle and an end. It was told by a person or group to an audience. This has changed through digital networks and social media so that stories are now less-linear, more open-ended, participatory and cross-media (Alexander and Levine 2008, 1). The audience takes an active part in the storytelling and can, for example, leave the story to research background information or add its own content through commenting, replying, editing or posting (Ibid., 3). Moreover, the combination of mobile devices and the Internet enables new ways of socializing, i.e. interaction between the users.

It can be argued that interactivity is closely connected to *personalization* as the user will only interact with the content when he or she is interested in it. Hence, the users' preferences have to be taken into account. As Alexander points out, storytellers therefore have to "develop skills

with empathy and sensory detail, in order to better connect with their readers or listeners"
(Alexander 2011, 11). Thus, paying attention to the audience when developing a story and
thereby increasing the personalization currently becomes more and more important within
digital storytelling.

To summarize, the term digital storytelling refers to creating and telling stories through *digital*
media. This can and is happening in various contexts and fields all over the world, even though
the focus is usually on its *personal*, *self-representative* use. Apart from breaking up the static,
linear storytelling structures, digital stories are often characterized by *interactivity*. Not only can
the users interact with the content, they can also interact with other users. That means that the
user plays a central role, which is why the creation of *personalized* content becomes
increasingly important.

These characteristics have striking parallels with the earlier defined desires of the users
(McRae 2006), which also include interactivity and personalization, the latter in the form of
seeking control and community creation. The audience is central when developing a story as
they will consume it later on. In order to reach a wide audience it is thus important to meet their
expectations, needs and demands. This is why I will not only examine the direct characteristics
of digital storytelling but also include McRae's desires in the following. I want to take into
account both aspects during the analysis of *Netflix* in order to get a profound insight into how
the company a) reacts to the digital shift and the resulting desires of the users for more
participation and control in the progress and b) integrates the features of digital storytelling in
its activities. To achieve this, I will at first point in how far the characteristics and desires can
be found in *Netflix'* provision and production of content. The results will then be summarized
in chapter 4.3. and used to draw conclusions about the company's work and intentions.

4. *NETFLIX* AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING

4.1. *NETFLIX*

> We are in the midst of an entertainment industry revolution. A convergence of technological,
> economic, and legal developments has led to the complete transformation of how consumers
> access and view programming. Consumers have the ability to decide when and where to view
> content and even whether to interact with it. […] [N]ew companies and new distribution models
> have emerged to fill the increasing demand, pushing the entire entertainment industry into a
> new realm of content-viewing experiences.
>
> (Possessky 2013)

This chapter will introduce *Netflix*, a video-on-demand and online streaming company that
describes itself as "the world's leading Internet television network".[3] According to the official

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[3] The *Global Internet Phenomena Report,* published by the networking equipment company *Sandvine
Incorporated*, examines "fixed and mobile data networks around the world, identifying facts, fads, and

website, *Netflix* has currently "over 57 million members in nearly 50 countries enjoying more than two billion hours of TV shows and movies per month" (Netflix 2015a). In order to analyze *Netflix*' use of digital storytelling, the *provision* of stories shall be explored first. As mentioned above, a source analysis has been conducted to reveal information about this topic. In the course of this, the company's development and business model as well as the website including its interface and personalization service were chosen as the central aspects for this examination. The results will be related to McRae's four desires and the four characteristics of digital storytelling.

4.1.1. THE RISE OF A COMPANY

Before turning into a video streaming service, *Netflix* started in 1997 as a video rental service. Back then, the company charged a fixed price for delivering DVDs to the customers. As Mary J. Cronin, researcher on product intelligence, mobile health and smart products, explains, *Netflix* did not just pretend to provide "Virtually all DVD titles!" but "bought up all available DVD film titles to become the clear leader in the nascent DVD entertainment sector" (Cronin 2014, 27).[4] At this point, the DVD format was just emerging, but *Netflix* co-founder Reed Hastings "bet that DVD technology would quickly overtake videotapes as the preferred film distribution and viewing mechanism" and turned out to be right with this assumption (Ibid.). In 2007, *Netflix* introduced its instant viewing feature, which added a video-on-demand service to its DVD rental service. Today, *Netflix* provides a complex online, i.e. *digital*, film and TV library which is accessible in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South America and several European countries.

For a low monthly price, the users "can watch as much as they want, anytime, anywhere, on nearly any Internet-connected screen. Members can play, pause and resume watching, all without commercials", states the company (Netflix 2015a). This shows that the users have the control about how much, when, where and in which way they want to use *Netflix*. This clearly relates to McRae's first desire and also implies personalization. Besides, this development indicates that with its changes the company aims to improve its service for the customers and

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the future trends that will shape the Internet's future" (Sandvine 2014, 2). This report highlights the leading position of *Netflix* in the field of video on demand. In North America, the company causes a downstream traffic during the peak hours that is significantly higher than the traffic of any other video-on-demand provider (Ibid., 5). In the United Kingdom and Ireland, *Netflix* is only surpassed by YouTube at the moment, but based on its current growth *Sandvine Incorporated* expects *Netflix* to become the leading on-demand service there within the next year (Ibid., 12). According to this report, *Netflix* self-imposed term of being "the world's leading internet subscription service" seems to be appropriate (Netflix 2015a).

[4] Cronin also mentions the often cited anecdote of *Netflix* co-founder Reed Hastings who decided to found a company that would abolish overdue renting fines after he had to pay $40 for an overdue video (Ibid., 26). This vision was fully achieved in 1999, when *Netflix* introduced the monthly subscription fee. Since then, the unlimited flat-based rental is a core part of *Netflix*' business model.

to adapt to technical innovations respectively. When DVDs became popular as a medium for storing and distributing videos, the company followed (or better foresaw) this trend and integrated DVDs into its renting service. The same applies for its streaming feature that was introduced when broadband Internet became a standard for many people in the U.S. and *Netflix* realized a new opportunity for its service.

Depending on the amount of watched content, streaming videos can be cheaper than buying a movie, especially as *Netflix* asks a monthly fee allowing unlimited streaming in return. Besides, many viewers want to watch a movie and then move on without collecting it on DVD. Consuming video content is all about "watch it and forget it" (Dixon 2013, 24). Communication scientist Alvaro E. S. Raba further elaborates on the consequences of video streaming. First of all, Raba explains that streaming accelerates everything. Movies are available for streaming shortly after they were released in the cinemas. This comes with a "voracious appetite for new content" on the part of the consumers (Raba 2014). At the beginning of linear television, the audience would either watch a show or totally miss it as neither recordings nor catch-up watching were possible. Hence, everyone would watch a show at the same time adhering to the fixed time slots. This watching behavior has been altered through the introduction of recording machines, DVDs and, finally, online streaming services, which gave the audience more control. In contrast to a linear TV program, as for instance HBO, *Netflix* is not bound to a limited amount of hours per week. It can therefore offer an infinite number of videos and provide its subscribers with more choice and control as they can chose what, where and when to watch. As a result, channels become less important. Moreover, *Netflix* has connected its service to several devices as, for instance, tablets, smartphones and game consoles, to increase the availability of its content and the opportunities to consume it. In this way, the users get even more control which again relates to McRae's first desire. It can be argued that *Netflix* realized the users' *desire to control entertainment* and reacts to it by giving them the control about how to use the offered video content. Apart from that, as an online service, *Netflix* provides its content in a *digital* way, i.e. the subscribers access the service online via the Internet and not through an analog TV set. Hence, the first of the four digital storytelling characteristics that were discussed in the previous chapter applies to *Netflix'* provision of stories. In the following section, *Netflix'* business model will be introduced to further elaborate on the four digital storytelling characteristics and McRae's desires within *Netflix'* work.

4.1.2. *NETFLIX'* BUSINESS MODEL

The article "*Netflix*: A New Business Model in the Distribution of Audiovisual Content" by Teresa Ojer and Elena Capapé provides a profound insight into *Netflix'* business model.

As the two film and media scientists point out, Paramount Pictures, Universal, 20th Century Fox, Warner Brothers, Walt Disney, and Sony-Columbia Pictures are the six main film production companies in the world, the so-called *majors*. They are characterized by a vertical structure, which means that they "control all the stages of creation of a film, from the initial idea to the screening at cinemas" (Ojer and Capapé 2013, 576). The increasing popularity of streaming services as *Netflix* and the growing consumption of online content change this business model of the majors (Ibid., 576-579 and Possessky 2013). As a result, new content is more and more released simultaneously via multiple channels, which reduces the time span between the release at the cinemas and the broadcast via other distribution channels.[5]

Furthermore, the development of the Internet and the introduction of mobile devices have influenced the consumption of video content. This results in a changed behavior on the part of the users, who have new desires and demands (McRae 2006), which in turn asks for new business models for the distribution of this content (Ojer and Capapé 2013, 578). This is where online video services come in. Before *Netflix* introduced its online streaming feature, services as *Amazon Unbox* or *Movielink* dominated the field by enabling the user to rent a film for 24 to 48 hours by downloading it for a fixed price. With *Netflix,* the concept of monthly payment was established and the films could be watched immediately. By streaming the content the wait for downloading it could be skipped just as on platforms like YouTube (Ibid., 581). Currently, the subscribers have to pay 7.99 dollars per month to get unlimited access to the online catalogue of *Netflix*. Besides, the company offers new users one month of free trial. As the company does not integrate any advertisement either on its website or in its video content, the amount of subscribers is essential. This clearly distinguishes *Netflix* from other broadcast networks, which mostly get their revenues through commercials. Due to this dependence on subscriptions it can be assumed that the needs of the users are very central to the company's business model. Only when the subscribers are satisfied they will pay the monthly fee to use the service. Once more, it therefore seems interesting to study McRae's desires in relation to *Netflix* in order to examine how the company reacts to them. In this context, *Netflix'* extensive personalization service is important (see 4.1.3.).

Besides, *Netflix* currently focuses on the distribution of original content, which also contributes to its success and leading position in the field of video streaming. Most of the other video-on-demand services are only "linked to a television branding infrastructure and offer a chance to

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[5] "Until very recently, content distribution in the entertainment industries was an ordered chain, with each distribution channel having a designated release window […]. In movies, the distribution chain began with the theatrical release of a film in domestic movie theaters and then in international theatrical markets. After theatrical runs, studios would license the content for home viewing distribution (DVD or videotape sales and rentals). Finally content would be licensed for television viewing, with cable television premium channels, like HBO and Showtime, usually getting first dibs and broadcast television taking up the rear" (Possessky 2013).

catch up with missed programmes", states professor in television studies Mareike Jenner (Jenner 2014, 5). In contrast to that, *Netflix* extended its former business model that only included video content that was also available on DVD or had already been shown somewhere else. Through the provision of original content, which ranges from comedy to drama and features popular film stars and directors, *Netflix* has become "the first in the chain of media exhibition" (Ibid.). In this way, the company can not only chose which content to offer but also directly participate in it. As *Netflix* takes part in the production process it can influence the structure of the series. As a result, the company can adapt it to its own demands in order to support its success and increase the number of its subscribers. This is in turn closely connected to the interests and desires of its users as they are the basis for the company's concept. The production of original content can thus be expected to be oriented towards the users. This will be examined in more detail in chapter 4.2. when analyzing *House of Cards* regarding the digital storytelling characteristics and McRae's desires.

4.1.3. Personalized Content and *Netflix*' Future Vision of Television

As *Netflix*' business model is based on the amount of subscribers, personalization is central to the company. Due to the required Internet connection for streaming the content, *Netflix* "knows exactly when, how long and how often its customers are interacting with its content" (Cronin 2014, 33). This information is used by *Netflix* to improve its technical basis and increase the personalization. At first, the website was upgraded so that it gave recommendations to the users based on the films they had watched. The decisive turning point came in 2002, when the personalized recommendation service *Cinematch* was introduced. It compares references and viewing patterns from different subscribers and suggests films based on the profiles of users with a similar taste.[6]

During this recommendation process, the user choses a particular movie from the streaming platform. His or her rating is then used by the software to recommend further movies to the user which are, again, watched and rated (Fig. 1). Hence, the service improves with the amount of movies a user watches and the resulting rating data. It can be concluded that this process is a two-way exchange and therefore to some extent *interactive* (Miller 2004). Interactivity within *Netflix* becomes even more apparent when taking into account that even though the users cannot directly interfere with the stories' plot, they can interact with the video content by

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[6] *Netflix* encourages its users to rate the videos they watch with a five-star system in order to know how popular a movie is among its subscribers. Besides, users can write reviews and recommend movies to other users. This data is used by *Cinematch* for its recommendations.
In 2006, *Netflix* announced an innovation contest to improve its *Cinematch* service: *The Netflix Price.* One million dollars were promised to the team or individual that could improve the *Cinematch* algorithm by at least ten percent. More than 30,000 teams from 170 countries reacted to this competition, which also brought a lot of publicity for the company (Cronin 2014, 31). For more information see Netflix 2009.

starting, pausing, rewinding etc. Besides, they can browse through the whole platform and freely switch between movies or the episodes of a series whenever they want. In addition, movies or series can be added to a personal list, for example, to remember them and watch them later on (Fig. 1). As *Netflix*' provision of content is interactive another digital storytelling characteristic as well as McRae's *desire for interactive entertainment* are fulfilled.
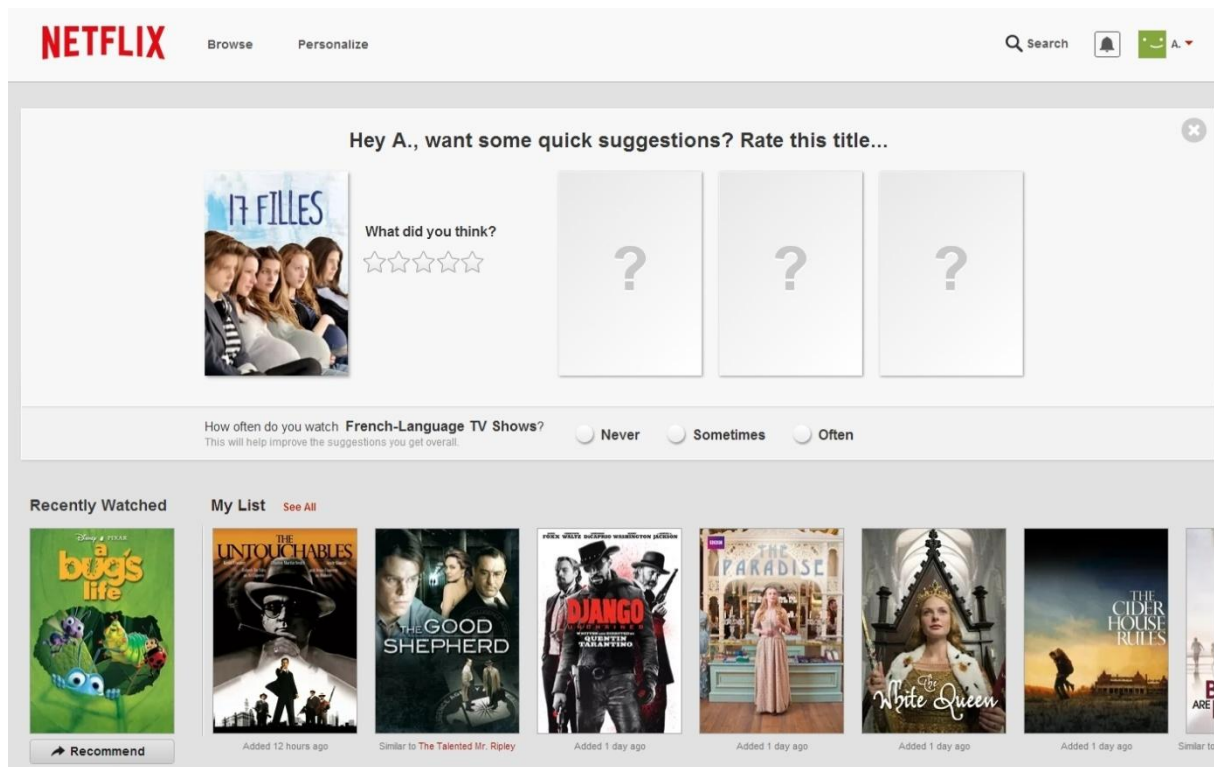

Fig. 1: The user is asked to rate the films in order to get personalized recommendations. Besides, movies can be added to a personal list.
(Screenshot from http://www.netflix.com/WiHome, 05-11-2014)

Since the foundation of *Netflix* and its DVD rental service, the personalization of its website and content became more and more important. In relation to this, Neil Hunt, Chief Product Officer of *Netflix*, explained in his speech during the Internet Week New York 2014 that "Internet TV is personalized TV" (Hunt 2014). According to Hunt, *Netflix* does not aim to offer the user a list of titles but "one or two perfect suggestions that perfectly capture what you want to watch right now depending on your mood and who is with you" (Ibid.). In the course of this development, it is the company's vision to create an individual channel for every single person (Ibid.). This leads to the assumption that *Netflix* mainly tries to persuade its customers of its service by applying their individual interests to personal user profiles. Again, the focus and the dependence of the company on the amount of subscribers, and thus the importance of their desires, become apparent.

Whereas with linear television people chose their favorite programs and discovered new shows by browsing through the channels, *Netflix* aims to perfect its personalization service in favor of abolishing these channels. This is also part of *Netflix' Long Term View* where *Netflix* summarizes its ideas and visions for the future developments of television as follows: "Internet TV is replacing linear TV. Apps are replacing channels, and screens are proliferating" (Netflix 2015b). According to *Netflix*, people, i.e. (possible) subscribers, do not enjoy the linear television experience "where channels present programs at particular times on non-portable screens with complicated remote controls". The company therefore believes that "the linear TV channel model is ripe for replacement" and suggests Internet TV as the replacing alternative (Ibid.). In this way, *Netflix'* streaming service directly responds to the desires of the audience by providing the content in a digital way and by focusing on interactivity, control and personalization. With these actions *Netflix* reacts to McRae's *desire to control entertainment* and the *desire for interactive entertainment*. Besides, the digital storytelling characteristics *digital*, *interactive* and *personalized* are met.
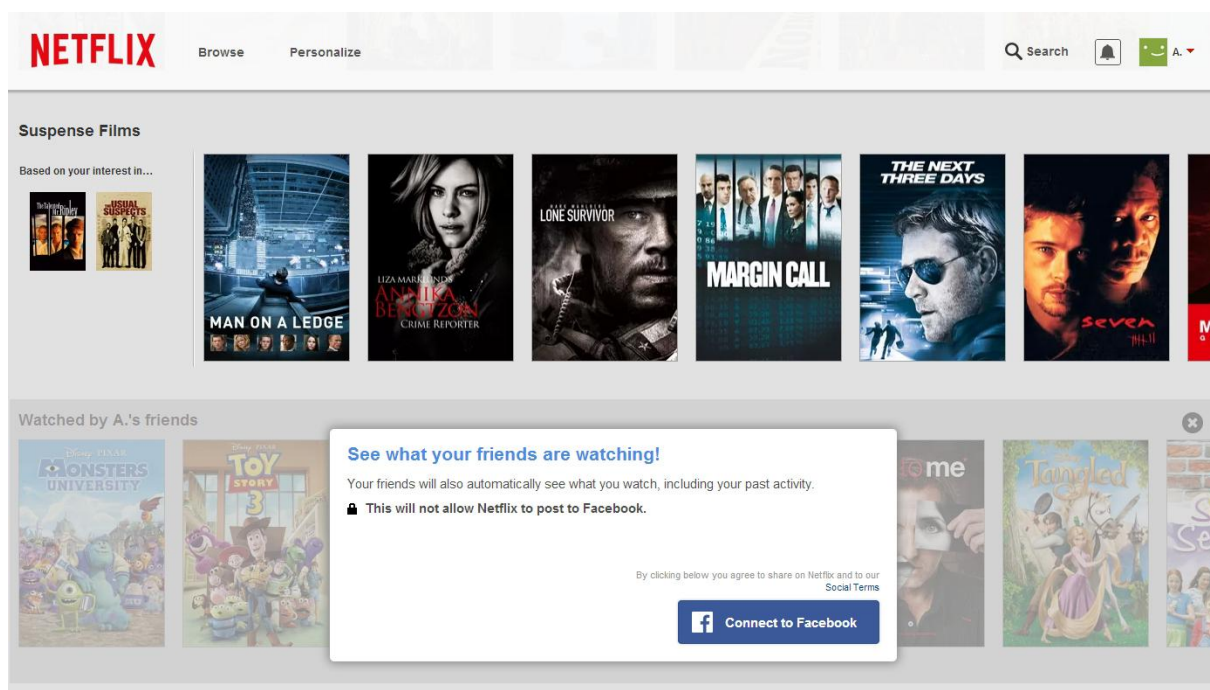

Fig. 2: Example of personalized recommendations on the user's profile as well as the opportunity to connect with *Facebook* to get to know what others are watching.
(Screenshot from www.netflix.com, 05-11-2014)

In March 2013, *Netflix* introduced a social feature, which allows the users to share the movies they have watched on *Facebook*. Besides, every user got two new sections on his or her *Netflix* page: *Friends' Favorites* (a list based on his or her friends' ratings) and *Watched by your Friends* (a list showing movies and series recently watched by his or her friends, Fig. 2) (Netflix 2013). Lately, this social feature was extended by a recommendation element.

It enables the subscribers to recommend the video content they watched to selected friends on *Facebook* who might also enjoy it (Netflix 2014). Through these social features, the users can actively engage in the process of providing the video content by sharing it with their friends. In this way, personalization within *Netflix* is extended even further. Moreover, these social features can be seen as a reaction to the third of McRae's desires, the *desire for community*.

4.1.4. *NETFLIX'* ORIGINAL CONTENT

To satisfy the "voracious appetite" (Raba 2014, see above) its streaming service has caused among the subscribers due to immediate availability, easy access and acceleration, *Netflix* has started to produce its own original content. In this context, *House of Cards*, directed by David Fincher and starring Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright, was the first series that was exclusively produced for *Netflix*. This means that it was released on the streaming platform without having been broadcast on a television channel before. Having started in 2013, the third season of the series is currently in production and will be released on *Netflix* at the end of February 2015. After its release, *House of Cards* was much discussed and received a lot of positive feedback and critique. For the first time, an online program was rewarded with an Emmy (Possessky 2013).[7] Recently, *Netflix* announced the production of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: The Green Legend* a sequel of Ang Lee's movie from 2000. This first original *Netflix* film is planned to be released in August 2015 in the cinemas and on *Netflix* at the same time. In this way, the usual gap between a movie's release in the cinemas and its accessibility via other channels will be eliminated (Child 2014).

The following chapter will focus on *Netflix' production* of stories to further examine the company's use of digital storytelling. Here, it will be analyzed in how far the circumstances of production and release have influenced the way of storytelling in *House of Cards*.

4.2. *HOUSE OF CARDS*
4.2.1. PLOT AND CHARACTERS

House of Cards is a political drama series that is based on the novel trilogy about Francis Urquhart by the British author Michael Dobbs.[8] The same-titled BBC mini-series of four episodes is an earlier adaption of Dobbs' story from 1990. In the course of *Netflix'* version, the plot, which was originally set in the UK, was relocated and adapted to the political system of the U.S. The series is set in Washington, D.C., and deals with Francis J. Underwood (Kevin

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[7] In fact, the first season won three out of nine Emmy and one out of four Golden Globe nominations. The second season was even nominated for thirteen Emmy Awards out of which it won one.
[8] Dobbs' trilogy consists of *House of Cards* (1989), *To Play the King* (1992) and *The Final Cut* (1994).

Spacey) – a Democratic congressman who has eagerly supported Garrett Walker (Michel Gill), the series' fictional 45th President of the U.S., during the election campaign. Against their agreement, Underwood is not rewarded by becoming Secretary of State but left to continue his work as a congressman instead. As a result of this broken promise, he decides to come up with a conspiratorial plan to take revenge on the people who betrayed him and to obtain a powerful position. In the course of this, Underwood gets support from his wife Claire (Robin Wright), who is just as cold and calculating as Underwood himself. While Underwood keeps pretending to support the President, his plan succeeds step-by-step in the background. By the end of season one, Underwood is nominated Vice-President and in the final episode of season two, he replaces Walker and becomes the 46th President of the U.S.

4.2.2. PRODUCTION AND RELEASE

As mentioned before, it is essential to relate the object of study to a broader context when conducting a textual analysis. In this case, the production and release of *House of Cards* shall shortly be introduced as they provide background information about the series. Taking into account these circumstances will help when analyzing the series in chapter 4.2.4.

Regarding the production of the series, *Netflix* did not ask for a pilot and moreover agreed from the beginning to the production of two complete seasons, with thirteen episodes each. As a result, the conception and creation of the series were liberated as neither all characters had to be introduced in the first episode nor the story had to be presented in a way that would show its promising potential (Spacey 2013). Thus, "a sophisticated, multi-layered story" could be created, "with complex characters who would reveal themselves over time and relationships that would need space to play out" (Ibid.). As producer Beau Willimon explains, the team hereby also got the opportunity to create long story arcs and to introduce something in the first episodes that would not turn up again until the end of season two (Willimon in Ryan 2013).

Willimon adds that having discussed several ways, the team decided to release the whole season at once to set *Netflix* apart from other networks (Ibid.). In that way, the subscribers can decide how, where and in what chunks they want to watch the series.[9] According to Mario Klarer, Americanist and communications scientist, *Netflix* "broke with all of the conventions of traditional serial distribution" when releasing the whole season at once, as the company did not only bow to the "new viewing habits of their customers, but also acknowledged […] that the

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[9] In relation to this, Willimon states that *Netflix* "recognized that viewers were deciding how they wanted to watch television shows. And some of them were watching it in pieces, some of them were watching it all at once, some of them might watch it in two days, and some of them might watch it over the course of two years. And they said, rather than try to make a choice that will appeal to the most people, or the biggest segment, why don't we just give them the option to decide for themselves?" (Willimon in Kornhaber 2014).

series format has completely emancipated itself from its roots in television with its piecemeal release pattern" (Klarer 2014, 3). It can be assumed that the increased liberation during the writing process and conception of the story as well as the all-at-once release of the seasons influence to the series' way of storytelling. Before studying this in more detail, some general remarks on serial storytelling will precede the actual textual analysis to further elaborate on the context of the series.

4.2.3. SERIAL STORYTELLING AND BINGE-WATCHING

The structure of a series can mainly be divided into episodic and serial. Sean O'Sullivan, Associate Professor of English, argues that the episodic storytelling consists of episodes that stand alone and "function more as short stories than as chapters in a novel" (O'Sullivan 2013, 65), whereas the serial storytelling is embedded in a "relational context with preceding and succeeding episodes" (Ibid., 71). Hence, the latter consists of episodes that can be compared to the sequential chapters of a book. Here, the story arc continues over several episodes and is not limited to just one episode as within episodic storytelling. One or two decades ago, most of the series stuck to the episodic format. David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* can be regarded as one of the first examples of serial storytelling. The production of series like *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, *Dexter*, *Breaking Bad* or *House of Cards* shows that this way of storytelling became more popular during the last decade. Apart from longer storylines, this novel-like storytelling also enables a more profound character development and more complex relations between the characters (Klarer 2014, 2). Whereas with episodic series, the viewer does not have to be familiar with previous episodes and developments, the serial storytelling asks for a consecutive viewing behavior. Besides, the end of an episode often "concludes with a moment of uncertainty […], often in the form of a suspense inducing cliffhanger" (Mittell 2013).

Streaming services that allow video content to be accessible from anywhere and at any time, uploading a series like *House of Cards* all at once and the increase of serial storytelling that keeps teasing the viewers into the next episode all accelerate the viewer's consumption. This can lead to the so-called *binge-watching* phenomenon – a term that refers to the watching of several episodes in a row. Binge-watching is closely connected to the control of the user. As Neil Hunt states "Internet TV means watching what you want, when you want and where you want it" (Hunt 2014). The amount of consumed content and the resulting binge-watching are reinforced by the increasing complexity of the serial structure.[10]

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[10] Regarding *House of Cards*, a reader poll on *Wired* has, among others, indicated that some viewers watched all episodes of the first season in a row the moment they were released on *Netflix* (Hudson 2013), but still "there were plenty of people who spaced it out over time" (Willimon in Kornhaber 2014).

To sum up, the episodes of a series are nowadays more and more designed for being watched in a row due to increasingly complex characters and various overarching plotlines. *Netflix* as a streaming service and the all-at-once release of *House of Cards* support this development. In the following, the *production* of stories, i.e. the original *Netflix* content, will be studied through conducting the textual analysis on some specific aspects of *House of Cards* (pilot episode, story arcs, episodes' length, recaps and teasers, cliffhangers and connections between the episodes, asides). The four defined characteristics of digital storytelling and McRae's four desires will structure this examination.

4.2.4. DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN *HOUSE OF CARDS*

Even though the production of *House of Cards* is not exclusively *digital* but also includes analog elements as, for instance, actors, decoration, cameras, the provision of the series only took place on a digital way, i.e. online via the *Netflix* platform. As argued before, this allowed a new flexibility during the writing and production process. At first, it shall therefore be examined in how far the digital provision had an impact on the series' conception and narrative structure.

As mentioned above, *Netflix* did not ask for a pilot before signing the series. Nevertheless, just as with other series, the first episode of *House of Cards* provides a typical first insight into the series and its content through introducing important characters and plotlines as, for instance, Underwood and his revenge plan or the ambitions of journalist Zoe Barns. Second, *Netflix* agreed to the production of two seasons from the start enabling long story arcs, which are typical for serial storytelling. Apart from short storylines that reveal themselves within one episode, there are indeed others that continue over several episodes or even seasons, e.g. Barns' affair with Underwood or her aim to prove the murder Underwood committed. Especially *House of Cards*' main plot, i.e. Underwood taking revenge and trying to become President, could only span all 26 episodes because of the production contract with *Netflix*.

In contrast to traditional television programs, *House of Cards* is not limited by any temporal broadcasting structures. Due to the provision on the Internet, the episodes do not have to adhere to a fixed time schedule but can have different lengths just like the chapters of a book. Nevertheless, all *House of Cards* episodes have, apart from slight differences, nearly the same length.[11] As Hunt admits, this is because "the idea that a story can have long segments and short segments" has not been "cracked" yet (Hunt in Kasperkvic 2014). It remains to be seen if this changes in the third season.

Due to *Netflix*' archiving structure, the videos do not have to be watched when they are released but can be discovered later. In that way, the shows "can live forever" (Ibid.).

[11] All episodes are between 47 and 53 minutes long, except for episode S01E01 (56 minutes) and episode S02E13 (59 minutes).

Usually, the episodes of a series that is characterized by serial storytelling start with a short summary of previous events and developments. *House of Cards* does not show these recaps at the beginning. Due to the availability of all episodes, the viewer can not only watch all episodes chronologically at all times but also easily catch up with former developments. It therefore seems to be less important to take into account that "someone might need information on past events" (Thompson 2003, 64). Moreover, the episodes "don't have to end […] with a tidbit of the next one because you know that people are going to be watching several in the row" (Hunt in Kasperkvic 2014). A preview teases the audiences into the next episode and bridges the time gap until its broadcast. As all *House of Cards* episodes were released at once, these previews were not needed.

When examining the connections between the episodes, it turns out that some cliffhangers occur. Still, not even half of the episodes end with such a moment of suspense to make the viewer keep on watching.[12] Hence, cliffhangers play a rather subordinate role in *House of Cards*. Furthermore, it is striking that the second episode is directly linked to the first.[13] It could be assumed that the producers expected the viewer not to stop watching after the first episode of the (new) series and therefore directly linked the two episodes. In a similar way, the end of season one and the first episode of season two are connected.[14] Apart from these two examples, no further segues are used between the episodes.[15] Still, this approach seems interesting in terms of digital storytelling. Through linking all the episodes together, the series could turn into a cinematic whole and loose its episodic character – an approach that is enabled through the series' all-at-once release and its online availability. As a result, the definitions of film and series could be altered as, according to Spacey, a series of thirteen hours uploaded altogether is not that different from a film anymore. In Spacey's opinion, the definitions and labels could therefore become less important as, in the end, "it's all content. It's just story" (Spacey 2013).

Even though the series focuses on the life of a specific person, namely Frank Underwood, it is not the personal story of an individual but a commercial-oriented series made by *Netflix*. Regarding the second characteristic of digital storytelling it can thus be argued that *House of Cards* is neither *personal* nor *self-representative*. The third characteristic is not applicable

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[12] *House of Cards* episodes that end with a cliffhanger are, for instance, S01E09 (when the education bill surprisingly falls and Underwood remarks threateningly that he wants to know who is responsible), S01E10 (when Russo suddenly disappears after he got drunk) or S02E08 (when Underwood and Claire find out that a compromising article about Claire has been published).

[13] Episode S01E01 finishes with Underwood visiting a café and reading a newspaper. At the beginning of episode S01E02, the same newspaper is shown and Underwood just finished his meal at the café.

[14] At the end of season one, Underwood, who has just been announced for Vice-President, goes for a run with Claire. The first episode of season two begins with the two still running.

[15] At the end of episode S01E04, Underwood visits Zoe in the evening and goes to bed with her. The next episode starts with Underwood getting dressed presumably the next morning, i.e. several hours must have passed and not just a few minutes.

either. While the user can control the consumption of the content, he or she cannot influence the story itself, i.e. there is no direct *interaction* or *participation* with the series. As a result, *House of Cards* is a static series that cannot be changed in its plot or action. The availability of all episodes allows the users to choose in which order they want to watch them. Still, a non-chronological order will make it difficult to follow the action due to the serial storytelling structure that is used within *House of Cards*. As the user cannot control the story nor interact with it, the *desire to control entertainment* and the *desire for interactive entertainment* are not fulfilled. Instead the viewer is provided with a series that is notwithstanding its different provision not significantly different from classical television series.

Fig. 3: Underwood addressing the viewer for the first time.[16]
(Screenshot from *House of Cards*, S01E01, 00:00:57)

The *desire for truth* is however to some extent fulfilled due to the *aside* – a central storytelling element of the series. Klarer defines the aside as "a form of monologue […] that is not addressed to any of the characters present on stage, but directed solely to the audience. […] [It] can only be heard by the audience, while the characters standing right next to the speaker are totally oblivious of his or her speech" (Klarer 2014, 4). According to Klarer, the asides often provide the audience with "information that is in direct opposition to what Underwood communicates to his listeners within the diegesis" (Ibid.). Apart from that, Underwood uses the

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[16] In the series' opening scene, the neighbors' dog is hit by a car outside Underwood's house. While someone goes to inform them, Underwood is left alone with the dog and addresses the audience for the first time. Explaining that certain moments require someone who does "the unpleasant thing, the necessary thing" (*House of Cards*, S01E01, 00:01:10-00:01:20), Underwood justifies why he has to kill the dog.

asides to tell what he does (not) like or appreciate.[17] He gives background information about people and events, explains relationships and contexts,[18] provides an insight into his manipulative plans and points out his interests and intentions.[19]

Hence, it can be stated that through the asides the audience gets to know backgrounds and Underwood's real intentions. Although the viewer does not actively search for the truth here, McRae's *desire for truth* is still partly fulfilled. Moreover, Underwood addresses the viewer repeatedly with "you" and asks them direct questions like "Who would you guess texted me just know?" or "I'm being played, but why?"[20] These direct contacts to the audience convey a sense of *personalization*. They give the viewers access to Underwood's mind and make them co-conspirators. It seems as if Underwood is addressing the audience personally although this is not true. Moreover, the series cannot be adapted to any personal preferences of the viewers. As the asides are only one-way contacts, the user might feel personally addressed by Underwood but a real feeling of community is not achieved. Hence, McRae's *desire for community* is not true.

4.3. DISCUSSION

Regarding the *provision* of content it can be summarized that the subscriber is the key to *Netflix'* concept and business model. It is all about personalization and the satisfaction of the users as, of course, the subscribers only stay with the service as long as their needs and desires are satisfied. In the course of this, *Netflix* does not only provide video content but actively works with it. Through analyzing viewing patterns and preferences as well as deriving recommendations from them, *Netflix* offers the content to its users in a *personalized* way. It is, therefore, not just a passive online video library but actively helps the subscribers to make choices and discover the offered collection. This leads to *interaction* as well as to the fact that the user can control his or her consumption of the *digitally* offered video content. Hence, it can be summarized that three of the four digital storytelling characteristics apply to *Netflix'* provision of stories. By providing the audience with control, allowing interaction and creating a

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[17] He introduces the "President-elect Garrett Walker" to the audience and adds the short comment "Do I like him? No." to express his antipathy towards him. About his relationship with Claire he says "I love that woman. I love her more than sharks love blood." (*House of Cards,* S01E01, 00:02:15-00:02:88 and 00:17:54-00:18:00).

[18] Before stepping into the car, Underwood informs the viewer about the meeting he is going to attend: "Every Tuesday I sit down with a speaker and a majority leader to discuss the week's agenda. Well, discuss is probably the wrong word. They talk while I sit quietly and imagine their lightly salted faces frying in a skillet" (*House of Cards*, S01E02, 00:00:45-00:00:56).

[19] While talking to Donald Blythe, Underwood suddenly states: "What a martyr craves more than anything is a sword to fall on. So, you sharpen the blade, hold it at just the right angle, and then, 3, 2, 1..." indicating that he directed the whole conversation to get a specific answer from Blythe (*House of Cards*, S01E02, 00:10:06-00:00:10:16).

[20] *House of Cards*, S01E09, 00:43:00-00:43:03 and S01E12, 00:40:19-00:40:25.

community through social features, the *desire to control entertainment,* the *desire for interactive entertainment* and the *desire for community* are accomplished as well.

In the next step, the *production* of content was studied. Here, the textual analysis of *House of Cards* revealed that the digital storytelling characteristics apply to the series only to a slight extent. Although its *digital* provision has some influence on the structure of the series (recaps and teasers are not necessary anymore and cliffhangers become less important), no significantly new format is created. Moreover, the series is not *personal*, *self-representative* or *interactive*, but commercially produced and static – just as a classic television series. The asides convey a limited feeling of *personalization* but as one-way-interactions they cannot create an actual community. Still, they partly fulfill the *desire for truth*. The rest of McRae's desires is not accomplished. Hence, it can be stated that the desires of the users do not play a significant role in terms of the production of content.

Having summarized the results from the analyses of *Netflix* and *House of Cards*, I will now try to point out what they reveal about the company in order to better understand its work and concept. *Netflix* mainly applies the users' desires and the characteristics of digital storytelling in the provision of content but does not significantly include them in its productions. Hence, the company's main difference in comparison to other television channels lies in its provision and distribution model. *Netflix* is accessible via a website that functions as a digital video library. As the number of customers is the key to the company's business model and success, it is the aim to attract as many of them as possible. As argued before this can only be achieved through offering a service that satisfies the users and fulfills their desires and needs. It therefore does not come as a surprise that three of McRae's desires, which specifically relate to the digital shift and thereby affect *Netflix* and its digital library, indeed influence the structure, concept and interface of the company's streaming service.

The production of original content on the other hand is not significantly characterized by a digital way of storytelling. Besides, the desires of the users that relate to the digital shift do not really play an important role. As a result, the structure of the video content, although specifically produced for a digital release, has not significantly changed yet. According to Hunt, the producers just "begin to see the opportunities that Internet TV provides to the medium of storytelling" (Hunt 2014). Apart from that, it is also likely that the production of video content for commercial purposes still has to follow the rules of classic, i.e. television-oriented, filmmaking. As *Netflix* depends on the subscriptions of its users it seems conceivable that the company tries to create a form of video content that is just as attractive to the (potential) audience as the one they find on classic television. Therefore, innovative new serial structures and an extensive use of digital storytelling that includes all its specifics and opportunities are likely to be considered as not yet suitable for a large audience.

It is possible that this will be achieved in the future, maybe when the company's vision comes true. When the whole concept of television changes and channels no longer exist its content will presumably also change in its structure and form. For now, *Netflix* has to meet both sides: the desires that arise with the digital shift and the habits and expectations towards the (classic) filmmaking. At the moment, this results in an innovative way of distribution that relates to the desires of the users and includes digital storytelling characteristics. However, the production of the content still sticks to classic structures and habits.

5. CONCLUSION

In the digital age, television is changing and new forms of storytelling are developing. One example in this context is the so-called *digital* storytelling – a term that arose at the beginning of the nineties when the first workshop on the topic was held. In general, digital storytelling can be defined as "telling stories with digital technologies" (Alexander 2011, 3). Often, this definition is specified by restricting it to a personal level of use. Although, digital storytelling is today practiced in different contexts and not only on a personal level any more, the academic field still mostly examines this personal type of digital storytelling.

This thesis aimed to extend the existing state of research by examining the use of digital storytelling on a non-governmental, institutional level. In the course of this, the private, commercial-oriented company *Netflix* was analyzed regarding its provision and production of content by taking its series *House of Cards* as an example. In the course of this, the background of television in the digital age (referring to Budd 2010, McRae 2006 and Tryon 2013) and digital storytelling (using Alexander 2011 and Miller 2004) were introduced by defining four desires of the users that arise with the shift towards the Internet (the *desire to control entertainment,* the *desire for interactive entertainment,* the *desire for community* and the *desire for truth)* as well as four characteristics of digital storytelling (*digital*, *personal* and *self-representative, interactive* and *participatory*, *personalized*).

With the help of a source analysis and a textual analysis these aspects were related to *Netflix* and its series *House of Cards*. The source analysis turned out to be a useful method as it helped to collect information from different articles, essays and interviews about *Netflix'* development, business model and provision of content. In this research, the conducted source analysis was not just a theoretical reflection but also included a practical part as the *Netflix* website was studied regarding its interface and personalization service (i.e., information from the sources could be confirmed through investigating the website). In this way, a broad examination of the company's use of digital storytelling could be achieved. As for the textual analysis, it can be stated that the method enabled a good analysis of the series. A broader context for the object of study could be achieved through introducing its production and

release. The aspects of the actual analysis turned out to be well-chosen as they provided a good overview of the storytelling technique within the series. Through focusing on these aspects, the textual analysis was well-structured and allowed a coherent investigation regarding the use of digital storytelling. The only disadvantage was that the thesis' length only allowed the analysis of one *Netflix* series.

It became apparent that *Netflix* offers its content in a *digital*, *interactive* and *personalized* way. The fulfillment of three of the four characteristics indicates, that digital storytelling is used when *providing* stories. Apart from that, three of McRae's desires are accomplished. This shows that *Netflix'* online service is mostly adapted to the expectations and needs of the users that arise with the drift to the digital. In contrast to that, *Netflix' production* of original content turned out to be less characterized by digital storytelling and McRae's desires. Even though the circumstances of the production and the *digital* release liberated the conception and creation of the series, *House of Cards* does not differ significantly from other series that use serial storytelling and are broadcast on television and, thus, no new cinematic structure is created. Due to the asides, the series can to some extent be regarded as *personalized*. Nevertheless, it is not remarkably characterized by digital storytelling as two characteristics are only partly true whereas the two others are not fulfilled at all. Moreover, just one of McRae's desires, namely the *desire for truth*, is to some extent met.

It is important to differentiate between *Netflix'* provision and the production of content. Regarding the research question it can be summarized that the company mainly uses digital storytelling in its provision of content but does not significantly include it in its productions. *Netflix* reacts to the users' desires that arise with the digital shift through offering a new way of distribution that completely takes place digitally and online and provides the audience with control, interactivity and influence. Again, this only applies to the provision of content. As for the production it can be stated that the company currently follows the rules of classic, i.e. television-oriented, filmmaking. *Netflix* depends on the number of subscriptions and therefore tries to meet the users' expectations. It can be concluded that the audience has a striking influence on the production of stories. As long as they are used to the classic television structures, it is risky to produce content that is much different as it is not sure how the audience will react to it. To avoid failure and unpopularity it therefore seems conceivable that the company holds on to the classic structures and does not experiment extensively with the opportunities of digital storytelling (yet).

Nevertheless, it became apparent that digital storytelling is not only used by governmental, non-commercial institutions any more. Although the chances and opportunities might not be completely discovered and applied yet, digital storytelling is already used to some extent in the case of *Netflix* so that the company can be seen as an example for the use of digital storytelling

on a non-governmental, institutional level. As a result, it seems necessary to adjust the definition of digital storytelling including its characteristics as it currently does not cover all uses of digital storytelling, namely the personal *and* the institutional, sufficiently. The use of digital storytelling on a non-governmental, institutional level should further be explored not only to be able to redefine the characteristics of digital storytelling but also to examine the ongoing development and trends in this field. In this context, other commercial institutions should be investigated to find out if and how they use digital storytelling for their purpose. Apart from that, this research could be continued by analyzing the third season of *House of Cards* (in order to find out if it is characterized by a new cinematic structure and thereby differs from the first two seasons) and other original *Netflix* series. In this way, more could be revealed about the specifics of a series that is produced for an online (all-at-once) release. This could also provide a deeper insight into future developments concerning digital storytelling as well as the definition and structure of series and films. Here, it also remains to be seen if *Netflix*' vision of total personalization will come true and which changes in (digital) storytelling this might cause in the future.

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