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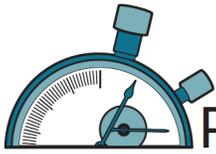
Bloodstained, Unpacking the Affect of a Kickstarter Success

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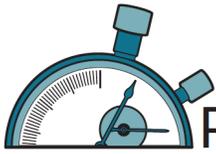
Since its launch in 2009, Kickstarter has stormed into popular media and culture, popularizing crowdfunding while making possible projects ranging from one of the first mainstream smart watches (Pebble Technology), to a fandom's motion picture film (Thomas), to a man making potato salad (Brown), to a spacesuit restoration by the Smithsonian Institution (Smithsonian Institution). As of the writing of this piece, over 11.3 million people have funded projects on the site, bringing over \$2.5 billion dollars for projects ("Start Your Project"). To many, these projects' Kickstarters seem to be straightforward: come up with an idea, put it on Kickstarter, and get funding. In practice, things are a lot messier: countless projects fail to ever get off the ground or even attract a single donation. While Kickstarter success appears one-dimensional, the rhetorical complexity of successful campaigns represents a wealth of data for scholars and practitioners in rhetoric and professional writing.

Using Michael Warner and Christian Lundberg as a frame, I argue the best Kickstarters mobilize their publics' affect via meaningful tropes baked into their project's pitch while using synecdoche to offer that same public the chance to help create the text that binds them together. Using the example of *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night*, I hope to demonstrate how these forces can be analyzed (and potentially replicated) by savvy professional writers and rhetoricians.

Kickstarter and the Affected Public

Warner's conception of a public provides a useful vocabulary for discussing and conceptualizing the relationship between backers and Kickstarter campaigns. A public, Warner explains, is self-organized, and exists by virtue of being addressed (74). Furthermore, a public is "the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse," (90) a form of poetic world making (114). As Warner explains, "Public discourse says not only 'Let a public exist' but 'Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way.' It then goes in search of confirmation that such a public exists, with greater or lesser success [...] Run it up the flagpole and see who salutes. Put on a show and see who shows up" (114). Discourse and a public operate in tandem, co-creating each other. A public exists because a text addresses it, and a text has relevance because a public gives it attention.

Backers, as a public, exist because a particular Kickstarter campaign has been pitched and draws their interest. In turn, a Kickstarter succeeds only when it manages to resonate with an expanding and durable public, when it finds those willing to salute its metaphorical flag. And, things get interesting when that campaign succeeds, as the poetic world making of the public becomes literal as backers bring the project to life via their funding and interest—heady stuff for many fans.



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While Warner's publics can help visualize the basic rhetorical relationships in a Kickstarter, Lundberg's tweaking of Warner's work gives us an even deeper insight into how successful Kickstarters attract and then mobilize their backers: effective use of their public's tropological and affective economies. Expanding on Warner, Lundberg explains that "publics are inextricably intertwined with an economy of trope defining the lines of affinity and affective investment that produce the conditions for public as a durable, even 'enjoyable,' social bond by articulating conditions for membership, including conditions of inclusion and exclusion" (408). Going further, he explains that a public is also "an identity metaphor that frames reading practices within an economy of tropes, to a certain extent prefiguring the effects produced by a public's attention to the text" (390). For Lundberg, publics bond via an underlying economy of tropes and affect: a given text that bonds a public succeeds because it validates and perpetuates the tropological and affective touchstones of the group.

When using tropes, Lundberg uses the Lacanian definition as a starting point, defining tropes as "an economy of exchange and articulation generative of all signs and their meanings" (389), adding that tropes are generative, taking part in an economy with "readable regularities in the exchange of tropes, governed by patterns and practices of investment that lend themselves to repetition and reiteration across time" (389, 408). Lundberg's language syncs well with Warner's assertion that "Not texts themselves create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time" (90). Any given public will not only have a shared text that channels the tropes they value the most, but that text will also fit into a line of texts that have previously attracted

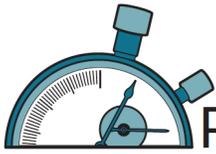
and nourished publics with at least a partially similar makeup by using and reusing the tropes they value highly.

Lundberg disarticulates affect from emotion, explaining that affect "describes the set of forces, investments, logics, relations, and practices of subjectivization that are the conditions of possibility for emotion" (390). In Lundberg's language, publics are drawn to texts that affectively impact them via centralizing tropes, and tropes gain value when they interact with the underlying affective investment of a given public.

Using the concepts of Lundberg and Warner, we would expect to see in Kickstarter campaigns publics that have been created and sustained by projects that mobilize public-specific tropes that tie into the shared historical affective economy of the public that self-organizes around a particular project. In such a conception, a Kickstarter represents more than a meaningful articulation of a public's world understanding: it also almost intoxicatingly provides a potential avenue to directly impact the continued existence, success, and expansion of that world understanding through the funding of the Kickstarter.

Gaming Kickstarters: An Industry-Shifting Phenomenon

To tease out how the language of Warner and Lundberg maps onto individual Kickstarters, I will use a notable Kickstarter success from gaming: *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night*. While there are many worthy causes supported by Kickstarter, including many that have had impressive social impact, I chose *Bloodstained* because of its location within the larger world of games and gaming Kickstarters, a prime factor in Kickstarter's meteoric success.



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Games Kickstarters are of note because of the industry-altering level of success these projects have had in the short time since Kickstarter's debut. As of this writing, the Games category of Kickstarter has raised over \$500 million dollars for projects, representing over 20% of the \$2.4 billion dollars raised on Kickstarter as a whole. The sheer scale of the share of games on Kickstarter shows the industry-altering impact this platform has had. At the same time, the success of Kickstarter as a starting point for successful video game projects has inspired multiple gaming-only platforms for crowdfunding, including Fig, a funding platform that allows for equity-based crowdfunding as well as reward-based funding ("About Community Powered Publishing"); Gambitious, a hybrid crowd finance and independent game publishing label ("About Gambitious"); and Collective, a pre-crowdfunding interest-gauging site created and maintained by industry publisher Square Enix ("About").

While the industry-shifting aspects of video game Kickstarters alone could make them worth studying, these projects paradoxically seem to succeed while standing opposite of the status quo of the affective and tropological economy of video gamers. In the current climate, preordering video games sight unseen is widely seen as a grave mistake, yet Kickstarting a video game project is often a functional equivalent to preordering taken to an extreme. Many of the games that get Kickstarted don't even have sample footage yet, but a considerable number have managed to raise millions in funding. To explain this, and demonstrate what Warner and Lundberg's language looks like in action when analyzing a Kickstarter, I argue that while these projects on the face of things seem to run counter to the existing tropological and affective economies of the gaming community, they tap

into those resources on a fundamental level through the synecdoche of a backed campaign standing in for the publication of the game being backed.

Gaming and Preordering: Bad Blood

For a bit of context, the call to not preorder games has been ongoing for several years in the gaming press and is a controversial subject that stems in part from a spate of botched high-profile launches (Kuchera, "I Won't Buy Battlefield Hardline"; Plunket; Good; Makedonski; Dingman), a sense that DLC¹ via preorder had spiraled out of control (Livingston; Kuchera, "Batman"), and a suspicion that preorders have been used as a way to pressure gamers to buy bad games before the press and game playing community have had a chance to see just how terrible the final product may be (Thier; J. Walker). Despite this ongoing and widespread sentiment that preordering games is a terrible idea, Kickstarted games have been raising millions (see Table 1), at times taking in more from individual gamers than traditional preorders, all for games that are often years away from final release.

Project Title	Number of Backers	Money Raised
<i>Shenmue 3</i>	69,320	\$6,333,295
<i>Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night</i>	64,867	\$5,545,991
<i>Torment: Tides of Numenera</i>	74,405	\$4,188,927
<i>Project Eternity</i>	73,986	\$3,986,929
<i>Mighty No. 9</i>	67,226	\$3,845,170
<i>Double Fine Adventure</i>	87,142	\$3,336,371

Table 1: Top Video Game Kickstarter Projects as of August 2015. Adapted From "Video Games sort by Most Funded."

Even though Kickstarted games of various types have at times failed to deliver (Schreier), at times

provided less than promised (Rigney), and even resulted in federal action on the behalf of backers (Mullin), they still remain popular.² The success of these games in the face of such widespread anti-preorder sentiment is more impressive when you consider that most of these games offer only concept art: backers aren't backing a game as much as they're backing the *idea* of a game.

The Anti-Publisher Public of Gaming Kickstarters

The case of *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night*, I argue, can help us understand how these gaming Kickstarters succeed in the face of widespread anti-preorder sentiment. The campaign, the second highest grossing Kickstarter³ in video games as of this writing, skillfully mobilizes the concatenated tropes of a beloved gaming series while skillfully interweaving an affectively attractive narrative of a now-independent developer returning to his roots to advance what amounts to a passion project in the face of rejection from big-name publishers.

Starting with its name, *Bloodstained* successfully employs the concatenated tropes of its spiritual predecessor, the *Castlevania* series, and, more specifically, the *Metroidvania*⁴ titles in that series. *Ritual of the Night* is a not-so-subtle allusion to *Symphony of the Night*, a *Castlevania* game that perennially shows up on lists of the top games of all time. At the same time, *Bloodstained* revels in the side-scrolling, gothic-infused supernatural gameplay the *Castlevania* series both defined and is known for, starting with the original game for the NES.⁵ While successful in the past, this side-scrolling approach to the series had been abandoned by

its publisher Konami several years before in lieu of a more modern 3D take on the series.

By tightly embracing the tropes of the classic series, right down to the NES/SNES-style graphics of the stretch goals and other awards associated with the campaign (see Fig. 1), *Bloodstained* connects with its public, fans of the side-scrolling version of the *Castlevania* franchise, by offering the gameplay tropes the series has slowly iterated via continual evolution and concatenation during multiple decades. In a vacuum, the skillful use of the public's tropological economy alone might have been enough to attract interest to the project, but *Bloodstained* goes even further to effectively mobilize its public.

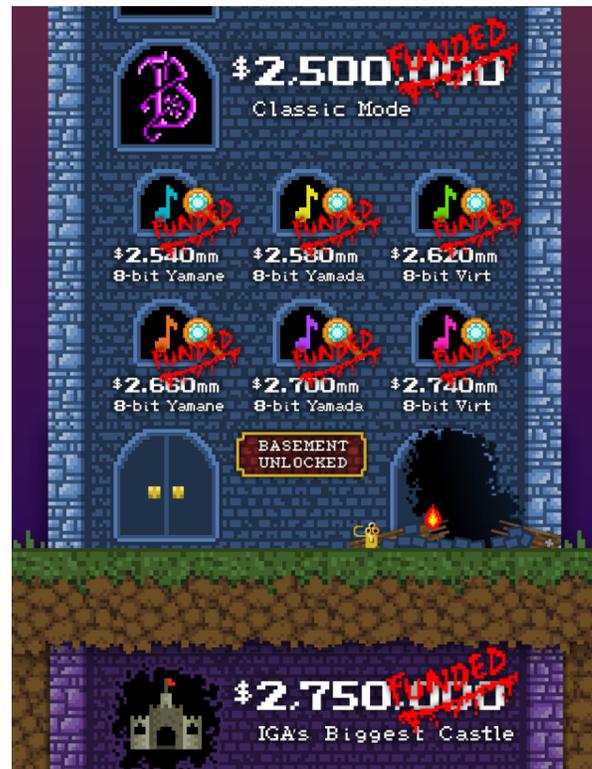


Fig. 1: Stretch Goal Illustration for *Bloodstained*. (Igarashi)

In addition to the tropological economy being drawn on, *Bloodstained* also resonates strongly with the anti-publisher sentiment of the wider gaming community. The pitch video that greets backers when they arrive on the page openly makes the case that this is a project that will succeed in the face of publishers' rejection. In the video, the lead developer Koji Igarashi explains to viewers that "Publishers of the world told me that gamers no longer care for this style of game," drawing on the passionate distaste some gamers have for big-name publishers. Then, Igarashi takes the appeal even further, standing up and violently throwing down a wineglass, exclaiming, "But I know that they are wrong!" telling the viewer (see Fig. 2), "I need your help to bring my vision to life!" In doing so, Igarashi interweaves the passion his fan base has for the *Castlevania* series with their disgust for publishers in the industry, offering the campaign itself as a rejection of the industry status quo.

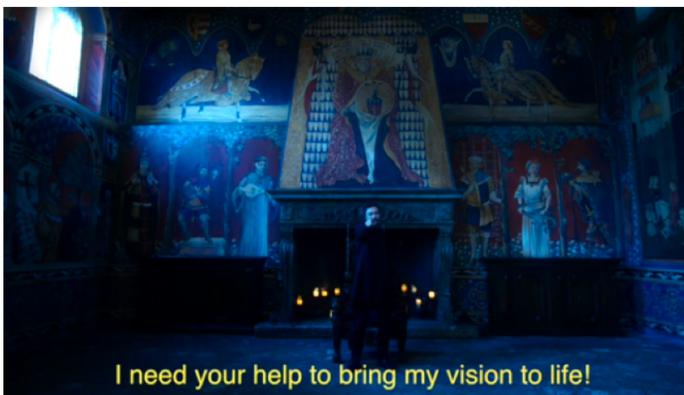


Fig. 2: Audience Challenge from Bloodstained pitch video. (Igarashi)

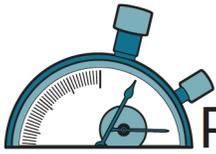
In the formulation of the *Bloodstained* campaign's self-presentation, the act of backing the project not only allows backers to thumb

their noses at the industry, it also allows the public backing the game to help bring the game into reality. In the pitch, and the literature surrounding it, there is very little in the way to discourage backers from viewing the success of the funding drive as the continuation of their beloved game series. Through synecdoche, the campaign *is* the game. For fans of the series that had perhaps given up on seeing their favorite series revived, the campaign not only plays on the correct tropes and activates the correct underlying affective investments, it lets them personally have a hand in bringing the game to life. And for a public passionately devoted to the idea of a new Metroidvania game, I argue that potential for that public to create its own new text, continuing the concatenated tropes of the series while thumbing their noses at publishers, is almost intoxicating, a position the campaign's final haul of \$5.5 million dollars seems to validate.

In the end, I believe *Bloodstained* succeeds because of how well it embodies the tropes and affective investments of its public, while at the same time offering that public a chance to co-create a new text to continue their conversations around.

Looking Ahead as Professionals

Kickstarter and crowdfunding in general are quickly becoming a legitimate alternative to traditional funding avenues such as grants, proposals, and angel investors (Tomczak and Brem). At the same time, many view this avenue of funding as almost transparent: come up with an idea, then cash in on it via the Internet. But, as I hope my analysis has shown, success is not that simple. There are complex forces at play during any Kickstarter campaign, and even my own approach only covers some of the myriad



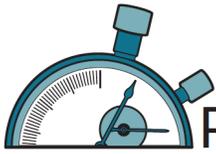
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of ways we can analyze these vibrant public texts.⁶ We need to continue the work of exploring the idea that a one-size-fits-all prescriptive approach to the genre exists.

I believe my research provides one starting point for those looking to begin the work of composing and researching Kickstarters and other crowdfunding genres. Instead of looking at the texts and videos that make up successful campaigns as standalone artifacts, I believe my research prompts a deeper investigation into the publics those campaigns address. Probing into the social media, press coverage, and even forum postings related to individual campaigns (and those generated independently by their publics), professional writers can help build a better understanding of the intricate affective and tropological relationships that are being maintained by the campaigns' publics and the way those relationships are being mobilized in crowdfunding successes.

In addition, because Kickstarters and crowdfunding campaigns are only just beginning once funding has been attained, I believe further study is needed of the updates generated by these campaigns that are shared with backers during the development and delivery process. They too may have much to teach us about the ways that successful campaigns translate into serial successes that continue to mobilize and engage with their publics far beyond an initial crowdfunding success.

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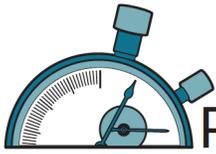
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Endnotes

1. DLC is downloadable content that is often charged for on top of a game's purchase price.
2. This is not to say that preordered games never fail to show up. There have been a few cases of such things coming to pass, such as *Rainbow Six: Patriots* (Crecente).
3. When this article was originally drafted, the *Bloodstained* campaign had just finished and the campaign that surpassed it, *Shenmue III*, was still wrapping up.
4. A platforming game that focuses on exploring static locations that are progressively unlocked by the player due to a steady stream of updates to their abilities via exploration, combat, and story progression. The name is a portmanteau of the Nintendo series *Metroid* and the Konami series, *Castlevania*.
5. Nintendo Entertainment System
6. See Tirdatov's application of the classic Aristotelian system of ethos, pathos, and logos for another view on the subject.

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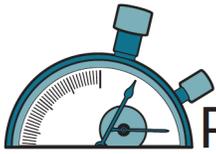
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