

Conversation, Discourse and Play: Interaction and Moderation in Twitch.tv Live Streaming

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INTRODUCTION

Twitch.tv is the dominant market leader in the live-streaming (live online broadcast) of video game content, with over one hundred million regular viewers, two million regular broadcasts, several thousand broadcasters making their full-time incomes from the practice, and a market value of approximately one billion US dollars. Broadcasters make their money through a variety of means. Viewers can choose to donate money through PayPal, or more recently, by using a digital currency on Twitch known as “bits”. Viewers can “subscribe”, which entails a monthly small amount being deducted from their bank balance and transferred to the streamer. Viewers can also use sponsored links to websites such as Amazon; take part in competitions the streamer might be running; whilst streamers can also secure income through deals with games companies who might want them to play their latest release live on-air. A crucial part of the phenomenon is what is known as “Twitch Chat”, a live chat window which allows viewers to speak to the streamer (who then often responds back). In most cases viewers who choose to financially support the stream are rewarded with special icons in Twitch Chat, which function as markers of social status and importance in the community of a particular streamer. As a major new form of game consumption, and one predicated on rapid and consistent communication between media producers and consumers (viewers), live-streaming and the actions of live-streamers are increasingly important to contemporary game studies.

In this paper we explore three central elements of the communication that takes place throughout video game streaming, and the importance of studying the interactions between streamers and viewers on this platform. Methodologically, this paper draws on interviews with over one hundred professional and aspiring-professional video game broadcasters, ranging from ten minutes to an hour, alongside ethnographic observations from almost a dozen major international gaming events in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Poland, in the last two years.

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Firstly, we consider the emotional affective labour that streamers carry out. This involves forms of digitally mediated outward countenance: being friendly to viewers, soliciting donations, building parasocial intimacy with spectators, or engaging through humour. We will explore each of these activities in turn, studying how streamers communicate with their viewers in these different forms, how they each contribute to the practice as a whole. Although such activities are presented in a manner supposed to be free, casual, and without preparation, these actions both require significant preparation before a stream and extensive, and often draining, labour throughout the time of the stream itself. We examine this kind of labour and its effect on streamers, on the broadcast streams, and what this kind of work means for our understanding of streaming practice and the future of Twitch. As part of this section, we also offer a first examination of the extent to which these individuals broadcast as themselves, or as a “character”. Many professional and near-professional streamers interviewed explained that they would not stream “as themselves” but rather as characters, ranging from individuals very similar to themselves to entirely fictional constructs, and gave a number of reasons and justifications for this perhaps seemingly unusual practice. Such a disjunction between the “real” and “broadcast” self, we argue, is an essential element of self-branding in an (increasingly) over-crowded marketplace, and represents a fascinating new elements of digital media practice.

Secondly, we consider the work that “moderators” - those who assist live-streamers in keeping viewers in their channel behaving according to a streamer’s particular set of rules - carry out, and how moderators mediate between streamers and viewers. Moderators are tasked with removing questionable content that other viewers say, and develop a strong bond of association with live streamers. In the former case, this might involve comments about sexual identity, gender, race, religion, politics, and other potentially controversial topics; it might also mean insults directed at other viewers, the streamer or other streamers, and could also include memes or references to particular outside media items or concepts not desired in that particular channel. In the latter case, numerous streamers understand their moderators as being “representatives” of their channel even when not in their channel, despite their labour and “representation” being entirely unpaid, leading us to consider new forms of unpaid work taking place. Moderators are a crucial part of the success of any major channel and yet get no financial remuneration for their efforts; indeed, live streamers actually “reward” moderators with extra duties, which they appear keen to take on. In this way moderators have become exemplary neoliberal workers, willing to support the actions of their “employers” and receiving only social status and positive feedback in exchange. This section of the talk will therefore look to explain some of these interpersonal dynamics on Twitch, and how communication in live streaming between moderators and streamers becomes a mutually-rewarding, although only one-way profitable, dynamic.

Thirdly, we consider the impacts upon the social lives of streamers from the kind of regular, rapid, online communication and interaction with viewers that typifies Twitch and live streaming. Although respondents are overwhelmingly positive about the effects of live streaming on their lives, and the career opportunities - to play videogames for a living - they have thus been afforded, they are also almost united by the negative impacts on their personal lives caused by their career choice. The working hours means losing contact with family members, losing relationships, damage to one’s physical health, high levels of stress, and so forth. At the same time, we also consider how the practice helps alleviate social anxiety for many of its users, who find the communication with their viewers to be an effective mode of reducing stress, building lasting friendships and professional connections, and empowering them to meet people in their “real” lives as

well. As such, live streaming and its effects on the social lives of streamers are not monolithic and singular, but complex and varied; it is these we explore, and how Twitch interactions shape the lives of streamers and viewers alike.

BIO

Dr Mark R Johnson is a Killam Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Alberta. His research focuses on the intersections between play and money, such as Esports, live streaming, fantasy sports betting, and gamification. He has published in journals including "Information, Communication and Society", "The Sociological Review", "Convergence", and "Games and Culture", and his first monograph, "The Unpredictability of Gameplay", is due out in 2018 from Bloomsbury Academic. Beyond academia he is also an independent game developer, a former professional poker player, a regular games blogger and podcaster, and a freelance writer for numerous games publications.

Dr Jamie Woodcock is a Researcher at the University of Oxford. His current research focuses on the digital economy, the transformation of work, and precarious labour. He has previously worked as a postdoc on a research project about video games, as well as another on the crowdsourcing of citizen science. Jamie completed his PhD in sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London and has held positions at Goldsmiths, University of Leeds, University of Manchester, Queen Mary, NYU London, and Cass Business School. His research interests include: digital labour, technology, management, critical theory, and the sociology of work.

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