The Winner Takes It All:
Dramatic Arcs in High-Performance Video Game Livestreaming

Nathan J Jackson
University of New South Wales, Sydney
n.jackson@unsw.edu.au

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
In March 2019, the Twitch streamer The Happy Hob (Hob) completed ‘The God Run’ (McWhertor 2019). This challenge involved completing the five notoriously difficult ‘Soulsborne’ games – *Demon’s Souls* (FromSoftware 2009), *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011), *Dark Souls II* (FromSoftware 2014), *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware 2015), and *Dark Souls III* (FromSoftware 2016) – back-to-back without dying. Moreover, he completed the run the day before the developer’s next game, *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (FromSoftware 2019) was released. This was a deadline after which he had promised his followers that he would get a tattoo and retire the run (at least for a while) if he could not succeed. This victory was years in the making, with his full-time streaming career dedicated primarily to the run for the better part of a year, and the games themselves since his channel’s inception. Success here was significant, but begs the question: how did it come to be so? In the end, Hob celebrated his victory with over ten thousand people, over twice as many as he had seen on average that month (‘The_Happy_Hob – Twitch statistics, analysis and predictions – SullyGnome’ n.d.).

This paper proposes that livestreams centered on superplay like this adhere to a cyclical dramatic arc that correlates with audience volume. Further, it examines how this arc illuminates the multi-faceted role of the streamer and affects the streamer’s performance – both of persona and game play.

Twitch, and video game livestreaming more broadly, have been the subjects of growing scholarly attention in recent years. Notably, great attention has been paid to how the platform facilitates the transition from private play to public entertainment through broadcasting (Taylor 2018), consequently blurring the already porous boundaries between leisure and labour in digital spaces as professional streamers ‘monetise their play activities, reconfigured as labour’ (Consalvo 2017, p.181). As the corpus of Twitch literature grows, scholarship is acknowledging the breadth of content on the platform and drawing out more nuanced examinations of video game livestreaming practices and their politics, for example how women streamers can perform transgression through their streaming personas (Consalvo 2018), how streamers of colour occupy a default status as deviants (Gray 2017), how streamers engage celebrity and influencer practices (Johnson et al. 2019; Woodcock and Johnson 2019), and the label of ‘titty streaming’ that has emerged from the platform (Ruberg et al. 2019).

This paper participates in these conversations on streamer practices through close attention to not just how streamers perform, but how they perform a particular type of play: superplay. Newman defines superplay as ‘a range of gaming practices that…are bound together by a common desire to demonstrate mastery of the game through performance’ (2008, p.123). Superplay streamers include speedrunners and challenge runners more broadly, such as the extreme example of Hob and ‘The God Run’. These streamers enact a cyclical dramatic arc, which follows the ebb and flow of tension.
related to a run’s potential success. The longer a run lasts – and hence the more likely it is to be successful – the greater the tension, and the higher the stakes. The arcs vary greatly in shape, echoing the general shape of a graph mapping the number of viewers, which suggests a relationship between dramatic arc and viewer volume. For instance, failing near the end of a (long) run leads to a sudden drop both in tension and viewers, and will be followed by a kind of cooldown period, namely a slower build-up of both in the next run. This paper proposes in detail how this model operates, describing not just how the arcs of different runs affect each other, but also how they affect streamer behaviour (and consequently the player-spectator relationship) and correlate directly with audience volume.

Scully-Blaker identifies speedrunning as a ‘practiced practice’ (2014) and this paper emphasises that superplay livestreams do not just render this rehearsal process visible, they are the rehearsal process. Consequently, the boundary between rehearsal and performance becomes porous, driving the tension that underpins this dramatic model. Further, the cyclical nature of this model adds another layer to the queering of time that Ruberg associates with the practice of speedrunning (2019), as spectators become witnesses of iteration, ever the same yet each time different.

These notions of success, rehearsal and temporality suggest a framework of metagaming, which will be mobilised from two angles to better understand the proposed dramatic arc. According to Boluk and LeMieux (2017), mechanics are metagames. In particular, the additional constraints placed upon play in the concoction and execution of modes of superplay concern themselves less with ‘how to play the game, [and more with] what game to play in the first place’ (p.51, emphasis in original). As such, the first avenue through which metagaming will be traced examines how the game is actually being played – with a focus on self-imposed/modified rules of play. This has a natural dramatic arc determined by performances of mastery despite these additional superplay rules. The second use of metagaming will extend the dramatic arc to examine its relationship with streamer performance and audience retention. The previously mentioned points of tension release facilitated by superplay reveal a complex relationship between play and spectatorship, which in turn impacts how the streamer relates to their audience. The streamer’s dual roles as player and performer require them to strike a balance between their goals of completing a run and growing and maintaining their audience, which are not always aligned. This requires strategic shifts between play-focused streaming and spectator-focused streaming that constitutes a form of metagaming distinct to this mode of play.

This paper draws upon ongoing ethnographic research as part of a larger project involving the close examination of a small number of Twitch streamers with a focus on streaming personas and the different forms of collective identity that they facilitate. This research will be combined with a theory of dramatic arcs here to examine how streamers strategically construct and perform persona in order to retain viewers during less exciting moments of play – particularly during longer runs – and to offset the drop in viewers immediately following ‘run-ending’ moments of failure.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


From Software. 2014. Dark Souls II. Xbox 360/PlayStation 3/PC. Bandai Namco Entertainment.


From Software. 2016. Dark Souls III. Xbox One/PlayStation 4/PC. Bandai Namco Entertainment.


