Prank, Troll, Gross and Gore: Performance Issues in Esport Live-Streaming

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the functions of *prank performance* and *troll performance* for the aesthetics of *personal live-streaming*, i.e. the practice of live-streaming one's personal performance via platforms such as Twitch.tv. The study is based on a close analysis of personal esport live-streamer Ali Larsen, aka Gross Gore, via a 12-month observation period. With help of Goffmanian frame theory the notions of *interview frame* and *play frame* are introduced as the basic cognitive tools for organizing personal esport live-stream experiences. The study concludes by proposing three factors that are vital for the aesthetics of personal live-streaming in general: (1) the feeling of affecting live-streams, (2) the suspense that derives from expecting something unexpected to happen in live-streams, and (3) the sharing of dramatic developments that occur in live-streams.

Keywords

esports, streaming, live-streaming, performance, pranks, trolls, aesthetics, frame, interpretation, *League of Legends*

INTRODUCTION

For many, esport has emerged as the practice of competitive videogame play that earns a living for those in the given occupation. In this article I deal with one specific sector of practicing and consuming esport, *personal live-streaming*, which has come to hold an increasingly significant role in the multifaceted phenomenon. By personal live-streaming I refer to the practice of live-streaming one's personal performance (game-related or not) via platforms like Twitch.tv. As such, I distinguish personal live-streaming from *impersonal live-streaming*, which to me is a parallel practice structured by a third party organization over the individual performers and their local audience.

What makes personal live-streaming a particularly fascinating part of contemporary esport culture(s) is the overall range of performances that flesh out these shows. In what follows, I pursue an advanced comprehension of personal live-stream aesthetics by examining two particularly interesting (and problematic) modes of performance that occur within them: *prank performance* and *troll performance*. I use Goffman's version of 'frame' to analyze these performances in action, thus also contributing to the frame analytical approaches to play as a by-product (see Glas et al 2011).

My study is based on a close examination of personal esport live-streamer Ali Larsen, better known as Gross Gore, whose show has recently become one of the most popular among the 1.5M monthly active broadcasts of Twitch.tv (cf. Kaytoue et al 2012). I conducted a 12-month period of observation from March 2015 to February 2016, during which my participation in Gross Gore's live-stream as a spectator took an average four hours per week (while additionally spending a few more weekly hours with other esport live-streams).

In the first section I introduce *interview frame* and *play frame* as the basic cognitive tools for organizing the participatory experience of personal esport live-streams. In the same section I demonstrate how spectators' *prank performances* disorient the interview frame. In the second section I show how esport players' *troll performances* and *troll-play* in particular disorient the play frame. I end the article in the third section by proposing three factors to be considered vital for the aesthetics of personal live-streaming in general: (1) the feeling of affecting live-streams, (2) the suspense that derives from expecting something unexpected to happen in live-streams, and (3) the sharing of dramatic developments that occur in live-streams.

PRANK PERFORMANCE

For present purposes, I define 'performance' with Erving Goffman (1956) as the activity of an individual that "occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (13). I also employ Goffman's (1974) notion of 'frame'—"the principles of organization which govern events" (10)—to distinguish two key schemata of interpretation that people apply in their participation of personal esport live-streaming: *interview frame* (conversation) and *play frame* (competition). My primary goal in this section is to show how spectators' *prank performances*, playful deceptions intended to cause observable harm and fun, disorient especially the interview frame.

Gross Gore is a professional British live-streamer whose broadcasts tangle around his career as a competitive *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) player. During the period of observation he played on the relatively high Diamond and Master Tier ranks, the latter of which represents the top 0.0005% of the 90 million active *League of Legends* players (see Superdata 2015). Gross Gore uses Twitch.tv technology (cf. Scholz 2012; Edge 2013; Walker 2014) for live-streaming at least six hours daily, excluding Sundays. At the time of writing, his live-stream has more than ten million viewers, some 160 000 followers, and around 5 000 – 20 000 simultaneous spectators whenever online. One more sign of his significant recognition is the total amount of £106,033 that he received as fan donations in 2015 (the sum was leaked in Gross Gore's live-stream in February 2016).

The largest share of Gross Gore's live-streams consists of *League of Legends* play; I estimate this to be about 60% of their total duration. While the official data sheet of the live-stream claims that between his ~30 minute esport matches Gross Gore takes ten-minute Q&A breaks for chatting with the spectators, in reality those breaks tend to prolong great lengths. The exchanges between Gross Gore and the spectators are carried out through the communication features enabled by Twitch.tv: spectators may pose questions via the live chat or by sending messages attached to donations (minimum £1), the latter getting Gross Gore's attention more effectively as they trigger audiovisual effects. By regularly stressing that he keeps no secrets from his spectators, the Q&A breaks are often filled with topics relating to Gross Gore's private life, from his esport

career and cooking preferences to social life and sex. I attribute to these chat breaks a specific *interview frame*, which is implied—or 'keyed' in Goffman's terms—by Gross Gore's personal camera stream maintaining full screen mode and his attention being focused on the spectators' comments and questions (Figure 2; Figure 3).

When Gross Gore starts to play *League of Legends* the interview frame gets overtaken by what I call the *play frame*. The construction of this frame is likewise a combined result of adjusted technological and behavioral settings: at the start of every match Gross Gore's personal camera stream shrinks and the *League of Legends* arena takes full screen mode (Figure 1; Figure 4; Figure 5). Simultaneously, Gross Gore's own oration takes the ongoing match as its main topic, narrating and speculating its live events. I could observe the number of questions and donations decrease drastically during the matches and increase between them, which implies that the spectators switch between interview frames and play frames relatively well.

While the types of esport spectator are undoubtedly many (e.g. Cheung & Huang 2011; Smith et al 2013; Georgen 2015), previous research suggests that spectators who actively play the live-streamed esport themselves experience additional enjoyment in the viewership activity (see McCrea 2009; Lee et al 2014; Hamari & Sjöblom 2015). My study supports those implications and adds that a level of skill with the live-streamed esport is required to follow the twists and turns of *personal* esport live-streams too, the latter being rather different from the former by its lack of shoutcasting and focus direction (see Koistinen 2015; Sell 2015). I provide a brief analysis of a basic team fight situation (Figure 1) to illustrate the interpretive procedures typical to the play frame of personally live-streamed *League of Legends* play.

Figure 1.

The first detail to observe here is that Gross Gore has chosen to play the champion Nasus, a fighter with good durability. With Nasus' capacity to tolerate plenty of damage, Gross Gore has initiated a fight to pull the enemy team's attention from his own teammates. The initiation is a success, as Gross Gore's teammate (champion Amumu) has been able to

stun three surrounding enemies with his ultimate ability (yellow circle). A few seconds after the captured moment Gross Gore's champion dies, but the main damage dealers of his team (Vayne and Vel'Koz) are able to finish all five enemies that have already depleted their abilities. While reading these details from the event is an instinctive procedure for any semi-experienced *League of Legends* player, for those with no or little experience such strategic and kinesthetic sensations are hard to attain.

I now move to describe how the spectators' prank performances, playful deceptions intended to cause observable harm and fun, regularly interrupt the play frame and disorient the interview frame. The below sequence of events took place after Gross Gore accidentally flashed his home address during his live-stream. The spectators wrote down the address and begun producing pranks that can be regarded tasteless, hilarious, and illegal at the same time.

Right after the address was revealed the spectators started ordering Gross Gore loads of food. By telephoning local fast food restaurants with Gross Gore's counterfeit identity, the spectators managed to interrupt and confuse the play sessions and Q&As with frequent home delivery orders, eventually filling Gross Gore's apartment with piles of hamburgers, pizzas, and other fine cuisine (Figure 2). What made this prank uncomfortable for Gross Gore was that many of the orders were not paid in advance. As a result, dozens of restaurants ended up blacklisting Gross Gore since he was not willing to pay for the orders that kept (and still keep) on coming during live-stream times.

Figure 2.

Not long after, the spectators decided to *swat* Gross Gore's live-stream. Swatting (from U.S. special SWAT force) can be defined as deceiving an emergency service by alarming a police unit to a target location by means of hoaxing a serious crime or a threat thereof. In this case, the spectators told the British police that Gross Gore had murdered his entire family. Thus, in the middle of a match, the spectators could watch live as a police unit entered Gross Gore's apartment. While the policemen handled the situation professionally, their authoritative discussions with Gross Gore and his online spectators evidently interrupted the play frame and disoriented the subsequent interview frame by turning the event into an actual situation of emergency (Figure 3). Being aware that

Twitch.tv carefully examines swatting for evident administrative reasons, Gross Gore made his stance clear and upbraided his spectators for the prank by concluding: "if you're going to play a prank on me, send me a prostitute, not the police."

Some days later Gross Gore's doorbell rang again during a live-stream. This time the spectators could watch as a young woman joined the live-stream, telling Gross Gore that she had been sent there by "an agency." Gross Gore insisted that he had not contacted any agency, and told the woman that this was most likely a prank done by his spectators. The woman left with haste, and the spectators could soon hear a man from "an agency" returning to the door to inquire Gross Gore about the prank. As the events unfolded, Gross Gore was naturally forced to act outside the usual frames of his live-stream, providing his spectators with an alternative reality show.
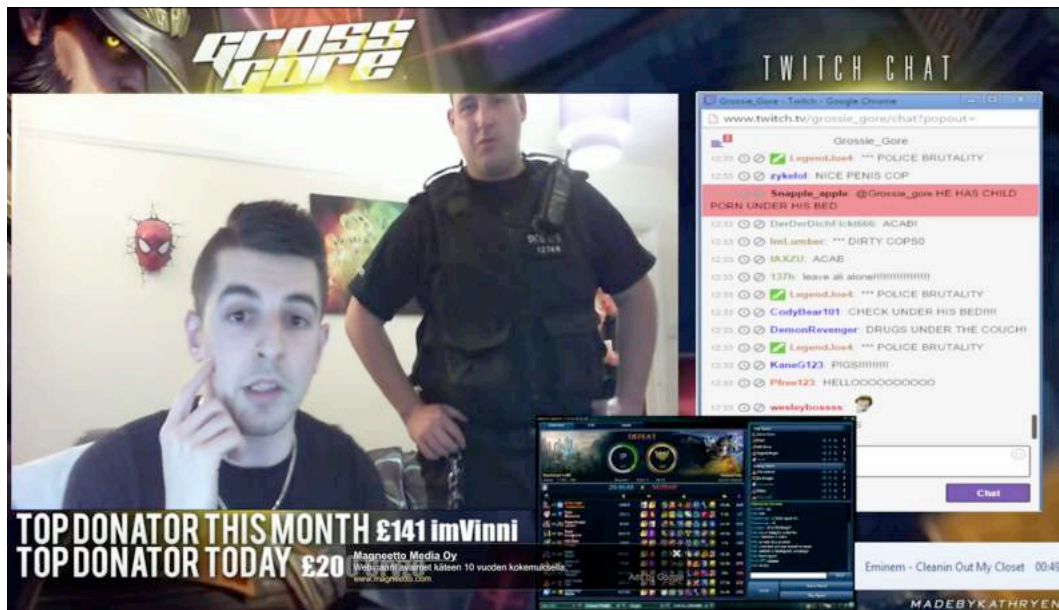

Figure 3.

According to Goffman (1956), it is common for an individual to modify one's performance to fit "the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented … [t]his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" (22–23). Correspondingly, it is interesting to perceive how the prank performances of Gross Gore's live-stream reflect his own identity as a tolerant individual with a sense of humor. Again, these characteristics stand as the foremost trademark of Gross Gore's personal brand and can be considered the very elements that have created the mini-society around his live-stream along the years. The ways in which even serious situations get handled with witticism ("send me a prostitute, not the police") make sense as strategies of consistent self-presentation.

TROLL PERFORMANCE

Manifestly, spectators enjoy affecting live-streams. The majority of their affective actions are not cumbersome pranks, however, but more conventional *troll performances*, following Susanna Paasonen's (2015) description of "intentional provocation of other users … by posting opinions and views that one does not actually hold, coupled with a pretence of simplicity or literalness" (33) (cf. e.g. Herring et al 2002; Phillips 2013;

Karppi 2013). A quick look at any online broadcast in Twitch.tv confirms that trolling as such is a significant part of today's live-stream culture. Yet in personal *esport* live-streaming the notion of trolling regularly extends beyond verbal expression; being also associated to *troll-play*, that is, intentionally provocative competitive play that does not correspond with the player's actual skills (cf. *griefing*, e.g. Blackburn & Kwak 2014).

As a result of Gross Gore's reputation among *League of Legends* players, his live-streamed matches are common targets of troll-play. In order to show how troll players disorient and complicate the play frame, the present section provides a narrative of another interesting sequence of events that took place in Gross Gore's live-stream during the observation period. Since understanding these events relies heavily on one's awareness of the *overgames* (Karhulahti 2015) that govern them, I start with a brief overview on those.

League of Legends play is regulated by multiple *overgame institutions*, i.e. social contracts that govern and reward the players and groups who have agreed to compete under them. Professional teams, for instance, strive to compete in the World Championships institution and its regional sub-league institutions that are regulated primarily by Riot Games, the developer of *League of Legends*. For those who have not reached professional status, Riot Games provides the Ranked League overgame institution in which participating players get mixed into five-player teams of strangers before each match. After each match the players of the winning team earn league points and the players of the losing team lose league points. Successfully winning multiple matches in a row enables players to climb higher in the Ranked League, ultimately reaching promotion matches that decide whether they get promoted to a greater Tier (from the lowest to the highest: Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Master, and Challenger). Players tend to invest plenty of emotional capital in their promotion matches, as getting into one might well be a result of hundreds of hours of competitive play that can easily take weeks or months. In the worst case, losing a single promotion match means that the next chance to compete for the promotion follows only after months and some further hundreds of hours of laborious play.

Gross Gore's randomly drawn teammates and enemy team members usually recognize him at the very start of each match, as players are represented by nametags. Realizing that the match in which they play might be live-streamed for thousands of spectators, some players occasionally pursue attention by choosing to troll-play by killing themselves intentionally or disturbing the match via other means. There is a tendency for this behavior to happen more often during Gross Gore's promotion matches, the stakes of which are substantially higher.

During the observation period Gross Gore competed mainly in Diamond Tier. He was close to reach Master Tier, which is, as noted earlier, an extremely high Tier with no more than 4500 players out of the 90 million *League of Legends* player pool. While the majority of the thousands of matches (20–60 minutes each) he played did not include troll-play, in important matches the probability of such behavior increased radically. In addition to troll-play, many matches were ruined by distributed denial-of-service attacks (DDoS), i.e. hacks that disturbed the targeted player's internet connection and thus removed her or him from the match. Gross Gore's team was terrorized by these means throughout the year, which evidently made it very frustrating for him to pursue his competitive goals.

A major culmination point of these struggles occurred in late August 2015, as Gross Gore had, regardless of all difficulties, managed to climb his way up to the final Master Tier promotion match. After only few minutes of play it turned out that two *enemy* team members had been eliminated by DDoS attacks. In other words, this time the spectators had arranged Gross Gore a free win to see him reach the long sought-after Master Tier promotion. At the moment when the spectators watching the live-stream realized this, mixed messages started popping up on the screen:

"It might be sad Ali, but you deserve Masters after all the times you've been through the same shit"
"Ali you should go afk [away from keyboard] for good sportsmanship ^^"
"just end this, take your win, and stop being a babby"

Untypical for Gross Gore, he stopped speaking for several minutes, eventually uttering that "it just doesn't feel right." He left the camera, soon to come back with a toothbrush. While brushing his teeth, Gross Gore watched as his teammates were crushing the shorthanded enemy team, troubled by a moral dilemma: to play or not to play?

The play frame that Gross Gore's earlier competitive efforts had supported was manifestly confused by his altered behavior. The rejection to compete and play changed the nature of the live-stream profoundly; as the above comments imply, the principles through which the spectators had organized their viewing experience altered along with the events and Gross Gore's actions. While the *League of Legends* battle arena still functioned as the media between the live-streamer and his spectators, both parties had bent the interpretive frames through which they were accustomed to participate it.

Some 12 000 spectators held their breath as Gross Gore finally thrust his champion Twisted Fate into a sprint. What Twisted Fate did, nevertheless, was not the final blow on the enemy base but a run towards the Baron pit in the middle of the arena. After reaching the pit, Gross Gore made his Twisted Fate dance on the beat of the *Yeah Yeah Yeahs* song "Heads Will Roll" that was playing on the background of the live-stream. This was a request for his teammates to discard the foul win; and indeed, one by one, the members of Gross Gore's team stopped playing, ran their champions to the Baron pit, and joined the dance (Figure 4). Visibly disappointed and sad for giving up the exclusive chance to reach Master Tier, Gross Gore and his team surrendered to the helpless enemy after 24 minutes of play. "I'll get it next time, we don't need a fucking DDoS to win this," he said as the Defeat-sign filled the screen (notice how Gross Gore uses the personal pronoun "we" to connect his performance with his fans).

After some three to four more months of live-streamed esport play, Gross Gore reached the Master Tier promotion match again. Right before the start, on December 7, he posted on his Facebook page that "Someone really special has come into my life" and "If we [sic] hit masters tonight we [sic] fly out to America to meet the girl of my dreams." Later that evening more than 21 000 spectators gathered to watch the spectacle unfold.
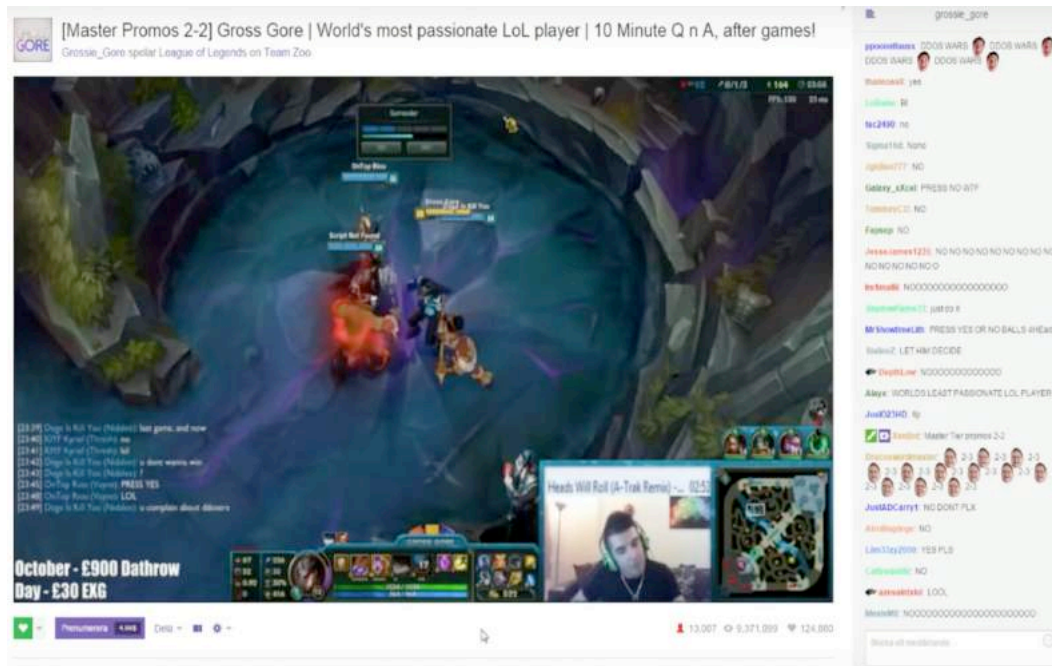
Figure 4.

At the very beginning of the match Gross Gore's teammate Yasuo did not show up in the arena (I shall address other players by their champion names). The spectators soon diagnosed this as an intentional dropout that was performed to sabotage Gross Gore's promotion match. Another member of Gross Gore's team, Rek'Sai, provided evidence for that diagnosis by confessing in the in-game chat that she knew Yasuo personally: "he hates gross … i said don't do this to him i want him to win …he promised to play serious. … now he trolls me."

The situation got worse. The third player in Gross Gore's team, Anivia, first seemed helpful based on her encouraging messages like "lets win" and "we can win." Experienced spectators quickly realized that this player was troll-playing along, nevertheless. As Gross Gore's champion Twisted Fate tried to take cover from enemy fire, Anivia repeatedly used her special ability to erect impenetrable ice walls that prevented Twisted Fate from reaching safety (Figure 5).

Gross Gore's team was thus lacking a player, and one of the three remaining teammates was helping the enemy by means of troll-play. Yet soon the events took an unexpected turn, as weird messages started to appear in the in-game chat from an enemy team player, Malphite, who was just about to get an easy win: "sad game, not even fun to play … i though it will be tryhard game not full troll."

Without further warning the spectators could see Malphite running straight at a deadly turret, providing a free kill for Gross Gore. In *League of Legends* champions re-spawn on the battlefield some 10–60 seconds after their death. Right after spawning back to life Malphite repeats the trick again, and again, and again. At this point Yasuo reconnected to the match with an in-game note "i lag grossie sry," but more attention-grabbing messages kept on coming from Malphite: "all i wanted is a tryhard game, not this **** … look at yourself yasuo and Anivia … get trolled trolls."

Knowing that troll-play is severely punishable and may result in the banning of one's account that has taken thousands of hours to build (a price that many troll players happily pay for their five minutes of fame), Malphite had decided to sacrifice his competitive identity for intentionally killing himself and thus helping tormented Gross Gore to win. The match was balanced again, with both teams now trolling and playing seriously at the same time.

As troll-playing Anivia, visibly frustrated by her enemy's counter-trolling, appealed to Malphite by crying "can you not troll, will send this to riot," the chat in Gross Gore's live-stream went wild. Spectators begun cheering for Malphite, sending donations with attached messages like "put half toward an RP [in-game currency] gift card for this Malphite."
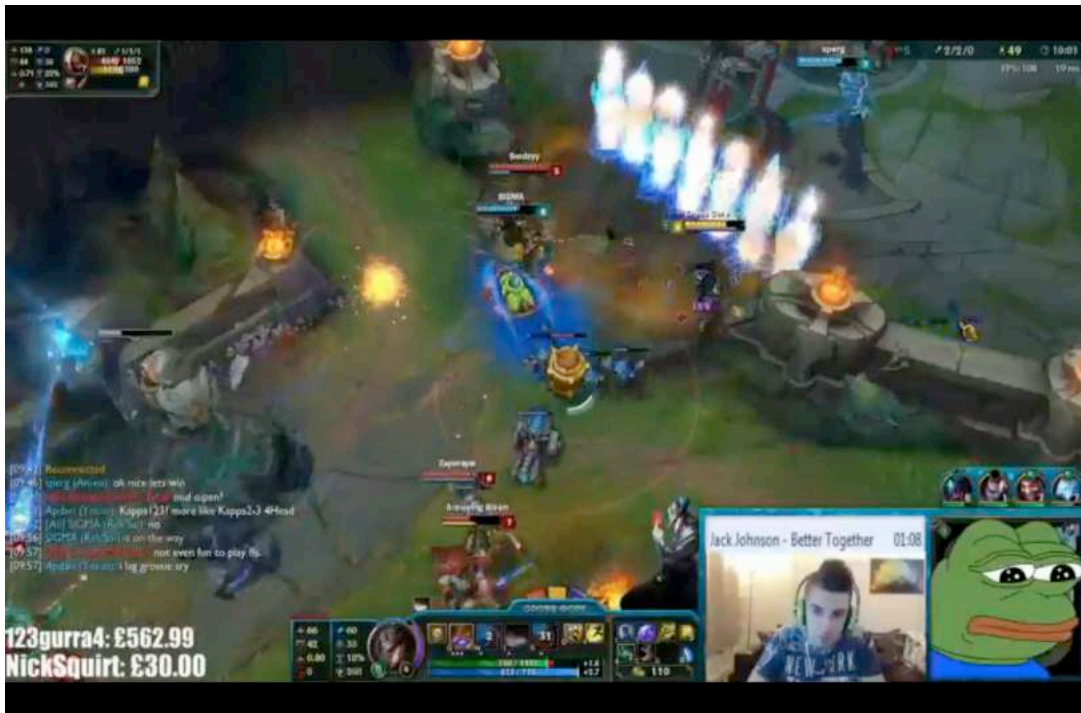

Figure 5.

What made troll-play particularly interesting in our situation was that Malphite's behavior became, paradoxically, a serious effort of competitive performance. To help the enemy as much as possible he could not simply suicide over and over again, as dying under turret fire does not provide his enemy gold for the kill; furthermore, he could not let the trolling Anivia and Yasuo get that gold either. Hence, Malphite's goal was to die so that one of the non-trolling enemies would get the final hit before his death. Spectators with adequate knowledge and focus could likewise admire how Malphite sold all his armor equipment (to be killed faster) and spent the gold on Boots of Mobility that enabled him to run to his death with the highest possible speed. Being aware that *League of Legends* has a backup feature to counter this kind of behavior—champions that die several times without killing enemies discontinue to give gold for their slayers—Malphite even came up with an advanced troll strategy: "gimme kill … so im worth gold."

Malphite's trolling was eventually followed by another unexpected instance. More players in the enemy team started to show strange behavior, as Zed and Kalista stopped performing on their earlier level and appeared to freeze whenever they should have entered a critical fight. The reason for this was revealed along with Zed's in-game message that soon appeared on the screen: "hf [have fun] bro … good luck on the trip buddy :]." With three players trolling in Gross Gore's enemy team the match was over. "Now you know how he feels every single ******* day" were Malphite's final words. After 32 minutes and 49 seconds of esport drama, Gross Gore was granted a promotion to Master Tier.

The (competitive) play frame can hardly be considered sufficient for the principles of organization that the players and the spectators were using as they participated and interpreted the event. While accepting the play frame and its inherent values were necessary requirements for understanding the competitive setting—*players invest extreme emotions to the match because they care about it to an extreme*—being able to bend that frame was likewise critical for comprehending the developments that crossed the conventions of competitive play. Spectators had to adjust their play frames so that they could deal with the drama.

DISCUSSION

This article has introduced two frames that are central for personal esport live-streaming, *interview frame* and *play frame*. Using Gross Gore's live-stream as an example I demonstrated how these frames take turns: both the live-streamer and the spectators alter their behavior and schemata of interpretation. In the first section I examined the notion of *prank performance*, playful deception intended to cause observable harm and fun. I showed how the spectators' vicarious prank performances interrupt the play frame and disorient the interview frame. In the second section I examined the notion of *troll-play*, a type of *troll performance*, as intentionally provocative competitive play that does not correspond with the player's actual skills. I showed how esport players' troll-play disorients and complicates the competitive play frame of a personal live-stream.

My study allows three conclusions that I consider significant for personal esport live-streaming aesthetics. Firstly, I confirm what William Hamilton et al (2014) have implied earlier: spectators enjoy the possibility of affecting live-streams. They want to *feel* that their actions have an effect, and they enjoy the feeling of their actions having an effect *in front of an audience*. In other words, spectators pursue the role of a vicarious performer themselves. While some might simply spam the live-stream chat with meaningless messages, others are ready to donate substantial sums of money to get their questions and insults noticed (the single biggest message-donation I witnessed was $500). The prank examples of this article represent some of the most extreme efforts that people are ready to carry out for the feelings they get from affecting live-streams.

Secondly, the emergent nature of prank and troll performances can be considered a feature that produces specific *live-stream suspense*: spectators expect something unexpected to happen. Being aware that a live-stream like Gross Gore's gets targeted by pranks and trolls frequently, people seem to be inclined to spectate for long periods or time just to be there when the event (prank, troll, etc.) occurs. This live-stream suspense is enhanced with a specific aura that other live broadcasts have difficulties to maintain. Due to the regulations of Twitch.tv and comparable platforms many of the exceptional live-stream events cannot be replayed afterwards, thus in order to experience them you must be there *when it happens* and you never know *when it is going to happen*. The

notion of screen ecologies (Carter et al 2014) becomes significant here—spectators might do other things simultaneously with keeping track of the live-stream on one screen—and stands as an interesting area for future research.

Lastly, based on the frequent increase of viewer numbers during pranks, trolls, and promotion matches, my study suggests that a large number of spectators get pulled in by the emergent dramatic content of personal live-streams. Notably, such dramatic content differs quite radically from those dramatic developments that are related to general sport (see Trail et al 2003) and esport (see Winn 2015) spectatorship. This also explains why personal esport live-streams, as particular broadcast shows, are still relatively small instances of entertainment culture: engaging with them vicariously and building live-stream suspense is a time-consuming enterprise that entails high motivation and long-term commitment.

In conclusion, it is worth reminding that many activities related to live-stream spectatorship, including prank and troll performances, can be considered extensions of our natural play instinct. My study agrees fully with Jaakko Stenros' (2015) remark that while prank, troll, and similar behaviors "are increasingly seen as negative [and even] illegal … there are alternative social systems where such activities are encouraged and celebrated" (195). As live-stream platforms like Twitch.tv keep on developing somewhat optimal environments for these "alternative social systems"—not least because they enable anonymous use—it becomes increasingly challenging for performers, audiences, and moderators to determine ethical behavior. While I do not straightforwardly encourage or celebrate any of the prank or troll performances exemplified above, I do believe that distinguishing their frames and aesthetic functions contributes to our perception when it comes to probing *why* such behaviors transpire.[1]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ENDNOTES

1 Two months after the observation period of this study, on April 19, Gross Gore's channel was permanently banned from Twitch.tv due to terms of service violations.