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Making Games Watchable:
Broadcasting Video Games and Playing Attention

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Film and Media Studies

By

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ABSTRACT

Making Games Watchable: Broadcasting Video Games and Playing Attention

By

Alexander Doran Champlin

Making Games Watchable examines spectator video gaming as an emergent media phenomenon with an attention to the way it relates to a wider media ecosystem. Industries and platforms of video game spectatorship are recent inventions. Games have long been watchable, an effect of their nature as screen media. Productions designed to formalize and distribute play as streaming content have arrived as the culmination of technological affordances, platform and participatory media, and the globalization of gaming culture writ large. As emerging media, video game watching is actualized across a number of platforms and in several distinct formats. The variety and novelty of these practices has limited the study of watchable gaming as a collective phenomenon. However, in the last half-decade an industry of platforms for distributing spectator video game content has succeeded by aggregating disparate modes of game spectatorship, signaling a need to think of game watching as its own kind of media.

This dissertation is focused on particular cases where game spectatorship is solidified as a media form. The throughline for this research is the formalized practice of watching video games. Rather than an exhaustive study of any specific platform, format, or industry, this work considers competitive play, video game live streaming, and Let's Play videos among a wider set of contexts in which games are shared online or watched in specific spatial arrangements. This project examines these contexts with the aim of articulating how play is repackaged and distributed as spectator media, and how these platforms for game viewing

produce new relationships to play. The goal of this work is to ask what this emergence can teach us about the way media making or media audiences are changing. What changes have occurred to produce a media ecosystem that is hospitable to spectator play? And what practices or processes are needed to make games watchable? The intervention is critical and theoretical, seeking to attach game streaming to a wider media ecosystem, to the political economy it emerges out of, and to its growing cultural impact.

The work of making games watchable includes practices taking place on different platforms, emerging out of production contexts that vary widely in scale, and aim at vastly different kinds of markets and ends. To explore this complexity this project adopts a research method drawing from site-specific studies of game spectatorship, oral histories of production, and a political economy of streaming platforms. The primary archive for this project comes from conversations with 30 video game live streamers between December 2015 and March 2016. This dissertation also draws from grounded site studies of esports studios located in Seoul, South Korea and Los Angeles, California, as well as trade conventions and streaming studios. These archives are examined against a political economy and cultural analysis of platforms and markets for video game spectatorship. Through this research, this dissertation articulates a transformation of video game play from interactive media to spectator content by examining the industrial frameworks and production processes that repackage play for an audience of watchers. It also suggests three interventions in the areas of game and production studies. *Making Games Watchable* finds video game spectatorship is the extension of wider trends in media making, in the domestication of content production, and the personalization or deeper segmentation of media choice. Video game spectatorship industries are sustained by production arrangements blurring the boundaries between labor and leisure activities, and

between domestic space and production space. They are built on forms of marketing that move away from mass appeal towards higher degrees of interactivity, intimacy, loyalty, influence, and patronage. And finally, they succeed through identifying and catering to micro-scale audiences in ways that enable novel kinds of content creation, especially in response to the values and biases of these audiences. At the forefront of trends in streaming and interactive media, video game spectatorship production offers insights into future trends in media making.

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INTRODUCTION

I graduated from college in 2010, in the wake of a global recession which dramatically shaped how I understood my career prospects. I moved to Ohio to start a masters degree in American Culture Studies. My best friend moved home to LA to work in retail, before moving to Argentina, and my old roommate moved to Japan to teach English for a few years. All of us, college grads from prestigious public universities, had to negotiate inroads into employment that accommodated for a sub-stellar job market that entailed making pretty big moves. We kept in touch playing video games. I was big on *League of Legends*[1] and *StarCraft 2*[2]*;* these became the ways we maintained our friendships. But games did more than serve as meeting spaces. They were aspirational arenas. *StarcCraft 2 (SC2)*, and later, *League of Legends (LoL),* had very elaborate ranking systems to track and measure players' relative skill level. We all ended up being invested in these rankings and in the competitive scenes around these games and through this investment we began to find new ways to engage and sharpen our play. In 2010, *StarCraft 2* ignited a fascination with esports among my friends. While we had watched and played *StarCraft: Brood War,*[3] the novelty of a new *StarCraft* game and the simplicity of watching over emerging live streaming and video- on-demand[4] platforms served as a fertile foundation for our fandom. A few years later I would experience the same obsession with *League of Legends* esports events. This was part of my original inspiration for this project. I felt like my friends and I had been playing competitive games almost as an antidote to the experience of trying to find meaningful employment in the middle of a international financial crisis. More than that, we were

[1] *League of Legends*, (2009; Riot Games), Video Game.
[2] *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty*, (2010; Blizzard Entertainment), Video Game.
[3] *StarCraft: Brood War*, (1999; Blizzard Entertainment), Video Game.
[4] VoD or Video on Demand, refers to post-produced, as opposed to live, streaming video content.

watching competitions, following streamers, and streaming video of past matches. We had become involved in a growing media assemblage that turned video game play into something we could consume in more ways than just playing for ourselves.

In 2013 I began to think about the industries emerging around video game spectatorship in more serious terms. This project started with an interest in the ways spectatorship was reshaping the way players consumed games. What I really mean by this is this project began with a concern that my fandom and my fractured career prospects made the world of competitive gaming a comfortable and immediately gratifying place to invest my time and energy. It is no wonder video game spectatorship catches on as strongly as it does in the post-recession. It is replete with narratives of pro players and top streamers turning their passion for play into something immediately valuable, and it addresses an often displaced audience looking for media that validates and affirms their hobbies. I started by looking at BarCraft[5] events, live viewings of *StarCraft 2* competitions held in sports bars. In 2014 I traveled to Seoul to look at esports competitions there and I compared these to the esports franchises and their corresponding studios being built in Los Angeles. Through this research, it occured to me the througline was an act of translation: the process of turning games from something one played into something others could watch. Games had always had a specular element, but the emergence of BarCrafts, LA-based esports franchises, and a cottage industry of live streamers, depended on a collective recognition that game culture could support a para-play industry built on spectatorship and streaming games.

At the time, video game streaming was still quite new. In 2007, Justin Kan, Emmett Shear, Michael Seibel and Kyle Vogt launched Justin.tv, a streaming platform that allowed

[5] BarCraft, a play on *StarCraft,* are a type of early remote esports viewing arrangement. Usually these are held in bars or other public venues and they are meant to emulate sports viewing.

users to broadcast live video of themselves to an audience online. What began as a lifestreaming or life blogging experiment featuring Kan, the namesake for Justin.tv, grew into a service where anyone could broadcast and anyone could watch. In 2011, the category for gaming became so popular, it was separated from Justin.tv to become a stand alone site called Twitch. Twitch promised a more specialized collection of content focused on gaming channels, a category previously called JTV Gaming. I began watching Twitch as an easier place to catch esports competitions I used to have to watch on stand alone, proprietary streaming clients. For me, Twitch was a place to watch *StarCraft 2* broadcasts coming from Korea, and later, *League of Legends* competitions. Other people were using it to perform feats of speedrunning, to broadcast tabletop role-playing sessions, to share pirated broadcasts of sporting events, and to casually play games with an online chatroom of fans. In this respect, it began to serve as a hub for video game subcultures.

Just three years after the platform debuted, Amazon would spend $1.1 billion to purchase Twitch, which had grown to account for the fourth largest use of U.S. internet network traffic, above Hulu.[6] The meteoric rise of the platform and its subsequent acquisition formalized and validated a growing international interest in video games as spectator media. Twitch served as a crossroads for gaming content, connecting a range of gaming subcultures around a single hub. Twitch became a central and pivotal part of a trend with an institutional history dating back at least as far the late 90s when competitive *StarCraf*t grew into a veritable sport in South Korea. Even earlier, video games had been the object of organized competitions and cable game shows, and as screen media they had always been spectatable at some level. Twitch and competitors gave sub-genres of spectator gaming a place to collect

[6] David Carr, "Amazon Bets on Content in Deal For Twitch." *New York Times.* Aug 31, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/01/business/media/amazons-bet-on-content-in-a-hub-for-gamers.html

and this helped stoke a fascination with video games as things to watch. When Amazon purchased Twitch, the service was barely three years old but had grown to attract millions of users and this growth would continue under Amazon's ownership. In 2014, Twitch averaged 55 million monthly users. By 2017, the platform had grown to attract over 140 million monthly visitors, averaging 15 million every day.[7]

Twitch is not alone in its success. Tournaments, prizes, and venues for spectating games have expanded dramatically in a matter of a half-decade. The number of platforms for this kind of media and the number of users making it have grown in step with the rapid expansion. We might understand this growth through a number of factors. Spurred by the integration of webcams into PCs and game consoles, better and cheaper computer hardware, and the proliferation of smartphones, the technological feasibility of live streaming has steadily increased since 2011 when Twitch launched. Growth is also aided by upward trends in average bandwidth capabilities for internet users worldwide and an wider trend towards streaming media over traditional broadcast content. The video game industry also expanded, accounting for $64 billion in revenue in 2014[8] and climbing to over $100 billion in 2017[9], ahead of predictions made three years earlier. Twitch's growth and subsequent purchase by Amazon in 2014 demonstrated something general growth in gaming did not: people watch games and this cultural interest in a particular form of engagement is significant enough to form the basis for an entire media industry built around video game spectatorship.

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[7] "Audience," *Twitch Advertising*, Accessed Nov. 10, 2018. https://Twitchadvertising.tv/audience/

[8] Jenna Pitcher, "Games Industry Revenue May Hit $100 Billion by 2018, Says Research," *Polygon,* Jun 25, 2014. http://www.polygon.com/2014/6/25/5840882/games-industry-revenue-hit-100-billion-by-2018-dfc-Intelligence

[9] James Batchelor, "Games Industry Generated $108.4bn in Revenues in 2017," *Gamesindustry.biz*, Jan. 31, 2018. https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-01-31-games-industry-generated-usd108-4bn-in-revenues-in-2017

Twitch is at the nexus of games spectatorship and its rise signals the vitality of an interest in games media beyond video games as self-contained objects. But it also belongs to a wider collection of media platforms and practices. Platforms for streaming games have sprung up to compete or cater to different global markets. Notable among these are the short-lived YouTube Gaming (Google's response to Twitch), Huya and AfreecaTV (both of which cater to the now booming Asian games market), and a host of other smaller competitors like Hitbox and Beam. This field of spectator gaming also includes different kinds of practices and sub-industries. Esports have enjoyed the most synergistic relationship with live streaming platforms, growing into large-scale regular competitions in the U.S. and across the globe. The growth of an international esports industry has also served these platforms, as viewers turn to Twitch, Afreeca, and Huya to watch gaming events they realize there is a lot more video game content out ther. Esports predate live streaming, and their success has as much to do with Twitch as it does with changes to the ways games are developed and marketed, a theme I take up in Chapter 3. Game spectatorship also coincides with speedrunning, a format I discuss in Chapter 1, and Let's Plays, a post-produced video-on-demand format that is designed for YouTube more than for live streaming which I examine in depth in Chapter 4. All of this is to say, video game spectatorship is a complex phenomenon that has emerged at this particular historical moment, as a condition of technology, culture, marketing, and platform affordances.

In this dissertation I examine spectator gaming as an emergent media phenomenon with an attention to the way it relates to a wider media ecology. The throughline for this research is the formalized practice of watching. I am interested in the particular cases where game spectatorship is solidified as a media form. Rather than an exhaustive study of any

specific platform, format, or industry, I consider competitive play, video game live streaming, Let's Play videos, among a wider set of contexts in which games are shared online as video or watched in specific spatial arrangements. I examine these contexts with the aim of articulating how play is repackaged and distributed as spectator media, and how these platforms for game viewing produce new relationships to play. The goal of this work is to ask, what this emergence can teach us about the way media making or media audiences are changing? What changes have occurred to produce a media ecosystem that is hospitable to spectator play? And, what practices or processes are needed to make games watchable? My intervention is critical and theoretical. I hope to attach game streaming to a wider media ecosystem, to the political economy it emerges out of, and to its growing cultural impact.

Methodology

This dissertation seeks to cover video game spectatorship as a constellation of media practices ranging from video game live streaming, to esports, to post-produced game media on YouTube. The work of making games watchable includes practices taking place on different platforms, emerging out of production contexts that vary widely in scale, and aim at vastly different kinds of markets and ends. To explore this complexity I adopt a research method drawing from site-specific studies of game spectatorship, oral histories of production, and political economy. All of my research informs my approach to the project, but certain chapters draw more heavily from different parts of this research. The primary archive for this project comes from conversations with 30 video game live streamers between December of 2015 and March 2016. These are conversations with connections I made primarily through Twitter, Reddit, and word of mouth. Most conversations took place on Skype, Discord, or in

person at the first and second "TwitchCons." This work is inspired by John Caldwell's study of below-the-line TV production, as it takes seriously the internal discourses that emerge out of production and shape media-industrial practice.[10] This research captures a sliver or a moment in the industrial history of Twitch streaming. My informants generous insights from their experiences using live streaming platforms provide an archive of early video game production histories, out of these conversations I draw much of my understanding of the labor, tensions, and motivations for video game streams on Twitch. While certainly not exhaustive, this research helps to articulate the lived experience of producers who are engaged with major shifts in the scale and market for media making. These oral histories form the basis of the first two chapters of this project, but the insights that emerge out of them also influence the fourth chapter.

The second archive for my project is grounded site studies of esports studios. In the summer of 2013 I traveled to Seoul, South Korea, where I visited the GOM, Nexon, and OGN esports studios—studios designed for the production of several ongoing esports competitions. The competitions are broadcast over streaming platforms but also over Korean cable television channels. This month-long research provided the groundwork for a comparison between Korean esports studios and the American esports franchises I study. Between December 2013 and February 2018, I attended esports competitions for the North American League of Legends Champions Series. During those four years the competitions were held in two different Los Angeles-based studios. My site research tracks the changes to the design and capabilities of these spaces as a way of articulating a developing importance and understanding of esports audiences, and the shifting goals of esports production. This

[10] John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008).

research also covers the Blizzard Arena, the second esports studio built in Los Angeles. Unlike their Korean counterparts, these studios are designed for specific franchises and owned by single game developers. The differences in the design of these studios and their relationship to particular esports franchises becomes the grounds for tracing the shifting goals of esports productions in a global marketplace.

Finally my work deploys a political economy of games media and streaming platforms. My research into the production culture of live streaming and sites of esports production is refracted through an analysis of the market forces operating on this media. My work on streamers draws heavily from an understanding of the affordances of the Twitch platform. As an attention economy which rewards the most popular channels with better visibility and better access to shared advertising and subscription revenue, Twitch conditions and rewards certain practices over others. The market forces at work on this platform shape the strategy individual streamers adopt in their work. The same is true of my site research, which is grounded in a comparison between the distribution of American esports media and the Korean franchises these productions are modeled on. In this case, I am interested in a shift from broadcast imperatives favoring advertising revenue in the Korean context, and game tie-ins that make esports franchises in the US loss-leaders for the games they promote.

Literature Review

The title of my dissertation, *Making Games Watchable*, is meant to emphasize the peculiarity of this media assemblage. Games are usually played, not watched. While it is not that troubling of a juxtaposition, recognizing that spectator video gaming exists as a negotiation of two media modes (video games and broadcast) is a fruitful place to begin a

critical analysis. At the juncture of trends in gaming culture and streaming media, the scholarly bodies of work that might be brought to bear on such an analysis derive from two main trajectories: game studies and television studies. My dissertation draws heavily from work in game studies; particularly, work having to do with play in a general sense, work on platforms and ontologies of games, and work on esports and closely linked phenomena. In TV studies, work done on production and second-screen TV or streaming TV to be most resonant.

Although video games have circulated widely as media objects since the 1970s, critical academic discussions of video games have emerged only more recently. The history of live streaming is even shorter than this. As a comparatively new academic field, a variety of disciplines have staked claims to game studies, from education to computer engineering. For my work, I find theoretical and critical game studies methodologies most useful. Early work in game studies sought to describe games in a media formalist capacity, debating the core nature of games. This work was born out of related fields and was deeply indebted to critical frameworks developed for other media, like literature or software. For example, Espen Aarseth's Cybertext, a work on what he terms "ergodic" literature, explores interactive and non-linear narrative, a cornerstone of video game interactivity.[11] Gonzalo Frasca, who's work on ludic decision making emphasized the possibility of choice rather than the narrative constructed by that choice, provided one of the key counterpoints a literary kind of game studies. From these two positions emerged an ontological concern with what actually constituted the essential components of video games. Jesper Juul's, *Half-Real*, sought to

[11] Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, (Baltimore.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

mediate narrative or rule-based understandings of games[12] in a work that recognizes game's are co-constitutive—the product of rules players navigate and the fiction of virtual worlds. However, the complexity of games and continual technological development made this ontological question difficult to resolve.

Following from this, a thread in game scholarship took up the project of theorizing these rules as a means to understand the nature of games. Alexander Galloway's, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* adopts a formalist approach to game studies. It is a deeply theoretical work, informed by his work in the related fields of technology and software studies, but it's theory is grounded in formalist studies of games.[13] Building on Galloway's formalist approach, platform studies in games takes a more dogmatic approach to the significance of technology and form, emphasizing the need to understand the technological constraints of platforms in order to appreciate the games produced for them. In the introduction to the platform studies series, Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost write, "The Platform Studies book series has been established to promote the investigation of underlying computer systems and how they enable, constrain, shape, and support the creative work done on them."[14] Platform studies foregoes a general concern with games ontology, by instead focusing on platform specificity. *Racing the Beam* considers how the architecture and technological limitations of the Atari 2600 game console played a crucial role in shaping the kind of games that could be developed for it. Unlike Galloway's work, this is not a theoretical project. It is much more concerned with technological history. The Platform

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[12] Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).
[13] Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks, (*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
[14] Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, *Racing the Beam the Atari Video Computer System*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009).

Studies book series has grown to include readings of a number of game platforms including Steven Jones and George Thiruvathukal's study of the Wii and Mia Consalvo and Nick Montfort's essay on the Dreamcast as a platform that permitted Avant Garde game development.[15] The issue with this approach, as Dale Leorke notes in "Rebranding the Platform," is that its insistence on technological form and focus on individual platforms limits the scope of platform studies' theoretical interventions.[16] For my work, platform specificity is crucial to understanding the ways users engage with the limitations and affordances of Twitch and YouTube platforms.

In game studies, an emphasis on platform specificity is meant to resolve some of the early difficulties scholars faced when trying to describe or theorize games. By turning to the technical characteristics of platforms, it is possible to differentiate between creative choices in game design and decisions made in response to platform limitations. However, this algorithmic focus really seeks to turn games into concrete objects for analysis. This is helpful from a historical and technical perspective, but almost completely removes players or play from the study of games. An alternative thread, a kind of counterpoint to platform studies, has been a return to questions of play. Game studies scholarship has routinely cited the work of Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, and Bernard Suits, early scholars of games whose theories of game's cultural significance have been generative jumping off points for taxonomizing video games.[17] Huizinga's work in *Homo Ludens,* one of the earliest cultural studies of games, seeks to develop a set of terms and characteristics that can describe all kinds of play.

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[15] Steven E. Jones and George K. Thiruvathukal, *Codename Revolution the Nintendo WII Platform*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012).; Nick Montfort and Mia Consalvo, "The Dreamcast, Console of the Avant-garde," *Loading… The Canadian Journal of Game Studies* 6, no. 9 (2012).

[16] Dale Leorke, "Rebranding the Platform: The Limitations of 'Platform Studies," *Digital Culture and Education* (2012).

[17] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).; Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).; Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2005).

Roger Caillois' *Man, Play, Games*, elaborates on Huizinga's work, clarifying and specifying the nature of games and their function as a mode of cultural expression. Less cited than Caillois and Huizinga, Bernard Suits', *The Grasshopper,* is more of a philosophical argument that play is a natural component of human expression, rather than a function of cultural negotiation. More recent play studies have returned to this theoretical work as a way of addressing play in a way that is less ontologically minded and more theoretical than platform studies permits.

In *Culture Play*, Miguel Sicart attempts to think through the way playing can serve as a kind of method for engaging the world. Modern play studies picks up the thread of early anthropologies of play and recognizes that in the contemporary moment, video games do not have an exclusive right to play. This scholarship argues play pervades all kinds of media. So rather than aiming at a limitation of game studies through technological focus, play studies move in the opposite direction, trying to think of all of the ways play is operative in our engagements with the mediated world. For the study of playful, video game-adjacent media, I find this notion especially generative. My work in Chapter 4 is particularly concerned with this idea of play and games culture imagined broadly. Eric Zimmerman's "Manifesto for a Ludic Century" also advances this notion of play's primacy, envisioning play as a kind of media use, one which requires a greater amount of mastery than reading on watching.[18] Zimmerman joins Sicart in seeing play as a tool for engaging the world. Even Ian Bogost, in his book *Play Anything,* moves from the staunch techno-formalism of platform studies to join this movement and embrace playful possibility. These works collectively recognize that play's cultural significance in the contemporary moment reaches well beyond games.

[18] Eric Zimmerman, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century," *Being Playful*, Sept. 9, 2013. https://ericzimmerman.wordpress.com/2013/09/09/manifesto-for-a-ludic-century/

While play is powerful, these celebratory approaches to the ubiquity of play and games are tempered by a thread in game studies that reminds us of the way games serve and support existing formations of power or economic interests. Nick Witheford and Greig de Peuter's *Games of Empire*[19] explores games as texts in the service of, or formed by the logics of, *Empire*, drawing from the work of Hardt and Negri. Graeme Kirkpatrick's *Computer Games and The Social Imaginary*[20] explores the development of games and gamer culture in conjunction with other social, economic, and technological developments. Kirkpatrick argues games create spaces that seek to compensate for broader changes in society. Kirkpatrick also draws from Edward Castronova's work on *Synthetic Worlds*[21] which arrives at similar conclusions about the relationship between games and culture: their appeal reveals a tension between the fantasies achievable in games which are unavailable in the real world. Indeed, both propose that the success of games and the growth of gaming cultures hinge on what they offer players as simulacral alternatives to 'real' world opportunities. I find these reminders of play's function in a industrial or political-economy of media industries a useful foil to celebratory play-futurism. Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux's *Metagaming* is the most recent addition to this field of work.[22] Boluk and Lemieux look not only at games, but the playful, game-like contexts surrounding them. The conceit for the book is that videogames are media designed to play metagames—games are not spaces apart or tools to test the reality of rules. Instead, they are nested in bigger systems of rules and meaning. My work adopts

[19] Nick Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
[20] Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013).
[21] Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago. 2005).
[22] Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

this proposition, and at a theoretical level makes the case that a ethos of play or the frame of game cultures informs the way media makers see and relate to their work.

As an emergent form of media, spectator video gaming, is still developing as as field of academic study. The speed with which the industrial formations in this area change makes it difficult for research to keep pace. Nonetheless, there is a growing body of literature dealing with video game spectatorship. Dal Yong Jin's, *Korea's Online Gaming Empire*, is an industry-focused study of gaming in Korea.[23] Although it covers the Korean games industry broadly, it dedicates two chapters to esports; one on the history of esports and another on professional players. T.L. Taylor's *Raising the Stakes E-sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*[24] considers competitive gaming internationally and with a sociological scope. Her work is especially interested in communities of players who participate in competitive gaming either as professionals or as spectators in attendance at these events. Taylor's study is an exhaustive profile of the early international esports industry, punctuated by a great deal of change and upheaval. Nicholas Taylor also works in this area with scholarship exploring the relationship between players on either side of the camera, as well as work on studio audiencing that I find particularly generative in my own discussion of esports studios.[25] Julia Hiltscher and Tobias M. Scholz have published four volumes of *The Esports Yearbook*, collections of articles covering various aspects of esport from academics, industry professionals, and players.[26] I refer selectively to articles from

[23] Dal Yong Jin, *Korea's Online Gaming Empire,* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010).
[24] T. L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes E-sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012).
[25] Nicholas Taylor, "Play to the Camera: Video Ethnography, Spectatorship, and e-Sports," *Convergence,* 1, no. 16 (2015).
[26] Julia Hiltscher and Tobias M. Scholz, *Esports Yearbook 2010*, (Norderstedt, Germany: Books on Demand GmbH, 2011).

these volumes which provide useful snapshots of the growth and change taking place in the esports industry over a half decade.

There is also a growing body of work covering Twitch and streaming media production. T.L. Taylor's, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* is the first book-length work to focus on Twitch and live streaming and it intersects with mine significantly. In it, Taylor, presents a sociological and historical discussion of the Twitch platform. This is based on ethnographic work with streamers, on a historical context for the platform, and a close attention to the practices circulating on it. *Watch Me Play* is a more comprehensive overview of the Twitch platform specifically, where I aim at a discussion of game spectatorship at a more critical conceptual level.

To the extent the labor of streamers resembles the labor of other kinds of participatory media makers, Alice Marwick and Theresa Senft's work on microcelebrity is also very close to my own research.[27] Marwick studies YouTube fashion bloggers and Senft studies early camgirls and social media celebrities. The notion of microcelebrity, which is central in both, applies to the growing field of media-making punctuated by shrinking audiences and a greater reliance on access, intimacy, and authenticity.

These trends in the shrinking scale and increasing interactivity of digital media also intersect with research emerging out of television studies. Philip Napoli's, *Audience Evolution*, Lisa Parks essay "Flexible Microcasting," and Beretta. E. Smith-Shomade's, "Narrowcasting in the New World Information Order," describe trends in TV production that rely on emerging technology, deeper segmentation of audiences, and reduced production

[27] Theresa M. Senft, *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).; Theresa M. Senft, "Microcelebrity and the Branded Self," in *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*, eds. J. Hartley, J. Burgess and A. Bruns, (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) 346-354.; Alice Marwick, "You May Know Me From YouTube: (Micro)-Celebrity in Social Media," In *A Companion to Celebrity*, eds. P.D. Marshall and S. Redmond, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2015), 333-348.

costs to make smaller-scale media distribution feasible and marketable.[28] All of these trends derive from J.C.R. Licklider's notion of narrowcasting as a possibility afforded by the advent of cable television technology.[29] Although video game streaming has a slightly different industrial genealogy, many of the changes referred to by narrowcasting or microcasting are at play, in advanced form, on Twitch. Live streaming also advances patterns in what television studies has called second screen initiatives, or connected viewing. I refer to Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson's work and scholarship from the Connected Viewing Initiative, which theorizes marketing and engagement practices emerging out of the conjunction of television and networked media.[30] My argument is streaming platforms like Twitch, which are natively digital, are naturally hospitable to the combination of interactivity and spectator activity.

Chapter Breakdown

My dissertation is divided into four chapters that address the production of spectator video game media. The first two chapters draw from oral histories of streaming to contextualize small scale participatory media-making for video game live streams. Chapter 1 focuses on domestic production contexts and streamers' articulations of how and why they become content creators. This chapter emphasizes the slippage between labor and leisure and the way this work affects the lives of these users. Chapter 2 shifts focus to audiences, by exploring the practices and strategies video game live streaming encourages. The second half

[28] Philip Napoli, *Audience Evolution: New Technologies and the Transformation of Media Audiences*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).; Lisa Parks, "Flexible Microcasting," in *Television after TV: Essays On a Medium in Transition.* eds. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); B. E. Smith-Shomade, "Narrowcasting in the New World Information Order: A Space for the Audience," *Television and New Media* 5, no.1 (2004): 69-81.
[29] J.C.R. Licklider, "Televistas: Looking Ahead Through Side Windows," in *Public Television: A Program for Action: the Report and Recommendations of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).
[30] Jennifer Holt, and Kevin Sanson, *Connected Viewing: Selling, Streaming, & Sharing Media in the Digital Age*, (New York: Routledge, 2014).

of my dissertation considers this phenomenon in terms of large-scale productions and the wider impacts of this media. Chapter 3 approaches esports through site research at studios, informed by a political economy of American esports franchises. The goal of this chapter is to contextualize the marketing and impact of video game spectatorship, specifically to emphasize the way commercial imperatives shift to accommodate and best capitalize on the influence of esports competitions. The final chapter presents four case studies, each dealing with a conflict emerging in relationship to the production of spectator gaming media. This chapter focuses on Let's Plays, lifestreaming, and platform policy, elements of the spectator video games ecosystem heretofore unaddressed in my dissertation. These cases help to fill in the gaps in my coverage of watching games, but also suggest ways of seeing the tensions emerging around this media, especially as a result of gender dynamics and the politics of liberal play.

Chapter 1: Gaming Gold Rush

Chapter 1: Gaming Gold Rush, seeks to contextualize the rise of video game live streaming practices by situating the production of this kind of media in the lives and domestic spaces of media makers. It compliments Chapter 2, covering practices media makers on Twitch develop to relate to, or leverage, their audiences. The research for this chapter is based on oral histories of live streaming collected between December 2015 and March 2016. This data refers primarily to the work of broadcasting on the Twitch platform. Inspired by Mark Deuze's book *Media Work* [31]and Lynn Spigel's, *Make Room for TV*[32], this chapter sets out to explore how the labor and technology of video game streaming are

[31] Mark Deuze, *Media Work,* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).
[32] Lynn Spiegel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

integrated into streamers' lives and domestic environments. Drawing from Deuze's discussion of new media labor, I describe the routes through which video game streamers come to practices of streaming, focusing on how the people I spoke with articulate their evolving production process and the media practices leading up to adopting streaming. These narratives emphasize a fluidity between play and labor. This is at once the appeal of participatory media and the simplicity of it. Their stories emphasize the way participatory media making incorporates interactivity, experiences of community and belonging, and their already established interest in playing games. I am particularly concerned with the notion that game streaming follows from existing patterns of media use, like playing games, as an extension of a other kinds of amature production, or as a social outlet. Drawing from Spiegel's discussion of television's arrival in the living room, I also use these conversations to explore the material process of integrating this production practice into leisure practices and domestic relationships. I am curious about the ways streamers incorporate technology and negotiate the demands of media production in their lives.

Emerging media environments are volatile. Platforms, media practices, and technology change rapidly as user bases grow and features are updated or added. The period these conversations cover is a very small segment of the history of the Twitch platform and in the trajectory of video game spectatorship media. As such, this chapter does not seek to provide a universal description of the ways streamers relate to the production of a video game live stream. Instead, the chapter aims to present a glimpse of the freneticism and complexity surrounding the growth of video game live streaming. Echoing Deuze, and Zygmunt Bauman, the chapter emphasizes the precarity of media making as a domestic endeavor and as an individual undertaking. Streaming teeters between hobby and occupation,

but also between profitability and insecurity. The period my research data covers is one of upheaval and novelty. While some of my informants had been streaming since Twitch was still an appendage of JustinTV, many others had come to the platform more recently. Between these two perspectives, this chapter aims at a profile of users' discovery and negotiation of Twitch. This helps to explain the rise of video game streaming in now, nearly-historical terms. Chapter 1 highlights the social character of this kind of content creation with an attention to producers' perceptions of their work.

Chapter 2: Playing Attention

Where Chapter 1 is concerned with the fluidity between domestic leisure and domestic labor, Chapter 2: *Playing Attention*, covers the way streamers negotiate their connections and commitments to the audiences watching them. Like the first chapter, my analysis is based on streamers' narratives of their work collected from conversations with Twitch users between winter of 2015 and spring of 2016. Here I shift focus to ways they articulate the tactics they deploy to manage and connect with their audiences. I situate my argument against television studies work on liveness and scale. Particularly the work of Jane Feuer, J.C.R. Licklider, and scholarship dealing with microcasting, narrowcasting, and connected viewing.[33] These concepts help to recenter the notion of liveness and immediacy, which characterize the systems of direct address and interactivity afforded by live streaming platforms. Audiences for individual Twitch streams are generally small. While a limited number of popular streamers can attract audiences in the tens or hundreds of thousands, most

[33] Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," *Regarding Television: Cultural Approaches – An Anthology,* ed, E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: AFI, 1983).; J.C.R. Licklider, "Televistas: Looking Ahead Through Side Windows." in *Public Television: a Program for Action: The Report and Recommendations of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

are considered successful if they reach anywhere near one thousand concurrent viewers. This scale is miniscule compared to television, but given the costs associated with streaming production setups, this kind of viewership is often enough to support a stream financially. Further, given platform affordances that foreground direct address, tipping, and subscription, streamers are expected to interact with and engage their audiences. As a result of these forces, and through a negotiation of platform affordances, live streaming on Twitch becomes a matter of managing audiences' attention.

Drawing on theories of an attention economy and work on other kinds of microcelebrity media, I argue that the scale of a live stream favors the performance of personalized media making. My claim in this chapter is that the work of streaming is internally conflicted. On one hand, streamers need to coordinate with other users on the platform to maximize their reach and to account for the time they are unable to stream. To do this they form professional, cooperative relationships with other streamers that look like grassroots networking strategies. On the other hand, they are expected to be authentically invested in their viewers and communities. This means an expressive, attentive performance catering to viewers' desires for accessibility. Building on my conversations with content makers, I explore how these tensions play out in the production of a stream. Streamers are positioned in such a way that they must make savvy partnerships in order to leverage their audiences. At the same time, they cannot be seen as instrumentalizing their communities. While this arrangement is a function of the platform affordances of Twitch, I argue that the trend towards participatory media making and media interactivity are operative in this tension. In this respect, patterns of grassroots coordination, the redeployment of flow and

networking strategies, and the marketing of attention and authenticity, anticipate what will be a pervasive tension in microcast media going forward.

Chapter 3: Loss Leisure

In Chapter 3, I shift focus from individual live streamers to larger scale esports productions. This research is based on a political economy of esports and site specific research at esports studios. I am focused on two of the largest esports franchises: *North American League of Legends Championship Series (NALCS)* and the *Overwatch League (OWL)*. Both feature regular seasons of competition based on professional sports, and both are based out of studios in Los Angeles. These esports studios are a combination of TV studio and sports arena, designed for the production of regularly scheduled esports competitions. While esports are some of the earliest forms of spectator gaming media, studios for competition outside of Korea are relatively new. Historically, most international and American video game competitions have taken the form of one-off events held in temporary venues. The growing popularity of these events, spurred by the popularity of Twitch, has led to the development of more regular competition and the construction of spaces designed for weekly esports events. Riot Games' *NALCS* was the first major esports production in the U.S. to adopt a weekly format. To do this, it built one of the first proprietary esports studios outside of Korea. It's *NALCS* studio (as well as a sister site in Cologne, Germany) was constructed in 2012 as a minimalist space for esports production. Over the next three years, this studio would move between two more locations, each time adding improvements designed to cater to production demands and audience seating. In 2017, the Blizzard Arena opened in Los Angeles, home to the newly-developed *Overwatch*

League. The *OWL* was the second U.S.-based esports league to build a studio like this, modeling its format closely on the *NALCS.*

I use these two studios to illustrate the development of esports industries in the U.S. The implementation of the *NALCS* and the *OWL* is peculiar to a global, post-cable television model of esports production. In a departure from the history of Korean esports, these U.S. productions and studios are designed entirely for live streaming, rather than cable distribution. Moreover, as productions managed by the respective developers of the games they create, their commercial function has less to do with traditional advertising and more to do with marketing the games themselves. I argue that the studio space reflects these changes to the format and function of modern esports production. The implementation of these studios reveal a growing awareness of the value of an audience and a better understanding of what it takes to make this fandom durable and dependable.

Chapter 4: Power Play

An initial question motivating this dissertation asked, "What does spectator media bring to video games to make them compelling to watch?" Chapter 4 revises that question, asking, "What does the playful nature of games culture bring to spectator media?" I explore this collision through moments of conflict and rupture, with the hope that these tensions produce insights about the essence of this media. Here I discuss a series of case studies that express emerging tensions around live streaming and Let's Play formats. I think of these cases as forms of policing or enforcing. They demonstrate conflicting ideas about how this media fits, or ought to fit, into existing media ecologies. I explore YouTube drama, copyright policing, actual policing, and dress codes for streamers as examples of the range of conflicts

this media has produced. Over a fairly short period, live streaming and broadcasting play have brought games culture and spectator media together in transformative ways, but this remediation has not been entirely smooth. The theoretical throughline for this chapter elaborates on formative game studies notions of play, and game rules. I draw on discussions with roots in early anthropological theories of play and more modern play studies work, like Eric Zimmerman's "Manifesto for a Ludic Century" and Ian Bogost's *Play Anything*.[34] In much of modern play studies there is an impulse to see play as a site of possibility or to treat the player as wielder of power. Drawing on Patrick LeMieux and Stephanie Boluk's work in *Metagaming*[35], I challenge a celebration of play as liberating. Instead, I argue it has a tendency towards liberalist individualism, and this playful selfishness is at work in these cases of conflict.

My argument in this chapter is that spectator gaming, to the degree it is situated within a culture of play, embraces the logics of a playful liberalism. As media skewing very heavily towards young men, who make up roughly 80% of Twitch's user base and YouTube's gaming community, this playful ethos compliments performative impulses and online cultures that are racist, misogynistic, and opposed to notions of social justice or cultural sensitivity. Where the first three chapters of my dissertation seek to discuss the mechanics, practices, and political economies of spectator games media, this chapter seeks to explore the social and cultural complexities and conflicts this media has introduced. At a structural level, this framing helps to demonstrate sites of tension between mass media and online, sub-cultural media.

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[34] Eric Zimmerman, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century," *Being Playfu*l (2013).; Bogost, Ian, *Play Anything* (New York: Basic Books, 2016)

[35] Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

CHAPTER 1

Gaming Gold Rush:

Streaming's Cottage Industry and the Practice of Performing Play-bour

When Amazon purchased Twitch in 2014 it had already grown from a relatively small streaming site into a platform with serious online reach, drawing an audience that matched many major cable channels. *A New York Times* article covering the acquisition reported Twitch was attracting about 100,000 concurrent viewers in 2012, just a year after the platform launched.[36] This refers to the number of viewers currently connected to the site at any given time, rather than the total for a day or month. By 2014, just ahead of the platform's acquisition by Amazon, this number had grown to over 750,000, surpassing the viewership of CNN at the time and roughly parallel with MTV's viewership. In 2017, the platform had a peak viewership of over two million viewers.[37] The number of users broadcasting on the platform also grew dramatically over this period following the same trajectory. In one month in 2012, roughly 300,00 people would use Twitch to stream. By 2018, that number had grown to over three million. This was affected by the addition of tools to make streaming easier and of streaming categories which allowed users to broadcast content beside games— like talk shows, cooking, and art channels. Moreover, most video game consoles now come with integrated support for Twitch streaming[38] and the Twitch app allows users to stream directly from their phones. Collectively, these developments have

[36] Gregor Aisch and Tom Giratikanon, "Charting the Rise of Twitch," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Aug. 27, 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/26/technology/charting-the-rise-of-Twitch.html
[37] "Audience," Twitch Advertising. Accessed Nov. 10, 2018. https://Twitchadvertising.tv/audience/
[38] Austin Walker discusses this in depth in an article comparing passive passive streaming and active streaming. Passive streaming is characterized as a kind of streaming enabled by consoles where players can stream using integrated, often one-touch, broadcasting functionality built into game consoles. Austin Walker, "Watching Us Play: Postures and Platforms of Live Streaming," *Surveillance and Society* 12. 3, 2014.

made streaming more accessible, meaning barriers to participation on the platform and the need to use specialized hardware or software configurations pose less of a challenge to users.

In *Make Room for TV*, Lynn Spigel "takes issue with the assumption that Television's rise as a cultural form was brought about solely by big business and its promotional campaign… Instead, this fascination was rooted in American culture and its long-standing obsession with communication technologies."[39] For Spigel, television's entry into the domestic sphere was eased by a confluence of factors including advertising, architectural changes, and changing conceptions of women's work. Taking a cue from Spiegl, this chapter asserts that the rise of Twitch was shaped in large part by domestic (re)configurations, emerging out of existing media practices and a longer genealogies of technological adoption like the arrival of broadband, video game consoles, and PCs. The question of how media arrives in the domestic space is operative here. Video game live streaming is one of the most recent trends in the booming growth of participatory media making. It involves the transformation of another domestic leisure activity: video games. The natural production sites for video game streaming are people's homes — usually their bedrooms, their offices, or their living rooms, but to turn these spaces into studios streamers make significant adaptations to these areas.

Twitch and video game live streaming are media decidedly of their historical moment. In an interview preceding Amazon's acquisition of the platform, its co-founder Emmett Shear explained, "This couldn't have existed five years before we launched it. You needed high-resolution video. You needed broadband internet, which just wasn't there."[40]

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[39] Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1992), 7.

[40] Mike Isaac, "Speed and Spectators Led to Twitch, a Gaming Nexus," *New York Times* (New York, NY, Aug. 26, 2014). https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/27/technology/speed-and-spectators-lead-to-a-gaming-

Twitch emerges at a time when broadcast and cable TV audiences are now finding their media online. When users are increasingly accustomed to streaming content, selecting media based on niche tastes, and interacting with the stuff they consume, it dovetails with the continued growth and success of the videogames industry as a whole. A big part of this confluence of factors are user-producers. What has been called the gig, platform, or sharing economy marks a shift in labor relationships, where people are more and more inclined to find supplementary work online. This is the backbone of services like Uber or Airbnb, but also things like Patreon or Fiverr (which come up in Chapter 4). Twitch arrives as a nexus for these trends, and its user base has been conditioned by this media ecosystem. More than technology or marketing, Twitch succeeds through its user base which has been conditioned blurring of labor and leisure, home and office, and a participatory service industry.

The practice of video game live streaming on platforms like Twitch encompasses media production frameworks ranging from the small scale—like individual users producing content out of their homes—to the increasingly large scale: esports events, television-like shows produced in studios, and event coverage for major industry conferences like PAX and E3. While large productions usually draw larger audiences, the majority of content produced for Twitch is small scale,[41] produced by millions of individual streamers broadcasting from in-home studios. In this chapter, my attention is on this type of labor, the work of producing content for comparatively small audiences and out of personal studios. Between December 2015 and March 2016, I had conversations with 30 streamers about their approaches and experiences streaming games on Twitch. These oral histories form the basis for this chapter. Using excerpts from these conversations, I explore the way small-scale producers experience

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nexus.html

[41] In 2015 Twitch reported 1.5 million active broadcasters and 11,000 partnered streamers, the majority of which are individuals. "Twitch Partner FAQ," https://www.Twitch.tv/p/partnerfaq (Accessed 7/16/16)

and reflexively conceive of the practice of streaming. These accounts of streaming describe a frenetic moment for Twitch. They help explain the motivations for live streaming and they contextualize how these practices get integrated into streamers lives and domestic spaces.

Participatory media making shifts the scale of production and dramatically reduces the costs associated with content creation. At the same time, this media generates a concentrated set of demands on the people making it. In Chapter 2, I address the finer points of the media ecosystem of Twitch's attention economy.[42] I argue that it encourages small scale producers to adopt production practices that are strategic or managerial in character, while performing a public persona which elides and obfuscates their labor. They do this in order to downplay the asymmetry of producer/viewer relationships and to emphasize a sense of "community." Ironically, small-scale producers are encouraged to grow their streams with the goals of attracting more viewers, improving production values, and eventually turning their work from a passion for gaming into a profitable media commodity. From a streamer's perspective this work can be self-fulfilling, but at the same time requires a reorganization of domestic space and domestic behaviors. As a function of this structure, producing a stream generally demands a great deal of personal investment. This chapter lays the groundwork for a discussion of streamers' relationship to their audiences, by first exploring their reasons for taking up streaming and their strategies for integrating this work into their lives.

For for the majority of streamers, broadcasting play doesn't begin as a calculated media practice with strategies for attracting and retaining audiences. Approaches to community building, growth, and audience management are less focal, at least to begin with. I argue that preliminarily motivations for streamers are more mundane. Certainly the

[42] James G. Webster, *The Marketplace of Attention: How Audiences Take Shape in a Digital Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014).

possibility transforming play from something often regarded as excessive or non-productive into a socially validated and profitable pastime is a motivating factor, but I would like to trace these impulses more deeply. I propose that for many streamers, streaming starts out as a personal undertaking emerging out of, and integrally connected to, their life and leisure activities. For many, streaming as a practice of media production follows almost fluidly from playing games – either as serious players turning this play into a marketable commodity or connected players building a stream in order to supplement or sustain their relationships.

In her work on camgirls, Theresa Senft deploys the term microcelebrity to "describe how camgirls utilized still images, video, blogging, and cross-linking strategies to present themselves as coherent, branded packages to their online fans."[43] While this notion of a branded identity is applicable to streamers who broadcast with the intention of making their personal performance profitable, many don't start out this way. So rather than seeing microcelebrity as the initial motivation,[44] we might understand streaming as an extension of Mark Deuze's discussion of modern media labor practices.[45] Referring to what Zygmunt Bauman calls *liquid modernity* or *liquid life*, Deuze argues that modern media work is increasingly individuated or personalized, but the cost of this personalization sees laborers adopting the risk and responsibility for their employment. More to the point, Deuze suggests that work is less clearly demarcated from play and consumption. This is the case with streaming. My informants frequently describe a slippage from playing to performing. The logic goes, "If I'm already playing all night, I might as well stream it." In a participatory media ecology, media makers are also media users, and dissolving distinctions between the

[43] Theresa M. Senft, "Micro-celebrity and the Branded Self," *A Companion to New Media Dynamics,* eds. Axel Bruns, Jean Burgess, and John Hartley, (New jersey: Blackwell, 2013), 346-354.
[44] While celebrity might not be the motivation, it is certainly an appropriate term for streamers work though.
[45] Mark Deuze, *Media Work* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

workplace and domestic spaces make the division between life and labor increasingly fraught. Live streaming accelerates this, turning a leisure activity into a potential source of income. To borrow Deuze's terms, I argue that streaming expresses a "convergence of the different spheres of activity in everyday life, dissolving the lines between work and leisure as well as between work and everyday life."[46] We might also add, liquification of work and play also corresponds to a liquefaction of the boundaries between the domestic space and public space, or between friends and clients. For my informants, motivations are initially a matter of social connection giving way to other imperatives, like channel growth, audience retention, and income. Streamers do forge small professional networks; more, the relationships among streamer, and between streamers and their audiences are often conceived of in deeply personal ways, only later giving way to tensions around promotion and management.

Streaming, especially when approached as a serious undertaking, produces demands on the personal worlds of producers. So, while the impulse to stream and the validation that comes from small scale social relationships are defining components of many streamer's narratives of starting out, streaming also places new tensions on the personal lives of broadcasters and new demands on their domestic arrangements. Here the confluence of labor and leisure flows the other way as well, placing sometimes incompatible demands on content creators' living situations. In the concluding section of this chapter I think through the way my informants discuss adaptations and adjustments made in their personal lives as a result of streaming. These adaptations are often material, as in development of a broadcast infrastructure or the process of building and elaborating a small-scale production studio in the home. My informants speak to the expensive and never-fully-complete work of building gaming PCs and workstations capable of handling the requirements of modern games while

[46] Ibid, 38.

also recording webcam video, simultaneously uploading all of this to a web-based streaming platform. Adaptations may also as abstract and as complicated as negotiating personal lives around the demands of streaming. They address experiencing the loss of some anonymity, the personal strain of time spent on a broadcast schedule, and the renegotiation of their personal connections in response to streaming.

In this respect, this chapter seeks to contextualize the highly individuated production context of a video game stream by focusing on the ways streamers articulate the integration of broadcast practices into their lives. Here I emphasize the work of starting out as each of my interviewees narrates their decision to begin broadcasting in terms of how this practice is situated within established patterns of media use and daily life. The work of live streaming for fun or for profit reflects Deuze's concept of new media production: the blending together of work and leisure, the seepage between the space of the home and the office, and the introduction of a new kind of precarity, as streamers adopt the cost and liability of producing media in this way.[47]

Streaming Genealogies

Video game live streaming, although formalized by platforms like Twitch and the short-lived YouTube Gaming, has roots in media practices and across platforms predating both. While streamers articulate a range of routes in coming to streaming, for some this is an extension of participation in practices that already were spectatable. Recognizing these genealogies helps to explain the emergence and popularity of Twitch in this particular moment. Players have long been recording games to document or preserve their play. In a now infamous scandal, a *Donkey Kong* high score was contested by Billy Mitchell, who

[47] Ibid

faked the score a in a home video—a convergence between play and recorded video.[48] But this has long been a legitimate method to preserve and share play in competitive and speedrunning game communities. Some of my informants also speak about an experience with these genealogies. Two, CSDA and GPB,[49] start out in the distinct (from live streaming) but often overlapping community of video game speedrunners.[50] For them, streaming is an extension of speedrunning networks historically built around post-produced video content. Other informants talk about coming to streaming at the suggestion of friends and family or through relationships formed within game communities. Perhaps the most outstanding example of one of these narratives of starting out in overlapping kinds of production is RSQV's. He is a variety streamer who has been producing video game-related content for years on other streaming platforms, well before the practice was formalized by Justin.tv and Twitch. However, his trajectory begins even earlier than this. He explains his passion for streaming as one rooted in his childhood spent gaming where he would connect his gaming consoles to a VCR and record videos of his gameplay from his Super Nintendo, an activity he attributes to a fascination with documenting his play. As a practice that combines televisuality and play, it segues neatly into his work on Justin.tv.

> "I never realized it, but when I was a kid, like 14 or 15, I used to record video games on VHS. I have VHS tapes at my mom's house somewhere with me recording video games, and it's dawned on me, that this is something I really liked doing. Its like

[48] Owen S. Good, "The King of Kong may be dethroned, but Billy Mitchell still belongs to history," Polygon, April 14, 2018. https://www.polygon.com/2018/4/14/17237904/billy-mitchell-donkey-kong-banned-twin-galaxies

[49] *CSDA,* Interview by Alexander Champlin, February 3, 2016, Interview 005, Audio Transcript.

[50] Speedrunners are gamers who play with the intention of completing the game (by various metrics) as quickly as possible, and share videos of their attempts on VOD and streaming platforms.

something I really wanted to do."[51]

At its simplest, this story taps into a kind of truism about streaming and games in general. They are fun to watch even if you're not the one playing. RSQV's early practice of recording his games encapsulates some of what is appealing about watching games on Twitch or YouTube. It recognizes the value of the visual elements of play and the unique narrative produced in any single play-through. This is what makes watching other people's play engaging in arcades, from a couch, or from an in-game spectator camera.

In more concrete terms, RSQV's practice also shares a technical genealogy with video game live streaming, in the sense that the configuration of VHS recording engages with similar processes of capture and translation taking place as gamers re-purpose games as entertainment for their spectators. Both are modes of media translation or remediation[52] that turn a video game into a video feed. It is this logic that RSQV cites as he talks me through the modes of media practice that eventually lead him to streaming following his early experiments recording play.

> "So Justin.tv was the first broadcast situation, but I did do other things on the internet. I did have a YouTube channel. I made videos – Machinima-type things. For a couple of years I made flash videos on Newgrounds, and that was like my first real dive into entertainment, and I did alright. I won daily awards here and there, and honorable mentions, and weekly things. But it took so much time and that's when I got into

[51] RSQV Interview by Alexander Champlin, February 3, 2016, Interview 006, Audio Transcript.

[52] Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation might help to understand the kinds of subtle translation that connect the various modes of media production that RSQV names as he describes the trajectory that brings him to Twitch. Moreover, it provides a conceptual keystone in understanding the way that video game play is translated into broadcast content. J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

making videos on YouTube."[53]

RSQV's work as a content creator is both a list of credentials and an explanation of the trajectory that brought him to streaming games in the vanguard at Justin.tv. Unsurprisingly, like recording VHS video of play, these practices and platforms also anticipate the work and, at some level, the fundamental ontologies of video game streaming. Machinima[54] is filmmaking using in-game models and environments as actors and settings for storytelling. But like streaming, it treats games as platforms for content creation. Newgrounds, a flash website launched in 1995, was a hub of early game and video content creation. And although RSQV was not using it to stream games, the structure of, and importance of, an audience remains salient on Newgrounds. Lastly, YouTube, like Twitch and Justin.tv served as a way to share game content with a wider audience. In this respect, RSQV's story of coming to streaming highlights sites and modes of media production that anticipate Twitch at various levels.

While most video game streamers are players first, turning play from a mode of media use into a practice of media production engenders a dramatic shift in the way streamers approach their games. In general, we might understand this as a desire to turn a hobby into a marketable or socially valuable endeavor, but each streamer recalls the genesis of their work streaming a bit differently. For many, streaming extends the social elements of networked game play. As Celia Pearce and Artemesia explain in *Communities of Play,* a case study of *Uru*[55] players after the game's server shut down: player communities are not necessarily tied to a particular game, but are experienced as social relationships built around

[53] RSQV Interview, 2016

[54] Machinima is a type of filmmaking that appropriates computer graphics, usually from a video game, to create a narrative cinematic text.

[55] Cyan Worlds. (2003). *Uru.* [PC], USA: Ubisoft.

games but mutable and capable of adapting to new games and new play contexts.[56] In this sense, streaming might be seen as a similar extension of play communities. Many of my informants describe taking up streaming to forge new connections with players or at the suggestion of player-peers. In this sense, streaming begins as a social endeavor, often undertaken with friends or otherwise as a means of building relationships with people who have similar gaming interests. Although each narrative is unique, they all generally reflect a realization that their video game play may be valuable in a broader context than the self-indulgent activity of playing for fun. It is the recognition that play may become an avenue to social connection, attention, or profit that turns players into streamers and casual streamers into serious content producers.

For RSQV, game streaming re-focused the energy he had put into media making for these other platforms. Moreover, it made play more meaningful at a time when he was beginning to lose interest in games. He describes a declining investment in gaming after leaving the Navy, a point at which his gaming social connections shrank. He found the games he enjoyed were cooperative or multiplayer games, and that without a close circle of friends to play with, these games lost their appeal. Justin.tv, which would eventually become Twitch, rekindled his interest in gaming and drew upon the kind of work he had done creating content for YouTube and Newgrounds.

RSQV came to Justin.tv originally to watch broadcasts of sports. The streaming platform in its early days served as a hub for people to share all types of content, but rebroadcasts of sporting events proved to be one of the major draws – so much so that early streamers remember bandwidth issues on weekends when pirated streams of soccer games

[56] Celia Pearce and Artemesia, *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

were drawing huge audiences to the site.[57] It was during a sports stream that RSQV first discovered the games section.

> "So then I see people playing [video games] and I think, holy crap, this might be a good way to start playing again and socialize. Because I always liked socializing [around gameplay]. I was lucky enough that the computer I bought had a TV tuner card in it so I didn't have to buy anything, and my TV had a coaxial cable-out so I bought a coaxial cable and connected them and just started broadcasting."[58]

This is a crucial realization for RSQV as it marks a transition in terms of what games and particularly playing meant to him. He is articulating a transition from play as fun on its own, to fun in the context of social connections formed out of play. What Celia Pearce and Artemesia describe as "a shift from playing for the game to playing for the people."[59] Indeed, it is the people, more than the games, that feature prominently in RSQV's narrative of actually getting into streaming. After using the site as a hub to watch sports he had made a few connections with other users on Justin.tv and these connections served as the basis for an audience.

> "I played a couple games with some people. I met people and talked to them in chat, and people got to know me a little bit. And at that time there weren't very many broadcasters, so when I started I was one of very few (people playing games on Justin.tv) anyway."[60]

This gave RSQV an audience as he got underway. And this audience gave way to social

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[57] I was at a TwitchCon panel that featured RSQV and a number of other early adopters of Justin.tv, and this was a topic of discussion. It draws an interesting parallel between esport and sport, as well as between streaming and pirate infrastructures.
[58] RSQV Interview, 2016
[59] Pearce and Artemesia, 2009
[60] RSQV Interview, 2016

connections around play. While small-scale compared to the massive following some streamers manage to achieve on Twitch, the importance of social connection becomes a theme repeated across my interviews. In this narrative of starting out, games feature less prominently than the connections that develop between streamer and viewer.

RSQV's narrative of getting into streaming games is one of the more striking I encountered among my informants as it speaks to a long history of media practices in his life that anticipate streaming games, but which also anticipate the social and cooperative elements defining streaming. Although none of my other informants trace their genealogies quite so far back, there are striking similarities between his trajectory and the routes to streaming taken by many others. I find this to be particularly true in regard to the social element of streaming and the discovery of streaming as a practice that combines hobbies with the possibility of greater attention and recognition as a content creator. The value of doing something original or finding an untapped niche is one that is repeated among my informants, even though the market is much more saturated for many of them starting later. Moreover, the revelation that streaming might be more than just a hobby or outlet is frequently expressed among my informants in terms of the size of and relationships developed with audiences – more than in the practice of playing itself. As I seek to theorize what turns gaming into a practice of content creation and broadcasting, and what turns these broadcasts into the serious undertakings, it is often the social component cited as the driving factor for my streamers – the recognition that others find the practice valuable and engaging.

In my interview with KRG, a long-time game streamer who joined Justin.tv at about the same period as RSQV, he explains this excitement in similar terms.

“I was reading an article on Kotaku in June or July of 2008 about a group that did

> video game streaming to raise money for charity. They did a marathon for 48 hours, and I remember reading it and thinking, I stay up all night playing video games anyway, so why not try something like that to raise money for charity."[61]

In regard to platforms, KRG did not follow the same trajectory as RSQV. He began on other life-blogging websites. He tells me he tried several before settling on Blog-TV, which he used before being invited to stream on Justin.tv, following the launch of its games section. Like RSQV though, KRG got into streaming as an experiment to turn play into something more. He initially intended that streaming for charity would be a temporary practice but found that with an audience his excitement for streaming grew.

> "I never intended it to last any longer than that one event. (But) I started streaming to test my quality and people showed up and they started chatting and I started chatting with them. And then we started playing games together and I was inviting people to come play."[62]

KRG's experimental entree into streaming as an altruistic experiment gave way to a practice that would become regular and regimented. And after six months of streaming on Blog-TV, KRG describes moving this practice and his audience over to Justin.tv where games streaming was becoming formalized. Here he would find a sub-section dedicated to games, and with it, an audience interested in watching other people broadcasting their play. Justin.tv's games section organized trends taking place more broadly around watching games and gathered content producers and consumers around a single platform.

> "I moved over to Justin.tv in December, 2008 and I did another one of those marathons. I just remember going from 8 to 15 viewers to over 100 viewers in that

[61] KRG Interview by Alexander Champlin, January 26, 2016, Interview 003, Audio Transcript.
[62] Ibid.

one weekend and I remember thinking, okay Justin.tv is probably a better place for me to stream because it's more focused on games in this one section"[63]

The formalization of game streaming and the corresponding growth of an audience turn streaming into something that, while formally similar to recording VHS tapes of play or broadcasting in a general forum, provides content creators with much larger and more focused networks of viewers. In turn, these networks become the social support for their work. From the perspective of producers, especially those starting out, the validation of peers and the relationships emerging out of their channels provide reason to invest more deeply in these productions.

Starting to Stream: Getting Personal

While the routes to streaming seem to vary widely among streamers, the possibility of being able to to turn play into something beneficial becomes a compelling reason to keep doing it. As streamers discuss getting into streaming, the value of their time and energy is often measured in abstract feelings of social connection and or audience growth, more than financial income from content production. Of course, the income model for streaming makes monetization directly contingent on the size of one's audience, as streamers are paid primarily though advertising revenue, subscriptions, and donations. In this respect, it is difficult to fully parse the motivations behind streaming, but in terms of the prevailing discourses, an overwhelming majority emphasize the value of their relationships that evolve from streaming. While many of my informants cite the hope of financial success as reasons to stream, for the majority of streamers starting out, it seems more a matter of building a following and forming relationships.

[63] Ibid.

I argue that one of the ways we might make sense of the value placed on sociality, more than an economy of attention, is in the specific ways my informants talk about what they get out of relationships with their viewers. RSQV, for instance, cites a loss of social connection as his reason for losing interest in games and he positions his broadcast as a way to form new connections around gaming. Other respondents make similar assertions about the emotional benefits of broadcasting.

BBQBRO, a streamer whose channel embraces and thematizes both *bro-ishness*[64] and barbecues, replete with meat-themed emojis for his followers to use in chat, is remarkably candid in explaining the social components of his decision to broadcast gameplay.

> "I started out streaming Day Z, like the actual Mod in 2012. And I was just looking to talk to other people because I was going through some stuff where I was feeling pretty lonely. I was just looking for people to play games with and talk to. I wasn't planning on making a community or anything like that"[65]

Like RSQV, BBQBRO's narrative emphasizes streaming as a means to make connections with other players and a way of subtly extending play—less as a matter of performance or content creation, but as a matter of small-scale, intimate connection. For a streamer whose public profile depends on a particular performance of bro-ish aloofness, he is very open about the importance of social relationships in his decision to stream. This becomes one of the most interesting patterns to emerge out of my interviews. As a mode of media production, streaming is largely the work of individuals, and while the audiences for streaming are often very large, the production context generally remains linked to the ebbs and flows of

[64] This is a kind of masculine performance. I discuss the the intersection of online masculinities and Twitch's culture in more depth in Chapter 4. Bro-ishness is fraught, it frequently overlaps with more exclusionary kinds masculinity, but it also cannot and should not be reduced to this.

[65] BroBQ Interview by Alexander Champlin, February 17, 2016, Interview 011, Audio Transcript.

individual streamers' lives. For this reason, it is not uncommon for content producers to theorize their work in terms how it fits within their personal experience—this as opposed to media workers who might conceive of their labor in terms of being a component in a much larger production.[66] It is both unsurprising and indeed integral to the work of streaming, that content producers articulate their labor in terms of its personal effects (and affects) on their lives. Moreover, because of the solidarity of production and the distance introduced by broadcast platforms and configurations it seems many streamers are acutely aware of the uniqueness of the relationships they form while streaming. Streamers are inclined to be reflexive about the kinds of emotional relationships streaming produces and the kinds of relationships streaming might supplement in their lives more broadly. I find that themes of social isolation appear throughout my interviews as I ask my informants what made streaming appealing to them. A number of streamers cite streaming as a means to forge relationships with other streamers or other watchers in supplement to other connections in their lives.

QH and iiN offer two exemplary accounts of coming to streaming in terms that thematize social isolation and pose broadcasting as an outlet and support network. iiN addresses this in terms of the occupational stress of working a job that places him in conflict with other people. For iiN, streaming allowed him a network through which he could form connections that were more immediately positive. QH poses streaming as an escape from an isolating domestic situation. She describes streaming as an outlet from a lonely home life as a military housewife and subsequently as a support system following a turbulent divorce.

[66] The media workers studied in John Caldwell's *Production Culture,* for instance, are able to make clearer distinctions between their labor as a component of a production process and the rest of their lives. Here, streaming is integrally linked to social bonds and domestic environments as an effect of production usually being a one-person operation. John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

iiN tells me he came to streaming at the suggestion of his cousin, K, an avid watcher of Twitch streams who introduced him to the platform and the practice. K would also become part of iiN's informal production crew, working as one of his chat-moderators. Although it was family that turned him onto streaming, iiN explains that the social connections he made streaming compensated for the negative interactions he had with people at work. Twitch streaming became community for him where he could feel more meaningfully connected to people.

> "I was working collections and that was just miserable. It was an assault on your mentality, 8 hours a day of people just cussing you out. And I found that I'd come home and be down and depressed but the second I started streaming, people would come into the lobbies, I could mask what was going on around me by talking to other people and getting into their world and finding out what was going on with them. So it ended up becoming very therapeutic and from then on I kept doing it...it became something that helped me…it was something I needed. Just being able to connect to people. Because in collections you kinda feel like you're not doing anything."[67]

Compared to collections, streaming felt like doing something. And for iiN this is measured primarily in terms of interpersonal connections with his audience and fellow players, all of this formed around broadcasting games. What is important to note is that at this point for iiN, streaming is not evaluated in terms of marketability but in terms of positive social engagements. He calls his community a family, and it is, even more so in the sense that his cousin K remains a part of the domestic and informal production of the stream. Although he later tells me that the possibility of turning this into something financially productive would lead him to leave collections and try his hand at streaming professionally/full time, his

[67] iiN Interview by Alexander Champlin, January 27, 2016, Interview 004, Audio Transcript.

entrance and his rationale for continuing to stream are social first. In this respect we might begin to see how the schizophrenic work of a serious community-driven streamer begins to take shape. Here streaming begins as a deeply personal practice, only later giving way to demands for growth and audience management.

Where iiN's narrative emphasizes social relationships around work—streaming games becomes a route to more meaningful social connection and an escape from what he experiences in his occupational space—QH traces her route to streaming through an even more intimate trajectory. She started streaming at 17, while she was living on an Navy base with her now ex-husband. She explains that the transition was isolating for her. They had moved away from their friend group and days became very boring and isolated. She articulates this in terms of her would-be peer group on the base, and poses streaming as an alternative to the lifestyle and social expectations of a young Navy housewife. Here the social connections facilitated by streaming offer an alternative to the social network of the Navy base. She explains her reticence at the suggestion but also the excitement and validation of finding connections through streaming following this initial experiment.

> "I was a military housewife at the time … I was 17, I was married, and any other girl my age was pregnant. So I was bored, I was *really* bored, and my ex-husband was like, 'you should stream, you should just try it.' And I thought, 'no one is going to like this.' I had dealt with a lot of bullying and a lot of therapy growing up so the idea of putting myself on camera in front of people was a massive thing."[68]

QH recognizes that the social network she might have engaged with on the base didn't necessarily comport with what she wanted to be doing at 17 and as a result of this disconnect she felt isolated. Streaming became a place where her interests could be validated. She was

[68] QH Interview by Alexander Champlin, March 16, 2016, Interview 020, Audio Transcript.

already a gamer and already had the equipment to start a fairly basic Twitch stream using just her Xbox One. As a result, the barrier to entry was largely a matter of anxiety about exposure. However, after she got past this, streaming games became a way to see herself and her interests re-valued in a context outside of the relatively insular world of a military base. For her, the community and connections she began to develop validated her personally.

> "Any time I saw the numbers, it didn't matter if it was 10 or 20 people, there was something inside me that just snapped, and I was like I can do this. ….Without Twitch I wouldn't have understood my self value and probably would have stayed with my ex-husband."[69]

Where iiN's use of Twitch allowed him to connect with people beyond the context of his work in collections, QH explains using streaming as a way of broadening her horizons. Specifically this meant inserting her in a social context and production context where she was better able to value herself and her energy. She explains to me that streaming isn't a back-seat career, and she conceives of it as a career now, complete with a range of commitments and responsibilities beyond broadcasting. As a mode of production and a social practice, streaming allowed her to develop the production practices and connections with an audience that re-valued her. Conceiving of herself as a streamer and engaging with the social networks and production context of Twitch proved to be an escape from an unhappy domestic situation.

Connection as a reason to get into, or a byproduct of streaming, is reflected more broadly in my research. Like QH and iiN, a number of my informants speak to starting a Twitch stream as a matter of their social or occupational situation at the moment where they begin to broadcast. MPNS an *H1Z1* streamer explains starting out as an interest in finding

[69] Ibid

people to play with. He traces his enjoyment of playing for and with viewers to years spent playing Nintendo 64 games on the couch with friends. GPB, a *Mario Maker* speedrunner and former semi-professional snowboarder, explains getting into speedrunning and streaming following a career-ending snowboarding accident. Speedrunning served as a challenge to keep him occupied as he recovered and placed him in contact with a broader community of *Mario World* and *Mario Maker* streamers who would become part of an online friend group. CeeMon, a *Destiny*[70] streamer, explains she began as a way to keep herself occupied and connected while waiting for a nursing program she had been admitted to to start. A trajectory she undertook as a result of a personal connection with another streamer.

Across these examples, we might begin to see the way streaming both informs and is informed by the personal and the social, rather than being a mode of media production that is purely about content, markets, or audiences. Particularly at the point of entry, these three accounts highlight the importance of understanding the production of a stream in terms of the immediate social experience of the streamer. As a small-scale production, streaming is deeply dependent and contingent upon the lived experience of the streamer and the context out of which they begin streaming. While this is not necessarily universally true, as many streamers undertake streaming for other, less social reasons, these accounts emphasize the importance of social and personal factors in the decision to stream. Moreover they temper the managerial logic of streaming as a business or media industrial practice. While there are industrial imperatives at work in the production of a Twitch stream, particularly at more advanced levels of production where audiences are conceived of in quantitative terms, the personal accounts of starting out emphasize the social character of much of this work and situate the production context in the personal.

[70] *Destiny,* (USA: Activision/Bungie, 2014), Video Game.

Starting to Stream: Informal Connections and Cooperative Play

While considering personal reasons for starting streaming helps to situate the productive work of streamers, we might envision social relationships more broadly when thinking of the work of starting out. In particular, connections among streamers. While streamer relationships are quite complex and bear further consideration in terms of how professional networks figure into strategies for streaming[71], for streamers just beginning to broadcast play, connections with others can be extremely productive. My informants speak about their relationships with other streamers in a number of ways. Certainly many draw inspiration from more established streamers. Most of my informants name established/celebrity streamers whose channels serve as inspiration for them. However, several speak to connections more directly. These accounts emphasize the value of support from other streamers starting out, and complements accounts of personal narratives of getting into streaming. That is, while it is important to understand how game streaming becomes an integral part of streamer's personal lives, it's also useful to understand where connections with other streamers help to structure these practices.

Specifically, I am interested here in the way connections with other streamers, especially other streamers who are already established, help to shape the work of people broadcasting play as they are just beginning to stream. A conceit shared almost universally among my informants is that the work of building an audience is hardest at the outset. Twitch's configuration as a platform grants the most visibility to already established streamers. Channels are sorted into game specific directories allowing viewers to find

[71] Cooperative relationships among streamers inform a number of broadcast strategies, like hosting, raiding, and the formation of streamer-groups. These are practices adopted by both new streamers and established streamers alike. This is addressed more fully in Chapter 2.

channels based on their viewing interests. Within these directories, channels are arranged by viewership placing the most-watched, live channel at the top of the list and smaller streams near the bottom. For new players broadcasting popular games, this often means they get buried below hundreds of other channels featuring different people playing similar content. Because of this configuration it is not uncommon for new streamers to broadcast for weeks or even months without much of an audience. The result is many new streamers find inspiration from already established channels. More directly, forming actual connections with these established broadcast networks often proves to be a major boon for smaller streams. Several of my informants talk about fortuitous moments of connection with already established streamers as major boosts for their channels. What unifies these accounts are the way new streamers talk about connections with established streamers as a means for sharing audiences and attention capital.

MPNS describes a chance in-game connection with a notable YouTube and Twitch personality, Boogie2988, as a moment of transformative growth. CeeMon also traces her early success to a shared stream with Yuui, another established streamer. This allowed her to begin broadcasting on her own with a built in group of followers already aware of her channel. Lastly, EIsh explains starting to stream after first working as a host on GeekAndSundry's Twitch channel and beginning with followers who knew her from that network. These accounts all emphasize the power of streamer networks as a means to boost viewership for new broadcasters. Although these connections can get much more complicated and cooperation between streamers figures into strategies for audience management more deeply, for new streamers the boost from contact with an established producer can be significant. Like social connections formed between streamers and the

communities they begin to create, social engagements among streamers can dramatically affect processes of content creation for newer games broadcasters.

MPNS started watching people stream in 2012 just after Justin.tv was rebranded as Twitch. He began streaming casually shortly thereafter and switched between Twitch and Hitbox before taking almost a year break until February 2015. When he returned to streaming on Twitch the audience he had developed during his first stint was almost completely gone. So, he started the process of building a new following. He explains his growth was slow; he was essentially starting from scratch in terms of finding an audience who would follow his channel and come to watch regularly.

> "Slowly over the first month I had about 30 and then I ran into Boogie2988…I ran into him in *H1Z1*[72], while he was playing, and a friend of mine was talking to me and said, 'Boogie is in your game, he really needs help, go pick him up,' and so I went and picked him up, and that night everything changed…"[73]

MPNS tells me this excitedly. Boogie is a celebrity in certain gaming communities. At the time of writing he has roughly 3.5 million YouTube followers and another 300,000 on Twitch, so when he streams he commands quite an audience. MPNS's chance encounter with him in an *H1Z1* server, while not entirely unlikely, is still exciting in its own right. The idea that, for a moment, the same instance of the game you are playing might be visible to thousands of other viewers is a cool proposition, especially to someone already invested in streaming. The interaction that follows is even more outstanding. *H1Z1* tasks players with fighting to the death on a map that continues to shrink, forcing the remaining players into closer and closer proximity as the game progresses. It's not uncommon for groups of players

[72] *H1Z1,* (USA: Daybreak Game Company, 2015), Video Game .
[73] MPNS Interview by Alexander Champlin, February 9, 2016, Interview 008, Audio Transcript.

to form temporary alliances in order to survive as long as possible. By using the video feed from Boogie's stream, MPNS explains he was able to locate him in the game world and form a temporary partnership. He tells me eagerly,

> "So I went and picked him up. I had to hunt him down first because there was a 10-second delay, not only on my stream but on his stream, too. So I went and picked him up and we drove directly to the safe zone. We were talking back and forth and we had really good banter. People were loving it in general. So he said, 'You did me a favor, now I'm going to do you a favor.' I had told him I was streaming too and that was how I found him. And he said, 'Tell me your Twitch name.' I said, 'No,' I don't want to be disrespectful.' [There is a tacit understanding among streamers that self-promotion on another streamer's broadcast is poor form] And he said, 'No, you're going to let me do this or I'm going to kill you.'[within the world of the game]"[74]

Manpon recounts that Boogie's endorsement over his stream garnered him a wealth of new attention. At the end of the night he had 700 spectators and roughly 70 new followers as a result of his interaction. The story is a good one because of how unlikely their encounter in-game was, but it speaks to the efficacy of cooperative capital. Especially for new streamers. An influx of viewers, even if they only show up for a moment, can effectively do the work of months spent streaming. My informants speak about growth in terms of a kind of multiplicative process—going from ten to twenty to fifty, to one hundred. In this respect, a momentary boost can lift a new streamer into a bracket of visibility that would take a great deal of personal work to reach.

CeeMon and EIsh also address this, especially in terms of starting with a built-in audience. CeeMon explains she first heard of Twitch through Facebook. A high school friend

[74] Ibid.

of hers was becoming a successful streamer, Yuuie. CeeMon had just finished the requirements to get into a physician's assistant program and was beginning what could have been up to a one-year waiting process. Yuuie and her boyfriend encouraged CeeMon to try streaming with her free time. In order to soften CeeMon's entry into streaming, Yuuie had CeeMon on her stream on several occasions. Like MPNS' encounter with Boogie2988, this exposure on another streamer's channel produced a level of visibility many streamers rarely receive early on. The exposure in this case meant many of Yuuie's viewers were able to familiarize themselves with CeeMon before she started her own channel, and were able to assess whether or not they would be interested in her stream. Video game streamers speak about finding an audience as a mutual process, where both the personality of the broadcaster and the unique appetite of the viewers must align. Of course there is more to this – taste in games, broadcast schedules, and production values all affect whether a viewer commits to following a streamer they come across – but assuming these things align, it is understood among streamers that the decision to choose a streamer from among thousands doing similar things has a lot to do with personality compatibility between broadcaster and viewer. In this respect, finding exposure on a larger scale, if only temporarily, can be transformative for a streamer in the process of launching a channel.

Cookee is reflective about the efficacy of this exposure for her channel. She tells me that starting with Yuuie's support meant people anticipated her doing her own stream and boosted her viewership when she did start to broadcast.

> "Because I had streamed with Yuuie I came in with 150 follows on Twitch. People had asked, 'So you're going to steam on your own channel?' And Yuuie was promoting me. The first time I went live I had quite a few excited people. …I got

> really lucky because I knew another streamer and she helped put me on my feet. But for other people to get up to 150 follows, sometimes they're streaming for a month and a half, two months, or even more."[75]

Because new streamers often conceive of streaming in terms of social interaction, an audience can be quite rewarding. Moreover, an audience is valuable because it turns streaming into a more complex media production, in the sense that it adds a layer of interactivity. Accompanying every stream is a chat dialogue, flowing text commentary which runs in a text box next to the video feed of the broadcast. Viewers, streamers, and moderators can all contribute to this chat, and on smaller streams this is generally where most community building takes place and social relationships develop. Turning a stream from a one dimensional broadcast into a kind of hyper-mediated internet forum depends largely on the health of this chat and it gives a streamer an audience to interact with directly. By arriving to streaming with a small following and a group of roughly 20 viewers on hand, CeeMon was better situated to continue to grow this channel.

EIsh explains having a similar experience starting her own stream. EIsh is in a comparatively unique position as a broadcaster on Twitch; she got her start as a host on Geek and Sundry's Twitch channel. A subsidiary of Legendary Pictures' Legendary Digital Networks, Geek and Sundry produces Twitch content more closely resembling a podcast or talk show. Although game playing frequently figures into their broadcasts, their production schema is much more sophisticated than most streamers producing content out of their homes. Geek and Sundry produces shows that feature recurring casts and specific content on their channel and recur weekly—pen and paper role playing games, talk shows, news, etc. EIsh worked as a host for several of these programs. While Geek and Sundry represents a

[75] CeeMon Interview by Alexander Champlin, March 5, 2016, Interview 015, Audio Transcript.

more formalized mode of production, it still commands a community of loyal and interactive users. Indeed, one of the Producers for G&S serves as a moderator for their chat community, which has branded itself Team Hooman. In 2015, EIsh launched her own stream but, like CeeMon, she did so with the benefit of her background at Geek and Sundry. In addition to a following that carried over from there, EIsh brought with her the benefit of her experience interacting with viewers as a host at Geek and Sundry as well as direct support form the channel who hosted her stream.

These accounts of starting out with some level of support emphasize the value of capital and attention shared among streamers. There are a variety of approaches to starting a channel and received knowledge often prescribes a range of strategies for building an audience – things like strategies for scheduling, selecting games to feature, demeanor. What these accounts demonstrate is that material connections among streamers, particularly at the outset, can prove especially valuable. In my interview with GPB he tells me that, "A few big streamers can make other streamers' success."[76] MPNS' story of a chance encounter with Boogie2988 demonstrates that even a short moment of exposure can lift a channel's visibility and garner returning viewership. Moreover, CeeMon and EIsh's support from established channels suggest established capital might be shared among streamers in powerful ways.

Starting to Stream: What Personal Boundaries?

Where the process of building a video game broadcast channel transforms play by introducing new social connections, new technical considerations, and new practices and rationalities for playing, it also affects the social lives of the streamers who invest in producing streams. Playing for an audience is not the same thing as playing recreationally or

[76] GPB Interview by Alexander Champlin, February 17, 2016, Interview 010, Audio Transcript.

on one's own. More than developing the infrastructure to produce a polished broadcast from home, streaming demands scheduling, standardizing play, and a degree of domestic transparency. Born of life-blogging – the process of opening one's life to viewers on the internet – streaming similarly opens the home and the lives of streamers to the specularity and demands of an internet audience. Generally, these demands can be negotiated be streamers who can choose how much or how little access to give their viewers. My informants talk about the decision to use webcams or simply broadcast video of play, the decision to make themselves accessible to their communities, and when to retreat from peripheral social media platforms used to support a streaming channel. However, many of these considerations elude streamers or remain unpredictable or unapparent at the outset. I mean that the transparency created by broadcasting play often pulls streamers lives into their work in unpredictable ways. In terms of Deuze's description of media work, this is a level of precarity unique to streaming.[77] A number of my informants speak to the bleeding together of their private lives and public presences and the difficulty of maintaining these boundaries. When thinking about the ways people get into streaming, this seepage between public and private lives is a defining characteristic of this kind of work.

Narratives of integrating public play into personal life generally begin simply enough. One streamer, LZA, whose work oscillates between playing games and doing game-related art, for example, discusses the decision of whether or not to show her face on webcam. She explains that two months ago she decided she would not show her face on webcam in order to emphasize the content she was creating and to remove the focus on her appearance and identity. By choosing not to show her face in her broadcasts she is in the minority of streamers; for many, their public identity and personality is tied to their appearance. Of

[77] Mark Deuze, *Media Work* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

course, appearing on camera comes at the expense of anonymity and LZA hopes anonymity places the emphasis on the work she is doing. “My stream is not about my face, it's not about how pretty I look, it's not about how ugly trolls think I look. It's about the content I'm putting out.”[78] As a creative streamer she is positioned a bit differently than Streamers who only play games—she is hoping that people connect with her artwork, rather than her identity as a player—so the decision to forgo a webcam video of her face might be adopted more easily for her than others. However, that it is a practice adopted with the intention of bracketing off her personal appearance and identity for her streaming work says a great deal about the possibilities for blending together these things in a broadcast. Many of my informants speak to exactly how interconnected the personal and the public work of streaming can be.

In talking about starting out, negotiating streaming as it fits into personal routines and domestic life is a major consideration. TA, a *CounterStrike: GO*[79] streamer, reflects on starting to stream seriously,

> “If someone asks me, 'Hey, should I start streaming?', I usually have a few questions. The first is, how old are you? If they are out of college and have a job or something, don't do it. Absolutely not. Do you have any social life? If you have any social life that you enjoy, don't do it. Because if you do, you’re going to have to give up either your job or your social life to stream. My short streams are four and a half or five hours, and on weekends I stream for like eight hours or more.”[80]

While the amount of time people dedicate to streaming is largely up to the streamer, those who hope to develop a following generally try to maximize the amount of time they are online, allowing them to accumulate more viewers over the course of a long broadcast. Thus,

[78] LZA Interview by Alexander Champlin, December 14, 2016, Interview P1, Transcript.
[79] *Counter-Strike: GO*, (USA: Valve Corporation, 2012), Video Game.
[80] TA Interview by Alexander Champlin, February 26, 2016, Interview 013, Audio Transcript.

one of the major adjustments streaming introduces is a renegotiation of time spent playing. For people with commitments and domestic relationships this change in schedule can be a strain. TA started streaming while he was living away from his girlfriend. He jokingly tells me it kept him occupied and out of trouble while they were living apart. He adds, though, that when they moved back in together his time spent streaming became more of a drain on their relationship. During the week, he tries to stream in the afternoon so most of his broadcast occurs when she isn't home, but that he usually streams about an hour after she gets in from work. I ask if she participates in the stream.

> "Not really. I think she would be if we had a bigger place, but I think she kinda hates it right now because it's a small place and I'm a loud energetic dude on stream. I think she sort of feels like she can't escape it a little bit. I'm hoping though, as it grows, she'll start to appreciate it a little bit."[81]

TA's girlfriend is fairly amicable about his stream. But even as he tries to minimize its impact on his domestic space, the blending together of streaming and his personal life is unavoidable and generates tension. It also doesn't end when he gets off stream. He explains that he tries to respond to Twitter and Discord messages when he isn't live. In order to escape this, he sometimes has to turn off his phone when they spend time together just to avoid the impulse to be accessible to his community of followers.

TA isn't alone in experiencing this tension between his personal commitments and the demands of streaming. QH expresses a very similar sentiment about the way the growth of her stream generated tension in her life. As channels grow they become more marketable and for lucky streamers they can be a reliable source of income. This transformation necessitates a reorganization of priorities and it's not uncommon for streamers to dedicate a great deal of

[81] Ibid

their time and energy to these new priorities.

> "So when it comes to explaining to a partner that you're going to dedicate the majority of your time to something they view as a pastime or at the most a hobby, that's hard for people to swallow...there is nothing about Twitch that is a back seat career. It gets really time consuming and people don't realize it. They say, 'you play video games eight hours a day.' No, that's not my job. I may play video games eight hours a day, but then during the remaining 6 to 10 hours (depending on how much sleep I want to get), I'm dealing with graphics work, dealing with my mods, trying to rally my community, trying to put out merchandise. I'm networking."[82]

While most streamers do not see streaming as a career from the outset, the demands streaming introduce shifts the way streamers prioritize playing and the productive tasks associated with managing a stream. So where LZA talks about the tension around allowing her personal life and her stream to overlap as a material question of how much to show on stream, this question gets much more complicated around things like prioritizing and managing time spent streaming.

Many streamers are able to negotiate these tensions in the context of their extant commitments. TA talks about his strategies for easing his girlfriend into it. He hopes as the stream becomes more profitable and more visible she will see the value of what he is doing. But in the meantime, he explains that he finds ways to mediate a domestic media production practice with a healthy, domestic relationship, even if this means setting boundaries between streaming and the rest of his life. These considerations are a crucial part of the production practice emerging around the cottage industry of game streaming. A number of my informants speak to the ways they negotiate these relationships. iiN for example, explains his

[82] QH Interview, Interview by Alexander Champlin, March 8, 2016, Interview 020, Audio Transcript.

decision to treat streaming more seriously was welcomed by his spouse. The respite streaming offered from the strain of his job in collections meant a successful stream might actually precipitate a more relaxed domestic situation. Similarly, Grand_POObear shares that his wife endorses his broadcast and helps to support their family as he is developing his channel. He works as an announcer and emcee in evenings to supplement the income streaming generates, but acknowledges the support of his wife as a crucial component of what makes his production feasible. In this respect, streaming doesn't necessarily need to be a point of tension despite its partial occupation of domestic space.

In some cases however, boundaries between streaming and domestic relationships are impossible to maintain, a byproduct of domestic production practices. QH explains that as her stream grew from something she did to occupy herself while her husband was busy with work into something she did for herself and for her community, it began to become a point of contention in her relationship. As their relationship became more strained and abusive, the attention she was *getting* from streaming and *giving* to her stream was too much for her husband to handle. In the process of leaving her husband, QH's production setup became the target of his frustration.

> "I was advised to leave by a military counselor. When I did, he shattered my phone, smashed my Xbox with *Destiny* inside of it, and deleted my Twitch account with 4000 followers. I drove 500 miles home, with just my laptop and my TV, and immediately got on Twitter trying to get my Twitch account back."

QH streamed for three months before she left her husband, and points to streaming as a major source of conflict between them. She recognizes the jealousy streaming elicited had been there all along, but the attention she was getting exacerbated tensions. While she doesn't

regret getting into streaming, explaining that her stream helped her to realize the problems in her relationship, her story dramatically highlights the difficulty of keeping personal lives and a home broadcast infrastructure separate. Moreover, it highlights the precarity of many video game broadcasters' positions as media makers, where disruptions-of-life-changes can put a broadcaster on hiatus indefinitely.

While QH's story is ultimately triumphant—she discloses streaming helped her revalue herself and leave a stifling domestic situation—her narrative also emphasizes the fragility of the work she does. As her domestic situation changed she was forced to abandon her streaming setup. This type of interruption can be dramatically disabling for streamers who often depends on consistency in order to remain relevant. Days spent away from streaming can cause a broadcaster's audience to look elsewhere for content. A need to stream regularly and the flightyness of viewers makes streamers particularly vulnerable to DDoS[83] attacks, interruptions in internet connection, or any other emergency that takes them away from their stream. In her case, her husband's decision to delete her account and break her Xbox could have signaled the end of her career or at least forced her to start again from scratch.

Similar stories appear a number of times in the course of my research. Several informants talk particularly about the way changing domestic situations, particularly divorce, figured into their public presences as content creators for Twitch. Both DRBRO, one of the largest *Destiny* streamers on Twitch, and MPNS talk about the ways divorce affected their broadcast and that these otherwise personal and private moments in their lives were broadcast in one way or another through their channels. Like QH, whose divorce shook her

[83] DDoS, swatting, and location based attacks against streamers that target the individuals behind streams as a way of disabling or disrupting their channels are a common form of harassment deployed against broadcasters.

channel, DRBRO and MPNS both explain the difficulty of keeping their private, domestic lives out of their public productions.

MPNS explains that shortly after his interaction with Boogie2988, which generated booming growth for his channel, he split from his wife. His divorce, like QH's, was difficult to parse from his work on Twitch. When he left, he lost his computer and moved back in with his family. This meant that for three weeks he was unable to stream. He managed this hiatus by explaining his situation to his fans, who reacted by helping him get back into streaming.

> "I told my followers (about the divorce). I was very honest with them. I ended up doing a Q&A and told them everything that happened and it got very personal. My community came through in a big way. They ended up building a completely new PC for me. They told me to make an Amazon wish list, and then people bought different parts from the list."[84]

MPNS's decision to approach handling his divorce in this way stemmed from the integration of his stream into the rest of his life. Specifically, a recognition that the change in his living situation would have a dramatic effect on how able he was to continue streaming. In fact, after leaving and moving back in with his parents, he was forced to change his streaming schedule. In the new living situation his nighttime internet connection made streaming difficult due to increased internet traffic in his neighborhood when people were home from work. So, even though he was able to return rather quickly to broadcasting following his divorce, he was forced to adopt a new time slot and lost a significant part of his audience because his new schedule placed him outside of their regular time to spectate.

MPNS was able to approach his divorce proactively and make a conscious decision to address his shifting domestic situation with his stream. In contrast, DRBRO explains, while

[84] MPNS Interview, 2016

he tried to keep his (divorce) private, the nature of broadcasting from home made bracketing his public and private lives impossible. His story of the domestic repercussions of streaming is one of the most pointed I encountered. It highlights the degree to which the kind of production practice Twitch and video game live streaming engenders is integrally linked to the domestic or private lives of streamers—how it pulls in things that creators might want to keep outside of the frame. Moreover, it demonstrates the often impossibility of maintaining privacy and boundaries when the interactive nature of Twitch's social framework demands more access to streamers. In this sense, QH's discussion of the tensions and jealousy introduced by the attention her audience gave her, or MPMS's discussion of the support he found after his divorce, or even the more general discussions of Twitch as an antidote to loneliness or general alienation, might be seen as part and parcel of the same broader social infrastructure. Twitch is born of life blogging and so it is sensible that the demands for transparency, access, and connection are often difficult to bracket, even in situations where streamers might like to preserve their privacy or anonymity.

DRBRO is, by all accounts, a very successful broadcaster. When I interviewed him, his channel averaged several thousand concurrent viewers and provided a substantial income. However, like nearly everyone else I interviewed, he started modestly. And like most individual broadcasters, his stream is produced out of his home. He tells me that the domestic production practice and tensions around turning streaming into a career proved too much for his marriage. DRBRO explains he began streaming while working at a Starbucks. His wife was completing graduate school. As his stream began to grow, he saw the potential to turn it into a career. He tells me that he asked his wife for her support while he transitioned into streaming full time, a job that at the time paid about what he had been making working

minimum wage. He explains,

> "When I started streaming I was married, and then I got divorced. One of the biggest motivating factors in that divorce was a the fact that my spouse didn't understand the transition I needed to make between what I'm doing right now and what I had been doing. She didn't get that '[DrBro] needs to stream eight hours a day because he's trying to make this a job.' She thought, 'Why is my husband spending so much time on this stupid hobby that isn't going to make us any money?' The transition between hobby and career is pretty perilous because you don't know how it's going to turn out. The tension exposed the priority in our relationship and the priority wasn't me. I had spent a very long period in my life supporting her while she was getting a master's degree that took two years. I said, 'Okay, that took you two years; give me six months on Twitch.' I still felt like I might make the jump (between a hobby and a career). 'Give me six months on Twitch and if I'm not making more than I was in my bullshit minimum wage job I'll drop it.' She gave me four months and asked for a divorce. And within that time I had gotten partnered and had gotten up to 400 subs[cribers] which was the equivalent of making minimum wage."[85]

DRBRO tells me this to emphasize the difficulty of managing the transition to streaming as a serious endeavor rather than a hobby. Developing the infrastructure and the connections necessary to build a channel and growing a following are crucial components of starting to stream. Turning this from a serious hobby into a source of income involves a more dramatic shift in domestic patterns. QH and TA address this in terms of time spent streaming as well as time spent growing a community, but as DRBRO suggests it is also a risky transition. The months spent dedicating time to turning a channel into a source of income that matches even

[85] DRBRO Interview by Alexander Champlin, March 15, 2016, Interview 019, Audio Transcript.

a minimum wage job are especially precarious. While many streamers see it as a matter of revaluing their labor in a new media economy of content creators and less structured occupational arrangements, there is also the matter of the efficacy of this work. Streaming is precarious and DRBRO is reflexive about this. He recognizes that the factors that make for successful growth are difficult to parse and that even with the right approach streaming may not work as a job. DRBRO's domestic situation, this transition from a job in the traditional sense to streaming as a mode of income, proved too much for his spouse. In this respect, his narrative might add some weight to other accounts highlighting the difficulty of negotiating game broadcasting into extant relationships and domestic structures.

He doesn't attribute the divorce to Twitch directly. It is more of a compounding factor, but following his wife's departure, it was refracted back through his channel. He explains trying to keep the change in his relationship a private matter but encountering the impossibility of hiding it as a function of his production situation. Where Manpon addressed the change proactively, specifically because it affected his ability to carry on streaming, DRBRO initially did not make his divorce known to his followers. Nonetheless, as a result of the location and intimacy of the production of a video game broadcast, the shift in his relationship status proved impossible to keep private.

> "Because suddenly this person who had been walking around behind me on stream was gone. 'Where did she go? What happened? Hey, where's [C]? Hey, where's [C]? Hey where's [C]'...Hey guys, she left.'
>
> - The emotional stuff I have had to force myself to go through on stream, years before most people would even start talking about it, is absurd. You want to talk about stuff people wouldn't talk to their therapist about for a year? I'm sitting there

being forced to talk about it three days after she moved out of the house. Because of the interactive level of Twitch, there is so much you're pushed to share." [86]

While DRBRO recalls trying to carry on streaming as though nothing were wrong the material shift in his living situation made this impossible to maintain. His stream is, at the level of the webcam, a window into his home and his divorce proved impossible to keep out of his public profile as a function of this access. Moreover, because his viewers had grown accustomed to being in his intimate space, they expected to be clued into the reasons for the change. DRBRO explains this less as an indictment of his followers and more as a critique of the fraught structure and conflicting narratives about connection that emerge out of Twitch. He is expected to share a great deal of himself with the people who view his broadcasts, but the structure of these connections make it so he cannot expect any kind of meaningful sympathy or emotional support form his viewers who are partaking in his life. This is the kind of schizophrenia of Twitch's attention economy, one which purports a deeper and more social relationship to media but which also fails to be more than media in terms of the connections it permits at the deepest level.

Conclusion

Video game live streaming remediates game play and broadcast media in innovative ways, blending the interactive and the specular in predominantly small-scale production contexts. Much of the structure of this media is rooted in the cottage industry of individual people micro-casting streaming content to their fans. While the infrastructure of Twitch and other game-streaming platforms encourage the growth of channels which feature the performance of play, this is only part of the productive picture. Streamers themselves

[86] Ibid

experience their work as a deeply personal endeavor. Particularly, in reflecting on their own process of starting out, streamers talk at length about the social, connective, and domestic aspects of streaming – the way broadcasting games is integrated into their lives and the kinds of personal connections it facilitates.

In this respect, video game broadcasters occupy a uniquely modern place as media makers. They occupy a space between the media workers that Mark Deuze describes and play communities in Celia Pearce and Artemesia's terms. Their work is intimate in a number of respects. Streaming broadcasts are produced largely by individuals out of home production contexts. More, particularly at the outset, their networks are small, meaning they connect with audiences more personally and form some of their most important productive relationships with peers and other streamers. For this reason, the narratives producers articulate about starting out stress the way streaming is integrated into their personal lives. My informants emphasize reasons for streaming that go much deeper than questions of income or occupation. A disproportionate number of my interviewees express the formative value of social connection formed with peers and audiences, especially as it relates to their own emotional needs and identities. So, while streaming opens the capacity for large audiences, profitable followings, and the prospect of small media empires, the production of a stream never fully leaves aside these more intimate elements.

As a function of this scale, streamers lives are also directly affected by their production practice. This intimacy becomes part of the commodity of a game stream, and streamers express the challenges of sustaining the levels of availability the platform allows. They articulate the cost of building and maintaining a home broadcast setup, the difficulty of bracketing the time necessary to broadcast play and perform community upkeep against other

social and occupational connections. More striking still are the ways streamers' discuss the effect of streaming on their lives and the difficulty of keeping private moments out of their broadcasts. As a result of production's position within the domestic sphere, home studios—and even the content streamers produce—are precariously connected to the private spaces of streamers' lives. Where part of the marketability of a game stream is the interactivity and connection small-scale microcasting allows, this same feature introduces much of the demand and risk that streamers experience as well. Streaming appeals to producers as a way to turn a hobby into social connection, creative outlet, or occupation. By transforming a domestic leisure activity into a digital export, streaming pulls domestic space into the public sphere—often in ways that content creators don't expect. The lesson here is that atomizing and distributing production also atomizes and disperses new forms of risk.

CHAPTER 2

Playing Attention:

Connection and Community in Video Game Live streaming's Audience Marketplace

In the previous chapter I consider the labor of building and managing a video game live stream in terms of the integration of a broadcast practice into the lives of individual streamers. Here I turn the focus from the personal space of production to the kinds of interactions and practices that content creators deploy as they seek to court audiences develop channels for video game streaming. Broadly, I argue that live streaming emerges as part of a larger trend in media content production and must be situated in a landscape of shifting demands and goals for media marketing. Streaming is an example of what media theorists have termed, alternatively, slivercasting, microcasting, or the long tale,[87] punctuated by small asymmetrical network configurations, grassroots media making, and a culture of micro-celebrity.[88] Collectively, these concepts invoke changes in the way media reaches consumers and the way audiences select and engage with the things they watch. Without

[87] For essays on Microcasting, Slivercasting, and The Long Tale see, Philip Napoli *Audience Evolution: New Technologies and the Transformation of Media Audiences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).; Lisa Parks "Flexible Microcasting,"*Television after TV: Essays On a Medium in Transition,* eds. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); B. E. Smith-Shomade, "Narrowcasting in the New World Information Order: A Space for the Audience," *Television and New Media,* 5.1, 2004, 69-81. S Hansel, "As internet TV Aims at Niche Audiences, The Slivercast is Born," *New York Times*, 2006. Accessed 4/25/17.

[88] Work by Theresa Senft and Alice Marwick informs much of my discussion of Micro celebrity. See: Theresa M. Senft, *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).; Theresa M. Senft "Microcelebrity and the Branded Self." In *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*. eds. J. Hartley, J. Burgess and A. Bruns (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) 346-354. Alice Marwick, Alice. "They're Really Profound Women, They're Entrepreneurs: Conceptions of Authenticity in Fashion Blogging." Presented at the 7th International AIII Conference on Weblogs and Social Media (ICWSM), July 8, 2013, Cambridge, MA.; Alice Marwick, "You May Know Me From YouTube: (Micro)-Celebrity in Social Media." In *A Companion to Celebrity*, eds. P.D. Marshall and S. Redmond, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2015) 333-348.

effacing the nuances of these theories, it is sufficient to say that what they describe is a move in media production and audience structure which favors niche or narrower interests, more segmentation of demographics, and patterns of consumption that lend themselves to subscription and selection over blockbuster appeal. To put this negatively, media theorists of television and internet convergence suggest these emerging structures are less and less a matter of broad audiences and programming with mass marketability, and that older models of content sustained by mass advertising or large scale sales are not as viable as they were in a more concentrated market.

As I outline in the previous chapter, video game live streaming embodies a type of self-motivated and generally deeply personal production – usually demanding of a producer's leisure time and domestic space. In this chapter I argue the personal and small scale contexts that streaming content is produced out of engenders patterns of marketing, consumption, and engagement geared towards sustaining these homegrown studios. Strategies for audience engagement target very small, very intimate communities of grassroots supporters or patrons. Courting tightly grouped and personally invested audiences is a shift in audience scale, commensurate with shifts in production scale towards domestic and individual-operated studios.

Video game live streaming is a form of user-generated content relying uniquely on elements of liveness and audience engagement to function. For the media apparatus to work, streamers and their viewers must be present at the time of the broadcast. Thus, in order to find success, it is incumbent upon content producers on platforms like Twitch to attract a loyal audience that will tune in – or log in, as it were – and participate consistently in the broadcast. The extremely small scale of these productions also means content producers

themselves are responsible for attracting and retaining an audience large enough to sustain their stream. In a heavily saturated microcasting context, individual broadcasters must develop practices to recruit and retain viewers. These are characterized by direct and authentic engagements with fans and the production of content that plays up immediacy and community. What I focus on here are the parameters of the platform and the strategies and frameworks that allow streamers to envision their labor, frame the kinds of connections they form with their viewers, and manage or grow their audiences. I think of this process as a matter of managing attention particularly through the kinds of personal connections they are making with their audiences. I draw on theories of audiences via the attention economy, micro-celebrity, flow and connected-viewing[89] to propose that strategies deployed by video game live streamers hinge on a conception of, and relationship to, viewers which downplays the mediating technology and power dynamics of the platform while capitalizing on live, interactive, and communal elements of streaming.

To this end, I explore the practices deployed to manage audience attention and flow. Essential to this grassroots type of flow are practices of marketing. Things like streamer networks, hosting, and raiding, which allow individual streamers to cooperate with other content producers to strategize dynamically about how they associate their content with other offerings available on Twitch. And more importantly, how they might shuttle their viewers back and forth between their streams and the streams of their peers and cohorts. This also includes more bottom-up modes of interaction, equally crucial to the media ecosystem of video game live streaming. Here I am referring to systems of donations, paid streamer subscriptions, and the chat infrastructure more broadly, which allow viewers to reach out and

[89] Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson, *Connected viewing: selling, streaming, & sharing media in the digital age*, (New York: Routledge, 2014).

interact with content producers directly. These dynamics, especially, make streaming more interactive than traditional forms of broadcast media and even other modes of connected-viewing. They are also integrally linked to Twitch's attention economy, as they allow individuals from the audience to bid for and command some of a streamer's attention during a broadcast. This is made more feasible given the scale of a Twitch stream compared to other forms broadcast, but it is this back and forth pull of attention that defines the production and general construction of a video game live stream. Archaeologically speaking, it is both the shrinking of a broadcast production infrastructure and an extension of chat-room or internet forum dynamics that produce games streaming as a mode of entertainment practice, with video game play included as the focus of these other two media modes. Understanding a live stream then, means considering how these genealogies recombine or remediate each other in the service of a new kind of interactive form.

In order to situate game live streaming as a particular kind of media practice that blends trends in broadcasting with trends in social media and participatory media, it is productive to consider the ways scholars have described changes in broadcast infrastructure and audience scale. It is helpful to begin with broadcast, particularly television history, out of which something like game streaming might be seen to emerge. Two frameworks seem particularly fruitful for the sake of sketching this genealogy. The first is J.C.R. Licklider's[90] term narrowcasting—a concept embraced by television studies for its usefulness in describing the ways a broadening of content offerings and changes in broadcast infrastructure have changed audience demographics, especially around the rise of a cable industry. The notion invokes a trialectic relationship between technology, content creators, and

[90] J.C.R. Licklider, "Televistas: Looking Ahead Through Side Windows," in *Public television: a program for action: the report and recommendations of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

consumption where changes to broadcast network infrastructure permit an expansion of channels, in turn allowing content to cater to a more narrowly defined audience. The second concept has to do with interactivity and broadcast. Here I am referring to more recent discussions of *connected-viewing*, *interactive TV*, or the second screen.[91] What these concepts collectively portend are a convergence between internet, software, or roughly "new media's" perceived interactivity and broadcast media's scope. I see video game live streaming situated directly between these two trends or at the convergence of their telos.

From Narrowcasting to Live streaming

With the advent of cable television, scholars began to speak of a change in audiences in terms of narrowcasting. Although frequently cited in terms of cable television networks[92], the concept refers more broadly to the hopes that TV might be able to reach a smaller and more specialized audience, and by this demographic shift, focus more closely on particular interests or functions. Rather than describing a medium meant to cater to the most general audience, narrowcasting meant broadcast media producers (and particularly their advertising interests[93]) could envision their demographics in a more specified and focused way. The wider bandwidth and material infrastructure (literally, cables rather than broadcast frequencies) meant that even early in the history of cable technology the possibility of a shift in terms of audience structure was visible.

The term narrowcasting originates in a 1967 report by J.C.R. Licklider for the

[91] See Holt and Sanson, 2014. Also, Michael Curtin, "Matrix Media," T*elevision Studies after "TV": Understanding Television in the Post Broadcast Era*, eds. Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay (London: Routledge, 2009).

[92] Narrowcasting has been used to describe cable television content that caters to a smaller audience than the major broadcast networks. Microcasting, Slivercasting, and the Long Tale have been adopted to describe the further shrinking of audiences for internet TV.

[93] Microcasting and trends in audience specifying/shrinking are largely driven by advertising see Michael Curtin, "Matrix Media."

Carnegie Commission on educational television. Formed in 1965 to research the possibility of a non-commercial, educational use for television, the Carnegie Commission would sow the seed for what would become the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and American public television. Licklider deploys the term to describe a mode of public television designed to offer training or instruction in narrowly-focused ways to student-audiences. Through a "rejection or dissolution of the constraints imposed by a commitment to a monolithic mass-appeal broadcast approach,"[94] Licklider envisions television expanding its offerings and deepening its civic function. Although video game live streaming doesn't share this pedagogical aspiration, at least innately, it does, through its infrastructure and model of content production, shirk broad reach and broad appeal in the name of media that offers something unrealized by mass market media. Moreover, both video game live streaming and this early conceptualization of narrowcasting foresee a future for live content where interaction enables a negotiation of content from the side of consumption.

As a techno-futurist endeavor, Licklider's narrowcasting articulates a remarkably prescient vision for television. In many ways, the description sounds like an early vision of connected viewing, or internet-mediated spectatorship. "Narrowcasting, however, may suggest more efficient procedures than broadcasting throughout a wide area in order to reach a small, select audience, and it is meant to imply not only that subject matter is designed to appeal to selected groups but also that the distribution channels are so arranged as to carry each program or service to its proper audience."[95] He imagines that viewers could choose a course of study from a range of possible programming options, and engage with this interactively, unlike traditional television. His sense of this potential hinges on a combination

[94] Ibid, Licklider, 212.
[95] Ibid, Licklider.

of technologies integral to cable television but also, coincidentally, to internet/networked media. Namely, the kinds of immediacy and interaction these technologies afford. In this respect, he explains narrowcasting as both a technological and philosophical shift in content production. Cable technology was introducing technical capacities that traditional television content delivery infrastructure was incapable of matching. With more bandwidth than television, cable allowed for exponentially more channels and more diverse content, but it also connected sender and receiver, and this is one of the keys to Lickliders vision for narrowcast television. He hoped that through cable technology, TV might become interactive. At this technological level, Licklider is describing something more like internet-mediated communication than cable broadcast, and unfortunately for its time, an innovation that likely would have proven too difficult to instantiate in the name of educational TV. As a result, critics building on the concept of narrowcasting have focused primarily on changes in scale, rather than interactivity, as the conceptual cornerstone for narrowcasting. With video game live streaming, it might be possible though to see these split histories rejoined.

As a concept in television studies, narrowcasting has come to refer broadly to the change in content production and consumption instantiated by the formalization of a major cable industry. And considered this way, broadly, it marked a shift in the way theorists talked about broadcast and audience formation as cable grew to include more choices arranged around more specific interests for deeply-segmented media audiences. Not simply about educational television, but about the ways targeting specific interests has become viable as a result of satellite and cable distribution infrastructures. In terms of content, narrowcasting has an obvious and significant legacy. Cable expanded the offerings of broadcast television dramatically, from a few network channels to hundreds of offerings. From cable's

narrowcasting, scholars have named continuing trends in the shrinking of audience and focusing of content in similar terms. For instance, slivercasting, referring to the slivers of demographics that more focused content in a more diverse media ecosystem might be able to target. In a similar vein, Lisa Parks uses microcasting to discuss the development of internet-TV channels aimed at reaching audiences underserved by network content, but also overlooked by by cable's offerings.[96] In this case, micro denotes smaller audiences made viable (from a producer's perspective) by changes in distribution infrastructure. A small online audience becomes valuable when internet distribution trims the cost of traditional television production.

Indeed, this might be the conceit for a whole range of microcasting/slivercasting endeavors that emerge out of the convergence of television and web. Michael Curtin's essay, "Matrix Media," traces the rise of decentralized media in opposition to older broadcast models' centralized, asymmetrical, sender-receiver content against the sluggishness and entrenched infrastructure of studio television production exemplified by writers' strikes and industrial stagnation just as the rise of YouTube and streaming platforms were lowering the barrier to entry and roughly decentralizing content production. Internet platforms for content creation and distribution have remapped the traditional producer-consumer relationship. Curtin characterizes this as a shift in content creation form one-to-many to many-to-many.[97] Indeed, where even narrowcasting, slivercasting, and microcasting held constant the side of production, this modern moment of content production disrupts centralized production. What streaming and live streaming introduce is a shift in the site of production. Although

[96] Lisa Parks, "Flexible Microcasting," *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
[97] Michael Curtin, "Matrix Media," T*elevision Studies after "TV": Understanding Television in the Post Broadcast Era.* Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay, eds., London: Routledge, 2009.

occasionally mis-characterized as a democratization of production, scholars like Bernard Steigler have talked about the moment in terms of isonomy[98], or the move from a hegemonic cultural production to personalized and individuated production and consumption. More than a shrinking of audience, this shift in production and distribution is one of the defining structural changes of the contemporary mediascape.

Video game live streaming is situated at the juncture of these two major swings. Streamers produce content out of small scale, homegrown, often improvised studios. They do this over platforms that grant them control over the process of production and what they generate is aimed at micro-markets they personally designate. In this respect, it makes sense to reconsider the central imperative of broadcast media up to this point, namely the role of advertising and marketability as the rationale for content creation. As I demonstrate in the previous chapter, for many of the producers I interview, the drive to stream isn't reducible to profitability. The self-reported impetus to stream originates from desires for social connection, creative outlet, and attention. This isn't to say these personal motivations are not valuable in their own right; indeed, many streamers see streaming as an alternate route to employment and one which simultaneously validates their hobbies and media diets. Rather, in the immediate sense, streaming and this kind of personal production opens a range of content possibilities whose immediate purpose isn’t broad (or even narrow) appeal.

This is Bernard Steigler's point in gesturing to isonomy, that production in this moment becomes an expression of the self. In opposition to the hegemony of mass media and beyond democracy, it is about producers actualizing their identities through production. The hope is a bit of an ideal and, as scholars like Michael Curtin and Jennifer Holt and Kevin

[98] Bernard Stiegler, "The Carnival of the New Screen." *The YouTube reader,* eds.: Pelle Snickars, Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009).

Sanson[99] have cautioned, this kind of production is susceptible to capture. But, from the perspective of producers and their audiences, the arrangement is more integrally personal. If the micro-market, matrix-media ecosystem of video game live streaming is about personal interest rather than marketability, the question shifts to the goal of this kind of production. Namely, what is actualized in an isonomic media landscape? What is exchanged between producer and consumer?

Attention Economies and Connected Viewing

The value of interactivity and synergistic second-screen media have been difficult to quantify but their effects on the form of television and their potential to generate data and feedback are striking. Where the medium had historically been defined by one-directional transmission from sender to receiver, the advent of internet and computer technologies seemed poised to upend this constraint. Recently scholars have begun to talk about these changes in terms of *second screens* and *connected viewing*, naming an undeniable and broadly reaching trend or shift in media consumption. From TiVo, to internet TV channels, to new forms of distribution, to new kinds of synergistic media arrangements, what the recent history of these trends has demonstrated is that old models of sender and receiver no longer fully explain broadcast media use.

Early entries into television and digital media convergence sought to blend the two for the sake of staking out new marketplaces and attracting new audiences. As these technologies have developed though, the efficacy and applications for these emergent conjunctions have become more refined and potent. As early as 2004, William Body traces

[99] Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson, *Connected Viewing: Selling, Streaming, & Sharing Media in the Digital Age*, (New York: Routledge, 2014).

the effects of TiVo on advertising practice in network TV, marked by attempts to make advertising more integral to programming and thereby more difficult to skip. He argues that the wider effects of these technologies will still be determined, citing several high profile overestimations of internet-TV futures as counterpoints to the case of TiVo's disruption of the advertising market. In the scheme of things though, this is a rough and relatively simple case of television and computer convergence. Body speaks for a moment when the future of this convergence was uncertain. More recently, the shifts in content delivery, audience engagement, and digital demography, have demonstrated just how dramatic connected viewing and digital convergence are for TV. Reality television has capitalized on the predominance of cellular phones, social media, and Twitter to turn traditional broadcast into more compelling exchanges between audience and content. Digital streaming and video on demand have revised the way TV is produced and shifted the way consumers engage with content.

Interactivity in this formerly passive medium has become a way to drive and harness audience engagement. Moreover, as these technologies have matured their effects have become more identifiable and marketable. Mark Andejevic and Hye Jin Lee explain that this kind of interactivity can manipulate audience affect, encourage "fannification," and turn passive consumers into active feedback loops.[100] To this end, producers' ability to gauge their markets and interface with their audience have certainly grown as an effect of this convergence. The integration of these technologies has meant audience demographics, use patterns, and interests, become easier to pinpoint. Where focus groups and ratings were once the best indication of audience behavior, the integration of new technologies has made these

[100] Mark Andrejevic and Hae Jin Lee, "Second Screen Theory," *Connected Viewing: Selling, Streaming, & Sharing Media in the Digital Age*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson (New York: Routledge, 2014).

processes of data gathering much more effective.

Equally significant are the behavioral changes instantiated by the integration of social media and broadcast content. By elaborating and extending content beyond the television screen, producers are able to encourage new kinds of audience engagements. Discussions of content resonate across social media platforms, clips get redistributed on streaming websites, and the experience of engaging with content as a fan becomes much richer. This is often a synergistic relationship. Audiences feel as if they are given more access to content or to communities that share their interest, and producers get a grassroots marketing environment that enriches the experience of watching live. Collectively, scholars who have talked about this convergence gesture towards connected viewing. Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson explain, "Connected viewing is more than digital distribution; it is the broader ecosystem in which digital distribution is rendered possible and new forms of user engagement take shape. It also extends to more marginal players, those firms and individuals operating 'outside' of the mainstream, who are looking to create innovative relationships with the digital, global, and mobile audience."[101] What is telling about the term is the way viewing is modified by connectivity. This isn't to say viewers weren't connected to content before; rather, the term foregrounds the mediation of spectatorship by the integration of new technology. In the case of television reshaped by connected viewing, scholars are describing the ways a familiar technology is reshaped by the operation of newer frameworks that foreground interactivity and incorporate platforms beyond television.

In the case of live television, connected viewing begins to realize the interactivity originally invoked by Licklider's hope for narrowcast content. Ironically though, where these

[101] Holt, Jennifer, and Kevin Sanson. "Introduction: Mapping Connections," *Connected Viewing: Selling, Streaming, & Sharing Media in the Digital Age*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson (New York: Routledge, 2014).

trends have brought viewers into more direct connection with what they watch, it has not been a matter of audience empowerment or edification outright. If anything, the access to more connected content and the turn towards digital mediation has made audiences more traceable, more manipulable, and generally more enveloped by the media they consume. Michael Curitn's notion of *matrix media* invokes this[102], implying that audiences find themselves situated in an assemblage of platforms and technologies that both enhance their experience of watching while also extracting new things from them in terms of data and attention. Video game live streaming is particularly interesting as a part of this trend. Small scales of production mean that the data producers are responding to go beyond aggregate "big data," and instead might simply be a single comment, a shift in the pace of a chat conversation, or one large donation. One informant explains to me that he sees a noticeable dip in his audience on nights when television shows like *Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead* air, allowing him to read in real-time what kinds of media his stream is contending with. So while not completely distinct from TV content modified by new technology, as a formal assemblage it is productive to see the trend as more than just one kind of internet TV. What characterizes it are legacies of social media, internet forums, and video game cultures out of which the practice emerges. More, because of the micro-audiences some streamers reach, their productions are more focused or particular than even micro-scale television might aspire to be.

Genealogically, live streaming isn't born out of television. It also isn't simply an elaboration of YouTube and other early forms of internet video on demand. As a platform, Twitch is rooted in an early, life-blogging experiment that would eventually become Justin.tv. Formally, life-blogging combined live internet video, a live chat feed, and live

[102] Michael Curtin, "Matrix Media," 9-19.

broadcasts of people's daily lives—things like *Big Brother* and *An American Family.* Integral to this configuration, and particularly in terms of its more modern iterations, is the chat feed. This participatory space turns live streaming into more than simply watching. It provides a direct line of communication between viewers who may talk with each other or may talk directly to broadcasters themselves. The chatroom elements turn a live stream into something more than bare content. It becomes a hub or a place where viewers arrive and hang out. My informants talk about this in terms of community, friendships, and connection. They point out that a successful stream and channel growth generally depend on chat activity. Indeed, many of the strategies they deploy in the production of their content center on the audience in chat—from raffles, to donations, to the work of moderators, to widgets designed to extend chat functionality, even to the use of emojis. In short, live streaming is born digital and one of the more significant qualities it inherits from this background is the chatroom element[103].

Unlike television and digital media convergence, where viewers must be conditioned to engage in new ways with content and often see the second screen as a supplement to live programming, for video game live streaming, connectivity is built in. Rather than a supplement to viewership, interactivity across the producer-consumer divide is natural. Indeed, constitutive of the format. From a producer's perspective, an active chat gives streamers an immediate read of their audience. It provides a flow of activity against which streamers can engage and raises their profile for prospective audience members. All of this in addition to the prospect of direct support from audience members in the form of donations, monetary bids for a streamer's attention, or for audience recognition. For audiences, the chat

[103] Of course, television historically had elements like live studio audiences or segments that allowed viewers to call in, so the capacity for exchange and direct address existed. But, the centrality of the audience's position in live streaming and the way that the platform integrates the audience's presence into the front-facing elements of the broadcast make these significant changes.

space is also enabling. It provides a direct line to content producers. Chat also becomes a significant part of the cultural experience of watching Twitch. This is where viewers express their cultural capital in the Twitch ecosystem. It's a space of conversation, but also a space for memes, jokes, trolling, and harassment—all of which are largely circumscribed from other kinds of connected viewing. This is also a question of scale, for the majority of live streamers, audiences are fairly manageable. Many have moderators to assist with the management of chat. Usually this means fielding comments a streamer might not be able to and policing the things people are contributing. But even so, a significant part of a streamer's work is making sure that chat feels engaged and the stream's liveness is palpable. In short, streaming isn't about the primacy of the broadcast feed, but the apparatus formed out of the conjunction of these constitutive parts.

Because of this, where television is sustained by advertisers' bids for more or more specific markets, streaming operates on the management of attention and interaction in concentrated spaces. I find it useful to think of the connected viewing scenario instantiated by video game live streaming in terms of an *attention economy.* The term gets taken up in response to the proliferation of media content, out of marketing and advertising imperatives. Herbert A. Simon explains the attention economy in terms of scarcity in a media ecosystem characterized by the infinite reproducibility of media. If there exists a near endless wealth of information, what are the limits on its use? Simon suggests that where we think of information as resource, it's use also consumes certain limited resources. In this case, "it consumes the attention of its recipients." [104] This framework is particularly useful for thinking of advertising, marketing, and entertainment in a moment characterized by the

[104] Herbert A. Simon, "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World," *Computers, Communication, and the Public Interest*, ed. Martin Greenberger (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971) 41.

proliferation of media options all competing for overlapping demographics. *Wired Magazine*'s Kevin Kelly echoes this in characterizing the internet as a kind of infinite copy machine, where value comes from the addition of new, unreproducible intangibles—things that can't be copied but add value to content and in turn attract attention.[105] For television microcasting or slivercasting, it might mean identifying areas of programming that are unrepresented or attract viewers based on specificity. For connected viewing, it is about integrating technology into broadcast configurations in order to give watchers a sense of better control or interactivity. For live streaming, the management and exchange of attention becomes integral to the interactions of users and producers. Video game live streaming fills very particular niches for its viewers. Moreover, these viewers get direct lines of communication with content producers, meaning that they can trade their attention for streamer's attention. The marketplace of Twitch also sustains this; viewers subscribe and donate to channels to patronize their preferred producers and in turn expect to feel like a valued member of someone's community. In short, the lens of the attention economy serves as a productive way to explore the kinds of exchanges taking place across Twitch in terms of the immaterial economy of video game live streaming.

So much of the content on live streaming platforms is produced personally and for a very small scale audience. As a result, attention's value as a currency is made more palpable. Where broadcast television and narrowcasting can measure audience demographics in large scale, video game live streamers are able to read their audiences much more closely and directly. In one of my first informal interviews, TA describes the connections he makes with one of his regular viewers in terms of knowing that particular viewer's game taste's and

[105] Kevin Kelly, "Better Than Free," *Edge*. Feb, 5, 2008. Accessed 4/5/17. https://www.edge.org/conversation/better-than-free

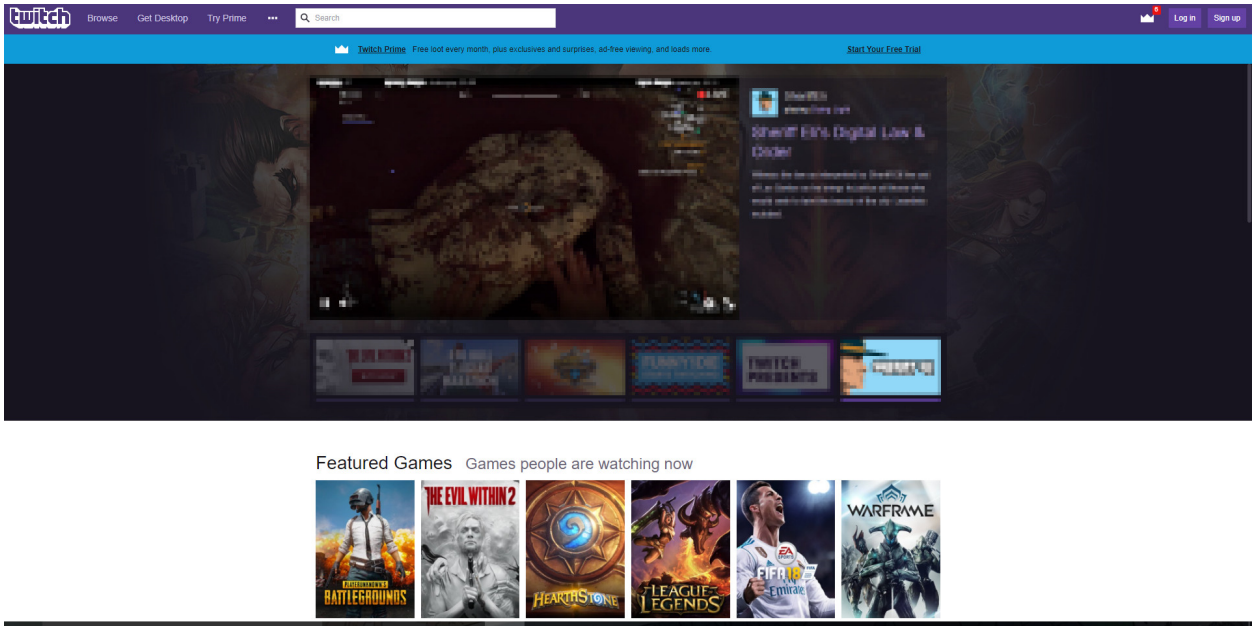
hobbies. He tells me he chats about soccer practice and offers advice about asking girls to school dances.[106] This also isn't exceptional. A number of my informants highlight the personal engagements they have with the people who watch them stream. RZ talks about knowing who individual viewers are and structuring the interactions he has or the advice he gives based on this knowledge. He also talks about playing games and completing quests in *Destiny* with his subscribers.[107] The point is that the nature of this kind of super small-scale production allows for more direct engagements between parties in the broadcaster-spectator relationship. More, that these engagements become a large part of the social and formal economies of the platform, as users and producers rely on attention to mediate the asymmetry of the broadcaster-spectator paradigm. This isn't to say friendships and connection are not authentic, but rather, because the economy of Twitch and other live streaming platforms depends so largely on attention, retention, and connection, these relationships become imbricated in the material economy of the platform as much as the social experience of broadcasting and watching.

On The Platform: The Form of a Live Stream

To appreciate these practices it is useful to understand the nature of the platform. The vast majority of my informants and generally, the vast majority of video game live streamers and their audiences, use Twitch.TV. Other platforms exist. The most notable are Hitbox, YouTube Gaming, and AfreecaTV. However, with the exception of AfreecaTV and YouTube Gaming's overlap with YouTube, both of which mix post-produced content and live content, all of the platforms are structured quite similarly, and thereby encourage fairly

[106] TA, Interview with the Author, Feb 26, 2016. Interview 13, Audio Transcript.
[107] RZ Interview with the Author, March 3, 2016. Interview 143, Audio Transcript.

similar productive strategies.[108] Liveness is the unifying feature here, as opposed to other video streaming services. On their front pages they feature content with broad appeal, with the intention of growing audiences for this content. They also feature directories of channels and games. The location and look of these directories varies by platform but all are arranged to give priority to producers or channels with the largest audiences. This means new viewers or those who are simply channel surfing are far more likely to see already popular streamers first, only finding new or small channels if they dig deep into a directory or select a game without many active streamers.



[Screenshot of Platform]

In this arrangement, the platform's liveness is a determining characteristic. What gets featured on landing pages and in directories are the most active live channels. The effect of

[108] Because the vast majority of my informants use Twitch.TV and because Twitch is something like the market standard for video game live streaming platforms, when I refer to streaming/streaming platforms I am talking specifically about Twitch. Generally though, these observations hold true for other platforms as well.

this is that as broadcasters start and end their streams, or as viewers move between content, channels will constantly move around within the hierarchy of these structures. It is useful to think of this in terms of the *flow* of these platforms. For Raymond Williams, live television engenders a kind of flow where viewers are moved from one element of content to the next in an arrangement that minimizes the disruption of ending one segment and starting the next.[109] Live streaming also enables this kind of strategic coordination, on the side of production— I mean productive practices adopted by content creators in order to manage, share, and direct their audience's attention; more on this in a moment. But in this case, the platform itself is also producing a kind of constant flow, one which is a mix of algorithm and active programming. On the main page of the platform curated content selected by Twitch staff is featured. Several of my informants have been selected to appear here (and this is how I found them). But within directories, algorithms take over this content management, shuffling channels up and down lists based on live viewership numbers. This always contingent arrangement of content reflects Herbert Zettl's notion that television's form and liveness is characterized by being always in process, "that each television frame is in a continual state of becoming."[110] Jane Feuer also adopts this framework in her discussion of liveness, arguing against the simplicity of *flow*, that the mediating technology of broadcast produces the notion of television's liveness rather than the majority of content actually being produced live.[111] In the case of live streaming, this mediating technology produces something beyond the experience of liveness—a different kind of flow which is less about moving viewers between programming and more about arranging programming for viewer's

[109] Williams, Raymond, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, (London: Fontana, 1974).
[110] Herbert Zettl, *Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics,* Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth, 1973, 263
[111] Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," *Regarding Television: Cultural Approaches – An Anthology,* ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: AFI, 1983).

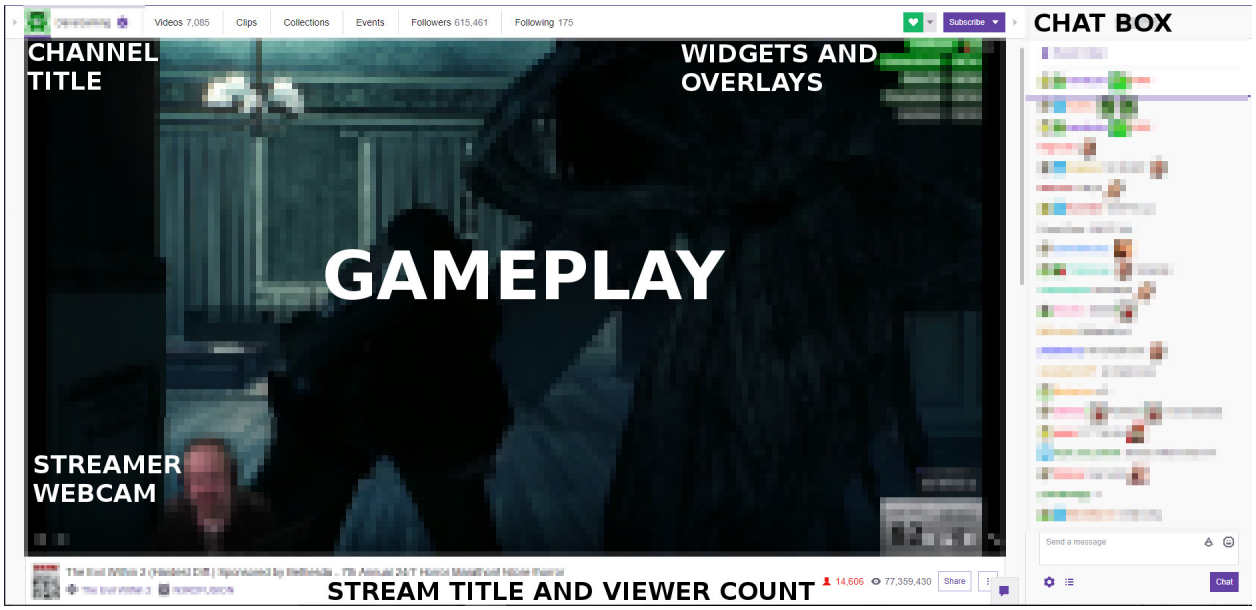
consumption. This particular shifting arrangement of content by popularity is the basis for the attention economy of Twitch and its peers. Flow in this instance is not simply an ideological feature, but part of the dialogical nature of microcast media that shapes structures of power and possibility on these platforms. In this sense, flow isn't something that viewers are simply subjected to, nor is it purely the effect of mediating technology. Flow is active and structures both sides of the sender/receiver dynamic.

Within this structure, the most popular streamers enjoy a kind of cultural capital specific to the platform. This is a form of capital which rooted in viewership numbers, or roundly, attention, and it is always contingent and shifting. As a function of these sorting mechanisms, a streamer's ability to attract, retain, and direct their audience becomes key to succeeding on these streaming platforms. This also means new streamers are placed in a very difficult position starting out, competing with established content producers with a greater share of viewership and a position of much greater visibility. AMF explains that for newcomers, "starting out is really hard. There are really talented people who get discouraged and quit and you'll never see them again."[112] The hope for these smaller streamers lies in the flow integral to Twitch as a platform. Viewers can leave a channel for any number of reasons, from boredom to a hostile chat environment. But also, with the exception of a few instances where channels try to stay live 24/7, usually through a rotation of streamers. Each broadcaster/channel is only active for a finite amount of time, creating windows where their viewers either tune out or migrate to watch something else.

In order to attract these viewers, broadcasters structure their individual channels and strategize about content in order to maximize their visibility and retention. The platform provides a number of forms through which this is possible. Beyond the landing page and

[112] AMF, Interview with the Author, Feb 2, 2016. Interview 7, Audio Transcript.

game directories, each broadcaster has their own page. This is what is referred to as their channel. A channel looks like a social media profile, populated by images, avatars, bios, schedules, PC specs, and descriptive information. It is also where viewers go to watch a streamer broadcast whenever they are live. When designing their channel, broadcasters present the look and context for their stream. This usually means branding their work in strategic ways. Some foreground the games that they play, others aim at an aesthetic that reflects their style or appeals to the audience they envision attracting. They can use it to link their other media profiles to their stream. Most use a combination of Twitter, Discord, Facebook, and Instagram to connect with their audiences. This page also contains links for donations, Amazon wish lists, and connections to stream teams or collectives they are a part of. On the page, viewers can choose to follow a streamer or, if a streamer has gotten partnership with Twitch, viewers can also subscribe (a monthly payment split between streamers and Twitch) in order to patronize a streamer and get some perks in return. Along the bottom, streamers can share videos of past broadcasts for viewers to watch on demand. Largely though, a channel page is fairly static, a monolith to a streamer's work, unless a broadcast is actually going on.



[Channel Interface]

During a live broadcast a channel looks and functions much more complexly and completely. Live video is central near the top of the screen and directly adjacent to this is the chat feed. This is where the majority of a streamer's energy is focused and where attention is managed most directly. Although the look of a broadcast can vary significantly, generally, the video feed mixes live footage of whatever game is featured with webcam video of the broadcaster. At least this is true of individual video game streamers. Large scale events and non-video game content have their own looks. The arrangement of video and images in the stream is complemented by overlays and widgets a streamer implements to extend the functionality and look of their broadcast. Widgets include things like chat notifications, subscriber/follower alerts, banners thanking recent donors, playlists, and a host of other tools for adding functionality or information to a stream. Overlays are static images that serve as borders to frame various objects on the screen or to post static images and art. With overlays, streamers are also able to feature information about their social media profiles, add

personal branding or sponsor information, and generally give the broadcast a consistent look. In thinking about how individual content producers market themselves and set their work apart from others on the platform, this use of complementary media allows them to make watching marginally more engaging, to highlight particular audience members for their support, and to give their channel a distinct flair.

Next to the video feed of the broadcast is the chat box. This is the formal characteristic that sets video game live streaming apart from other forms of spectator media. Chat turns a live stream from a static sender-receiver broadcast into an experience of community, interaction, and immediacy. Here, users talk among each other in the style of an often fast-moving chat room. But chat can also be the site of direct and indirect engagements between watchers and producers. Most of my informants foreground the importance of this interaction for their production. They explain that depending on the kind of stream you produce, your ability to engage with chat can make your channel feel more like a community. This is often simply a matter of viewers posting in chat and streamers responding to these comments. Or the reverse, a streamer posing a question and viewers weighing in. But the capacity for connection gets more nuanced than this; moderators might speak for streamers in chat. Streamers might read lines from the chat feed live over stream. Often they will thank people for donations, subscriptions, or follows singling out individuals for their participation. More than a site of dialogue, the chat itself is framed as a significant component of the media assemblage that is the live stream. Viewing a stream in full screen comes with the option of a *theater mode,* where both the video and chat are full-screened (as opposed to video only). From the broadcaster's perspective, there is also an option to view what Twitch terms broadcaster mode. In this arrangement, streamers see the live feed of their chat without a

redundant video feed. This allows broadcasters to monitor chat without dedicating screen space or bandwidth to live video. As a crucial formal component of live streaming, chat's symbolic, mediating, and material implementation gets rather complex, but at its most basic level, this is where live streaming feels most live. So, where Jane Feuer critiques television's liveness as often being more of a structural illusion than an actual transmission of produced-live footage, live streaming leans on it's liveness.[113] Or put another way, this liveness is an integral and essential part of the media configuration that is video game live streaming, and therefore the way content gets produced and the way play gets translated for streaming anticipates and works though this capacity for live interaction. In fact, I argue that this capacity for liveness and its deployment serves as a means to structure relationships between the various kinds of users on these platforms and to disavow structural inequities that persist in the sender-receiver relationship.

The chat box foregrounds connectivity, community, and liveness. In terms of the outward facing content produced in the course of a video game live stream, the chat function is what sets the medium apart from television, other microcast contexts, and even other video streaming platforms. As scholars of connected viewing have noted, the value-added from connecting viewers to programming encourages different kinds of affective and fannish engagements with media. We might think of this in terms of using companion sites to dialogue about a program. Or we might imagine it in terms of the investments viewers feel when they tweet about what they watch or when they vote for contestants on reality programs. For television though, all of this functionality is added after the fact, through connecting television's media form with newer media technology. In this respect, it changes the way users can engage around television, but it doesn't necessarily mark a shift in the

[113] Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television"

formal relationship between content and consumer or between sender and receiver. It also doesn't really change the core object that is the broadcast program. The speed with which this interactivity effects programming, if at all, is extremely slow compared to the immediacy of being able to directly address content producers. Think of the differences between American Idol votes via phones and speaking directly with a broadcaster. Twitch and other live streaming platforms are digital by nature and their interactive functions are deeply integrated into their media form. More than the mere act of transmitting video game play, or the immediacy of live content, it's the capacity to connect through the platform that marks video game live streaming as distinct. In this regard, we might see the chat box's proximity to the video feed of the live stream as a sign of its importance.

The usefulness of this chat function opens up a more direct, and some might argue, a more democratizing or at least dialogical connection between producer and consumer. But in actuality, there are a number of levels of communication it permits and they do not all function in the same way. One way to articulate this might be to distinguish between dialogues from user to user and dialogues between users and producers. We also might complicate this further by distinguishing user-user dialogue between parties with different kinds of power. Moderators, for example, occupy a higher position of authority than subscribers, who enjoy more privilege than regular followers. At the same time we might consider the kinds of interactions streamers are having with their audience. For example, is it organic conversation or is it a response to a donation, subscription, tip, or follow, as these kinds of interactions are more often instrumentalized than organic dialogue? Seen in this way, the chat occupies a very important role in the form of a live stream. It shapes the way liveness is experienced. And at the same time, becomes crucial to establishing the various

kinds of attention circulating in the attention economies of live streaming platforms, in effect, creating different, asymmetrical tiers of interaction. What I mean, is that in this form the kinds of inequities and power that exist in any economy, get played out. Users can connect with each other on sometimes equal footing. But engaging with producers exercises a structurally different kind of exchange. Interestingly though, this isn't as simple as viewers wanting attention and streamers giving it out. Rather, it is more exact to think of it in terms of the value of this exchange for each party. For instance, a large streamer with a significant audience has less need for an individual user's comment, subscription, or donation, but getting this kind of attention directly within a pool of hundreds or thousands of viewers might be particularly meaningful for an individual. However, for a small streamer working to build a following, a viewer showing them attention could be a significant moment, even if that viewer is only channel surfing. Of course, chat isn't the only infrastructural space in which this kind of exchange happens. And much of the brokering of attention and audience takes place not between streamers and their viewer base, but between different streamers as they arrange ways to manage and direct viewership.

The unifying significance of these exchanges are their effect on community. The presence of chat and the ability to dialogue with streamers and other viewers creates a sense of shared place around which communities can form. To support this, Twitch allows users to follow each other and to subscribe[114] to channels that have a partnership with the platform. The value of this is users then see when channels they follow are live or about to go live, making them much more likely to return. Because Twitch's directory system privileges the most active live channels, this capacity to follow and join a community for a particular

[114] A subscription costs $5, monthly and is split between the streamer and Twitch. Whereas a follow is free. With subscriptions, tips, cheers, and donations, you move from attention traded for attention to a kind of patronage.

streamer makes it so that each time a streamer begins a broadcast they aren't simply starting from scratch. While a follow certainly isn't guaranteed when a viewer lands on a stream, if a streamer is able to entice them to stay and to follow either through the quality of their content or by engaging them in chat then they increase the likelihood the viewer will want to become a part of their community. This creates a kind of exchange around attention where streamers try to gather audiences by appealing to their interests or otherwise engaging with them directly through chat. For many streamers this kind of exchange is sufficient, a kind of altruistic sharing economy around the attention as a transaction.

But the platform also permits more material transactions, a system of patronage. The most integral in the partnership system. For streamers this is often a major goal and many of my informants talk about struggling to reach the requisite viewer count to apply for partnership. Twitch has suggested this means averaging roughly 500 concurrent viewers over several broadcasts to be considered for partnership, but a number of my informants suggest that this is often not quite the case, citing examples of streamers who have gotten partnership with less. The ambiguity of the process means many streamers see themselves as being ready for partnership which puts them into this process of repeatedly applying to Twitch for partnership, getting turned down, and then making adjustments to their broadcast in order to try again. The reason partnership is so appealing is it marks a major shift in a streamers relationship to the platform. It comes with a number of benefits. Technical tools like transcoding[115] and the ability for users to adjust stream quality get rolled out to partnered streamers long before they get implemented widely. Partnership also opens up opportunity for more platform support and more chat functions, like channel specific emojis. Most

[115] Transcoding allows the platform to decompress and recompress video to meet the needs of end user. It makes streaming video much more adaptable, by changing bitrates and encoding.

significantly though, partnership means streamers share advertising revenue generated by their channel and any subscriptions their audience buys.

Attracting Audience and Attention

As our interview gets underway I ask iiN about his *followers,* the regular viewer base for a channel on Twitch. Although it is a question I ask each of my informants, iiN's response stands out. He explains that they aren't followers, they're family and, whether I know it or not, I'm also a part of this family now.[116] It's a significant semantic gesture that begins to encapsulate the work of producing a successful Twitch stream. iiN's enthusiasm belies something vital and complicated about the work of live streaming: a community-building imperative hardwired into the platform and integral to the labor of a Twitch broadcaster. It's not as if it feels forced or insincere. In fact, he refers to his community in this way throughout our interview, in his regular communication with his channel, and its language adopted by the consortium of streamers he belongs to, A/D. His teammate AMF refers to his followers in the same way. It foregrounds what makes live streaming unique; that the scale of production permits very personal connections between broadcasters and their audiences. Actually, the nature of this kind of production makes drawing lines between authentic connections and instrumentalized audience management impossible to parse. That is, the nature of media making on this scale and the types of interactions happening across this platform often mean the asymmetry of broadcaster-spectator relationships exist simultaneously and inseparably with an authentic and earnest sense of community and belonging. In this paper I argue that the labor of video game live streaming involves mediating this tension and devising ways to

[116] iiN, Interview with the Author, Jan 27, 2016. Interview 4, Audio Transcript.

think and act as both producers *and* community members, friends, or family.

As a late entry into trends in narrowcasting, microcasting, or slivercasting, video game live streaming has come to exist in a marketplace or productive environment where the majority of content creators are trying to reach audiences in the tens, hundreds, and thousands, with only the most successful individual streamers reaching concurrent audiences larger than that. This is meager in comparison to broadcast television where prime time programs on the major American networks can reach anywhere between 3 and 15 million viewers. That isn't to say that numbers that might rival a smaller cable network or even prime TV aren't possible over platforms like Twitch. At the time of writing, major competitive events had drawn audiences clearing one million concurrent viewers (with one claiming nearly 15 million).[117] But these kinds of events are exceptional and operate on a different productive framework which I discuss more fully in a subsequent chapter. Some individuals also manage to draw exceptional numbers for viewership. Again, at the time of writing, the record concurrent viewership for an individual was just over 200,000 spectators.[118] But like esport events, these are outliers more than an indication of the kind of labor Twitch users in the majority are doing and the kind of attention they are drawing.

To try to generalize across this scale is counterproductive. While records are indicative of the reach and potential of the platform—more so, as most happened within the last half a year of Twitch's relatively short history—they don't actually encapsulate the larger

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[117] Leo Howell, "League of Legends Hosts 14.7 Million Concurrent Viewers During Worlds," *Espn,* Dec 6, 2016. Accessed 4/24/17. http://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/id/18221739/2016-league-legends-world-championship-numbers; "New Twitch Rankings: Top Games by Esports and Total Viewing Hours," *Newzoo,* Jul 14, 2016. Accessed 4/25/2017, "https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/new-Twitch-rankings-top-games-esports-total-viewing-hours/; Ella McConell, "ESL One Cologne 2015 the World's Biggest and Most Watched Counter-Strike: Global Offensive Event to Date!," *ESL,* Aug 28,2015. Accessed 4/25/17. https://www.eslgaming.com/news/esl-one-cologne-2015-worlds-biggest-and-most-watched-counter-strike-global-offensive-event-date-2256

[118] Xing Li, "Faker Finally Started Streaming on Twitch," *Dot Esports,* Feb 6, 2016, Accessed 4/25/17 https://dotesports.com/league-of-legends/faker-Twitch-stream-channel-4644

body of content shared on the site. The success of these events hinges on their appeal to broad swaths of Twitch's audience, usually around the games that are already the most popular. If anything, they are complemented by the work of players who produce content in more regular and sustained ways. Record setting events on this platform happen at a rate of several per year, with more mundane competitions held weekly or monthly depending on the game in question. The vast majority of content on Twitch is produced by individuals, streaming regularly, at a rate of roughly two million users broadcasting per month.[119] For these kinds of users, the Twitch ecosystem is markedly different. Large-scale events operate on an industrial model more in line with sport or television. They are sustained by revenue from subscribers, advertising, ticketing, and the synergistic promotional value attached to whatever game is being featured. For the small-scale streamer, overhead is much lower. This generally includes the initial setup cost (which is not negligible), the price of games or game service subscriptions, any ancillary money fed into the production of a stream (more on this shortly), and the time it takes to stream. To cover these costs, an individual only needs an audience that is consistently in the hundreds and actively interested in patronizing their work. Moreover, because the cost of entry is so low, many produce content without the goal of actually monetizing their work.

Assuming a streamer is interested in supporting their production through monetization rather than incurring the full cost of equipment, games, and time themselves, the routes to profitability are shaped by the small scale of these broadcasts and the size of audiences. Because revenue sources for streamers are multiple and variable, and because overhead is also contingent on several factors, it is difficult to say definitively what exactly it takes to make a stream solvent. What *is* consistent is revenue depends significantly on an

[119] "The 2015 Retrospective," *Twitch.* Accessed 4/25/17. https://www.Twitch.tv/year/2015

audience's relationship to a broadcaster and vice versa. Where broadcast television has historically been a vehicle for advertising, and cable is a mix of advertising and subscription, streaming depends largely on subscription and other kinds of patronage. Although some streamers receive revenue from ads and other sponsorships, most of my informants report that the major source of their income comes from audience donations—an integral part of Twitch's attention economy—and from subscriptions which grant streamers a share of ad revenue in addition to a share of monthly payments made by dedicated audience members. This is doubly significant. It suggests a trend away from advertising in the traditional sense as the raison d'etre for live content. It also makes the work of streaming more literally about community building than about broad appeal or mass entertainment. In short, streamers are positioned to prioritize deep engagements with their viewers. Engagements that feel more meaningful, participatory, and consistent. This keeps users coming back. It keeps them present during a broadcast and as the economy of the platform moves in the direction of active patronage, as opposed to numbers of passive eyeballs pointed at a screen, it makes affective connections between broadcaster and spectator a bigger incentive than bare quantity.

Of course, as I note in the previous chapter, my informants cite a number of rationales for streaming and many don't see it primarily as a matter of profitability (and the nature of its attention economy actually discourages a direct address of any economic imperatives). The idea of producing video game live streaming as a mode of employment or income is tantalizing for many, but they also report on the value of social connection, creative outlet, and fun, as reasons to stream. This, though, is the nature of the platform. Whether a streamer is looking to build a community or hoping to sustain themselves through this labor, the routes

to these things are generally quite similar. Within an attention economy as media choices proliferate, the efficacy of content is measured by its ability to command attention. So whether streamers want a community of friends to connect with, an audience to support their production, or simply to be visible in a particular game directory, the platform makes all routes to this equally dependent on attention and popularity. Moreover, this means all streamers are broadly working towards the same general goal of developing an audience, raising their profile on the platform, and leveraging their skills or personality to reach a bigger audience.

Like other streaming media platforms, from YouTube to Netflix, Twitch arranges content so viewers are able to find the streamers or events that are most likely to appeal to them. The interface employs a number of routes through which someone might do this. A search bar lets you find channels or games by name. Directories sort channels based on what content a streamer is focusing on. Primarily this is structured by game, but there is also a constantly growing set of directories for *creative*, *talk shows*, *poker, cooking,* and a range of other activities that don't boil down to video game play. Users can also search by communities or find *stream teams*. And Twitch itself always has a curated selection of five channels on its landing page which generally feature events, talk shows, or a featured partnered streamer. In every case, except for searching for someone directly, the site's suggestions are sorted by popularity. The directory of games is arranged by popularity; within a game directory streamers are sorted by their number of concurrent viewers. Events and streamers on the front page are also curated based on popularity or otherwise put there through Twitch's partnership program to raise their visibility.

This structure introduces a kind of schizophrenic set of demands on the work

streamers do. They must at once work to form relationships that feel deep and meaningful, but also must instrumentalize these relationships in order to grow and attract new viewers. This dual demand is an interesting constraint which produces patterns of production unique to video game live streaming. Streamers are positioned to think effectively and strategically in relationship to their audience and implement strategies capitalizing on Twitch's unique infrastructure. In comparison to television and other forms of spectator media, the practices implemented by streamers resemble flow and other types of marketing strategies implemented in live television, but also invent new kinds of productive practice that elaborates and extends beyond the limitations of live TV by returning to direct address. They also develop innovative ways to work within the constraints of the platform, whether they are working to stream professionally or socially.

The individual content producers on Twitch engage with this infrastructure and each brings a slightly different set of skills, qualities, and constraints to their production. As an effect of this, streamers develop deeply personalized strategies for negotiating the dual imperatives of growing an audience and connecting with this audience. Raymond Williams famously posed the concept f*low* as a way to think about broadcast television programming adapted to the temporal form of the medium, moving away for a string of discrete programs towards a calculated stream of advertisements, promotional preview segments, and program content, with the goal of keeping audiences engaged.[120] Live streamers on Twitch are engaged in a similar process of strategic programming and performance that is deeply attuned to the particular form and constraints of their medium. Interestingly, because the production of a stream is highly personalized, the variation among these approaches is rather striking. Some streamers talk about prioritizing a dialogue with their viewers, some talk

[120] Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, (London: Fontana, 1974).

about strategically scheduling their broadcasts, others talk about the implementation of social media as a way of extending the community space they create when they stream. They talk about cooperating with other broadcasters to create informal kinds of programming flow. The ways these practices get implemented are highly variable but there are a number of key consistencies among them. First, they are closely connected to the technical and structural form of the platform, from the general infrastructure of Twitch's search and directory system, to the particular tools and capabilities enabled by live streaming technology. Second, they all reflect the imperatives of the attention economy. Among the productive practices deployed by streamers, all center on structuring content that attracts viewers, deepens their investment, and encourages their support (either by being present or by becoming part of the monetary infrastructure that sustains a streamer). Third and finally, in this management of attention they reflect the tensions of their position, a need to be available as a community leader, but also the need to instrumentalize viewership for the sake of this attention economy.

On Producing: Attention

Producing content on Twitch means devising strategies to manage attention and directly manipulate audiences. However, the platform's formal structure—a combination of live video and chatroom, as well as its micro-scale audience that each channel commands—means the strategies broadcasters develop to do this must straddle a thin line, instrumentalizing their audience while at the same time fostering a community and giving their viewers a sense of access and investment. This isn't exclusive to live streaming. Scholars have addressed the tension between instrumentality and authenticity in streaming

media broadly, especially around forms participatory culture[121]. Much of this research centers on YouTube celebrities video blogging in fashion and makeup, although as live streaming has grown in popularity, scholars are making similar observations about the production of authenticity on these platforms as well. Mark Johnson and Jamie Woodcock outline the labor of streamers trying to make careers out of video game live streaming, focusing on the aspirational elements of this production. (Johnson and Woodcock 2017) Approaching the phenomenon from the other side, Max Sjoblom and Juho Hamari study user motivations for watching and patronizing Twitch streams, finding that affective motivators are strong predictors of viewers support.[122] All of this suggests that authenticity, and particularly an authentic experience of community, serve as the backbone for media-making on this scale.

Community is a big part of the video game live streaming ethos. Twitch itself champions the term, using it to refer both to the discrete audiences each channel commands and also to the entire user base for the platform. Community is a buzzword for the platform. At the first TwitchCon in 2015—a major event for broadcasters and fans of the platform—community served as the raison d'etre for the gathering. It was a topic of panels, the object of nightly events, and to cement this point, as the first recognition at the Hall of Fame Awards

[121] Jean E. Burgess and Joshua B. Green,"The Entrepreneurial Vlogger: Participatory Culture Beyond the Professional-Amateur Divide," *The YouTube Reader*, eds. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009) 89–107.; Brooke Erin Duffy, "The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspirational Labour in the Digital Culture Industries," *International Journal of Cultural Studies,* 19.4, (2016) 441– 457; Florencia García-Rapp, "'Come Join and Let's BOND': Authenticity and Legitimacy Building on YouTube's Beauty Community," Journal of Media Practice, 18:2-3, (2017) 120-13.; Alice Marwick, "They're Really Profound Women, They're Entrepreneurs": Conceptions of Authenticity in Fashion Blogging" Presented at the 7th International AIII Conference on Weblogs and Social Media (ICWSM), July 8, 2013, Cambridge, MA.; Andrew Tolson, "A New Authenticity? Communicative Practices on YouTube." *Critical Discourse Studies* 74 (2010), 277–289.

[122] Max Sjoblom and Juho Hamari, "Why Do People Watch Others Play Video Games? An Empirical Study on the Motivations of Twitch Users," *Computers in Human Behavior* 75 (2018), 985-996.

event, Twitch acknowledged "The Community" for cultural achievement.[123] This emphasis on community makes it difficult for broadcasters to be upfront about their tactics for audience management without alienating fans. A number of my informants reiterate this point to me. As one puts it, "Its weird, you can't be a sellout, but you also have to kind of be a sellout in a way, or you have to think about it."[124]

Mediating this tension becomes one of the major labors of a video game live streamer. Given the personal nature of this kind of production, it is useful to explore the particular practices they describe. One way of dividing these up is to think about how streamers strategize in relationship to their communities of viewers. Then how they operate above and outside of their audiences, either in relationship to other streamers or in relationship to the platform itself. I would first like to gesture to the ways streamers coordinate with peers and structure their presence on the platform, which I read in terms of a kind of grassroots flow. Next, I will focus more directly on the kinds of relationships they cultivate with their audiences as a point of comparison.

Among streamers, the production of a channel and the implementation of strategies meant to manipulate audience behavior is fairly transparent. Streamers discuss their relationships to each other in terms of professional connections. This doesn't preclude friendship, but permits much more straightforward discussions of tactics for audience management, coordination, and flow. The most obvious examples of this are hosts and raids. To host, means using your channel while you are offline to broadcast someone else's stream. When hosting, your regulars see this other streamer's broadcast when they come to your channel. It is a capability built directly into the platform. A broadcaster can set up a list of

[123] The recognition came complete with a plaque commemorating the achievement given to an audience member selected from the crowd at random.
[124] GPB, Interview with the Author, Feb 17, 2016. Interview 10, Audio Transcript.

streamers to host automatically while they are offline. Raid's are marginally more active. They involve asking viewers to visit another channel and usually spam messages in that channel's chat. Both of these tactics are mutually beneficial, allowing both streamers involved to share exposure, form networks, and exchange their capital (in the form of attention) with their peers. They are part of a give-and-take among content producers on Twitch.

A variety streamer with a small but solid following, AMF explains how sharing among streamers works,

> "I have streamers that come into the chat, and if I find out they stream I try to show them as much love as I can. Send my family over to them. I remember when I started. If you have no one in your chat you're trying to be really active and talk, so if someone does come they're not bored and they'll stay. If I can send them 15 of my viewers it makes it so much easier."[125]

The ability to share an audience, even if it is small, is a significant gesture among streamers. It allows established broadcasters to lend their audiences to other streamers who might be trying to grow their profiles while also building professional networks. Because so much of the platform's sorting and arrangement of channels depends on viewership numbers, the addition of even a few viewers can lift a channel into a significantly higher position of visibility. The act of lending viewers also sets up a back and forth exchange between streamers. The idea is that this kind of support gets reciprocated, or at minimum, passed along to other broadcasters in turn. A number of my informants reflect on their relationships to other broadcasters in terms of how they navigate these kinds of connections and how different approaches to this exchange reveal a broadcaster's community-mindedness. As

[125] AMF, Interview with the Author, Feb 2, 2016. Interview 7, Audio Transcript.

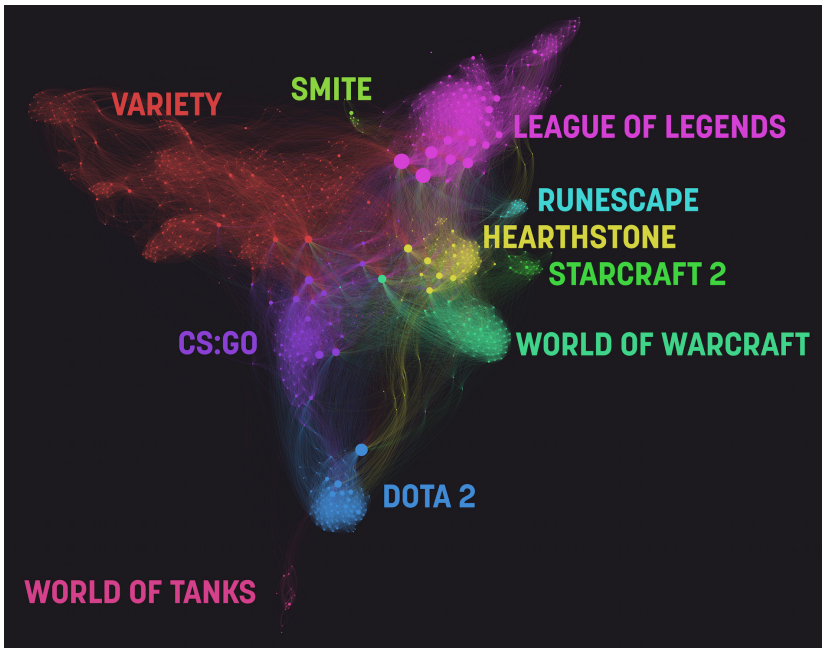
AMF explains,

> "There are a lot of people who are really excited to get hosts and get raided, and they definitely try to turn around and give back to you. And then there are people who do the opposite. They want what you have and don't want to give it back."[126]

In Twitch's attention economy, viewers in aggregate are a vital commodity. And in sharing viewers, you run the risk of diluting your base or losing them to other streamers who share your time slot or stream similar content. In this respect, the give-and-take becomes very important. Streamers treat this exchange very seriously.

The upshot is that this kind of sharing can form the basis for networks between streamers and their audiences. For viewers it signals that two channels share an affinity, as part of a network, through connections between streamers themselves, similar games/content, or styles of broadcasting. Twitch's own analytics show users tend to stay close to the broadcasters they know and games they like, so signaling these points of contact can be a way to circumvent the kinds of search tools built into the platform that are based only on audience numbers.[127]

[126] Ibid.
[127] Danny Hernandez, "Recently Watched: A Data Story," *Twitch Data Science Blog*, Nov 3, 2015. Accessed 4//25/17. https://blog.Twitch.tv/recently-watched-a-data-story-c7bab40f30b4



[Map of Twitch Ccommunities][128]

For broadcasters, forming these relationships can be a very significant part of building a following. Audience sharing among a group of streamers means everyone involved can build on any success in the group. It also gives broadcasters the capacity to cover much more ground, adding new game communities, and new time slots to their professional networks. KRG, a variety streamer who was an early adopter of the platform says,

> "I know some people try to network. So it will be like, 'Hey, I stream at this time, and I know you usually finish at this time, so maybe we could hook it up where you like host my channel.' I know a lot of small streamers try to use it to help each other out."[129]

[128] Elliot Starr, "Visual Mapping of Twitch and Our Communities, 'Cause Science!'" *Twitch Data Science Blog*, Feb 4, 2015. Accessed 4//25/17. https://blog.Twitch.tv/visual-mapping-of-Twitch-and-our-communities-cause-science-2f5ad212c3da

[129] KRG, Interview with the Author, Jan 26, 2016. Interview 3, Audio Transcript.

The efficacy of these tactics means that in addition to hosts and raids, many streamers participate in formalized collectives called teams, where they agree to promote and host each other. Some even go as far as coordinating their schedules in order to create a kind of ersatz flow. KRG explains,

> "I'm part of a few teams, and one of the teams I'm on, I've noticed that a lot of the people on that team will try to help each other and vice versa, so I'll try to host their stream or shout them out and stuff like that."[130]

Stream teams elaborate on more informal uses of hosts and raids and seek to turn these things into the basis for a kind of network coordination. There are a number of ways this gets implemented. Channels feature links to team pages which list all of the active streamers on that team. Twitch's auto-hosting allows broadcasters to select channels to host automatically while they are offline. Like channels' teams often invoke similar theme's, aesthetics, or principles that unify their look. What is significant in all of this is the depth of consideration going into these configurations. While the platform introduces some of the capacity for the implementation of broadcaster networks, the actual coordination between channels is spearheaded by streamers themselves.

GPB reflects on the way teams leverage streamer networks to manage an audience and maximize viewership against the platform's bare emphasis on viewership numbers and directory sorting. He explains how programming works within his stream team,

> "A few streamers can make other streamers success if that makes any sense. We've gone to the point where you formalize it as a team, like The Grind, where we look to just kind of promote each other over and over and over again. We keep people in these 24-hour traps where they can't leave us. You host one guy to host one guy to

[130] Ibid. KRG.

host one guy and he hosts the original guy again."[131]

For streamers, this kind of organization is encouraged. It is a distinctly grassroots kind of arrangement, but what emerges out of it is a reflexiveness about programming and about the demands of the attention marketplace particular to Twitch. At its most sophisticated, it aspires to be like TV. GPB recognizes that his goal of a stream team—that can carry an audience for 24-hour cycles—is a lot like TV where networks program content 24-hours-a-day. But it's also about providing a space for this audience to congregate and engage with familiar content, peers, and broadcasters.

In developing their programming relative to the platform and in relationship to other broadcasters, video game live streamers reflect deeply on the nature of their work. Because they are operating in a post-network broadcasting environment where audience behavior is made more unpredictable and all the more important to understand, streamers learn to account for everything from the duration of their streams, to the games they feature, to the ways this media environment intersects with other markets like television or game publishing. These producers take on the task of programming themselves in a way that reflects their understanding of their communities as audiences, in aggregate. These strategies emerge out of reflexive understandings of their work accumulated through their connections with other streamers, trial and error, and ultimately, a very close relationship with their core viewership. Although the platform provides some analytics about viewership, the live and interactive elements of producing a stream provide much more direct insight about viewership. My informants refer primarily to their own experiences and received knowledge when they reflect on their broadcasting practice.

As Mark Andejevic and Hye Jin Lee note in regard to connected viewing contexts,

[131] Ibid. GPB

the immediacy of interactive broadcasting creates much tighter feedback loops, which for streamers produce on-the-job insights about the efficacy of their tactics.[132] For example, KRG reflects on how he senses his audience change based on when he streams.

> "If you're streaming at noon one day and then 7 p.m., you're not going to see your channel grow the way you want it to. What happens is at noon you might be reaching a European audience but if you stream at 7 p.m. you're reaching a US audience. You won't see a lot of the people from noon at 7 p.m. When you stream you want to have a set time when you start."[133]

The connection he shares with his audience gives him an immediate read on demographics. Knowing who is watching at certain times of day lets KRG begin to develop a strategy with the intention of maximizing return on the time and energy he dedicates to streaming, in this case, setting a consistent start time to promote return viewership. Indeed, live feedback and direct insight comes through frequently in my informants' accounts of streaming. LG, who started out playing the open world construction game, *Minecraft,* makes a similar assertion about the ways audiences respond to games a broadcaster features. A variety streamer, meaning he plays a number of games rather than focusing on one, LG finds that his audience has particular tastes based on an intersection of his play style and their media prefrences. Selecting games to feature elicits palpable reactions from his followers, over time he is able to tailor his selection to what they like and don't like.[134] Much like setting consistent times to broadcast, LG and other variety streamers have learned through their production practice to anticipate their audiences' tastes and program themselves to account for these demands. Game live streaming's feedback loop accelerates demography and audience management

[132] Ibid. Andrejevic and Lee.
[133] KRG, Interview with the Author
[134] LG, Interview with the Author, Jan 25, 2016. Interview 2, Audio Transcript.

native to older modes of media transmission, making what works and what doesn't work immediately apparent to streamers and in turn making the entire media apparatus much more reactive on both ends.

This facilitates media production catering to the demands of users directly. Broadcasters are able to adjust their practice on the fly and deliver a personalized, even personal, experience of media watching. From the side of production this is enabling. Broadcasters see which tactics work and are immediately able to leverage this to build an audience. Broadly, what streamers find users demand is more of this personal touch, not simply media catering to their schedules and tastes, but which hails them directly. When my informants talk about the feedback they get and the strategies they devise, what they return to, invariably, is a leveraging of their attention and availability on stream to produce an experience of media watching that gives viewers something television can't: a media production that responds directly to them. The feedback loop of Twitch's attention economy reinforces this.

As it turns out, what users seem to want most in this ecosystem is connection to streamers and to feel as though their presence matters to a streamer or to the community of watchers in a channel. What broadcasters find is chat matters and managing a viewer's sense of engagement and community produces feedback and material returns that reinforce the appeal of the platform's personal elements. BRBQ, a pretty macho streamer who mostly plays the Zombie survival game Day Z explains,

> "I get a lot of feedback now about how I interact with my chat. They're like, 'Dude, no other broadcaster talks as much to their chat as you.' Every Monday I'm on the front page of Twitch for two hours, so every Monday I have 1400 viewers in there

> and I'm actually talking and keeping up with the chat. They are really impressed with that, but that's because my chat is going to come before the game. My gameplay is going to get sacrificed to talk to chat, but that's the point of Twitch: people like to chat."[135]

In chat, streaming becomes more than bare watching; prioritizing this space of production and engagement deepens the sense of community viewers experience. There are a host of ways broadcasters supplement this. Chat bots and moderators can help field chat comments by filtering out trolls, spam, and offensive content, but also by picking up the slack when chat gets too hectic and engaging with viewers by answering questions or keeping conversation moving. Other tactics include extending the functionality of chat to enable betting, to host raffles, to allow viewers to vote on playlists, and a whole host of other tactics. But ultimately, it is the experience of direct engagement and the sense of place—the channel as a community destination—that ultimately sells a stream to viewers.

In this respect, broadcasting over Twitch means developing practices that expand an audience's sense of immediacy and belonging, and programming in a way that blends the boundaries between broadcast content and other kinds of access. One way to acknowledge that community doesn't end at the end of a broadcast is creating ways for viewers to continue to engage after a stream stops. Social media platforms are a powerful tool for this. Most streamers intent on building their following look to keep their community "always on" by using external platforms to extend the ways viewers can engage. Twitter is popular for this, as a way to share updates and communicate broadly with an audience. Many of my informants use it to share updates about their channels and announce when they are about to go live. It also serves as an off-platform space to coordinate with other streamers. I relied

[135] BRBQ, Interview with the Author, Feb 17, 2016. Interview 11, Audio Transcript.

heavily on these networks to build connections with streamers, finding that a few contacts in certain communities made interviews easier to lock down once I was integrated into these networks. Another extremely popular platform for this kind of connection is Discord. Originally a workaround for *Skype* vulnerabilities, many streamers use it to keep their communities active while their channel is offline. By moving your chat to Discord, the relationships users form in chat can carry on with or without the streamer always being present. AMF explains its appeal.

> "When you get on Discord you are plugged in. You can turn off the stream, you can turn off notifications. But with Discord, if you come in and if you like my stream and join my community, it's always on. You are part of my life, I'm part of yours, and so is everybody else. There are always people talking in my Discord, sharing memes, videos. Every morning I wake up and somebody has said 'Good morning' and started the conversation."[136]

Social media extends the sense of community and immediacy streaming audiences are built around. While the platform itself already embodies connected viewing in the sense that viewers are simultaneously engaged with watching and chat, the implementation of secondary platforms and services deepen the experience of this community. What AMF describes is a community persistent and consistent beyond the broadcast of a live stream. This allows viewers to form relationships with each other around a streamer or a channel, without necessarily needing a broadcaster to be always present to moderate. This makes community feel more authentic and dependable. Ironically though, this is also what makes it marketable: users investments make them more manageable and allow streamers to use their audiences more effectively.

[136] AMF, Interview with the Author.

The alternate view of this autonomous community—built on a deep connection transcending the streamer or the channel—would see community as still fully imbricated in Twitch's market forces. Socially invested viewers are much more valuable than casual watchers, both for streamers and for the platform broadly. This is where the ambiguity and duplicity of the platform's personal imperative is most pronounced. GPB explains Discord in a way which refocuses the line between authentic community and a managed audience.

> "I have you for 7 hours a day, but if I get off of my stream and still occupy you for another 4 hours a day, I can monopolize your entertainment. And your entertainment dollars and your time. That's where you're going from a fan to a super fan. As a streamer, you make your living off a dedicated few."[137]

This isn't to say community is inauthentic, but that community building as an imperative is dualistic within Twitch's infrastructure. It is both a matter of cultivating a space of belonging and cultivating an audience that can be managed and used – either to network with other streamers or to become visible on stream. The dedicated few that GBP describes are more likely to participate in raids, are more likely to be ambassadors for a streamer in another channel, and are more likely to support a stream through tips, donations, and subscriptions. In this framework a healthy community is also a stable base upon which the kinds of attention and market capital innate to Twitch can be cultivated. The work of leading these communities, even if it's altruistic, is encouraged by the platform. To relate to other streamers and to attract more viewers, a broadcaster has to think both strategically and affectively, and at times the distinctions between these imperatives are even unclear to producers. What audiences want is more connection and more attention, which is what these tactics in audience management provide; they downplay the asymmetry of marketplace frameworks by

[137] GBP, Interview with the Author.

emphasizing the experience of personalized production.

As personal as this kind of understanding and connection are, these tactics turn viewers back into an aggregated mass audience, at least for the sake of management. So, in order to leverage the capital their follower or viewer base represents, broadcasters have to be able to think of their work as a matter of managing, more than simply relating to their viewers. It reflects the depth of their thinking about the platform and their production, and a maximization of their work. Interestingly though, it's an ethos at odds with the kind of personal performance adapted to streaming for an audience. Because streamers must oscillate between managing and connecting to their audiences, it is not uncommon for their work to become internally conflicted.

While strategies for managing audiences are a crucial part of streamers' own self reflection and a core component of their relationships to each other, naming and addressing these tactics and goals with an audience is verboten for streamers. They express a fear that foregrounding the ways audiences figure into Twitch's marketplace would alienate their core viewership. This introduces an incompatibility in the work these broadcasters do. It’s one which complicates their relationships to their audiences but also their conception of themselves. The platform, the performance, and para-platforms of live streaming are organized around the ideals of transparency, immediacy, and personalization in the name of turning audiences into communities. But streamers are positioned to also hold this at a distance, meaning the kinds of community connections they do make are always at some level complicated by the market imperatives of the platform.

Dracula, a channel moderator I interviewed, puts this most succinctly.

“It is interesting to see how connected people will get to a streamer. It's such a narrow

> window they will tune in for: four or eight hours or whatever it is for the day. But whatever it is, they will feel extremely personal, almost even a two-sided connection with someone they don't even know."[138]

Dracula is addressing a disconnect between the persona an audience perceives and the reality of a streamer's life. Within this marketplace, the reflexivity streamers deploy when connecting with each other is not shared with viewers. If anything, it turns the personalization of a stream into a core commodity, one which effaces the other side of the dynamic. Audiences are positioned to want more access and streamers are encouraged to adopt tactics that produce a sense of this access. The effect is a confusion of the distinctions between broadcasters and their communities. Dracula's point is that at a certain scale community become more of a performance or an alibi than an actual fact.

What Dracula and others recognize is that as the scale of consumption grows producers are forced into confronting the performance and limitations of personalization. The aesthetic of community positions viewers to desire more access and the nature of this attention economy encourages streamers to share even the most private and intimate parts of their lives. Informants tell me about how they cover their breakups on stream, how viewers can see into their domestic lives, and how communities come together to help them rebuild after they leave abusive spouses or have to move back in with their parents. And for both sides of this media assemblage, these things feel real and meaningful. Streamers are encouraged to open themselves up to their audiences and in turn, audiences are conditioned to think of the connections they share in terms of depth and authenticity.

I met Dracula through DRBRO, whose experience emphasizes the limitation to community. DRBRO has succeeded in a way many of my other informants aspire to. Indeed,

[138] Dracula, Interview with the Author, March 15, 2016. Interview 19, Audio Transcript.

among the *Destiny* streamers I interviewed his name comes up as paragon of the community, a streamer who has been producing content for a long time (in the world of game streams) and has found significant success on Twitch. In the process of streaming across the lifespans of several titles DRBRO has built a community by straddling the line between personalization and professionalization, and he is positioned to reflect on the limits of community. Dracula and DRBRO are confronting an advanced structural limitation on this kind of production: the difficulty of feeling like a community member when you're community is so large.

As audiences grow, the nature of a community changes and streamers encounter material limitations to the depth of connection they can achieve. Demands for access and the need to maintain the sense of immediacy and interactivity don't go away. DRBRO, a hugely successful streamer by most metrics laments this about his growth:

> "There is definitely a sense of loss on my side, of not being able to think of anything I do, anything relating to my favorite hobby, as just fun anymore. I always think, oh, I should be making a video or I should turn this into a web series Then the constant bombardment was something else...the constant bombardment of attention, and not just from other streamers. The need to pay attention to viewers, to release schedules, to plan my day around other streamers if I'm trying to build exposure, and just trying to be respectful of my fianceé's time...there are all of these internal conflicts."[139]

The labor of streaming is managing community through the management of attention, providing viewers with the sense that their attention or dedication to a broadcaster is reciprocated. At a small scale this is achievable. A broadcaster can have close and familiar connections with their audiences. But as demands grow and communities become sizable

[139] DRBRO, Interview with the Author, March 15, 2016. Interview 19, Audio Transcript.

audiences, the way broadcasters relate to their followers has to shift to account for these differences in scale. DRBRO is at the forefront of this. His audience has become a commodity raising his profile among streamers, supporting him financially, and enabling him to network with game developers and marketers for a host of products related to gaming. The downside is he can't feel as connected to his audience or be as transparent about the work of streaming with his followers. He has to demonstrate his community engagement, but the asymmetry of this relationship means it's now a part of the job for him as opposed to being just natural part of the media practice. This isn't because he has lost interest, but because the size of his audience demands a level of performative attentiveness. At the end of our conversation he reflects on this change pointing to the way it has altered his conception of what he is doing: "I felt like there was this community or closeness that had suddenly just evaporated into thin air and I was like what the f***, what caused this? I realized there is a point where you are no longer just a guy playing games on the internet."[140]

DRBRO isn't an exception in this regard. His is an advanced form of the conflicted nature of this mode of production. While the platform facilitates a style of media making that is much more dynamic, reactive and communal, it doesn't ever escape the demands of market forces. These imperatives separate producers form their audiences in material ways and these divisions have significant effects. Streamers are called to build communities. They do this in two key ways: by connecting with other streamers to form professional networks where reflecting on labor, audience management, and Twitch's attention economy is encouraged, and in relationship to audiences, where streamers' work becomes more conflicted. For an audience, streaming is about building personal and authentic experiences of community, a media that responds to individual users with the caveat that a certain reflexivity and

[140] Ibid.

connection is prohibited. GBP explains, "You don't like to talk about it, it's one of those things nobody ever wants to talk about, because it's not... [He pauses and thinks] The minute you talk about business or money, it will never work for you. Everyone will hate you."[141] Streamers' expression of their personality and connection to their community must excise an acknowledgment of the platform's attention economy, at least as it relates to the way this attention economy shapes streamers' relationships to their audiences.

Conclusion

This is the irony of content creation for Twitch. Streamers are labeled creators, broadcasters, and content producers, but in order to succeed they can't be overly candid about this in their work for fear of recentering the asymmetry of their relationship to viewers. This excepts Amazon's billion-dollar buyout of the platform.[142] It ignores Twitch's structure as a platform which rewards streamers who are able to deliver a very large, loyal, and dedicated user base with better access to profit sharing and more visibility on the site. It also conflicts with streamers' needs to think tactically about their practice and actualize network strategy with peers. All of these things must largely go unspoken between streamers and their communities for the sake of the personal experience of connected viewership. These are changes that displace risk onto content creators and serve platform interests first. At an advanced stage, the convergence of trends in narrowcasting, connected viewing, and around attention, create a media form deeply personalized and even personal—the limit is that you cannot look too closely at the forces which support and enable it. To the extent that Twitch embodies wider developments in media making, user-labor, playbor, and microcasting, these

[141] GBP, Interview with the Author.
[142] Eugene Kim, "Amazon Buys Twitch for $970 Million in Cash," *Business Insider,* Aug 25, 2014, Accessed 4/25/17, http://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-buys-Twitch-2014-8

tensions should give us cause to think about the kinds of capture and constraint that serve as the pretext for emergent forms of personalized, live viewership.

On Twitch, what starts to get exchanged for attention is a kind of access that goes much further than watching. It has an intimate and affective character deeply integrated into the structural elements of the entire formal apparatus which is fully imbricated in the work streamers do. At its small scale, video game live streaming production is always deeply integrated into the lives of producers who are building production infrastructure and practice into their lives. This is also what they market in their productive practice, a form of media able to respond to viewers and trade in attention in such a way that the experience of watching develops into community and authentic connection. These elements are suited to media production and consumption on this scale, offering an experience of interactivity and affectivity that broadcast and even narrowcast content are otherwise incapable of producing. And as live streaming is integrated into participatory media and social media platforms more broadly, this trend should only continue to grow. For all of its novelty and innovation though, it remains important to keep the material constraints and market forces that subtend this media phenomenon in sight. As the scale of media production gets more intimate and more personal, effacing the asymmetry of broadcasting relationships becomes increasingly more important. This serves producers, but it is important to recall, it also serves the media ecosystems and platforms built around this labor.

CHAPTER 3

Locating Esport Spectatorship:

Studio Audience(ing) and Sites of Speculation

The irony of esports media is that all of the game action takes place in a virtual space apart. While players are acting on computer interfaces in real arenas, their actions are only made meaningful in the world of the game. This ontology differentiates esport from traditional sport and undergirds critiques of esports 'real'-sportiness. The “e” in esport signals this difference, semantically focusing the mediating power of electronics, the electrification of sport. But as consumer content and a rapidly growing emergent media form, and despite the virtual remove of competition, esport has come to center itself on practices of locating, grounding, and concertizing. To borrow the language of Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity,* esport succeeds through its ability to shift phases, disintegrate and reintegrate, and to be ethereal and material. The flexibility facilitated by a virtual remove compliments the tactical ways competitive gaming has positioned itself as live-streaming media keystone. Esport is a media of marginality, even as it’s grown into a billion dollar industry. Once a niche industry that existed as pop-up events under the folding umbrellas of unstable organizers, modern esport production has cultivated new ways to operate on the margins. Esport production has built its foundations on these margins through prospecting, speculating, and stabilizing itself around a commercial framework that reorients the imperatives of broadcast media making. Where the most recent iterations look like sport, they achieve this through negotiations that dramatically shift the goals of media production.

Pioneered in Korea at the turn of the 21st century, at the juncture of cable television and internet cafe culture, emergent media platforms and improvements to broadband infrastructures between 2008 and 2012 gave rise to a global esports scene which has been growing steadily since. Once a novelty, a Korean quirk and a global blip, esport has grown into a billion dollar industry rooted in emerging markets, speculative investment, and new ways of capturing and leveraging audiences. It is a trend that has seen steady growth globally for a half decade, with each subsequent year producing more striking numbers and new horizons for competitive gaming.

In this chapter, I examine the history of the *NA LCS* studio in Los Angeles, North America's first dedicated, proprietary studio for esports production. And to a more minor extent, the newly-minted Blizzard Arena. I consider these two franchises with a focus on the ways they ground their production – and by this I mean the way these franchises are rooted in audience and in the sites of their production and the way the studio space reflects both of these foundations.

I like Zygmunt Bauman's[143] notion of liquidity as a place to begin an analysis of esport studios. The construction of esports studios studios outside of Korea is ostensibly a move towards industrial solidification, formalization, and investment. But what liquidity for Bauman really encapsulates is the melting of categories that were once defined more rigidly. For Bauman, liquidity describes a process of reformation where relationships between institutions are reoriented. Esport, while building towards a studio-based production that resembles the industrial complexity and fixity of sport, does so in a way that reshapes the roll of the audience and the underlying commercial imperatives that support esports media. What is most significant about this is that the esports franchises I examine here don't make a net

[143] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press. 1999).

profit off of advertising, sponsorships, or licencing. This is the structuring conceit of this chapter, where the production of esports media resembles traditional sports and reality TV, it differentiates itself in one major way: it doesn't intend to be or need to be internally solvent. Instead, modern esport production leverages influence, second-screen synergy, and speculative futures to develop other forms of capital and capture, and in this way pioneers a structure for media making that renegotiates or liquifies the rationales that have traditionally shaped serialized sports media.

Franchising the Future

2017 was a landmark year for esports, for North American esports[144], and for the Los Angeles-based heart of the North American esports industry in particular. Most significantly, it saw the launch of LA's second, dedicated proprietary esports studio, the Blizzard Arena in Burbank, which would host the newly minted *Overwatch League*, as well as *Heathstone*, *Heart of the Storm*, and *StarCraft 2* tournaments.[145] The most novel of these, Blizzard's *Overwatch League*, is a tournament modeled on sports franchises and tied to particular cities around the world.[146] 2017 also saw the reorganization of one of the most successful esports leagues, the North American and European *League of Legends Championship Series* which adopted a new model of sports franchising in preparation for its upcoming 2018 season. Also based in LA, the North American *League of Legends Championship Series* has been the

[144] Electronic sport, organized video game competitions.
[145] *Overwatch* (2016), *StarCraft 2* (2010), *Hearthstone* (2014), *Heroes of the Storm* (2015), all developed by Blizzard Entertainment.
[146] The inaugural season of the *OWL* featured 12 teams representing different cities, many of which are owned by existing sports franchise owners or established esport teams. They are divided into two groups a Pacific and Atlantic division, and Blizzard has indicated that in the future more teams might be added to the league. The first season runs from January to July of 2018. "Welcome to Overwatch League." *Blizzard Entertainment*. Accessed 13 April, 2018. https://overwatchleague.com/en-us/about

perennial esports franchise for a half decade.[147] It's reorganization was a move away from a model that rotated teams in and out of competition (a relegation system) in favor of a permanent structure where sponsor-owners buy franchise spots and grow these teams over subsequent seasons. A move with very visible buy-in from major, and crucially, traditional sports franchises. This reorganization was ostensibly about shifting *League of Legends* fandom towards a more durable kind of seriality, seeking to repeat itself on the scale of years rather than weeks.[148]

Both the launch of Blizzard's *Overwatch League* and the restructuring of Riot's *League of Legends LCS* portend a great deal about the future of competitive gaming in North American and global markets. But, in short what they signal is an interest in concertizing, formalizing, and soliciting investment for permanent and durable esports organizations, infrastructures, and markets. These franchises are big. Riot sold permanent positions for 10 million USD to existing teams and 13 million USD to new teams, and Blizzard charged 20 million USD for its franchise spots.[149] What differentiates these from traditional sports teams though, is the management of the league as a whole falls to Riot and Blizzard respectively, rather than franchise owners forming a commission. All around a media production that has succeeded, so far, by driving in-game microtransaction economies and bolstering player

[147] Riot's *LCS* remains the industry leader in in esport, drawing viewership figures that remain the high watermark for competitive gaming. And these figures generally double-year to year. See: Matt Perez, "Report: Esports To Grow Substantially And Near Billion-Dollar Revenues In 2018," *Forbes*, Feb. 21, 2018, Accessed April 13, 2018. https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattperez/2018/02/21/report-esports-to-grow-substantially-and-near-a-billion-dollar-revenues-in-2018/#78b96ead2b01

[148] Patrick Garren, "UPDATED: A List of All the 2018 NA LCS Teams, Their Owners and Who's Backing Them," *The Esports Observer,* Nov. 21, 2017, Accessed April 13, 2017. https://esportsobserver.com/na-lcs-2018-reported-team-owners/

[149] Irwin A. Kishner, "Esports Leagues Set To Level Up With Permanent Franchises," Forbes, Oct. 3, 2017. Accessed April 13, 2017. https://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2017/10/03/esports-leagues-grow-up-with-permanent-franchises/#2673723d21d6

bases.[150] What this means is that the franchise owners buying into these leagues and the game developers are forming relationships around the perceived potential of this media phenomenon rather than established revenue streams.

These moves by Blizzard and Riot Games are timely. Riot has been growing its *League of Legends (LoL)* franchise for over 6 years, and as an 8-year-old video game, *LoL* is a kind of miraculous dinosaur in the world of gaming. Launched in 2009, and a proprietary esport since 2011, its continued success has been the product of a Sisyphean process of patching, updating, and remaking the same game in order to keep it fresh and current. Concurrently, there has been a string of developments to turn its early, modest esports production into a genre-defining franchise. From a restructuring of ranking systems within the game itself to better clarify player's relationships, to a professional scene, developments in terms of its esports production practice, and the steady development of its studio space. Blizzard's *Overwatch* has had a different trajectory. Just 2 years old, the game launched to outstanding reviews and seemed poised to evolve the MOBA[151]/Shooter/esport landscape. But as an esport the game has struggled to find an audience.[152] In both cases, Riot's and Blizzard's moves to implement systems of franchising, to develop esports localization, and ground this in the studios where these competitions take place, signal a desire to transform their proprietary titles into lasting and bankable media franchises. Franchises rooted their sites of production with audiences that are dedicated, embedded, and dependable. And both come at precarious moments in the lives of their respective esports markets.

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[150] Pete Volk, "Riot: Esports Still isn't Profitable, and We Don't Care," *Rift Herald*, Sept. 13, 2016, Accessed April 13, 2017. https://www.riftherald.com/2016/9/13/12865772/lol-esports-profit-money-riot

[151] MOBA refers to a *Multiplayer Online Battle Arena*, as a genre this style of game borrows formally from real-time strategy games. Players control a single character and work as a team to complete game objectives.

[152] Nathan Grayson, "Overwatch Still Isn't Ready To Be A Top Esport," *Kotaku,* June 5, 2017, Accessed April 13, 2017, https://compete.kotaku.com/overwatch-still-isnt-ready-to-be-a-top-esport-1795833289; Mike Stubbs, "A Year On From Launch, Overwatch Is A Struggling eSport," *Eurogamer,* June 28, 2017, Accessed April 13, 2017, http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2017-06-27-a-year-on-from-launch-overwatch-is-a-struggling-esport.

Blizzard's *Overwatch,* while overwhelmingly successful, has struggled to find its place as an esport. Its initial debut as a competitive game came with an influx of talented teams, a huge player base, and a great deal of speculative potential as an esport contender. However, 2017 failed to produce any major buzz for *Overwatch* as a spectator esport, plagued by some glaring internal barriers. It lacked of a "spectator mode" which would give esports producers and audiences a better view of the action, and with a visual style that appealed to players, but was overwhelming and illegible to watchers. *Overwatch* was poised to slip into irrelevance as a spectator phenomenon, even as it continued to succeed as game. The *Overwatch League* (OWL) aims to step in and develop an esports franchise that can stem these losses and make good on the speculative potential of this game. To do so, it has built the *Overwatch League*, heavily modeled on Riot's *LCS*.

Riot's *League of Legends* is positioned slightly differently. Its success as an esport has served as a model for the industry broadly. Blizzard's Battle Arena is deeply indebted to *LCS* arena (both of which refine Korean esports studios), just as it's league format borrows from Riot's model. However, esports audiences have historically been fickle. The game itself has been around for nearly a decade and its player base, while massive, can't continue to grow in the way it once did. Games like *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*, *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*, *Defense of the Ancients 2, Fortnite*, and *Overwatch* are moving into the field of esport media production. So, while *League of Legends* remains dominant, this is a position that requires growth and solidification.

In either case, developments taking place around these franchises are as massive as they are hopeful and defensive. It might even be appropriate to call them conservative, if an undertaking as speculative as either of these can be called conservative .Esports in the early

2010's were still realizing their potential, the site of surprising growth and emergence. The current moment belies an attempt to cordon off, to stake out, or to preserve the markets that have been tapped and to reinvest around these. All of this is driven by a player-audience whose allegiances are capricious and fleeting. This isn't to say esports are in trouble. Quite the contrary. If anything, data would suggest the value of esports is broadly on the rise. Rather, what they suggest is a shift in outlook for two major publishers behind some of competitive gaming's biggest texts. Riot is moving to further entrench its position in a market that has historically been tumultuous and defied durability. Blizzard is hoping to push Overwatch into this same market, against the same uncertainty, trying to make the most out of a game that seems apt to esport success before it loses its viability. The future for both of these endeavors is uncertain but together they embody a kind of politics of their moment. They attract audiences resembling sports fans but who engage quite differently. They stake out new areas of content production and consumption making use of post-broadcast internet streaming platforms to reach their viewers. And, they skirt commercial frameworks based on advertising in favor of new (and crucially) internal-facing economies of synergy and anticipation.

I argue that esports franchises, particularly where they are modeled on traditional sports with arenas and regular seasons of play, are imbedded in a post-2008, post-recession politics of risk, austerity, and cycles of speculation. There are several reasons for this. While each year, at least since 2010, seems to mark a step towards a more formally solvent, durable, or marketable esports industry,[153] the processes of this production are less about unfettered growth, or even profit directly and more about new forms of capture, and emergent or

[153] Peter Warman, "Esports Revenues Will Reach $696 Million this Year and Grow to $1.5 Billion by 2020 as Brand Investment Doubles," *Newzoo*, Feb. 14, 2017. https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/esports-revenues-will-reach-696-million-in-2017/

speculative markets. As these markets become more clearly defined, the capacity for booming growth seen in the immediate post-recession seems less certain and more competitive – attached to future markets of consumers and semi-solidified positions in the field of esports.

The history of this half-decade in esports might best be understood through a political economy of esports audiences and the practices that hail and house these audiences. This is especially significant because in the spirit of liquidity, in lieu of marketing or profit in a familiar sense, the audience as an object of influence, management, and investment becomes the rationale for this kind of media making and the object of this political economy. The esports studio, a bastion of this political economy, is where esports producers distill and reflect their viewer-base in a carefully constructed media space with the aim of informing and directing audience behavior and loyalty.

My research is based on 5 years of regular site visits to the *LCS* studio as well as site specific research at other permanent esport studios, specifically 3 KESPA studios in Korea and the Blizzard Arena In Los Angeles. I use the history of the *LCS* studio's development in conjunction with the broader growth of the *LCS* and esports (conceived generally) to contextualize developments in "audiencing"[154] and marketing around esports in North America. I argue that the political economy of esport media making and audience positioning is a byproduct of post-2008 politics of risk and austerity and that it corresponds to trends in participatory media making and fan engagement. What is at stake for esports productions are market position and influence over a specific audience, rather than clear lines of profitability.

[154] This is a term deployed by Nicholas Taylor in his essay on esports event configurations. It describes practices and infrastructures that house and hail an audience with the goal of developing an audience and instructing audience behaviors. I discuss it further in the following section. Nicholas Taylor, "Now You're Playing with Audience Power: the Work of Watching Games," *Critical Studies in Media Communication,* 33.4, 2016.

Esports franchises and studios are a form of speculation, if they can reach an audience and keep this audience invested, they prop up the games they feature. I argue that a move away from traditional marketing or licencing, towards influence and tie-ins characterizes an emergent form of audiencing that reflects the trends in the contemporary media landscape. This is about finding ways to locate, attract, and cement an audience. This is true on Twitch's micro scale and it is true at the large scale for esports production.

On Critical Studies of Esport Media

As an emergent media phenomenon, critical scholarship on the nature, history, and implications of esport or competitive gaming has struggled to keep pace with the speed of industrial development taking place in esport. Much of the scholarship in this area has been focused on definitions of esport, on framing, and on describing this media practice.[155] Where scholarship has tired to theorize esport, it has frequently been generalizing and often overly celebratory. There is a great deal to be said about the practice of making and marketing esport, but a critical or materialist approach to the production of these texts is a necessary addition to this conversation.

Two of the most exhaustive and rich works on esport are Dal Yong Jin's political economy on the Korean games industry,[156] and T.L. Taylor's book-length anthropological study of esports industrial practices.[157] In the short life span of this phenomenon, both of

[155] For work focused on definitions of esport see: Tanja Adamus, "Playing Computer Games as Electronic Sport: In Search of a Theoretical Framing for a New Research Field," *Computer Games and New Media Cultures: A Handbook of Digital Game Studies*, eds. J. Fromme and A. Unger, (Berlin: Springer, 2012), 477-490.; Seth R. Jenny, Douglas Manning, Margaret C. Keiper, and Tracy W. Olrich, "Virtual(ly) Athletes: Where eSports fit Within the Definition of 'Sport.'" *Quest* (2016).; Emma Witkowski "On the Digital Playing Field: How We 'Do Sport' With Networked Computer Games." *Games and Culture*, 7.5 (2012).
[156] Dal Yong Jin. *Korea's Online Gaming Empire*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010).
[157] T.L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: The Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012).

these studies serve more as historical context for contemporary industrial configurations. Jin's *Korea's Online Gaming Empire* explores the gaming industry in Korea broadly, but dedicates two chapters to esports, specifically in terms of the political economies of these practices. What I find most useful about this work is his discussion of the growth of an esports industry in Korea which he situates between social, technological, and political forces. I refer to this history of early Korean esports in this chapter. This is because the Korean esports industry is nearly a decade older than a comparable esport industry in the West, and moreover, because the Korean esports industry developed infrastructures resembling the studios for serialized production emerging in the West. Taylor's study of esports focuses on tournaments primarily in North America and Europe, focusing on the period leading up to 2009. What is striking about this history is the degree to which the industry lacks formal structures. It's born out of LAN tournaments and other kinds of informal practice. The communities she is engaging with are markedly different than the robust media industries that have grown in the past decade. In both cases, these works serve as foundations for understanding how the field is shaped currently, but are more historical at this stage.

Other scholars have taken up questions of audiencing around esport in a more focused way. Nicholas Taylor's work is particularly informative in this respect.[158] His study of two MLG events, one in 2008 and another in 2012, identifies a shift towards a more formalized infrastructure and a clearer demarcation between the spectacle of play and the audience. He concludes that the studio audience for these events is serving as a referent for the online audience who see themselves reflected in the crowd. In the development of esports studios in

[158] Nicholas Taylor, "Now You're Playing with Audience Power: the Work of Watching Games." *Critical Studies in Media Communication.* 33.4, (2016).

the US, this is palpable. In their promotion of the *LCS* Studio, Riot foregrounds this function, "We knew how much the energy of a passionate crowd enhanced the experience for pros and fans watching at home. We created the opportunity for fans to gather and watch games live from the studio, bringing new energy to the weekly broadcasts."[159] While I agree with this in broad strokes, I think the question of audiencing goes much deeper than this. Benjamin Burrows and Paul Ramma[160] argue that esport and live streaming platforms serve as testing grounds for new patterns of production and new technological affordances. I think this position is closer to the truth. The development of permanent esports studios is part of a broader shift changing audiencing in a number of crucial ways. One of the most meaningful is an observation about Riot's profit model. The *LCS*, Riot Games' wildly successful and widely-emulated esport production operates at a loss.[161] What this suggests for audience and production is not simply the preeminence of an online viewer, but the whole imperative for production in the first place. A move away from marketability towards a kind of audiencing that is managerial and speculative in its scope.

Esport Foundations

Video games as a medium have existed for a half century[162] and even the earliest

[159] Bear Schmiedicker and Dave Stewart, "Arena: Home of the LCS." LoL Esports Website, Riot Games, Mar. 6, 2017. Accessed April 15, 2018. https://www.lolesports.com/en_US/articles/arena-home-of-the-na-lcs

[160] Benjamin Burrows and Paul Ramma, "The eSports Trojan Horse: Twitch and Streaming Futures." *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research.* 8.2. (2015).

[161] Eric Van Allen, "Pro League Of Legends Team Says It's Losing More Than $1.1 Million A Year," *Kotaku Complete*. Sept. 2, 2017. Accessed Apr. 15, 2017. https://compete.kotaku.com/pro-league-of-legends-team-says-its-losing-more-than-1-1798727989 ; Brendan Sinclair, "Friction between Riot and League of Legends Team Owners," *Gamesindustry.biz*, Aug. 24, 2016. http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2016-08-24-friction-between-riot-and-league-of-legends-team-owners

[162] In 1961 researchers at MIT wrote Spacewar, which used a vector display to represent the game world. This is often cited as the first video game.

iterations had agonistic[163] elements. The capacity to compete with other players in a game lends itself directly to more formalized kinds of competition. Julia Hitscher's "A Short History of eSports" in the *eSports Yearbook* compiles a helpful gloss of early gaming competitions. Stanford's *Spacewar* pit players against each other on a 9 inch CRT screen and in 1972 Stanford held the first, formalized video gaming competition, an "Intergalactic *Spacewar* Olympics."[164] Iterations of video gaming competition would follow from this as games became a familiar household media form. Atari held a *Space Invaders* Championship in 1980. Between 1982 and 1984, the TV show *Starcade* featured players competing for high scores in popular arcade games. One of the most valuable pieces of video game history is the custom cartridge used in the *Nintendo World Championships*, which features competition levels of several NES games designed specifically for this event.[165] In the '90s, following the home console boom of the late '80s, several TV show—like *Nick Arcade* (1992)—featured video game competition. All of which is to say, there is a long history of formal competition around games preceding what one might consider the more contemporary iterations of esports.

Geologically, these tournaments and game shows demonstrate a long history of gaming competition. But in terms of scope, scale, and presentation, they reflect an era markedly distinct from contemporary esports. When scholars invoke esport what they are referring to is more than organized competition. What is salient about the modern wave of esports is an attending media industry that markets this competition to an audience of spectators. Post-1999, esports represent a more sophisticated and coordinated effort to turn

[163] Agon is a concept deployed by anthropologist Johan Huizinga to describe games of competition. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture,* (London: Routledge,. 1949).
[164] Julia Hiltscher, "A Short History of eSports," *eSports Yearbook 2013/14,* eds. Julia Hiltscher and Tobias M. Scholz, (Norderstedt, Germany: Books on Demand GmbH 2015).
[165] Ibid.

video game play into a spectator commodity deeply indebted to the competitive gaming boom in Korea. We could imagine roughly two era's in the history of video game competition. This isn't definitive, but it's a useful way of bracketing competition. The first would be the period up to 1999, where players competed in video games, but where this competition was sporadic, often informal, and when it was about spectatorship, it had more in common with game shows than spectator sport.

The second era would begin roughly with the Korean esports phenomenon of the late '90s and early 2000s. Dal Yong Jin traces its genesis to a confluence of factors.[166] In the '90s Korea began a rapid development of its broadband infrastructures. This coincided with the late '90s Asian financial crash which found a generation of young people out of work and occupying internet cafes as spaces to search for jobs. The internet cafe, called PC Bangs in Korea, served as a social space where people gathered to work but also to play games in their downtime. It was in these PC cafes that Blizzard's *StarCraft: Brood War*[167] became an esport urtext and spawned formalized competitions, esport studios, and cable channels dedicated exclusively to video game competition. The production model that modern esports studios seek to emulate was born in Korea just at the turn of the century.[168]

Outside of Korea, where fan bases were more diffuse and where broadcast wasn't formalized, the esport industry was slower to develop. The primary venues for large-scale video game competition were esport tournaments. And while these grew gradually in the late

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[166] Dal Yong Jin, *Korea's Online Gaming Empire*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010).
[167] *StarCraft: Brood War*, (1999; Blizzard Entertainment), Video Game.
[168] It's worth noting that Korean cable television while still driven by advertising functions a bit differently than American cable television. Where American cable is a vestige of the American TV industry of the 1970s, Korea's cable industry is more modern. It arrived in the early 90s with the rapid expansion of broadband infrastructure and has the benefit of catering to a much more culturally homogeneous audience. When I visited Korea for research, I remember getting to my AirBnB in Seoul and deciding I should try to find esports on TV. A channel surf turned up stations dedicated to the board game GO, a style channel, and of course several dedicated exclusively to video games (at the time it was SpoTV Games and OGN). These channels also owned production studios where esport competition was recorded.

'90s and 2000s, they never reached the kind of saturation point or durability the Korean industry saw. To dismiss the international video game competition industry during this period would be a mistake, as there was a global interest in esport preceding and following the Korean boom. The *Red Annihilation Quake* event held in 1997, for example, drew national attention in the US.[169] But crucially, these were events taking place in temporary spaces like hotels and convention centers. While the US and Europe never developed cable channels for games or studios in the same way Korea did, the launch of what would become the *Twitch.tv* platform in 2011 introduced an alternative to this broadcast infrastructure outside Korea. Twitch aggregated video game content on a single platform, circumventing the need for older kinds of broadcast infrastructure. What this meant was esports and esport-adjacent content, like speedrunning or *let's plays*, which had circulated online within their corresponding niches, now had something like a hub to collect and catalyze an interest in game spectatorship.

Twitch collected a range of spectator game content – from live streams, to pen and paper roleplaying, speedrunning, and esport competition. It was an alternative to proprietary streaming platforms where esports used to circulate outside of Korea. For example, you used to have to watch *StarCraft 2* events on GOM TV's streaming interface, which was clunky and required a downloaded software package. So in the absence of cable channels, live streaming platforms created a centralized place where esport content could develop. This allowed esports to draw more consistent audiences globally, made tournaments more visible, and helped audiences from adjacent niches to find content that complimented their interests.

Interestingly, the growth of Twitch coincided with a global economic collapse, with a

[169] John Davidson, "How 'Quake' Changed Video Games Forever," *Rollingstone,* June 22, 2016, Accessed April 15, 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/how-quake-changed-video-games-forever-20160622.

wave of emergent streaming media platforms, and also with the launch of *League of Legends* in 2009 and *StarCraft II* in 2010. In some ways, it retraced the ecosystem that boosted Korean esports production, only on a more diffuse global scale. The global economic collapse of 2008 meant that when Twitch launched in 2011, its core demographic (predominantly, young men) was looking at an unemployment rate nearly double what it had been three years earlier. It was also joining a wave of streaming platforms that were changing media consumption patterns.[170] Collectively, this produced a mixture of a broadened player base, the introduction of new infrastructures that conditioned this base, and excitement around new competitive games, all within an economic climate that made emergent media strategies more appealing. This was a boon for Twitch, for esports productions, and for the game publishers who were taking a managerial stake in competitions.

At the time, *League of Legends* was positioned to capitalize on this confluence of factors. Distinct from other esports offerings, its free-to-play model created a low barrier to entry for new players so that even before Twitch became the defacto home of streaming esport media it was building a massive player base. In 2011, Riot games released data for the first time showing *LoL* had 15 million registered players and 1.5 million daily players.[171] The popularity of *LoL* made its esport growth deeply synergistic. The growing esports attention it was getting through Twitch meant its player base continued to grow. As its player base grew, its popularity as an esport expanded, all of which supported its micro-transaction economy. *StarCraft 2* didn't share a F2P model; players had to purchase a copy of the game in order to play. In 2012, Riot moved to capitalize on this swelling success. They took an active stake in

[170] Netflix launched its streaming service in 2007 and Hulu began streaming in 2010, meaning that a wider base of users were conditioned to get their media through streaming platforms.
[171] Alexander Sliwinski, "League of Legends Surpasses 15M Registered Players, 1.4M Play Daily." *Engadget*. Jul. 26, 2011. Accessed, Apr. 15, 2018. https://www.engadget.com/2011/07/26/league-of-legends-surpasses-15m-registered-players-1-4m-play-da/

producing *League of Legends* esports competition for streaming platforms. They had already been doing this in Korea, but the growth of Twitch in the West meant they now had a platform to build their production around. And in late 2012, just ahead of its Season 2 World Championship in Los Angeles, Riot released followup numbers claiming 80 million registered players and 12 million daily players.[172] While this doesn't signal a direct correlation, the exponential growth of the game's base was coincidental with the launch of Twitch and the launch of Riot's *LCS*. What it does demonstrate is a groundswell around esport centered on *League of Legends* and Twitch which would provide the energy to build a serialized, studio-based esports production.

On the *LCS* Studio – A Monolith to Modern Esport Spectatorship

It's December 2013 and I'm driving to a small sound stage on the MBS Media Campus in Manhattan Beach. It is a collection of studio spaces for rent, available for short media engagements, post production, and events. These are temporary spaces. In a sound stage near the middle of the campus, avid video gamer-fans are gathering for the 2013 *League of Legends* "Battle of the Atlantic," an exhibition tournament pitting North American and European teams against each other in *League of Legends*. While the event is novel, it is a landmark moment for the future of the esports industry in the US. The MBS studio where this event is held will serve as Riot Games' semi-permanent studio for the subsequent season (Season 4) of competition in the "*League of Legends* Champions Series" (*LCS*), a biweekly competition between professional teams of video game athletes. The *LCS* studio in Manhattan Beach is one of the first semi-permanent venues for esports competition outside

[172] Anthony Gallegos, "Riot Games Releases Awesome League of Legends Infographic," *IGN,* Oct. 15, 2012. http://www.ign.com/articles/2012/10/15/riot-games-releases-awesome-league-of-legends-infographic

of Korea, and the first to hold regular spectator video game competition. It's an upgrade from a small studio in Culver City that was home to the *LCS* for Season 3. Rather than a temporary arena space for one-off tournaments, the MBS *LCS* studio would serve as the centerpiece of North American competition over the course of the next year.

Esport had been growing steadily following buzz around the game *StarCraft 2* in 2010, the launch of the Twitch platform in 2011, though an expanding number of international esports tournaments, and as a result of a general maturation of video game industries. Still, the esports industry outside of Korea was very young and prone to fluctuation. In her 2009 study of professional gaming, *Raising the Stakes*, TL Taylor recounts having to keep track of tournaments on sticky notes posted to her office wall because new tournaments emerged and became defunct so quickly that keeping abreast of the current milieu was an ongoing task.[173] This was a market prone to speculation, where an audience of fans intent on watching competition around any particular game—the principal commodity—was nascent, fractured, and fickle. The 2008 recession had impacted esports, which were driven primarily by funding from endemic advertising sponsors: energy drinks, computer hardware manufacturers, and game companies. While the economic decline eventually precipitated the growth of esports audiences in the long term, in the immediate moment it had a chilling effect which saw sponsors pulling funds for tournaments. A number of prominent tournaments/leagues shuttered or relocated, including the CPL, WSVG and CGS, which all went under between 2008 and 2009. In an article on esports in the aftermath of the recession, former professional gamer Marc-Andre Messier, criticizes structural weaknesses in the industry for this decline, namely an ambiguity about the value of esports commodities.[174] By

[173] Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*.
[174] Marc-Andre Messier, "The Lessons eSports Should Learn From The Recession." *Esports Yearbook*

late 2012 though, when the *LCS* officially launched, esport was recovering strongly, more than quadrupling the number of tournaments hosted in 2008.[175]

This quadrupling reflected the boom and bust nature of the esport phenomenon. Rather than a core group of producers or invested parties, esport in the West was driven by tournaments that succeeded or failed based on the support of sponsors and the value generated by attendance and viewership. And, the growth of Twitch and platforms like it dramatically increased the visibility of these events making sponsorship more enticing to endemic supporters. More, the 2010 release of *StarCraft 2,* the squeal to the game which drove Korea's initial esport craze, saw the creation of a number of new tournaments in Korea and synergistic tie-ins with existing esport tournaments internationally. This growing global esports scene also benefited from the participation of *StarCraft* Pros. The competitive esport scene that grew around *StarCraft 2* created a kind of durable focus for esports competition, guaranteed to draw high-caliber players and fans consistently.

Reliable esports fandom around genres of games persisted and *StarCraft 2* seemed a stable text – appearing regularly in esport competition and the feature of a new wave of serialized competition in Korea. But discrete games struggled to hold an audience. Major tournaments like the now (nearly) defunct Major League Gaming (MLG) would release a list of the games featured its events, and these lists offer some insight into how the field of popular games shifted. Some games, like the *Call of Duty* series, released new iterations each year that would become the basis for competition. Other games, like *Halo* or *Tekken,* came and went season-to-season. What this meant was that while esport continued to grow,

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2013/14, eds. Julia Hiltscher and Tobias M. Scholz, (Norderstedt, Germany: Books on Demand GmbH 2015).
[175] Mike Popper, "Field of Streams: How Twitch Made Video Games a Spectator Sport," *The Verge*, Sept. 30, 2013. Accessed Apr. 15, 2018. https://www.theverge.com/2013/9/30/4719766/Twitch-raises-20-million-esports-market-booming

individual games were not dependable for franchising year-to-year or event-to-event. For example, of the 16 games featured at MLGs between 2009 and 2012, none appeared at all tournaments. The *Halo* and *Call of Duty* franchises were the most dependable. Each year saw competition around a different version of the game. *StarCraft 2*, following its addition to the lineup in 2011, remains a featured game for the next 3 years, speaking to its potency as an esport touchstone, but this also signals the difficulty of imagining any kind of regular and lasting esports formula, and makes Riot's decision to build an annual esports production around the title in 2013 all the more assertive.[176]

LoL, launched in 2009, was a Free-to-Play MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) developed and published by Riot Games, headquartered in Los Angeles. The game is based on the structure of *Defense of the Ancients* (often DOTA), a mod for the game *Warcraft 3*. In MOBA games, two teams of players compete to invade and destroy the opposing team's base. Each player controls a single character in the game with a limited set of abilities and a corresponding role in the team's competition. The game functions like a mash up of an RTS [177] and a team-based shooter where a squad coordinates to reach an objective.

By 2013, the game LoL was already wildly successful.[178] But as a relatively young esport, the game's commercial potential as a spectator text was still being tapped. It had just concluded what had been dubbed it's third season with a record-setting championship held in the Los Angeles Staples Center.[179] "Season 3" was something of a misnomer. 2011 and 2012

[176] This is based on MLG tournaments held between 2004 and 2015.
[177] RTS refers to a real-time strategy game, these include the *StarCraft* and *WarCraft* series, for example.
[178] In 2012 *League of Legends* boasted a player base of 80 million and an average of 12 million daily users. In 2014 these numbers would grow again, with LoL claiming 27 million daily players. Paul Tassi, "Riot's 'League of Legends' Reveals Astonishing 27 Million Daily Players, 67 Million Monthly," *Forbes,* Jan. 27, 2014. Accessed Apr. 15, 2018 https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2014/01/27/riots-league-of-legends-reveals-astonishing-27-million-daily-players-67-million-monthly/#670ad5016d39
[179] Jenna Pitcher, "League of Legends Finals a Sell Out at Staples Center, North American Regionals Conclude," *Polygon,* Sept. 2, 2013. Accessed Apr. 15, 2018.

saw competitive esports play of *League of Legends* capped with "World Championships" but competitive play leading up to the championship was attached to larger tournaments and events like PAX, MLG and the ESL. Season 3 in 2013 marked a departure from this format. For the first time Riot Games took a managing role in organizing competitive play leading up to the finals, at least in the US and European markets. Korea, already a major market for esports competitions, had been running its own *League of Legends* competitive series since 2012 with weekly competitions held at the OnGameNet (OGN) e-stadium in Seoul, South Korea under the joint supervision of Riot and the Korean eSports Association (KeSPA), a Korean state agency that regulates and oversees esport. So a year before Riot sought to build a regular live broadcast of LoL competition in North American and European markets, the game was already fully-functioning with regular competition in Korea under a cooperative arrangement between Riot, KeSPA, OGN, and the cable network SPOTV Games. The 2013 North American and European competitions sought to emulate the Korean format in the West. To do this, Riot leased two small sound stages to host weekly competitions. One in Cologne, Germany and one in Los Angeles.

These two original studios aimed for a minimal kind of media making, designed for a rudimentary production of esports competitions. Notably missing from these spaces were any kind of arrangement to seat a live audience. Korean esports venues had long solidified infrastructures for the production of competitions attended by live audiences and featured these same audiences in their broadcasts. Western esports competitions at tournaments did

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https://www.polygon.com/2013/9/2/4685046/league-of-legends-finals-a-sell-out-at-staples-center; Samit Sarkar, "League of Legends Season 3 Finals Drew 32M Total Viewers," *Polygon,* Nov. 19, 2013. Accessed Apr. 16, 2018. https://www.polygon.com/2013/11/19/5121688/league-of-legends-season-3-world-championship-finals-viewers

this as well[180], but these early studios used in the production of the *LCS*, did not. They were small, with just enough space for the two competing teams, referees, cameras, and casters. Both teams faced each-other from opposite sides of the room, each side lit according to its corresponding color in the world of the game, red and blue. For the sake of competition in a virtual playing field, *Summoner's Rift,*[181] the material space of this competition did not need to be robust. It was only visible in brief moments at the beginning and end of competitive play as teams were gearing up for battle or reacting to the outcomes of the game. This early studio belies something essential about esport: the bulk of content takes place in a space apart. Players act, but their actions are impactful in the world of the game. So, at a time when this production was more experimental than proven, it made more sense to develop it in an environment catering only to the obvious audience the viewers watching the online stream.

And these online streams were quite successful. Regular season play on Twitch for Season 3 consistently drew over one hundred thousand concurrent spectators, with many more tuning in via other platforms like YouTube and Azubu.tv. Although income from these streams didn't cover the cost of this production[182] the success of *LCS* streams grew the profile of *League of Legends*, feeding fan participation in the game itself. The streams became a kind of synergistic marketing device that would compliment the world of the game, encouraging players to see themselves in relationship to professional players.

Coincidental with this Riot reorganized the player ranking system within the game. They did this in January of 2013 to match the launch of *LCS* Season 3. The system eliminated a universal ladder that ranked all players together and implemented a tiered rating

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[180] Christina Kelly, "Spectator Experiences at MLG Dallas vs. Korea,"*Esports Yearbook 2010,* eds. Julia Hiltscher and Tobias M. Scholz, (Norderstedt, Germany: Books on Demand GmbH, 2011).

[181] Summoner's Rift is the name given to the in-game map or playing field in *League of Legends.*

[182] Volk, "Riot: esports still isn't profitable, and we don't care"

system that saw players moving between ranks from bronze at the lowest to challenger at the highest. Players would rank up or down within each rating going from Bronze 5 to Bronze 1 before moving to Silver 5, and so on. At the time it was a very close replication of the rating system at place in *StarCraft 2* which also also had ranks from bronze to diamond, and a "master tier" (instead of challenger). In an official forum post about the change, Riot explained, "We decided to move to the new league system for a few reasons. For starters, having a single ladder with all ranked players doesn't provide a lot of incentive for advancement. When you're ranked 290,000 and have 289,999 opponents left to pass on the way up, that process can seem meaningless and interminable."[183] This made competition more legible, but it also coincided with Riot's formal foray into esport. It's Challenger League was a feeder league for the *LCS*, meaning top-ranked players in the game could see themselves in direct relationship to professional teams. This also corresponded to a reworking of the timing of the game's ranked seasons to roughly coincide with the seasons of *LCS* competition.

In this initial year of esport production, there was a synergistic relationship developing between Riot's esport media and the world of the game. While Riot had yet to implement a studio audience, it was already considering audiencing in other ways – training its player base to see itself in relationship to its professional players. The reorganization of its ranking system to better reflect individual player's relationships to professional play and the adoption of a season schedule that followed the *LCS*'s timing acted as a kind of virtual audiencing that incentivised esport spectatorship and used esport to encourage game players, as well. Its esport production placed *League of Legends* consistently near the top of Twitch's

[183] Yegg, "New League System in Ranked." Official Post to the North American League of Legends Forums. Jan. 15, 2013. Accessed April 18, 2018 http://forums.na.leagueoflegends.com/board/showthread.php?t=3004520

directory, especially on days when *LCS* competition was running—building the game's profile among gamers who otherwise might not have been inclined to adopt *League of Legends*. The world of *LCS* esport also impacted the *meta-game* in LoL as players emulated strategy used in professional play.[184] And the growth of a highly visible profesional scene, encouraged participation around LoL's primary profit model, the purchase of in-game cosmetic items for real money – a micro-transaction in-game economy.[185]

The payoff for this preliminary year of esport production culminated with the World Championship for *LCS* Season 3. The success of this 2013 season was capped with the Season 3 World Championship in Los Angeles, held in the Staples Center. It drew 32 million online viewers over the course of the event, across all of its streaming broadcasts, in addition to the 13,000 fans who attended at the venue.[186] Where the *LCS* in its regular season drew consistent viewership, averaging hundreds of thousands of concurrent viewers on Twitch, the finals event was a resounding success, demonstrating the virility of *League of Legends* as an esport and validating Riot's move to manage its esport competition internally. In the field of esports, the success of the world finals marked a growing confidence in esport competitions—part of a groundswell of major esport events that included DOTA's third international which boasted the largest (and partially crowd-funded) esport prize pool to date. (And another Valve success, CS:GO Majors, which also launched in 2013.)

In the West, large-scale tournaments served as hubs of esports production. These took

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[184] Metagaming refers to strategies players develop above and around games, such as devising strategies that leverage understandings of game algorithms to gain an advantage. Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux write extensively on the concept of metagaming, suggesting it's also a way of seeing how games play-players, which I find to be a good encapsulation of esports marketing synergy. See Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[185] Omer Altay, "Top Free to Play Games by Revenue, 2017 – Superdata Research," MMOS.com, January 30, 2018, Accessed April 20, 2018, https://mmos.com/news/top-free-play-pc-games-revenue-2017-superdataresearch

[186] Samit Sarkar, "League of Legends Season 3 finals drew 32M total viewers"

place in temporary spaces over short periods of time. While these types of events remained the predominant forums for esport competition, in 2013 the *Battle of the Atlantic*, and more specifically, the tournament space where this event was held, marked a change. For the first time, North American *League of Legends* had something like a dedicated live studio. What this demonstrated was an interest in growing fandom and reflecting audiences watching online back to themselves with real spectator counterparts in a live studio. In their history of the Battle Arena Riot Games' Bear Schmiedicker and Dave Stewart explain, "We knew how much the energy of a passionate crowd enhanced the experience for pros and fans watching at home. We created the opportunity for fans to gather and watch games live from the studio, bringing new energy to the weekly broadcasts."[187] The MBS studio, while still temporary, reflected a growing confidence in building LoL as an esports franchise and a need to identify and contextualize the practice of watching.

This new studio borrowed a great deal from Korean esports studios and from TV studios broadly. Specifically, the way it situated and leveraged its audience. The entrance was behind a huge roll-up door. As you entered from the back of the stands and turned a corner to your seats you were greeted by a stage resembling a TV game show. It stretched from one side of the room to the other. Facing it were rows of chairs, an upgrade from the plastic patio chairs used in Seoul, but still modular. And behind this were rows of elevated bleachers. The stage retained the red and blue lighting of the original Culver City studio but was reorganized to serve the live audience. In the center of the stage was a large screen, the focus of the action and where the virtual world of the game was represented to the audience. On either side were seats for the two teams. These faced the audience and featured smaller

[187] Bear Schmidicker and Dave Stewart, "Home of the LCS," *Lolesports.com,* March 6, 2017, Accessed April 15, 2018, http://www.lolesports.com/en_US/articles/arena-home-of-the-na-lcs

screens that captured video of the players faces – an addition to the spectatorial experience that was unavailable to the online audience. One of the most striking things you noticed as you entered the space were huge portraits of the game's characters on the walls. And finally, a battery of cameras. Many of these were hand held, carried to whichever part of the stage needed them. Others were located on rolling tripods which could be pointed at both the stage and audience. And the last was a camera suspended from a gigantic boom that could be swung to give an aerial perspective of the audience and stage.

The Battle of the Atlantic, when viewed by the online audience, made tactical use of these new capabilities. In transitions leading up to play, the boom camera is used frequently to demonstrate the audience present.[188] And the audience plays a large part in the look and energy of these competitions. They are given light-up boomsticks and carry signs (often written on poster paper provided by the venue). On one of my first visits to a studio like this in Korea, I wrote a message on a poster given to me at the door which doubled as an advertisement for Hot 6, a Korean energy drink. Probably because I was one of only a handful of spectators in the audience carrying an English-language poster, me and my sign made it into the English broadcast. At the Battle of the Atlantic, crew sat members of the audience wearing *League of Legends* clothing (especially Teemo hats) and carrying signs in the front center section of the audience so the boom camera would focus on them during transitions.

Off stage were two other parts of the production apparatus: a caster's booth where the game's live commentators provided play-by-play analysis of the live game and a second space used for commentary during transitions between games. While out of the audience's

[188] Video, "Alliance vs Dignitas Game 1 | EU vs NA Battle of the Atlantic 2013 | ALL vs DIG G1 Bo3," YouTube Video, December 14, 2013, Accessed April 15, 2018, https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=bU7flfLeBL8

line of sight, the shoutcasters were notably still present in the space of the audience, occupying a platform in the back of the room where they could watch the game and where the audience was visible to the online viewers. So in moments where the broadcast switches to sportscaster commentary, the game screen and the auditorium remain focal. Online viewers can see the stage and hear the audience behind the casters, and often signs and players on stage are visible as the casters speak. In Blizzard's studio, this same setup allows audience members to hold up signs and wave behind the game's commentators.

The studio also housed second production space used for between-game commentary and review provided by a different group of esports analysts. These casters review footage of the game and provide a kind of translation of the action in whichever game just took place, filling time between matches, and also communicating the game to the audience. This was part of the appeal of the *LCS*. The weekly format and constant translation meant viewers unfamiliar with the game could learn to read the action and more dedicated players could learn and adopt the professional meta-game in their own play. All of this while Riot minimized the downtime between games.

This initial studio, while temporary, was a robust media apparatus designed for serialized weekly production. The space changed the pace of production and the consistency of esports competition against an industry focused more on eventized competition than consistent and centralized media making. Where most tournaments took place sporadically, with minor events for any given game taking place once every few months and major events taking place once or twice a year, the *LCS* adopted a new structure. The Battle of the Atlantic and an All-Star Event in winter of 2013-14 would serve as testing grounds for weekly *LCS* production in the MBS studio. Riot began offering tickets for competitions held every week

of an 11-week season.

This was significant because the weekly format made esports competitions less nimble and adaptable but also allowed it to build an audience that did more. In an article on esports in the recession, Marc-Andre Messier explains that early esports competition in the West was hugely dependent on sponsorship funding.[189] This meant the model of one-off esports events took place when forces aligned. And further, that these events could feature whatever the most popular games were. The studio model shifts this from a production centered on sponsorships, prize pools, and a rotating selection of game, towards a focus on a single game and an audience dedicated to *League of Legends*. The payoff is a practice of esports consumption connecting fandom more directly to the lifespan of the game. In an interview with Dave Stuart[190], the lead producer for the NA *LCS*, he explains that this model is geared towards building a fan base in a way that is forward-looking. It recognizes that dedicated fans at this early stage are much more valuable in the longer span. A young fan base which has developed a strong relationship to a game become long-term consumers of that franchise. Events are exciting in part because they are infrequent and this viewership is what sponsors pay for when backing a tournament. Events don't necessarily condition the same practices of media engagement as serialized esports. For a game like *League of Legends*, connecting with a fan base is potentially more valuable than attracting an audience to sell to sponsors. With serialized esport, audiences have the potential to grow into a more dependable kind of base, which is significant because esports fans are young and their media allegiances are still forming. This is part of what makes this kind of production speculative. In the long run it seeks to condition patterns of future consumption. Rather than just building

[189] Messier, "The Lessons eSports Should Learn From The Recession," 2015.
[190] Dave Stewart, personal interview, 4 February 2018.

an audience, it is about building an audience which will appreciate in value and behave in particular ways. From participation in in-game microtransaction economies to drawing a broader player base to a game, to developing a media production with an audience that might grow into an asset, serialized esport production complicates the commercial imperatives that subtend spectator sport.

[The most recent iteration of the NA *LCS* Studio. Secondary screens annotate gameplay and emulate the look of the game world.]

Playing up Presence

In 2015, Riot launched the successor to its MBS studio, a permanent studio directly across the street from its LA headquarters. This studio would undergo a series of structural changes but served as the permanent production site for *NA LCS* competition going forward. The LCS Battle Arena, as it was named, was constructed in what used to be a Hulu TV

Studio.[191] While it continued to produce esports media in the same format as the MBS studio, its construction and implementation reflected an understanding of what audiencing meant for the *NA LCS*, especially as this pertained to the experience of the studio audience. For viewers watching on a live stream, the translation of gameplay into spectator text is fairly seamless, where a TV, phone, or computer screen corresponds to the natural perspective of playing the game. By comparison, a studio is an unnatural space for video game spectatorship. As Nicholas Taylor suggests, the live studio audience is deployed for the benefit of the online viewer – they serve as counterparts and points of reference for online spectators. But unlike sports where the action taking place exists on the field of play, which is present in a stadium, the esports live audience doesn't experience this, as gameplay also has to be represented to the crowd using screens and sports commentary. The studio begins to emulate the look of the game and annotate the experience of watching for the crowd. Where the development of the modern esports studio is broadly about hailing an online, live streaming viewer, the development of these studio spaces has also demonstrated a more robust understanding of how an experience of presence and immediacy might be developed specifically for this studio audience.

What I would like to focus on here is audiencing in and through the space of the studio itself. Where the move towards a serialized, weekly format, and studio-based production reflected a kind of audience-building practice aimed at a broadly conceived online market, the subsequent changes to the studio reflect a deepening understanding of the experience of presence in the studio itself and how this presence contributes to the cultivation

[191] It is a studio that had been used for TV and other kinds of media production, but most recently it was owned by Hulu. I think the connection between esports streaming media and Hulu, as a post-broadcast platform for TV, is a fortunate coincidence that begins to express the trajectory that I'm trying to sketch here, one that moves away from a static audience towards new forms distribution and consumption.

of synergistic fan practice. In keeping sight of the theme of speculation, these developments aren't reducible to a singular goal or collective effect. Instead, they function kind of rhizomatically – minor adjustments that build out different parts of the spectatorial or spatial experience of the whole. What gets implemented are minor practices that seek to trade up towards a kind of collective threshold for audience engagement.

Where the first iteration of an *LCS* studio was a reflection of concerns about connecting with an online viewer as modestly as possible, the MBS studio demonstrated a growing confidence in this audience and the realization that the studio audience is part of the product. It also was a testing ground for ways to reach and engage the fans present. Between matches on streaming platforms, broadcasters show promo videos or countdown screens announcing when the next match will begin. For a studio audience however, this downtime is particularly uncomfortable. On a studio lot there really isn't much to do. For Korean audiences, breaks at esports studios are usually time to step outside and smoke, which is true in North America as well. But Riot used this time to build fandom. During breaks, fans were treated to swag projectiles, meet and greets with players and teams. At the Battle of the Atlantic these practices were still getting worked out, but I went home with a foam stress ball in the shape of one of the game's cute creatures and had a chance to meet one of the celebrities of the game, a player named Double Lift. So, even at this early stage, the traces of what would become a part of the fan experience at these games were developing.

Riot's implementation of the LCS Battle Arena in its first permanent studio added a gift shop stocked with merchandise, some of it only available in this space, but all of it focused on the characters and world of *League of Legends* and the professional players of the

game. This would even come to include player jerseys and team memorabilia.[192] The studio also added a permanent concessions stand, meaning fans didn't have to leave the venue during competitions, which often lasted upwards of 5 hours. The design of the interior of the battle arena was more notable. The artwork covering the walls was no longer game characters, but instead featured professional players and moments from past *LCS* events. This belied an emphasis on building up the history of the *LCS* competition specifically.

Its construction adapted a number of additions targeted at the studio audience, both to make it function like a sport arena and also to make the experience of watching games more immersive. In keeping with the theme of speculation, I see these developments as testing branching ways of reaching and engaging the studio audience. The early development of Riot's *LCS* esports studio reflected a kind of cautious approach to strategies for growing and managing an audience. The studio was always advanced for a US-based esports production space, but its gradual development from the audience-less Culver City location to its temporary MBS studio, and finally to the point where Riot built its own permanent studio, suggest these experiments in reaching an esports audience were focusing in crucial ways. Moreover, the launch of Blizzard's arena at the end of 2017 and start of 2018 added a second permanent studio in the Los Angeles area. This studio borrowed from the development of the LCS Battle Arena, refining and extending the developments that were palpable in the development of Riot's studio.

I would like to focus on two of these refinements in particular. First, the development of an emphasis on player and team narratives – especially those rooted in the space of the

[192] Among the changes that I address at length, the studio also added a gift shop stocked with merchandise, some of it exclusive and only available in this space, but all of it focused on the characters and world of *League of Legends* and the professional players of the game – this would even come to include player jerseys and team memorabilia. The studio also added a permanent concessions stand, meaning that fans didn't have to leave the venue during competitions, which often lasted upwards of 5 hours.

studio itself. These are significant because they orient the experience of watching games and they work towards a kind of locating that turns the studio into a destination or a physical node in the fandom. To return to the question of liquefaction and solidification, these developments tie esports production to specific sites and a specific history. The development of esports stories and later of esports team franchises roots this production in legacies of competition, solidifies team positions, and connects this media to specific organizations and places. But these are changes also visible in the look of the studio. They introduce a contemporary legacy or history for esports fandom to focus on. Second, the development of visual adaptations that augment the experience of studio video game spectatorship. These are adjustments to the studio that affect the spectatorial experience of the studio audience, especially how the virtual space of the game is represented to this audience. These developments recast the virtuality of esports as the building blocks for specific sites, specific histories, and specific viewing practices.

When Riot built its permanent studio, the *LCS* was entering its fifth season and its third as a weekly serialized esport based in permanent studios. As such, the *NA LCS* had developed a significant history that it was able to cite. This legacy of competition became a way to develop and ground fandom around specific teams, players, and regions. One of the most striking changes to the studio space was an emphasis on this history. In the move from the MBS Studio to the Battle Arena, the décor of the studio changed from game characters to images of past teams and past events (like the World Championship), and star players. The design change shifted focus to the competition and the players as emergent celebrities and placed focus on the corresponding teams and franchises associated with competition. In breaks between games, fans at the studio were given the chance to meet these players. After

each series, fans would line up in the parking lot to take photographs and shake hands with players. Producer Dave Stewart explains that "people are interested in the stories," narratives about players, teams, and rivalries make the fandom compelling.[193] As the lead producer for the *NA LCS* since Season 4 and a former producer and writer at Fox Sports, he speaks to the narratives sports media emphasizes: player drama, legacies, the sports stories of the game. But this emphasis on narrative and character became part of the studio's design as well. It gestured retrospectively to the legacies of competition and concurrently to the players as the embodiment of this narrative. In subsequent seasons the *LCS* studio would add championship banners commemorating the teams that won major events. Building both the legacies of competition and emphasizing team fandom over a general interest in esports, the studio served as a site around which esport spectatorship was organized as well as a space to develop and ground the durable kind of fan practice it was cultivating.

When Blizzard opened its studio in late 2017 to feature *Overwatch* competition, the *OWL* didn't have the same legacy of competition. Nonetheless, the studio opened with regalia featuring its franchised teams and their star players. When I conducted my first site visit about 4 weeks into its inaugural season of competition, the studio was decorated with the logos of the competing teams while monitors around the lobby streamed video highlights of past matches. Other screens listed team rankings and match histories. Just as the *OWL* was launching, it was also actively creating a history of *OWL* hilights for the sake of fans visiting the studio – turning its emergent production into media with a legacy and weight. It was generating sports statistics and data to concertize and enable the kinds of knowledge die-hard fans of a sports franchise would be able to recall. The effect of reciting its history through the studio space is to downplay the nascent precarity of this kind of media production. Although

[193] Dave Stewart, personal interview, 4 February 2018.

the *OWL* is new, this emphasis on stats, sports data, and legacy suggests ways for fans to invest in the culture of esports. It reproduces the familiar look of sports reporting in the studio itself. The esports studio in this case oscillates between a place where this legacy of competition is made and where the same history is cited as a case or fodder for fan practice.

With both the *LCS* and the *OWL,* this practice of reciting esports stories through the studio space begins to encapsulate some of the virtuality of esports production. Just as the studio becomes a site to verify and represent the audience to itself, it also becomes a place to verify and produce the narrative of esports sportiness as well as an antidote to the immateriality of gameplay. For Blizzard's *OWL* in particular, the immediate cycling from event to history compresses this to a scale that begins to reflect the fluidity of this legacy. The production of an esports history is a hope for the possibility of a longer history. Their *Overwatch League* is so new and so untested that the citation of events as immediate history reflect a hope that this kind of legacy might be possible around the game. Or, to put it more modestly, the studio itself begins to do the work of producing fan knowledge and fan practice – equipping any visitor to the studio with the insider knowledge of a dedicated sports fan. These practices mimic sports reporting but situate it within the design of the studio space.

On a larger scale, this is also what takes place around both leagues' franchising systems. The hopeful or speculative use of permanent franchises as a means to signal the durability of esport just as these developers are moving to enact a structural shift that would make these productions more durable. The creation of permanent teams produce nodes of fan practice. In 2018, the *LCS* restructured its league system to give teams permanent spots rather than rotating the lowest ranking teams out of the league at the end of a season. What this meant was Riot games would sell permanent franchise positions to team organizations and

function like a sports league where profits are shared among the league's members. In the past, Riot had funded teams through stipends and teams would make up the difference through branding, merchandising, and sponsorship. The new model would reorient production so all profits were pooled and split in order to support teams, broadcast production, and pro player salaries. In a post on the change, Riot explained, "We see this as a positive step forward for the league for multiple reasons, but mainly because teams will no longer have to juggle uncertainty while planning for their future."[194] The rationale for the change posits it as a way of mitigating uncertainty for teams and encouraging long term investment in their brands. And while this is true, it also coincides with an attempt to make the *LCS* as a whole more dependable for Riot and more legible to fans. For Riot, the *LCS* served as a device to drive game participation, rather than as a distinct revenue stream in its own right. The old model left the work of producing profit largely to teams who received support from Riot but had to find most of their support from advertising and sponsorship. The new model solidified team positions allowing them to produce a kind of durable and dependable position in the esports market. Specifically, it hopes professional players will become the material loci where advertising and fandom collect in the service of the *LCS* as a whole. Moreover, because the *LC*S was itself a kind of advertising tool for *League of Legends*, Riot could underwrite it using revenue generated by the game rather than needing it to support itself. The new model anticipates a shift towards the entire system generating profit—it doesn't necessarily eliminate risk, but rather redistributes it around a new structure.

When Blizzard launched the *OWL*, they adopted a similar model of franchising, with some crucial amendments. Most notably the *OWL* was an entirely new production, so any

[194] "Evolution of the LCS." *Riot Games*. Web Page. Accessed April 15, 2018, https://www.lolesports.com/en_US/articles/evolution-of-the-na-lcs.

investment, Blizzards' or their partners, was entirely speculative. Investors were anticipating the potential value of a partnership with Blizzard Entertainment (who had produced such successful esports texts as *Hearthstone*, *StarCraf*t, and *StarCraft 2*) and the potency of esport as a booming area of development. In a similar way to Riot's *LCS*, these franchised teams would serve as the nodes around which these anticipated esports fans would identify. Only, these franchises were tied to specific cities in a way that seeks to make this fandom geographically particular. The teams in the *OWL* correspond to global cities with names like, "The New York Excelsior," "Seoul Dynasty," and "Los Angeles Gladiators." So, where permanent franchises seek to give fan practice durable points of reference (and to underwrite esport production), these franchises also sought to create a kind of identity of place around these games. Mirroring sports teams, many of which were the principal investors behind these esports franchises[195], this enactment of team franchising is a kind of liquid locating. Although the capital for these teams in many cases comes from owners with geographic ties to the cities they cite, all of the teams participate in competition in Los Angeles. Moreover their rosters are made up of players who don't necessarily share any relationship to the cities they represent. For example, the London Spitfire employed only Korean professional players. Like an attempt to use the studio as a site to simultaneously generate and recite esport history, the geographic naming of franchises is an attempt to insert place into a media production that, on so many levels, exists in the absence or near-absence of location.[196]

[195] Both the *OWL* and the *LCS* franchises have deep ties to traditional sports teams in the NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB. For the *OWL* some of these include the Miami Heat, the New York Mets, The New England Patriots, the Texas rangers and Philadelphia Flyers. For the *LCS* this includes The Golden State Warriors, the Milwaukee Bucks, and the Cleveland Cavaliers.

[196] At the time of writing it was imagined that eventually each team in the *OWL* would have its own stadium in the future, but this to is obviously speculative, and so naming precedes locating. Andrew Webster, "At the Overwatch League's Opening Night, I Witnessed the Strange, Thrilling Future of Esports," *The Verge*, January 16, 2018, Accessed April 15, 2018, https://www.theverge.com/2018/1/16/16897500/overwatch-league-opening-night-blizzard-arena.

Although the studio grounds this production in the presence and visibility of the studio audience and provides a regular site for producing esports media, esports remain speculative and virtual. The practices of locating taking place in and around the studio leverage franchising as a means to mitigate the divide between digital world of the game, its online audience, and the space of the studio.

Permanent franchises and franchises attached to notion of place are part of an effort to give nascent forms of fandom around esport something to latch onto. However, because these teams are new and because they share only a nominal connection with place or history, the studio itself becomes a physical site around which these things can be grounded and represented. For fans of *LCS* and *OWL* franchises the studio operates to verify and enable a kind of locative or enduring team identity. Moreover, for the *OWL* teams associated with geographical identity, this association presupposes a place that does not exist. Owners have ties to specific cities, but neither the teams nor their players share this connection. The studio in this case stands in as a kind of universal site where team rivalries can be played out. The studio is the precondition for production practices seeking to create nodes of connection for fandom. The studio becomes this physical site easing the oscillation from the immaterial to the material, or the virtual to some kind of located place and practice.

While all of this is largely figurative, the studio also facilitates a much more immediate kind of oscillation between physical and simulated space. Where the studio audience is a point of identification for fans consuming a broadcast online, the studio itself also has to adapt the experience of watching for its audience. Esport is screen media. Unlike other forms of sport, it doesn't correspond directly to the physicality or the lines-of-sight of an arena. Where sports fans spectating other kinds of competition attend stadium games to be

in the presence of other fans and to see the action play out in person, the nature of esports competitions makes this difficult. The studio provides a place for fans to gather and a site for the physical performance of playing, but the impacts of their actions are always mediated by a screen. This is true for the fans watching online, for the ones in the studio, and even for the players of the game who only see the impact of their play on their own screens. Naturally then, the development of a more feature-rich and more audience-focused spectator practice means a development of more engaging kinds of specularity in the studio space.

One of the major changes in Riot's new permanent studio was the addition of more screens to supplement the experience of watching the game. In terms of the translation of the virtual playing field into something meaningful for the audience, the proliferation of screens in the studio space is one of the most palpable adaptations to these kinds of spaces.
Each season and each new studio seems to reflect a deeper understanding of how to make the studio space a more engaging place to watch video game competition. In the case of Riot's studio, this meant the addition of screens to compliment the game action. While the main action continued to play out on a single central screen, additional screens became ways to make the experience of watching in the studio more compelling and immediate. The experience of immersion and presence shifted to secondary screens. In its MBS iteration, Riot used screens in front of each player's position on stage to give the audience a clearer view of the players faces. Meaning fans could see players reactions to things happening in the game. In a subtle way this draws clearer connections between game action and the players in the studio.

The development of the studio space following Riot's initial MBS studio reflects a deepening understanding of how esports might be translated for a live audience who is also

physically present. The second studio Riot constructed elaborated on the first in significant ways. The number of screens increased, which allowed spectators in the audience to see more information than they would have in the MBS studio, as well as more than they would have at home. One of the most significant additions to Riot's *LCS* arena was a banner of screens running along the wall behind each team. Added in 2016, the banners were used to announce the achievement of in-game objectives. Familiar to players of the game, these screens announce "First Blood," "Barron," or "Victory." Announcements like these signal crucial moments in the game when one team has taken an objective or scored an important kill. But they also serve to orient the audience, reminding them that a specific event is tied to the players on the stage. These screens also served a more ambient function. During regular gameplay, the screens show a 3D image of the flora of the game world. It's just an animated image of a row of trees familiar to *League of Legends* players, but it suggests the design of the studio is moving to make the connection between the computational space of gameplay and the physical space of competition more enveloping.

One way of imagining this development is to think of it in terms of the history of sports stadium screens. In an essay on large-screen video displays in sports arenas, Greg Seigel suggests that the implementation of screens in sports stadiums beginning in the 1980s is a trickling of TV aesthetics into the stadium.[197] In sports stadiums, screens encourage spectators to shift attention from the field to the video display for replays, to see events in the stadium, and for closeups on the action. This becomes a reflection of the preponderance of TV aesthetics, but it also produces a temporal and spatial adjustment of the experience of watching that allows viewers to experience stadium spectatorship in a televisually enhanced

[197] Greg Siegel, "Double Vision: Large-Screen Video Display and Live Sports Spectacle." *Television and New Media.* 3.1, 2002. 49–73.

way. The screen produces a sense of more presence. For fans in an esports studio though, there isn't a playing field to spectate or to turn attention away from. Instead, the proliferation of screens operate to move the field of play into the studio making the players actions at keyboard more visible and adopting the backdrops and flora of the game world. The use of this screen is less about making the stadium more TV-like, but rather more game-like. The ambient backgrounds and announcements of "Killing Sprees" and "Barron" function like moving the map and HUD announcements into the studio space.

[Blizzard's *OWL* studio shows a panorama of the game world on its massive screen before competition resumes.]

On a much larger scale, this is what the Blizzard Arena does with its own massive screen. The Blizzard Arena takes this concept much further using a gigantic screen to produce a kind of panorama of the game world. The screen runs from either side of the 450-seat, 50,000-square-foot auditorium that houses the *OWL*, wrapping partially onto the walls at either side. Taking a page from Cinerama[198], the screen wraps around the front of the

[198] Cinerama, a portmanteau of *cinema* and *panorama*, is an ultra-widescreen film projection technology that

studio in a gigantic "U" so the stage, the players, and the first few rows of the audience sit within its span. It's more an LCD wall than a screen itself. At different points of play, the screen is used in different ways. When competition is taking place, the game is displayed on a smaller screen in the center of this wall and the edges serve as background. Sometimes this background shows a kind of panorama of the game world, but at other points it shows detailed information about the match taking place. During my visit, as the game announcers were analyzing play from the perspective of Pine—the star player on The New York Excelsior—this screen showed a detailed breakdown of Pine's performance in-game accompanied by a gigantic rendering of his character's image. Another function of the screen is to offer fans in the studio a virtual tour of a map before competition begins. Like a Google street-view of the playing-field, a wide-angle camera flies through the map so the audience can see the world the competitors will inhabit. Similar to the *LCS*'s ambient trees and rendition of HUD announcements, these supplementary screens envision ways to make the practice of watching in the studio more immersive and crucially, more game-like. The panoramic screen of the *OWL* demonstrates this most directly; a technological capacity that seems to draw the entire studio space directly into the game world.

This visual capability isn't shared with the online audience, the broadcast feed that goes out over live streams – for both the *LCS* and the *OWL* – shows only what studio audiences would see on the main screen. These other elaborations set the studio apart and recognize a need to make the studio site compelling for the audience present. The use of screens to supplement this experience blurs distinctions between the world of the game and the world of the studio. This isn't the sports stadium becoming more like TV, but rather more like the world of the game, closing or mediating the distance between the virtual space of

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used a curved screen and multiple synchronized projectors to screen film in 146 degree field of view.

play and the physical space of spectatorship. And this is how we can begin to see all of these practices of locating and grounding converge. The consolidation of audience, of franchises, of history, of place, and even of virtual worlds around the studio space seeks to condition a practice of video game spectator and fandom in a single studio. Where Riot's first esports studio was a modest space designed to reach an online audience as modestly as possible, the more robust studios following from it are engaging with a more ambitious kind of audiencing. They are producing sites to grow a practice of esports spectatorship that builds upon itself, that seeks to spawn franchises and durable points of connection – all of which cyclically reinforces gameplay though spectatorship and though competitive play.

Conclusion

The creation of LA's first and second permanent esports venues are reflective of a growing confidence in esports media. Not so much the development of a industry based on clear lines of profitability, but rather a speculative and emergent industry driven by margins, by futures markets, and product synergy with the games themselves. While the legacies of esport and even esports studios are now over two decades old, their current formation elaborates on the conventions of the form while pioneering different ways of making this media profitable. The roots of the esport studio as a formal space in Korea provide the blueprint for Riot's *LCS* Studio and Blizzard's Arena, but the productions rooted in these spaces strike out in a new direction. This isn't media made for cable television, or for commercial profitability. Esports remain a turbulent and uncertain practice in the West, and what Riot and Blizzard capitalize on are their own ties to the games they make. The studio becomes a hopeful and still experimental space where the development and crystallization of

tactics for hailing an audience reflect a growing understanding of how this production reaches its spectators. It signals what producers hope spectators will invest in the consumption of esport media.

Neither the *LCS* nor Blizzard's *Overwatch League* are internally profitable – at least for the producers of this media, and at least not yet.[199] For the team owners and sponsors this is a bit more complex, but for Riot and Blizzard esport media making involves hailing an audience. This hailing occurs at several levels but what it serves ultimately are the games themselves. Esports are a nearly-secondary kind of media that sustain interest and activity around a primary media: the games in which these teams compete. In this respect, the studios themselves are also secondary spaces or translational spaces which operate to make, ground, and contextualize this play – providing sites of identification and participation through which the relationships esport encourages can be developed. Riots' *LCS* has worked to foster interest and participation in the game *LoL* itself, to build its profile, and to extend its lifespan. Blizzard's *Overwatch League* seeks to do the same thing for *Overwatch*. It creates a back and forth between virtuality and materiality. In the spirit of liquidity this means both virtual worlds and material studios, and media material and virtual capital.

[199] Eventually, ticket sales, esports merchandising, and broadcast deals might offset these costs, but mostly this kind of profitability isn't the point. The value of esports is in its promotional capacity, supporting the games themselves.

CHAPTER 4

Power Play:

Cops, Copyrights, and Crop-Tops, or the Limits of Play

In June 2018, a live streamer broadcasting under the name Arab Andy or alternatively ISIS Poseidon[200] was arrested in Washington after streaming audio recording of a bomb threat in a university classroom.[201] The recording, read by a computerized voice and followed by the sounds of explosions, was chosen and played remotely by one of his viewers using a Text-To-Speech (TTS) feature on Arab Andy's channel. The feature allows viewers to pay to have messages or audio clips played over a speaker that Arab Andy carries. It is a frequent feature in lifestreaming[202] which allows viewers to interact with the world around a streamer from the distance and anonymity of their personal computer, and it is designed to be abused. In this format, a lifestreamer serves as a kind of mobile human emissary for their audience, carrying a camera, a speaker, and the messages written by the audience out into the real world where they can produce meme-worthy[203] content. Andy doesn't play video games

[200] Arab Andy is a particular kind of live streamer called a ***life***streamer or sometimes an IRL Streamer, who instead of playing video games, broadcasts themself doing things "in real life." ISIS Poseidon is a reference to Ice Poseidon, a lifestreamer who popularized the format and with whom Arab Andy is loosely associated. Finally, Arab Andy is one of a number of Andy's, including Asian Andy, Mexican Andy, and Salmon Andy, all of which are references to Andy Milonakis, the former MTV Star and one of Ice Poseidon's original lifestreaming partners.

[201] Julia Alexander, "YouTube Lifestreamer Arrested for College Campus Bomb Threat Prank," *Polygon,* Jun. 1, 2018, https://www.polygon.com/2018/6/1/17416738/arab-andy-lifestreamer-YouTube-arrested-seattle-university-of-washington

[202] Lifestreaming is a form of live streaming that involves broadcasting some part of a streamer's everyday life. On the platform Twitch, lifestreaming belongs to the category "IRL" - In Real Life. On YouTube it is handled under YouTube Live. Many of the original live streaming experiments involved lifestreaming or lifecasting, or lifelogging - broadcasting from an always-on webcam. Twitch has its roots in Justin.tv which started as a lifecasting channel featuring 24/7 webcam video of founder Justin Kan. Precursors included JenniCam, Jennifer Ringley's webcam experiment which broadcast webcam pictures from her dorm room taken at 15 minute intervals.

[203] This media is highly citational with an internal logic familiar to users. Daniel Recktenwald's work on video game live streaming suggests that communication between streamers and their audiences follows predictable

on his streams, but his channel broadcasts on the same platforms to overlapping audiences and play remains focal. Viewers goad streamers into performative antics or use TTS to sow mayhem around the streamer. Sometimes it is directed at the streamer, but just as frequently TTS targets the people who happen to be nearby, leaving the streamer to try to navigate uncomfortable social/IRL scenarios. On other similar channels, TTS can be heard harassing Lyft and Uber drivers, playing loud and probably offensive media in libraries, grocery checkout lines, and on public transit. This is shock media for the 21st century, a kind of inside joke that streamers and their audiences get, but which passers-by may be largely oblivious to as they become the object of semi-anonymous internet harassment. This idea of a world of meaning available to the online audience, and out of sync with people who aren't part of this audience, is the inspiration for this chapter.

Arab Andy's arrest exemplifies a disconnect between online logics of playfulness and trolling against the rule of law or real world consequence. It is a useful case to open this chapter because Arab Andy's reaction to the arrest foregrounds an assumption that play affords its own rules—that play makes the threat less serious or insulates him from consequence. I make this case with the concept of a *magic circle* in mind. The term is originally attributed to Johan Huizinga, who writes,

> "All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the

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patterns that oscillate between streamers' reactions on camera and viewers use of emoticons and expressions. Daniel Recktenwald, "Toward a Transcription and Analysis of Live Streaming on Twitch," *Journal of Pragmatics*, 1.13, Feb. 2017. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314030873_Toward_a_transcription_and_analysis_of_live_streaming_on_Twitch

> temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."[204]

In game studies the concept is as fecund as it is fraught. In an essay on the magic circle, Erick Zimmerman laments the literal way the notion has been taken up in game scholarship, especially given the popularization of the concept in his co-authored book, *Rules of Play.*[205] In a post for *Gamasutra*, Zimmerman worries that scholars have read it too literally, suggesting instead, "that games are a context from which meaning can emerge."[206] This is a substantial revision, but useful for the point I am pursuing. It is not important that magic circle exist as a real boundary between games and life—this chapter does not aim at the ontology of games. Instead, I'm interested in the way it might produce an interpretive or contextual frame around play. This reading offers the ground to talk about how players or gaming micro-celebrities' sense of what play affords might diverge from the way law or power treats transformative and transgressive play.

The episode that leads to Arab Andy's arrest begins with the streamer walking around the University of Washington campus as his viewers suggest he try to talk to girls. This nerdy chauvinism and baseline out-of-touch-ness is standard for this kind of media, but already it reveals the kind of disconnect I am gesturing towards. He is one of a large contingent of streamers who complain about feminism, social justice warriors, and treat the harassment of women as part of the game. The real drama unfolds as he enters a sociology classroom where

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[204] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).
[205] Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen, *Rules of Play* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003)
[206] Eric Zimmerman, "Jerked Around by the Magic Circle," *Gamasutra*, Feb. 7, 2012. https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/135063/jerked_around_by_the_magic_circle_.php?page=2

a meeting of students and faculty is taking place. When a student asks if Arab Andy belongs in the room, he casually affirms, just before TTS audio announces "C4 has been activated" and commences a fake detonation countdown punctuated by sounds of explosions and screaming. This is all played over the speaker Arab Andy carries. In the following moments, video shows students and faculty frantically run from the room. Arab Andy also quickly leaves the building as he turns the camera to face himself. We see a young Middle Eastern man with a dark complexion, a messy beard, and a backpack loaded with camera and broadcast equipment used to run his stream. In this moment it is conceivable people could associate him with the stereotype of the Middle Eastern terrorist, but this is the running joke for his channel and the nickname ISIS Poseidon. With goofy excitement he begins reflecting on what an ideal reaction this has been.

As shock media, the bomb prank and the initial reactions it elicits constitute a wild success. It is compelling content that will net him more viewers, notoriety, and encourage other watchers make donations and post TTS comments on his stream. A few minutes later, as Arab Andy walks around campus, you get the sense that the gravity of the situation has not dawned on him. Fire trucks rush through campus and students he encounters talk about an evacuation while Arab Andy continues to perform for his viewers. Then, as he is walking off campus, two police officers arrive to arrest him.

The entire arrest is caught on camera and shared with everyone watching. As he is ordered to the ground, Arab Andy insists, "I didn't do nothing." Then, as he's placed in cuffs, he frantically makes this defense: "What are you doing bro? I didn't do anything wrong bro, stop bro, I didn't do anything wrong bro. Look at the video. I recorded it. (The officer says, 'Good.') That's fucked. You're gonna arrest me for nothing. Come on, stop bro. That's not

fair...this is like assault, this is a YouTube live stream bro. It was a donation, someone donated to media. It was like two bucks and it played some shit." Eventually officers place the phone in a bag and the screen goes dark with the stream still running. As all this is going on, donations start pouring in and the robot voice of TTS reads one message, "Free Arab Andy, he did nothing wrong, this is a misunderstanding officers." This is immediately followed by a media donation that plays N.W.A.'s "Fuck the Police."[207]

This episode details a collision between internet cultures of play (specifically, video game live streaming communities) and the stakes or materiality of real world actions or rules. Andy's insistence that it was all a mistake, a prank gone wrong, and generally unfair, is really a defense built around the game-like nature of his stream. In this case we might specify it as a tension between post-9/11 politics of risk and policing and the frivolity of online play. But, more broadly it presents an incompatibility between of the virtuality of internet irreverence and the real world, emphasizing the boundaries of this play. The world of trolls, memes, and internet anonymity fails to align with face-to-face interactions, material stakes, and more serious kinds of rules and consequences.

There is a long history in game studies of examining the rules of games and the nature of play. While Arab Andy's arrest wasn't really about watching video games, it is part of what we might consider the wider legacy of video game live streaming, Twitch, and interactive live media. It's format draws from the heavily annotated and dialogical style of a game stream, especially the elements designed to allow viewers to pay to interact or engage with the streamer. What I find particularly interesting about this kind of media is that in the concept of play they introduce new tensions around power, policing, and the protections

[207] "Arab Andy Arrested for Bomb Threat (full video including chat)," *YouTube*, https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=ya7iSA0diJY

afforded to performance. This media often pits the nature of playfulness against order, offense, rules, and authority (or ownership). Arab Andy's arrest is one case I would like to examine, among several, that begin to demonstrate the boundaries of a kind of emerging culture of entitled play. These cases gesture to different definitions of 'the rules,' especially in terms of the politics that seem to be at stake and the outcomes that prevail. Collectively, they reveal a kind of meta-magic circle, an understanding of play enabled by and expressed through playful media. By elucidating these rules I hope to arrive at a discussion of the nature of play as a concept, which, in a polemical sense, I would like to pose as a challenge to overly positive or uncritical notions of play.

A Meta Magic Circle

Recent game studies scholarship has revived a theoretical interest in play as a mode of cultural expression. This was a pivot from earlier video game studies scholarship concerned with the formal nature of video games. Works like Espen Aarseth's book on nonlinear literature, *Cybertext*, Jesper Juul's *Half-Real*, a mediation of debates about the narrative or rule-based nature of games, or Alexander Galloway's proto-platform studies approach to games' algorithmic hearts all advance this project of defining games or interactive media at a structural level.[208] As a young medium, a fresh object in the field of media studies, these questions were due consideration. In the forward to the *Platform Studies* book series, a further focusing of this ontological thread, Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost explain, "The best artists, writers, programmers, and designers are well aware of how certain

[208] Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).; Galloway, Alexander R. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).; Jesper Juul, *Half-real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

platforms facilitate certain types of computational expression and innovation."[209] This concern with the technological affordances of a particular platform was meant to reign in or refocus more broadly ontological work in game studies by limiting the scope to specific technical apparatuses. This further focusing belies a difficulty with ontology. Video games as a medium often defy formal categorization. Beyond their computational roots, the structure, aesthetic, and experience of playing video games varies dramatically from text to text. The platform studies approach seeks to resolve this ambiguity by placing an emphasis on the materiality and history of a platform as a way to secure and focus this question. An alternative thread in game studies is a re-emerging concern with the more ethereal side of games' medium specificity, namely the element of play. The turn to a focus on play reflected a nagging antithesis to the promise of ontology. What if the question isn't about games at all, if video games are too broad a category to taxonomize? The idea is that, perhaps play may be better suited for examination than games' technical or structural elements.This shift saw game studies scholarship returning to the work of early game theorists Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, and Bernard Suits who each sought to taxonomize games or play in broad strokes. Huizinga, whose notion of the magic-circle I discussed earlier, sought to locate the function of play in culture from a loosely anthropological perspective.[210] Roger Caillois's 1967 work on play, *Man, Play, Games*, sought to elaborate on Huizinga's work and further categorize and theorize types of games and modes of playing.[211] Bernard Suits's, *The Grasshopper,* takes a much more philosophical approach to games, suggesting that games or

[209] Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost *Racing the Beam the Atari Video Computer System*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), vii.
[210] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).
[211] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).

play are integral to the human experience.[212] The work of these three scholars is aimed at a broad concept of play. While none are recent enough to discuss or even imagine the field of video games, each advances a model of culture or human expression that depends on playing games. They imagine play as something integral to human culture and characterize it as a mode of expression.

These general theories of play, already heavily cited in game studies, became the inspiration for a renewed interest in play generally. The booming success of the games industry, the proliferation of interactive media, the advent of gamification or the integration of game-like elements into other kinds of media, all seem to point to play's wider and growing cultural significance. In media studies, this inspired a rethinking of the way play fit into culture. Eric Zimmerman suggested in "Manifesto for a Ludic Century" that data would become the predominant format for all media and that the interactivity of data systems would privilege players. He explains, "Being playful is the engine of innovation and creativity: as we play, we think about thinking and we learn to act in new ways. As a cultural form, games have a particularly direct connection with play."[213] Zimmerman's manifesto sees players as the types of users best equipped to engage, navigate, and master a world driven by data. In many ways it borrows from McKenzie Wark's *Hacker Manifesto*, which paints a hope for hackers as the cultural experts who might pierce the mystifying veil of data or ideology.[214] The gamer of the ludic century becomes a kind of revolutionary data hero who can master the rules and constraints of systems. In another play studies work, Miguel Sicart calls play "a

[212] Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2005).
[213] Eric Zimmerman, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century," *Being Playful*, Sept. 9, 2013. https://ericzimmerman.wordpress.com/2013/09/09/manifesto-for-a-ludic-century/;
[214] McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard university Press, 2004)

way of being in the world."[215] Perhaps a little less ambitious than Zimmerman's work, Sicart's study of play still sought ways that play might be understood as a kind of liberating activity. This is a theme taken up in Ian Bogost's most recent work on play as well. Bogost, who's contribution to Games Studies' ontological trajectory includes the staunchly materialist insistence on platform specificity, joins play theory as one of the most exuberant philosophers of play's possibility. In the introduction to his book *Play Anything,* Bogost promises, "When we play, we engage fully and intensely with life and its contents. Play bores through boredom in order to reach the deep truth of ordinary things."[216] Synthesizing Sicart and Zimmerman, Bogost suggests play's recognition of the rules or constraint allows us to see the world as it is, and thus change the way we relate to it to better play the game.

Within this revived play scholarship there is an impulse to be optimistic about the possibilities that playing creates for new ways of thinking or being. Latching onto the personalization and expression of playing, and the mastery needed to play well, these theories of play look for a kind of revolutionary possibility in play. Leaning on the widespread growth of interactive media in the late 20th century and early 21st century, a renewed scholarship on play emphasizes the potency of playfulness. To be able to play within a system, a user must understand and master its rules. This is kind of a fantasy of players as hackers in a world of information and data, but what if the reality is more mundane? What if players are just media consumers? This question is roughly the point of this chapter, to say: yeah, play is potent, but its power is not necessarily designed for good.

The antithesis of the player-hacker who has mastered a system, is a player who has become absorbed in the dream of the magic circle. The allure of the space apart, created for

[215] Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013).
[216] Ian Bogost, *Play Anything* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2016)

the sake of playfulness, mystifies the player. Media scholar Lisa Nakamura describes games as spaces of optimistic possibility, where notions of meritocracy and optimism work to obscure structural inequity. She writes, " gamers' intense attachment to games reflects the opposite of guilty pleasure, much less time wasting. In a viciously neoliberal economy, gaming feels like a virtuous pleasure, for games reward player labor, while, in contrast, labor in the real world is often undervalued, treated as surplus or even as worthless."[217] This explains the appeal of games, but it also begins to contextualize their mystifying cultural character—an emphasis on meritocracy and reward that privileges a certain class of player. A reticence to see players as the arrival of a new, more savvy, more engaged, and more agential media user is also expressed in Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux's *Metagaming*.[218] The conceit for their book is that videogames are media designed to play metagames. Games are not spaces apart or tools to test reality of rules. Instead, they are nested in bigger systems of rules and meaning. Here play is seen as a condition of industrial design. Not necessarily the free expression of agency or mastery of a system of rules, but an experience constructed to engross the user. The magic circle here mistifies the player as much as it opens to them a new world of still limited possibility to explore. At some level this reads like the Althusserian formulation of ideology, that it alludes to materiality while ensuring this reality eludes understanding. But the point is more direct than the mystification of ideology; simply, games don't exist without stakes. The magic circle—a notion that somehow these stakes could be suspended—forgets that players cheat, that they flame each other after the game ends, that microtransactions, licences, and networks keep gameplay

[217] Lisa Nakamura, "Racism, Sexism, and Gaming's Cruel Optimism," in *Gaming Representation*, ed. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 248
[218] Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

from ever existing in a space fully removed from the material world. A theory of a metagame is a theory of the way playful media is made meaningful beyond the stakes of the game.

This is a critical reversal of the utopian hope for play. While theorists might hope for the potential of playful performance, we also must not misplace the need to reflect on the allure of the game space and its function in a materialist frame. Zimmerman is correct in the sense that the ludic century will be a century of systems, game states, and rules. But he is too quick to see the player's impending triumph over the algorithm. What is fun about games is becoming engrossed in the state of flow. This is a powerful position for the gamer, one that allows a mastery of the rule or of the algorithm. However, the appeal of play is also what makes it problematic and I would like to bring this critical skepticism towards play to an analysis of spectator video games. In this chapter, I consider the ways notions of play, or perceptions of the rules of the game, create problems or conflict.

Part of the appeal of video game live streaming is it presents new possibilities for expression. It is a novel configuration that allows content consumers and producers to interact. Streaming atomizes broadcast channels in such a way that anyone can become a producer and anyone watching can access or influence this production. This is the pinnacle of media made personal, of the mystifying appeal of access or democracy around media making. The streamers I interviewed for the first chapter of this project are participating in a platform specific gold rush in hopes they might make gaming a valuable endeavor. Similarly, the success of microcelebrity adopters of YouTube and the appeal of esports turn streaming into a kind of game world flooded by players hustling to figure out what it takes to turn playing into a full-time job. This is playful media, in the sense that exceptional or entertaining play might net a larger audience. But it is also playful in the sense that the

platform itself situates its users in a larger game-state where the strategic allocation of time, attention, and audience management might turn leisure activity into a career or at least, a profitable side-hustle.

I say all this because, with the growth of video gaming live streaming there is a tendency to see the limitations or proprietary nature of broadcast and cable networks dissolved and the possibility of fully digital distribution as a kind of new horizon for grassroots media making. As a counterpoint though, it is important to recognize that this logic of play produces its own magic circle. Turning media making into a game or importing the values of play culture is a fraught exercise. In this chapter, I would like to challenge the notion that play is liberating. Instead, I'm interested in the way play might rather be enabling or mystifying. Play is compelling because it offers a sense of newness. Of old rules suspended and new, more fun rules to take their place. Play presents players with a new set of conditions cordoned off from reality. But the cases I am collecting here suggest that rethinking reality through the lens of play might instead produce certain conceptual incompatibilities.

Video game streaming isn't ontologically new. It has strong roots in other forms of internet-enabled broadcasting or streaming. The emphasis on game play and the integration of chat and interactive capacities complicate these genealogies and provide streamers and their audiences with comparatively novel ways of connecting with each other. Streaming play becomes an extension or convergence of streaming media and play cultures, and this convergence introduces a new paradigm that encourages individualistic, selfish, and sometimes reckless kinds of play. This is maybe the antithesis and more likely the logical conclusion of play theory turned utopian. While I don't disagree that play helps us to

understand and reimagine our relationships to media, I think the kind of impulses play caters to or permits need to be further elaborated upon. As it turns out, a liberalist, individualistic, self-motivated player might be the ideal media user for the 21st century, but this user isn't necessarily interested in the collective good or a benevolent humanism. In contrast to a playful utopia of self-actualized users, perhaps this media metagame sells a play space where gamers can be selfish. The freedom and access associated with platforms for sharing user-generated content and the aspirations of playful media towards the freedom of game worlds seems to suggest play isn't necessarily civilizing.

A Beta Magic Circle

As preface to this discussion, it bears noting that the conflicts this chapter proposes to highlight are politically valenced, in part by the culture of these platforms. The openness of a platform economy means content is personalized and targeted at slim segments of the larger user base of YouTube or Twitch.[219] However, while there is a multiplication of channels and with this an expansion of choices,[220] this doesn't necessarily correspond to cultural heterogeneity. Demographically, this media skews very hard towards young men. Twitch's audience statistics suggest that half of its user base is between the ages of 18 and 35 and 81% male.[221] Although it doesn't specify which side of that bracket the other half falls, it is likely that users under the age of 18 make up a big part of this audience. For YouTube, which hosts a wider variety of content, it is difficult to say much about demography for the platform as a

[219] I cover this extensively in Chapter 2, where I argue that the production of a video game live stream is built around major scalar shifts in the size and demographics of audiences.
[220] Often this gets described as the democratization of content, but I think it's more about the proliferation of nodes through which users might connect. This generates more choice without necessarily introducing more democracy or diversity of content.
[221] "Audience," Twitch Advertising. Accessed Nov. 10, 2018. https://Twitchadvertising.tv/audience/

whole, but data suggests similar figures for its games audience. Channels featuring games-related content have viewership generally over 80% male, with channels featuring MMOs, and Shooters boasting 90% male viewer bases.[222] Data for YouTube as a whole also suggests that, like Twitch, its viewers are mostly young, and that the younger the viewers, the more inclined they are to spend more hours on the site in a given month. All of which suggests that as we talk about video game live streaming media we are talking about media catering to young men, predominantly. This means that while the range of choice may be expanded, we are still talking about media platforms or ecosystems that are internally, culturally hegemonic.

So, to the extent that the conflict emerging from the irreverence of play is the subject of this chapter, this is play that often reflects the values of this user base. This value bias is due in part to the structure of these platforms which favor the most popular creators and most-viewed channels. Sorting content by views means that while the platform may be open, users functionality select and reinforce a kind of hegemony of performance. The most successful channels on Twitch or among YouTube's gamers have been selected by a core user base that shares a lot of demographic overlap. Upwards of 80% is not a negligible statistic, and so without trying to overdetermine these audiences or these platforms, it remains fair to say they are catering broadly to a male/masculine subject. The difficulty in making this observation is that to extrapolate further risks oversimplifying the range of expressions or associations coming out of this media or the reasons viewers connect to content creators. Excessive or offensive content may draw viewership, even if those viewers

[222] Eric Blattberg, "The Demographics of YouTube, in 5 Charts," *Digiday*, April 24, 2015, https://digiday.com/media/demographics-YouTube-5-charts/

don't like or agree with the performance, for example. This also explains why some creators may favor exaggerated or incendiary play.

At the same time, this is a games culture, post-gamergate, operating in a political climate where racist, sexist, and xenophobic expressions are uttered with more confidence. While gamers are an increasingly heterogeneous group, hardcore gamers, as demonstrated by Twitch and YouTube, are overwhelmingly male and can often be outspoken in their frustration with feminism, social-justice, and politically correct messaging. Moreover, this media moves between platforms so the most interesting content will appear on Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and 4Chan. In this way, men's nerd media has strong ties to platforms that also serve as hubs for men's rights movements and alt-right politics. Certainly these things are not coterminous, and I would be wildly overstating the significance of these connections to say mainstream games culture shared these values. In many ways, the culture of games has become increasingly inclusive, resisting the machismo and homophobia of some brands of masculinity. But as a culture, or in an ecology of platforms, it is more hospitable to these ideas than other subcultures might be.

A hegemonic majority may not make gaming a hostile space directly, but it produces structures that inform how gamers perceive themselves and the values of their communities. Kishonna L. Gray has argued minority groups are quickly identified in online game spaces.[223] So even when these communities aren't hostile to difference, they are often quick to call attention to players who don't fit the dominant demographic. These questions of digital demography get complicated quicky. It is important to avoid minimizing the presence, impact, and experience of minority groups online, especially because hegemonic frames

[223] Kishonna L. Gray, *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 16.

often assume their insignificance. As Anna Everett demonstrates, there is a long history of black early adoption of internet spaces, particularly because networks made organizing easier.[224] Similarly, Twitch is home to a community of streamers who don't conform to the dominant demographic and have found audiences and communities on the platform. At the 2015 TwitchCon a panel of LGBTQ streamers addressed issues affectign queer people who stream, covering harassment but also ideas about community building and solidarity. Adam Koebel observed:

> "I think there is an interesting parallel between gender as a performative act and twitch, which relies on performative behavior. A big thing that draws people to a community or chanel is that they can identify with certain things about a person. So when people come in [to a chanel] for the first time they are looking for things they either can like or cannot like about a person's behavior."[225]

Koebel's point is that the platform is driven by identification and superficial markers of identity often become grounds for knee-jerk reactions. This politics of identification allows marginalized communities to find each other, at the same time opening them up to harassment.

As a case in point, I attended a panel at the 2016 TwitchCon, "Diversify Twitch," which was added to the program in response to a wave of poorly moderated racist chat at the Austin DreamHack *Heathstone* tournament. At DreamHack a black player, Terrance Miller, became the target of this racism. At the TwitchCon panel meant to address this, the online chat began to spam the same racist messages and an emote of a famous black streamer (TriHex) often deployed as a racial meme. Although the moderators did a better job of

[224] Anna Everett, Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace, (New York: SUNY Press, 2009)
[225] Adam Kobel, LGBT+ Broadcaster Pane, TwitchCon 2015, Panel, 2015.

curtailing abuse targeting the all black panel of streamers, it immediately validated the point that racism on the platform seems unavoidable. DeejayKnight, was the first to address this directly, recognizing that while it seemed objectively terrible, the chat was more complicated. Some users might not know their behavior is offensive or grasp the racialized meaning of the TriHex emote. In his stream, he finds a 1 minute ban from chat and a quick personal acknowledgement, "Hey, don't be like that, talk to me." is often enough to rein this in.[226] While this is a step, it can't really address structural issues born of majority abuse. In the Q&A segment an audience member and streamer, Blaze, observed, it is already hard to find black streamers. He asked, "How do we overcome this, they put us on the front page and then the chat get crazy?"[227] This speaks to the problem of a unregulated forum. Twitch is an important forum to minority communities of gamers who are seeking solidarity. However, its collectivizing potential also enables collective abuse, abuse which often fails to see itself as destructive.

The fascination with games and with play comes with a liberal-individualist reticence to take anything too seriously. Games are fun, playful, spaces of escape. So even when gamers are not inclined to right-wing viewpoints, they are often exasperated with the politically correct culture of the 90s and early 2000s. This is not radically misogynistic or racist media. In these racist or sexist chats, viewers are quick to defend free speech or suggest harassment is universal. More often users express a libertarian ethos that is individualistic but not outwardly exclusary. Scholars of masculinity have noted men's internet nerd culture does not identify with the domineering, hegemonic masculinity described by R.W. Connell.

[226] DeejayKnight, "Diversify Twitch," TwitchCon 2016, Panel, 2015.
[227] Blaze, "Diversify Twitch," TwitchCon 2016, Panel, 2015.

They do not value machismo, or violence, or chauvinistic power in the way some brands of masculinity might. Gamers also tend to be it's less homophobic. Erick Anderson and Mark McCormack have described an inclusive model masculinity, and in many ways the expression of gender among practitioners and users of spectator gaming media more closely resembles that.[228] Streamers themselves will often joke about their beta masculinity[229] (as opposed to being alpha males). This is often in reference to feeling excluded by dominant culture and the grounds for deeper connections within an online gaming subculture. In their work on YouTube, gamers Marcus Maloney, Steven Roberts, and Alexandra Caruso argue that YouTube personalities are more inclusive, less homophobic or misogynistic, and increasingly intimate or emotional.[230] This coincides with the expressions of community, intimacy, and vulnerability expressed by the streamers I interviewed for this project.

Still, an emphasis on unfiltered speech, individuality, and a resistance to the politics of representation, while not necessarily reactionary, often lends itself to an audience that seems to feel attacked or threatened by progressive politics. They feel like they are not the beneficiaries of dominant gender or racial categories, even if they belong to these groups demographically. This is the key tenet of beta masculinity. It was also the grounds for gamergate and for the distinction between hardcore and casual games culture. So, at the risk of generalizing, this media combines highly personal and affective performance of individualism with a playfulness that strives to be anti-political or sees itself outside of politics. This stands in complement to the microcelebrity ethos of the platforms where this

[228] Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack, "Inclusive Masculinity Theory: Overview, Reflection and Refinement;" *Journal of Gender Studies,* Oct. 23, 2016. 547-561.

[229] This is also often a claim of incels an online movement of men who lament their inability to form romantic connections with women. This is a movement that is often extremely misogynistic, producing men's rights terrorists. So it's difficult to be definitive in any overarching way, there is a great deal of cross cultural overlap on these platforms, which again, goes with the liberalist ethos.

[230] Marcus Maloney, Marcus, Steven Roberts, and Alexandra Caruso, "'Mmm … I love it bro!' Performances of Masculinity in YouTube Gaming," *New Media and Society*, 20 no.5, April, 2017.

media circulates and the scalar shifts supporting these kinds of producers. As Theresa Senft and Alice Marwick suggest of YouTube celebrities widely, the draw of microscale media is a sense of authenticity.[231] So, without the need to appease ratings boards or mass audiences, these Twitch and YouTube gamers can position themselves as edgy and irreverent as a means of carving out their niche. Departing from the carefully calculated media of mass appeal, they aren't afraid to offend if it means endearing themselves to a core audience that prizes unfiltered, unpredictable content. This media becomes political in an earnest attempt to eschew politics, or better still, incite or upset over-serious politics.

Colliding with the Limits of Play

One of the initial questions I considered when framing this chapter was: can we talk about an aesthetic of video game live streaming? Is there a cohesive kind of performance or are there outstanding structural elements that correspond to video game spectator media? I think what is fruitful about pursuing this line of questioning through points of tension and rupture, is that these exceptional moments emerging around what is already an exceptional media form, begin to sketch some of the borders or profiles of this type of media. Like a silhouette or shading over a relief, these moments of tension help us to understand the ways video game live streaming is working itself into the broader cultural ecosystem, and the places where its rough edges still stand out. These boundary cases allow us to see the edges of a magic circle around this kind of playful, game-adjacent media.

[231] Theresa M. Senft, "Microcelebrity and the Branded Self." In *A Companion to New Media Dynamic*s, eds. J. Hartley, J. Burgess and A. Bruns, (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). 346-354. Alice Marwick, "You May Know Me From YouTube: (Micro)-Celebrity in Social Media," In *A Companion to Celebrity*, Edited by P.D. Marshall and S. Redmond, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2015), 333-348.

Heretofore, I have explored the practices sustaining video game live streaming. These include production, audience management, infrastructure, and a political economy of large-scale esports media. What is compelling about all of these cases are the ways they anticipate more general changes in the making and marketing of media. These include smaller audiences and niche interests—leveraged in ways that are more about producing manageable, and dedicated viewers—who will re-invest in this media, as opposed to selling mass audiences to advertisers. Because this type of media might be said to anticipate future movements in content production, these edge cases are even more important to consider. It is not simply a matter of live streaming's growing pains, or to say live streaming is being brought into the fold, as it were. Instead, these are byproducts of characteristic differences live streaming brings to a media ecosystem. And live streaming comes to represent some of the core values of this ecosystem. To concretize this, Arab Andy's arrest should be understood in terms of the political economy of the work of a live streamer. He positions himself precariously in order to solicit support in the form of tips and donations from his follower base. As foolish and shortsighted as his performance of the Arab terrorist trope is, it is undertaken to appease a micro-audience with no real recourse to the legislative rules governing broadcast media or public space. Instead, it imagines the play-space of the stream will cover the consequences of his performance, incorrectly, of course.

The cases I have selected here demonstrate the way play fails to escape politics. That play can't be apolitical. They also suggest that an overly optimistic view of play's potency fails to grasp the forces acting on it. Against the notion of enabled players, I hope to position a notion of a platform economy or structures in place enabling this kind of super-performative play but also establishing the boundaries for it. The rise of user-generated

media, which is often treated as an opening up of the possibilities for what might be produced, is enabled first by the rise of platforms to connect users and host content. While Twitch and YouTube put more power in the hands of individuals, these platforms become valuable not simply because of the media they create, but also because of the user bases they connect. The proliferation of games, of data, or of user-made media depends first on the presence of platforms and these platforms mostly try to naturalize the degree to which they mediate. So, while YouTube or Twitch content lends itself to some genre conventions and a host of platform affordances, the content circulating across it is thought of as it's users' creations, rather than media enabled or conditioned by its platform. Platform affordances are structuring, though. The way content is organized and sorted, and the ways users can interact around this content, goes a long way towards shaping what gets produced. Moreover, the platforms in this case also do a lot to determine the limits of what can be created. Twitch famously took a hardline stance against "titty streams," channels that featured women in low cut tops. And both YouTube and Twitch are very careful about the use of licensed media like music in videos or broadcasts. This illustrates my second point, that these playful platforms enable these performances only to the extent that they serve their owners interests, in this case Google or Amazon.

In this chapter I consider the structures that rein in play or how the ethos of playful media collide with the boundaries of some kind of magic circle, at a metagame level. Policies that say, "this is the limit" or, "this is too far." I look first at the case of Nintendo's copyright claims against video game Let's Players and the way this battle—played out over social media, games journalism, and YouTube's content management system—begins to sketch a tension between play conceived as personal and expressive, and games as commercial

objects. The middling resolution of this policy (Nintendo arrived at a solution that softened its hard-line policy but remained clunky, frustrating, and disenfranchising for content producers) offers a useful commentary on the magic circle, highlighting a top-down limitation on how much players can make performative play their own. The second case, between Campo-Santo and PewDiePie, which is legislated through the same channels as Nintendo's claims against Let's Players, extends beyond a protection of IP and pivots towards ethical or moral policing. Whereas Nintendo's use of copyright protects its IP broadly, Campo Santo uses the same principles and YouTube's DMCA takedown system to target an individual creator as a response to racist antics on his channel. This turns performative play into a conditional media form, a policed space. It's not about a broad boundary around the monetization of play, but a targeted, conditional use of IP to signal the limits of incendiary play. The notion of targeting and selecting kinds of authorized and unauthorized performance begins to sketch what I would like to think of as a *meta-magic circle*. If a magic circle cordons of game space from the rules of the real world, a meta magic circle would seek to set exceptions for game culture and media from real world expectations. The wider and more conditional rules that emerge, which say, "Streaming is great but it needs to adhere to these limitations, particular to the platform." Or, as in Arab Andy's defense, "It's just a game, it's not offensive." This is a principle at work in the third case I discuss, Twitch's policing of "titty streamers." In 2014, Twitch introduced a terms-of-use policy targeting mostly women streamers, establishing limits for acceptable dress on the platform.This begins to bring us back to this question of the gendered dynamics of this media. Responding to cries for fairness from its mostly male user base, Twitch implemented rules about dress in order to curtail the use of sex appeal as a means to sell streams. This

decision was celebrated by a portion of Twitch's predominantly-male audience despite the obvious tones of censorship. This case reveals the limit of the liberalist ethos of this playful subculture, replaced by cries for equity from (mostly) men.

All of these cases are about what play permits or what is allowed under the umbrella of play. Like Arab Andy's arrest, they express a confusion about the rules and protections afforded by a play space, by a meta-magic circle. And like Arab Andy's, each results in or from some kind of policing. Not as literal as officers on camera, but still about the rule of law or rules of the platform against the liberalism of a play space. Understanding the nature of these conflicts goes a long way towards sketching the contours of play culture and specifically how this culture relates to a wider media or political landscape.

Nintendo, Let's Play? Let's Not.

Streaming games and broadcasting play exists in a kind of strange symbiosis with game texts and game publishers. The practice of producing streams or video of playing depend on having some game to play in the first place. But for license owners, the collective energy of excited gamers sharing game play with others is invaluable viral marketing in the age of social media. And players, of Let's Plays or on streams, see themselves as brand ambassadors and community organizers. Their work, which is really about inserting their personality into gameplay, helps to grow player bases, revive interest in older games, and drive attention to games. In practice, they support a viral buzz around titles and work as curators or emissaries to the communities who watch them. As much as this relationship is symbiotic, streamers are still dependent parties in this configuration.

The nature of video game streaming depends on having some game to play and this produces a peculiar doubling of platforms. Twitch or YouTube serve as platforms for broadcasting content and connecting streamers or content creators with an audience. But, in this arrangement games themselves also take on platform characteristics. They become essential software for performing play. This is especially apparent when changes to a game directly affect the people using that game to make content. And many games have relatively short life spans. For example, many of my contacts for this project played the game *Destiny* when I was speaking to them. But as the player base for that game migrated, these *Destiny* streamers found they had to move to different games to continue to reach an audience. First to *The Division* and eventually to *Destiny 2*, both of which experienced messy launches and long periods of content drought.[232] To pose this another way, Twitch groups channels by the games they feature. Streamers and Let's Players often stick closely to franchises, genres, or styles of games. These games are the context through which users connect with a player and often creators will find that changing games dramatically affects the size of the audience they are reaching. The stakes of this relationship are obvious when, for example, a player is banned from a game for cheating or for a violation community standards in a game. This also means that while game developers don't generally exercise their license rights against users playing their games, the potential for this kind of conflict exists. So, while Twitch and YouTube are platforms in an obvious, essential sense, games themselves take on a kind of platform status as well. They might similarly be understood in terms of the nature of their

[232] Content Drought is a term used to describe a lul in game development or patching. The life cycles of video games have shifted towards subscriptions or microtransactions, where developers add content in order to keep players engaged. This extends a games relevance and keeps players committed to a title longer than if it has a clear end point. However this also means that game developers need to continue adding to a game to keep their audience committed.

affordances, or their user bases, and access to a specific game is generally a precondition to the work of the content creators I study here.

In late 2013, Nintendo disputed the de facto treatment of games as open platforms for streaming play, leveraging its rights to its IP through YouTube's content ownership system. As video game live streaming was growing towards a kind of tipping point, driven forward by buy-in from game developers and the expansion of platforms for distributing this kind of media, Nintendo took a hardline stance against YouTube content creators sharing video of their play. In May 2013, Nintendo started to file IP claims against videos featuring segments of Nintendo games. While it did not pursue takedowns or legal action, Nintendo used YouTube's Content ID system to identify and claim advertising revenue from user-generated videos featuring Nintendo games. The targets in this case were largely users making "Let's Play"-style videos of Nintendo games. In this format, users record segments of gameplay, often with some kind of value-added in the form of users' commentary, their performance, or style of play. The format began as a kind of forum post featuring detailed documentation of a game's narrative and structure, but punctuated by the poster's comments and engagement with other users on the forum.[233] A "Let's Play" offers another way of experiencing a game, similar to watching someone complete a game over a live stream. Let's Plays have the benefit of a video-on-demand format, meaning elements can be edited or post-produced. Many times, streamers will play segments of a game and upload these in episodic installments, generally edited around a streamer's performance through discrete parts of a game (levels, stages, between checkpoints, or cut scenes).

[233] The Something Awful Forums were one of the fist platforms for this kind of content. Although they were more often a series of still images than videos of gameplay, at least at first.

Nintendo's actions against YouTube channels were executed quietly, through YouTube's Content ID system. News of this policy shift came from frustrated YouTubers posting to Facebook and Twitter. Zack Scott, a YouTube Let's Play-er, in a Facebook post now taken down, was the first to express his frustration, with game news sites quickly picking up the story. Scott's post called Nintendo's move "Backwards," explaining, "Video games aren't like movies or TV. Each play-through is a unique audio-visual experience. When I see a film someone else is watching, I don't need to see it again. When I see a game that someone else is playing, I want to play that game for myself."[234] Scott goes on to explain that while there are people who may watch instead of playing, those people aren't really gamers, and that most who do watch are watching to see his commentary, to see how to get through parts of the game, or to see how he reacts to the game. In terms of the ontology of video games and the nature of play, this response seeks to highlight what makes streaming or spectating games compelling media forms—that play is personal. At the same time it uses play to elevate the player-content-producer to the status of an author. What is being created in a Let's Play video is a performance of play that is infectious or at least vicariously engaging. While I am dubious that watchers who don't feel compelled to play aren't real gamers, Scott poses this as a rather idealist way of addressing the perceived threat of Let's Plays. But the broader point, that play is primary, bears consideration. It's almost as if Scott's Facebook appeal could stand in for debates about the ontological nature of games, siding resoundingly with play as a form of narrative and against notions of games algorithmic nature.

[234] Zack Scott's Facebook Post has been removed but the text of it is still in articles covering the policy change. See: Joe Mullin, "Nintendo kicks "Let's Play" Videos Off YouTube then Slaps Ads on Them," *ArsTechnica,* May 16, 2013. https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2013/05/nintendo-kicks-lets-play-videos-off-YouTube-then-slaps-ads-on-them/

Zack Scott · 8 842 personnes aiment
Hier, à 14:37 ·

J'aime

I just want to express my feelings on the matter of Nintendo claiming not just my YouTube videos, but from several LPers as well.

I'm a Nintendo fan. I waited in the cold overnight to get a Wii. I'm a 3DS ambassador. I got a Wii U at midnight when I already had one in the mail. I've been a Nintendo fan since the NES, and I've owned all of their systems.

With that said, I think filing claims against LPers is backwards. Video games aren't like movies or TV. Each play-through is a unique audiovisual experience. When I see a film that someone else is also watching, I don't need to see it again. When I see a game that someone else is playing, I want to play that game for myself! Sure, there may be some people who watch games rather than play them, but are those people even gamers?

My viewers watch my gameplay videos for three main reasons:
1. To hear my commentary/review.
2. To learn about the game and how to play certain parts.
3. To see how I handle and react to certain parts of the game.

Since I started my gaming channel, I've played a lot of games. I love Nintendo, so I've included their games in my line-up. But until their claims are straightened out, I won't be playing their games. I won't because it jeopardizes my channel's copyright standing and the livelihood of all LPers.

[Zack Scott, Deleted Facebook Post, Archived]

By comparison, Nintendo's response, Tweeted after several video game news platforms covered the story, is an emotionless and reasoned defense of their brand identity. Citing a need to protect its intellectual property and keep things family friendly, it makes no reference to play or game performance. The Tweet read,

> "As part of our ongoing push to ensure Nintendo content is shared across social media channels in an appropriate and safe way, we became a YouTube partner and as such in February 2013 we registered our copyright content in the YouTube database. For most fan videos this will not result in any changes, however, for those videos featuring Nintendo-owned content, such as images or audio of a certain length, adverts will now appear at the beginning, next to or at the end of the clips. We

> continually want our fans to enjoy sharing Nintendo content on YouTube, and that is why, unlike other entertainment companies, we have chosen not to block people using our intellectual property."[235]

By the standards of the film, television, or music industries this kind of arrangement is generous. YouTube has a long history as a battleground over fair-use, where copyright claims from media producers can take the form of serious legal battles. But as YouTube's "What is a ContentID Claim?" page explains, content owners are more likely to choose to block or mute a video. It also explains that users have a certain amount of recourse and can remove the offending content or challenge claims, linking to explanations of YouTube's appeals process and a explanation of fair use.[236] The page has even added video games to the list of media subject to fair use claims. The difference in this case has to do with media ontologies. Defenders of Let's Players like Scott suggest streaming is about a performance, a kind of value-added that centers on the personality and expression of a Let's Player. This defense rests on the interactive nature of video game: assume that in playing, a player inserts some portion of themselves into the game. It's also about the microcelebrity ecosystem in which individual content creators, streamers, or YouTube video producers are growing and developing a following around a personal brand rooted in connection, authenticity, and performance. PewDiePie[237], the face of YouTube gaming celebrity, while acknowledging

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[235] Nintendo via, *Polygon.* Emily Gera, "Nintendo Claims Ad Revenue on User-Generated YouTube Videos," *Polygon,* May 16, 2013. https://www.polygon.com/2013/5/16/4336114/nintendo-claims-ad-revenue-on-user-generated-YouTube-videos

[236] "What is fair Use?," *YouTub*e, Accessed Nov. 2, 2018. https://www.YouTube.com/yt/about/copyright/fair-use/;
"Dispute a Copyright Claim," *YouTube Help*, Accessed Nov. 2, 2018. https://support.google.com/YouTube/answer/2797454.;
"What is a ContentID Claim?," *YouTube Help*, Accessed Nov. 2, 2018. https://support.google.com/YouTube/answer/6013276

[237] PewDiePie's real name is Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg, but in the spirit of referring to streamers by their chosen online personas I continue to refer to him as PewDiePie in this chapter.

Nintendo's right to it's IP, complains, "If I played a Nintendo game on my channel, most likely most of the views/ad revenue would come from the fact that my viewers are subscribed to me. Not necessarily because they want to watch a Nintendo game in particular. ...~~So fuck you Nintendo.~~ So, you should reconsider this decision Nintendo."[238] Although tongue-in-cheek, responses like Pew Die Pie's emphasize the irreverently personal nature of this media. His personal brand is built on calculated but often inflammatory individualism. He's arguing here about an ambiguity in the metagame of this kind of media: what role do games and what role do personalities and channels play in the vitality of this media? Policing Let's Plays through the same content management system and the same language as infringements against music, television, or film rights, eliminates the player and individual elements that constitute the production of a Let's Play, or the creation of any kind of streaming channel and community.

This presents an interesting convergence between logics of play, participatory culture, and older notions of intellectual property. For play studies—for play as an expression of the player's agency, this formulation ignores the role of the player. It reduces games to purely readerly texts. To claim exceptional, spectator-worthy play under the ownership of Nintendo's brand effectively ignores the elements of play that are userly, co-constitutive, or individual. It is at odds with a culture built on the promise that play is personal. For Nintendo fans this is doubly ironic because in 2013 Nintendo was still producing games for it's Wii U console, a follow up to its popular *Wii* platform with its *Mii* avatars - all of which were roughly about the personalization of play.[239] Similarly, for a microcelebrity marketplace like

[238] Patricia Hernandez, "Nintendo's YouTube Plan is Already Being Panned by YouTubers," *Kotaku*, Jan. 29, 2015. https://kotaku.com/nintendos-YouTube-plan-is-already-being-panned-by-youtu-1682527904

[239] The Mii avatar, designed so that users could easily put their faces on characters in the game world, was about foregrounding the personalization of play. Irwin, John, "So Long, Mii: The Life and Probable Death of

YouTube, where communities are built around channels or individuals, Nintendo's ad grab is tantamount to saying, "You can do this for fun but we don't recognize you, the creator, as a value generator here." It ignores viral marketing, the power of attention, and the work of creating communities, building followings, and adding value through personalization. This policy seems antithetical to Nintendo's player-hailing Wiis and Miis, just as it seems at odds with the "you" in YouTube. Without suggesting either side is in the right, it expresses a complexity that begins to emerge around new patterns of media making. It's not that the digital media era actually democratizes content or turns everyone into a media producer. But the promise of this era, the metagame as it were, is that it might be possible. People producing content for Twitch and YouTube are engaged in a metagame that says a kind of celebrity auteurism might be achievable over this platform. For YouTube this generates content and for content creators it becomes the reason to invest in this kind of media making—it might make their play valuable in a new way.

Nintendo's content claims were met with understandable backlash from the Let's Play community but also from the game media industry more broadly. It was framed as backwards or otherwise stuck in an older era of intellectual property that did not understand the value of viral media or community-driven content. Nintendo would go on to adapt it's policy with a Creators Program launched in 2015. Users could register as partners with Nintendo and split profits from video ad revenue. Against the hands-off policy that other game developers took to this kind of content, the Nintendo Creators Program still looked draconian, but structurally it addressed the conflict between fan-produced content and licensed games by splitting profit down the middle. The FAQ for the Creators Program

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Nintendo's Cartoon Avatar," *Paste,* Jul. 28, 2017. https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2017/07/so-long-mii-the-life-and-probable-death-of-nintend.html

explains, "Video creators that sign up for the Nintendo Creators Program will receive a percentage of the advertising proceeds (70% for channels; 60% for videos) for any registered YouTube channels or videos containing Nintendo-copyrighted content."[240] What it does not note is that only users who meet certain benchmarks are eligible. Originally, partners needed 10,000 lifetime views; later the program was amended to require 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 hours watched. It also requires each video to be approved before posting and Nintendo still collects YouTube revenue itself and then redistributes it to creators after the fact. All of which makes the Creators Program a very delicate arrangement that only admits a select number of players and retains strict control over what gets published to YouTube. This is particularly alarming among YouTuber's posting reviews of games who see the program as an authorized form of censorship.

What this highlights is the precarity of this type of play-fueled performance. Precarity in a platform economy is already high, but the double dependence of Let's' Players and streamers on platform ecologies—as well as the the status of the games they play—amplifies this. The appeal of a platform economy for users is often the freedom to become entrepreneurs.[241] For capital behind these platforms, the distance from laborers and the stripped down institutional infrastructure becomes insulation from a lot of risk. Platforms are dependent on a user base, but not overly invested in any single user. This arrangement comports neatly with an ethos of games and game play. Both are about individual performance; about mastery; about effacing the governing structures of algorithms, and emphasizing player's masteries of these systems. This is what makes Nintendo's Creators

[240] "Nintendo Creators Program Overview," *Nintendo Support*, Accessed Nov. 3, 2018, https://en-americas-support.nintendo.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/14034/~/nintendo-creators-program---overview
[241] Veena Dubal, "Wage-Slave or Entrepreneur? Contesting the Dualism of Legal Worker Categories." Calif. L. Rev. 65 (2017).

Program so offensive to players and fans of platform-driven media.The program recenters the governing, constraining elements of the platform. It reminds everyone of their dependence on the platform, of the boundaries of the magic circle. In more mundane terms, it reminds users of the world outside of their magic circle. The labor/play of producing this kind of content must do more than abide by the rules of YouTube or Twitch, it must concede to the power of game publishers over what these creators produce.

PewDiePie and Campo Santo

Nintendo's policing of copyright begins to sketch the larger theme I'm aiming at in this chapter. Video game spectator media is uniquely suited to the platform economy, as both games and platform/microcelebrity media share a liberal, individualist imperative. They gamify personal expression in these carefully constructed digital spaces and provide users with the opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of these systems. This is the point of Eric Zimmerman's manifesto for a ludic century: gamers are expert users and the logics of play share a lot with the logics of data systems and platforms. My point though, is that this expression of mastery assumes a stable and identifiable set of governing rules. A simple magic circle, a coherent system in which players can compete. But these systems are not stable, and fairness or rules are not the limit of these systems. They intersect with power, but the rules change, systems are updated, and while players may excel within them, they won't ever own them. Claiming content rights against video game streams starts to reveal the permeability of these systems but it's a wide-ranging addendum to the magic circle that affects all users in a similar way. It is a change to the rules, but it's not necessarily

asymmetrical. The case I would like to pose in supplement is much more targeted and it includes PewDiePie.

The collection of advertising revenue from YouTube videos featuring Nintendo content is about license and intellectual property—the rules of content ownership vs. content creation. The case of Campo Santo vs. PewDiePie pits a more essential kind of player-expression against an ambiguous rule of morality. So, even while the stakes continue to be about copyright, the deployment of IP in this case elevates this particular copyright claim to a battle around censorship and individuality that I think more clearly demonstrates the tension between play and prohibition. Campo Santo is the game developer behind the 2016 indie hit *Firewatch*, a cinematic single-player game that lent itself to streaming and Let's Plays. In 2016, PewDiePie published a video on his channel featuring the game.

However, in 2017 PewDiePie—already the most-watched and subscribed channel on YouTube—began to draw attention for on-video actions that seemed potentially racist or offensive. In January 2017, PewDiePie posted a review of the service Fiverr which connects contractors with freelance workers. Fiverr is a kind of open-ended take on the platform or sharing economy, where the services available range from design work to programming, to video editing. PewDiePie explains, "Fiverr is a website where you can ask anyone to do anything for five dollars."[242] As it turns out, you can contract peoples' services for more or less than five dollars and in his review of the platform PewDiePie selects several to try out. Most of the services he selects are only marginally successful. A Jesus impersonator reads a message but mispronounces the name PewDiePie asked him to read. Several others need more clarification or can't complete his request. The most successful contract features two

[242] Deleted Videos, "Pewdiepie Fiverr Deleted Video - Reupload - Full video," YouTube, Feb. 19, 2017, https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=ul2bgoJds84

Southeast Asian men whose service is a video of themselves holding a sign with whatever message you choose. The sign in PewDiePie's video reads "Death to all Jews." PewDiePie features this segment as the climax of his own video, where he emphasizes his surprise that these two guys have gone through with it. He tells his audience, "I'm feel partially responsible. I didn't think they would actually do it." Nonetheless, he still shows the entire clip in his video, as they dance and unfurl the sign. The stunt is a step too far and not nearly enough removed from PewDiePie's apparent endorsement. Perhaps underestimating his newsworthiness, the story was featured in the Wall Street Journal in a report citing anti-Semitic jokes he made in nine other separate videos. This news resulted in the cancellation of a planned collaboration with Disney-owned Maker Studios, as well as the YouTube Red series *Scare PewDiePie.*[243]

[The reveal, from PewDiePie's Fiverr Review Screen Capture: "Pewdiepie Fiverr Deleted Video - Reupload - Full Video"]

[243] Ben Popper, "YouTube Cancels PewDiePie's Original Series Following Nazi Controversy," *The Verge,* Feb. 14, 2017, https://www.theverge.com/2017/2/14/14608518/YouTube-cancels-scare-pewdiepie-season-2

This series of events reflected the incompatibility between the kind of exaggerated or insensitive performance that generates attention on microcelebrity platforms and a mass market ethos that seeks to preserve a general air of respectability. Fans and friends of PewDiePie defended his video as a joke gone wrong, insisting that reports misunderstood the context. The sign in the Fiverr video, which also included "Subscribe to Keemstar," is an inside joke about another YouTube celebrity whose videos are often shocking or racist.[244] But right wing websites also latched on to the story treating PewDiePie as an ambassador of their message.[245] Posts on Stormfront and articles in the Daily Stormer applauded PewDiePie for bringing their platform to the mainstream.

In September of 2017 PewDiePie made news again. This time for using a racial slur in a video game live stream of himself playing *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds*.[246] In the stream, PewDiePie is trying to defend one of his fallen teammates from another player. When he fails to make the play he yells, "What a fucking nigger, jeez, sorry, but what the fuck." In this case "jeez" reads like an attempt to put the word back in his mouth. In the heat of the moment he can see he's made a huge mistake. He apologizes and attempts to downplay it, but on the heels of the previous scandal it's insensitivity seemed suspect. Commentators pointed out the way the word rolled off his tongue—hard R and all—revealed a familiarity with the term often thrown around in game lobbies as a way to rile players up. It is worth noting this took place in a live stream and PewDiePie is known more for his edited and post-produced content where slip ups can be edited out. Whether PewDiePie meant it or not is

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[244] Brian Mengus, "YouTube Stars' Defense of PewDiePie is Bullshit," *Gizmodo,* Feb. 15, 2017. https://gizmodo.com/YouTube-stars-defense-of-pewdiepie-is-bullshit-1792396850; H3HProductions, "Is PewDiePie Racist?," *YouTube*, Feb. 14, 2017, https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=JLNSiFrS3n4

[245] *The Daily Stormer*, the news page for the White Nationalism forum *Stormfront,*posted several articles embracing PewDiePie's comments. For example, see: Andrew Anglin,"PewDiePie 2024!," *Daily Stormer,* Jan 22. 2017. https://dailystormer.name/pewdiepie-2024/

[246] *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds,* (2017: Bluehole), Video Game.

beside the point. The ensuing media attention attached this outburst to the previous scandal, framing the streamer as unrepentant and unchanged.

This time, using mechanisms similar to the ones Nintendo deployed against Let's Players, the independent game developer Campo Santo stepped in to remove PewDiePie's Let's Play video of their game *Firewatch*. Although not a real threat to PewDiePie's revenue stream, the takedown request was more of a symbolic gesture meant to publicly threaten PewDiePie. In a Tweet, Sean Vanaman, one of the founders of Campo Santo, explained, "Freedom of speech is freedom of prosecution. His stream is not commentary, it is ad growth for his brand. Our game on his channel = endorsement." The DMCA takedown, more than a claim against advertising revenue, treated PewDiePie's Let's Play of *Firewatch* as a copyright violation, resulting in the removal of the video from YouTube while also potentially jeopardizing PewDiePie's entire chanel - at least per YouTube's three strikes rules.[247] While YouTube was quick to honor the legitimacy of the request, some saw the move to use copyright to police PewDiePie as a form of excessive, targeted censorship. Internet trolls, fans of PewDiePie's, or people frustrated with this action took to the video game marketplace/platform Steam to post retaliatory negative reviews of the game *Firewatch*.[248] This interaction around the outburst particularly between Campo Santo and PewDiePie, and then PewDiePie's defenders against Campo Santo, turned the scandal into a game of indirect, symbolic, attrition. Steam's histogram of game reviews shows a sharp uptick in negative user ratings following Campo Santo's decision in early October 2017. One review reads, "Terrible story, too short, and social justice warrior developers. Forgettable

[247] Julia Alexander, YouTube Accepts Campo Santo's Copyright Strike Against PewDiePie, Could Lead to Bigger Issues," *Polygon*, Sept. 14, 2017. https://www.polygon.com/2017/9/14/16309430/pewdiepie-campo-santo-strike

[248] Ben Kuchera, "The Anatomy of a Review Bombing Campaign," *Polygon,* Oct. 4, 2017, https://www.polygon.com/2017/10/4/16418832/pubg-firewatch-steam-review-bomb;

game." And another: "At least one of the game devs seems to be a DMCA abusing SJW crybaby who is using copyright laws to wrongfully take down videos if the reviewer uses a word he doesn't like."[249] The fanatic defense of PewDiePie suggests two key points. First, as I've suggested in previous chapters, microcelebrity media makers command deeply loyal audiences. PewDiePie's fans rushed to defend the stunt as a joke, pointing out that even he seemed surprised at the execution. Second and more crucially, the outrage that PewDiePie was being misunderstood by *social justice warriors* and politically correct politics—a violation of free speech or harmless play—points to a convergence between online video gaming/play culture and a neoliberal ethos that aligns with online men's movements and alt-right politics. Like the defenders of the Fiverr skit, these review bombers are saying this isn't that serious and don't force racial sensitivity onto us or our media. In a metagame sense, these reviewers argue, this is just a game and language shouldn't be treated so seriously if it's not meant that way.

Like the charge that Nintendo's policy on Let's Play fails to grasp the co-constitutive nature of play, this campaign to defend PewDiePie pits the logics of legal precedent and public offense against an ethos of play that doesn't want to take anything so seriously. But, more than in the case of Nintendo against Let's Players, this battle itself becomes gamelike. As it unfolded, Campo Santo's Sean Vanaman leverages the public punishment of PewDiePie as an admonishment of the groups or the politics that have have celebrated his mistakes or outbursts. In response, PewDiePie's fans and defenders are doubling down on the sanctity of free speech and the harmlessness of play. I envision this discursive conflict as a staking out of the meta magic circle.

[249] Andy Chalk, "Firewatch is Getting Review-Bombed on Steam," *PC Gamer*, Sept. 12, 2017, https://www.pcgamer.com/firewatch-is-getting-review-bombed-on-steam/

As playful media with serious stakes, game logics prevail. PewDiePie's fans (some of whom may overlap) are claiming fair use, free speech, and the sanctity of a play space apart. They are advancing a fantasy of a magic circle around play that defends it from responsibility or accountability. Campo Santo and White Nationalism recognize the value and impact of these outbursts beyond the platforms where they circulate. Even while PewDiePie's career as a content creator is larger than Let's Play videos and video game spectatorship, the idea that game rules apply to this kind of media still prevails. The alt-right claims PewDiePie, not because he really supports their message, but because in the broader game of attention-getting, it's a savvy endorsement—PewDiePie's celebrity raises the profile of their message. Even though PewDiePie and his defenders can explain that he's not racist or not seriously an anti-Semite, their defense rests on the idea that he didn't mean it, it was a bad joke. They seek to separate performance and play from the history and social realities of racism or genocide.Campo Santo's DMCA Takedown operates on the assumption that something has to be done to send a message. It reminds people of Campo Santo's position as much as it punishes PewDiePie's outburst. All of these interventions are discursive, turning the joke into a site of gatekeeping and policing.

As I suggested earlier in this chapter, there is this statistical affinity between the audiences consuming live streaming game media and men's movements and this baby battle around a single YouTube video recenter's this data. The defense of PewDiePie reads like the defense of a cultural hegemony that is tired of being treated as the hegemon. Games or nerd culture has historically seen itself as marginalized. And in this light, the policing of gamers feels like an injustice imposed from outside. It seems like Campo Santo does not grasp the magic circle games produce. The defense of PewDiePie operates on a sense or perception

that individuality and expression is under attack. To the extent that game media celebrate individual play, exceptional players, and the universality and immutability of game rules, it seems loath to recognize social inequity because this is at odds with a meritocratic frame. To sensitive gamers, these moves by Nintendo and later by Campo Santo seem to misunderstand the sanctity and (identity-free, but really white guy) individuality of play. All of which is especially confounding to an audience who is organized by an interest in play and players brought up on notions of gaming's sacred spaces.

Titties, Twitch, and Fair Play

I'm emphasizing the idea of a magic circle here because it has been a fruitful theory in game studies. It helps to explain the ways play, in a variety of applications—ritual, games, free or open-ended play—establishes the context for its own performance. It is a useful tool for thinking not just about video games specifically, but also a through-line for considering playful media in other manifestations. To the extent videogame live streaming and Let's Play videos are enmeshed in the marketing, remediation, and performance of video game play, they also generate their own magic circles. The rules of these magic circles are not as concrete as the algorithms or hardware specifications that define games. For instance, the impulse for the branch of game studies, platform studies, was to demystify games by carefully dissecting and studying their constitutive parts. But while platform affordances are one way of recognizing the boundaries of play, play's co-constitutive nature makes hard-coded rules only a partial picture of the frames around games. These case studies suggest an alternative to coded rules or stated objectives. They suggest a way that play as a concept or play as a way of being informs or affords the approaches players take. Defending

PewDiePie's missteps or Let's Players ownership of their performance helps to demonstrate the ways these rules or frames are more abstract than bare technology. And in this case, rules are crucial. They defend gamers from the politics of social justice, copyright, or responsibility for other people's feelings. They advance a notion of play values individuality, universality, and fairness. The irony is that "fair" here is a subjective determination. Rather than the fairness and impartiality of coded rules, fairness in this case is attached to a liberalist philosophy that, in keeping with the interactive nature of play, creates a play space that doesn't afford anyone an advantage. However, to the extent that this is statistically men's media, a collective understanding of individuality doesn't really mean a universal individual. And this is what the policing of dress codes on Twitch begins to demonstrate. Fans of this media lean towards radical defenses of free speech and are activated by threats of censorship or moralizing—at least when it applies to streamers' ability to play, joke, or offend—as long as it seems harmless within the bubble of play. But when the collective feels the balance is off, that some users have a different relationship to the rules of the game, this looks like a violation of the sanctity of game spaces.

In 2014, Twitch amended its Rules of Conduct section to include policies for dress code. The change was quick to draw attention from the community as it it marked a response to long-standing debates about what was acceptable performance on the platform. Specifically, concerns that women on the platform enjoyed an unfair advantage over men, a result of their sex appeal and the demographics of the platform. Players were concerned with what they termed, "titty-streamers," "cam-whores," and "Twitch-thots,"[250] who they perceived to be less concerned with playing games than getting attention. The language for

[250] Thot is an acronym for "That Ho Over There."

the rule is tongue-in-cheek and would be re-written a year later as two concise bullet points. But it has a lot to say in the way it is formatted and worded:

> Dress...appropriately Nerds are sexy, and you're all magnificent, beautiful creatures, but let's try and keep this about the games, shall we?
>
> Wearing no clothing or sexually suggestive clothing—including lingerie, swimsuits, pasties, and undergarment—is prohibited, as well as any full nude torsos*, which applies to both male and female broadcasters. You may have a great six-pack, but that's better shared on the beach during a 2-on-2 volleyball game blasting "Playing with the Boys."
>
> * If it's unbearably hot where you are, and you happen to have your shirt off (guys) or a bikini top (grills), then just crop the webcam to your face. Problem solved. We sell t-shirts, and those are always acceptable. #Kappa[251]

The policy is playfully self-effacing and painstakingly neutral in its attempt to address both men and women's' bodies. But behind this is a much more pointed attempt to curtail the use of sex as a tool to attract attention. The policy seeks to recenter gaming as the core of Twitch's product, but this of course ignores the wider appeal of player performance and micro-celebrities as driving forces on the platform. In this sense, the policy is broad enough in it's framing that it could apply to both men and women. But at the level of it's design, it specifically targets the perceived advantage afforded to women on the basis of their sex.

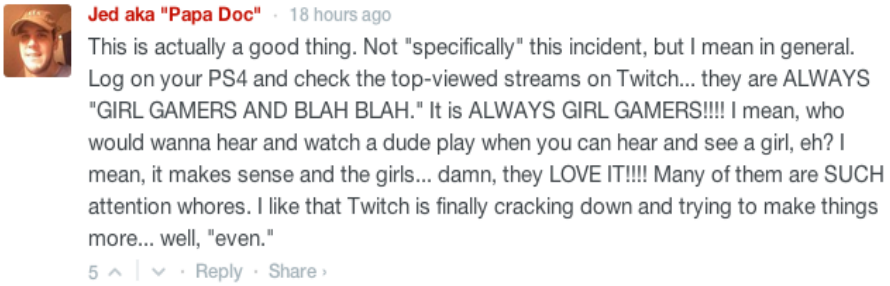
And to this extent it offers an interesting intersection between the perceived rules of the game, as expressed by the users of the platform, and the actual implementation of policy. Here the game logics leak into code, at the same time revealing the skewed and selective

[251] "Rules of Conduct - Last modified on 10/27/2014," *Twitch*. Via *The Internet Archive.* https://web.archive.org/web/20141229214612/http://www.Twitch.tv:80/p/rules-of-conduct

nature of this game. As Twitch implemented policy that sought to reign in streamers' dress and gender performance, the same cries against censorship or overactive moralizing didn't go up. Where gamers had lamented Nintendo's policy about ownership of Let's Plays and Google, Disney, or Campo Santo's punitive treatment of PewDiePie, many of Twitch"s users took to social media to celebrate the decision. The difference in reactions has to do with a collective sense of the internal rules for these platforms - that they are designed for a certain kind of gamer or that this culture is based on certain values. YouTube and Twitch sort content on their platforms by the views or attention this content commands. The self-selecting, self-sorting nature of this media privileges channels and performances that can manage or attract the most attention. To the extent the rules of fair play for this kind of playful media are managed largely by collective understanding, the demographics of their user bases condition what values make the rules. While Twitch's policy was on one hand a defense of its brand, a need to keep things family friendly and safe for the large portion of its user base that is quite young, it was really catering to the concerns of the largest part of its user base. The lightheartedness with which the Rules of Conduct were worded belies an attempt to downplay their targeted nature.

In an article on the dress code, Matt Albrecht collects a series of tweets and posts written in response to the policy.[252] The first sums the collection up well,

[252] Matt Albrecht, "Twitch's New "Dress Appropriately" Policy is Founded on Obliviousness," *The Mary Sue,* Oct. 29, 2014. https://www.themarysue.com/Twitch-dress-code/



[Screenshot of Twitch Reactions, Albrecht]

They all point to an perceived advantage women enjoy on the platform, with the qualification that these aren't real gamers and instead, people exploiting men for the attention. Albrecht draws a comparison between the policy and the then recent GamerGate Scandal, arguing both are oblivious to the advantages afforded to men, identifiable in wage gaps and representation. TL Taylor would later elaborate on this point noting that Gamergate and concerns about women's' bodies on Twitch both purport to be about ethics and fairness, while veiling deeper frustration with threats to the perceived values of "gamer culture." Taylor explains, "Trying to pass itself off as a movement about 'ethics in gaming' while in practice acting as repudiations of feminism and the increasing heterogeneity of gamers in gamer culture, GamerGate became a black box term that contained a multitude of vile and often harmful impulses and practices."[253] This is an astute comparison and gestures to the larger point of this chapter. Gamer culture, or a culture of play, is informed by the way play has been marketed and and the way players have been trained to operate by games. To call these impulses is correct—defenses of the ownership of Play, of PewDiePie's mistaken racism, and

[253] TL Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018). 233.

of a fairness breached by women's sexual advantages, are all impulses grounded in an imagination of what *play* means, what it permits, and what things violate its rules.

Twitch's dress code policy, at least as it was originally stated, was short-lived. While it was celebrated by part of Twitch's user base as a solution to a perceived inequity, in practice its coy moralizing was difficult to police. Users saw it as license to crusade against these "boobie streamers," but with the exception of blatant uses of nudity or sex-to-sell streams, Twitch had to tread more carefully or risk alienating an important minority on it's platform. While Twitch did issue warnings—Kacey Tourney tweeted about a warning received for a photo on her profile[254]—it's not clear that much came of the policy after it was introduced. Then in November 2015, the policy was quietly rewritten:

> **Pornography and Other Sexually Explicit Conduct** - Any content or activity involving pornography, sexual intercourse, or adult services is prohibited. Conduct involving exploitation of minors will be reported to authorities via the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.
>
> **Inappropriate Broadcaster Behavior and Attire** - Nudity and conduct involving overtly sexual behavior and/or attire are prohibited.[255]

The new rules eliminated the light language of the original policy and make no mention of the types of dress specifically prohibited. The language is more ambiguous, leaving the determination of what actually violates this policy to an internal standard, rather than frustrated users.

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[254] Damon Bers, "Twitch Insists Gamers Keep Their Clothes On," *Huffington Post,* Oct. 29, 2014. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/28/Twitch-dress-code_n_6062096.html

[255] "Rules of Conduct - Last modified on 11/20/2014," *Twitch*. Via *The Internet Archive.* https://web.archive.org/web/20151122000332/http://www.Twitch.tv:80/p/rules-of-conduct

Of course none of this eliminated the broader debate about what was fair or equitable on the platform. In a 2018 article for Kotaku, Cecilia D'Anastasio profiles Kaceytron, a World of Warcraft streamer who has embraced the "Titty-Streamer" label. D'Anastasio writes, "Kaceytron branded herself as a professional "fake gamer girl," a parody of a stereotype that existed in gamers' heads, and invited those same gamers into her fandom."[256] The article follows a deeply misogynistic rant issued a few months earlier by a streamer, Trainwreck, that revived the debate about women on Twitch. In this rant he complains that women who stream are, "the same sluts that rejected us, the same sluts that chose the goddamn cool kids over us. The same sluts that are coming into our community, taking the money, taking the subs, the same way they did back in the day."[257] Between Kaceytron and Trainwreck, it becomes clear this isn't really a policy issue at all. It is about how users understand the affordances of the play space that is Twitch's attention economy. Complaints about fair play and performances that bait these complaints operate at a metagame level that is really about managing or engaging with the rules of the platform.

[256] Cecilia D'Anastasio, "'Titty Streamer' Kaceytron Is Nourished By Bitter Gamer Tears," *Kotaku*, Feb, 28, 2018. https://kotaku.com/titty-streamer-kaceytron-is-nourished-by-bitter-gamer-t-1823396335
[257] Nathan Grayson, "Streamer's Hateful Rant Revives Debate About Women On Twitch," *Kotaku,* Nov. 15, 2017. https://kotaku.com/streamers-hateful-rant-revives-debate-about-women-on-tw-1820418898

[Kaceytron Webcam Image and Border, From D'Anastasio]

In early 2018, Twitch again clarified its rules adding an entire section covering sexual content, and at the time of this writing it is the final word on the policy. A blog post explaining the changes reads, "Attire in gaming streams, most at-home streams, and all profile/channel imagery should be appropriate for a public street, mall, or restaurant. As a reminder, we will not tolerate using this policy as a basis to harass streamers on or off Twitch, regardless of whether you think they're breaking this rule."[258] The last line is illuminating. If it wasn't already clear, the policy has always been attached to a game-like hope that the rule could be deployed in the name of fair play. From the perspective of the platform, dress codes are a metagame between users that really doesn't serve Twitch's bottom line. The policy has little do do with how average users engage with the platform and much more to do with a perception of what the rules of the game are for streamers. If everyone is vying for attention, what constitutes a fair way to go about soliciting this

[258] "Twitch Community Guidelines Updates," *Twitch Blog.* Feb. 8, 2018. https://blog.Twitch.tv/Twitch-community-guidelines-updates-f2e82d87ae58

attention? If player's decide gender or sex affords women an advantage, it becomes a frustrating challenge to their sense of equity. So, when men make up the majority of this user base, women's presence on the platform is more conspicuous. Because women are perceived as having an advantage in the libertarian or meritocratic marketplace of game streaming, their very presence becomes a threat.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters I consider the ways video game spectatorship has been situated in a wider media landscape. From the arrival of live streaming at the juncture of domestic work and playful labor, to the development of an esports industry that works to supplement player bases and drive in-game microtransaction economies. This chapter considers this question in terms of the way video game spectatorship introduces new challenges for media ethics, law, and for actual policing (in the case of Arab Andy). But the wider question at work here has more to do with the playful ethos of this kind of media. Eric Zimmerman's prognostication that the 21st century would be a century of play, seems prescient given the way this playful media seems to be encroaching on the domains of long-established media forms. Live streaming, Lets's Plays, and esport, are radically reimagining the way broadcast or spectator media works. Maybe this is the power of play? But these renegotiations spurred by play are not the kinds of liberating, form-breaking play an optimistic play studies might hope for. What this chapter emphasizes is that spectator games media is still an extension of video game culture. As such, it imports a lot of the characteristics, demographics, and values of this culture. These media productions emerge from, or are experienced within, the context of this games culture which happens to lend

itself to a liberalist, irreverent ethos. I argue that these media practices are enveloped in a meta-magic circle, a conceptual frame that privileges play and resists things which might limit this fun. Rules like copyright, the forces of cultural sensitivity, and legal consequence threaten to curtail this fun. The idea that some players might have advantages in this system also disrupts a fantasy of play. My point here is that the fantasy of play surrounding this media helps to explain its appeal, especially in a moment where online irreverence and selfishness is in vogue. But this fantasy of play is often incompatible with the forces acting on this media. Identifying where this fantasy collides with the rules of the real world helps us to understand the topography of this metagame-space.

CONCLUSION

Video game spectatorship was a novel concept when I began work on this project. I still remember the first seminar paper I wrote on the subject, describing my visit to a BarCraft event in Orange County, California. I spent most of the class presentation of my research fielding questions about esports, never really getting to my observations or arguments about the BarCraft itself. The BarCraft, by the way, was in a Buffalo Wild Wings on a Saturday afternoon, attended by a mixture of avid *StarCraft* fans and confused Little League families wondering why video games were on TV in a sports bar. Early in the project I would explain my dissertation research to other adults and was often met by the same confusion, until I would remind them that their kids or nieces and nephews were watching games on YouTube and Twitch. In the span of 5 years, the need to couch my project like this has given way to excited recognition. Video game spectatorship has become a familiar phenomenon, even to people who don't consume this media themselves. Developments in the esports and streaming sectors are covered by major news outlets. ESPN and ABC began broadcasting select *Overwatch League* matches in 2019[259], and the success of *Fortnite*[260] has turned sreamers and Twitch into an impossible-to-ignore meme.

As I complete this disertation, video game spectatorship has solidly entered the cultural mainstream. In March 2018, rapper Drake partnered with a Twitch broadcaster named Ninja in a joint *Fortnite* stream that attracted a record-setting 628,000 viewers—more than an individual streamer had achieved before or since.[261] The partnership and the attention it drew was the result of a fortunate confluence of factors. Obviously, Drake's celebrity status

[259] Mallory Locklear, "Overwatch League Will Air On ABC, ESPN and Disney Networks," *Engadget*, July 11, 2018.
[260] *Fortnite*, (2017; Epic Games/People Can Fly), Video Game.
[261] Patrick Gill, Christopher Grant, Ross Miller, and Julia Alexander, "Drake Sets Records with His Fortnite: Battle Royale Twitch Debut," *Polygon,* March 15, 2018.

helped, but so did the immense popularity of the game *Fortnite*, which has become one of the most-played games ever with a player base nearing 250 million at the time of writing.[262] It was also synergistic arrangement, as Drake, Ninja, *Fortnite*, and Twitch overlap significantly in terms of their audience demographics. For Ninja, whose real name is Tyler Blevins, his high profile in the world of *Fortnite* and the attention garnered from sharing his stream with Drake earned him appearances on CNBC and the Ellen Degeneres Show to discuss the work of streaming on Twitch. But confluence aside, these events demonstrate a striking upsurge in video game viewership and its cultural relevance. More importantly, they demonstrate ways video game streaming is intersecting organically with other media.

Even when streams aren't record-setting, the number of people watching and the benchmarks for success have grown. When I was conducting interviews in 2015 and 2016, a streamer attracting 3,000 concurrent viewers placed in the top tier of broadcasters. Today, top streamers regularly draw tens of thousands of viewers. This is because more people are watching games. Rather than a fandom built around a single game, a single style of presentation, or even a single platform (although Twitch remains the dominant force in the market) video game spectatorship is a broad media phenomenon, a loose genre incorporating several formally distinct sub-categories. The growth in its popularity is aided by this breadth, the range of content in the field—speedrunning, casual play, tabletop RPGs, esports, etc.—helps to amass an audience. And this is the point: live streaming is geared towards particular niches in gaming culture, but collectively these niches have produced a vital and complementary ecosystem of gaming content. As microcast media, audiences for most channels remain small, certainly in comparison to broadcast audiences. However, the range of forms and subject matter allows viewers to find inroads to watching that fit their media

[262] Dustin Bailey, "*Fortnite*'s Player Count is Closing in on 250 Million," *PCGamesN*, February 21, 2019.

interests. Although I may not care much about what is happening in the world of *Fortnite* streams, I regularly find myself watching *StarCraft*, fighting game tournaments, or whatever hot new release is making waves online. Today I'm less likely to watch a *League of Legends* esports match than I was when I started, but that has not diminished my engagement with these platforms. I'll channel surf between streams when I get bored with one, and bouncing around in this way, whether on Twitch or on YouTube, often results in finding a channel or a streamer I enjoy, even if I've never heard of them before. This has made streaming a regular part of my media diet, though what I am watching now has changed significantly since I started this project. And this is how video game spectatorship has positioned itself as a relevant cultural phenomenon: the collective energies of niche media makers have allowed game streaming platforms to develop dedicated audiences that come back for more than one thing.

Although platforms for watching games are relatively recent inventions, spectator gaming itself is not new. To a certain degree, video games have always been watchable. Siblings have been taking turns, alternating playing and watching, since consoles arrived in the home. An idle arcade game will enter *attract mode* and play itself as it tries to entice the next player. Video game tournaments have existed nearly as long as the medium itself. Video recordings of play are used to preserve and demonstrate high scores. And since the late 90s, video game spectatorship has been formalized as esports competitions. However, live streaming and broadcasting gameplay as a global media industry has been a much more recent development. At a technological level, this is facilitated by the arrival of high-speed broadband internet access, improvements to consumer computer technology, and by recording equipment becoming cheaper and integrated into PCs, cell phones, and gaming

consoles. In addition to these technological incubators, streaming media and personalized media have become more commonplace and people are increasingly used to consuming things produced by individuals and peers. This coincides with a greater degree of intimacy and interactivity around the content people see. Video game streaming emerges simultaneously with the rise of Instagram influencers, as things like YouTube celebrity and podcasting are challenging more traditional kinds of stardom or content creation. All of which is to say, it isn't useful to think of video game spectatorship as some kind of rupture. Instead, it's the extension of trends in media making, in the domestication of content production, and the personalization or deeper segmentation of media choice.

Rather than a kind of miraculous apparition, video game spectatorship is the logical conclusion of gaming culture tuned mainstream and hobbies turned into content or occupation. This is also what makes video game spectatorship instructive. It as at the forefront of trends that seriously shift the scale and location of production and the phenomenon anticipates major shifts in the ways audiences consume this media. My informants for this project—some of whom have made streaming a career, some who supplement their regular jobs with their broadcasts, and others who simply stream for fun—are joining a class of domestic media makers producing for platforms which do a minimum of content creation internally. For the companies behind these platforms, namely Google and Amazon, participatory media is a boon. User/creators do the risky work of experimenting with their productions to find what their audiences connect to, from style of address, to the way they schedule their broadcasts, to the games they choose to feature. It also mostly eliminates the need for traditional studio-type spaces and otherwise eliminates platform

owners' need to operate their own studios. Esports studios and digital production studios still make content for these platforms but unaffiliated with the platform.

For the producers and consumers of this content, spectator games are extensions of other play and of leisure activities, a born-domestic kind of media. For the cottage industry of small-scale content creators, this play-labor can be quite rewarding, with top streamers earning millions in advertising, sponsorships, subscriptions, and donations, not to mention the admiration of their followers. For others, the rewards are more social, in the form of connection and community achieved around the content they create. However, this work can also be quite risky. Small-scale media makers adopt the costs of production, so unstable markets and external forces (from internet outages to online harassment) can jeopardize these users' success. This is one of the major lessons to take from micro-scale production: while audiences are treated to more choice and specificity in what they consume, the users making this content trade autonomy for risk. While the profits they can make in an economy based on attention, influence, and patronage are significant, their work depends on the platforms they use, the games they play, and their ability to consistently reach their viewers. They join a growing class of self-employed workers who depend on platforms to make a living.

To succeed on these platforms small-scale producers become more than content creators. They do a great deal of affective work. One of the hallmarks of live streaming is a trend towards higher degrees of interactivity and direct address. Creators spend a lot of energy engaging their audience, reading and responding to chat, and narrating their play. In many instances, play itself is secondary to the community-building that streamers do. The rise of platforms like discord, the implementation of tips/bits, and the primacy of social media as secondary sites of connection between streamers and their communities gestures

towards the value of cultivating intimacy. This makes sense, given the dynamics of these platforms—streamers depend directly on dedicated audiences for the majority of their income. While advertising revenue is not negligible, the bulk of a streamer's support comes from different forms of patronage, either from viewers' payments to them or subscription and tips paid through the platform. And this begins to shape how this media is made. A reliance on patronage changes marketing goals. It results in a move away from broad appeal and mass advertising and towards more specialized and more personal kinds of appeals to patronage. Streaming content is able to generate intimacy and trust, demonstrated by viewers willingness to directly support streamers. This intimacy and trust is potent. It allows streamers to leverage their viewers. For instance, streamers may form partnerships with each other built on sharing audiences or they might direct their viewers to raid another channel, in turn building up their own notoriety. As advertising begins to accommodate for shifts towards smaller more dedicated audiences, the leverage streamers have over their audiences also takes on more value. We see examples of this already. My informants with large viewer-bases discuss being approached by developers to feature games. More recently, in 2019, publisher EA paid popular streamers to play *Apex Legends* the week the game launched.[263] Among these streamers was Ninja, who reportedly received $1 Million USD to switch from Fortnite to Apex for the week. This was a move that recognized the power this kind of promotion would have with their target audience. And it worked. Following its launch, Apex became the most-viewed game on Twitch and was downloaded by 50 million players in its first month. So streamers occupy the space of traditional advertising, mediating between companies and viewers in the way commercials used to.

[263] Nathan Grayson, "Report: EA Paid Ninja $1 Million To Stream *Apex Legends,*" March 13, 2019.

This kind of leverage is not unique to small-scale streams either. Esports franchises like the *League of Legends LCS* and *Overwatch League* are able to operate at a loss because their operating costs are offset by their value to the games they feature. Both games, *League of Legends* and *Overwatch*, are sustained by microtransaction economies where dedicated players buy cosmetic items in online stores to change the look of their characters. These microtransaction markets are only as strong as the player-base for their corresponding games. So, esports serve to energize and extend the lifespan of these games by keeping players invested in the expanded world of competition. While esports make money from advertising, selling franchise licenses, broadcast deals, and ticket sales, it is their value as de facto game publicity that is the most powerful. In this respect, these large productions are not so different from small-scale productions in the sense that both are built on a kind of self-branding and loyalty building. Streamers hope their audience returns to watch and subscribe. Comparatively, esports builds an audience that will return to the game or purchase skins. At either end of the spectrum—from small, individual producers to large esports productions—video game spectatorship demonstrates emerging strategies for turning a narrow audience of dedicated viewers into a powerful commodity on the condition that the energy of this narrow audience can be directed in calculated ways.

In thinking about how games are made watchable, it turns out that more than a matter of technology or network capacity, it is strategies for identifying audiences, incubating fandom, and leveraging a smaller, more dedicated viewership that has given the phenomenon its foothold. Put another way, we might see video game spectatorship as a second wave of streaming media. It emerges into a market that has already proven the success of streaming platforms like YouTube, Netflix, and Hulu—platforms that have split from broadcast

advertising models in favor of subscriptions. Video game spectatorship refines the uses and value of niche interests, small productions, and small audiences in a streaming ecosystem. Streamers connect with their audiences, blurring the boundaries between community and media consumer. Even large-scale esports which don't depend as much on direct address demonstrate that a dedicated viewer is valuable beyond being a deliverable to marketers. Although esports broadcasts haven't yet attracted enough sponsors or buy-in to be independently profitable, esports fandom connects to the vitality of the games they feature, and esports become an essential part of their games' lifespans.

Video game spectatorship and the growth of the Twitch platform demonstrate the ability for niche or microscale media to stand alone. Moreover, it demonstrates the vitality and viability of user-generated content and microcast media. Outside of the structures of studio systems and networks, aided by the flexibility of production, and through a closer connection with the audience, micro-scale media is certainly poised to offer more diversity and choice, or at a minimum, to be more reactive to audience demands. Participatory media has historically been thought of as a democratization of content and at some levels, this seems to be validated by the success of Twitch. Video game spectatorship platforms succeeded by bringing together a variety a media practices in a way that made their small audiences part of a kind of collective. However, while the shrinking of production costs and audience size make content creation more accessible, and while the platform remains open to all, video game spectatorship doesn't necessarily disrupt any hegemonies. First, these platforms exist within established media monopolies. While Ninja or PewDiePie own their personal brands, their content depends on platforms owned by Amazon and Google. Early legal battles around censorship and top-down content moderation suggest that even these

very successful producers aren't free from oversight by the platforms who host them. Second, these platforms use sorting mechanisms that guarantee the most visibility to the largest streams and this begins to frame how content is generated. For example, Twitch sorts all content by number of viewers. This is true of games and channels. In other words, the most-watched games can be found at the top of the game directory and the most watched streamers for any given game are listed at the top these directories. Already established content is more visible, and in turn, more emulated. Sorting mechanisms shape what viewers choose to watch and streamers choose to play and it generates a loose formalism about the style and presentation streamers use. So while there is no forced hegemony, it can begin to seem like the discourse and presentation of this content is limited or doesn't encourage much deviation.

In fact, a lack of diversity is a theme that remains all too relevant. As niche media, video game spectatorship finds success by grouping together small subsections of viewers interested in certain kinds of games, and demographically these groups are remarkably homogeneous. This cultural and demographic homogeneity has the opposite effect of democratizing content. It creates an internal bias towards particular viewpoints. As demonstrated by the rise of alt-right and reactionary politics online, niche media has the ability to create echo-chambers or to silo certain ideas. For video game spectatorship, an overwhelming proportion of viewers are young men and this has made issues arising from a lack of democracy and diversity particularly pronounced on these platforms. Moreover, because video games themselves champion meritocratic, individualist notions of skill and algorithmic mastery, this culture is quick to reject frames or viewpoints that account for systemic disadvantage and structural inequity. As a result, streaming and video game

spectatorship dovetails with internet misogyny, racism, and irreverence. Twitch famously instituted a policy targeting women's dress and self-presentation at the request of its predominantly male viewer base, a policy it would have to amend a year later to be less overtly sexist. Meanwhile, high profile streamers and content producers have made overtly racist and sexist remarks on stream—actions that have been defended in the name of free speech and harmless fun. While streaming demonstrates the potency of micro-scale media to foster emerging kinds of content, it also serves as a reminder that narrowcasting may serve narrow-mindedness. Streaming has created online communities for the generation and consumption of emerging and even marginalized media, some of which is pioneering and progressive. At other times, these communities can be possessive, reactionary, and outright hostile or destructive. The open-source nature of co-created content also makes room for rogue elements or spoilsports to intervene in dangerous ways. Of course this isn't an indictment of streaming or games culture as a whole, but rather, a cautionary example. It keeps with the theme I am suggesting here, that videogame spectatorship emerges at a moment when the uses and power of networked and co-creative media are still being sorted out.

When I began my research I thought of the driving question as, "What kind of translation has to take place to turn games from userly media to viewerly media?" This meant, how do you take a medium that is built on interactivity, on a relationship between a user's inputs and an algorithmic set of responses, and make that interaction compelling for other people to watch? As the project has developed, the concern has been less about why people watch or the formal translation of games themselves. Instead, my work has focused on production, or the reproduction of play through technology, through strategies of address,

and through emerging kinds of labor. This dissertation is concerned with the act of making play compelling media and it focuses on the creation of hospitable contexts for video game spectatorship. This is a byproduct of the growing cultural relevance of games—especially among a class of young people who have grown up with games and grown weary of television, traditional advertising, and mass market media. It is also the product of a platform economy that can support micro-scale media distribution. But at the core of this emergence are new kinds of media relations. Games matter as cultural context and content, but what is marketed and what makes this media form solvent, are changing relationships. For example, the relationships between producers and their patron audiences. Or, relationships between leisure and labor, domestic space and work space. Video game spectatorship arrives at a time when the value of influence, and direct address, and the technology to enable highly personalized and narrowly focused media, coincide. Demographically, video game spectatorship is uniquely poised to capitalize on this convergence. Games appeal disproportionately to young people, a user base ready to cut cords, to seek interactivity and community online, and explore labor relationships that are playful and independent. This is also where this medium expresses its immaturity. It values irreverence and attention; while it can be inclusive it can also be insensitive and shortsighted. Ultimately, this is what makes it valuable as a case for media studies. Video game spectatorship congeals into a media phenomenon just as its constitutive characteristics are shaking the media sphere broadly. Streaming media, platforms, interactivity, and online discourse are reshaping the cultural landscape. The lessons video game spectatorship has to offer suggest a great deal about the direction we are going.

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