"And today's top donator is": How Live Streamers on Twitch.tv Monetize and Gamify their Broadcasts

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents an overview of economic behaviour on dominant market-leading live streaming platform (Gillespie, 2010; Srnicek, 2017) Twitch.tv. Twitch is approximately the thirtieth most-viewed website in the world, with over 150m spectators, and 2m individuals around the world regularly broadcasting. Emerging originally out of the esports scene (Taylor, 2018), Twitch is now a major site for the creation and mediation of gaming culture through relationships between broadcasters and viewers (Anderson, 2017). The advent of live streaming means that "anyone can become a TV provider" (Pires & Simon, 2015:255), and individuals from around the world have been taking full advantage of this opportunity (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017). In this paper we are specifically interested in how live streamers profit from their activities - monetization - on the platform, and how they often do so through the implementation of game-like interfaces, competitions, or concepts - gamification - which are highly effective in this space. We begin by briefly reviewing literature on both Twitch and platforms, followed by a description of our data and methodology which draws on interview and ethnographic techniques. In the first case we draw on over one hundred interviews with professional and aspiring-professional live streamers, while in the second case we draw on several hundred hours of online ethnographic observation of the Twitch platform, coupled with extensive offline ethnographic research at major streaming and gaming events in the United Kingdom, United States, Germany, Poland, and Brazil.

Drawing on these conceptual and empirical foundations, the core of the paper addresses seven core monetization methods we identify for live streaming. Subscriptions entail a guarantee to give a monthly amount to a streamer in exchange for the visual distinction of one's username on Twitch. Donations and "cheering"

entail either giving the streamer money directly via Paypal, or donating through Twitch, during which the platform takes a cut of the money, but viewers get automatic recognition of their donations. Advertising entails running adverts for corporate products on one's channel. Sponsorships are secured by many live streamers with games companies or other brands, who offer free products or promotion in exchange for highlighting their wares during particular broadcasts. Competitions and targets involve encouraging buy-in from viewers in the hope of winning an individual or global prize. Unpredictable rewards for financial support are the sixth method, drawing on the psychology of gambling and games of unpredictability more broadly to keep people donating in the hope of recognition. Finally, the implementation of monetary "channel games" represent a gamification of the Twitch platform itself, highly appropriate given its primary user market.

We explore each monetization technique in turn, considering what elements of the platform encourage them, how streamers act, how viewers act, and how elements of gaming culture have been skilfully monetized by entrepreneurial live streamers – yet within boundaries and confines laid out by Twitch. In particular, we focus on practices that exist both within and beyond the governance of the platform itself: this analysis of Twitch examines how these economic dynamics influence, and are influenced by, the political, social and cultural relationships of live streaming. The monetization models emerging here have important implications for the entrepreneurial (generally young) individuals trying to build new online careers, as well as for how other platforms (or people on platforms) may choose to monetize. On Twitch itself, meanwhile, the striking profitability of the most successful streamers and Twitch as a whole make it is crucial to interrogate who is winning and losing in financial terms, and why, and how the role of money brushes up against the inherent playfulness of a platform dedicated (primarily) to gaming. We argue that this interplay between streamers and the platform holders shows not just how content production on Twitch might be made profitable, but also goes far to deciding what sort of gaming content is made, how, and when, on the platform.

BIO
Mark R. Johnson is a Lecturer in Digital Cultures in the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. His research examines intersections between play and money, including live streaming, esports, loot boxes, gamification/gamblification, and playbour. He has published in journals including "Information, Communication and Society", "Media, Culture and Society", "The Sociological Review", "Convergence", and "Games and Culture".

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