Performing Both Sides of the Glass: Game Affordances and Streamer Content

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the influence game affordances have on the live performances of videogame streamers on Twitch, both within and outside the gameworld. Focusing on the performance of two videogame components, challenge and narrative, this paper develops a conceptual framework for examining the process by which streamers engage with and creatively exploit game affordances in order to attract and entertain an audience on Twitch. This paper is part of a larger research project which intends to observe and interview a selection of streamers, drawing from their lived experience in order to better understand how gameplay is performed and catered to a live audience.

Keywords

Live streaming, Twitch, game affordances, gameplay, performances, interview

INTRODUCTION

The growth of live videogame streaming, in large part spearheaded by the competitive videogame scene, has expanded the types and forms of content available on the Twitch platform (Taylor 2018). Beyond professional e-sports events, Twitch has become home to a dynamic range of videogame content with streamers mixing gameplay with humour, story-telling and social interaction (to varying degrees) in order to carve out a viewership within the platform (Taylor 2018). It is within this cultural and economic climate that this paper is situated, exploring the shifting and evolving manner by which games are experienced and consumed both privately and publicly, by not simply 'players', but also streamers and spectators.

This paper investigates the influence game affordances have on the live performances of Twitch videogame streamers. Therefore, it is important that the use of the term *affordance* is clarified relative to its convoluted history as a term. In order to apply a theory of affordances specific to videogames, this paper will ground its understanding of the term in Cardona-Rivera & Young's (2013) three manipulable entities: (1) *real* affordances, referring to player actions technically possible in an interactive virtual environment (2) *perceived* affordances, referring to actions the player perceives as possible, and (3) *feedback* encompassing information used within a game to convey *real* affordances to the player so as to elicit an accurate *perceived* affordance (Cardona-Rivera & Young 2013, p.4). This framework captures the process of player experimentation and learning that typically comprises gameplay while considering the possibility of breakdown that may occur when poor feedback results in a real affordance failing to be perceived by a player (Cardona-Rivera & Young 2013). Building on this existing framework, this project will examine the influence different game affordances have over the moment-to-moment decision making and live performances of Twitch videogame streamers, drawing attention to the respective role

both streamers and videogames have in offering particular types of experiences for Twitch spectators.

The live performance of a game's challenge or narrative (or both simultaneously) will serve as the focus for this paper. Challenge and narrative may be understood to align with Vahlo's (2017) respective definitions for coordination and exploration. Coordination involves spatial or logical problem solving, coordinating fine motor skills and adjusting oneself to the rhythm of gameplay (Vahlo 2017). Exploration, on the other hand, involves an element of randomness and is less connected to explicit game objectives, including character customisation, role-playing, an extensive gameworld or a complex story (Vahlo 2017). Both elements of gameplay tie into the central objective of this paper: to develop a conceptual framework for examining the relationship game affordances share with streamer content, as understood through the streamer's performance of a game's challenge and/or narrative.

This paper requires engagement with both the field of game studies and internet & media studies in order to first capture and then discuss the process by which the streamer (player) participates in gameplay, and then examine the role the Twitch platform and a live audience has in influencing the moment-to-moment performance of gameplay. Consalvo's (2017) research into tandem play follows a similar path to this paper, questioning the relationship streamers share with in-game factors such as failure, and the influence this may have over streamer performances and interactions with the live chat. However, this paper intends to observe more closely the role streamers have in mediating gameplay for spectators through their engagement with a particular game's affordances. Therefore, this paper will extend its analysis beyond failure as a shared experience among streamers, investigating instead how *different* forms of failure occur within different *types* of streams and via different game affordances.

BIO
Lachlan Howells is a PhD student at Curtin University's School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry. His thesis investigates the relationship between game affordances and the online performances of live videogame streamers on Twitch. This project evolved from his honours thesis, which examined the creation of community-specific 'emotes' (i.e. Twitch's version of emojis or emoticons) on Twitch videogame channels. His research interests include videogames, internet communities, online humour and game design theory.

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