Behind the Streams: The Hidden Labour of Game Live Streaming

Mark R Johnson

Lecturer in Digital Cultures, University of Sydney
S212 John Woolley Building
Camperdown, NSW 2050, Sydney, Australia
mark.r.johnson@sydney.edu.au

Keywords

Live streaming, Twitch, playbour, work, aesthetics

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The live streaming of digital and analogue gaming has emerged as a major new topic in games research. Live streaming platforms – exemplified in most countries by *Twitch.tv* – offer the infrastructure and support for individuals around the world to broadcast their digital gameplay (and other activities) live over the internet, often including a webcam (Hamilton et al, 2014) and generally with a chat window alongside (Recktenwald, 2017; Wulf et al, 2018) so that viewers can talk to one another and to the streamer. A major strand of streaming research has come to address questions of political economy, such as platform infrastructure, monetisation, surveillance, and especially labour. These include considerations of Twitch as a site of playbour which "privileges white, cis, and abled streamers who run successful streams" (Catá, 2019:145) and the consequently gendered emotional labour of live streaming (Ruberg & Cullen, 2020); the reciprocal and co-constructive relationships between the platform and its users (Ask et al, 2019; cf. Partin, 2020); how Twitch's "infrastructure" can be understood as one that "supports and encourages voluntary self-surveillance" (Walker, 2014:438; cf. Partin, 2019) of one's play activities; and streaming careers (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017), streamer entrepreneurialism (Johnson *et al*, 2019), and the affective labour of live streaming (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). All of this political economic work has laid vital foundations for understanding the labour practices that take place on Twitch and other platforms, and complex contests and disputes between actors and ideologies within these spaces.

In particular, however, I note Witkowski et al (2016:430) who drew attention to some of the "hidden" labour performed by streamers as being essential to understanding the practice. Despite this initial mention, what we might therefore call the "off-camera" labour of live streamers has yet to be examined in any detail. What goes on behind the camera which streamers' viewers are unaware of? What sorts of activities are required to make streams run smoothly and crisply, to create a streamer's on-camera personality, to generate and maintain their fame? What are the expectations, motivations and pressures? What other actors are involved in these processes? Drawing on extensive interview data with over one hundred professional and semi-professional live streamers, this paper focuses on exploring off-stream labour for the first time, and the demands it makes on game broadcasters. Examining these hidden labour practices will afford us a window into how streams are constructed and supported by diverse forms of hidden labour, and how the dynamics of streaming communities, the political economy of game live streaming, and the professionalisation of aspirational streamers, are all shaped by what takes place off-camera.

A brief introduction will look at existing research on Twitch and live streaming, focusing particularly on assessments of labour. With this conceptual and theoretical background established, the body of the paper then distinguishes the main forms of off-camera labour Twitch streamers engage in. The first is labour that goes into stream aesthetics, especially so-called "overlays" which help make a channel visually distinct from others, and implementing sounds, graphics, custom icons and emotes, and so on. The second is networking, through which streamers look to connect with other streamers broadcasting similar content (often forming and maintaining larger communities of streamers all dedicated to particular genres of game, for example, whose viewers move between associated channels), but also scoping out the competition in other similar channels, and in some cases arguably even trying to "poach" viewers from other streams. The third involves work on other platforms beyond Twitch such as maintaining and supporting communities of loyal viewers on social media platforms like Discord, as well as uploading content to YouTube, in order to strengthen community formation and grow the visibility of a channel. The fourth, which concludes this section, covers activities such as handling large volumes of email traffic, managing channel moderators, and pursuing sponsorships. These sorts of maintenance or management activities were mentioned rarely – not, I argue, because they are themselves rare or trivial, but because they have already become mundane, a situation which tells us much about the off-camera practices of live streamers and their orientations towards live streaming and the use of their time.

All of these examinations will thus produce a typology of off-camera game live streaming labour, and begin to frame some of the many ways that game streaming reduces, shapes or otherwise influences what might otherwise be perceived as the "leisure time" of gaming content broadcasters. With live streamers becoming increasingly slick and professionalised (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017) and live streaming playing an increasingly central role in gaming culture (Gandolfi, 2016; Pellicone & Ahn, 2017; Taylor, 2018), this is an increasingly important dimension to understand about some of the most visible and influential gaming content creators in the world.

BIO

Dr Mark R Johnson is a Lecturer in Digital Cultures at the University of Sydney. His research focuses primarily on live streaming and Twitch.tv, as well as examinations of esports and game consumption & production. He has published in journals including *'Information, Communication and Society'*, *'New Media and Society'*, *'The Sociological Review'*, *'Convergence'*, *'Media, Culture and Society'*, and *'Games and Culture'*. Outside academia he is also an independent game designer, a regular games blogger and podcaster, and a former professional poker player.

Bibliography

Ask, K., Spilker, H. S., & Hansen, M. 2019. The politics of user-platform relationships: Coscripting live-streaming on Twitch. tv. *First Monday, 24*(7).

Catá, A. S. 2019. Convergence of Rhetoric, Labour, and Play in the Construction of Inactive Discourses on Twitch. *Digital Culture & Society, 5*(2), 133-148.

Gandolfi, E. 2016. To Watch or to Play, It is in the Game: The Game Culture on Twitch.tv among Performers, Plays, and Audiences. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds, 8*(1), 63–82.

Hamilton, W.A., Garretson, O., & Kerne, A. 2014. Streaming on twitch: fostering participatory communities of play within live mixed media. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, ACM,* 1315-1324.

Johnson, M. R., & Woodcock, J. 2017. 'It's like the gold rush': the lives and careers of professional video game streamers on Twitch. tv. *Information, Communication & Society, 22*(3), 336-351.

Johnson, M. R., Carrigan, M., & Brock, T. 2019. The imperative to be seen: The moral economy of celebrity video game streaming on Twitch. tv. *First Monday, 24*(8).

Partin, W. C. 2019. Watch me pay: Twitch and the cultural economy of surveillance. *Surveillance & Society, 17*(1/2), 153-160.

Partin, W. C. 2020. Bit by (Twitch) Bit:"Platform Capture" and the Evolution of Digital Platforms. *Social Media+ Society, 6*(3).

Pellicone, A. J., & Ahn, J. 2017. The Game of Performing Play: Understanding streaming as cultural production. In *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems,* 4863-4874.

Recktenwald, D. 2017. Toward a transcription and analysis of live streaming on Twitch. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *115,* 68-81.

Ruberg, B. & Cullen, A. L. L. 2020. Feeling for an Audience The Gendered Emotional Labor of Video Game Live Streaming. *Digital Culture and Society, 5*(2), 133-148.

Taylor, T. L. 2018. *Watch me play: Twitch and the rise of game live streaming.* Princeton University Press.

Witkowski, E., Recktenwald, D., Manning, J., & Ge, Z. 2016. Livestreaming in theory and practice: Four provocations on labour, liveness and participatory culture in games livestreaming. In *Proceedings of the 22nd international symposium on electronic art,* 429-431.

Woodcock, J., & Johnson, M. R. 2019. The affective labor and performance of live streaming on Twitch. tv. *Television & New Media, 20*(8), 813-823.

Wulf, T., Schneider, F. M., & Beckert, S. 2018. Watching players: An exploration of media enjoyment on Twitch. *Games and Culture*, 15(3), 328-346.