

# Performing with Games: videogame affordances and live content on Twitch.tv

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## **Keywords**

Videogame affordances, Twitch.tv, streamer, performance, challenge, narrative, community.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The act of playing does not occur in a vacuum but rather, in the words of Newman (2008), is “informed by and situated within the context of other players and their analyses and playing” (12). Although the public performances that shape players’ understandings of videogames today take different forms than they did a decade ago, Newman (2008) sheds light on the sociality that surrounds videogames and players, and the creativity inherent within works that modify, transform, adapt, and make sense of videogames. From the personal anecdotes and reflections present in videogame walkthroughs on gameFAQs, to the first appearance of a Let’s Play (LP) on somethingawful forums, through to the enormous success of LPs on YouTube, a trend may be observed to unfold in which players find novel and creative ways online to express and communicate their experiences in and around videogames. With each platform, new trends evolve, bringing with them new codes and conventions with which to define the media genre. This paper examines videogames in their current context, considering the influence live-streaming platforms, specifically *Twitch.tv*, have over how individuals play, discuss, interpret, and experience videogames online.

Building on research first presented at DIGRAA in 2020, this paper brings together five extended, semi-structured interviews with different Australian-based Twitch streamers. These interviews draw on streamers’ lived experiences, with questions centered broadly around their relationship with the games they play live on stream, how their enjoyment is either enhanced or diminished through their engagement with the live chat and how they perform gameplay as part of appealing to an audience of live spectators. A second component of this paper’s methods involves pairing the above interview responses with Twitch transcriptions (recorded from the participants’ respective Twitch channels) to provide an additional window into the online environment discussed in the interviews. The transcriptive methods used draw heavily from Recktenwald (2017), with the Twitch transcript’s layout illustrating the sequence of interactions that emerge between the streamer and live message chat in response to some ‘game event’. These transcripts were useful in revealing which aspects of gameplay and streamer performance generated heightened attention and participation from spectators, while also capturing the influence chat participants had over the streamers’ moment-to-moment live performance.

Across the five interview participants there were several different *types* of streamer, comprising three ‘variety’ streamers (i.e. streamers who regularly play different videogame titles as part of their content), one ‘speedrunner’ (a streamer who races to

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complete specific videogame titles as fast as possible) and one streamer who centred their Twitch content around competitive first-person shooters (FPS). Building on Gandolfi's (2016) notion that "...affordances in digital games are parameters that [Twitch streamers] ponder and exploit" (5), this paper examines how streamers leverage videogame affordances as part of performing an entertaining stream for their live audience. To formulate questions for the interviews that would prompt streamers to consider their game preferences and the *types* of gameplay they performed, the terms challenge and narrative were especially useful. Drawing on Vahlo (2017), challenge is understood to be more immediately tied to a player's fine motor skills and strategic decision making, while narrative is more immediately tied to exploration and roleplaying. During a given live stream, the conversations observed to unfold between streamers and their live chat could be tied, in varying degrees, to these two broad facets of gameplay. Instances of lore contemplation and discussion aligned more explicitly with a videogame's narrative, while reactions to failure/success and discussions of tactics and strategy aligned with challenge. While the terms challenge and narrative are not fixed or binary, the interview responses revealed a tendency amongst streamers to favour or emphasise one over the other, and to engage with videogames differently, or not at all, based on the nature of their narrative and challenge.

This paper presents preliminary findings borne of the methods described above, examining interview respondents' respective approaches to streaming on Twitch, their relationship with the videogames they play and the online community they foster. Focusing on moments during streams that generate heightened activity in the live chat, I examine the different ways streamers engage and leverage videogame affordances as part of performing an entertaining stream. Lastly, I ask how the player-videogame relationship is maintained, altered or fractured as a consequence of broadcasting via the Twitch platform. Here I consider how the Twitch platform positions itself relative to its users, considering how streamers engage with videogame affordances, not only to successfully play or 'complete' a game, but to produce 'meaningful' moments, i.e. moments that engage spectators and extend the social dimensions of the Twitch platform.

## BIO

Lachlan Howells is a writer and researcher from Perth. He holds degrees in sociology and finance from Curtin University, where he is currently completing his PhD, researching the evolving practices that have emerged around videogame live-streaming. This research examines the different types of live performances, and modes of viewership, that have emerged on the Twitch platform. More recently, Lachlan has begun research into online extremism, investigating how young people counter and resist far right and extremist narratives on Twitch.tv.

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