

# Exploring Comedy and Humour in Twitch.tv Game Live Streaming

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## ABSTRACT

Websites such as *Twitch.tv* in the Americas, Europe and Oceania (Olejniczak, 2015), *Douyu* in China (Zhang & Hjorth, 2019) and *Niconico* in Japan (Steinberg, 2017), are transforming the consumption of digital games and the formation of digital gaming communities. Anyone with a sufficiently fast internet connection and the ability to navigate computer software can broadcast themselves (Skardzius, 2020), almost always with a running voiceover commentary and a webcam, playing digital games on PC, console, or even mobile phones. The broadcasters - “streamers” - are watched by viewers, who talk to each other and the streamer using these websites’ chat functions, post graphical emojis (called “emotes” on *Twitch*), and display status through the buttons or badges next to their usernames. Live streaming has grown rapidly in the past several years and accelerated further during Covid-19 social disruptions (Stephen, 2020), reaching the point where millions of streamers are broadcasting their digital gaming to tens of millions of spectators. Streamers - whether “micro-streamers” broadcasting to a handful of viewers (Consalvo *et al*, 2020; Chan & Gray, 2020; Phelps *et al*, 2021), aspirational individuals seeking some earnings from their broadcasts, or professional streamers who make a consistent income (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; cf. Lu *et al*, 2018) - carry out many different activities to maintain viewers’ interest in their channels. This includes holding conversations with their viewers (Scully-Blaker *et al*, 2017; Recktenwald, 2017), offering rewards for monetary donations (Siutila, 2018; Wohn *et al*, 2018), generating a sense of intimacy and relatability with their fan base (Ruberg & Lark, 2020; Sheng & Kairam, 2020), building and maintaining off-platform communities for their followers on sites like *Discord* and *Reddit* (Faas *et al*, 2018; Johnson, 2021) - and deploying *humour*.

Although numerous scholars have observed that humour plays a key role on *Twitch* (Chow, 2016; Pellicone, 2017; Anderson, 2017; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019; Lybrand, 2019; Mihailova, 2020; Jodén, 2020), an analysis of game streaming explicitly focused on the role of humour has not yet been produced. Scholars do not generally “elaborate on the role of technology in the creation of humor” (Švelch, 2014:2533), but the closest for *Twitch* is probably the work of Chow (2016) or Pellicone (2017) whose Master’s and Doctoral theses discuss *Twitch*’s in-jokes and recurring jokes, although primarily focused on crowd behaviour and interaction, and the performance of live streaming as a cultural act, respectively. There is therefore space for a focused analysis of live streaming humour, and as I argue in this paper, conducting such an analysis gives us not simply an abstract understanding of a particular form of online comedy, but also sheds light on contemporary gaming

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culture, the (sometimes problematic) dynamics of internet celebrity more broadly, and on how platforms' affordances and cultural norms can intersect to produce new forms of behaviour that sometimes even subvert their own power structures.

This paper begins with a rapid literature review focusing on three dimensions - the relationship between humour and play, that between humour and games, and that between humour and the internet. I then outline my method, which is ethnographic in nature and draws on hundreds of hours of *Twitch* observation over the past five years. Although other live streaming platforms do exist, *Twitch* is highly dominant in game streaming in most countries. In this paper I focus on three cases of Twitch game streaming humour practices that emerged from this study – which I call “The Body in the Bath”, “The Twitch Cops”, and “The Dead Rabbit” – to demonstrate the forms and dynamics of humour and wit on the platform. Each represents a different “stage” of *Twitch* humour: the first, arising from the behaviours of live streamers; the second from viewer behaviour in live streams; and the third looking at viewer behaviour outside of streams but still involving stream content. These case studies can be usefully understood as the three temporal steps of a *Twitch* stream - a broadcast, its immediate live reception while being broadcast, and then its continued cultural life beyond both. I relate the nature of each case study and what it shows about the dynamics of humour on *Twitch*, and the reluctance of live streamers to not turn gaming into comedy, even with games meant to be “serious” in nature. These illustrate how deeply the dynamics of humour and comedy I describe here are built into *Twitch* and its associated culture. The discussion then develops “stream-humour” as a concept distinct from yet connected to the humour(s) associated with play, games and the internet, and focuses on how the *platform* and its infrastructure and affordances have been integral in shaping this distinctive form of comedy. The paper concludes by emphasising the implications of this study for our understanding of *Twitch* game streaming specifically, and gaming culture more broadly.

## BIO

Dr Mark R Johnson is a Lecturer in Digital Cultures in the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. His research focuses on Twitch.tv and game live streaming, as well as esports, game production and consumption, and gamblification in digital games. He has published in journals such as “Information, Communication and Society”, “Media, Culture and Society”, “Games and Culture”, and “Convergence”. Outside of academia he is also an independent game developer best known for the roguelike “Ultima Ratio Regum”, and a regular games blogger, podcaster, and commentator.

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