

Time and Temporality in Game Streaming on Twitch

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the creation of games, and time, has begun to see scholarly attention. Researchers have, for example, interrogated the working conditions of labourers in the games industry, which inevitably has a significant time dimension (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2006; Schumacher, 2007; Harvey & Fisher, 2013). This is especially apparent in the discussion and critique of so-called “crunch” practices (Peticca-Harris et al, 2015; Cote & Harris, 2021), in which generally compulsory overtime is enforced on employees in order to meet a deadline that a company has not previously been on target to meet. However, the possibility of interesting and potentially enlightening relationships between gaming-related “content creation” and time - Twitch streaming, “Let’s Play” videos on YouTube, modding, cosplaying, games podcasts, game fan art, and so on - has not yet been explored. Although outside of the formal games industry, these practices represent sites of tremendous fan activity and fan labour. A few publications on such topics do address the time requirements in some of these activities, but it is rarely a focus (Rosenberg & Letamendi, 2013:16; Hong & Chen, 2014:299-300; Postigo, 2016:12; etc). There is therefore a need for a time-focused study of gaming creation outside of the games industry, looking instead at gaming content creation. I propose beginning such a discussion with a study of game streams on Twitch, whose size and impact within gaming (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; Taylor, 2018) makes it a highly valuable case study. In doing so I hope to achieve two goals. Firstly, to offer an interesting case study of how time deeply is far more deeply interwoven in gaming-related content creation than has previously been noted, and secondly, to further develop our understanding of Twitch game streamers and their practices, strategies, and perspectives on their streaming lives.

To do so I begin with a brief literature review addressing gaming “content creation” before introducing the work of Hartmut Rosa, which will be used throughout the paper to frame and more fully articulate the complex temporal dynamics, and discourses, experienced by and created by Twitch streamers. I also cover relevant literature on game live streaming to lay the groundwork for this paper. Following this I outline my method (semi-structured interviews with popular Australian game streamers) and describe the analysis and coding of this data. The paper’s discussion is then split into three sections, titled “When do I stream?”, “When should I stream?”, and “Who do I compete with?”, which explore the three main elements of understanding game streaming’s temporalities. In the first of these I examine how most streamers in this sample are broadcasting in the evenings and examine both

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practical (work or caring commitments) and discursive (evenings are “gaming time”) articulations from respondents about their selection of this time period. In the second of these I demonstrate that although most respondents go live in the evenings, most think they *should* go live in the mornings. I particularly draw here upon their explanations of the international nature of Twitch and the global audiences – especially from the United States – that many are looking to secure, and highlight the sometimes strikingly complex sets of decision-making that streamers are using in explaining the most “optimal” times for game streaming. In the third of these I explore what respondents had to say about different levels of competition at different times of day, and also the importance of the idea of “consistency” to how many game streamers organise and think about their time. In each section I draw extensively on quotes from the data to illustrate the arguments proposed, and utilise Rosa’s work in understanding how the phenomena and thought processes described are both in some ways emblematic of contemporary (digital) life, yet in other ways distinct and idiosyncratic. Throughout these I particularly emphasise the relationship between the pragmatic and the discursive elements of when game streamers go live, and also identify the important role that happenstance plays in shaping a game streamer’s broadcasting schedule. I conclude by summarising the core findings of the paper and discussing what these mean for our understanding of Twitch game streaming practices, and proposing future research directions opened up by this initial project.

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 game live streaming and Twitch.tv, esports, and gamification and gambification. He has published in journals including ‘Information, Communication and Society’, ‘New Media and Society’, ‘Media, Culture and Society’, ‘Convergence’, and ‘Games and Culture’. Outside academia he is also an independent game designer best known for the roguelike ‘Ultima Ratio Regum’ and is a regular games blogger and commentator.

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