Japanese Game Live Streamers: Practices and Languages

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INTRODUCTION

"Live streaming" has grown to a point where millions of people are now broadcasting to a collective worldwide audience well into the hundreds of millions (Taylor, 2018; Johnson, 2024). Digital gaming is not the only activity that streamers show on their channels, but it is one of the most central and the most influential. In such a stream the viewer sees a live broadcast of the game being played accompanied normally by a webcam shot of the player and their surroundings, and a chat window in which viewers talk to each other and to the streamer. The streamer plays whatever game they are playing; viewers discuss what's going on with each other often through the use of in-jokes (Jackson, 2020; Johnson, 2022) or little graphical images generally known as "emotes" (Brown & Moberly, 2020; Evans & Llano, 2023), as well as sometimes posing questions to the streamer; and on many channels significant and enduring cultures of fans can be constructed. Most streamers broadcast to very small or even non-existent audiences (Phelps et al, 2021a, 2021b), although thousands have been able to monetise (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017) their broadcasts to the point of being able to make some income or even their entire income for the practice.

In most countries the website Twitch dominates this space and stands in the foreground of scholarship on the area, although there is also growing body of work on Chinese live streaming platforms (Zhang & Hjorth, 2019) and examinations of similar phenomena on other sites that are not live, or generally not live, such as YouTube (Postigo, 2016). Scholarship on Twitch and live streaming more generally, however, either explicitly or implicitly assumes an English-speaking - and generally white, and most often North American - subject. There are valuable exceptions, such as research focused on or including the experiences of black streamers (Chan & Gray, 2020; Woodhouse, 2021; Carter & Egliston, 2021), Spanish-language game streamers (Sixto-García et al, 2023) and Brazilian Twitch streamers (Montardo et al, 2017). Yet nationality, language and local culture, and their impacts on live streaming, have overall yet to be studied in much detail. There is therefore a clear gap in the literature

here: what sorts of game live streaming practices and communities are being forged outside of the English-speaking world?

To explore this question the current paper presents findings from the first study to date in English, or Japanese, of Japanese game live streamers. Drawing extensiely on quotes from fifteen semi-structured interviews with Japanese-language game live streamers, we present two key insights: 1) that Japanese game streamers' concerns with privacy and anonymity are far stronger than among their English-speaking live streaming colleagues, and 2) that there is significant internationality present in these channels, which challenges commonly held cultural ideas about Japan being somehow "other" (Wagenaar, 2016; Koníček, 2019) and hence apart from many wider global flows and interactions. In the first case we show that a key practice for Japanese game streamers is the absence of face cam. This leads to many using VTuber avatars, a practice that does exist outside Japan, but which we show is far more common within that context. The reasons given were diverse, but all centered around particular notions of privacy, online safety, a concern with being "found out", and a desire for a stronger separation between one's "real" and one's "gaming" life than appears to be the case for western game streamers. This is a novel finding in our understanding of (game) live streaming, and one that further reinforces the importance of understanding national, cultural, and linguistic differences in the practice. In the second case, we show that far from Japanese game streamers being very separate from the implicit English-speaking "mainstream" of game streaming, there are actually many points of interaction, overlap, commonality, and engagement. Many Japanese game streamers use Twitch rather than the domestic NicoNico; many are used to getting comments in English or other languages in their streams, highlighting an unanticipated diversity of viewers; many use some basic English to respond to these viewers; and some explicitly express a desire to expand their broadcast beyond the natively Japanese-speaking audience. Many also have some level of skill with Chinese, which brings in viewers particulaly from Taiwan. Within a broader theoretical setting that allows us to understand the default "otherness" with which Japan is often seen abroad (in both gaming contexts and others), here we challenge any sense of separation when it comes to game streaming, while also acknowledging and interrogating points of genuine difference when and where they do exist. The paper concludes that game streaming by Japanese players represents a potentially important new direction in both the study of game streaming and the study of Japanese gaming, and in turn a national, linguistic, and cultural game streaming context that demands closer attention.

BIO

Mark R Johnson is a Senior Lecturer in Digital Cultures in the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. He has published extensively on live streaming, Twitch.tv and esports in journals including "Information, Communication and Society", "New Media and Society", "Media, Culture and Society", "Television and New Media", "Convergence" and "Games and Culture", Outside academia he is also an independent game designer best known for the roguelike "Ultima Ratio Regum".

James Baguley is a graduate from the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. He completed his undergraduate thesis in Digital Cultures on the sociotechnical strategies employed by online videogame fandom on Discord. Currently preparing for a PhD, he is keenly interested in online subcultures and sociality, and hopes to conduct research into the dynamics of relationships between creatively-oriented online entities (e.g. video-makers, videogame developers) and their audiences.

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