

Parasocial Players: Examining “Authenticity” In Gaming Podcast Audiences

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Keywords

Gaming media, twitch, parasocial relationships, gaming podcasts, content creation

INTRODUCTION

Gaming media in the mid-2020s is in a transformative state. The ascendancy of platforms like Twitch (Johnson, 2024) and YouTube (Carter et al., 2020) have helped independent creators gain a foothold in what was once the exclusive domain of gaming journalists and reporters. Yet while these transformations point towards a crisis point in gaming journalism and the broader journalism industry (Stanton & Johnson, 2024), the changes wrought by digital media also provide opportunities for creators and audiences alike. One aspect of this transformation that has gone unexamined is the opportunities the medium of podcasts provide, exemplified in this case by the rapid growth and expansion of “gaming podcasts” as a subset thereof. Despite some of the oldest of these shows dating back nearly twenty years and the videogame -category being the very largest in Apple Podcast’s “Leisure” section, there has been almost no sustained research into gaming podcasts and their appeal. This is particularly notable considering the overlap in research engaging with authenticity in gaming media, and in podcasting. Scholars like Siobhan McHugh (2022) and Zuraikat and Brown (2020) have noted that one of podcasting’s key features is its uniquely authentic nature and ability to foster parasocial relationships, while game studies researchers including Ruberg and Lark (2021), Kowert and Daniel (2021), and Leith (2021) have similarly examined the existence of authenticity and parasociality on platforms like Twitch. There has, however, been no research examining the potential differences or similarities between the forms of authenticity deployed in these mediums, even as the gaming media ecosystem becomes increasingly reliant on this type of content.

This paper explores these questions, focusing particularly on the important role that presenting an authentic persona plays in appealing to gaming media audiences who listen to gaming podcasts. To do so I draw on 1,800 survey respondents from gaming podcast audiences and semi-structured interviews with 28 gaming podcast creators, both of which represent by far the largest bodies of survey and interview data yet collected on gaming podcasters. Through analysis of this data I show that it is the strength of gaming podcasters’ authenticity and their fostering of parasocial relationships - alongside the hands-and-eye free nature of the medium - that appear to play a key role in capturing gaming podcast audiences. These findings demonstrate that not only is authenticity a key draw for a significant portion of the audiences of these podcasts, but that it is in fact highlighted by some as being *more* authentic than the relationships fostered on other platforms like Twitch. This finding is highly significant when taken alongside associated findings that the audiences of gaming podcasts both overlap with and diverge from the broader audiences of gaming media -

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2025

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roughly 40% of creators claimed podcasts were their primary form of gaming media, while 48% noted they shared this title with other gaming media formats.

The paper also presents findings that further complicate our understanding of gaming media authenticity by showcasing how some aspects of the audience reject the idea that there is any form of personal relationship between listener and host - running strongly counter to research on parasocial relationships on Twitch (Ruberg & Lark, 2021; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). Survey respondents were in fact equally as likely to state that they had no personal relationship with hosts as they were to proclaim that hosts felt like their friends. Interestingly, these responses were not mutually exclusive - listeners might acknowledge a lack of relationship in the same sentence they highlighted the feelings of connection. These novel findings thus paint a nuanced picture of how listeners navigate the tensions inherent in the (potentially parasocial) relationships these podcasts generate. Even as listeners understood that authenticity can be projected as a performance, this data shows that still found it to be effective in cultivating a connection between creator and listener. This represents a striking finding for studies of gaming media audiences as it not only showcases a significant level of critical thinking amongst audiences regarding their relationships with creators, but it also deepens our understanding of these performances of authenticity that occur in different kinds of gaming media. In doing so, this paper highlights the need to not only examine these different forms of gaming media in conversation with one another, but also shows the importance of continuing to engage with formats which have been historically neglected such as gaming podcasts, for their audiences represent new avenues for research that can provide important and distinctive findings.

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LANGUAGE AND STYLE

BIO

Ryan Stanton is a PhD student at the University of Sydney. His doctoral research is the first large scale analysis of gaming podcasts and is focused on situating them within the broader gaming media ecosystem. He is particularly interested in issues of labor and precarity, analyzing how these creators make a living in the field, having published an article in *Games and Culture* about this topic. Prior to this, he completed his honors analyzing the fan communities of Actual Play podcast, *The Adventure Zone*, a summary of which has been published in the *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research presented in this abstract was funded, in part, by a Research Training Program Scholarship awarded by the Australian government.