

Watching People Play. The Role of Spectatorship in Player Careers

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Abstract

Games are often defined as an interactive medium. In the many debates over the differences between games and movies, for instance, the argument that games are actively played rather than watched; the player is the one making the story. This argument is not only found in game studies papers: it is also one of the way players justify their playing. The *World of Warcraft* players I interviewed in 2008 often came back to the fact that "You don't interact with TV, you look at a screen. [...] When I play [...] I talk with real people [...] and we have real discussions" (Coavoux 2010, 53). Yet, games have always had an audience made up not only of players, but also of onlookers (Lin and Sun 2011). The streaming of game-related videos on platform such as Twitch.tv shed the public light to that aspect of video games. Nowadays, watching streams is an integral part of video game culture.

In this talk, I will examine spectatorship from a viewer's perspective: how does it fit into their player career? I use career with a symbolic interactionist meaning (Becker and Strauss 1956) to define not only professional career, but the history of an individual. Therefore, player careers are defined as the succession of games and ways of playing (embedded in social, professional, affective biographies) a player went through.

My empirical data is from an ongoing qualitative research on esports and video game streaming spectators. Ten interviews with regular spectators have been conducted, and twenty more will be in the coming month. Since I am writing this proposal based on the preliminary analysis of the first 10 interviews, results are subject to change. The participants are all adults aged 20-40, from various socio-economic backgrounds. The interviews were a mix of biographical and semi-directed interviews. In the first part, participants were asked to tell their life history as players (games they played, contexts they played in). I systematically asked them to link every episode to their status at the

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time (age, occupation, family situation, etc.). In the second part, the interview focused on contemporary stream spectatorship: what they looked at, how they picked streamers, etc.

I will focus on three dimensions of spectatorship in player careers. They are dependent on the fact that the interviewees are adult who used to spend a lot of time playing, and that some of them struggle to keep doing so.

First, game streaming spectatorship is intertwined between game spectatorship and general video streaming. Most interviewees have a long history of game spectatorship, beginning in their childhood, when they played with their siblings and watched them play. Moreover, they all watch other streamed content, like YouTube channels. In that sense, game streaming spectatorship needs to be understood in relation to global mutations in the use of video, and more especially the move from TV to the Internet.

Second, a strong motivation for watching that is overlooked by the current literature (Hamari and Sjöblom 2017) is staying up-to-date with current games. Because they have time constraints and face a gigantic video game market, interviewees use streaming to apprehend the new games. Streams have become for some players the main, and often the only, media about games. They do not read magazines, websites, or blogs. This need to stay up-to-date has various motivation depending on the life cycle: to some, watching has almost replaced playing (a young mom or a PhD student do not find time to play anymore); to others, it is a way to quickly judge new games.

Finally, spectatorship can be a surrogate for playing. Spectatorship might make up for lost time as was already mentioned; but more unexpectedly given current theories of interaction in games, some interviewee actually like watching more than playing, at least for certain games. This can be the case for very competitive games with an unfriendly community, such as some esports titles where new players, especially women, are subject to bullying. In one case, a 26 years-old women referred to *League of Legend* as "an amazing game", but one she could not play (too time-consuming, too unfriendly). This can also be the case when scouting for different games: streaming is a way to have new gaming experience without having to learn the tricks of the trade.

Game watching must be studied seriously as an integral part of contemporary gaming cultures. Contrary to some theoretical and folk expectations, games are as much a medium that is watched than one that is played. Moreover, watching, as playing, is better understood through the social contexts it takes place in.

BIO

Samuel Coavoux is a researcher in sociology at Orange Labs/SENSE (France) and an associate researcher at the Centre Max Weber. He studies the reception of cultural goods.

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