

Audiencing on Twitch

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the growing academic interest in live-streaming platforms like Twitch, there is limited work that takes seriously the role that the *interactivity* of the platform plays in the experience of using and viewing live-streamed content (see Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; Smith et al., 2013). In this presentation, we will discuss the ways the Twitch platform connects with what Taylor (2016, after Bratich, 2008) calls ‘audience power’ (as applied to physical e-sports tournaments). Audience power is taken to mean the mediated capacity to affect and be affected (Bratich, 2008). In this work, we highlight the main ways that viewers on Twitch ‘audience’ such a way through the Twitch platform. They do not simply ‘passively’ receive information but are ‘actively’ involved in its reception. Moreover, consistent with Bratich’s theorization and footing in autonomist/Marxist media theory, we argue that audiencing through Twitch generates considerable economic value.

Firstly, throughout the Twitch platform **viewership** is one of the most basic ways in which the audience is commoditized. Through simply displaying the number of viewers, both concurrently and in total, the platform leverages the (albeit minimal) ‘work’ of the audience to rank streams (with the most popular streams rising to the top) and for advertising content. The dominance of popular stream and streamers become reinforced by their popularity, clustering the viewing audience.

Secondly, the **chat window** is one of the most prominent ways in which viewers can ‘audience’, and in turn a good example of how their affective labor constructs the appeal of watching live gaming on Twitch. Popular streams (several thousand viewers) on Twitch rarely involve meaningful chat; the sheer number of people commenting means that the *speed* of messages moving up the chat window is so fast, few comments can even be read by viewers. In this way, the chat window becomes a proxy for the *noise* audiences create when watching live sporting events, in turn impacting the way the event is received. Key moments of play – such as a *Battlegrounds* player in combat – are distinguished by the audience by the way the speed of the chat reflects the excitement of the content, actively altering the reception of the stream. Reflecting this value, the chat window can be replayed alongside recorded videos from Twitch to retain this element of the experience.

Various **emotes** and **badges** are coupled to the active work involved in the chat window on Twitch, to both commoditize the audience but also construct clear hierarchies between ‘fans’ and mere ‘spectators’. Across different games, emotes (effectively emoticons, but often faces and brands) have specific meaning. In streams of *DOTA2*, the OSFROG () emote is used in response to events within the game

that involve an over-powered or unbalanced item or character in the game, and popular streams will frequently see the entire chat window dominated by a rapid flurry of this frog emote. This ingroup meme distinguishes fans from spectators, who do not understand the implied meaning of the term (it mocks the game's creator 'IceFrog' and the ongoing, slow development of the game). Similarly, subscriber and mod badges that appear adjacent to a commenter's username works to place viewers into a hierarchy based on their affective labour (in the case of volunteer mods) or genuine economic value (in the case of channel subscribers, who pay monthly fees).

In these ways (and many others not covered in the scope of this abstract), we see how Twitch viewers are key to the experience of content on Twitch – and the ways their affective work of watching content on Twitch takes on economic value. In addition to helping make sense of the popularity of the Twitch platform (over 100 million visits per month), we argue this work helps connect the study of online livestreaming to prior work in the study of physical gaming tournaments (e.g. Taylor, 2016), and the need to always consider the important role that spectators play in any gaming context.

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