The Authenticity Engine: Livestreaming on Twitch

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INTRODUCTION

An Australian streamer breaks down in tears while talking with her viewers, overcome because she hasn't been paid for promotional work she did some time ago, and fears she won't be able to pay her bills. An American streamer starts a game of *Dark Souls,* pauses it while a small child appears to tell him about a sibling having an issue, puts up a 'break' screen to investigate the problem, and returns after a few minutes to resume play without comment. A British woman stops playing *Cuphead* after dying repeatedly, apologizes to her community for not providing adequate entertainment, and switches to another game. Meanwhile behind a fourth streamer a toddler appears holding a slice of pizza aloft that bobs up and down as he walks through the camera's frame.

Such instances were not scripted nor likely anticipated by the streamers involved. If each streamer was making a Let's Play video of their gameplay, those elements would have been edited out, never to appear for public consumption. Yet due to Twitch's liveness, they were all broadcast, and the streamers themselves coped with the issues in different ways – if they were even aware of them. This liveness is one of the celebrated features of Twitch and similar live streaming services (Mixer, Caffeine.tv) and presumably one of the draws for the audiences that flock to them. We argue that this liveness - in tandem with the particularities of Twitch itself - generates authenticity. This presentation details how micro-streamers perform authenticity via intentional and unintentional practices.

LITERATURE

Work examining live streaming has mainly focused on those who stream to thousands or millions of viewers (Taylor 2018; Johnson and Woodcock 2017). Past work identified three categories of game streamers: esports players, speedrunners, and Let's Play/variety streamers (Hamilton, Garretson, and Kerne 2014). Such spaces are known to be toxic (Consalvo 2018), although streamers rely heavily on moderators (mods) to counteract this (Wohn 2019). Live streaming services are also now featuring a wider

variety of creative activities (Consalvo and Phelps 2019) as well as the banalities of everyday life (Zhang and Hjorth 2017).

However, only a small proportion of those who livestream gameplay make money from doing so, and most stream to small (or even nonexistent) audiences. This research investigates these 'micro-streamers' (mostly streamers with fewer than 100 concurrent views). The guiding questions were (1) how do individuals engage in live streaming and (2) how does live streaming change the act of gameplay – if at all.

METHODS

This study engaged in multiple methods. We initially identified >100 channels across Twitch, featuring variety streamers that were diverse in terms of their gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, age and ability. We observed channels over three years, accumulating hundreds of hours of viewtime to observe live streaming practices, taking fieldnotes and screenshots. We conducted 44 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with self-identified "smaller streamers" which lasted between 45-200 minutes in length. Finally, we invited interviewees to participate in a follow-up survey a year later to determine who was still streaming, reasons for quitting, and their biggest challenges. Data included hundreds of pages of transcripts and fieldnotes, and hundreds of screenshots and videos of livestreaming.

PERFORMING AUTHENTICITY

The large majority of those who stream gameplay on Twitch are neither partnered nor affiliates (i.e. compensated), and it is not their full-time job. For most of those we interviewed it is a leisure activity performed in addition to paid work. While some streamers may have greater aspirations, many are happy with the current state of their channels, viewers and practices, and are not striving to 'make it big on Twitch.'

The vast majority were either students or had jobs (or partners) that paid the majority of their expenses. A few streamed to single-digit audiences, with the rest trending upward into a few hundred or occasionally more viewers. Smaller streamers sometimes expressed casual or aspirational interest in making Twitch a full-time job, but most believed that doing Twitch for a living would never be practical – either because of its format for streamers as independent contractors with no benefits or support structures, or because they knew they didn't want to dedicate the time needed (and gamble on having the luck) to succeed long term. Even though most viewed their streaming as a hobby or leisure activity, they took it seriously and no one had plans to stop streaming.

All streamers took care to create a channel that was representative of them in some way, via their streaming personality, channel aesthetics, game choices, and other elements. Almost to a person, they reiterated the mantra that to be successful (however they defined the term) they should have a schedule and stick to it. For most, this comprised streaming several days a week, for at least a few hours at a time. This norm of the Twitch community translated into multiple sessions of constant gameplay, and via that 'always on' liveness, scripted and unscripted elements of authenticity could take shape.

Marwick, writing about individuals who work in technology fields, highlights the importance of how such workers 'self-brand' themselves to be employable, in particular through displays of authenticity. She makes the point that "the idea of a single 'authentic' self … is a social construction, one at odds with actual social practice" (Marwick 2013, 235). But in terms of actual practices, Marwick highlights authenticity as arising from "displays of a hidden inner life" (p. 120) as well as "honesty without pretense" (p. 120) in ways that are consistent. So how do Twitch micro-streamers perform authenticity via their streaming?

Intentional performances include sharing details of one's personal life, having a regular schedule, and interacting with one's community both on and off-stream. Unintentional performances of authenticity were equally important to live streaming, however, and include being overcome by emotion, gameplay failure, breaking of the fourth wall, technical difficulties, and dealing with abuse and harassment. Performing authenticity is something that most streamers grapple with, whether they think of it in those terms or not and is explored in more depth in the presentation.

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