Living on Twitch: An Ethnography of Fatigue

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Keywords
Twitch, Livestreaming, Analytic Autoethnography, Gamification,

INTRODUCTION

Over the last five years, Twitch's growth as a livestreaming broadcaster has become unparalleled and garnered much attention from videogames press and academic writers. To the same degree, its business model, culture and employment structure has provided rich space for critique. Research has focused on the rise of streaming as a business practice (Taylor, 2018), the political economy of livestreaming labour (Johnson & Woodcock, forthcoming) and the platformization of online life in general (van Dijk, Poell and de Waal, 2018; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Yet this new wealth of writing on livestreaming has produced a new gap in research. Focusing on Twitch as a business shifted the attention of researchers onto streamers who have become famous or financially successful, leaving most smaller streamers ignored.

We argue that small streamers face challenges unique to their position in the livestreaming ecosystem and that their lived experience merits attention from researchers. In particular, the specific position of pre-affiliate or affiliate streamers on Twitch lends itself to a great degree of self-disciplining behavior, fatigue and exploitation. Additionally, we argue that the totality of their lives and professional practice as streamers cannot be reduced to merely economic factors. This being the case, new multipronged research approaches are required for researchers to understand and advocate for these streamers.

METHODS

Our research methodology has been formed by combining a heterogenous collection of social sciences methods to triangulate our findings. Specifically, we rely on long form qualitative interviews with more than 40 participants over a 2-year timespan, ranging from 45 to 200 minutes each, and dealing with a wealth of topics including play, self-branding, failure, emotional labour, community engagement, advocacy and harassment among many topics (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor, 2012). Following these interviews, we also conducted longitudinal surveys to gauge how our respondents viewed their activity twelve months after we had spoken to them. Additionally, we have supplemented our interviews with autoethnographic reflection about our own experience streaming (set up in the context of this study), drawing on analytic autoethnographic methodology (Anderson, 2006). Furthermore, we have engaged in ethnographic observation of livestreams over a period of 3 years and attended TwitchCon (the main annual convention for Twitch streamers) between 2015 and 2017, in order to enrich our understanding of Twitch as a work environment, a community of workers, a platform and a broadcaster that has a formative and institutional impact on the activities of streamers (Smith, 2005).

FINDINGS

The totality of our findings is too large to communicate here, so we have decided to focus on one recurring theme: Fatigue. This theme was apparent throughout our interviews, our survey data and dovetailed with our autoethnographic data. The vast majority of streamers we interviewed spoke to us about the increasing and ever-present fatigue that is instilled by the affiliate and partnership programs streamers are enrolled into. The platform of Twitch has a great deal to do with quantifying and keeping this adherence to regular, consistent and unwavering work schedules, especially through its Achievements system (rolled out in 2017). However, the toll of this work prerogative becomes much more apparent when streamers need to put in progressively higher amounts of time and energy to be approved for affiliate and partner status by Twitch corporate. Our findings show that this fatigue is also exacerbated by harassment and systemic inequalities that target women, neuroatypical individuals, disabled people, queer folks and people of color at exponentially higher rates.

The almost-total majority of our respondents detailed the stresses of keeping their streams going and trying to grow them into sustainable communities or businesses. With respect to affiliates on the cusp of partnership, this meant unrelenting and structured effort under adverse conditions, for little or no financial or professional gain. Furthermore, this uncertain period of their lives as streamers is intensified by omnipresent rhetorics of consistency from the platform affordances and institutional discourse, as well as a lack of transparency from respective partnership programs. Unpartnered streamers and affiliates don't immediately present as labourers because of their nebulous relationship to Twitch as a business and their own financial gains, and yet they bear a similar burden to their partnered colleagues. Attention to their lives and struggles is overdue.

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