

Pink-Collar Playbour: The Digital Housework of Video Game Livestreaming

Christine H. Tran

University of Toronto, Faculty of Information

140 St George St, Toronto, ON

Canada, M5S 3G6

1-416-898-1798

christine.tran@mail.utoronto.ca

Keywords

Twitch, livestreaming, gender, race, labour, domesticity, platformization, feminist game studies

SUMMARY

From bedroom to bathroom, my dissertation explores the domestic experiences of gendered and racialized Twitch streamers in North America. This is a growing, remote labour force of entertainers whose monetized broadcasts of videogame play have built Twitch.tv into Amazon's \$15 billion USD platform for live video entertainment (Swant, 2016). Recombining digital ethnography with methods from platform studies and institutional discourse analysis, this project examines Twitch.tv as a case study in how the platformization of cultural production (Nieborg and Poell 2018) affects systematically marginalized cultural workers through one of the most intimate levels: the home.

To novice telecommuters of the COVID-19 pandemic—in what has been termed “essentially the largest global experiment in telecommuting in human history” (Papanikolaou and Schmidt, 2022, p. 59.)—Twitch streamers offered instructive models on how to shelter, work, and play in place. Twitch has grown into the thirtieth most-visited website on the planet by affording the real-time interaction between broadcaster, brands, and audiences to the mass popularization of games. From animated masks that obscures unmade rooms to chat moderation bots, the performance toolkit shared between professional and semi-professional Twitch streamers and telecommuters inspired headlines such as Wired's 2020 claim: ‘We Are All Steamers—and Zoom is Our Stage.’ Within the perspective of systematically marginalized players, however, this hospitality of this “All” has always been problematized by cultures of exclusion, harassment, and precarity that have marked marginalized players participation in white, male-dominated gamer hegemonic cultures.

As the infamous practice of “Zoom bombing” throughout 2020 demonstrates, patterns of harassment and stalking in game streaming cultures have spread to non-gaming video spaces (Jacob and Tran 2023, forthcoming; Tran 2021). For women and racialized streamers, especially, Twitch's powerful gaze can remake gameplay into a precarious chore: the sale of domestic videocasts further extends the risks of a white- and male-dominated gaming culture of harassment, hostility, and stalking into intimate zones (Gray 2017; Ruberg et al., 2019; Tran 2022). Amidst growing ethnographies interest in the livestreamed enculturation of games (Johnson and Woodcock, 2019;

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

© 2023 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Taylor 2018), it has become urgent to understand the legacies of race and gender which everyday livestreaming has come to inherit from gaming cultures of Twitch.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“Domestic work”—and the struggle over its definition and validation in formal economies—offers a powerful lens through which to understand the risks and rewards of game streaming. From personal computing to couch co-op, the domestic contexts through which popular games socialize users into players has highlighted the home’s role in putting game(r)s to work (Chess 2017; Harvey 2015; Nooney 2012). As the confessions of EA Spouse and a growing body of game studies literature remind us, unpaid feminized work done at home has been the invisible engine of precarious careers in the games industry (Bulut 2020; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2006). This ludic legacy speaks to the work of Immaterial labour scholars like Kylie Jarrett (2015) have popularized frameworks like “The Digital Housewife” to understand the consumerist, affective, and socially reproductive shape of commercialized internet activity. It is from this intersection of thought that I draw upon Marxist feminist theories of social reproduction (Bhattacharya 2017; Federici, 2012) to situate sites of work involved in streaming as being both private and public, as well as physical (play space at home) and virtual (the digital work of promoting oneself across social media) and understand how streamers’ intersecting identities—race, class, gender—shape their homegrown careers in virtual spaces.

METHODOLOGY

Fraught distinctions between “home” and “site” have long been embedded in the ethnography (see Pink et al., 2017), which informs the design of this dissertation in conversation with anthropologists Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe’s (2020) framework of “patchwork ethnography.” This method of observation centers on “short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process” (para. 4). At its theoretical core, patchwork ethnography is a challenge to the precarious temporality of precarious academic labour. The data of this dissertation is contextualized by my personal experiences as a precarious situated early career research who was interacting with streamers in their homes throughout the pandemic. Three primary and collaborative-informed methodologies were employed (and detailed further below):

1. Twelve semi-structured interviews between myself and gendered streamers conducted via Zoom video teleconferencing from their home sites of livestreaming, several of which included virtual tours of the streamers’ personal dwelling space;
2. Twelve participant observation sessions lasting one hour, shadowing their public broadcast of play on Twitch.tv from the perspective of an audience member;
3. An institutional analysis of Twitch and its parent company Amazon’s operations, drawn from archived documents regarding the relationships between the company, streamers, and audience members.

Participants generated any level of income from playing digital games on Twitch within a variety of genres and communities. Such kinds of games and playing styles include speedrunning, role-playing games, battle royale games, and even crossword puzzles. Half of respondents identified as white. The other identified as having racialized backgrounds. These racialized include 2 African American participants, 2 participants of East Asian backgrounds, and 1 participant of Guyanese American background. This composition reflects the fact that Twitch remains a predominantly—but not immovably—white and male-dominated site of cultural production.

PROGRESS TO DATE

I am a fourth-year PhD Candidate in the early phases of writing my dissertation. By the conference date, I will aspirationally have completed at least two empirical chapters of my dissertation and finishing the third and final. I have published one peer-reviewed article and have another upcoming about spousal labour on Twitch that comprise the great majority of the first chapter of my thesis.

Through participation in this PhD Consortium, I hope to expand my network of collaborators and colleagues working at the intersection of platforms studies, ethnography, and feminist political economy of games. I am especially looking forward to feedback on completing my dissertation in a strategic manner and navigating the particular demands of early career researchers entering the academic job market in 2023 and 2024.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bhattachary, T. 2018. *Mapping Social Reproduction Theory*. London, UK: Pluto Press.
- Bulut, E. 2020. *A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Chess, S. 2017. *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dyer-Witford, N., and de Peuter, G. S. 2006. "'EA Spouse' and the Crisis of Video Game Labour: Enjoyment, Exclusion, Exploitation, and Exodus." *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31 (3). <https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2006v31n3a1771>.
- Federici, S. 2012. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Binghamton, NY: PM Press.
- Günel, G., Varma, S., and Watanabe, C. 2020. "A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography." *Society for Cultural Anthropology*. June 9, 2020. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>.
- Harvey, A. 2012. *Gender, age, and digital games in the domestic context*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jacob, A. and Tran, C.H. 2023 (Forthcoming). "How We Learned to Stop SWAT-ing and Love the (Zoom-)Bomb: A (De)Predatory History of Disrupting the Livestream." In *Real Life in Real Time: Live Streaming Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Jarrett, K. (2015). *Feminism, labour and digital media: the digital housewife*. Routledge.
- Johnson, M. R., and Woodcock, J. 2019. "'It's like the Gold Rush': The Lives and Careers of Professional Video Game Streamers on Twitch.tv." *Information, Communication and Society* 22 (3): 336–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1386229>.
- Nieborg, David B., and Poell, T. 2018. "The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity." *New Media & Society* 20 (11): 4275–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>.
- Nooney, L. 2013. "A Pedestal, A Table, A Love Letter: Archaeologies of Gender in Videogame History." *Game Studies* 13 (2). <http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney>.

- Papanikolaou, D. and Schmidt, L. D. W. 2022. "Working Remotely and the Supply-Side Impact of COVID-19." *The Review of Asset Pricing Studies* 12 (1): 53–111. <https://doi.org/10.1093/rapstu/raab026>.
- Pink, S., Mackley, K. L., Morosanu R., Mitchell, V. and Bhamra. T. 2017. *Making Homes: Ethnography and Design*. Bloomsbury Academic. <https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=N7mTDgAAQBAJ>.
- Swant, M. 2016. "As Social Platforms and Brands Turn to Live Video, Will Viewers Keep Tuning In?" Adweek. December 5, 2016. <https://www.adweek.com/performance-marketing/social-platforms-and-brands-turn-live-video-will-viewers-keep-tuning-174876/>.
- Taylor, T. L. 2018. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tran, C. H. 2021. "Stream(Age) Queens: Zoom-Bombs, Glitter Bombs & Other Doctoral Fairy Tales." *Communication, Culture and Critique* 14 (2): 356–60. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcab028>.