Playing video games for a living. Coping with emotional tensions and economic precariousness surrounding live streamers' careers on Twitch

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Twitch.tv is a major hub of gaming culture, creating a space where video games and live streaming entertainment are tightly interwoven, as viewers gather to watch streamers play and engage with them and with other viewers in real time through the chat. In the last few years gaming culture has evolved towards the increased centrality of gaming as a spectator activity (Anderson 2017), declined both in the public dimension of game viewership (i.e. major eSports events) and in the more intimate and domestic sharing of the ludic experience of playing video games in live streaming (Johnson and Woodcock 2019).

Live streaming is changing the landscape of gaming culture in different ways: first and foremost, by bringing the player's corporeality back into gaming, it has shattered the techno-utopistic ethos (Condis 2018) rooted in the origins of the Internet, bringing into light conflicts related to the dimensions of gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation in gaming culture (Cross 2016; Salter and Blodgett 2017). Second, it has created opportunities for turning gaming into a job, both for professional eSports players and for streamers.

Those opportunities are linked with the affordances and regulations (Zolides 2020; Ruberg 2021) of the platforms that make them possible, in our case Twitch, and with the streamers' ability to maintain a positive relationship with their communities. In other words, the job of the streamer is about transforming their *gaming capital* (Consalvo 2007) and other forms of capital, including *social capital*, into *economic capital*, a possibility enabled and bound by Twitch as a platform. The affordances of the platform (Swords 2020) are centered around the gamification of the relationship between the streamer and their community, through features such as cheers, polls and bets, channel points and hype trains, in order to smooth the conversion process of *social capital* into *economic capital* for the streamers.

Our research aims to explore the transformations in gaming culture brought about by these processes of monetization and professionalization by centering the streamers, through qualitative semi-structured interviews with 22 Italian streamers, 9 male and 13 female and at different stages of their careers on Twitch.

Live streaming is particularly interesting because it can be seen as a game in itself, in which the streamer's goal is to keep their viewers engaged and create excitement using both the game they're playing and the Twitch platform as tools. However, live streaming is also work, which can create tensions related to the emotional and practical labour required in order to fulfill two needs: that of maintaining the relationship with the viewers and that of normalizing the monetization of the

relationship without being seen as inauthentic or greedy. In previous research, we highlighted how streamers need to maintain a kind of implicit pact with their community, in which the monetary flow that takes place is framed as a way to support the streamer and help them provide better content and a better experience to the viewers (Carradore and Carrera 2019) so that viewers don't feel exploited but feel that they're providing meaningful help to the streamer. On Twitch, in fact, there's a perceived "economy of authenticity" (Ruberg *et al.* 2019) connected to both *gaming capital* (i.e., being accepted as a real gamer, a legitimate participant in gaming culture) and *social capital* (i.e., having a genuine relationship with one's community and not just exploiting it for the money). Therefore, streamers sit at the intersection between work and play and must mediate the tensions that come with it, all within the precarious position of working on a platform they have no control over. Our interviewees, in discussing their relationship with Twitch as a platform and as a company, pointed to Twitch's lack of interest in supporting creators and improving the infrastructure in response to their needs, as was also evidenced by the strikes that took place in 2021 both in the US (#ADayOffTwitch) and in Italy (#NoStreamDay).

In previous research we focused on the gendered dimension of female streamers' negotiations with the platform and with their viewers, in which we highlighted their balancing acts with respect to the dimensions of dealing with sexist toxicity and managing their presentation of femininity and *erotic capital* (Hakim 2010) in order to be recognized as legitimate participants in gaming culture and not as posers exploiting their attractiveness to monetize male viewers' attention (Carradore and Pirola 2022). Our presentation aims to describe the ways "playing video games for a living" and monetizing the social dimension of gaming communities are experienced by the streamers, focusing on the emotional labour they perform for their communities, the need and difficulty in maintaining boundaries between their public front and their private self while remaining "authentic" and the uncertainties surrounding their careers on Twitch. Qualitative research on streamers' experiences that makes use of interviews is still scarce, but previous works have explored topics such as mental health issues (Yu *et al.* 2021), precariousness and career opportunities on Twitch (Johnson and Woodcock 2017) and challenges faced by female streamers in the South-East Asian context (Alvarez and Chen 2021). Our work is situated in conversation with this line of research but also aims to look from a distinctly sociological perspective at professional game streamers on Twitch and problematize their role in the evolution of gaming culture.

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