

# Playful Podcasting: Analyzing the Creators and Audiences of Gaming Podcasts

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## INTRODUCTION

Although for several decades gaming magazines were a dominant form of gaming media – places for discussion, reviews, debate, criticism, and the like – the growing ubiquity of the internet shifted these functions away from magazines and towards online websites instead (Kirkpatrick 2015; Nieborg and Foxman 2023). Similarly, the rise of the prosumer and amateur creators has led to another shift in games media, presenting challenges for those working for more traditional gaming websites who face increased precarity in their work (Hume 2023; Klepek 2022; McEvoy 2023) – though this has also led to a boom in the volume of gaming-related content available to the user. Analysis of this content has covered a variety of topics, with researchers providing discussion on the motivation of gaming channels on YouTube (Törhönen et al. 2019), the ways these creators monetize their labour on Twitch (Johnson and Woodcock 2019), and the types of audiences engaged with this work (Sjöblom and Hamari 2017). One area which has not been significantly studied however, is the emergence of gaming *podcasts* as a significant and increasingly influential format within the broader gaming media ecosystem. Despite their size and prominence, there has been little to no analysis of these podcasts on their own merits. Questions regarding the motivations of these creators, their production processes, audience reception, and their place in the broader media ecosystem, all remain unanswered.

It is this gap in the research that I am working to address in my doctoral dissertation. Using a mixed methods approach to data collection and a grounded theory framework for analysis, my thesis will be the largest scale analysis of gaming podcasts to date. In doing so I hope to highlight the importance and significance of studying this growing area of games media and broader new media communities. Sitting at the intersection of a variety of different fields means that these podcasts are uniquely positioned in what they reveal about the changing lives of media producers in a variety of different contexts – something that my research expands upon.

I have collected data through three main methods – each aimed at highlighting the answers to different core research questions. Each of these methods were utilized to collect data from 23 different podcasts – selected to ensure that the research captured the diversity of the gaming podcast field. Firstly, to understand the

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production process and motivations for creators, I conducted interviews ranging from 55 to 140 minutes in length with podcast creators. I also distributed a survey to the audiences of these podcasts which received over 2,000 responses. The survey included both open and close-ended questions, enabling me to further understand listener demographics and motivations. Finally, to further understand what – if anything – sets gaming podcasts apart from other podcasts or forms of gaming content creation, I ensured that I listened to a representative sample of episodes past and present from all the shows which I studied – as well as additional episodes from shows ultimately not chosen. All totaled, over five weeks' worth (in total hours) of podcasts were listened to during the project to gain a deeper understanding of the different formats and styles of show present in the field.

As I conclude the data collection part of my project, clear findings have already begun to emerge. For example, discussion with the creators challenged prevailing discourses around the podcasting industry as meritocratic or democratic, and emphasized instead the large amounts of work involved in producing these shows for creators – be they hobbyist or professional. They also highlighted the difficulty in achieving success, noting that pre-existing cultural capital or name recognition was extremely helpful. Overall sentiment towards the field amongst these creators was positive – contrasting with the increased levels of precarity and mismanagement that plague other sectors of games media and the broader gaming industry (Winkie 2023). For many of these creators the ability to produce an independent, fan supported project was viewed as liberating, even if this had its own set of challenges. The benefits of having a pre-existing audience also align with the discussions that highlight podcasting's strengths with creating intimate and personal connections with fans (Weldon 2018). The parasocial attachments that creators may have formed in other podcasts or media can be leveraged through the audio medium of podcasting to great effect – something which also ties into the shift from traditional reporting towards personality and influencer-based content which the gaming media seems to be undergoing (Plunkett 2023). Indeed, many of the audiences highlighted the ways they felt personally connected to the podcast hosts, while the shows themselves often adopted a casual, talkative “chumcast” format which further enhances the feelings of connection that a podcast can leverage. Despite all this however, it was rare for any individual podcast to be successful enough to sustain its creators; their work was often supplemented with bonus content for subscribers, work in alternative jobs, or additional gaming media such as streaming or YouTube videos.

All this works to paint a picture of these podcasts as increasingly important to both games media and the broader industry. At a time when layoffs are occurring at a variety of well-established gaming media outlets (Ellison and Izadi 2023; Hume 2023; Khan 2023; McEvoy 2023), more and more creators are attempting to find more secure alternatives, unaffected by the continued churn of the industry. Podcasting, like Twitch and YouTube, is one of the many new avenues that creators are utilizing that serves as an excellent illustration of the industry's pivot towards personalities. It is my hope that this doctoral project will therefore serve as an important foundational piece of research on gaming podcasts, highlighting both the changes in the field and the importance of analyzing these shows as gaming media in their own right. As the first sustained study into the field of gaming podcasts, the thesis will not only provide this analysis, but function as an important call to action – both situating these podcasts within the broader media landscape and research and providing future directions for research into their ongoing role and potential future effects.

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