Playing With Videogames on YouTube in East Asia

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, digital game play has expanded notably into the space of video streaming and sharing platforms such as Twitch.tv, Bilibili, NicoNico Video, and YouTube. This shift has significant relevance for gaming cultures around the world. It renders more and more formerly private play experiences public, turning them into platform-mediated performances with the potential to generate revenues. It tentatively makes play experiences accessible to a wide range of users across the globe, thus making community practice transparent and providing information, knowledge and entertainment to diverse audiences that include players and non-players alike. However, while research on Let's Plays and live streaming exists (Taylor 2018; Spilker, Ask, and Hansen 2020; Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2015; Ackermann 2017), edited videos about games and their surrounding cultural practices remain understudied. YouTube in particular, despite being a frequently used resource in teaching and researching videogame contents, player practices and related cultural processes, it is rarely considered as a space of digital game and play culture in its own right.

This paper presents a number of preliminary insights into the diverse engagements with and cultural and social practices around digital games YouTube facilitates in East Asian language spaces. Drawing on my recent mixed-method exploration of game-related YouTube spaces in Japanese, Korean and Chinese, this paper asks 1.) how games are played, performed and negotiated on YouTube in and across these language spaces, 2.) how YouTube affords and limits such negotiations technically and spatially, and 3.) how it is positioned within and interlinked with the wider space of digital platforms and its economic underpinnings.

In order to answer these questions, I analyze metadata and comments belonging to popular and relevant videos referring to Street Fighter 6 and Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom in the aforementioned languages, adding English to the data set. The two games were chosen due to their popularity in the regions considered, their genre differences, and their similar release dates, which opened up a possibility for studying

video and user engagement over time. The data were gathered over the course of one year between October 2023 and October 2024 via the YouTube API by first requesting the 100 most viewed videos and the 100 most relevant videos in each language (Japanese, Korean, Chinese Traditional, Chinese Simplified, English) for each game, and then gathering metadata and comment data via the YouTube API (with order = "viewCount" and "relevance" respectively, and relevanceLanguage iterating through the abovementioned languages), using custom python code and the lean version of the passable youtube grabber (https://github.com/zoomingmediaresearch/pyg-lean).

The data gathered captures the development of both videos and their comment activity over time and allows for both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The initial analysis presented in this paper focuses on 1.) the ways in which the two games are played and performed on YouTube, by considering and comparing the content of the videos in each language region; 2.) the ways in which both games and their performances are perceived and negotiated among the users and viewers in and across language regions, by analyzing the emerging user networks and comments; and 3.) the potential of a translingual space and thus a transregionally shared gaming culture constituted by video sharing and viewing practices on YouTube, by considering the languages and viewer practices in and across the language spaces.

The results demonstrate a diversity of developments that characterizes game-related YouTube spaces both in and across East Asian language spaces. Framing the some of the tentative conclusions about the emerging platform-mediated digital play on YouTube, this paper aims to expand the notion of game play beyond the screen, thus connecting to recent discussions about the need to rethink the position of what is often referred to as paratext (Consalvo 2017; Galey 2023; Švelch 2020). By positioning YouTube in the regional landscape of regional platforms in East Asia (Steinberg and Li 2017), I further identify the limitations of my approach with regard to better understanding gaming culture beyond game play.

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