

More than Let's Plays? Towards a content analysis of game-related YouTube videos

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LONG ABSTRACT

From the very beginning, digital games have never been solely about individual experience. They have been part of shared experiences involving co-presence, collaborative exploration, spectatorship and community building in private and public contexts (Nakazawa 1984). In addition, respective discourse about games and the experience of play took place in magazines, advertisements, walkthrough guides and game centers' communication notes (Picard 2013, Kato 2011).

In recent years, this exploration of game spaces takes place most prominently on the internet, through walkthroughs, wikis and similar guides (such as Gamefaqs, IGN.com etc) and, of course, through live streaming and video sharing of gameplay on platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, Bilibili or Niconico Video.

Considering the vast amount of video game-related content posted daily on these platforms, relatively little research exists on the content of the videos, or on how they contribute to or constitute game culture and, more specifically, player and user community discourses around certain games. Much of the research focuses on the role of games live streaming (Taylor 2019), the figure of content creators/streamers (Johnson & Woodcock 2019) or notable topics, discourses and events of online game culture (e.g. gamergate) (Bjørkelo 2020, Euteneur & Meints 2020, McKitrick et al. 2023). Recent research has considered the importance of video sharing practices beyond live streaming in more detail, and has discussed possible methods for studying such practices (Radde-Antweiler et al. 2014, Radde-Antweiler & Zeiler 2015, Nguyen 2016, Ackermann 2017, Hagen 2017). However, it often relies on the generic term of "Let's play" and rarely addresses the diversity of content about video games on platforms such as YouTube, their variety of formats, content types and values, mostly

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focusing on research on the motivations behind streaming of digital games (Gros et al 2017, Sjöblom and Hamari J. (2016)). What is more, little attention is given to the local and regional diversity of platforms such as YouTube.

As a first step toward creating a more nuanced, regionally contextualized account of platform-mediated videos about video games, this paper proposes a system of categories to analyse and distinguish video game-related videos across different languages on YouTube. Our goal is to complement and expand on the broad category of Let's Play and provide a basic set of characteristics for describing the range and variation of content in different games, regional communities and video creation practices.

The system of categories proposed in this paper has been developed in a group research project, using videos of Street Fighter 6 and The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom in Chinese, English, Japanese, and Korean as case studies. Both games were chosen as starting points, due to their timely and similar release date and sharp differences in genre and player communities. Videos were selected by retrieving the top 100 most viewed videos in each language per month, and the top 100 most relevant videos per month, according to the YouTube API, for twelve months. During that time, the set of categories was iteratively applied, evaluated, improved and re-tested on the videos.

The category system presented here is structured around three main categories, addressing different dimensions of videos through a set of specific sub-categories and tags.

VIDEO. This category results from a formal analysis of the audiovisual elements included in the video, and addresses questions such as “What elements constitute the video?” and “In which way is the content shown?”. It includes the following sub-categories and tags (in brackets):

- **Main video source (animation; game; live-action; mixed)** [single choice]: it describes the main audiovisual source of the video, which can be used to describe the whole video.
- **Key formal elements (avatar; camera; text)** [multiple choice; optional]: it describes other sources that might appear consistently in the video.
- **Other significant tags (background, extra music, multiple actors, re-used videos, voice/sound FX)** [multiple choice; optional]: it includes other, more detailed, formal elements (e.g extra music or audio source), and notable features of the video (e.g. several actors on screen).
- **YouTube shorts (yes/no)** [single choice]: it checks the video format (traditional vs modern short)
- **Other noteworthy formal elements (write here):** used for suggesting other formal properties that are not included in the category system.

CONTENT. This category results from the content analysis of the video, and addresses questions such as “What is shown in the video?” and “What are its topics?”. It includes:

content type (creative, experiment, game comparison, reaction video, speedrunning, tournament, training, walkthrough) [single choice; optional]: it describes the genre or type of the video, selected among recurring video formats.

content focus (boss fight, character, crafting, derivative, equipment, glitch, graphics, MODs, Music, PvP, story) [multiple choice (max.2); optional]: it describes the theme of the video, notable topics and focus.

other noteworthy elements (write here): used for suggesting other content tags that are not included in the category system.

VALUES. This category results from the analysis of the values and intents of the video, according to the subjective interpretation of the researcher. It includes:

- **Value (comedic, community-building, entertaining, informative, promotional)** [multiple selection]: researchers interpret what intent/s might perspire from the video.
- **Other noteworthy evaluation (write here):** used for suggesting other values or merits of the video, that are not included in the category system.

In the paper, we introduce the workflow from data harvesting to categorization, discuss the iterative approach across multiple languages and its limitations, and provide an overview of the category system. We demonstrate its application by considering the distribution of categories in our two case studies across the different language spaces. Doing so, the paper aims to open both the approach and the resulting categories to a critical discussion with the conference participants, hoping to ignite a collaboration towards refinements, adaptations and translations of the categories for other research cases in the DiGRA community.

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