

How Streaming Facilitates Affective Transformation: A Case Study of Horror Game Spectatorship

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INTRODUCTION

Videogame engagement has undergone a significant transformation in recent years, expanding beyond play itself to encompass diverse activities and interactions surrounding videogames. Such practices not only reshape how game texts are interpreted but also broaden our understanding of what constitutes play. One prominent example is game stream viewing. Existing scholarship on game streaming has explored various dimensions, including studies of streaming as a cultural product (Taylor, 2018), streaming platform affordances (Hamilton et al., 2014), streamer labour (Johnson, 2021; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019), the relationship between players' bodies and streaming as a technological artifact (Egliston, 2020), and viewer motivations (Orme, 2022). However, research remains limited on the affective dimensions of stream viewing experiences. This presentation contributes to game streaming studies by concentrating on the effects of stream viewing after gaming, investigating how this practice alters the way certain videogames are experienced and gives rise to new forms of affective responses through the assemblage of players, viewers, and games.

This affective shift induced by stream viewing is particularly salient in horror games. Playing horror games typically elicits visceral fear and tension; these affective responses, however, often diminish in the context of game streaming. This presentation uses the platform horror game *Little Nightmares* (Tarsier Studios, 2017) as a case study to explore why this shift occurs. In this game, players take on the role of Six, a hungry little girl attempting to escape a vast vessel inhabited by monstrous entities. Unlike most horror games—which either adopt a first-person perspective where players directly view the gameworld through an avatar's eyes, or place the camera behind an avatar allowing players to view from its back—this game employs a side-scrolling perspective that displays the avatar's front-facing appearance throughout gameplay. This design enables what I term empathetic horror, defined as the fear, distress, and nervousness that arise from players' deep empathetic bond with their avatar through embodied and affective involvement in a game. In contrast,

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novel affective responses, particularly humour, emerge during spectatorship of this game’s streams on Bilibili, a famous Chinese streaming platform characterised by Danmaku (real-time comments that flow across the screen as video plays). Through this case study, this presentation addresses two research questions: what factors contribute to and influence the affective transformation from horror to humour? And what role does the Danmaku game stream (on Bilibili) play in facilitating this shift?

This study employs what I term auto-microethology, a methodology that extends Seth Giddings’ concept of microethology. According to Giddings (2014), microethology focuses on small-scale, short-duration events occurring during gameplay. Building on this foundation, I integrate autoethnographic approaches, recording and analysing my own gameplay experiences to obtain direct evidence of psychological and emotional responses. This self-reflexive method allows for a more nuanced understanding of players’ internal affective states. Furthermore, to examine specific affective responses with greater precision, this study concentrates on feelings aroused at particular moments rather than attempting to capture the entirety of gameplay experience. The avatar’s death moment is one such focal point, as it can trigger markedly different affective responses when experienced through play versus spectatorship, offering rich ground for analysis. Accordingly, this study begins with my fieldnotes on a specific death moment of Six and conceptualises this moment as an assemblage, comparing affective responses generated during my firsthand gaming experience with those from observations of a playthrough stream on Bilibili, and investigating how they are collaboratively shaped by different actors. Table 1 illustrates the contrasts between my affective responses as player and viewer, along with the relevant actors.

	Gaming (as player)	Stream viewing (as viewer)
Primary reactions	Fear, nervousness, distress	Schadenfreude, relief
Expressed in fieldnotes/Danmaku comments	<i>“created a visually shocking”; “heightened the tension”; “felt a shared body with Six”; “made me reluctant”</i>	<i>“my attention shifted”; “no longer evoked my frustration”; “taking amusement in his faults” “hahaha” (Danmaku comments)</i>
Relevant actors	Game: representations (monsters, Six, death, chase), mechanics (obstacles, timing), perspective; Player’s engagement (failure)	Gameplay content, Streamer’s performance, Danmaku comments

Table 1: Differences in viewer/player responses (summarised from the fieldnotes)

Through the lens of assemblage theory, this study further examines how watching Danmaku game streams reframes a fear-inducing moment as humorous. It identifies three factors responsible for this transformation: (1) the shift to a third person observer perspective in streaming diminishes the sense of horror while disrupting empathetic connection; (2) the introduction of new actors in a reconfigured network that alters the meanings and effects of existing actors, such as monsters and death; and (3) the Danmaku game stream itself functions as a new actor in generating humour. This study particularly highlights the unique characteristics of Danmaku

game streams on Bilibili: the velocity, emergence, and uncontrollability of streaming facilitate a humorous environment; Danmaku, as interactive commentary parallel to game content, fosters and strengthens certain entertaining effects by redirecting attention toward the performative spectacle of play. Through this case, this study provides insights into evolving affective responses across gaming and streaming contexts.

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