

"That's such a show!": Constructing the Entertaining Spectacle in Game Live Streaming

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INTRODUCTION

This study investigates how specific moments in game live-streaming transform into a spectacle, in the form of emotional climaxes, that triggers intense audience reactions. While existing research examine game live-streaming as a general construct, with a focus on participation motives (e.g. Cabeza-Ramírez et al. 2021; Li et al. 2020; Jodén and Strandell 2022), this study concentrates on specific highlight moments and conceptualizes them as spectacle. To conceptualise this transformation, the study employed an integrated theoretical framework that explains not only how such moments emerge within the performance and interactivity, in and around the livestreaming, but also how they escalate into ritualised collective spectacles.

Drawing on Goffman's (2023) dramaturgy and its extension to live-streaming contexts (Taylor 2018; Li et al. 2019), the study understands the stream as an ongoing, co-constructed performance in which streamers actively manage impressions while viewers participate through commentary, responses, and platform-specific expressive tools. This performative environment is further

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intensified through interactivity, defined as reciprocal, contingent communication supported by technological features (Bonner 2010; Lee 2005; Rafaeli et al. 2007). Lee's (2005) multidimensional model clarifies how user control, responsiveness, personalization, and connectedness contribute to a dynamic co-performance, making the stream a site where meanings are continually negotiated.

Within this interactive performance ecology, incongruity humour becomes a key mechanism that "charges" particular moments. Following incongruity theory (Raskin 1979; Morreall 1983), humour arises from the gap between expectation and outcome. In live-streaming, this typically occurs when a streamer's stated intention, confident prediction, or carefully crafted performance suddenly collapses into an unexpected or contradictory outcome. Such incongruous disruptions not only attract immediate attention but also create a fertile trigger for viewer participation, prompting rapid chat reactions, shared jokes, or collective mocking. These strands collectively explain how particular moments become affectively charged and socially meaningful within the flow of the stream.

This study also explains how charged moments escalate into collective spectacle through ritualised audience participation. Collins's (2014) interaction ritual model illuminates how synchronous engagement, such as bursts of danmu, repeated emotes, or coordinated textual reactions, creates the conditions for collective effervescence. When group co-presence, shared focus, boundary-making, and shared emotional tone align, individual reactions become amplified into a collective, synchronised response. This ritualised escalation marks the key transition from an isolated performance mishap to a socially recognised and emotionally intensified moment. Eventually, Debord's (2021) notion of spectacle offers a lens for understanding how these ritualised reactions become further transformed into hyper-visible cultural products. Once recognized and amplified, these moments take on a "pseudo-reality" that exceeds the original live interaction. The spectacle therefore emerges not only from the streamer's actions but from the layered interplay of performance, interactivity, humour and ritual participation.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilises Androutsopoulos' (2008) discourse-centred online ethnography. The target groups are non-esports streamers on the platforms of Douyin and Huya, broadcasting competitive multiplayer game *Honor of Kings*. Full-session screen recordings capture gameplay, streamers' verbal performances, and synchronous chat logs. This study aims to extract the highlight moments when certain actions from streamers cause a surge of audience reactions (e.g., bursts of corresponding danmu logs). Drawing on discourse analysis, the study examines communicative practices and semiotic resources, focusing on the common performances from streamers and audiences in constructing highlight moments.

PRELIMINARY RESULT

This study found that entertaining spectacle in game live streaming does not originate from the game itself but is socially constructed through the

interaction between streamers and audiences within the mediated field of game live streaming. The construction of spectacle can be understood through a two-part mechanism: trigger and interactive ritual. The trigger refers to an event or action that creates a moment of affective salience, a point at which audience attention suddenly converges. A trigger alone does not constitute spectacle. It must be collectively noticed, taken up, and amplified through interactive ritual (Collins 2014) — the process by which the audience responds, imitates, and aligns their reactions in the chat window, while the streamer engages with these responses. In this process, the livestream becomes a form of co-performance (Li et al. 2019): a single trigger is collectively reframed and intensified through streamer-audience participation. As reactions become synchronised, the shared focus of attention and alignment of emotional tone generate collective effervescence (Collins 2014, 35), transforming an isolated moment into a collectively recognised emotional climax. Such highlighting moment takes on a new life shaped by Debord's (2021) spectacle logic, becoming a hyper-visible, self-contained piece of entertainment that exists independently of the live-stream's ordinary flow. Underpinning the whole process is the streamer's ongoing affective labour (Woodcock & Johnson 2019): the continuous work of performing, managing emotions, and maintaining an engaging persona that can not only generate potential triggers but also sustain the conditions for interactive ritual.

This study identified four distinct types of entertaining spectacle, each characterised by a different trigger mechanism (see Figure 1): (1) Reversal Spectacle, (2) Conflict Spectacle, (3) Performative Spectacle, and (4) Audience-Driven Spectacle. Reversal spectacle emerges when a streamer's actual gameplay performance deviates from audiences' expectations, either based on the streamer's established persona or on viewers' baseline assumptions about competent play. Conflict spectacle is triggered by interpersonal confrontation during gameplay. Performative spectacle arises from the streamer's deliberate departure from ordinary gameplay logic or from non-game performances during livestream intervals. Audience-driven spectacle is initiated by the chat rather than by the streamer, as audiences spontaneously create, repeat, and develop memes.

Four Types of Entertaining Spectacle

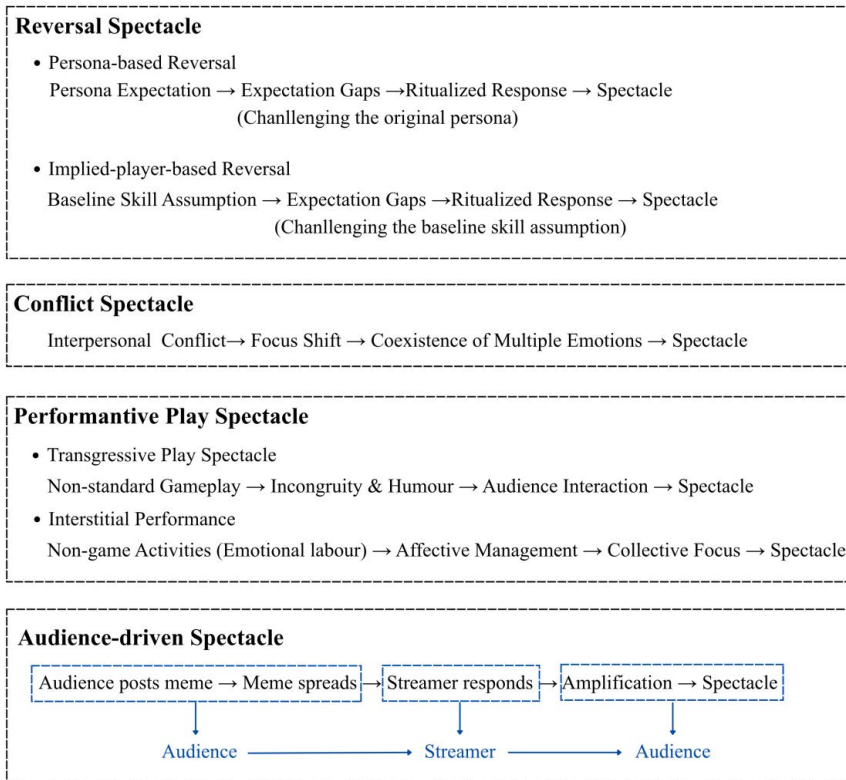


Figure 1: Four types of entertaining spectacle

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