

Spectating the Samurai: Performing and Preserving History through Twitch

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Livestreaming through the platform Twitch has become increasingly widespread in the academic world. For experimentation with knowledge dissemination (Boom et al. 2018), outreach (Boom et al. 2018), and the creation of participatory communities (Malone and Mueller 2025), many historical video games have been recognized as valuable for streams, engaging online audiences in discussions about the past (Bierstedt 2022). Therefore, Twitch has been used to explore how researchers “can share knowledge about the past” through this “unique form of science communication” (Leiden University 2021). While it has been suggested that watching Twitch livestreams is an inactive form of media consumption, Brown and Moberly point out that Twitch affords different modes of interactivity (2021). This paper expands current understandings of “interactivity” by examining what occurs when one host actively plays a historical video game while co-hosts participate remotely through Discord without playing themselves, and what affordances this livestreaming practice can offer for experiencing and constructing historical interpretations.

Historical game studies has moved away from merely studying the ‘accuracy’ of historical video games and has become diversely interested in the way that games make history (Chapman 2016), the ways that players engage with the past (Kappell and Elliott 2013), and the nebulous role of counterfactual history in games (Grufstedt 2022). Through interaction with digital games, historical game scholars critically engage with the games for research. This process also holds potential for outreach purposes as Bierstedt (2022) conceptualizes in his understanding of the

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“streamer-historian”. He poses that streaming holds effective modes of outreach around historical games, as streamer-historians can “provide a commentary through which to interpret a game’s arguments” that can help to “bridge the gap between the simplification of the game and the complexities of historical discourse” (Bierstedt 2022, 880). Our contribution recognizes the potential of streaming for educational intent, and acknowledges the potential for extending Bierstedt’s notion of the streamer-historian, as the performance of history through spectating constitutes a distinct mode of participatory history (Pennington 2022).

To investigate how interactivity unfolds within collaborative livestreaming practices, we conducted two two-hour Twitch streams (VALUE 2025a; VALUE 2025b) of the recently released *Ghost of Yōtei* (Sucker Punch Productions 2025), an action-adventure game set in Hokkaido in 1603. In order to examine interactivity under conditions of first-encounter play, we did not engage with the game prior to streaming, which took place one day after release, and once again two weeks later. During each session, one streamer played while two others participated as remote co-hosts via Discord, observing, commenting, and performing interpretation. We simultaneously recorded these streams and uploaded them to YouTube, in recognition of the growing importance of preserving early-stage gameplay as part of the broader documentation and study of historical representation in games (Newman 2011).

This set-up allows for an examination of different roles in streaming and creating public content around history. While prior research has already pointed out that the role of the spectator of digital game play, such as a Twitch audience, cannot be mapped neatly onto binary active and passive forms of media consumption (Taylor 2016), the co-hosts in this setting can be seen as in the middle of the scale; neither player nor spectator. They take on the roles of Newman’s (2002) secondary player; during the stream they provide counsel on actions and offer encouragement, but simultaneously, they are creating a performance for the audience. This unscripted encounter with the game produced a performative dimension extending beyond gameplay or the historical elements of the game, resulting in a mode of improvisational historical interpretation. In this configuration, the co-hosts’ interpretive interventions enabled a form of collaborative, participatory, “doing history” that unfolded alongside the gameplay. What resulted was emerging moments of historical meaning-making generated through the interplay between performance and spectating.

This study contributes to game studies by highlighting the understudied role of non-playing co-hosts and the role of spectating as a form of doing history. Additionally, this work broadens the scope of the streamer-historian beyond education or outreach merits, by focusing on the interaction between performance, spectating and improvisational history-making. By centering the role of non-playing participants, it shows how spectatorship itself can be a form of historical and preservation practice. Despite a typical degree of separation from direct play,

through streams, this work has found that spectators are given significant opportunities to be involved in historical meaning-making and understanding.

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