

On Becoming “Like eSports”:

Twitch as a Platform for the Speedrunning Community

Rainforest Scully-Blaker

Concordia University
Montreal, QC, Canada
fscullyblaker@gmail.com

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Since its foundation in 2011 and subsequent purchase by Amazon in 2014, Twitch.tv has promoted and shared the growth of many online gaming communities. By affording an unprecedented level of interaction between broadcasters and their audiences through site features such as a live chat window and subscriber incentives, Twitch has reshaped how gameplay footage is shared online, and not just for Let’s Players.

In his article, “The socio-technical architecture of digital labor: Converting play into YouTube money” (2014), Hector Postigo discusses what he calls ‘YouTube-worthy’ gameplay – that play which the site’s gaming content creators strive for when accumulating footage for their videos. The concept of ‘YouTube-worthy’ does well to encapsulate not only the effort involved in the content creator practice, but also offers insight into some of the platform-specific limitations and affordances of YouTube.

It is in this spirit that this paper will pose the question of what ‘Twitch-worthy’ gameplay might look like. For indeed, how are Twitch content creators to guarantee the same quality of YouTube ‘highlight reels’ when their gameplay is shared live and uncut with their audience within seconds of it taking place?

To answer this question, this paper focuses on the speedrunning community, a growing community of players devoted to completing games as quickly as possible without the use of cheats or cheat devices, and how members of this community relate to Twitch as a platform. As a longstanding community of practice, many speedrunners have experienced being content creators in both a pre- and post-Twitch Internet. Consequently, this paper begins with a discussion of the transition of speedrunning from video hosting sites like SpeedDemosArchive and YouTube to the present, where speedrunning livestreams account for a marked portion of both Twitch’s content creators and stream-viewing audience.

Next, the discussion moves to what ‘Twitch-worthy’ might be by examining what streaming conventions have emerged in the speedrunning community, from the use of a webcam and microphone to varying levels of subscriber benefits and so on. To this end, speedrunners’ own accounts of what they do to garner viewers and what makes other streamers a pleasure to watch are cited.

Finally, this paper moves to a recent, emerging tension within the community. As speedrunning, which was a relatively niche practice as recent as three years ago, continues to grow in popularity and more people are able to take up streaming as their primary means of income, the worry arises in some runners that the practice risks

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becoming 'like eSports'. While the exact meaning of this varies from person to person, it can generally be said that anxieties surrounding the potential for further professionalization and monetization within the community strikes some as a departure from what speedrunning ought to be (which, in itself is another varying definition that will be touched on).

Ultimately, this paper will make strides towards deepening our understanding of Twitch as the dominant platform for hosting game content online and the effects this new mode of broadcasting gameplay can have on player communities at large. Accounts from the speedrunning community are taken from the author's own collected interviews.

Keywords

Twitch, livestream, YouTube, Content Creation, Community, Community of Practice, Speedrun, eSports

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