The Affective Labor and Performance of Live Streaming on Twitch.tv

Introduction

"Live streaming" entails the live broadcast of video content to viewers over the internet. This practice has become dominated in most countries by the website Twitch.tv, which began broadcasting only video game content but has expanded to include a range of content, in the process attaining a market value of approximately $1 billion. The platform boasts over one hundred million regular viewers, two million of whom broadcast their own material on the platform to viewer communities ranging in number from single-digits to millions. Those who are able to bring in the largest crowds now make a living on the platform through a range of monetization techniques. While most Twitch streamers are amateur producers, a significant number earn their living through streaming, while others are involved in associated activities like commentating on "Esports" (competitive gaming) competitions. A primary element of streamers' labor is *performance*, much of it invisible and—until and unless a broadcaster becomes highly successful—unpaid.

Live streaming and game commentary are important for critical media studies for two reasons. Firstly, live streaming is a major global phenomenon and one only expanding in scope and reach. The scale of the audience is now impressive enough to rival many television channels and traditional sports broadcasts, whilst it is also becoming an increasingly central element of digital gaming culture more broadly. Secondly, streaming represents a career path that many young people—disproportionately impacted by the financial crisis—are pursuing, finding the apparent

opportunity to play games for a living understandably compelling (Johnson and Woodcock 2017). In a different vein, this is comparable to the opportunities of professional sports. These factors make Twitch an important element of contemporary youth employment dynamics, especially for those disaffected by, or unsuccessful in, traditional education or career paths. Our study of Twitch streamers highlights an emerging area within digital games that can be best understood through considering the labor that goes into the activities involved.

In this article, we examine the affective dimensions of video game streaming labor, which involves being compelling to watch and friendly to viewers, soliciting donations, building parasocial intimacy with spectators, and engaging audiences through humor. Our analysis pays particular attention to the extent to which streamers broadcast as "themselves," or as a "character." This disjunction is a tactic of self-branding (Hearn 2008; Marwick 2013) in an increasingly crowded marketplace. We also examine these kinds of labor within the dynamics of the platform, shedding light on the stresses and challenges for streamers. This inquiry is intended to examine the labor that Twitch streamers perform, and in doing so, to understand aspects of the work that goes into this rapidly growing, and increasingly visible, contemporary digital game labor practice.

Twitch and Live Streaming

Although Twitch is an area of increasing scholarly concern, there is presently limited research on the platform. The rise of user-generated content online has been a focus of academic interest (Banks and Deuze 2009; Banks and Humphreys 2008), with some viewing this as a progressive and participatory shift (Burgess 2009; Jenkins 2006), and others being more critical of the role of platforms in exploiting users (Duffy 2015; Hesmondhalgh 2010). The Twitch platform can be compared to YouTube and Hector Postigo's (2016) study of video game commentary on

YouTube is a particularly important reference for our analysis. Hector Postigo (2016, 332) focuses on the technical and social affordances of the platform, examining how "the hybridity of play and production" provide the opportunity for transforming leisure into a form of work. Despite Twitch's growth, "there is not much research studying this new emerging and prosperous online community" (Churchill and Xu 2016). Kishonna L. Gray (2017) has explored questions of race and the experience of Black gamers streaming on Twitch; Max Sjöblom and Juho Hamari (2017) have looked at why people watch streamers; Mark Johnson (2018) has examined disability and health on the platform; and Emma Witkowski (2011) has examined the roles, positions, and struggles of women players in the live streaming domain. Others have studied the different cultures that streamers gather around them (Gandolfi 2016; Taylor 2018), while the authors have previously examined the lives and careers of Twitch streamers (Johnson and Woodcock 2017). Nevertheless, the literature remains at a nascent stage. The intention of this paper is to contribute to the literature on digital game labor studies, an approach that has so far not been applied to Twitch.

Our research combines interview and ethnographic data. We draw on 100 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2016 and 2017 with professional and aspiring streamers and Esports commentators, of which approximately one-third identified as women and two-thirds as men. These interviews lasted between ten minutes and over one hour, and took place at gaming events in Poland, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The interviews focused on the themes of labor, performance, and work. Transcripts were coded and interviewees have been assigned pseudonyms. The authors also carried out ethnographic observation at these gaming events, which provided context for the interviews. This research was supplemented by observation of 200 unique live streams on Twitch from a diversity of streamers. This multi-sited ethnographic research helped to ground our analysis in not just the comments of live streamers as interview

respondents, but also their lived experience at these important and highly visible events during which they must perform and be publicly engaging for long stretches of time. The combination of methods provides much needed context to Twitch streaming culture and enables us to access participants in an online phenomenon that are otherwise difficult to reach.

Affective Labor on Twitch

To make sense of one crucial part of generating the appeal of watching live streams—the interpersonal and social dimension—this article builds on arguments about "affective labour" (Hardt and Negri 2004). This starts with Arlie Hochschild's (2012, 7) notion of emotional labor, which denotes a requirement to "induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others." On Twitch, this requires the modulation of emotions and affect through the streamers' performance. Affective labor takes this further, emerging from autonomist studies of work and referring to efforts designed to generate emotional responses, such as those of service workers who are expected to always be smiling, or the importance of "attitude" to one's employability. This involves the communicative aspects of immaterial labor, referring to activities that do not resemble traditional work, but have been effectively commodified. This might include the production of user-generated content, forms of social labor (deWinter, Kocurek, and Vie 2016), many kinds of creative work, the performance of identity and legitimacy in one's domain of employment, and so on. These closely-related forms of labor are all interwoven in the activity of live streaming.

Twitch is a deeply social platform for content production and distribution. Beyond a simple broadcast relation, streamers and viewers communicate to one another through the platform's chat system. The browser presents the user with three interactions: first, the live-streamed gameplay

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(mirroring what the streamer sees); second, an embedded live-stream of the streamer, showing them narrating and playing the game; and third, a chat window to the side that the audience can use to type messages to the streamer and each other. These aspects are crucial to the platform's appeal, allowing multiple avenues for engaging viewers through the streamer's performance. Beyond these affordances of the platform, streamers can choose how to perform in order to draw an audience. Given the "difficulty of predicting public tastes and the impossibility of exactly duplicating a hit" (Prindle 1993, 5), this is a challenge faced by creative laborers. What works for one streamer may not work for another, but the streamer attempts to produce "intangible feelings of ease, excitement, or passion" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 293).

For some streamers, this means using humor. One streamer, Philip, explains, "I like to fancy myself somewhat of a comedian," and indeed many streamers noticeably seek to be witty in their broadcasts. However, for others, this means using more broad concepts, such as Marie's comment on the central roles played by "my personality, my commentary, my reactions to things." She drew on these as a "variety streamer," or someone who plays a wide range of games, and was able to rapidly adjust to the demands of a particular game. What works for one streamer may not work for another, and what is popular at one point can quickly become outdated. In Elizabeth Wissinger's (2007, 300) discussion of fashion model labor, we see the impacts that this variability in appeal can have: "fashion models are valued for their ability to unleash a wide range of responses, responses that might shift or be modulated faster than they can be subjectively recognized as emotions." In a comparable way, Twitch streamers are expected to respond quickly to comments in chat and to in-game developments, to be emotional, to vary how they act according to game context, viewers, and time of day—and to modulate their performance for both current and potential viewers.

Despite commonalities with other forms of work like "vlogging" (Hou 2018), Twitch is developing online performance in new directions. Streamers broadcast a webcam video of themselves, which appears to viewers embedded within the streamer's game play. This picture-in-a-picture of the streamer playing the game illustrates how Twitch affords new ways to mediate affective performance, allowing the audience to connect with facial expressions, voice, and immediate surroundings. Streamers' physical reactions are thus embedded visually within the virtual experiences generating those reactions—winning or losing, discovering something new in a game, and so forth. Equally, as John Short et al. (1976) demonstrate with social presence theory, the more acoustic, visual, or physical contact a medium allows, the greater the possibility for social impact. The recreation of the social setting of the living room through the direct facial contact with the player, the active conversation, and the relaxed, friendly manner in which streamers talk, all recreate the local multiplayer setting of video games, while simultaneously allowing people to view remotely from across the world. We also note that almost all successful streamers have set stream times, which allows a more personal connection to the content. In this way, live-streaming reinforces the sense of spending time with a friend.

Alongside the pursuit of a stream that mirrors the comfort and intimacy of real-world interactions, we also note trends that seem to move in the opposite direction, specifically, the notion of streaming in *character*. This takes a range of manifestations, from mild to intense. On the mild end of the spectrum, we can look to the comments of Todd, who described how they are "definitely more animated on stream." Similarly, Samuel, reflecting on their own practice, noted that streaming required "turning on your personality or turning on a character" and that "I think that I am like a, sort of, more animated version of myself (when I am streaming)." This animation is a form of "outward countenance" (Hochschild 2012, 7), mediated through an ensemble of

affects, deployed to make a connection with a distributed audience, all while playing a video game. The flow of affect that is mobilized within a stream is a real-time version of what Brian Massumi (2002, 36) describes as feeling "one's own vitality, one's sense of aliveness, of changeability." Streamers have found that an effective way to keep viewers engaged in their stream is to be extremely active, even hyperactive, always giving viewers something new to look at, respond to, or comment on, and minimizing the "down time" that might lead to disinterest, and thus a viewer turning off.

Others, however, take the notion of streaming "in-character," and streaming as containing an element of theatricality, further. As one streamer, Daniel, explained, the act of streaming should be understood fundamentally as "a performance," including the need to emotionally prepare and ensure the performer is in the right "mood" beforehand. In contrast to recorded broadcast media content, "it's all improvisational [because] Twitch is a live environment," as Philip put it, who drew on their experience with improvisational comedy and theatre. They continued, "I'm used to performance. I've done leading roles. I've done side roles. Character acting is my favourite thing to do." Another respondent, Rob, an Esports commentator, had previously acted in Shakespeare plays, but found that "with all that background behind me, I still realize how hard it is." Many of our interviewees find that treating Twitch as an acting performance was helpful, albeit a performance designed to look like a comfortable, organic, relaxing time with friends. There are similarities here with other forms of social media performance. However, this still meant acknowledging that even experience with acting fails to fully prepare one for the intensity, and the volume, of labor required on the platform.

This more explicit *acting* many rely upon on Twitch was noted by numerous interviewees who had gone so far as to invent characters for their stream. Connor, for example, streamed in the

guise of a pirate: "yeah, it's a character, but it's based on me as a person and the enhanced version of that." This began because Connor "liked theatrics" and "so for my channel, I got a pirate ship on there." This led to increasingly speaking in an archetypal pirate manner on Twitch, and branding his stream around the idea of piracy, until a distinctive character emerged. Another interviewee, William, who had "a Norse look," said that "people kinda just put it up on me and I'm like, OK, I'll be a Norse character." Such explicit characterization accentuates the significance of performance, both for streamers who pretend to be, say, a pirate or Norse, and for streamers who put forward a seemingly "authentic" personality (Duffy 2017). This performance imperative introduces new pressures on streamers, which illustrate expectations that Maurizio Lazzarato (1996, 135) associates with immaterial labor: "one has to express oneself, one has to speak, communicate, cooperate, and so forth." It is no longer adequate to just be one's self, as one must shape the kind of subject one appears to be on stream.

While motivations to undertake the affective labor of streaming require further study, we present some initial hypotheses. First, we suggest streaming in character is a way to manage the stress and effort that live streaming demands. Although on one level acting "in character" might appear to be more demanding than the alternative, it might allow streamers to separate their off-stream and on-stream lives, and thereby maintain greater control over their emotional labor by only showing a single, character-based, facet of themselves on their broadcasts. Equally, it seems that streaming as a character also serves to mark out these streamers from others on the platform. Streaming as a character is therefore an element of self-branding (Duffy 2017) that becomes so deeply associated with streamers that few of these individuals ever stream out of character, except in rare cases when giving some emotional disclosure to their fans, or promising a "serious" conversation with their fanbase about the future of their stream, their health, and so on.

Nevertheless, there is more research to be done here, especially drawing more detailed conceptual and empirical comparisons with other kinds of live performance; although the live performance on Twitch is undoubtedly unique, it is still likely to share many characteristics with other forms of acting or performance labor in creative industries.

What is the point of such efforts? Our research shows that it is primarily to generate *feeling* in viewers, and an attendant sense of closeness or association. Wissinger's (2007, 253) account of the labor of fashion models is especially relevant here, particularly her consideration of how "the production and manipulation of affect or feeling can also be achieved through human contact that is virtual (such as the work of an actor appearing in a movie, or the work of a model appearing in a photograph)." Unlike the model, whose picture is circulated after the moment of capture, the streamer is able to, and indeed must, maintain a real-time connection with an online audience. Streaming is a form of cultural production, entailing a "series of activities that are not normally recognized as 'work'—in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion" (Lazzarato 1996, 132). As one streamer, John, explained, "if you're a little bit of a social butterfly, I think streaming works really well": whereas the traditional popular culture image of the "gamer" suggests introversion, it is the most gregarious, emotionally engaged, and outgoing individuals who find success in live streaming.

The Value of Twitch Streaming

Streaming on Twitch professionally—"playing" video games for a living—or aspiring to do so, is contingent on numerous forms of emotional, affective, or immaterial labor, which transform that play into work. Such a blurring of work and play has been discussed at length in the

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context of older digital platforms, like Facebook and YouTube, and it is highly relevant also to Twitch. For example, Axel Bruns (2008) has coined the portmanteau "produsage," combining production and usage, while Julian Kücklich (2005) opts for play and labor with "playbor." In the literature on gaming specifically, Tiziana Terranova's (2000) concept of "free labor" has been particularly influential, but is often shorn of its theoretical roots in autonomist Marxism. This tradition is, unsurprisingly, critical of work and how it is organized under capitalism (cf. Negri 1989), often reading the emergence of video games as part of a subversive flight from work (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Kirkpatrick 2013). We can therefore see a broad and detailed awareness of these kinds of labor that blur traditional lines of work and leisure through gamification (Fuchs 2014; Woodcock and Johnson 2018), and which allow us to more fully conceptualize streaming labor.

A transition from *playing* video games as a form of leisure to doing so as a form of work is thus not straightforward. Postigo (2016, 341) uses a hybridized formulation to understand this transition: first, "gameplay," to understand how this activity begins as a form of play (and one that many of us are familiar with); second, "making gameplay," as this act of play becomes a form of cultural production; third, "making game pay," as the latter is transformed into work as it becomes the activity through which the streamer makes a living. In the process, streaming develops from a "hobby" into a "job," meaning that streamers, like the YouTube commentators that Postigo (2016, 343) studied, have to "produce content even if they do not want to." This means a constant *performance* of their hobby, not in an individual, private sense—the enacting of gameplay in a digital environment—but in a public, closely watched, and monitored context, where performance translates directly into income. As Philip explained, the work of the stream also meant re-watching recorded streams, "thinking back on any lessons on performance [. . .] for how to best connect,

and best reach [viewers]." Streamers reflect on their own performances, which become less a question of watching one's past leisure, and instead a reconstitution of that activity as work that needs to be improved, optimized, and turned into an even more convincing performance next time around.

For Twitch streamers, there are two main ways that they can make an income. The first is through building an audience. Viewers on Twitch can be monetized through either paying a subscription to the streamer's channel (which is split between the streamer and Twitch) or through making donations (either directly to the streamer or through Twitch*'s* in-app currency, "bits"). This means that the larger a consistent audience a streamer can build, the higher an income they can make. The second method flows from this. Once a streamer has built an audience, it then becomes possible to negotiate with companies for advertising or sponsorship. This economic compulsion brings additional pressures and demands into the process. As professional streamer Ben Bowman (2017) notes, there are 168 hours in each week, and he is "expected to be live for as many of them as possible," with only enough breaks between playing games to allow him to recover.

We have argued elsewhere that Twitch streaming has been shaped by a "neoliberal subjectivity" that depends on the entrepreneurship of the self, equating success as the result of hard work via the volume of hours streamed per week (Johnson and Woodcock, 2017), which will generate an inevitable emotional toll. Bowman grew his channel by streaming "a mind-crushing" twelve to sixteen hours a day, every day of the week, for two years straight: "this," he explained, "was the only way I could maintain growth." Similarly, despite the glamour of contemporary Esports events, Vanessa explained that for a commentator, "a 15-hour day is not uncommon." While getting to travel around the world for this work was exciting, the reality, she said, was: "I

flew there, I saw the inside of the convention center, I flew back." The need here for self-motivation in the face of monotony is captured by Bowman and others in a "common mantra," which is to "Always Be Casting." Streamers must be constantly "on," friendly, or witty, and are required to remain in character for long periods, not only within a single day, but potentially for many consecutive months, or even years. This goes beyond the pre-recorded experiences of vloggers or other performances on social media. It takes a toll on even the most extroverted people, especially when maintaining intimacy is essential to having a career in an area with effectively zero job security, and it is clear from our research that live streamers feel the pressures of such labor.

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to elaborate on some of the particularities of the labor process involved when someone begins to stream on the Twitch platform, specifically the labor of being presentable, funny, engaging, and in-character. This is a central part of the complex relationships on Twitch between the streamer, the game, the platform, and the audience. In doing so, these forms of labor have been shown to be deeply creative and contingent on being socially active and emotionally responsive. What emerges on this platform is a performativity of micro-celebrity that is being mediated in novel ways: streamers seek to develop a unique manner of interaction with the audience, drawing on their own gameplay skills and personality, and, in some cases, on the theatricality of character acting. To viewers, streams might seem casual and not that far from the experience of watching friends play on a console in a living room; yet this belies the striking amount of affective labor that goes into a stream. We have presented several of the most important elements of streamers' labor, but each of these is ripe for a more complete examination in its own

right. In particular, the new pressures of being a professional streamer demand urgent attention. Given the rapid and ongoing growth of Twitch and the diverse forms of affective labor examined here, it is clear that understanding these forms of work on Twitch is central to theorizing digital game labor.

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