REAL LIFE IN REAL TIME

LIVE STREAMING CULTURE



edited by

Johanna Brewer, Bo Ruberg, Amanda L. L. Cullen, and Christopher J. Persaud

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Foreword: Broadcasting Our Lives, Broadcasting Ourselves

T. L. Taylor

It is now about a decade from when game live streaming first really caught my eye when, back in 2012, I was still living in Sweden and wrapping up a book on esports. Those early experiments in transforming private play into public entertainment have grown into a whole new genre of media that lives on a variety of worldwide platforms that host content 24/7. That trajectory of growth established before the pandemic-mode of early 2020 only accelerated as huge chunks of daily life went online. As so many people shifted their school and work lives to the internet, web cameras suddenly became hot commodities, complete with inflated prices. Recommendations for lighting systems or fancy mics, previously only used by streamers or "influencers," started cropping up in everyday conversation. Some folks even sought out green screens to better handle their virtual backgrounds. While 2020 was a strange year for us all, the mainstreaming of live streaming—whether in a Zoom room or on Twitch—caught me a little off guard.

I should not have been surprised, of course. Sites like Twitch have their roots in early internet cam culture, where people experimented with broadcasting, or at least visually sharing, their life online to others (see chapter 1). The riveting, and at times disturbing, documentary *We Live in Public* chronicles how 1990s internet culture collided with art and entertainment to produce fascinating experiments in early web broadcasting, from one couple wiring their entire house with live cameras and constantly chatting with their viewers to a 100-person living space that streamed the often-dramatic lives of its inhabitants—think *Big Brother* without any filters and a heavy dose of art antics, all online.

In many ways, our current moment of streaming—where gaming is only one of a variety of activities that folks share—is a return to its roots. On any

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given day of the week, we can now pretty easily watch live broadcasts of academic symposia, improv comedy shows, musicians and DJs (see chapter 2), cooking and crafting, and people just hanging out and chatting. Over the course of the pandemic, many of us also watched live streams of Black Lives Matter protests or the distressing assault on the US Capitol. As the editors of this volume note in the introduction, live streaming, be it from quasi-TV studios in the home or via mobile phones on the streets, is increasingly a site not only of entertainment and sociality, but of politics and struggle.

Of course, politics and struggle were always woven into streaming, even when it was simply gaming. The history of live streaming is not just about participatory and cocreative media, but also a place of exclusions and harassment, gatekeeping and regulation (see chapters 5, 6, and 8). And it has always been a place where the labor of users, whether in producing content or in moderating and managing communities, has been at stake. As so many have extended their lives online, both personal and professional, and turned to live streaming as a way to connect with others or share their work and play, the call for us to take yet another critical look at it is vital.

The labor and economic conditions around streaming continue to raise critical questions about a growing sector of the culture industry (see chapter 17). Over the years, the nascent professionalization of live streaming (or at least the hope of generating some financial support for your streaming endeavors) has continued to develop. The process of being allowed to make money off your streams by attaining "partner" status was originally somewhat opaque and the subject of endless community discussion. Although Twitch's discretionary judgment remains a component of the process, the professionalization of streaming, or at least the aspirational rhetoric of such, has now been baked into the user interface (UI) of the broadcaster.

This sociotechnical circuit is important to pay attention to because it points to the ways that platforms weave in cultural and sociopolitical modalities. The "Insights" bar of the broadcaster UI allows access to various tools and analytic sites, operationalizing content and viewership in a way much more aligned with traditional broadcasting and its quantification. It scaffolds in hooks to conversations of "influencer reach," revenue, marketing, audience demographics, and return on investment (ROI). It offers data to populate your pitch deck or to frame yourself to potential sponsors. And in a quasi-gamification fashion, the platform now delineates target goals for you on the "path" to affiliate or partner. Achievements like "What is

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thy bidding?" that credit you for getting followers on your channel, or "The empire business," which is unlocked after streaming 500 hours, seek to tap into an affective pull of achievement systems, but in the service of growth and monetization (Siutila 2018).

It is important to note that streamers who approach their channels with an eye toward professionalization have long utilized various analytics and have certainly set goals for themselves as a way of tracking their progress. That is not what is new. It is the uptake of this on the platform itself that I want to flag. As with so many aspects of gaming, the *Creator Dashboard* circa 2021 had taken emergent practices from the community and baked them into the formal product, amplifying the sensibility along the way and, in the most generous read, made transparent what was often implicit. Yet the integration of this orientation into the platform UI also provided a powerful signal to any user poking around the preferred frame of action in operation (in this case, a fairly instrumentalized form of engagement). The less generous read suggests a pipeline that funnels users into a set of often-grueling practices and an ongoing precarious labor structure (see chapter 18).

We would be remiss, however, if we flattened the story of contemporary live streaming to simply be about instrumentalization and monetization. Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of fully understanding these spaces involves the ways that joy, community, and even care are also infused into them. It can be hard, of course, in the face of exclusions and harassments, serious issues around labor, and the commodification of experience not to lose sight of what often draws people to online life. It would be a mistake, though, in the service of much-needed critical accounts, to overlook the vibrancy of the communities and connections that people build into streaming spaces. Understanding the complex navigation of underlying structures requires nuanced research.

In some ways, my calling this out amplifies already powerful work happening within critical internet studies that does not dismiss pleasure, joy, or a sense of a vibrant collective, even on our most damaged platforms (see chapter 10). I am inspired by the work of scholars like André Brock (2020), Ray Fouché (2006), and Kishonna Gray (2020), to name just a few, who have so insightfully spoken to the creativity and adeptness of marginalized communities as they work with and over technology. As Brock (2020) argues, we cannot lose sight of "Black digital practices engendered by joy, sexuality, playfulness, anger, and politics" (37). We must find ways

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to tell the full story with these platforms—one that can hold a sharp critical insight that unpacks the black box of the socioeconomic-technical assemblage, alongside an understanding of the lively meaning that people make.

The power of connecting with others and creating authentic moments has always been a part of live streaming, and telling this side of the story remains vital. Over the years, we have seen the work that many streamers who are committed to fostering positive spaces have undertaken (see chapter 20). From modeling inclusivity to building up robust forms of community management (through both teams of moderators and socializing their viewers), there is a rich history of carving out positive welcoming spaces on platforms we might otherwise often turn a fairly critical eye. This heterogeneity has to be better reckoned with and explored.

Perhaps one of the most interesting developments has been the move by some streamers who have long been subject to harassment and gatekeeping to not just be visible, but boost community building and appeal *through* otherwise marginalized identities (see chapters 9 and 12). A prime example of this is the Peer2Peer.Live site which was launched in March 2021. Developed by Steph Loehr, Irene Nieves, Sabrina Mack, and Lucia Everblack, with support from Trans Lifeline, the site's tagline "Identity is Content" speaks to a move to promote visibility and reclaim connection through identity.

At the time of Peer2Peer.Live's launch, Twitch, while having introduced a general tagging system in 2018, didn't allow streamers to tag their channels with "identity markers" beyond the fairly broad "LGBTQIA" label. Into the gap, this third-party site offered a broadcaster-generated system of tags (open-ended but vetted) for viewers to find communities of interest. As the press release for the site noted, "Trans Lifeline launched Peer2Peer.Live to fill gaps left by Twitch's lack of identity-based tagging that left minority streamers with limited to no discoverability options on the platform" (Trans Lifeline 2021).

Streamers could apply to the Peer2Peer.Live site for membership and, if approved, then tag their channel in various ways and boost discoverability through those designations. The stream would still be hosted on Twitch, but it also showed up on the Peer2Peer.Live site, which acted as an opt-in aggregator. Visitors to the site could click on varying tags, like "Deaf/HOH," "Black," "Bisexual," or "Muslim," to find streamers that have chosen to self-identify in various ways using whatever tags they chose. Multiple tags can be chosen (a technical nod to intersectionality). Another set of tags also lists

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forms of accessibility that the channel might offer, such as American Sign Language (ASL) or closed captioning.

Peer2Peer.Live made material through infrastructure the fact that streamers themselves are a critical component of a broadcast. It also highlighted the power of affinity groups, particularly for those who might otherwise experience an unwelcoming environment online. As the developers wrote on the Values page, "We believe that connecting to community is a vital part of what it means to be human. . . . Peer2Peer.Live provides a broadcaster directory that helps content creators and viewers with marginalized identities connect to and empower one another" (Peer2Peer 2021). Stream content is rarely just about the broadcast of an artifact (a game) or a process (play, crafting, cooking). It is generally the interweaving of process *and* person that is vital. Sites like Peer2Peer.Live have taken the emergent community and identification practices that already were informally present in streaming and helped codify and amplify them.

Of course, Twitch knows how central identity is to streaming and has acknowledged this aspect of broadcasting, not least of which by cutting special deals with high-profile content producers or by increasingly promoting particular streamers during Black History or Pride events. The platform, however, has historically been hesitant to adopt it as a guiding principle extended to all users through specific platform features. What is notable, then, is how much calls for this feature originated from the very communities usually framed as being "protected" by not bolstering their visibility.

Yet, as Trans Lifeline noted in its press release, this framing may overlook the power of community as a form of safety and protection, "Trans Lifeline is hosting Peer2Peer.Live because we know the value of peer support. We know that having community prevents crises. People thrive in communities with shared experiences, and Twitch isn't helping people find community" (Trans Lifeline 2021). While invisibility as a tactic has long been used by vulnerable communities when there is an absence of committed and sustained structural protection, it has profound shortcomings in the long term, both for individuals and society.

As with much of online life, users themselves stepped in to fill the gaps left by official developers and formal systems. Peer2Peer.Live tapped into the power and community-building possibilities of self-identification mechanisms as a form of positive visibility and discoverability on an often-saturated platform. And, as is often the case with user-generated

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interventions, the formal platform itself finally caught up to where the community was headed.

Just a few months later, in May 2021, Twitch launched its own opt-in tagging system. Under the heading "Celebrate Yourself and Your Community with 350+ New Tags," the site introduced tags "related to gender, sexual orientation, race, nationality, ability, mental health, and more" (Twitch 2021). It notably thanked the trans community for its "passion and persistence" in pursuing the feature and spoke of partnering with a number of LGBTQ+ organizations to try to make their system as inclusive as possible. To address concerns with potential harassment as a result of visibility, they linked to their Hateful Conduct and Harassment Policy, Community Guidelines, and moderation tools.

In both the case of the evolution of the UI for streamers Twitch itself has undertaken, and the launch of a third-party site like Peer2Peer.Live, we can see the historical roots of nascent user practices and how they get taken up, amplified, and iterated in various technological ways. It highlights how the work of streamers gets folded back into the platform or the culture broadly, and how these communities sit within larger flows of economics or systems of governance that they must contend with. This sociotechnical assemblage, ever evolving, ever shifting, and full of pushes and pulls, points to the continued need to keep researching, analyzing, and puzzling through stream culture—exactly the work that this valuable volume is doing.

What I saw in my earliest days of research, while still often present as crystalized bits lodged in the culture, is nonetheless always transforming and morphing. Streaming is never a fixed site, artifact, or set of practices. It requires ongoing attention, not to finally capture a settled story or chronicle a stabilized object, but to continue our critical inquiry into unpacking it. I am incredibly grateful to the myriad scholars who are continuing our collective investigation about this vibrant side of online life. This collection is sure to be a foundational part of that conversation.

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Introduction: The Revolution Is Streaming Live: Cultural Perspectives on the Age of Live Streaming

Bo Ruberg, Johanna Brewer, Amanda L. L. Cullen, and Christopher J. Persaud

It's the end of May 2020, and I've been quarantining for almost three months now. My landlord has just told everyone in my house that we will be evicted if we don't leave in a month, so I go out for a walk outside my Cambridge apartment, trying to make sense of all the upheaval ringing in my brain by breathing the masked midnight air. The streets are eerily quiet. I can't tell if I'm getting used to the main square in my neighborhood being completely vacant. On the bricks outside the shuttered subway station, someone has scrawled in chalk "BLM 6:30 NUBIAN SQ 5/31." Calculating as I head toward home, I reckon that it would be about a seven-mile journey to get to that part of Roxbury on foot. By the time I'm unlocking my front door for one of the last times, I'm more full of angst than when I left.

I know that I am living through a collective trauma, a layer cake of global crises that includes both a raging pandemic and a surge of state-sponsored racial violence, and yet I am feeling so cut off from humanity. Reflecting, I realize that one of the reasons why I have spent so much of my time in isolation sewing masks and live streaming my "speedruns" of the process has been to create a new space for connection. It seems that making "cloth hugs" for people's faces and sharing that experience with the world has become my way of keeping in touch. But right now, rather than crafting and 'casting, I wish I were part of a crowd, chanting for change. Folks won't be gathering in the Boston area until tomorrow, so I open up Twitch and click on "WOKE," one of the channels I know will be live streaming the Black Lives Matter protests that are happening in other places tonight.

When I open the channel at around 2 a.m. Eastern time, there are already over 13,000 people tuned into WOKE's stream (figure 0.1). Tiled on the screen are nine live views being broadcast simultaneously, including

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Figure 0.1
Channel of the streamer WOKE, with live feeds from many people.

footage shot from the first-person perspectives of protesters on the ground in cities across the US—Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Denver, and Washington, D.C.—as well as feeds from TV stations in St. Louis and Portland and a nested stream from the independent news channel UnicornRiot. Even though it's nighttime all across the US, people are in the streets at this very moment. My screen fills with an explosion of flashing lights, jostling bodies dressed in black, and blurry clouds of mist or tear gas. Only the audio from a single video feed, the protest in Dallas, is playing, but the police sirens are as loud as their lights are bright, and I lean in to make sense of the confrontation that's unfolding in that corner of the screen. My pulse quickens as I think, "Is this happening? Yes, we are really doing it." It's like I can see the torrent of emotions that have been whirling inside me displayed in their countless variations across my screen. Outside, my soon-to-be-former city is quiet, but after drowning in silence all night, being able to immerse myself in the cacophony that is ringing out across the country makes me feel connected again.

As May spills into June, I spend the nights packing my belongings into boxes while witnessing historic events play out over real-time video. I notice a significant uptick in streamers using the platform for spontaneous citizen journalism, from longtime content creators like ZombiUnicorn to newcomers like JoshBeStill, and I find myself in awe at the groundswell of

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people broadcasting from the front lines of what eventually will become a worldwide movement for racial justice.

Sure, I could say that I need to be watching this live because these emergent forms of platform activism are my current research focus, but in truth, I am drawing comfort from this new form of civic engagement. Lockdowns have made my life as a technology design activist feel like I exist in a virtual simulation. I have been working feverishly at my keyboard alone for months, fretting, "Does what I'm doing through organizations like AnyKey and the ACLU make a difference? Am I helping folks with the things I build and write? Is anyone even out there anymore?" Being able to participate in the protests remotely and feeling the energy of the millions of people across the country who I am in common cause with reassures me that I am part of something larger, that online and real life are connected, now more than ever. Although this moment of great upheaval has been fraught with uncertainty, I am exhilarated by the thought that no matter where I am living when it happens, the revolution will indeed be streaming live.

* * *

This is Johanna's story, but each of the editors of this volume has had a moment much like this one: their own powerful instant of realization that live streaming, the practice of broadcasting video (and/or audio) footage live online, has been core to their experiences with the transformative events of the last few years. All four of us have been longtime live stream viewers, researchers, or streamers ourselves. Yet, with the pandemic on our doorstep, the planet seemingly poised for ecological collapse, and concerns of social justice in the US finally coming to a head, we have each been reminded—whether in joy or in sorrow—how live streaming now sits at the center of the contemporary digital mediation of our lives.

For Bo, as for Johanna, this moment came during the Black Lives Matter protests. One afternoon, in the midst of conducting research on domestic space in live streaming, Bo opened Twitch's "Browse" page and was shocked to find that one of the channels with the platform's highest current viewer count was the breathless, frenetic, multicamera footage of the protests Johanna describes above. Living in Orange County, a staid suburban bubble and California's seat of political conservatism, they felt an immense and sudden flood of relief upon finding WOKE's stream and joining the tens

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of thousands of viewers who were similarly watching on the edge of their seats. Here was a way, certainly small but nonetheless significant, to be there, to gain access to the world, and to stand in solidarity with those putting their bodies on the line in the critical fight for social justice.

Chris has been a longtime watcher of various gaming content creators and esports players on Twitch, having grown up playing competitive *Super Smash Bros*., among other games. In a way, the COVID-19 pandemic made live streaming strange again: a comfortable leisure medium became a curious portal to the unknown almost overnight. As drag performances, book talks, concerts, and even sexual encounters all remade themselves in live streaming contexts, he came to understand his usual outlets for fun and intimacy through fresh eyes. One night in June 2020, as he danced his way through a queer DJ set and fundraiser, he noticed that there were people in the audience whom he recognized from his new home in Los Angeles, as well as friends of friends and Instagram crushes from around the world. Turning his camera off for a moment, Chris wiped some sweat from his chest and noticed some other moisture had dripped onto his lap. He was crying. Chris was profoundly moved by the level of connection that was possible through the ordinarily mundane Zoom interface that he had grown accustomed to using for graduate school seminars and meetings. However lonely it was to move to a new city right before IRL sociality became quickly unavailable, live streamed queer nightlife had become a crucial site of communion and belonging.

Amanda's most impactful encounter with live streaming came earlier, and it was also her first. In 2014, a friend sent her a link to the original *Twitch Plays Pokémon* live stream: a cacophonous, crowdsourced playthrough of the video game *Pokémon Red* controlled by the rapid chat inputs of viewers (figure 0.2). In this instant, Amanda found herself amazed both by the technical setup of the stream—a system that allowed thousands of people to influence the actions of a player-character collectively, in real time—and by the narrative and lore that viewers were constructing as they played, building off of the emergent and often unintentionally hilarious scenarios that materialized through their unruly play. For Amanda, still in the formative moments of her journey to game studies research, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* represented the power of fannish affect, full of creativity and exuberance, but also the potential of live streaming technologies specifically to bridge distances and form communities on a global scale.

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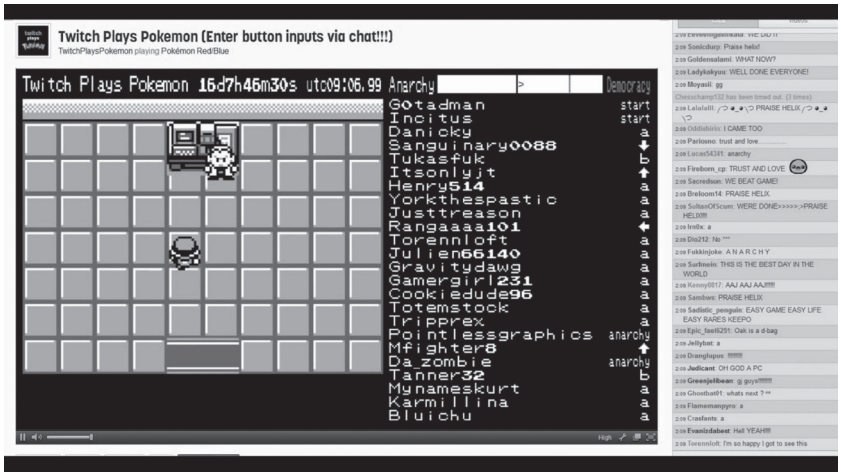


Figure 0.2
Screenshot of the first *Twitch Plays Pokémon* broadcast. *Image:* DDR's Let's Plays

A few years later, live streaming would facilitate another critical moment in Amanda's life. In 2016, while watching an *Overwatch* competition on Twitch, she happened to glance at the user chat while a woman "shoutcaster" (the esports equivalent of a traditional sports commentator) was on screen. To Amanda's horror, the chat was quickly flooded with derogatory comments from dozens of viewers about the shoutcaster's physical appearance and the legitimacy of her expertise. Witnessing this blatant display of gender-based harassment is what pushed Amanda to research not only live streaming, but specifically the experiences of women streamers. Here, it became clear that the same radical potential of live streaming technology that had seemed so full of promise in the case of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* was being weaponized against those who were seen as unwelcome in gaming spaces. Ever since, even as she continues to be a passionate participant in streaming communities, Amanda is known to always question who gets to participate in cultural and technological innovations, and on what terms.

The significance of these moments goes beyond our own individual experiences as live streaming researchers and citizens of a society that is increasingly being live streamed. They also go beyond the political and cultural landscapes of the US, where we four editors currently live. As both existing work and many of the new contributions in this volume show, live streaming is a worldwide phenomenon, touching everything from protests in

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Hong Kong to rallies for democracy during the Arab Spring to music in Brazil and LGBTQ communities in South Korea (Davies 2020; Kavada and Treré 2019). These anecdotes serve as illustrations of a much broader set of cultural phenomena. Live streaming, which takes place on a wide range of platforms and entails the broadcast of a diverse array of content, has rapidly expanded beyond its image as the domain of video game players and online influencers to become an integral part of fields as wide-reaching as politics, policy, activism, labor, business, education, art, performance, identity expression, community formation, and much more. The pressing relevance of live streaming to society today and the importance of its continued academic study are made particularly palpable in examples like those given here.

As the chapters found in this book demonstrate, live streaming, often misunderstood either as an internet fad or a simple source of entertainment, is deeply bound up with culture, both reflecting and meaningfully influencing the broader cultural context from which it emerges. For that reason, we present this work in a mode that is simultaneously analytical and polemical: calling for a greater engagement with live streaming not just as a set of technical tools or monetization systems, but as a mirror of the culture and an increasingly potent force shaping both major events and everyday life as they manifest online today.

Live streaming is many things at once. It is the possibility for making connections among people, for sparking joy across distance, for presenting oneself in true and empowering ways to the world. But live streaming is also corporate, controlled, a case study in the complexities and murky practices of platform politics. And live streaming is often a magnet for discriminatory behavior, exploitative labor practices, and the reactionary silencing of those whose messages or even whose bodies do not fit the dominant notions of the kinds of content that deserve to be seen. Above all, in its many manifestations, live streaming is culture: real life happening in real time.

The Age of Live Streaming

Although the term "live streaming" broadly describes the practice of broadcasting video live online, live streaming itself takes many forms, across a variety of platforms. Often, live streaming broadcasters, or "streamers," stream footage of themselves by appearing on camera or using a camera to broadcast their activities from a first-person perspective. Depending on the

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particular streaming platform or event, different live streams may entail different levels of audience interactivity, offering opportunities for viewers to chat, express themselves through emotes, or leave tips. While live streaming today is often associated with the popular platform Twitch.tv, it also takes place on numerous social media and content-sharing sites, including YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Outside the US, platforms like South Korea's AfreecaTV and a number of live streaming services in China are among the important forces shaping the practice on a global scale. Live streaming is also a feature of community-oriented communication platforms like Discord and an important component of online sex work, exemplified by the popularity of webcam modeling sites like MyFreeCams and subscription-based services like OnlyFans.

Live streaming can also encompass many everyday online practices that users may not initially think of as live streaming: forms of real-time self-broadcasting such as the use of Zoom, FaceTime, and video call features in mobile apps. Increasingly, these tools have become a crucial component of everything from dating and hookups to court hearings. Simultaneously, many of the activities being live streamed on widely recognized platforms like Twitch fall far outside the realm of what many would consider typical live streaming content: from sleeping or eating to reading tarot or milking goats (figure 0.3). Especially at a time when worldwide health concerns have driven so much of professional and personal life online, live streaming is

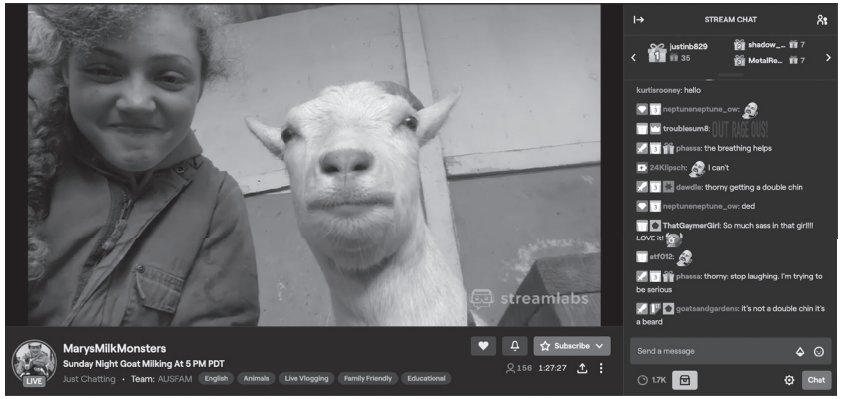


Figure 0.3
156 viewers watch goat milking live on the Twitch channel MarysMilkMonsters.

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now everywhere. It is how we live our lives online today. This is the age of live streaming.

Indeed, although live streaming has a long history, its popularity has skyrocketed in the last five years. In 2018, when T. L. Taylor published her landmark study *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Video Game Live Streaming*, live streaming platforms like the prominent Twitch.tv had already become part of everyday life for millions of people around the world, as both streamers and viewers. Since then, these numbers have continued to grow dramatically. According to news sources, Twitch alone went from 2.2 million registered streamers broadcasting content in 2017 to a height of 9.8 million registered streamers by the end of 2020 (Taylor 2018; TwitchTracker 2021). This is not to mention the nearly incalculable number of students and educators who moved online to live streamed classrooms during the pandemic, receiving their learning and sharing their own ideas remotely, via video. There are many ways to explain the rise of live streaming, which relate to but also extend far beyond the "new normal" of COVID-19 and the events of 2020 (Khobra and Gaur 2020). Live streaming can provide an important sense of community and connection for broadcasters and viewers alike, bridging the physical gap of distance by beaming real-time footage from the home of one individual into the homes of others. Live streaming also offers meaningful opportunities for self-expression, whether through playing video games, making art, creating music, giving lessons on how to apply makeup, cooking food, or sitting around and just chatting.

These forms of personal expression are only part of the story, however. Live streaming is also now being put to all kinds of professional and political purposes, including some that have had an immediate and undeniable impact on our society. On October 20, 2020, the New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) participated in a live broadcast of the video game *Among Us*, as she encouraged the nearly 435,000 viewers who tuned into the stream over the course of its run to vote in the upcoming US presidential election (figure 0.4). Months later, in January 2021, viewers around the world watched the inauguration of President Joe Biden via live streamed video. All the while, citizens have been Zooming into live streamed local town halls, making sense of the daily news by listening to commentary from their favorite live streamers, and occasionally watching in horror as live streamed public lectures given by marginalized people have been disrupted by harassers who use the affordances of live streaming to enact

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Figure 0.4
AOC plays *Among Us*, in an effort to encourage voter turnout in the 2020 US election.

online violence in real time. Live streaming is how the events of the world reach us today, and how we participate in them. More than that, though, live streaming is shaping these events. The technologies, interfaces, and norms that make up live streaming are now major forces in mediating (and thereby transforming) how we know the world and the people in it. This is not just life live streamed; it is life refracted through live streaming.

Above all, live streaming is a matter of culture, as each of the chapters in this volume evidences in its own fashion. We mean this in a number of ways. First, live streaming is shaped by culture, growing and adapting specifically in response to the larger cultural forces that surround it. For example, the tools and platforms that make up live streaming, as we know them today, have evolved (and continue to evolve with each new update and iteration) in response to shifting standards of technology design that are themselves deeply rooted in cultural assumptions. Second, live streaming shapes and regulates culture, exerting its own increasingly potent influence by setting the terms of possibility for what kinds of people and what kinds of content can be broadcast live. After all, if live streaming is rapidly becoming the central platform for sharing voices on the internet, where does that leave those who feel unwelcome, or even unsafe, in such spaces? Third, live streaming is itself a locus of cultural formation. Live streaming has already formed and will continue to form its own "live streaming cultures": subcultures and communities with their own unique characteristics.

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Although they may have many things in common, different corners of live streaming culture often hold diametrically opposed views. In all these ways and more, just like any form of communication technology, live streaming can never be a culturally neutral set of tools, nor are live streams ever simply "virtual." Much to the contrary, they are imminently, materially real—and getting more real every day.

Contradictions in Live Streaming

Live streaming is a realm of productive contradiction, especially when it is viewed through the lens of culture. These contradictions speak to the powerful ways in which live streaming both exists within and overturns established expectations about the interplay between digital media, society, and everyday life. Rather than trying to resolve such contradictions—that is, to boil down the "truth" about live streaming—it is crucial to draw out and critique these tensions. Attending to the clashes between notions of what live streaming *is* or what it *does* can show us how live streaming itself serves as a microcosm in which broader issues of history, power, identity, and access play out. Many elements of these contradictions are already reflected in the existing scholarship on live streaming: a rapidly growing interdisciplinary area of research that comes together to build conversations across a range of methodological approaches and ideological investments. In addition to the topics addressed here, valuable research on live streaming has been done in many areas, such as communication practices of live streaming, the intersection of work and play in streaming, audience motivations and consumer practices, community formation, and genres of streaming related to creative expression (Gandolfi 2016; Ford et al. 2017; Pellicone and Ahn 2017; Faas et al. 2018; Johnson and Woodcock 2019; Sjöblom and Hamari 2017; Cai and Wohn 2019a; Diwanji et al. 2020; Hamilton, Garretson, and Kerne 2014; Seering, Kraut, and Dabbish 2017; Wohn 2019; Phelps and Consalvo 2020; Parker and Perks 2021; Haaranen 2017).

One such contradiction is the tension between understanding live streaming as fundamentally new or reframing it as an extension of older technological advances. On the one hand, streaming is very much of the present moment. However, the age of live streaming has always been a long time coming. It is often celebrated in news reports and corporate marketing copy as a fundamentally new phenomenon—an innovation or "disruption"

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(to use a buzzword from the tech industry) that brings online video broadcasting into everyday life for the first time. In truth though, live streaming has a long history. We can locate its origins in many places: the introduction of broadcast media into domestic spaces through the adoption of the television set in the home during the 1940s and 1950s (Spigel 1992); the practices of "camgirls" in the 1990s and 2000s, whose early efforts to broadcast their lives to viewers on the internet have been documented by scholars like Theresa Senft (2008); the rise of online platforms structured around the algorithmic sharing and monetization of user content documented by Tarleton Gillespie (2010). From a more conceptual standpoint, we can place the very notion of streaming within larger aquatic discourses that make sense of technology dating back as far as the telegraph through metaphors of water and flow—a connection that Arun Jacob and Christine H. Tran explore in chapter 6. Situating live streaming within these longer histories matters because it highlights how individuals, communities, and societal forces that came before the present moment have played a fundamental role in shaping live streaming today.

Yet, at the same time, live streaming *is* new. Even accounting for each of these historical influences, we still see reflected in live streaming a large-scale shift in the relationship between technology and the everyday lives of those in internet-connected societies. Just as certain innovations of the Industrial Revolution, like the locomotive and the movie theater, offered a newfound mobility to women in the past, live streaming technology allows marginalized people in the modern era to transcend geosocial boundaries in profoundly novel ways. In an age of surveillance panic, the immersive, intimate nature of streaming manages to create a previously unimaginable bridge between the public and private spheres, bucking societal norms about what it means to see and be seen in the world when millions of people are regularly inviting strangers to visit their bedrooms virtually. As we open ourselves up to one another through this fundamentally fresh form of rich, real-time mass communication, individuals from previously disconnected communities forge new powerfully affective connections on a global scale. Broadcast entertainment and internet technologies can have a profound effect on the development of not only contemporary aesthetics, but also the modern economy and structures of governance. We see that live streaming represents a unique inflection point in which entrenched issues of the past, like misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism,

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and economic exploitation, are being challenged by the emergent logic of a revolutionary creative context. This tension between the history of live streaming and its radical newness, which potentially represents its own kind of break from history, is just one of the many challenging yet productive dichotomies that characterize live streaming.

Another contradiction lies in the relationship between live streaming and video games. It is true that video games, in the form of amateur gameplay and professional esports, hold a prominent place in the landscape of live streaming today, with platforms like Twitch (and Microsoft's Mixer before it shut down in 2020) emphasizing the centrality of gaming content. While live streaming has risen to prominence through other forms of social media as well, video games have played a sizable role in the phenomenon's widespread visibility and adoption. Live streaming has also come to play a central role in practices of the video game industry. Many new games are often announced first or debuted on Twitch; some games are being explicitly designed to be more "streamable" or incorporate the participatory affordances of live streaming into their gameplay (Conditt 2020). Live streaming has even changed the design of game hardware—one notable example is the Share button that came standard on the PlayStation 4 controller (and is now labeled "Create" on the PlayStation 5), making all gameplay, in effect, ready for streaming. Just as we cannot understand live streaming today without at least a partial accounting for video games, we cannot understand video games today without recognizing that streaming has had a huge impact on how video games are played, promoted, and designed.

Relatedly, since live streaming maintains such close ties to video games, understanding the cultural aspects of live streaming also requires understanding the cultural forces at play around games. Because the technological and corporate structures of live streaming have taken shape around gaming, live streaming of all sorts is caught up in the concerns of video game culture, including types of streaming that appears to have little to do with video games. Academics and media outlets alike have noted that the meritocratic, misogynistic, and racist beliefs that often run rampant in video game culture also strongly affect live streaming, in many cases creating significant challenges for already marginalized streamers and players (Grayson 2020). We can see this, for example, in Ge Zhang and Larissa Hjorth's work on gender performativity in the practices of women streamers on the Chinese platform Douyu (Zhang and Hjorth 2019), or in Brian Chan and Kishonna

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Gray's writing on Black men's paths to microcelebrity in video game streaming, "a space not made for them" (Chan and Gray 2020). Many of the contributors to this volume, as well as this volume's editors, have also worked to confront what Mia Consalvo has termed "toxic gamer culture" as it bears on the cultures of live streaming (Consalvo 2012). Bo Ruberg, Amanda Cullen, and Kat Brewster (2019) have studied how sexist attitudes toward women's bodies set problematic expectations for streamers' legitimacy. Meanwhile, Johanna Brewer, Morgan Romine, and T. L. Taylor (2020) have made a call to the human-computer interaction (HCI) community to improve Twitch's moderation tools in the name of fostering inclusive communities.

At the same time, live streaming is also about so much more than video games. As illustrated by the numerous examples mentioned in the introduction, along with the many more that surface in the chapters of this volume—live streaming is being put to purposes so vast and diverse that video games now represent only a fraction of live streaming practices and their related cultures. Even on Twitch, which has remained the dominant presence in the live streaming landscape over the last half-decade, its "IRL" categories have now eclipsed game-related categories in viewer numbers (figure 0.5). Continuing to see live streaming as the stuff of video games risks overlooking the many other forms of streaming that are taking place today, much of them spearheaded by the very people that toxic gamer culture has often

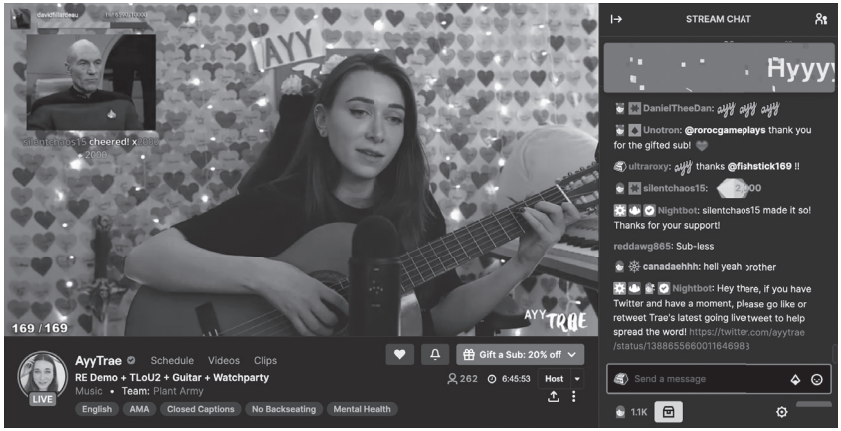


Figure 0.5
AyyTrae plays guitar while getting ready to host a *Star Trek* watch party—an example of "IRL" streaming.

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pushed aside. It also risks leaving the impact of live streaming tools on other realms of society and everyday life unaddressed and uninterrogated.

Live streaming also inhabits a paradoxical space between self-expression and control. Even as we celebrate the ways that live streaming allows individuals the opportunity to share their passions and proudly broadcast their identities, we must recognize that such freedom goes hand in hand with regulation. All live streaming platforms have their own community guidelines and terms of service: documents that dictate what kinds of content and behaviors are or are not allowed. Sometimes these rules helpfully limit condemnable behavior like harassment and the use of hate speech. However, just as often, such rules justify the exclusion of already precarious participants in the culture of live streaming—for instance, by deplatforming women streamers whom straight male viewers deem too "sexy," or banning LGBTQ+ content that is held to different standards of respectability than content about heterosexual sex and romance (Ruberg 2020). Toxicity in live streaming cultures itself functions as a mechanism of control, often attempting to set the terms for who can appear on screen, what they can say, and how they can say it. The possibilities for self-expression through live streaming are vast, but the realities of platform politics and digital cultures mean that those possibilities are also contested and far from limitless (Cunningham, Craig, and Lv 2019).

Similarly, in tension are the qualities of live streaming as empowering or exploitative. Many individual live streamers are, to some extent, their own bosses: setting their own hours, producing content of their choosing, and building their own personal brand. Through live streaming platforms, they have stages from which they can perform to the world—often from the relative comfort of their own homes. Yet, for all the power that live streaming puts in the hands of creators, it also has the potential to take power from them, such as in the form of overly extractive labor expectations. Streamers bring page views and donations to the platforms that host them; the most successful streamers are also the most lucrative for their platforms. Meanwhile, whether or not they see themselves as having attained success, streamers must perform myriad forms of labor, engaging in work that is simultaneously creative, entrepreneurial, physical, relational, and affective (Woodcock and Johnson 2019; Törhönen et al. 2021; Meisner and Ledbetter 2020). As Charlotte Panneton argues in chapter 18, platforms like Twitch have themselves fostered unreasonable expectations for streamers,

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normalizing a culture of crunch that can lead to burnout and the deterioration of streamers' mental health. Is this empowerment? On whose terms, and at what cost, do streamers get access to the promised power of the live streaming age? These are questions, like so many in this volume, that resonate far beyond the domain of academic study, out into the wider landscapes of our society that grow more and more intertwined with streaming practices each day.

Particularly salient for the present volume is one final point of tension: the contradiction between live streaming as liberatory or discriminatory. Existing research has rightly highlighted the prominence of gendered and racialized harassment in streaming, as well as addressing the ways that issues of problematic labor practices and unequal access often fall along lines of identity and privilege (Uszkoreit 2018; Cai and Wohn 2019b; Guarriello 2019; Wang 2020; Chan and Gray 2020; Nakandala et al. 2017). A number of the chapters in this volume address toxicity and the hard work that streamers, moderators, and community members are undertaking to combat it. At the same time, there remains within live streaming the potential to operate as what Ruha Benjamin refers to, drawing on Black radical traditions, as a "liberatory" technology: one that resists the norms of "discriminatory design" (and, we would add, the discriminatory technoculture) in order to foster a "liberatory imagination [that] opens up possibilities and pathways" (Benjamin 2019). Live streaming is both discriminatory and liberatory at once. This becomes clear if we think back to the personal anecdotes with which we opened this introduction. LGBTQ+ folks often face derision and derogatory remarks on live streaming platforms; yet it is also on these same platforms that we find LGBTQ+ folks gathered at queer parties, joyfully dancing the night away. Black streamers are confronted with numerous challenges, ranging from viewer harassment to instrumentalization by streaming platforms, and yet live streaming is also the means through which untold thousands of viewers were able to access and lend their virtual presence to Black Lives Matter protests. There is no resolution to this contradiction; the answer lies in making the contradiction visible.

Live Streaming Culture: Mapping the Present, Imagining the Future

It is time for an intervention in the ways that we—as scholars, students, designers, and viewers—make sense of live streaming. Let us be clear in

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our claim: There can be no truly meaningful study of live streaming that does not account for its relationship to culture. The interplays between live streaming and culture are vast, and their implications touch many fields of academic study, from social scientific studies of the internet to humanistic analyses of digital media to design-focused investigations of live streaming as a set of tools for HCI. Although many scholars have begun delving into research on live streaming (and some have already been experts on the topic for years), there has yet to be a centralized hub for conversations about the cultural implications of live streaming that cut across these disciplinary boundaries. Yet, we believe, it is crucial for perspectives on live streaming culture to be shared among students and scholars of many sorts. Technologists can learn from humanists and social scientists by coming to understand how the systems they design have the potential to perpetuate or resist dominant and often oppressive systems of power and privilege. Those studying internet technologies from a more theoretical perspective can benefit from the contributions of sociologists and anthropologists, whose methods of speaking directly to participants in cultural phenomena can bring rich and arguably more socially just insights to humanistic analysis. Meanwhile, those who research people—whether they are streamers, viewers, moderators, or technology professionals—can deepen their understanding of both technological systems and underlying conceptual forces that influence the lives of their subjects. Fittingly, you will find all these voices present in this volume, as well as those speaking from the perspectives outside academia.

This volume opens with a foreword by T. L. Taylor, whose landmark book *Watch Me Play* has served as a critical entry point into live streaming research for many contributors to this volume. Addressing topics like labor, identity, politics, community, and users' own efforts to develop technologies for streaming, Taylor reflects on how live streaming has grown and changed—and, in some ways, notably not changed—since she began her research on streaming a decade ago, in 2012. Following this foreword, the chapters of the volume have been grouped into five sections.

The first section of the volume, "Streaming beyond Video Games," demonstrates how live streaming has emerged from nongaming practices and, crucially, how it is increasingly becoming adopted in far-flung areas of society, art, and labor. In chapter 1, Bo Ruberg makes a case for a feminist retelling of the history of live streaming, centering the importance of webcam modeling, a form of online sex work, in narratives about how the

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contemporary cultural phenomenon of self-broadcasting came into being and rose to popularity. In chapter 2, Gabriel Pereira and Beatriz Ricci explore how the COVID-19 pandemic inspired Brazilian musicians to use YouTube's live streaming feature to organize massive, interactive, virtual concerts, representing a notable shift in Brazilian cultural engagement with new media. Next, in chapter 3, Kelli N. Dunlap, Marie Shanley, and Jocelyn Wagner look at the role of mental health in live streaming, drawing from interviews to reveal the mental toll that streaming often places on broadcasters, creating anxiety and distress related to the constant threat of viewer harassment, long hours, work burnout, and the need to "act as shrinks to their fans." This section ends with chapter 4, in which Olivia Banner looks at the for-profit medical industry's growing practice of live streaming surgeries, part of marketing and public relations efforts. As Banner reveals, these live streamed surgeries, typically promoted through the rhetoric of technological innovation or sensationalistic voyeurism, are themselves deeply shaped by visual logics of racial and gendered inequity.

Live streaming offers inspiring new possibilities for self-expression, but the cultures that surround it are still often mired in issues of discrimination and harassment. In particular, the heightened visibility that live streaming provides often comes with increased risk for women, people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and those with disabilities. The volume's second section, "Tackling Toxicity in Real Time," looks at how discriminatory practices manifest in streaming spaces, as well as how these forms of harassment are confronted by live streaming broadcasters and other participants. In chapter 5, Olivia Rines turns to consider the creative tactics that streamers themselves can use to resist harassment, providing a detailed examination of how one streamer handles her trolls by creating parodies of "breaking news" segments, in which she comically calls out the viewers who have posted discriminatory or inappropriate content in chats. Arun Jacob and Christine H. Tran's reflection in chapter 6 on the history of disrupting live streams situates what has come to be known as "Zoom-Bombing" within the context of larger cultural ruptures—struggles for the right to make oneself seen within digital publics. Bringing race explicitly into considerations of live streaming toxicity, Aaron Trammell confronts the discriminatory whiteness of board game streams in chapter 7. By critiquing live streamed content produced by *The Dice Tower*, a popular hobby gaming review site, he draws attention to concerns about racialized labor and what he

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terms "white geek privilege." Concluding this section in chapter 8, Andrew Zolides writes about how Twitch's moderation and reporting tools are frequently put to toxic purposes, often being weaponized by discriminatory viewers to harass marginalized streamers.

Among the many cultural factors that shape live streaming, issues of identity play a particularly powerful role. The third section of this book, "Broadcasting Gender and Sexuality," focuses on the interplays between live streaming and issues of LGBTQ+ experiences, gendered bodies, and the challenges of navigating identity onstream. This section begins in chapter 9 with Jin Lee's discussion of queer live streaming in South Korea, which reveals how LGBTQ+ YouTube streams have become sites of queer expression in the midst of an often-homophobic cultural environment. Similarly interested in queer streaming communities, then, in chapter 10, Christopher Persaud turns to online drag performances during the pandemic, exploring how queer nightlife pleasures translate to the live streaming format. By focusing on the event series *Black Girl Magic*, which features an all-Black cast of drag artists, Persaud brings a vital "queer of color" lens to studies of community-building through streaming. In chapter 11, Amanda Cullen examines the case of a woman who streamed while visibly pregnant; in the piece, Cullen addresses both the streamer's deft self-performance and her audience's entitled response to her body. Finally, in his interview with esports player Sasha "Magi" Sullivan in chapter 12, Matt Knutson presents an element of Sullivan's experiences with shifting gender pronouns during live streamed coverage of competitive gaming—offering a case that, as Knutson writes, "reminds us that the conditions of visibility in live streaming remain fraught."

Design is also central to live streaming, as an important facet of human-computer interaction in the landscape of contemporary internet technologies. The fourth section of this book, "Designing the Live Aesthetic," brings to the fore the cultural implications of the emergent designed aspects of live streaming platforms, such as their interfaces and communication affordances. Emma French explains in chapter 13 how "actual play" live streams have significantly reshaped cultural practices around tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), bringing new models of participation to games like *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* through the interactive tools of streaming. Next, in chapter 14, Evelynn Kersting, Janelle Malagon, and Casey O'Ceallaigh recount their experiences hosting *The Arena*, a weekly live stream about competitive game play that shifts the traditional format of academic

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conversation to make it more accessible to a broader community of participants. In chapter 15, Michael DeAnda turns the lens of cultural critique to *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, a phenomenon in which a live chat community created a new narrative for the classic Pokémon video games, in order to examine how streaming's affordances can allow for modes of collective play that empower fans to transform the meaning of original media content. Finally, in chapter 16, Nathan Jackson offers a reading of the cultural meaning of Twitch emotes, bridging discussions of the body and design by critiquing the emojis that have come to characterize the language of audience participation on streaming platforms; specifically, Jackson looks at the PogChamp emote and its messy relationship to race and white supremacy.

Live streaming is not just a concern of the present; it is a sign of things yet to come. The final section of this book, "Revolutionizing Cultural Production," explores the disruptive implications of live streaming and its relationship to culture, interrogating the shifts that live streaming has already sparked in media cultures and prompting us to question what further change awaits over the digital horizon. Here, Will Partin posits in chapter 17 that live streaming represents a new "cultural industry," while also arguing that seeing live streaming in this light reveals streaming itself to be less novel than proponents often suggest. In chapter 18, Charlotte Panneton confronts the labor politics of live streaming and explains how Twitch has created a culture of "grinding," in which streamers must accept precarious working conditions in order to fit Twitch's "narrative of self-actualization and aspirational entrepreneurialism." Offering a more hopeful interpretation of live streaming's revolutionary impact on culture, Robyn Hope describes how the charity-focused live streams of speedrunners have positively reshaped the stated values of retro game fan communities in chapter 19. Finally, in chapter 20, Johanna Brewer concludes with a polemical call for digital media users to take inspiration from live streams and learn to "see like streamers": flipping the panopticon of internet technology and finding within the cultures of streaming new and powerful tools for revolution.

What emerges across these works is a rich, complex, and productively ambivalent picture of live streaming and its relationship to culture. Taken together, the chapters in this volume challenge us to find new ways to tell the history of live streaming while also offering a broader view of what live streaming is being used for and whose lives it affects. Some chapters raise concerns about how the cultures and affordances of live streaming create

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breeding grounds for harassment, suggesting that the potentially liberatory tools of self-broadcasting might be put to discriminatory ends. At the same time, a number of authors address the agency and ingenuity of streamers themselves, who also author their own self-performance and find ways to reclaim the medium of live streaming. Intimacy, togetherness, and community are themes that cross these works, suggesting that streaming can valuably be used to bridge gaps between people, while also giving rise to problematic expectations around access: the assumption that viewers have the right to see or know or comment on intimate, embodied lives of streamers.

These chapters also serve as clear illustrations of how the technological and design elements of live streaming, like any other digital system, are deeply bound up with culture, and indeed often encode questionable cultural norms in their very design. Ultimately, this volume and its contributors challenge us to look to the future, training our eyes simultaneously on the possibility for harm and the potential for radical change that the cultural practice of live streaming contains within itself.

The Revolution Is Streaming Live

To conclude this introduction, we return to the images with which we began—images of a world in upheaval, a world in crisis, a world on the brink of change—and to this notion of live streaming as participating in revolution. Gil Scott-Heron's 1970 poem and song "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" draws its title from a slogan of the 1960s US Black Power movement, giving voice to a rejection of the appropriation and exploitation of social action movements for racial justice by the commercial media. In each verse, Scott-Heron parodies and rejects different aspects of television as both a business and a culture: "You will not be able to . . . skip out for beer on commercial breaks," he sings. "The revolution will not give your mouth sex appeal, the revolution will not make you look five pounds thinner" because, as he repeats, "the revolution will not be televised."

Thinking about the revolutionary potential of live streaming while listening to Scott-Heron's iconic piece, so often referenced in popular culture and already the inspiration for so many plays on words from media studies, is both jarring and fitting. If Black Lives Matter protests and other forms of citizens taking to the streets to demand equality in the midst of a global pandemic are the revolution (and they are), then the revolutions of our

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contemporary live streaming age will most definitely be televised: captured, broadcast, and consumed via live streaming, a mode of viewership that is quickly becoming the dominant televisual medium of the twenty-first century. In many ways that Scott-Heron might well take issue with, thanks in part to mobile phone camera technology as well as live streaming, the revolutions of today go hand in hand with today's media industries and practices of media consumption.

Yet, if we return to Scott-Heron's words, we find something unexpected in his concluding lines. "The revolution will not be televised," he intones one final time. "The revolution will be no rerun, brothers. The revolution will be live." And there it is—the sticking point at the crux of live streaming's revolutionary potential: The revolution will be live. If we interpret Scott-Heron's piece through the framework of today's media landscape, we see a stark contrast between prerecorded media (which becomes the stuff of reruns and commercial breaks) and live streaming, which brings its content to viewers in real time. Live streaming, then, still has a potential place within the revolution: the possibility of offering a sense of there-ness, of urgency, of participation that challenges the passive, viewing consumption that Scott-Heron and those after him who have drawn inspiration from his words resist when they insist that the revolution will not be televised. The revolution may not be televised, but perhaps it can be live streamed.

And, in this way, live streaming itself may be revolutionary. This is a slippery claim—one that risks reiterating technoutopian and corporate tech rhetorics about the infinite "revolution" of new devices. But it is worth lingering with this provocation and allowing it to hang over the chapters to come. How might live streaming be put into the service of the revolution? Can a set of tools and platforms be reactionary in nature while supporting radical ends? And, if live streaming is already its own revolution, who gets to claim that revolution as their own?

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Streaming beyond Video Games

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1 How Camming Made Streaming: Retelling the History of Live Streaming through Webcam Modeling

Bo Ruberg

The way that we tell the history of live streaming matters for the way we envision live streaming today. What are the origins of live streaming? Who has been centered in established histories, and whose contributions have been overlooked? The answers to these questions have direct effects on how live streaming is understood as a medium of culture. They shape our foundational beliefs about whose presence in the medium has been longstanding, influential, and therefore legitimate. They also dictate our assumptions about what sorts of people and practices stand at the margins. Telling—and retelling—the history of live streaming constitutes a way to challenge dominant narratives about what live streaming *is* and the people to whom it belongs.

To date, the history of contemporary live streaming practices, and video game live streaming in particular, has primarily been told through stories about technological innovation and shifts in media industries. Writing in *Watch Me Play*, T. L. Taylor situates the rise of live streaming on game-oriented platforms like Twitch within longer histories of televisual media entertainment, including broadcast television (Taylor 2018, 3–6). Donghee Yvette Wohn and Guo Freeman (2020) are among many who have connected the evolution of video game live streaming and esports, suggesting that the growth of live streaming has gone hand in hand with the increased visibility of competitive gaming. As live streaming continues to gain public attention, mainstream news reports too are adding their takes on the history of live streaming. Throughout 2020 and 2021, many such reports explained the explosive expansion of live streaming as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, citing people's longing for human contact during lockdown as the soon-to-be historical cause that brought many new

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streamers and viewers to live streaming platforms (Stephen 2020). Meanwhile, companies like Twitch have told their own versions of live streaming history, framing streaming as a novel practice at the center of a current revolution in online content creation and community building.

However, these are only some of the possible ways to tell the history of live streaming. To gain a fuller, more accurate, and more inclusive understanding of live streaming, we must also seek out its alternative histories and counter histories. These alternative histories should challenge us to reconsider what we think we know about where live streaming comes from and whose efforts honed and popularized the practice of broadcasting oneself online. This chapter offers one such history: the history of how live streaming as we know it today originated not with broadcast television or esports, but rather with webcam modeling. As Angela Jones explains in her book *Camming* (2020), webcam modeling is a form of internet-based sex work that predominantly involves performing erotic acts live for viewers who pay (in one way or another) to watch or to engage with cammers. Stated more broadly, webcam modeling can be thought of as "a genre of indirect sex work, in which cam models sell interactive computer-mediated sex online" (Jones 2020, 1). Although webcam modeling is often associated with young, white, cisgender women, there are many men, as well as people of color and transgender people, who engage in this work, both as a form of labor and a pleasurable mode of sexual and creative self-expression (Jones 2020, 7).

Despite being almost entirely overlooked in dominant narratives of live streaming history, webcam modeling has in fact fundamentally shaped contemporary live streaming—including genres of live streaming that may seem initially unrelated to sex and sexuality. As I detail in this chapter, there are many striking similarities between the work of webcam modeling and other forms of real-time, online self-broadcasting, including live streaming video game play. Yet live streaming is not only closely connected to webcam modeling in the present moment; the two have also been intertwined across their histories. Going back to the pioneering "camgirls" of the 1990s, up through sex workers who set up subscription-based online webcams in the early 2000s, through the birth of Justin.tv and its eventual transformation into Twitch, I show how the history of live streaming is one and the same as the history of webcam modeling. Although this relationship has implications for live streaming across platforms, I focus here on Twitch, partly because its historical connections to webcam modeling are particularly

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clear and partly because, ironically, Twitch as a company has worked the hardest to distance itself from associations with sex work (Ruberg 2020). It is here, where "toxic gamer culture" (Consalvo 2012) meets the disavowal of streaming's erotic implications, that this historical intervention is most urgently needed.

Camming is far more than a salacious footnote in the history of live streaming. On the contrary, webcam modeling *made* live streaming. That means that it is not white male tech visionaries or gregarious gamer bros to whom we should credit the rise of live streaming; it is sex workers. To remove them from this history is an act of erasure, perpetuating the stigmatization and pathologization of erotic labor often done by women, queer people, transgender people, and people of color. In a moment when sex workers are being rapidly deplatformed specifically by companies including Twitch (Dickson 2021), it is crucial to recognize that there is no history of live streaming without the history of online sex work, and no live streaming without sex workers.

Camming and Streaming

The relationship between video game live streaming and webcam modeling is a fraught one. On the one hand, there are many parallels between the day-to-day labor involved in streaming and camming. Both involve the use of similar equipment, such as multiple devices and monitors, carefully arrayed lighting, and the construction of specifically arranged physical spaces that form a visual backdrop. Camming and streaming are both highly physical forms of labor. In the case of camming, this physicality is explicit, with the webcam model performer visually foregrounding their body and using it to perform erotic actions on-screen. Yet physicality is just as crucial to live streaming. Streamers often bemoan "streamer burnout," a state of physical and mental stress caused in part by the bodily exhaustion that comes from sitting for long hours playing video games or talking with viewers while needing to be constantly "on" (Alexander 2018).

Similarly, live streaming and webcam modeling are both modes of digital labor that blur notions of work and play, raising questions about what it means to navigate the space between amateur and professional and make money while either playing a game or engaging in sexual play (Nayar 2017). In addition, there is a growing number of similarities between the platform

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affordances and monetization structures found in the camming and live streaming industries, respectively. Many of the techniques for encouraging viewers to engage and give money that streamers have cultivated (Johnson and Woodcock 2019) have erotic counterparts in camming techniques. As the work of internet celebrities and influencers becomes increasingly cross-platform, there are also numerous webcam models who live stream, and vice versa. These similarities illustrate how the line between camming and streaming is fundamentally porous: a culturally constructed division between so-called normal and sexual self-broadcasting.

Such overlaps also help explain how the specter of sex work has come to be so vilified in the context of video game live streaming. Many scholars have identified the prevalence of toxicity and harassment in the gaming culture on Twitch (e.g., Guarriello 2019). This toxicity takes many forms, but prominent among them is discriminatory behavior toward streamers who are perceived to be too sexual in their self-appearance and are therefore derided as "camgirls," "titty streamers," or "thots" (Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019). Such streamers are often envisioned, both by Twitch viewers and by Twitch as a company, as corrupting the platform with their sexual presence. Many of the platform's regulatory policies, as well as their notoriously inconsistent enforcement of such policies, can be understood as an ongoing effort to build a firewall between live streaming and webcam modeling. In their many forms, these attempts to separate live streaming from webcam modeling reflect a perceived need to ensure that the already precarious public perception of live streaming—and video game live streaming in particular—remain untarnished. Here, the fragile masculinity of video game culture merges with the public relations gymnastics of Twitch, wherein the cultural legitimacy of streaming hinges on its insistence that is has nothing to do with sex or the feminized work of erotic online labor.

Admittedly, the blame for misrepresenting webcam modeling falls on multiple shoulders. The mainstream perception of camming, perpetuated by sensationalized representations like the 2015 documentary *Hot Girls Wanted*, equates webcam modeling with sexual exploitation or the general seediness of the internet. Standing in contrast to this are the perspectives of sex workers' rights activists and feminist scholars who value the work and creative contributions of erotic performers. Scholarship on webcam modeling also has its own questionable relationship to history. As research on camming grows, recent work has approached webcam modeling from a

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variety of angles—such as through economic lenses, an approach that also manifests in live streaming research, looking at phenomena like market competition between cammers (van Doorn and Velthuis 2018) and how camming can be seen as a form of "feminist entrepreneurship" (Bleakley 2014). Yet much of this work, along with popular press reporting on camming from the past few years, itself dehistoricizes webcam modeling, framing its cultural importance through the "recent growth of the adult webcam industry" (van Doorn and Velthuis 2018, 178) or the "burgeoning 'camgirl' genre" (Bleakley 2014, 892). As with live streaming, news reports have also pointed to the COVID-19 pandemic as a historical turning point in the growth of webcam modeling and viewership (Bishop 2020).

It is certainly true that the industry of webcam modeling has expanded in recent years with the rise of large corporate camming platforms like Chaturbate and MyFreeCams—which, not coincidentally, mirrors the rise of streaming platforms like Twitch. Yet it is misleading to couch a discussion of camming only in the current moment when it has in fact emerged and grown over the last three decades. Thus, in addition to offering us a new perspective on live streaming, rehistoricizing webcam modeling helps us better understand camming itself, drawing attention to the work of webcam models not just as performers, but also as important agents in the history of internet technologies: early adopters and innovators in their own right.

A Brief History of Webcam Modeling

To understand how the histories of live streaming and webcam modeling are intertwined, we need to look at the history of camming. The origins of contemporary adult webcam modeling can be traced to the experimental online practices of the early camgirls. Writing in *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*, Theresa Senft defines the term to mean "women who broadcast themselves over the Web for the general public, while trying to cultivate a measure of celebrity in the process" (Senft 2008, 1). These women were not webcam models in the present-day sense, in that their performances were not primarily sexual (although they involved sexual elements), and many understood themselves not as sex workers, but as artists and internet pioneers (Senft 2008, 5). Senft's study focuses on a cohort of camgirls who were active between 2000 and 2004. However, she contextualizes their work within a camming tradition that started in the mid-1990s

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with individuals like Jennifer Ringley, whose infamous JenniCam began in 1996. Senft explains that these camgirls were among the first people to bring web-enabled cameras into their homes—and more specifically, in a number of cases, into their bedrooms. In this way, she says, such women functioned as beta testers for techniques of online content creation and management that have become pervasive in the intervening decades. Some of these techniques include "the generation of celebrity, building of self as brand, and engagement in a specific form of emotional labor," which have clear parallels in the self-branding techniques and forms of affective labor engaged in by contemporary live streamers (Senft 2008, 8).

Yet, the idea that the work of these early camgirls should be seen as the precursors to contemporary webcam modeling is itself a contested narrative. Feminist scholarship on the formative years of online self-broadcasting often explicitly distances experiments like JenniCam from associations with sex. Arguing for the importance of camgirls in the popularization of "lifecasting," which would later become the focus of Twitch's predecessor, Justin.tv, Emma Maguire (2018) writes that such women played an influential part in "changing the contemporary media landscape where 'reality' (or at least its appearance) emerge[d] as a valuable entertainment commodity" (27). Yet, paralleling similar remarks made by Senft, Maguire rejects the tendency for the work of camgirls to be interpreted as sexual in nature. "These young women's digital practices of self-representation have often been sexualised and objectified," she states, "and the radical aspects of their lifecasting practice have been displaced by discussion of the more sensational aspect of giving strangers access to images of their naked bodies" (Maguire 2018, 44). Critiques like these have value, and yet they also risk replicating discriminatory attitudes toward sex work. On the one hand, it is important not to reduce interpretations of these early lifecasting practices as merely points in the genealogy of webcam modeling. On the other hand, to separate the history of camgirls from the sexual aspects of their performances supposedly on the grounds that it makes them less "radical" implies problematically that sex work itself is not a form of radical self-expression or that the history of camming must be disentangled from sex to render it legitimate.

Wherever we land on the question of whether to understand the work of early camgirls as sexual, the fact remains that their practices laid the groundwork for a subsequent generation of webcam models who made

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the erotic implications of self-broadcasting explicit. Lissa Rivera, the curator of a 2019–2020 exhibit at the Museum of Sex in New York titled "Cam Life: An Introduction to Webcam Culture," highlighted 1996 as a pivotal year for the birth of webcam modeling (Shepherd 2019). That year saw the launch of both JenniCam and the now-megaconglomerate Amazon, which owns Twitch and has been instrumental in shaping the current financial, technological, and (by extension) cultural landscapes of live streaming. The fact that camming emerged in lockstep with the company that now controls the largest live streaming platform in the world is one of many points of interrelation between these histories.

As early as 2002, online sex workers were setting up shop, broadcasting themselves via live webcam feeds that they hosted on their own independent websites, to which viewers often paid monthly subscriptions. Even prior, webcam hosting sites like iFriends.com and Rude.com had already emerged: platforms where individuals could register as models and offer their services through the sites' systems, with multiframe interfaces that looked much like the streaming and camming platforms of today. One webcam model whose own professional trajectory reflects this historical shift is "Trixie," who began performing professionally in 2001 and opened her own network of personal websites, including TastieTrixie.com and a number of spinoffs, soon afterward (http://tastytrixie.com/blog-grid). When I interviewed Trixie for an article in *The Village Voice* back in 2007, TastieTrixie .com was still active (Ruberg 2007). Trixie described how she placed ten spycams around her home, each of which broadcast live feeds or recorded footage online twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The cameras regularly captured her having sex with her partner and walking around her home naked—performances that Trixie orchestrated for her viewers. She also used the bathroom camera to broadcast herself during her period, examples of what Trixie called "shocking" to her male viewers, who "have their dicks out and they expect that they're not going to be challenged." Although the experiences and goals of adult webcam models in the early 2000s varied, as they do today, Trixie's story serves as evidence of the many individuals involved in forms of labor that look much like live streaming nearly two decades ago—who, like many streamers today, saw themselves simultaneously as creative content producers and self-made businesspeople.

In roughly 2010, a sea change moved the camming industry toward its more contemporary model of centralized, platform-based services. This

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took place in tandem with other changes in the relationship between adult entertainment and the internet, making it increasingly less viable for online sex workers to make money through customers' monthly subscriptions on their individual websites (Wallace 2011). Simultaneously, shifts in consumer hardware lowered the barrier to entry for webcam models; the cost of external webcams dropped, and it became increasingly common for personal computers and laptops to come equipped with internal webcams. These changes created the conditions for the rise of corporations that provided platforms for webcam models to plug into and begin working, giving them ready access to the software and financial processing systems that allowed them to cam without some of the challenges of operating independently.

This shift to a centralized, platform-based model for webcam modeling also had a wide-reaching impact on the larger landscape of online platforms. Many of the systems and affordances that have since been adopted by other content-sharing platforms were originally born or tested on camming sites. One example is the use of granular, customizable, and gamified monetization systems in which tips (of one kind or another) go to a content producer, with a cut taken by the hosting platform—a practice that migrated from camming sites to live streaming platforms like Twitch. The viewer-facing interface design now familiar on Twitch also has predecessors in webcam sites, where home pages and browsing interfaces are similarly filled with a cacophonous mosaic of live webcam feeds. In using algorithms to determine which streamers will be prominently featured on such pages, Twitch also follows the lead set by camming sites, where such algorithms have long been used to highlight webcam models according to certain characteristics and to downplay the presence of others. Thus, rather than saying that contemporary platforms for streaming and camming look strikingly similar, we might more accurately say that streaming platforms emerged and evolved to look like camming platforms.

An Alternative History of Video Game Live Streaming

Even before accounting for the influence of webcam modeling, mapping the history of Twitch is a complicated task. Official narratives run up against lesser-known backstories as the platform attempts to tell stories about its past that fit its contemporary brand. In the most basic sense, the current iteration of Twitch evolved from Justin.tv, a lifecasting platform launched

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in 2007. The founders of Justin.tv, as Taylor (2018) writes, envisioned lifecasting as "reality TV based on streaming people's lives 24/7," which they believed would "democratize live video" (53). Justin.tv contained broadcasts of many sorts, including a bit of game-related content. Over time, the popularity of gaming streams grew on Justin.tv, eventually spinning off in 2011 into a separate site, Twitch.tv. By 2014, the popularity of Twitch had so surpassed Justin.tv that the original site was shut down and the company rebranded as Twitch Interactive. This also coincided with the purchase of Twitch by Amazon. Ironically, given that Twitch is itself a spin-off of a platform that predominantly featured lifecasting content, Twitch banned all content that did not include game play until 2017, when it began to allow streams in categories such as what have come to be known as "Just Chatting" and "IRL." These categories, harkening back to the platform's history (and much to the chagrin of many gamers), have now once again become the most popular on the platform (D'Anastasio 2020).

These historical twists and turns are largely invisible to the millions of streamers and users who engage with Twitch today. To read mainstream news coverage about Twitch's growing popularity, or even the company's own "About" page, it would appear that it is entirely new, exciting precisely because of its nature as sui generis—in a class all its own (Twitch 2021). Yet some scholars have pointed to parallels between contemporary live streaming and the projects of individuals who have since been labeled technology visionaries—prominent among them Josh Harris, who founded Pseudo.com (Taylor 2018, 32). Along with Tanya Corrin, Harris also created weliveinpublic.com. Started in 2000, weliveinpublic.com was an online experiment that entailed broadcasting twenty-four-hour surveillance footage from multiple points in an apartment shared by Corrin and Harris, including video of sexual interactions between the pair. In one sense, pointing to Harris's work as an early inspiration for the kinds of broadcasting that would later, through Justin.tv and then into Twitch, become contemporary live streaming offers a valuable point of complication for streaming's history. It roots the origins of streaming practices in experimental art-making and highlights the ways that performances of intimacy rather than gameplay or mastery have always been at the heart of video game live streaming. At the same time, weliveinpublic.com becomes less impressive—or at least less visionary—if we consider that it was started four years *after* the founding of JenniCam, or that by 2000, many online sex workers were already doing

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the same thing as Harris and Corrin: filling their homes with cameras and broadcasting the footage on the internet.

These examples also suggest that we could retell the history of live streaming, including video game streaming, as self-broadcasting from the bedroom. Jones (2020) explains how early webcam models enacted a meaningful shift in the landscape of digital media production by bringing webcams into their beds. Yet this is also precisely where much contemporary video game live streaming on platforms like Twitch takes place, as Daniel Lark and I have demonstrated elsewhere (Ruberg and Lark 2020): in the home, and depending on the genre of gaming stream, often in the bedroom itself. If we were to believe that video game live streaming was fundamentally inspired by or designed to mimic esports broadcasts, then we would expect to find most gaming streamers shooting footage of themselves in professional or pseudoprofessional venues. Instead, even the most male-dominated, white, heteronormative sectors of video game live streaming—that is, those sectors also invested in disavowing associations between live streaming and webcam modeling—typically offer viewers a sense of personal access to the inner world of the streamer: a view into their personal lives and often, quite literally, their houses. This practice of setting up a camera and broadcasting oneself in one's own intimate private space was not developed through media histories of mainstream broadcast television or the professionalization of digital gaming. Rather, it was explored and established by camgirls and webcam models, who render explicit the erotic overtones of this invitation into the bedroom that persists into the practices of live streaming.

Fittingly, just as the history of live streaming is the history of webcam modeling, the history of streaming's discontents also parallels camming's discontents. Long before the birth of Twitch, online sex workers were already encountering many of the same dilemmas as today's streamers. Asked back in 2007 about her advice for other individuals who wanted to take up webcam modeling, Trixie explained the pros and cons of working through a large platform like iFriends versus operating independently: "It's a limited platform. You're not always the one in control . . . [but] a girl on her own ends up spending so much time just getting customers, putting out ads, posting on message boards. It's exhausting" (Ruberg 2007). Here, we can hear prescient echoes of the present-day laments of live streamers, who may value the fact that Twitch allows them to step into a set of ready-made systems, but who also may well feel frustrated about the ways in

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which Twitch controls its streamers, limiting what content they can show, what they can say, and how their content is made visible.

The Cultural Politics of Retelling Live Streaming's History

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the ways that the history of webcam modeling has influenced the forms and cultures of contemporary live streaming. Rather, it is an invitation to look at these intertwining histories more closely, allowing us to see how sex work has played a role in shaping nearly all aspects of streaming: from its technological systems to its profit structures to the types of access that viewers of both streamers and cammers imagine that performers will allow them into their homes.

Exploring alternative ways to tell the story of live streaming's history is key to addressing—and redressing—the culture of live streaming. Each version of this history comes with its own insights, but also its own omissions. For example, telling a history of video game live streaming that does not acknowledge the importance of webcam modeling is inherently sexist, given that many of the webcam models whose work has helped shape live streaming have been women. Thus, by paying attention to webcam modeling, we see that women have been instrumental in the history of live streaming despite the fact that today, live streaming is still often seen predominantly as the realm of men. Ignoring this history promotes a vision of live streaming—and video game live streaming in particular—as a masculine domain not just in the present, but also in the past, implicitly justifying the male domination of live streaming culture by rooting it in historical narratives that foreground the contributions of men. Leaving camming out of the history of video game live streaming also legitimizes the belief of reactionary gamers that those whose performances or bodies read as sexual have no place on streaming platforms. By contrast, retelling this history as one that centers camming is a way to challenge the expectation that sex workers (and, by extension, women, queer people, transgender people, and people of color) do not belong on platforms like Twitch. In reality, they have been here all along.

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2 "Calling All the Cattle": Music Live Streams during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil

Gabriel Pereira and Beatriz Ricci

In April 2020, as Brazilians were beginning to socially distance due to the COVID-19 pandemic, over 3.2 million viewers attended the live stream concert of country singer Marília Mendonça. Using the iconic catchphrase "Calling all the cattle!" to invite her fans, she set a record for the most people watching a concert on YouTube simultaneously (Mandl 2020). She may not be well known outside Brazil, but she is representative of both the intense connection with fans that marks the digital age (Baym 2018) and the growing influence of music live streams in Brazil. Since the pandemic started, music live streams became a common element of Brazilians' lives, from enormous events associated with mainstream media industries to smaller, independent performances.

Brazil was incredibly unique in its adoption of live streaming—it boasted not only some of the best-attended music live streams in the world, but also incredibly creative and emotional performances from artists. Artists experimented with ways of relating to their fans and tried to survive the lack of physical concert opportunities without much—if any—governmental support. Our motivation when analyzing this complicated moment is making visible the particularly vibrant live streaming cultures in the Global South, while also offering considerations for the future of media industries and cultures postpandemic globally.

In this chapter, we analyze this diverse scenario and how it points to an actualization of previously studied new media practices in the country (Fragoso 2006; Horst 2011; Spyer 2017). We focus on two interrelated questions: How did Brazilian musicians and their public connect during the coronavirus pandemic through music live streams? How were these live streams sponsored, platformized, or commercialized, and with what consequences?

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To investigate these questions, we rely on a close analysis of over twenty-five live streams in Brazil in the period of March 2020 to December 2020, along with their coverage in mainstream and social media. Moreover, we used secondary sources such as media interviews with artists, industry events and seminars focused on music/content creators, and market surveys. In addition, one of us (Ricci) participated in a design research project that conducted interviews with music live streamers and audiences in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Brazil during the pandemic.

We begin by contextualizing the rise of music live streaming in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic. Then we turn our attention to how these live streams worked and how musicians performed "relational labor" (Baym 2018) to build intimacy with their audiences. We continue by discussing four short case studies that emerged from our analysis, which highlight the multifaceted character of such relational labor. Finally, we conclude with a reflection on how financial and racial inequality affects live streaming music and its future. Our objective is to offer an exploratory look into this growing media practice, while also considering its connection to broader political, economic, and cultural issues.

Brazil's "Lives" as a Cultural Phenomenon

Brazil was one of the countries most severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic due to reckless governmental decisions. This resulted in an extended partial lockdown, imposed by state and local governments. People's feeling of isolation was worsened by a tumultuous political background, with the far-right President Jair Bolsonaro denying the seriousness of COVID-19.

As almost all cultural events were canceled, artists started to live stream. The motivation for these concerts was not only to keep in touch with fans, but also to inform the population of the importance of practicing social distancing and handwashing to mitigate the virus's transmission—marking a stance against the lack of governmental oversight. Most musicians were not earning money from their streams, but using their platform to fundraise for charity, especially food banks. This culture of solidarity came in a moment when many people were falling into poverty due to the pandemic.

According to industry leaders, the live streaming of music was already growing in Brazil in the years leading up to 2020 (Rocha 2020). Many musicians were already experimenting with these formats, though not in the

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scale that it grew to. According to a survey by the Brazilian Union of Composers with 844 people in the music industry, only 13 percent of musicians had performed online before the pandemic (UBC 2020). The survey also found that in July 2020, amid the first wave of the pandemic, 56 percent of musicians intended to do live streams. This shift to live streaming seems to be connected to financial reasons, as 86 percent of musicians were earning less, with about 30 percent indicating that they lost all sources of income from music. However, the survey also illustrates how the majority of those doing live streams were not appropriately paid for these concerts, using them mainly to connect with their public and showcase their work.

Besides this pandemic context, other factors contributed to the success of music live streams in Brazil. First, it is important to consider that Brazil has a relatively high internet adoption (over 74 percent of the population, according to a survey by CETICBR (2020)), with strong use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram.[1] Second, Brazilian people have a historical tendency for quick adoption of new digital technologies, especially for social relations (Horst 2011). Social media platforms such as Google's Orkut were appropriated by Brazilian users as a social media platform in the mid-2000s, amassing millions of users until its closure in 2014 (Fragoso 2006; Recuero 2008; see also Spyer 2017). These social aspects of Brazilian culture created a unique context for live streams to flourish, as artists almost naturally moved their performances into social media channels already in use by their public.

Relational Labor, Intimacies, and Socially Distanced Proximity

The live streams in Brazil occurred predominantly through Instagram and YouTube, with open access. A minority also took place through Twitch and Globoplay (a streaming web service owned by Globo, Brazil's largest media conglomerate). Besides the core affordance of streaming video, platforms allow other functionalities, such as writing messages in a public chat, sending money tips to artists (YouTube), and inviting guests to join "the stage" (Instagram). Globoplay is a particular exception, as it is the only Brazilian platform and solely affords the transmission of video for coproduced events.

Live streaming was adopted in different ways by artists, especially in terms of their level of production. Some streams, mostly in the beginning, were made by artists in their homes using only a smartphone. Through time,

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as cultural producers perceived the potential of live streams, there was a massive increase in production value. This professionalization occurred as sponsorships poured in, especially by retail chains, fintech, and alcoholic beverage companies. Soon, some live streams featured elaborate scenarios, professional camera/audio crews, influencer hosts, and even waiters serving cocktails to the few invited guests.[2]

Most of the artists with well-funded live streams were those with established careers, and who play particularly popular and commercial genres (such as *sertanejo* music). This unequal distribution reflected wider gaps in the Brazilian entertainment industry and society as a whole, especially those of sexism and racism. As many scholars have pointed out (e.g., van Dijck 2013), although platforms have created the potential for any artist to present work to the world, different conditions of visibility and production value pose problems for newcomers, particularly those from marginalized groups or music genres.

There is, though, an impediment faced by all live streams: artists are physically separated from their public, unable to interact with their audience as in traditional concert formats. At the early moments of pandemic live streams in Brazil (around March–April 2020), musicians' interactions were particularly messy and disjointed. Many artists made mistakes when playing their instruments, did not have a script, or chose not to dress up. This moment of casualness showed musicians in a humane and vulnerable way, directly in their homes. It did not take long, though, for live streams to become more and more elaborate and well prepared. Artists learned to build narratives for the format, adapt to the affordances of live streaming (e.g., the chat feature), and master how to perform in a way that made audiences engage with these concerts in new ways. We associate this with a rising form of "relational labor" (Baym 2018) based on creating intimacy and proximity around the live streaming of music.

In her book *Playing to the Crowd,* Nancy Baym gives a compelling analysis of how musicians construct authenticity and intimacy with fans through social media. She argues that the music industry has always sought to evoke naturality, but that today, they also have "to communicate with audiences as you would with friends" as the affordances of social media "favor a norm of 'personal authenticity and connection'" (2018). Baym suggests that the concept of relational labor "emphasize[s] the relationship building and maintenance at stake in this work, while calling attention to the 'labor'

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context of work and the concerns about the self and alienation." In the case of live streams, building and maintaining relations with the public mean creating an experience of connection despite the physical distance between performers and the public. As previously discussed in the case of Twitch gaming live streams, although this work of making oneself "presentable, funny, engaging, and in-character" may appear to be casual, a lot of work and pressure go into it (Woodcock and Johnson 2019).

Complementary to this notion of relational labor is Crystal Abidin's (2015) notion of "perceived interconnectedness," which conceptualizes the model of communication through which digital influencers create intimacy with their followers through social media platforms. Rather than previous models of mediated connection, which took shape through television and radio ("parasocial relations"), Abidin argues that social media offers a new set of affordances that allow viewers to see people's lives from up close, and invite them to visit "the backstage 'behind the scenes.'" The digital influencers described by Abidin use their personal voices to build intimacy and "convey the closeness and relatability upon which the success of their advertorials lies." Much like that, musicians–live streamers in Brazil used strategies to engage their audiences based on closeness: they speak directly to the camera as if to a friend, tell personal stories, read and respond to messages from fans, and show their home. Although they do not expose the "trivial and mundane aspects of everyday life" in the same way as digital influencers, musicians use their charisma and authentic personalities to give an "impression of accessibility and relatability," thus creating a more leveled playing field—a form of "bi-directional dialogue" (Abidin 2017).

The creation of this perceived interconnectedness through relational labor was crucial to make music live streams so popular in Brazil. As devastating news on the number of COVID deaths made headlines, these mediated concerts found resonance with their audiences: "We found ourselves making plans with friends: 'Hey, let's drink some beer on Friday while watching that music live stream.' So it created a new environment, which came in parallel to the experience we are living with the pandemic" (Constantini 2020). Musicians' capacity to put life in the distance of mediation, "to recreate a personal sense of social relationships" (Baym 2018, ebook), made them into something people related to, easing the intense feeling of social distancing and bringing people (virtually) together.

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The Live Streamers: From Mainstream to Indies and Their Different Approaches

We now describe four cases of artists' approaches to live streaming, with special attention to their connection with fans and the structural conditions of their live streaming. Our analysis is not exhaustive but exploratory, focusing on those who were particularly representative of this pandemic moment.

Marília Mendonça and the "Down to Earth" Country Phenomenon

Sertanejo artists were at the forefront of live streaming culture in Brazil during the pandemic. Marília Mendonça, an immensely popular singer from the state of Goiás, held a live stream on YouTube in April 2020 to a record-breaking 3.2 million simultaneous spectators (figure 2.1). In her own living room, the singer sat in an ornate chair wearing flip-flops and sang using only musical playback for over three hours. Mendonça's approach to music is popularly known in Brazil as *sofrência* (literally translated as "suffering") because it focuses on tales of infidelity, jealousy, and other love affairs. Her catchphrase,

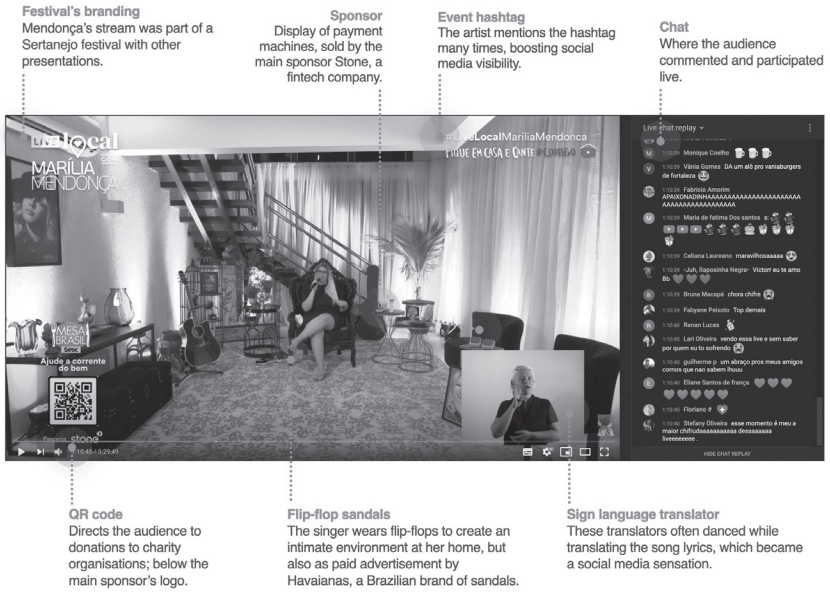


Figure 2.1
Annotated screenshot of Mendonça's live stream.

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"Calling all the cattle," is a reference to being *corno* (literally translated as "horned"), a term used for a person whose partner has cheated on them.

Mendonça's connection to her audience is casual, crafting intimacy through her music and down-to-earth spontaneity. Not only is she informally dressed in her living room, she also cracks jokes about her incapacity to look at the correct camera. At one point, she charismatically begs her producer for a "toilet break," or else she might have to pee onstage. She sings passionately, and she often looks at her phone to read messages from fans—not too different from us watching her live stream, dividing our attention between our phones and the computer screen. She is having fun, and we as the audience are joining her in it, an intimacy heightened through her songs, which speak directly "to the heart." Fans respond to it by sending a barrage of emojis in the chat, most often hearts (both broken and full), crying emojis, and cattle horns. Many also write about their very own heartaches ("Go easy on us, Marília, this is too much suffering!"), ask for shout-outs, compliment her, or even write messages to their exes.

Mendonça's first live stream did not appear overly produced to the audience, and yet it had professional components such as camera operators, audio crew members, and live sign-language translators. The event was sponsored by big corporations and also fundraised for charity, with the singer declaring that over 230 tons of food were donated by fans.

Mendonça live streamed many other times throughout the pandemic to similar effect, often as part of large music festivals. She represents a wide array of highly commercial *sertanejo* artists that are able to create intimacy and authenticity through a "people like us" connection, showing vulnerability and humility through their music and performance. Identity and belonging play a large role in this relationship, as shown through the "cattle" epithet, which brings the singer and the public together through their mutual emotional suffering. These streams were highly commercialized and well produced, connecting to a broad public as part of one of the strongest music industries in the country, with high visibility and sponsorships.

Caetano Veloso and an Invitation to the Music Veteran's Home

Caetano Veloso is one of the most important Brazilian musicians in history. Starting his career in the 1960s, he has since amassed dozens of albums and awards. Veloso was still performing around the world until the pandemic forced him to isolate in his apartment in Rio de Janeiro, together with his

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partner and cultural producer, Paula Lavigne. As an avid social media user, Lavigne often posted funny, short Instagram videos of life at home, where Veloso was seen casually reading books, drinking kombucha, and making silly comments (figure 2.2, left). Soon enough, fans started a campaign asking Lavigne to convince Veloso to host a live streamed concert (see Amaral, Monteiro, and Vieira Souza [2015] for further discussion about fan activism in Brazil). She responded by recording more videos, with Veloso digressing from responding to the request.

After two months of amassing hype, the live stream "Caetano, A Lenda" ("Caetano, The Legend") was scheduled to be a production of Globoplay, directly from Veloso's home on the day of his seventy-eighth birthday. The stream itself looked modest, even though it was produced by Globo, enlisted a famous show director, and used high-quality sound and camera equipment. Veloso played with his three sons in his living room, with an ornate, full-wall bookshelf as a backdrop (figure 2.2, right).

Veloso's live stream represents a continuation of the intimate and heartfelt character of Lavigne's home videos. He played with his family at home. Often, tears could be seen in his eyes, and his voice would quaver. He would frequently attribute mistakes in the performance to lack of rehearsal, but these bumps on the road turned out to be endearing. During the almost three hours of the performance, tweets from the audience were displayed onscreen, with nostalgic messages such as "My heart is warm!" or "Brazil is not what you see in the news. I was reminded of the soul of my beautiful



Figure 2.2
On the left, Lavigne's Instagram video of Veloso; on the right, Veloso playing with his sons.

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country—and rediscovered hope—watching @caetanoveloso #LiveALenda. Can't stop crying and I don't even know why." Lavigne was fundamental in engaging fans to participate in this intimate moment, while at the same time mediating the intense interactions that social media platforms imposed on Veloso, who doesn't even own a smartphone.

Veloso's stream, although commercially platformed and produced, was able to build intimacy through homeliness, nostalgia, and family. By showing us the behind-the-scenes of his performance, we were made to feel as if we were attending the birthday party of a relative, while reviving all the special moments in our lives that Veloso's music has been part of. Such humanity and vulnerability of the event brought together a wide, intergenerational public.

Teresa Cristina and Building an Intimate Community

Teresa Cristina is a fifty-two-year-old *música popular brasileira* (MPB) and samba singer who would go on to be crowned the "Queen of Live Streams" by her fans. She, who shared an apartment with her mother and her daughter in Rio de Janeiro, was worried about her mental health during the quarantine, as well as the political impacts of Bolsonaro's far-right government (Cristina 2020). To fight against depression, Cristina started broadcasting daily live streams on her Instagram account.

From March 2020 to the end of October 2020, the artist streamed every evening for around two hours, directly from her bedroom. She'd pick a theme related to music (e.g., LGBTQIA+ artists) and study it before informally talking and singing about it live later in the day. In just a few weeks, the singer built a community of fans who joined her each night. Cristina's audience in these live streams was engaged and loyal, although not particularly large (around 500 people in a normal day, but many more when famous guests made appearances).

Prestigious artists as well as local and national celebrities from all walks of life, such as Preta Gil and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Brazil's 35th and 39th president), joined her streams to watch and participate. These guests shared stories, played instruments, or sang—often a cappella. It was not rare that during these soulful interactions, she'd express her passion in smiles and tears (figure 2.3). In her own words: "I drink my beer, get emotional and have fun every night. We need art to live. This is an open space for all music enthusiasts" (Cristina 2020).

Cristina built intimacy with her audience by using the affordances of live streaming to create a community for people to find refuge in music, culture,

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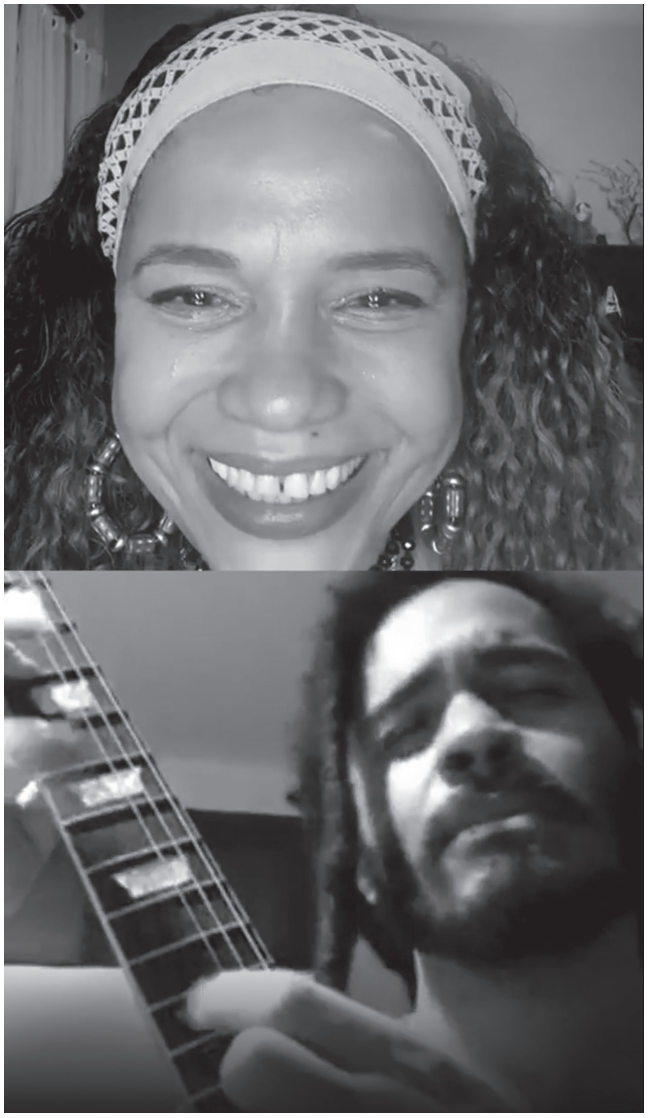


Figure 2.3
Cristina's live stream on Instagram, with the guest participation of Chico Brown.

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and vulnerable conversation. She engaged these audiences by singing, as well as by showing empathy in times of isolation and political polarization. Cristina's relation with fans relates directly to Abidin's (2015) notion of "reciprocal intimacy," an intense connection where influencers are particularly "responsive and communicative" by liking fan comments or responding to many shout-outs. By making her live streams specially casual and intimate, she was able to build an engaged and trusting community.

As an artist working for over two decades, Cristina had never achieved mainstream visibility in her career, a consequence of Brazil's structural racism and sexist culture. Her consistent live streaming work raised her status as a social phenomenon, and although sponsors and commercial attention did not follow, she appeared on the cover of *Vogue* magazine, signed a book contract, and was invited to several events to talk about career, racism, and politics.

Independent Artists and the Long Tail of Live Streaming

Lesser known independent artists had different responses and experiences when live streaming and maintaining relationships with their fans. These artists represent the long tail of live streams in Brazil, which amassed thousands of small performances, with very different conditions and viewership ratings than mainstream stars enjoyed.

Even though independent artists may not have the sponsorships or visibility afforded by mainstream support, most already have close ties to fans on social media, where they create tightly knit communities of listeners. Through casual and intimate performances, without high-end equipment, these artists found creative and curious solutions to the typical problems of digital concerts, such as lack of interaction with the audience, poor camera angles, or the shortage of stage props.

The alternative MPB singer and visual artist Luiza Lian created an immersive atmosphere for her live concerts by using flashy club lights and video projections into her living room, giving visual life to her lyrics and performances (figure 2.4). The audience was presented not only with live music, but also a strong visual narrative of the artist's performance. Alternatively, Liniker e os Caramelows, a soul and Black music band, used video mapping to show their members on the screen, as if each of them were in a different window (figure 2.5). Their virtual stage setup gave the audience a sense of social distancing, while displaying colorful animations to create an artistic and dynamic atmosphere for the experience.

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Figure 2.4
Luiza Lian's projections.



Figure 2.5
Liniker e os Caramelows playing in different windows.

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Indie artists distanced their performances from television norms, instead seeking to create a more authentic experience and creatively explore alternative configurations from those of physical live concerts. The relationship with fans, cemented through visual connection and experimentation, creates a sense of exclusivity and uniqueness that goes beyond the commercial commitments demanded by record labels or sponsors, supplementing their already close contact with fans on social media.

During the pandemic, we observed underrepresented artists gaining an important voice and building strong communities around them, while delivering innovative concerts to stay in touch with their fans. Perhaps unsurprisingly, though, it was the commercial musical acts that took most of the spotlight and visibility, with high-sum sponsorships and all forms of support by media and music labels—the indie artists, it is important to make clear, did not receive much (if any) payment for their performances.

Conclusion: The Inequalities of the Past and the Uncertainties of the Future

When compared to international live streaming events of large scale, such as Global Citizen's event curated by Lady Gaga in 2020, it is easy to notice how Brazil's live streaming initiatives during the pandemic reached an impressive level of engagement, experimentation, and diversity. It was a vigorous joint response from the whole music industry in order to adapt to the pandemic restrictions, on a national scale and with direct societal impacts. We see this rise of music live streaming in Brazil as part of several particular contexts: first, the Brazilian population's high adoption and usage of social media, as well as interest in digital forms of sociality; second, the rise of COVID-19 transmissions in the country and the important responsibility taken by artists to fundraise for charities and educate the population to stay home; and third, the massive investment in sponsorship of live streaming famous music acts, especially by very large retail chains, fintech, and alcoholic beverage companies, who saw these platforms as a way to reach a homebound audience.

The relational labor performed by musicians was a crucial aspect of making these live streams successful. The most memorable and effective live streamed concerts didn't just copy-and-paste the model of a physical concert: they explored various relational possibilities in the digital space and

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created their own language through technological and social performances. To engage audiences in intimate spaces of "perceived interconnectedness" (Abidin 2015), artists used different tactics: highly produced concerts such as those by Marília Mendonça and other *sertanejo* stars learned to use their charisma and common identities (e.g., "the cattle") to build rapport with fans; old-timers such as Caetano Veloso brought the public into intimate contact with his family and home; independent voices such as Teresa Cristina found an audience through streaming to a relatively small, intimate community, through continuous relationship-building and emotional connection; and independent artists crafted innovative visual experiences using whatever they had at hand.

A crucial consequence of this emergent scenario of live streaming in Brazil is increased financial inequality. A survey by DATA SIM (2020) indicated that live streams may lead to more production from well-established artists and the most powerful companies in the industry, contrary to what may be expected from the inclusivity of digital technologies. Although in the beginning of the pandemic, live streams were relatively modest, since late 2020 there has been an increase in highly produced formats. With the support of the media industry and the help of public relations (PR) strategists, mainstream acts have reframed relational labor to become more spectacular and televisual, including the use of high-tech, ostentatious features. An example of this is Mendonça, whose later concerts used generous sponsorships to transform her home into a high-tech live streaming studio, with famous guest appearances, drone footage, lighting effects, and gigantic screens showing fans' faces.

Meanwhile, independent artists continue to work hard (and often by themselves) to keep their audiences engaged. Their intense relational labor is less visible to broad audiences and much less valued by sponsors. Many of these artists struggled to turn these intimate connections into actual pay—a situation that may have forced them to risk their health to play physical concerts sooner. Such disparity generated by live streams is further expressed by Teresa Cristina (2020): "The amount of artists, of white people, that have their career easier for everything . . . This is something we are tired of referring to. The lack of support for samba singers isn't something new. The pandemic has just put a magnifying lens on many situations."

If the current conditions of live streaming of music reflect and reinforce financial and racial inequalities, the future of the genre is particularly

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difficult to forecast. It is clear to musicians and industry representatives that live streaming is a promising format and people are interested in watching such content. However, the music industry still considers it a risky, little-understood format, especially once traditional concerts return (Ferro 2020). And for musicians, it means that they'll have to adapt to this new reality of relational labor, as summarized by the rapper Rashid: "I don't think everybody has to have an entrepreneurial or youtuber disposition, but the modern times are in fact forcing us [musicians] to be content creators" (Pollo 2020). The live streaming of music in Brazil during the pandemic shows how a dramatic crisis brings forward both the amazing creativity and love of these artists and the perpetuation of many injustices and inequalities.

Notes

1. Some mobile carriers offer free mobile data to be used exclusively on these platforms, increasing users' reliance on them.

2. The expansion of live streams' staff was publicly criticized, as it defeated the purpose of the "stay at home" messaging of live streams.

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3 Mental Health Live: An Ethnographic Study of the Mental Health of Twitch Streamers during COVID

Kelli N. Dunlap, Marie Shanley, and Jocelyn Wagner

Introduction

From the earliest days of JenniCam (Taylor 2018) to current Twitch channels, streamers (i.e., live web broadcasters) have used their broadcasting platforms to connect socially with others and share personal mental health experiences. However, the mental well-being of streamers themselves has been a recent topic of discussion. In the late 2010s, games journalism began to feature articles about the stressors of being a streamer. These articles largely consisted of interviews with famous streamers who shared their personal experiences of intense stress and burnout due to the demands of the job (Grayson 2019; Alexander 2018; Howley 2017; Reynolds 2019).

Scholars have likewise examined streamer mental health through a variety of lenses, including the affective (emotional) labor involved in live streaming (Ruberg and Cullen 2020; Senft 2008; Taylor 2018; Woodcock and Johnson 2019); the affordances of being a streamer with chronic health issues, including mental illness (Johnson 2019); and the impact of microcelebrity and influencers discussing their own mental health on streams (LaMastra et al. 2020; Taylor 2018).

Streamer Stressors and Mental Health

Despite recognition of significant mental health stressors on streamers, the vast majority of research has focused on viewers (Taylor 2018). Given the parasocial relationships between streamers and their audiences, however, viewer-centered research can clarify the unique stressors faced by streamers. For example, Twitch, the most popular live streaming platform in North America, is frequently used by viewers to find emotional support and social connection online. Community and belongingness are core motivations

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for Twitch viewers, and the engagement between a streamer and the community plays a larger role in stream viewership than content being broadcast (de Wit, van der Kraan, and Theeuwes 2020).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, Twitch communities have provided an essential social service by keeping people connected. Increases in depression, anxiety, loneliness, and reduced social support are common adverse mental health impacts experienced during COVID-19 (Asmundson and Taylor 2020; Courtet et al. 2020; Reger, Stanley, and Joiner 2020). However, social bonding through collective gatherings has been shown to provide protective psychological effects in times of tragedy and crisis (Hawdon and Ryan 2011; Paez et al. 2015; Rennung and Goritz 2015). Because of the labor of streamers, Twitch communities continue to be able to provide opportunities for bonding, group gathering, processing of shared pain and emotion, and social support, despite social distancing and lockdown procedures. Ultimately, the stability and effectiveness of online streaming communities as psychologically protective and supportive environments depend on the well-being of the streamer. To understand why, even before COVID, Twitch streaming communities frequently served as places for peer mental health support, one must understand the current state of mental health services.

Mental Health in the US

Before COVID-19, 7.7 million (16 percent) American children and 47 million (19 percent) American adults met criteria for at least one mental illness (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2019; Whitney and Peterson 2019), and the majority did not receive therapeutic intervention (National Alliance on Mental Illness 2019). On average, only 43 percent of those who meet criteria for a psychological disorder obtain treatment (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2019).

In August 2020, after five months of social distancing and lockdown, anxiety and depression—the two most common types of mental illness (National Alliance on Mental Illness 2019)—were three and four times higher, respectively, compared to the same time period during the previous year (Czeisler et al. 2020). Between January 2020 and September 2020, the number of people seeking help for anxiety rose 634 percent, and the number seeking support for depression rose 873 percent (Nguyen et al. 2020).

Not only were more people experiencing mental illness symptoms, they were experiencing greater symptom severity (Mental Health America

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2021; Nguyen et al. 2020). Suicidality was also at an all-time high; 37 percent reported having suicidal thoughts almost every day, with the highest rates reported by LGBTQ+ youth (Mental Health America 2021). The shortage of mental health providers pre-COVID was already problematic, with only about 25 percent of people who requested services receiving them (America's Mental Health Rankings 2020). Although the shift from primarily in person to nearly 100 percent telemedicine has reduced geographical and proximity barriers to treatment,[1] there were not nearly enough providers to meet the pre-COVID need for services, much less the massive increase in demand since March 2020.

Given the general shortage of mental health professionals, the significant systemic barriers to treatment (e.g., cost, insurance, location, and stigma; Andrade et al. 2014), and the predictable yet still alarming spike in requests for mental health services (Panchal et al. 2021), it is not surprising that people have sought nontraditional resources, like streamers and streaming communities, for mental health support.

Streaming, Mental Health, and COVID

As discussed previously, the intersection of mental health and streaming has generally existed since the mid-1990s and "officially" recognized by the creation of a searchable "mental health" tag on Twitch in 2018 (Robertson 2018). Prior to tags, Twitch had a "community" feature to help users find like-minded streamers, one of which was Cast Together, a group of more than twenty Twitch streamers who were open and willing to talk about their own mental health experiences (Speedy 2017). These are just a few examples of the ways in which, prior to the pandemic, Twitch and its community were attempting to accommodate the use of the platform as a place for mental health support.

In April 2019, Twitch reported 4.2 million active streamers on the platform and 889 million hours of content viewed that month (TwitchTracker 2021). In April 2020, the numbers skyrocketed to 7.2 million active streamers and 1.8 billion hours watched. This massive increase in engagement on Twitch is attributed to the majority of the US population being under stay-at-home orders and other lockdown measures, such as the cancellation of professional sporting events (Koeze and Popper 2020).

In this chapter, we explore how this spike in viewership has affected streamer well-being. Do more people at home spending more hours viewing

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lead to rising numbers in streamers' chats, and does that translate into financial stability? Or does the economic impact of the pandemic lead to less financial security by decreasing the ability of viewers to donate, subscribe, or otherwise monetarily support streamers? Has an increase in the number of streamers driven up perceived (or actual) competition? Has the potential for self-imposed pressure to stream more often or for longer hours intensified? What effects do the increased frequency of emotionally charged in-chat conversations or the deaths of community members have on streamers? Do they feel a greater responsibility for the mental health and well-being of community members? It is these crucial questions that we will seek to address in the coming pages.

Studying Streamers' Mental Health

To answer the questions posed here, we decided that the best approach would be to ask streamers about their experiences directly. The goal of the study was twofold. First, we wanted to understand if streamers were experiencing an increase in mental health–related content in their streams and chats and, if so, how this increase affected streamers' mental well-being. Second, we wanted to create a list of recommendations for improving support of streamers' mental health in ways that are both accessible and easy to understand by the larger streaming community.

We began by recruiting participants via Discord and Twitter, by asking them to complete a brief survey. Sixty-two Twitch streamers completed the initial screen for inclusion in the study. Because we were interested in understanding the effects of the pandemic on streaming experiences, we required participants to be active currently, as well as prior to the emergence of COVID. Of the fifty-two streamers who met those criteria, twenty-three responded to direct contact from researchers, and ultimately nineteen completed interviews between September 18 and October 15, 2020. See table 3.1 for a demographic breakdown of the streamers who participated in the study.

Using Zoom, itself a live streaming platform, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews, which were then transcribed, anonymized, and assigned an alpha-numeric label (e.g., K4 or M1) to maintain participants' confidentiality. By employing a qualitative methodology, we systematically attempted to gain insight into the rich and complex experiences affecting

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Table 3.1
Participant demographics

	N	Percentage
Gender		
Nonbinary	1	5
Women	11	58
Men	7	37
Streaming Experience		
1–2 years	5	27
2–3 years	6	31
3+ years	8	42
Streaming Frequency		
2–3 times per week	7	37
3+ times per week	12	63
Average Follower Count		
Below 1,000	9	47
Between 1,000 and 5,000	6	31
More than 5,000	4	22

streamers' mental wellness. Four major themes emerged from our analysis, and we explore each of them in depth in the coming sections.

Streamers Serve as Frontline Mental Health Responders

Viewers routinely seek out streamers and community spaces where they feel a sense of connection, belongingness, and psychological safety, and pandemic restrictions have only intensified the need for these kinds of community connections.

Throughout the interviews, streamers noted an increase in their Twitch chats and private Discord channels regarding this kind of community engagement. They reported seeing more real-life content coming up in chats, and many noted increases in sharing personal struggles, such as emotional difficulties or financial troubles. Despite frequently voicing the sentiment "I'm not your therapist," many streamers disclosed that they felt responsible for maintaining the health and well-being of viewers in their streams. K3 described it as follows: "A lot of people use you as a tool to help them deal with whatever they're going through, just by watching. You don't have to be a therapist to have empathy . . . or remind somebody that

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they're not alone." Similarly, many streamers expressed feeling the obligation to be "on" and available for the needs of the community at all times. J3 summarized: "You're leading a community, you're leading people, and so you have this responsibility to help them to be around for them," and J2 put it even more succinctly: "I'm here for my community, we're gonna get through this together."

Compared to pre-COVID, streamers shared that the frequency of crisis events—ones that prompt the streamer or the moderation team to connect viewers to professional services—increased during quarantine.

This increase in frequency and intensity reported by streamers mirrors the experience of mental health professionals during COVID. The demand for mental health services increased 52 percent since the start of the pandemic (National Council for Behavioral Health 2020) and, much like streamers, therapists have been struggling to meet the demand. In addition, like therapists, streamers are holding space for an ongoing trauma that they themselves are experiencing in real time (Madani 2020). Comments made by streamers were often uncomfortably similar to comments made by mental health professionals speaking to the experience of being a therapist during COVID.

Streamers Are Struggling to Find Balance

Difficulty finding balance between the demands of streaming and the demands of offline life is not new for streamers (Alexander 2018; Stokel-Walker 2018; Wiltshire 2019). However, COVID poses additional and unique challenges. Most of the streamers interviewed commented on the need to find balance between their own mental wellness and the wellness of their community. The differentiation between the needs of the self and the needs of the community created tension, especially in those who expressed feeling responsible for maintaining the health and well-being of their community. Several streamers mentioned feeling that they had to mask their own mental health struggles to appear strong for their communities. M1 vividly described the experience: "Oh God, it feels like there's a lot of pressure to not be a human being and just be an entertainer. I feel like any time I have any sort of an emotional reaction on the stream, I'm just supposed to hide it because all my viewers need a distraction, and I'm supposed to be that distraction." This sentiment of needing to be "always on" and present a cheery front was directly stated by 53 percent of participants. Several

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streamers stated that they had taken time off or streamed less as a way to manage their mental health.

Streamers Are Unsupported and Unprepared to Address Mental Health

Whether or not a streamer intends to address mental health issues on their stream, viewers use stream chats to meet their educational, social, and psychological needs. Streamers are frequently a touchpoint for persons managing a mental health issue, from feeling disconnected or lonely to struggling with symptoms of mental illness. Streamers expressed feeling ill-equipped to handle the increased frequency and intensity of mental health topics and concerns occurring in their streams, chats, and communities. Even streamers whose content focused on mental health and who identified as mental health advocates described feeling a sense of unease and self-doubt and a strong desire for guidance. In addition to frustration, streamers reported feeling overwhelmed and unsupported in terms of mental health resources, and all the interviewees expressed a desire for more mental health education, information, and resources.

Streamers and Their Communities Are Resilient

Social gatherings facilitate bonding and enhance cohesion and social identity—a coming-together effect that provides mutual support during times of crisis (Rennung and Goritz 2015). Collective gatherings, especially public ones, during or following a tragedy amplify solidarity within a community by providing a venue for socially acceptable outpouring of emotion, acknowledging that the tragedy is a collective grief rather than an individual loss, and reminding community members that they are not alone in their grief (Doka 2003). Each stream is a public-facing collective gathering for members of a community and contains the ingredients required for fostering solidarity during difficult times. Some streamers viewed their role in the pandemic as one of providing distraction and entertainment, and yet their streams and chat still allowed viewers the opportunity to feel connected, bonded, and not isolated in their sadness or grief. There is also evidence to suggest that maintaining regular activities, such as a regularly scheduled stream, is helpful. "While one may find it difficult to continue with mundane everyday activities, these activities bring people together, promote solidarity, and enhance recovery" (Hawdon and Ryan 2011, 138).

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In addition to the comfort and normalcy of scheduled streams, larger-scale events such as fundraising marathons or live streamed memorials reinforce traditional rituals for coping with grief and loss; "ritual reaffirms community" (Doka 2003, 180). Rituals for processing grief help individual pain be processed as a collective experience and grow into a sense of solidarity, pride, hope, and resolve—the foundations of resilience and recovery (Hawdon and Ryan 2011). During the interviews, J5 shared a particularly striking example of this principle in action. In mid-2020, one of J5's moderators died by suicide:

> We put a memorial service together for her . . . we literally held it in Animal Crossing. We were just running around on Animal Crossing on an island, having a memorial service because I think that closure is really important and grieving and all that, and with COVID and stuff like we can't go to funerals and it's not like we were all close enough with her family . . . it would have felt intrusive to ask for an invite to the Zoom funeral and stuff like that, so we just did our own thing.

It's clear that streamers have noticed an influx in the frequency and intensity of psychological distress in their communities and have largely used their roles as community leaders to provide space for social connection and mutual support. Overall, these themes align with previous research on resilience and coping during times of crisis, despite taking place entirely in digital spaces. However, the role of community leader comes with a cost. In taking care of their communities, streamers often feel emotionally taxed or overwhelmed and lack adequate support and resources for themselves. Recommendations for improving mental health support in the streaming community are addressed next.

Implications for Improving Streamer Mental Health

We asked all our participants what mental health resources they used most frequently while streaming or in their streaming communities, and what resources they wished were available. From their rich responses, we identified three key categories of requests for resources, which we elucidate in the next sections, along with our recommendations and reflections.

Make Sharing and Connecting to Resources Easier for Everyone

Streamers largely do their own legwork to put together resources for their community and educating themselves about mental health. One major

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obstacle in accessing and sharing resources was a perceived lack of those resources. While the resources they require, such as mental health tip sheets and therapist directories, already exist, they are not present in spaces where streamers know to look. For example, the TwitchCares document, which is hosted by Twitch and provides dozens of links to mental health information and resources, was largely unknown to the streamers. As M1 stated, "I had no idea that the TwitchCare page existed; I kind of wish that maybe that was more visible."

Similarly, coordination between smaller, game- and streaming-specific organizations and large mental health entities to create and promote content relevant to streamers on a national platform would likely have a positive impact on the well-being of live stream communities. Finally, by improving the visibility of TwitchCares and rolling out related mental health features (e.g., platformwide chat commands that refer to reliable mental health resources), Twitch itself could ease much of the friction for accessing these important services.

Provide Alternatives to Hotlines and Links

As K3 eloquently stated, "Everybody's kind of tired of just being sent to a website or to a phone line." There is a strong desire for more personal and warm handoffs between streamers and viewers; streamers want to know that their viewers and community members are being taken care of. While referral to emergency hotlines is the correct course of action when someone is in crisis, most incidents that streamers reported involved viewers who were in need of supportive, long-term services, and for whom a crisis hotline was not appropriate.

As addressed in the introduction of this chapter, the US mental health marketplace is excessively complicated and largely inaccessible. Changing the mental health system is not within the purview of Twitch or streamers, but it is what streamers are reacting to when they express frustration at not being able to connect viewers to services. Nonetheless, there are still opportunities for improvement. Platforms like Twitch could establish partnerships with local, state-level mental health organizations, especially those that provide free or reduced-cost services. Similarly, they might expand and amplify less-known mental health resources, such as warmlines and peer-support organizations. Finally, Twitch could take a more proactive approach by emailing each streamer upon signup (or upon reaching the level of

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Affiliate or Partner) with a list of mental health partner organizations where they can find additional support.

Offer More Psychoeducation, Training, and Professional Support

Most streamers requested training on mental health streaming topics such as coping with harassment, parasocial relationships, and setting boundaries. Professionally developed resources should focus on enabling streamers to feel competent and confident, from providing appropriate resources to acting as a mental health advocate. Streamers also expressed significant interest in connecting with mental health advocates and professionals to ask for advice on mental health and streaming issues.

Programs providing didactic training and mental health mentorship for streamers exist, though not without significant limitations. Some programs limit their services to partnered streamers (Kelly 2021), excluding the vast majority of streamers. Other programs keep trainings and resources behind paywalls (Guardians Mental Health, n.d.) or charge for peer support (HealthyGamer, n.d.). While there isn't anything inherently unethical about a business limiting or charging for services, it does create barriers (e.g., financial, status)—largely the same barriers that make accessing mental health care so challenging.

Some streamers have begun to fill in the gap themselves. Most are self-described mental health advocates, individuals who have undergone some level of training or have a background in mental health. Some streamers are licensed mental health professionals and integrate their expertise into their streams. However, if streamers hold advanced degrees or licensure in mental health, use those credentials as part of their streaming brand, and then also engage in providing professional individualized opinions on stream, then the likelihood of misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and risk of harm to viewers is high:

> If it even comes across in the media, or in a video session like Dr. Phil that what you're doing is therapy, that's potentially a problem because you're misconstruing or misleading people into thinking that this entertainment situation is actually representative of what mental health professionals do. (Warren, n.d.)

For example, it is ethical for a psychologist on a television show to talk about symptoms of depression and provide general education. However, it is unethical for a psychologist to make recommendations about a person's specific depression, provide a diagnosis, or suggest a specific course of

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treatment (e.g., seek cognitive behavioral therapy). The same holds true for mental health professionals on Twitch.

Unfortunately, some streamers openly dispense medical advice on-stream, such as diagnosing their guests or making specific treatment recommendations (Limbong 2021). This is especially dangerous coming from people who present themselves as mental health authorities. Even off the clock, mental health professionals have an ethical obligation to avoid causing harm and to comport themselves in line with ethical guidelines (Haeny 2014).

Given the complexity of these concerns, platforms should collaborate with reputable, nonprofit mental health organizations, as well as experts in curriculum development, to create openly accessible webinars, trainings, and educational content that strengthen streamers' skills and competencies in mental health. Likewise, they should coordinate with recognized and accredited mental health services that specialize in peer support to develop peer-counseling programs. Twitch would be well advised to partner with recognized and accredited peer-support providers to embed access to these programs within the platform itself using in-chat commands. Similarly, the site should avoid partnering with or promoting streamers who attempt to provide therapy, therapeutic services, or medical advice on-stream. Accredited mental health organizations ought to develop initiatives with the purpose of reaching out to the streamer community and provide evidence-based education and training on mental health basics and peer support.

Conclusion

Prior to the pandemic, the mental health impact on streamers was frequently categorized as "stressed," "burned out," and "exhausted." However, the spike in engagement on Twitch following the pandemic underscored the urgency of exploring the ways in which increasing demands from viewership affect streamers' mental health. While streamers had publicly reported more engagement in their streams, especially in-chat discussion of significant real-life issues faced by their community, including financial, social, and emotional stressors, this study has brought deeper understanding of the impact of the pandemic on their mental well-being.

Twitch streamers experience a wide range of stressors that are occurring with greater frequency and intensity compared to pre-COVID times. Stressors include financial instability, loss of income opportunities, the deaths

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of community members, perceived increases in demands on their time and emotional resources, more emotionally charged community interactions, and a sense of needing to "be there" or "put on a strong face," often at the expense of their own well-being. Streamers are frequently finding themselves in situations like that of mental health first responders: directing people in crisis to appropriate resources, facilitating discussions about emotionally heavy topics, and providing social support to members of their community. Unfortunately, many streamers do not have the training or knowledge to effectively manage these situations and feel overwhelmed, anxious, and unprepared. Streamers feel isolated in their roles as leaders and responsible for the health of their communities, despite lacking their own support systems.

There is a serious and significant disconnect between the mental health resources that currently exist and streamers' awareness of these resources. Improved communication and promotion of existing resources, whether via outreach campaigns or through Twitch directly, are clearly needed. This study emphasizes the need for improved education, communication, and support around mental health and mental illness.

Streamers collect and distribute mental health resources and information, while simultaneously acting as frontline social support for their communities. Their individual efforts make a difference, but it shouldn't be on them alone. Mental health organizations and streaming platforms must work together to lighten the emotional and mental load. Despite the general availability of mental health information and education, the awareness and accessibility of resources that are relevant to streamers and are viewed as trustworthy and accessible by streamers are severely limited. Investing in the well-being of streamers and their communities at the professional level—from streaming platforms to mental health organizations—presents a significant opportunity to circumvent traditional obstacles to care and positively affect mental health on a massive scale.

Note

1. One of the most significant barriers to treatment is accessibility. A total of 77 percent of counties in the US have a shortage of mental health providers. Rural areas are particularly underserved, as 65 percent of nonmetropolitan counties do not have a single psychiatrist and 47 percent do not have a licensed psychologist (America's Mental Health Rankings 2020).

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4 Live Streamed Surgeries, Medical Media's Racial and Gendered Logics, and Patient Agency within Misogynoir

Olivia Banner

Live streaming has entered the surgical theater. Plastic surgeons stream from the operating room on Instagram, promoting procedures that reshape the human form to meet ideals of appearance on the social media platform most associated with curating one's self-presentation to fit cultural norms. Hospitals use live streaming to market their services, and, to meet this demand, IBM's digital health division (Watson Media) has developed its own broadcasting service, BroadcastMed. The service advertises with a motto drawn straight from the digital content industries: "Discover how BroadcastMed is streaming healthier outcomes and revenues through creating engaging live content." Medical conferences routinely include panels on how health-care professionals can incorporate live streaming into their practice, often to market services that frighten the intended consumers. Live streaming has become embedded within the medical industries' public relations and marketing apparatus.

When the press reported on a significant moment in the history of internet broadcasting—Carnie Wilson's 1999 live lap-band surgery—the coverage used a sensationalist rhetoric. More than twenty years later, popular press coverage of broadcast surgeries no longer engages the sensationalism associated with a celebrity. Instead, today's coverage centers on the novelty of the technology or the media facilitating the broadcast. Since 2010, press coverage has emphasized the first surgery live-tweeted, the first Google Glass surgery, and the first Facebook live streamed surgery. Such coverage emphasizes a technology's novelty, along with the surgical expertise guiding the procedures. Obscured in this emphasis is live streaming's reshaping of patient agency and activism. After all, it is not just the hospital, its technologies, and its surgeons that are broadcast; the human at the center of their activities is broadcast as well.

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That reshaping is the topic of this chapter. Through a comparative analysis of two live streamed surgeries—the first, brain surgery on a young white woman, the second, breast cancer surgery on a middle-aged Black woman—it explores patient agency within the intersection of these two giants of the US economy, the social media industry and health-care industry. In particular, I critique this digital visual environment, characterized by specific racialized and gendered visual logics. Both events were live streamed on Facebook, saved to the hospitals' Facebook pages, and promoted on hospitals' websites, making them eminently suitable for comparison. I analyze these mediations in relation to rhetorics of patient agency to bring into relief how new mediations shape negotiations of patienthood.

In particular, the example of Sonia Johnson, a Black woman who underwent a lumpectomy, contributes to understanding where analyses of live streaming culture intersect with Black feminist health science studies. Articulated by Moya Bailey and Whitney Peoples, Black feminist health science studies intervenes in multiple points of scholarly and activist intersection: "feminist health studies, contemporary medical curriculum reform conversations, disability studies, environmental justice, and feminist technoscience studies" (Bailey and Peoples 2017). Studies of the mediation of Black women's health are particularly important within these intersections since media are "an important technology in the institutionalizing of medical practice as well as [in how it] impacts public perception of difference. . . . [M]edia [are] a public health pedagogy that [teach] us about what our society believes about health" (Bailey and Peoples 2017). By comparing the live streams of these two surgeries, this chapter argues that medicine's live streams visually stage women's health matters in ways that reproduce the raced and gendered logics that have characterized the history of medicine's visual culture. Johnson's example helps us understand how *misogynoir*—where anti-Blackness and misogyny meet—inform not only live streaming itself, but also how Johnson herself negotiated the limited spaces of agency allowed within the hospital-controlled broadcast setting.

Raced and Gendered Logics in Medicine's Visual Cultures

In October 2019, Jenna Schardt underwent brain surgery at Methodist Dallas Hospital to remove a mass of blood vessels that were causing seizures. After an initial period when she was anesthetized so that surgeons could open

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her skull, the anesthesiologist brought her back to consciousness so that she could verbally respond to surgeons' questions and move parts of her body as requested. A narrator told viewers that these responses allowed the surgeons to check whether they were appropriately removing problem tissue (Methodist Dallas 2019b). The surgery was discussed by the hospital's male chief of neurosurgery and its male public relations officer, both of whom remained off camera. Within the visual frame, two male surgeons and a male anesthesiologist circulated around Schardt's body, all of which was covered by a blue surgical drape except for her face, which remained visible. A press release from the hospital quoted Schardt as saying that she hoped that broadcasting the surgery would "educate and inspire others." Within the live stream itself, the narrator clarified that Schardt was enrolled in a graduate program to train as an occupational therapist for people who have had strokes. It was out of professional interest, then, that she agreed to the live stream, which might help undo people's misconceptions about brain surgery. Viewers did not see all the surgery; the live stream began after Schardt had been anesthetized, her skull opened up, and the surgeons were just at the point when they needed to bring her out of anesthesia. Fifty minutes of the surgery were live streamed on Facebook, with doctors answering questions posted to the chat, and the recorded video remains on the hospital's Facebook page.

The video's continued presence on that page indicates the promotional function of such live streams for hospitals. Having hospital staff answer questions during the surgery promotes the hospital as participating in new media's logic of interactivity: this is "engaging content" that is also participatory and produces audience engagement for the hospital. The broadcasting of a successful surgery also promotes the hospital and its surgeons as competent providers of complicated surgical operations. Although the online and print media cover these surgeries as human-interest stories and operate out of a cultural fascination with medical technological advances, a critical perspective on the medical-industrial complex situates them within the hospital industry's ongoing search for new ways to reach its customers. They also point to an individual hospital's need to market their services within a competitive marketplace. In the case of this particular operation, brain surgery's aura as the most dangerous and complex of all surgeries means that its successful completion adds prestige to a hospital.

In a key sense, it was the woman's consciousness during the procedure that framed this live stream as remarkable. In a promotional video released

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the day prior to the surgery, the two surgeons explained that luckily, advances in medical imaging technology now allowed them to map out precise portions of a patient's brain involved in speaking and motor functions, so that they could be sure to remove only the mass affecting those functions (Methodist Dallas 2019a). Schardt then testified to her own amazement at the wonders of these technologies, as well as a bit of hesitation: "Oh wait that's me! I'm the patient." She went on to say, "I mean it's cool that they can do that and that they have this kind of technology. I'd rather have them have me awake and speaking so that we know that we're hitting the right areas." The video cuts to one of the surgeons, who says, "She understands the importance of this, she understands the delicacy of this, and she's fully invested in this. We couldn't do this without her being fully involved and wanting to proceed." These rhetorical frames drew on the trope of the "empowered patient": a patient who understands the complexities of their medical situation and who engages with the process, educating themselves and, in effect, partnering with their doctors. Unspoken in this trope is that these patients operate in the for-profit health-care system context (see also Tomes 2016). The surgeons' use of phrases such as "we couldn't do this without her being involved" points both to her patient engagement and her involvement, via being awakened from anesthesia during the procedure, within the surgery itself. The surgery itself was thus narrated as an uncanny reproduction of the interactivity of new media themselves.

Considered within the history of medicine's promotional media, this live streamed surgery drew on longstanding medical visual logics of gender and race. Male surgeons (often white), their masculinity figuring authority, expertise, and scientific mastery, work over the body of a young (usually white) female, her youth marking her reproductivity and her whiteness. This representation reinforces longstanding Western visual conventions of the primacy of the young white woman to the future of the nation-state. For example, the made-for-television movie *Threshold* (dir. Richard Pearce 1981), which promoted the Jarvik artificial heart prior to its actual introduction to a public repulsed by the idea of it, featured a white male surgeon saving the life of a teenaged white girl; before this, live television broadcasts of heart surgeries during the 1950s featured young girls as the surgical patients (Serlin 2010; Kirby 2011).

In light of this tradition, it is not surprising that the hospital would have chosen Schardt as a model patient for its publicity efforts. Her reproductive

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age feeds into the cultural framing that young white women's continued health is of paramount importance to the US nation-state. It is also not surprising that the hospital would view this surgery, being performed by male surgeons, as a good choice to promote the institution itself. As an advertisement for medical expertise, men are culturally framed as the seat of authority. The live stream itself highlighted men as "authoring" the surgery, both visually and aurally. It featured two male voices: the head of the hospital's public relations office (Ryan Owens) as he posed questions to the hospital's chief of neurology, Dr. Nimesh Patel, both of them within the surgical room but not participating in the procedure. Thus, two male voices aurally reproduced the visual emphasis on masculine knowledge and authority. During their conversation, Owens would often self-describe as unknowledgeable about surgery and therefore able to ask Patel basic questions; this allowed viewers and chat participants a point of identification that also contrasted with the scientific mastery to which Owens did not lay claim. Twenty minutes into the forty-five-minute live stream, the camera moved to get a close-up of the two male surgeons working side by side, and Patel rhapsodized about them: "They came out of training programs that were top ten in the country; they chose to come to Methodist, they believe in serving in a purpose higher than themselves . . . Doing this surgery is basically surgical choreography; it's like doing a dance." Through his rhetorical flourishes, Patel underlined the cultural framing of brain surgeons as being atop the hierarchy of medical expertise, their powers almost godlike and deserving of reverence. Sometimes five men (neuromonitors and surgeons) surrounded Schardt; at other points, the camera caught glimpses of possibly female staff; but at no point did a woman appear within this live stream as a significant source of medical expertise.[1] In other words, men filled the entire visual scenario, their figures arranged around the central female body.

In addition to this compositional centering of the white woman, other features mirrored conventional cinematic modes of objectifying the female body. The film opened on a midshot of Schardt, still under anesthesia, framed by the surgical drape, her unconscious and passive face at the center of the visual frame. As the two surgeons responded to questions from Patel, the camera slowly zoomed in on her face, while the male voices discussed the history of her case, details about her young age and medical professional education, and finally, the procedure itself. This close-up on the passive, unconscious, young white female reproduces the longer visual

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cultural history of medicine's promotional media, where the zoom formally instantiates the male surgeons' agency and mastery around the passive female. Other moments in the live stream also reproduced gendered logics: for example, as she awoke from anesthesia and was surrounded by two male neuromonitors, she slightly smiled, and Patel and Owens explicitly paused in order to comment, in a phrase that highlighted the objectification of the male gaze, "What a great smile."

Framing the surgery as enabling Schardt to return to her medical career education, the live stream also emphasized her as productive worker. Her dedication to her future occupation, which she articulated as the reason for the live stream, was emphasized as the surgeons saved the life of a future worker in the feminized medical profession of occupational therapy. In this, brain surgeons were positioned again at the top of a hierarchy of value within the medical industry. In other words, the representational and visual logics of this surgery conformed to historical traditions of gender and race in medical media, emphasizing throughout masculinized expertise that saved the (re)productive white woman.

Misogynoir in Digital Media Culture, Medical Media, and Black Women's Agency

I turn now to a live streamed surgery that differed from Schardt's in terms of the patient, the procedure, and the surgeons, but whose similarities underscore that live streaming surgeries are now a mundane part of medicine's promotional media. In October 2018, Sonia Johnson, a fifty-year-old Black woman, underwent a lumpectomy to treat breast cancer at Methodist Charlton Medical Center in Dallas. The surgery was broadcast on Facebook Live; it remains on the hospital's Facebook page to this day (Methodist Charlton 2018), and an excerpt from the full video resides on the hospital's webpage (Johnson and Methodist Health 2018). The live stream began with a mid-shot that captured the surgical table on which Johnson lay prone, covered in a blue surgical drape. Two people in pink scrubs (the surgeon and a surgical aide) appeared at Johnson's side, while two blue-suited staff waited within the frame. The male nurse wore a blue face mask, while the female nurse wore a pink face mask. A woman, identifying herself as Dr. Keisha Hendrickson, a radiation oncologist at the hospital, introduced the live stream. She then handed off the narration to Nicole Metcalf, the executive director of

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the Komen Foundation in Dallas. They introduced Johnson as a mother and grandmother from DeSoto, Texas, with a history of family breast cancer, who has been rigorous about attending to her breast health through regular mammograms and check-ups. Throughout the surgery, these two women conducted a conversation in which Metcalf asked questions concerning what the surgeons were doing and Hendrickson explained. During the surgery, the surgeon, the narrating oncologist, and Metcalf also answered questions posted to the chat.

Komen's participation, plus the October date of the broadcast—in the US, October has been dubbed, by the Komen Foundation, Breast Cancer Awareness Month—tied the surgery to raising the awareness of Black women, who have a higher rate of aggressive breast cancer and a higher mortality rate from it, about mammograms. The pink surgical gowns and masks worn by attending staff visually thematized the pink ribbon, which, after decades of work by the Komen Foundation, has become ubiquitous in US culture as a sign of support for breast cancer patients (King 2008). In the excerpt of the live stream posted to the hospital's webpage, a close-up of the surgeon's pink-leopard-striped clogs revealed a pink ribbon pin attached to them. In other words, the event was staged so its participants were branded with the logo of the pink ribbon, highlighting the ties between pink ribbon culture, corporate sponsorship, and discourses of breast cancer as a matter of medical expertise. The live streamed surgery was both medical promotional media and corporate promotional media, serving both the hospital and the Komen Foundation.

While visually and rhetorically framed as an event to raise awareness about mammograms, the actual live stream emphasized the newness of technologies and procedures used during the surgery, promoting oncology's technological prowess and its welcoming of new media. For example, at one point, Hendrickson interrupted Metcalf due to a moment of heightened interest in the surgery, and the oncologist freed the camera from its tripod to move it closer to the surgical table. Hendrickson took over the narration, describing "a new innovation in technology for identifying the localized area in the breast for removal. Part of the tissue that Dr. DiPasquale removed was placed into a device by the operating room table. That device is also another innovative and sophisticated tool that is being used to assist with improving outcomes for breast cancer management." As Hendrickson explained, the broadcast showed a close-up of the image on the device's

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screen. Later, she narrated, "We have just seen Dr. DiPasquale using sophisticated, innovative, modern technology to accurately identify the sentinel lymph node." Hendrickson then identified by trademark one of the technologies being used: "Savi Scout is a tool that allows the surgeon to more pinpointedly identify the area of abnormality in the breast." Later, in the chat, the official Methodist account reiterated this, saying "The Savi Scout helps make [removal of the tumor with little disturbing of health tissue] possible." As the camera panned to show more machines at the other end of the operating table, Hendrickson said, "You are also seeing now a high-tech revolution in the management of breast cancer. We are viewing the surgical specimen on the machine that's called a Faxitron that allows the surgeon to accurately identify [that] the area of involvement has been completely removed from the breast." Where Schardt's live stream framed the technologies being used as awesome, in Johnson's live stream, the visual focus on the tools involved emphasized them as new and innovative technologies, with their status as innovations conveyed through the repeating of the trademark terms that mark them as part of US high-tech innovation culture.

Where Schardt was awake and aware during her surgery, the viewer able to see her face and mouth (and thus witness features of her agency), Johnson was neither awake nor any part of her visible. Instead, throughout the live stream, her entire body was covered by the blue surgical drape. Even when the camera was closest to Johnson's body, none of it could be seen. Silent and invisible, Johnson was a disappeared body in the live stream: the activity was located in the surgeon and staff, the technologies they used to view the tumor's location, the interactive, dynamic chat function, and the narrating voices of Hendrickson and Metcalf. The action in the live stream, in other words, directed the viewer to pay attention not to Johnson, but instead to this new technology, which supported the surgeons. In their similarities, then, Schardt's and Johnson's live streamed surgeries highlight how the medical industries view live streamed surgeries: as a method to showcase new technologies and the hospital's willing use of the new media of participatory culture itself.

The differences between these two live streams, however, highlight how misogynoir, as a characteristic of visual and digital culture, shaped Johnson's live stream and her media appearances outside the event of the surgery itself. To quote Moya Bailey (2016):

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> *Misogynoir* describes the coconstitutive, anti-Black, and misogynistic racism directed at Black women, particularly in visual and digital culture . . . The term is a combination of *misogyny*, "the hatred of women," and *noir*, which means "black" but also carries film and media connotations. It is the particular amalgamation of anti-Black racism and misogyny in popular media and culture that targets Black trans and cis women. Representational images contribute to negative societal perceptions about Black women, which can precipitate racist gendered violence that harms health and can even result in death. . . . [R]acism and sexism [are] public health concerns that critically impact medical treatment and medical science.

The specificity of "anti-Black" racism is important to identify here: misogynoir does not apply to all women of color, but rather specifically to Black women due to the West's historical legacy of anti-Blackness. This conceptual equation has scaffolded the history of medical racism. Documented by historians of medicine such as Harriet Washington and Dorothy Roberts, anti-Black misogyny informs the history of Black women subjected to medical experimentation in gynecology in the nineteenth century, forced sterilization in the twentieth, and a medical establishment that routinely ignores Black women's authority over their own bodies and minds—for example, Serena Williams's testimony about her medically racist treatment after giving birth (Roberts 1999; Washington 2006; Salam 2018).

This means that Johnson enters this highly mediated context with the question of a Black woman's agency, front and center. The rhetorical framing used by the narrator—that a Black woman asked to live stream her surgery to contribute to improving Black women's possibilities for longer lives—centered her agency, even as the event itself visually disappeared her entirely. In her media appearances, Johnson always brought attention back to the choices that she was making about her care. Her insistence on Black female agency is especially significant because of one difference between Schardt's and Johnson's live streams: where Schardt was awake, her agency demonstrated through responding to questions, Johnson was silenced and invisibilized (figure 4.1).

Johnson's *visually* invisibilized body during the surgery echoes with misogynoir—the specific form of misogyny directed at Black women, where anti-Blackness (the nonhuman) and misogyny meet. Whether or not the hospital or surgeons understand the broader general context of misogynoir is insignificant; the significant part is that Johnson's postsurgery insistence on her agency refuted the possible misogynoirist readings of the event.

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Figure 4.1
Screenshot of Methodist Charlton live streamed surgery. *Source:* https://www.facebook.com/115556565138653/videos/554610924992826.

Also, in her media appearances, Johnson reframed her own individual surgical event as oriented toward social justice public health, stating repeatedly that her individual act of broadcasting the surgery might help the collective aim of improving Black women's health. This is, whether implicitly or not, an antimisogynoir goal—one that responds to the history of medical racism directed at Black women. At one point during the live stream, Metcalf and Hendrickson gave statistics about Black women in Dallas—Black women's higher incidence of late-diagnosis cancer and that Dallas ranks number three in the nation in terms of the deaths of Black women from breast cancer—which, however obliquely, indicate how the slow violence of environmental and medical racism is itself a form of misogynoir. A commenter (whose avatar was of a Black man) wrote in the chat, "You just had to bring color into it didnt you" (figure 4.2). In undermining the criticism of racism that the hospital representatives seemed to articulate, this statement reproduces misogynoir once more.

Perhaps too, Johnson herself reviewed the live stream of her surgery and noticed that a number of comments were highly critical about how the surgery was filmed. One commenter wrote, "See better videos on YouTube. Being across the room and showing us nothing, isn't exciting!" Another wrote, "I

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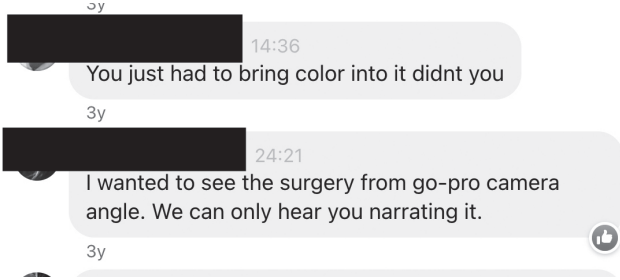


Figure 4.2
Chat commentary accompanying Methodist Charlton live streamed breast cancer surgery.

wanted to see the surgery from go-pro camera. We can only hear you narrating it" (figure 4.2).

These comments, and their disgruntlement with camera angles, conform to the objectifying visual logics that permeate visual culture and to what Michel Foucault (1975) named "the clinical gaze" of medicine. They dehumanize the actual person undergoing surgery in their quest for a zoomed-in view. In a sense, viewers who demanded these close-ups of fragments of the Black female body incised by surgical tools reproduce the clinical gaze of broadcast medical media. In this, Johnson's insistence on the agency, however limited, that she wielded within the affordances of US medical care contested the misogynoir of medical media.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis demonstrates that broadcast medical media produce gendered and racialized texts. Controlled by hospitals' public relations departments, such broadcast media also produce medicalized texts. Rather than emphasize how environmental racism determines racial disparities in breast cancer and mortality rates, the broadcasts depict a clinical gaze, highlight the hospital's technologies, and represent surgical procedures as curative.

When viewers complained in the chat that the camera wasn't zooming in close enough, hospital officials responded that they had to strike a balance between educating the public and "what the general public will find appropriate"—that is, not showing the gruesome details of the procedure,

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as well as not showing a woman's breast. While it is impossible to determine whether Facebook's policies on visual images of breasts affected their decision, what does seem likely is that the hospital purposefully avoided a more detailed view of the procedure's gory aspects. Certainly, they were eliding other surgical moments of violence to the body: rendering a person unconscious and inserting a breathing device, slicing flesh, burning tissue, and suctioning out blood and matter. The brevity of the stream—thirty minutes in the middle of the procedure, after Johnson was anesthetized and prepped—made the surgical process seem shorter than it actually was, an artificial brevity nevertheless presented as fact through the accompanying conversation that reemphasized it as a short procedure. In addition, the stream elided the grueling rounds of chemotherapy that Johnson underwent before surgery and the grueling rounds of radiation that she would undergo after. Instead of revealing the agony of the human undergoing breast cancer treatment, the stream framed surgical authority and modern technology as central actors in a seemingly simple, efficient, and smooth process.

The stream thus framed breast cancer and its care as curable through a single instance of technologically enhanced surgery. The presence of a Komen Foundation representative, seemingly insignificant within the cultural omnipresence of Komen, indicated that this live stream was predetermined by pink ribbon culture, which emphasizes philanthropy and obscures activism against environmental racism. And while the live stream noted racial disparities in breast cancer rates, this was a medicalized approach to racial disparities, not a social justice one, because the live stream elided a key additional aspect of racial disparities in breast cancer: wealth disparities, which lead to significantly disparate access to and provisions of health care, and US racial capitalism's debilitation of communities of color. Live streaming health care thus reproduces medicine's racialized and gendered logics, enacting a mediated misogynoir. Johnson worked within the existing limitations of for-profit, racist medicine and media to prioritize Black *women*. Within these limits, her efforts articulated a form of social justice health, what we might call social justice *health caring*.

Note

1. Fascinatingly, a female-presenting commenter on the Facebook chat asked why there were no speech language pathologists (SLPs) in attendance. Even after the official Methodist account responded that there were neuromonitors, rather than SLPs,

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present, and that the neuromonitors were trained specifically for this procedure, the same commenter pushed back, saying that SLPs did indeed have this expertise in their wheelhouse. This caused the Methodist account to respond that the hospital had a lot of "love" for SLPs, but they used neuromonitors in this instance. The gendered nature of this back-and-forth—SLP is another heavily feminized area of expertise—is undeniable, especially in light of the facts that the neuromonitors were male and the Methodist account chose to attempt to assuage the challenge to their policies through a gendered rhetoric of "love" rather than, for example, "value."

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Tackling Toxicity in Real Time

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5 "Breaking News: Streamers Don't Wanna Do the Horizontal Tango with You": Creative Responses to Toxicity

Olivia Rines

In July 2019, the popular online media outlet *Polygon* published an article exploring a live streamer's creative response to toxic comments in her chat room (henceforth referred to as "chat"). Known as PaladinAmber, Amber Wadham uses multiple cameras and ingenious overlays to parody breaking news segments in which she calls out viewers who behave inappropriately. Through these segments, Wadham offers an alternative method for dealing with toxicity and redirects the spotlight to herself (instead of the toxic user), boosting her popularity and causing clips of her live streams to go viral on other platforms. However, while these methods have furthered her success on the platform, these segments also thwart a cardinal internet rule—"Don't feed the trolls." By calling out individuals who engage in toxic behavior, Wadham may encourage them to keep acting toxically, as many trolls do what they do because they relish the responses (Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014). This chapter explores this hypothesis, considering whether PaladinAmber's methods of moderation, while effective in calling attention to the issue of toxicity on Twitch, may simultaneously encourage some users to behave toxically in the hopes of being publicly reprimanded by her.

Toxicity in Video Game Culture

Toxic behavior on the live streaming platform Twitch stems from its being embedded in video game culture, which typecasts gamers as young, white, cis, straight, and male (Shaw 2012). Gray and Leonard (2018) assert that video games "create a virtual and lived reality where white maleness is empowered to police and criminalize the Other. Games provide opportunities to both learn and share the language of racism and sexism, and the grammar of empire, all while perpetuating cultures of violence and

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privilege" (13). Through the dominant ideologies perpetuated in gaming culture, a violent and hateful discourse has emerged to match the conduct and language seen in video games. This discourse is aimed at individuals who do not conform to the gamer stereotype. A classic example of this behavior is Gamergate, which began as a campaign for ethical video game journalism but evolved into the extreme online harassment of several women in the video game industry at the hands of a vocal group of predominantly white male gamers.

Marginalizing, ostracizing, or otherwise hostile behavior aimed at those who do not align with the gamer stereotype is known as "toxicity." Toxicity may take the form of cyberbullying, trolling, harassment, or other forms of abuse, but it is differentiated by the effect that it has on those witnessing said behavior, as it affects everyone involved in the interaction rather than simply the individual at whom the toxic behavior is directed (Blackburn and Kwak 2014). Unfortunately, the perception of toxic behavior is subjective (Kwak and Blackburn 2015) and highly context-dependent, as behavior perceived as comedic in one space might be labeled as toxic in another depending on the audience, making it challenging to identify and regulate.

Toxic behavior is inherently tied to a sense of online unidentifiability. On Twitch, users are identifiable only by their user names. This anonymity may encourage participants to behave toxically because of a sense of online disinhibition—a lack of restraint encouraged by the online environment (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012). While toxic behavior exists in other spaces, such as sporting events, the lack of face-to-face interaction in online communities allows much of this behavior to go unchecked. This has led to the generalization that live streaming communities are toxic, hostile spaces, and, thus far, there has been little evidence to contradict this conclusion.

One of the groups most targeted for their deviation from the gamer stereotype is women streamers, who regularly face sexual harassment from their viewers and male streamers (Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019). Terms such as "titty streamer" and "Twitch thot" (an acronym for "that ho over there") shame women streamers and challenge their success on the platform. Furthermore, the sexualization of women streamers contests their authority to speak about video games, rejects these streamers as legitimate gamers, and discourages their participation in gaming communities.

Such discrimination has become normalized on Twitch, and yet this has not stopped women from streaming. To combat toxicity, women streamers

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have created concrete rules regarding appropriate behavior in their communities and enlisted channel moderators—community members granted special permissions by the streamer—to ensure that their community remains a safe space. These strategies align with steps taken by Twitch, including the addition of platform moderators, updated community guidelines, and AutoMod (a machine learning tool that flags potentially toxic messages to be reviewed by a moderator) (Batchelor 2017). Such changes have led the cofounder of Twitch, Kevin Lin, to conclude that "while toxicity may seem to be particularly common within gaming circles, there are pockets of respectful and positive users that will hopefully serve as the foundation for the wider community going forward" (Batchelor 2017). Lin argues that, through careful management and moderation, live streaming communities can flourish outside the shadow of toxicity. It is these strategies that are the focus of this chapter, as they provide crucial evidence that toxicity is not inevitable; rather, it is a product of harmful ideologies that can be counteracted by streamers, users, and Twitch as a platform.

Breaking News: Combining Moderation and Entertainment

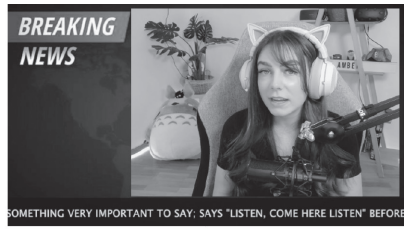
Amber Wadham (PaladinAmber) is an Australian streamer who, at the time of the *Polygon* article's data collection, typically streamed four days a week and averaged 450 viewers. She regularly streams Just Chatting and the games *Rainbow Six Siege* and *Apex Legends*. Wadham cycles through cameras and overlays to create unique effects on her streams, some of which are depicted in figure 5.1. Her overlays provide additional entertainment, and her camera angles punctuate her points, sometimes quite literally (see example 5.1), keeping her audience engaged regardless of whether she is playing games or crucifying viewers for disobeying her rules.

To examine PaladinAmber's methods of managing toxicity, a critical discourse analysis of two of her live streams (ten hours total) was conducted as part of a larger project analyzing the types/levels of toxicity in three women streamers' communities and their methods of regulating this behavior. The data for this project—video data, chat logs, and field notes—were collected over two weeklong periods in June and August 2019 following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. The analysis involved transcription of the live streams utilizing conventions adapted from Jefferson (1978) and Hepburn and Bolden (2013) and a critical discursive and thematic analysis of the

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Side-Facing Distance Camera (SFDC)



Breaking News Overlay (BNO)



Just Chatting Overlay (JCO)



Gaming Overlay (GO)



Front-Facing Up Close Camera (FFUCC)



Side-Facing Up Close Camera (SFUCC)

Figure 5.1
Six examples of PaladinAmber's camera angles and overlays.

data. It also highlighted toxic discourse, responses to/discussions of toxicity, and methods of moderation to conceptualize Wadham's approach to regulating toxicity and the effects that it has on her community.

Toxicity, for Wadham, is largely defined by Twitch's community guidelines, which prohibit lawbreaking, violence, threats, explicit content, hateful conduct, harassment, doxxing, and malicious content (Twitch 2020). At the time of this study, toxic behavior typically involved objectification and harassment, as well as the use of all caps, which is equated with shouting.

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PaladinAmber's "breaking news" segments mostly address instances of personal and sexual harassment, and her commitment to challenging toxicity in her chat is underscored through the diverse strategies that she utilizes while streaming, including the use of active moderators, explicit rules, and chat commands. Wadham takes these methods a step further, though, by engaging in public moderation, where she confronts misbehaving viewers. Her public moderation often takes the form of "breaking news" segments, which are modeled after similar segments on mainstream television news channels and feature a custom overlay, seen in figure 5.1. This overlay has an introductory screen with an animated logo and includes scrolling text along the bottom that reads "Breaking news, garbage goblin has something very important to say; says 'listen, come here listen' before eating a handful of garbage and running off." The "garbage goblin" reference is part of the persona that Wadham has developed, in which she is responsible for "taking out the trash," with "trash" referring to toxic viewers. For example, when a user indicated they wanted to see a "breaking news" segment, PaladinAmber responded, "Oh you missed it. We took out the trash like an hour ago. Two-two trash people." By constructing toxic users as "trash people," Wadham underscores her position on users who behave toxically—they are equivalent to garbage that should be taken to the dumpster. PaladinAmber and her channel moderators do not hesitate to "take out the trash"—temporarily or permanently banning users who do not abide by her rules, which shows Wadham's willingness to sanction inappropriate behavior and sacrifice the size of her audience to protect herself and her community from toxicity.

Positioning herself as a garbage goblin contrasts with the seriousness of the segments themselves, in which Wadham often chastises misbehaving viewers. Example 5.1 models Wadham's "breaking news" segments. Through this example, one can see the sequencing of these segments and how PaladinAmber incorporates overlays and camera angles to create an entertaining yet effective display of public moderation. In example 5.1, Wadham responds to a user who made a condescending comment about her cameras, which she reads aloud in lines 1–2. During this excerpt, PaladinAmber (PA) is playing a game with fellow streamer Maz (M), who expresses his appreciation for these segments as Wadham prepares to launch into her well-structured section. The example underscores how these segments function as subversive humor, simultaneously entertaining viewers while critiquing one user's behavior.

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Example 5.1
Stream 1 (02:55:45)

PA: ((in gaming overlay)) ((reads utterance in chat)) "You must feel like you're special and unique with those extra cameras." Okay.
M: Aww.
PA: Alright, it's okay, are you ready? This is what we all come here for. Are you ready? ((switches to BNO))
M: My favorite bit.
PA: ((whispered)) It's the bit. It's the bit.
PA: Good afternoon and welcome in, Calm, that's right, listen that- ((switches to FFUCC)) This just in. ((switches to SFUCC)) Stop being a ((switches back to FFUCC)) C U N Tuesday. ((switches back to BNO)) Umm, listen, I'm quirky as fuck ((switches to FFUCC)) without the camera angles, ((switches to SFUCC)) it's pretty dang clear, ((switches back to FFUCC)) there just a little bit mwah quality chef's-kiss production. ((switches to BNO)) So if you don't like it, and you want to watch standard gameplay, ((switches to FFUCC)) do your- do- ((switches to SFUCC)) do yourself a favor. ((switches to SFDC)) Stop making it unpleasant ((switches to SFUCC)) for everyone else. ((switches to FFUCC)) Go. Be free, my friend. Go see- ((switches to BNO)) go and see all of the other content creators out there. There's plenty to choose from. ((switches to FFUCC)) Just don't come back ((switches to SFUCC)) here anymore. ((switches to BNO)) Alright, guys, back to you. ((switches back to GO))

Example 5.1 highlights the structure of PaladinAmber's "breaking news" segments: welcome (line 8), discussion of "news" (lines 9–20) and sign-off (line 21). Prior to the news segment, however, lines 1–7 show the stimulus for the segment. In lines 1–2, PaladinAmber reads AnythingButCalm's message aloud. Upon recognizing the message is ill-mannered, Wadham prepares herself for the segment, and Maz remarks "My favorite bit" in line 6, leading Wadham to whisper-chant "It's the bit." By calling the segment a "bit," a reference to a section of a stand-up comedian's routine, both Maz and Wadham acknowledge the ways in which these moments function as subversive humor, directing attention to the hegemonic assumptions at play when users act toxically and transforming such assumptions into a source of laughter (Vitis and Gilmour 2017, 344). The subversive humor also allows PaladinAmber to construct public moderation like her "breaking news" segments as entertainment on her channel, embedding such moments into her character as a streamer.

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The subversive humor of these segments succeeds because Wadham's style of comedy functions as critique and constructs her as someone capable of managing misbehavior. For example, in line 10, Wadham tells the user to stop acting like a "C U N Tuesday." This phrase has comedic value, as Wadham spells out the slur but turns the last letter into an acceptable word, subverting viewers' expectations while simultaneously criticizing AnythingButCalm's behavior. Her refusal to say "cunt" is offset by her use of "fuck" in line 10, when she describes herself as "quirky as fuck." She embraces the "special" and "unique" components of the user's claim while arguing that it is her character—not the cameras—that makes her unique. The balance that she strikes, in both her use and nonuse of vulgarity and her rejection of AnythingButCalm's statement, works to construct PaladinAmber as a confident streamer who is invested in her community's well-being and capable of responding to misbehaving viewers in ways that allow her to entertain her viewers while reinforcing her community's expectations.

Furthermore, Wadham uses camera angles to emphasize her claims and reduce online disinhibition. By returning to the "breaking news" overlay in line 13, Wadham shows that she is finished addressing her first point—I am unique without the camera angles—and is shifting to her next point—the user's punishment. Using overlays and camera changes, she stresses that, if the user wants more traditional content, they can leave. Each camera change follows a phrase, punctuating her claims and underscoring their seriousness. The camera changes also allow the viewer to get a close-up view of Wadham's face. These camera angles give the viewer the impression that Wadham is making eye contact with them. This illusion is important because, as Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) argue, lack of eye contact contributes to toxic online disinhibition. By zooming in on her eyes while admonishing AnythingButCalm's behavior, Wadham encourages viewers to pay attention and reduces any sense of invisibility or anonymity, which could reduce the likelihood of the user reoffending (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012).

Finally, in the closing lines of the segment, Wadham prescribes a punishment, which adds a tangible consequence to her public critique. By stating "Just don't come back here anymore" in line 18, Wadham implies that the user is permanently banned from her channel, although her statement could also potentially equate to "you're not welcome here." Wadham then ends the segment by returning to the "breaking news overlay" one last time to sign off. This is solidified by her return to the gaming overlay, at which point Maz and Wadham continue playing their game.

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Through multiple camera angles/overlays and subversive humor, PaladinAmber's "breaking news" segments function simultaneously as entertainment and resistance. She creates a sequence in which she addresses what has been said, responds to the utterance, and reprimands the user who posted it. These segments, therefore, can be understood as critical witnessing (Vitis and Gilmour 2017), in that they capture the offense (the toxic utterance) and allow the audience to bear witness to Wadham's interpretation and response. The "breaking news" segments gain "validity by providing testimony and evidence that allows the audience to bear witness to both OSH [online sexual harassments] defined and interpreted from a woman's perspective and the pervasiveness of this harassment" (Vitis and Gilmour 2017, 342). Her segments can also be seen as transgressive, much like fellow streamer Kaceytron, who is known, among other things, for her "incisive critique of the Twitch community" (Consalvo 2019, 98). Wadham publicly critiques a style of behavior accepted by Twitch users as part of the status quo and engages in an open discussion regarding its inappropriateness and her unwillingness to tolerate toxicity more broadly. That PaladinAmber has been able to dedicate an entire segment of her live streams to responding to toxicity speaks not only to the pervasiveness of this behavior, but also to how eager viewers are to witness her responses.

Trolling for Entertainment

PaladinAmber recognizes that public moderation functions as entertainment for her community, and she enjoys these segments, labeling them comedic "bits." However, because these moments have been publicized by news outlets and on Wadham's Twitter feed, where she frequently posts clips, there is some concern that this publicity could attract trolls—individuals who engage in "deceptive, destructive, or disruptive [behavior . . .] with no apparent instrumental purpose. [. . . T]rolls operate as agents of chaos on the Internet, exploiting 'hot-button issues' to make users appear overly emotional or foolish" (Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014). While similar to cyberbullying, trolling is unique in that there appears to be no end goal for the behavior beyond disruption. Because Wadham's segments are dynamic, face-threatening, and entertaining, they align with the types of behavior that trolls seek to incite. Evidence of this trolling desire can be seen in example 5.2, which features utterances from PaladinAmber's chat.

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Example 5.2
Stream 1

(00:22:09) Misery: So I have seen a lot of your fun stuff on Twitter. First time viewing. Is it weird I want someone to say something stupid so you can hit em with that $19.95?
[. . .]
(03:46:46) goodygood: um hey roast me
[. . .]
(03:47:26) rollinrollin: my first time hear I was tempted to say something horrific in hopes of being the target of a tweet. but i decided id rather stay and not be doooosh

Stream 2

(00:37:24) guardian: I came to be a fuckhead
[. . .]
(04:28:35) spicy123: I aspire to be roasted by amber
[. . .]
(04:33:00) noenvy: I'm here to get roasted

The users in this example express a desire to witness and, in some cases, be the subject of Wadham's public moderation. Misery, in lines 1–4, indicates that they came to PaladinAmber's channel because of the publicity surrounding her "breaking news" segments, which Misery calls "fun stuff." The user then questions whether it is "weird" to want someone to misbehave just so that they can witness Wadham's response. Specifically, the user phrases it as "hit em with that $19.95," which is a reference to another style of public moderation that Wadham uses, in which she parodies television advertisements while chastising a misbehaving user. Similarly, rollinrollin (lines 8–9) expresses this same sense of being torn between misbehaving for the sake of entertainment and behaving appropriately out of respect for PaladinAmber. Both Misery's and rollinrollin's comments show how users might be tempted to post inappropriate messages in Wadham's chat to incite her, but, as rollinrollin points out in the second half of their utterance, doing so would make them a "doooosh" (douche) and they would rather "stay." In other words, rollinrollin recognizes that, while an inappropriate comment might provide short-term satisfaction, such behavior

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might also result in removal from the community. In addition, rollinrollin emphasizes that such behavior would be characteristic of a douche—a jerk or idiot. Other users in example 5.2 are less insightful. While not actually misbehaving, at least in these examples, these users indicate that they want to be the subject of Wadham's public moderation, meaning that they would first have to behave egregiously enough for her to do so.

PaladinAmber is aware of this desire and addresses one of the user's comments: "Also spicy123, um you aspired to be roasted by me? Don't aspire to be roasted by me. You wanna know why? Those who get roasted by me are literal pieces of garbage, and you don't want that." Returning to the analogy of herself as a garbage goblin responsible for disposing of trash people, Wadham tells spicy123 that being roasted means that the users are "literal pieces of garbage" (i.e., toxic people). Like rollinrollin, Wadham explains that, regardless of any short-term benefits that may come from misbehaving in her chat, users should not seek public moderation because, according to her logic, being the subject of public moderation requires foul behavior, and foul behavior would make them bad people. However, her censure of such behavior and her construction of users who act toxically as "garbage" do not appear to be fully effective, as users in example 5.3 point out that trolling behavior has become common in her chat due to the publicity.

These users recognize that PaladinAmber's public moderation may be an incentive for trolls, who seek public, emotional responses to their behavior. While the publicity has increased interest in Wadham's streams, it has

Example 5.3
Stream 1

(00:01:51) mistermiyaki: Oh boy, who's ready for comments trying to provoke Amber into responding?
[. . .]
(00:04:24) captncrunch: I feel like people now come in here just to say the things they have seen on twitter

Stream 2

(01:21:51) finalcountdown: I can't tell if the comments are genuine thirst or bait to get the news treatment

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also attracted the attention of trolls, who will undoubtably see her public moderation as further incentive for their behavior. As mistermiyaki points out, such comments are clearly attempts to "provoke" Wadham. According to this logic, then, Wadham would be "feeding the trolls" or "giving them what they want" by engaging in public moderation. Similarly, captncrunch correlates the posting of clips of Wadham's public moderation on Twitter to the increase in trolling behavior, recognizing that the publicity surrounding PaladinAmber will inevitably draw the attention of other trolls.

Thus, it appears that Wadham and some of her viewers are aware that public moderation is risky because it may encourage the very behavior that Wadham seeks to eliminate. Despite this risk, however, Wadham stands by her behavior. In example 5.4, she emphasizes that there is value in drawing attention to toxic behavior and making it visible beyond the platform.

Wadham emphasizes in this example that people will troll or act toxically regardless of the measures that people put into place. She recognizes that such behavior is inevitable, given the platform, users, and social climate. However, she agrees with the user who says that "calling out shitty behavior"—i.e., public moderation—is not "stooping to their level." Wadham argues that her behavior does not equate to toxicity, perhaps because she sees public moderation as a response to such behavior and motivated by a desire to curb toxicity more broadly. Although another user questions whether Wadham's public moderation is counterproductive, Wadham firmly disagrees, arguing that "speaking up about it" and "reporting" this behavior are productive. She addresses this point in an interview with Grayson

Example 5.4
Stream 2 (01:00:02)

PA: ((in gaming overlay)) ((reads utterance in chat)) "Calling out shitty behavior is not stooping to their level." No, it is not. And no- don't let anyone ever say- tell you that is cause listen let me tell you [. . .] People need to learn, and here's the thing, right? So many people ask me this. ((reads utterance in chat)) "Don't you think it's counterproductive what you do?" Absolutely not. You want to know why? Cause people are going to fucking do it anyway, and I would rather speak up about it and be like hey, this is really shitty and if you don't stop, I'm going to literally report you.

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(2019), where she asserts that public moderation may encourage people to question their behavior and eventually change it:

> If you've ever done something stupid, and somebody said to you, "Hey, that was really stupid," it truly makes you question [. . .] And whether or not they questioned it right there and then, eventually if enough people start saying, "Hey, this behavior is really stupid; you should probably consider changing that or just logging off," it starts to sit there with that person, and then hopefully that change comes. [. . .] if one out of 10 people really learn that lesson of "It's the internet, but also your actions have repercussions," then my job is done as a comedic entertainer.

PaladinAmber sees public moderation as productive because it may encourage users to reflect on their behavior. It forces users to recognize that their behavior is unacceptable and gives them the opportunity to reform, or at least consider the repercussions of, that behavior. Wadham recognizes that not every user will reform their behavior in response to her actions and such change may take time; however, even if only "one out of 10 people" change, Wadham argues that would be reward enough. By consistently addressing toxic behavior publicly, Wadham hopes her sentiments will resonate with users who may otherwise be oblivious to the impact of their behavior. By incorporating public moderation into her streams, Wadham seeks to change the public sentiment on toxicity more broadly, as users will come away from her stream with an understanding that their "actions have repercussions," a perspective that may not have been obvious if they only engage with streamers and communities that ignore or encourage toxic behavior. Thus, although public moderation may encourage some users to act toxically, such concerns are counterbalanced in Wadham's mind by the visibility that public moderation brings to toxic behavior and its consequences.

Conclusion

This chapter explored an individual streamer's creative responses to toxicity, showing how public moderation can be used to enforce community norms, entertain viewers, and bring visibility to the issue of toxicity. Through her public moderation, PaladinAmber asserts her authority as a streamer, pushing back against users whose online disinhibition encourages them to troll, harass, or otherwise antagonize streamers and their communities. For Wadham, public moderation is both punishment and entertainment. Users who misbehave in her chat may become the subject of one of her segments,

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calling attention to their inappropriate behavior and making them the focus of her comedic skits. Wadham argues that this form of moderation may encourage users to reflect on their behavior, thus hopefully inspiring them to behave more appropriately in the future. However, the publicity surrounding these segments has also attracted the attention of trolls, who may see PaladinAmber's responses to toxicity as irresistible temptation—public moderation may feel like a reward for them. Thus, although public moderation may draw attention to the issue of toxicity on Twitch and the experiences of streamers and communities affected by toxicity, streamers who engage in public moderation may face further trolling or toxic behavior consequently. Although Wadham makes it clear that she is willing to accept this trade-off, other streamers may not.

Although this response to toxicity is not without its consequences, it is vital to underscore the value of PaladinAmber's actions. Wadham is potentially altering the behavior of users who interact with her streams and drawing attention to the issue of toxicity more broadly, even if this attention has repercussions. Numerous articles were written about Wadham's segments, and clips from her streams gained significant attention on Twitter. Her work is a reminder that toxicity is painfully common on Twitch, but also that not all communities are responding passively to this issue. There are many streamers and users who are fighting for more inclusive spaces on Twitch and for changes to the platform itself. By consistently engaging with users who act toxically, Wadham reminds users that toxicity is not a forgone conclusion in all Twitch communities. Streamers like PaladinAmber have positioned themselves as agents of change through their informed and creative responses to this behavior, thereby changing the narrative about toxicity on Twitch from a discussion of harm to a tale of resistance.

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6 How We Learned to Stop SWATing and Love the (Zoom-)Bomb: A (De)predatory History of Disrupting the Live Stream

Arun Jacob and Christine H. Tran

G(r)eek Chorus: Introduction and Context(s)

On October 8, 2020, Christine served as cochair of the Junior Fellow Lecture Series, a long-running University of Toronto event where graduate students remix and present research around a theme of the month. It was our first full academic year to be scheduled around the global COVID-19 pandemic. All talks were telecast via Zoom. To match this year's screened-over nature, Christine centered the talks around digital memes. Our institution still operated under the colloquial "U of T" time, where events start late on purpose, to hold over from prepandemic days when the expanse of the school's urban campus landscape rendered a walk from one class to another into a commute. Even after the pandemic downloaded our events into our phones and laptops, lecturers carried over this temporal tradition into our (first) year of "blended learning." As these ten minutes of chatter concluded, the first alarm rang from the screen's bottom corner: at a low angle, a video of someone masturbating.

"Hey, Christine, you're hot!" heckled one of the rectangles. Music blared through the speakers. Pornographic images were screen-shared en masse; one graphic act overtook the room completely while the other nonswarming group members in the Zoom were called out by name and a shrill chorus of prepubescent voices chanted racial slurs. Unfamiliar icons from video games scattered across a room of familiar faces (*Among Us* imposters were among us). The shock of several colleagues was physically documented. Others laughed; some danced to the music. Gathering their wares, Christine ended the meeting and reconvened on the group's Discord server.

"Well, that was my first Zoom-Bomb!" a colleague (a white, male, and dancing one) put in the chat. Another graduate student asked, "We were

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hacked? Do they know my location now!?" An administrator would ask if Christine wanted university police to investigate. Christine would never find out if there was, indeed, a *CSI: Cyber*–type subdivision of campus security. Yet these provocations to secure in the face of streaming did not go away as we continued to PhD on Zoom.

This chapter is incubated in the disruption. Academic live streaming has sold us the dream of uncut interaction among our advisors, students, and selves over dispersed geography. We began this research in July 2020, several months *before* Christine's Zoom-Bomb. It was also four months into Canada's first COVID-19 lockdown, which upended academic calendars the world over, including our first years as doctoral students. As we surrendered our in-person conferences for Zoom links, we also theorized the role of interruption in our streamed-rolled lives. As plosive impositions of civic space, Zoom-Bombs—the phenomenon that Christine experienced—reproduce what E. Gabriella Coleman (2012) calls the "rich aesthetic tradition of spectacle and transgression at play with trolls" (101). Immersed in this audacious culture of hackers, pranksters, and other interrupting interlocutors, we examine the question: Was the live stream a technology built around disruption? To answer this, we examine networked disruption at three epochs: (1) a prehistory of the live streams in telecommunications metaphors, (2) the eminence of "swatting" in video game live streaming communities, and (3) institutional responses to Zoom-Bombed academic events. As spectators and streamers cope with how a sniper's gaze shrivels their teaching and gaming experiences, the background noise of cultural work's hazards reaches new levels of amplification.

Prehistory: On Stranger Tides

Why "streaming"? Electrical engineering discourse's hold over these metaphors carries into media studies, which rely on the technician and technologists' vocabulary to comprehend how it is that these media technologies operate. Ghislain Thibault (2015) highlights the lineage of hydrologic metaphors employed in articulating the relationship between media and its audiences, such as radio waves, television channels, surfing the web, bit torrents, etc. Today's liquid metaphors for media technology carry over from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when referring to electrical systems dominating our vernacular. For example, electrical "current" traversed cables,

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wires, and tubes; electromagnetic "waves" were transmitted and received. Such hydrospheric discursive operators often obscure the material realities and the conditions that drive these media technologies. By metaphorically relying on liquid metaphors, streaming media services evocatively suggest the idea of real time, continuous time, and the uninterrupted flow of content. Yet although digital streaming media services may appear continuous, at the level of bits and bytes the coding and decoding algorithms used to parse, segment, and compress the video files are only simulating a real-time and/or continuous live experience. The digital signal must be unpacked, decoded, buffered, and reassembled to be legible to the human user. The codec is materially analogous to the shipping container. It essentially does for the streaming media economy what the shipping container does for the global supply chain. That is, it offers an efficient and effective distribution of content and the emergence of new technical standards in industry (Levinson 2016).

Contemporary live streaming practices are sites of struggle and rupture—sites that make threadbare the hegemonic discourses of the digital media industry. As Friedrich Kittler (1990) elucidates, nineteenth-century media technologies such as the telegraph, typewriter, and telephone did not just fundamentally change how people communicated with each other. Instead, these media technologies changed the very perception of people's minds and bodies. The persistence of hydrospheric metaphors in contemporary media prompts us to queer these metaphors drawing on the Foucauldian idea of archaeology, which insists on making explicit the deep principles of knowledge. Although streaming media, much like their hydrospheric doppelgangers, streams are placid compared to torrents, floods, rapids, etc. (Burroughs 2019, 147). To use Geoffrey Winthrop-Young's (2010) heuristics, these media technologies are made of a stack of hardware, software, and wetware (186). The streaming hardware consists of desktop computers, laptops, cell phones, set-top boxes, smart TVs, IP TV boxes, etc. Streaming software is made up of browsers, codecs, video encryption algorithms, digital rights management (DRM), etc. Atop this is the cultural workers/wetware layer of the streaming software stack, which includes content creators from Twitch streamers to webcam models. Technorhetorical slights of hand (aka water metaphors) help to consolidate (separate) these cultural layers with (from) the technical before the consumer's eyes.

Building Zoom-Bombs as a *cultural technique* of hydrographic genealogy, we see how streaming has long been a downloader of cultural transgression.

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Bernhard Siegert (2015) mobilizes the idea of cultural techniques to highlight the operations or sequences of operations that historically and logically precede the media concepts generated by them (15). We start with the term "filibuster," derived from the Dutch word *vrijbuiter*—meaning "privateer," "pirate," or "robber" used by sixteenth-century Dutch colonists to refer to the pirates of the Caribbean. The Spanish iteration of the term *filibustero* was used in the nineteenth century to refer to the US pirates that would commandeer Spanish colonists' naval vessels. The pirates would hijack the ships of Spanish conquistadors and steal their booty. The term is now used in contemporary parlance to refer to a method of hijacking US Senate proceedings by boisterous senators who talk for too long, sometimes clad in diapers or spouting nonsense. The ease with which men in power wield disruptive techniques as a weapon to get ahead is a leitmotif that echoes through history. As a disruptor, the filibuster subverts the system to establish dominance in the ecosystem. It is the penchant for this domination through communicative acts that we will be exploring in the next genealogical variant.

. . . and SWAT about It?

Where pestering bleeds into predation, "swatting" is born. The *International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication* defines "swatting" as a subgenre of "doxxing": a publication of someone's private address for the purpose of isolating the person. In this family of action, swatting draws its name from its policing dimension, or when "a specific type of doxxing when . . . a false report made [is] to police of a severe crime committed at the address, which requires a Special Weapons and Tactics (*SWAT*) team to invade the target's residence" (Eckert and Metzger-Riftkin 2020, 2, emphasis added). Sarah Jeong (2015) condenses these techniques for us into this graceful turn of phrase: "assault by proxy" (31). Misery is the recognizable infrastructure of commercial internet activities. As Coleman (2012) writes, "Trolls work to remind the 'masses' that have lapped onto the shores of the internet that there is still a class of geeks who, as their name suggests, will cause Internet grief, hell, and misery" (109). In recent years, the market for internet misery has evolved past the proprietorship of self-declared trolls. The persistence of troll events like Zoom-Bombs and video game stream swatting reveal the porosity of live connection: holes persist in this seemingly endless flow of digital spacetime. Through disruption events like

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swatting, streamers and other players, however, find themselves pulled out of these holes and into the abyss.

The "Wichita Swatting" incident is held as the worst-case scenario for this kind of assault. In 2017, Kansas state police deployed a SWAT team to the home of Andrew Finch, who was killed in the altercation. Casey Viner and Shane Gaskill—two people unrelated to Finch—became agitated with each other over a "friendly fire" incident in the game *Call of Duty: WWII*. Finch was not a known gamer and had zero involvement in this gaming community. Viner and Gaskill's identification as gamers, however, took center stage in this narrative. Viner and Gaskill's conflict escalated over Twitter, with Viner threatening to kill Gaskill over wagers' loss during the match. According to an *LA Times* report, "Gaskill posted an address on West McCormick Street in Wichita and dared Viner to 'try some (expletive)'" (Queally 2018). Tyler Barriss, then twenty-five, contacted the address and called the Wichita police department with a threat. Identifying himself with a pseudonym, Barriss claimed to be holding his family hostage after killing his father at gunpoint. Following the address given to them, SWAT forces invaded Andrew Finch's home on West McCormick Street and killed him. While active streaming was not directly a part of the Wichita swatting incident, the combined terms "Wichita," "Gaskill," and "swatting" irrevocably became attached to the gaming community. Barriss, a racialized man, became the face of swatting as its deadliest.

Lost in these conversations about Barriss's persecution is the role of carceral forces in Finch's death. Plenty of media discourse is dedicated to the role of troll-adjacent technologies in facilitating Finch's demise—such as the toxicity of gamer culture, which, again, Finch had no part in. Live video technologies that had no real place in this specific swatting tragedy were blamed before militarized police. We could find no mainstream media criticism that focused on why it simply takes prank calls for police forces to self-justify violent force against an unarmed citizen. Official Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) definitions of "swatting" likewise emphasize the prankster's dramaturgy (and thus primary guilt). To the bureau, any "hoax call made" constitutes doxxing (FBI 2021).

As of late 2020, the FBI's hijacking of secured smart devices was continually identified as a source to record or actively record live stream events (Cimpanu 2021). Smart camera footage can be manipulated, deleted, and/or distorted; thermostats can be remotely recalibrated; smart doors can be

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unlocked; baby monitors can be meddled with; and so on and so forth. These acts of remote home invasion (i.e., home invasion without human actors at the scene) have a military history in drone pilots. A cursory search of "swatting" on YouTube generates half a million results; the top videos are compilations displaying titles such as "Top 10 Gamers Swatting on Live Stream," "Streamers SWATTED Live during Their Stream," and a *VICE News* minidocumentary on "Police Militarization Meets Hacker Culture: Swatting." Such an archive of combative spectacle resonates with what Roger Stahl (2010) terms "militainment," or the long-standing tradition of consumer commodities that transform warfare into entertainment. Video platforms like YouTube archive the live militainment of swatting, long beyond the moment of geotagging, locating, and police dispensation. In a patrilineally reproducing family of interrupters, the digital replay of swatting opens the door for Zoom-Bombs.

Play and Depredate

Why are the most famous swatting examples associated with game live streams? Swatting, like other forms of doxxing and disruption, is culturally aligned with the contentious term: "gamer culture." If we locate Zoom-Bombs as the media grandchild of swatting—and swatting within the genealogy of doxxing practice—it becomes difficult to discuss these predatory aesthetics, apart from "a male backchannel" of masculine gamer discourse (Nakamura 2012, para. 8). Sending a brigade to someone's home to disrupt the flow of their game reflects an undercurrency to Mia Consalvo's (2007) concept of "gaming capital," or the inputs and outputs that distinguish "good players" from "bad players." Under the logic of gaming capital, these kinds of disputes let spectators loot capital back from the gamer. Although gaming spectatorship predates the ascent of Twitch and game streaming, Twitch has transformed this mode of watching each other play through live interactions and chats.

At the onset of COVID-19, reports on the growth of Twitch stream views initially were exponential (Stephen 2020). Yet for many, this renewed attention to spectatorship and games hearkened memories of Gamergate, a technomediated and prolonged harassment event from 2014 onward. From *Depression Quest* developer Zoë Quinn to the mobbing and doxxing of *Tropes vs. Women* commentator Anita Sarkeesian, women and feminists

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in the game industry are normalized for violent harassment by Gamergate's online mobs. As with live streaming and swatting, Gamergate harassment tactics emphasized the location and broadcast of private residences as a common technique to instigate fear along gendered lines. Gamergate was not an insular event. To femininst game scholars, the "symbolic" violence of Gamergate challenged widespread separations in rhetoric between virtual, discursive forms of violence from "real," physical ones (Gray, Buyukozturk, and Hill 2017). Massanari (2017) asks us to consider the direct affordances of cultural platforms like Reddit in aggregating aggressive behavior through up-votes and other applauding affordances. These platform affordances might be viewed as props in a larger-aesthetic chain reaction.

Writing in 2014, *Deadspin* author Kyle Wagner (2014) forewarned that Gamergate was likely "a rehearsal, where the mechanisms of a toxic and inhumane politics are being tested and improved" (para. 30). As the extreme right exclusionary populist alt-right jumped from the geekier edges of the entertainment industries to the center stage of political discourse and culture in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, some journalists suggested that "geek culture" had become a way for young men to be radicalized into a particularly toxic form of misogynist and racist masculinity (Hudson 2018; Nagle 2017; Urquhart 2019). The alt-right movement's views draw on the men's rights movement, which views men as victims of female equality, anchored by the strong internet presence of 4chan and 8chan. In the American context, these views attract religious extremists, Tea Party advocates, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists, among others (Thompson 2018).

From the standpoint of nonenthusiasts looking in, swatting is a confusing telephone game of human interlocutor that certainly fits into a certain stereotype about aggressive gamer masculinity. As Derek Burrill (2018) posits:

> [G]amer identity of the late 2000s and 2010s—the identity most commonly associated with the trolls and bullies behind Gamergate—is produced and reproduced through normative associations between gender and technology, cultural practices and the public sphere, as well as result of the ubiquity and normalization of war and battle videogames. (24)

Live streaming platforms like Twitch make access to this military media more widespread. Now a player need not be active in *Call of Duty*, for example, to participate in the spectacle of militainment. We can "just watch." Yet

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as the murder of the nongamer Andrew Finch via swatting in 2017 shows, the passive position is no guarantee of safety. Live streamed violence does not need your consent or participation in the adjacent culture to victimize you. When Christine was Zoom-Bombed, they and the university learned of the existence of Reddit boards and Discord servers that circulate private passwords and links. Just as Reddit serves as a gamified amplifier for Gamergate harassment, so does this legacy of online harassment survive in the streamrolled academy of COVID-19. To understand the converging histories of depredation and pestering that resulted in the Zoom-Bomb, media scholars have to treat these breaches as technical, cultural, and *historical* antecedents.

(Re)enter the Zoom-Bomb

Zoom Video Communications was founded in 2011, which is coincidentally the same year as the live streaming site and occasional purveyor of swatting content, Twitch.tv. Just as Twitch was not developed to be a games streaming site per se (the former Justin.tv was oriented to lifecasting), Zoom was not developed to be a public streaming website. Rather, it began as a telecommunication service whose software went public in 2014 and rapidly grew into the "unicorn" company of business communication start-ups well before the 2020 pandemic turned it into a household name. Zoom marketed itself as a telephone. Its Zoom Phone software premised itself on the vision of C-suite executives being able to master teleconferencing from the palms of their smartphones.

As Zoom-Bombing infiltrated the vernacular of 2020 classrooms, institutional responses were characterized by quaint off-loading of labor onto the instructor. The University of Utah, for example, created a colorful infographic guide on how to "Zoom-Bomb proof" your event or classroom. Some tips included instructions on creating links and removing screen-sharing capacities. Yet other tips were inclined to identity policing: "Avoid using your Personal Meeting ID (PMI) in public events" and "Do not share your meeting link or social media or any public platform" (Rhodes 2020). These dictates positioned instructors as deputies of their own digital towns, braced for the prospect of unwanted visitors ("Remove unwanted participants and prevent them from rejoining"). They were also to be bouncers, appraising the "realness" of students ("Make sure 'Only *authenticated* users can join meetings' is selected," emphasis added). In effect, institutions downloaded

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responsibility onto the user. These responsibilities required not only managing the educational content flows of the classroom, but also facilitating rhetorical transactions.

Popular media leaned on a politically neutral vocabulary to summarize this phenomenon. As the news site *How-to-Geek* characterized it:

> This issue isn't necessarily *a security flaw*. The problem is how people handle public Zoom meeting links. These links are shared thousands of times between clients, friends, colleagues, classmates, and so on. Careless handling of them can result in a Zoom meeting being open to public access. Then, anyone who finds the link can join an in-progress meeting. (Gunnell 2020, para. 4)

Such rhetoric responsibilized victims in two ways. First, it framed live harassment as external to Zoom itself. The error was not in the security systems, but rather the users. Second, it dismissed the violence of Zoom-Bombs as the result of inattention on both ends: victims as careless handlers and the Bombers' actions themselves as "usually done in an attempt to gain a few cheap laughs at the expense of the participants." The low currency valuation of these laughs may be inadequate for nongaming enthusiasts, as suggested by how *The Daily Beast* characterized bombers as "tricksters" (Sommer 2020, para. 2). The popular technical press response to Zoom-Bombs tends to reproduce the logic that we see in institutional responses to Zoom-Bombing: a matter of "[c]areless handling." This discourse downloads the risk onto instructors, administrators, and other classroom interlocutors, offering little systemic critique about where these techniques are learned and what kind of literacies they demand from workers who go unpaid for this additional labor. Such popular responses tend to downplay the fact that many Zoom-Bombs are enacted through the language of racialized and misogynistic violence. Consider Christine's experience with Zoom-Bombing, where the disruptors commented on Christine's appearance and used racialized slurs. As of this writing, the ways that Zoom streaming can be operationalized for conservative ideology have only expanded. On the weekend of March 25, 2020, the young MAGA operative Charlie Kirk and the undercover conservative trickster James O'Keefe put out calls in widely circulated tweets for conservative college students to take advantage of new online classes by recording their professors (Sommer 2020).

The progression of how discursive acts of recreational nastiness made by involuntary celibates (incels), men's rights activists (MRAs), and the anti-feminist community Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), which are

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meant to be read as performances of virtual manhood, turn into violent outbursts—as seen in the case of Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian—begs the question: *cui bono*? (Beran 2018; Jane 2018; Moloney and Love 2018). Understanding Gamergate as the genesis of a greater cultural battle over the conversations around space, visibility, and inclusion makes it clear that this was a proxy war being waged to redraw the borders of the hegemonic domain of culture. In the manosphere, the sentiment that was being affectively communicated through social media technologies was that the pole position of white cis-male heteropatriarchy in the social order was under threat (Van Valkenburgh 2018).

Conclusions

Zoom-Bombs are just one genus of confrontations with the vulnerabilities inherent to live stream technologies. To think that a "stream" was once a thing. Like a complex swatting of your least favorite live streamer, streams are rather a series of tactical processes: setting up a waiting room, adjusting your webcam, and imagining your audience. Interruption becomes infrastructural to insurrection. Just as these real-time technologies host a space to fantasies of continuous flow, they also grant space for popular ideations of civic interruption to beta-test themselves on the most vulnerable. By understanding these histories of broadcasting yourself as already a tactical and (de)predatory struggle, we suggest future understandings of live streaming culture to begin not where the broadcast flows, but rather where it "leaks."

Released in March 2021, *Zoom Escaper* (see figure 6.1) is an extension that exploits the normalization of streaming "leaks" to create ready-built auditory interruptions for your next video call. Do you really not want to be in this meeting? Deploy an "Upset Baby" or "Urination" sound effect to launch the social emergency of choice and be your ticket out. Like a Zoom-Bomb of sexualized slurs, the gendered register of interruption strikes again. Would a "Woman Crying" caution a call from the SWAT team? Or would it not be a good enough reason to end the feed? The power struggles for your attention continue to spill over into cultural, technical, and historical conversations in media studies. After all, to disrupt is often to reassert the privileged position; to feel confident that one is doing something of consequence as one disrupts someone else is to forcefully impose one's sense of self, being,

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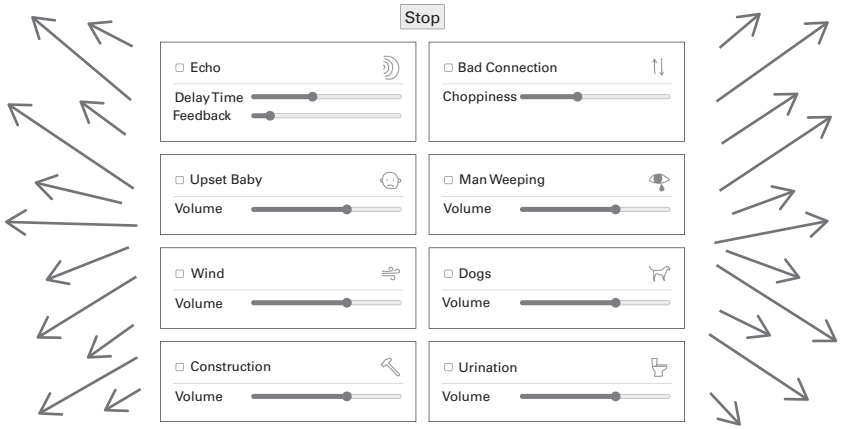


Figure 6.1
Zoom Escaper allows users to interrupt their own video call with a host of sound effects.

worth, and politics onto the proceedings. Take the events on January 6, 2021, when seditious actors participated in acts of insurrection at the US Capitol in Washington, D.C.; the media constitute and influence the conditions of human sensing and knowing of this (Horn 2007, 8). Before insurrectionists arrived that day with the intent to disrupt the next president's affirmation, the competencies, fluencies, and literacies adjacent to swatting and doxxing had long been developing on digital platforms. By breaking down what disrupts a live stream through a communicative act such as Zoom-Bombing, we would like to point to how one is being encultured into a suite of cultural practices enfolded through this communicative act.

Like a good Zoom-Bomb, a genealogy of live streaming should blow up the integrity of the object itself. Is a teleconference call a stream? Or a FaceTimed visit to Grandma's? Or a faculty meeting via Microsoft Teams? By locating disruption in different media, we see the early elements of mainstream live stream cultures reoccurring in various forms: the trolls, the economies of attention, and familiar expectations of etiquettes and responsibilities placed upon those who orchestrate our attention. Zoom-Bombs were foreshadowed in the live stream genealogy of "depredatory" logics that made telephone wires into a spectator sport and made victims out of hosts. More than isolated harassment events specific to the academies of COVID-19, Zoom-Bombs were foreshadowed in the live stream medium's relationship with depredatory logics. The vocabulary of this depredation,

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in its mediated avatar, is militaristic a priori: for example, the military raid, a tactic used to exhaust the enemy by engineering chaos. As institutions aspire to leverage new genres of live streaming, the persistence of depredatory harassment groups and tactics shows that we are not always ready to manage the cultural forces attached to these technologies—nor always equipped to contend with their long-developed literacies in cruelty. Historicizing the vulnerabilities of live streaming to militant depredation tactics like Zoom-Bombs can clarify how institutions structure technological conditions that, if they do not outright reproduce harassment, render our most vulnerable actors to the mercy of their demoralization tactics.

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7 Precarity and Privilege: The White Politics of Board Game Streamers

Aaron Trammell

This chapter investigates the live streaming work that is done at *The Dice Tower*, one of hobby gaming's most popular game review sites. Technically a network of hobbyists from all around the world who contribute prerecorded game reviews, playthroughs, and miscellany to a singular YouTube channel: *The Dice Tower*. The network is owned and operated by Tom Vasel, a popular hobby game personality who manages it from Homestead, Florida. At *Dice Tower* headquarters, Vasel produces live streamed media alongside his own prerecorded content. When Vasel streams, he and his team play board games live, share top-ten lists with fans, share news about industry gossip and upcoming Kickstarters, and even fundraise. These streams are first presented live and then lightly edited and saved as content on the network's YouTube archive. Importantly, I focus on the racialized context of precarious labor and branding in my analysis, as I feel that the dynamics and context of this labor have ramifications not only just for YouTube streamers, but also for live streamers broadly construed.

As I will unpack in more detail later in this chapter, I focus here on streamers who work on YouTube as opposed to other live streaming media sites, such as Twitch. Because YouTube is first and foremost a site that specializes in recorded media first and streaming media second, the practices of YouTube streamers are somewhat idiosyncratic. Many YouTube streamers stream from the studio where they record their content, whereas many Twitch streamers share the content they are interacting with on their computer and build a streaming studio around the chair they are streaming from. For this reason, we must account for the ways that the old media practices that circulate around studio spaces inform the politics of streamers on YouTube. The adaptation of a studio model onto YouTube live streaming allows for a wider variety of content, as streaming in this context is

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assumed to be the product of a sophisticated filming apparatus, as opposed to the digital apparatus of game capture.

To navigate the dynamics of identity and neoliberalism in the hobby game community, this chapter will show how brand identity is navigated by its streamers. Although the grassroots infrastructure of live streaming may offer streamers new opportunities to challenge the white status quo of their community, the politics of celebrity produces its own pressures and has the potential to reproduce the white-supremacist structures of other older media paradigms like television, film, and radio. To come to grips with race in the context of streaming, it is fundamental to understand how branding in this paradigm is racialized and connected to the very fabric of grassroots community. At the heart of this chapter is a story about how streamers who occupy a space of white privilege have been forced to confront it. By examining these moments of confrontation, it focuses on how the financial and social incentives of live streaming have pulled new and more diverse voices into the hobby game community—a community that is itself grappling with the implications of precarious labor within its own streaming apparatus.

Branding, Crowds, and Live Streaming

Professionally, for live streamers, understanding this dynamic means recognizing how the precarity of labor makes the kind of ideal intervention discussed here difficult to achieve within their personal streaming environment. On a traditional movie set, the director, an assistant director, or even the director of photography might be tasked with ensuring that the composition of people on the screen reflects the values of the studio producing the movie. In other words, on the set there is a specific and manageable task related to the project of representation that is managed through the labor structure of the crew. In a live stream, however, each streamer is their own director, sensitivity editor, scriptwriter, cinematographer, public relations expert, and more.[1] In other words, diverse representation is only one of many things that streamers are tasked with managing as they tend to their stream. For streamers, being able to present a thoughtful and inclusive streaming environment is not only logistically and creatively challenging; it is also one more thing that they have to juggle as they balance the many aspects of their brand presence.[2]

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A paradigm of precarious labor defines the context of live streaming in a variety of ways. The media scholar Nicholas-Brie Guarriello explains how companies like Amazon and Alphabet (which owns YouTube) encourage streamers to cultivate an embodied sense of "always-on labor" (Guarriello 2019, 1754). Similarly, other media scholars like Jamie Woodcock and Mark R. Johnson suggest that this labor eventually culminates in a troubling emotional toll (Woodcock and Johnson 2019, 820). Certainly, even though live streaming offers opportunities for people of color to break into a homogeneously white space, it is important to note also the potential ramifications of inclusion in this context, as scholarship that considers the impacts of streaming on streamers has revealed a troubling paradigm that accelerates many of the most concerning aspects of the attention economy.

As I have detailed elsewhere (Trammell 2019), live streaming is one of the many forms of labor that members of the hobby game community engage in to make ends meet. Importantly, it is central insofar as it is the primary media apparatus that the community uses to get industry news out to its consumer base. Unlike the media ecosystem that is relied upon in the digital game community, there are few for-profit organizations that organize the media presence of the hobby game community. Because profits are generally slim, sites like *Kotaku, IGN, GameSpot, and Polygon* generally don't consider or review games being distributed in the hobby game community. Occasionally, these sites will run an article that covers news in the hobby game space, especially if it pertains to a franchise with a considerable presence like *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) or *Magic: The Gathering*, but more often than not the media ecosystem of the hobby game scene is composed primarily of fans offering coverage of news and events on their own streams. The bottom-up nature of the hobby game media is especially poignant, given that hobby games have been most successfully sold through crowdfunding sites such as Kickstarter. In 2018, the cartoon adaptation of a live streamed *D&D* game broke fundraising records. *The Legend of Vox Machina* is officially the best-funded movie or television series of all time on Kickstarter.

The Dice Tower is a fundamental part of the hobby game media ecosystem. They frequently live stream industry news updates and fan updates about the newest crowdfunded games that are available. As the industry has grown to embrace crowdfunding, the live streaming work of *The Dice Tower* has produced the infrastructural context for industry growth. Grassroots game designers rely on the live streamed content that *The Dice Tower* records

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because it helps them tune into an engaged fan base that has been cultivated through the site's prerecorded game review content.

Crowdsourcing and grassroots media have defined the hobby game industry in recent years. The industry's newfound reliance on the crowd has challenged holdovers from an earlier and more homogeneously white male moment in the hobby game industry to reevaluate their market strategies. The newfound emphasis on understanding one's market means that hobby game streamers must adapt to accommodate more diverse audiences who expect that their tastes will be represented in the transaction. *Critical Role*, for instance, draws on a "diverse" network of sensitivity consultants to maintain a media footprint that is read as tasteful by its fans.[3] Satine Phoenix keywords "everyone" when she talks about her work as the community manager of Wizards of the Coast to the media.[4]

The critical media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser draws attention to how the logic of crowds dictates the experience of the self in socially mediated spaces, "To be authentic to yourself, one must first be authentic to others; it is about external gratification" (Banet Weiser 2012, 80). In other words, diverse audiences have renovated the hobby game space by investing in personalities who adopt inclusive practices. Importantly, Banet-Weiser suggests approaching this sense of collective authenticity with ambivalence, as the constitution of the self in question relates to the interests and desires of the crowd that funds it. For example, even though *Critical Role* offers an excellent example of how some audiences desire diverse and inclusive representation in their media, other crowdsourced hobby games like the loathsome *Kingdom Death: Monster* packaged offensive and off-putting content in its Kickstarter. From a review at *Polygon*:

> Kingdom Death is easily the most offensive game that few have ever played. One miniature called the Wet Nurse was sold alongside the first print run. It featured a monster with phallus-shaped tentacles in the midst of violating its female captives. You don't play the game as the Wet Nurse, nor do you play against it. But it's part of the game's lore, it exists in the game world and that alone troubles people. (Hall 2017)

Although there is a crowd in the hobby game scene that desires inclusive, welcoming, and generally palatable content, there is also a crowd that desires the offensive, outlandish, racist, and sexist.

As in live streaming overall, the work of incubating communities of toxic masculinity often takes place separate yet parallel to the work of anti-racist,

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LGBTQIA+, and feminist organizing. Academic research by Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett (2017) and Suzanne Scott (2019) on these topics often focuses on the ways that geek masculinity as a fragile and often toxic identity space is central to the ways that toxic behavior spreads online. I concur, and yet I feel that white privilege is also at play in these spaces.

White Geek Privilege

Geek masculinity is best theorized as a set of contradictions. As T. L. Taylor explains, geek masculinity is the outsider positionality adopted by geek men who have been socially subordinate to other men in society. As such, geek masculinity often emerges as a performance of mastery over many esoteric elements in everyday life. In other words, by failing to master a conventional sense of masculinity, geeks endeavor to master trivia, games, lore, and technology (Taylor 2018, 111–112). One limitation of geek masculinity is that it falls short of connecting the performance of unconventional mastery to the greater problem, as articulated previously, of toxic geek masculinity. Thus geek masculinity is not inherently toxic, so we need to consider other frameworks for better understanding the racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic undercurrents of geek culture.

White privilege may have some explanatory power in this discussion. The concept entered public discourse during the movement toward desegregation in the 1960s as a way to describe the many structural hurdles that Black folks had to overcome in order to live in white neighborhoods. By the 1980s, the term had more fully entered the public discourse, as it was popularized by feminist activists such as Peggy McIntosh, who endeavored to simply list manifestations of white privilege in everyday life (McIntosh 1988). McIntosh's list of forty-six everyday kinds of white privilege is cited by the critical race theorist Richard Dyer as a key moment of dissemination and popularization of the concept (Dyer 1997, 9). For the purposes of this chapter, we can define white privilege as the many invisible and everyday advantages that white people enjoy in society that Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) do not. Although these advantages can be listed, no single list can sufficiently address the numerous ways that white privilege socially emerges.

To understand what I term "white geek privilege," we must begin by understanding that it emerges through the negative space of geek masculinity.

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Where geeks double down on esoteric and arcane forms of mastery in an effort to disguise the ways that they fail to achieve the normative standards of hegemonic masculinity, white geeks also enjoy the myriad privileges that are attached to white identity. White geek privilege is toxic specifically because it doesn't recognize its own entitlement. White geeks see themselves as outsiders and justify their actions as if they are oppressed. In fact, the most horrific takes on white geek identity—incels, Gamergaters, and denizens of Reddit's TheRedPill—all epitomize white geek privilege's most toxic potential.

Literature about live streaming and race frequently focuses on the tactics that Black people use to carve out niches to participate in a space that furthers the values of white supremacy. In the critical media scholar Kishonna Gray's study of Black Twitch streamers, one user remarked, "I never SAY I'm black in a game. That's almost as bad as admitting your [sic] a girl" (Gray 2017, 362). Elsewhere, Gray and coauthor Brian Chan convey the ideology of white supremacy in this context as a discourse around color-blindness. For them, "color-blindness" captures how the visibility of race itself in conversation is policed as a topic of conversation on Twitch (Chan and Gray 2020, 359). In this sense, the lack of conversation around race furthers a discourse that values the invisibility of race—a common characteristic of whiteness. These dynamics around race dovetail with the expectations of microcelebrity and branding streaming that expects streamers to "authentically" present their identities to the audience. Yet Black streamers on Twitch are actively discouraged from presenting their race. Thus, authenticity in this context suggests that fitting in to the standards of the white cultural milieu is an unfortunate and racialized part of streaming.

White geek privilege is the way that geeks justify misogynist, homophobic, and racist behaviors to themselves. It is the way that a perceived outsider identity allows geeks to justify, enjoy, and embrace the structural boons of white privilege. Thus, it is also the structural element that makes participating in the world of hobby gaming challenging. With the exception of some notoriously bad apples, the hobby gaming community does not inhabit white geek privilege in an extreme or violent way. Instead, the community performs white geek privilege through gatekeeping. The community sees itself as an enclave of outsiders and then demands that newcomers prove their mastery of the obscure games within—the toolkit of geek masculinity—to police its borders. The community's reluctance to change shows white

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geek privilege at play within it. The politics of crowdsourcing, however, have forced the hobby game community to rethink its practices. The following case study highlights both how the values of white geek masculinity structured live streaming early in the hobby games scene, as well as how new, diverse audiences were able to challenge these toxic practices.

Case Study: *The Dice Tower*

The Dice Tower is the world's largest streaming network of board game streamers. Although almost anyone can produce programming for *The Dice Tower*, it is all screened by the channel's host, star, and moderator, Tom Vasel. Vasel is a jocular white Christian gamer who positions himself as part of the grassroots hobby community and frequently claims that politics doesn't belong on his show. Fan pressure in recent years has forced Vasel to share the spotlight with a new and diverse set of personalities such as Zee Garcia, Mandi Hutchinson, and Suzanne Sheldon. This section shows how grassroots pressure and activism around inclusivity on the part of the board game community forced Tom Vasel to diversify *The Dice Tower*.

The personalities who operate *The Dice Tower* are streamers who produce streaming media that runs the gamut. This includes live playthroughs of games, "boring" unboxing videos, question-and-answer sessions with fans, live coverage of game conventions, conversations with board game designers, miniature painting videos, companion streams to podcast content, and even live variety segments where the hosts cover a wide-ranging spectrum of topics. While *The Dice Tower* owns a website that serves as a landing page for most of its content, its YouTube channel is the fundamental gateway through which fans engage with its content. In addition to the many streams that *The Dice Tower* crew presents, they use YouTube to archive streams from the past and stage prerecorded content—such as the board game reviews that sustained the group prior to the popularization of live streaming. Importantly, a good deal of *The Dice Tower*'s clout within the hobby game community derives from the relationship that its owner, Tom Vasel, has with the community itself. This relationship is in many ways the product of white privilege because of the community's historically white demographic. Because Vasel resembles others within it, he has been able to position himself as a key figure within the hobby game community.

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He built a cottage media empire by reviewing board games; thus its success is predicated in some major ways on his appeal to the average geeky white man who watches his videos.

Because tabletop games are not digitally born, live streaming requires a fundamentally different infrastructure than one would typically find on a live streaming rig for Twitch gaming. Live streaming in the world of tabletop gaming requires set dressing, time off-camera spent memorizing the rules of the game, and generally a cast of several streamers. In this sense, live streaming tabletop games is a fusion of many genres of digital media broadcasting, including the conversational format of podcasting, the consumer-oriented format of product reviews, unboxing videos, the lifestyle-oriented videos generally produced by travel bloggers, and indispensably, live streaming.

Even though live streaming is just one of many types of content produced by *The Dice Tower*, I argue that it is important to view the channel as a stream because the paradigm of labor encouraged by YouTube would encourage a reading of it as such. On some days, the cameras may only roll live for two hours at a time in *The Dice Tower*, but on others they may roll for as many as twenty-four hours. The labor of being always on in this context is the common ground between the streamers at *The Dice Tower* (and others with similarly unconventional YouTube streams) and the streamers who work within the conventional context of the medium—streaming video games on Twitch. In an interview Vasel has related to me how managing his affect, as well as the affect of the others who stream on his channel, has become a major part of the job. Smiling and presenting a cheerful upbeat demeanor are essential parts of understanding the common aspects of performance and production in the streaming economy. Although, as Bo Ruberg and Amanda Cullen have argued, this work is often gendered (as is the unfortunate work of navigating online harassment), this example shows that it is also often a necessary cost of participation (Ruberg and Cullen 2020).

When Vasel founded *The Dice Tower*, there were no models for live streaming and all of the videos they produced were prerecorded. Now, as *The Dice Tower* has adapted to a model that foregrounds live streaming, the personalities involved have adapted to these practices of streaming in a piecemeal manner. The somewhat haphazard rollout of streaming at *The Dice Tower* reflects a decades-long culmination of Vasel's engagement with the board game community.[5] Before reaching a critical mass of popularity that allowed *The Dice Tower* to fully fund Vasel and some other streamers, Vasel moonlighted as a

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digital content producer while working an assortment of other jobs, including English-language tutor, pastor, and math teacher. The combination of Vasel being an early participant in the hobby games scene and the volume of content that he has eagerly produced has allowed him to cultivate an audience of almost 300,000 subscribers for his site and support his business with a Kickstarter that generally pulls at least $300,000 annually.

Vasel was new to crowdfunding in 2012 when he launched the site's first Kickstarter. Along with his podcast cohost of nine years, Eric Summerer, Vasel was able to drum up almost $70,000 in community support. At the time, this was a big deal for Vasel, who had been doing most of his review work pro bono in his spare time when he wasn't working as a math teacher.[6] In the 2014 Kickstarter, support for *The Dice Tower* nearly doubled. Only barely acknowledged on the Kickstarter page is Zee Garcia, a Cuban-American-identifying, trained theater teacher and board game enthusiast who began a heavy rotation joining Vasel in some of his video reviews. Garcia was one of the only content producers for *The Dice Tower* and the community overall during this period who was not a white man. In 2015, Garcia became a full-time employee of *The Dice Tower* when the site hit a stretch goal of raising $100,000. Indeed, the group raised almost $180,000, a reflection of a funding community that desired more diverse content.[7]

Vasel must have realized that diversifying *The Dice Tower* was key to the site's success. In 2014, he launched a series of videos entitled "Board Game Breakfast" that were essentially wide-ranging clip shows that were submitted by members of the hobby game community. On this show, Vasel began to air videos by women and people of color as well.[8] Key in this field of contributors was Suzanne Sheldon, who would regularly have a segment aired on "Board Game Breakfast." Sheldon didn't regularly roll with the men of *The Dice Tower*. Unlike Garcia, who lives near Vasel in Florida and is often featured in videos reviewing games in the same room, Sheldon is an Asian-American woman who lives in Seattle and submitted segments of herself reviewing games. Where Garcia offers a good example of how diversifying a community's streamer pool offered financial incentives via a rapidly growing crowd, Sheldon is a good example of how diverse streamers still must overcome white geek privilege to be seen in the community. One crucial difference between Sheldon and Garcia is that while Garcia rarely notes his Cuban heritage, Sheldon has been deliberate in signaling her engagement with intersectional activism to the community.

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"Who the hell are Suzanne and Mandi?" coffeedude7 wrote to the popular Reddit board r/boardgames in 2017.[9] His voice is one of the many comments epitomizing white geek privilege in the hobby games community. He was responding to Vasel's announcement that he and Summerer would no longer be running *The Dice Tower* podcast on a weekly basis, and instead it would be hosted by Suzanne Sheldon and Mandi Hutchinson every other week. Mandi Hutchinson is a Black Canadian gamer who, like Sheldon, foregrounds her intersectional activism in her social media presence.

The inclusion of Sheldon and Hutchinson as hosts of *The Dice Tower* podcast was scrutinized by many in the hobby games community. Some argued that the two shouldn't be allowed to inhabit the same space as Vasel and Summerer, pushing for their podcast to be categorized and labeled as a separate stream.[10] Others still suggested that they would stop funding *The Dice Tower* altogether.[11] The hullaballoo about Sheldon and Hutchinson's inclusion was stalwartly defended by Vasel, who, on a thread for the site *Board Game Geek,* insisted:

> Mandi and Suzanne are on our show, and until THEY want to leave I'm not changing it. Starting a new thread every few weeks telling me to change it isn't going to work. I've always done the Dice Tower the way I want. I take input from other people, and listen to a lot of feedback. . . . If that makes you not support our current Kickstarter, or point towards our Kickstarter's funding and use that as proof to back up your argument, then so be it. Some things are more important than money.[12]

Perhaps it takes white geek privilege to counteract white geek privilege, as Vasel's response was celebrated by some members of the community on the same thread as "impassioned, principled, and well-reasoned."[13]

The Dice Tower shows how the adaptability of streaming platforms allows streamers the flexibility to include and exclude simultaneously—potentially furthering a neoliberal paradigm of inclusivity that uses new and diverse faces as a way to reach new markets without necessarily challenging the white supremacist structure of the community itself. Yet, on the other hand, the board game hobby is undeniably reaching new and more diverse audiences, thanks both to the efforts of women and BIPOC who demand inclusion and the efforts of some white geeks with clout in the community, like Vasel, who went out of their way to make space for new and more diverse voices, like Garcia, Sheldon, and Hutchinson, to have a platform.

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White Male Privilege in the Board Game Community

The *Dice Tower* case study given here shows how efforts toward inclusion that foreground the participation of BIPOC creators have been successful in opening up board game streaming channels to broader and more diverse audiences. There is a clear economic motive for these initiatives, as they are often win-win forms of engagement for both streaming producers that seek to broaden their audiences and for BIPOC content producers that seek to participate in spaces that were once tightly managed through the invisible tethers of white geek privilege.

I explored the example of live streaming on *The Dice Tower* because it spoke to a clear moment of advocacy within the community that produced a change in the status quo of the channel's representation. Importantly, the case study illustrates how white content producers, such as Vasel, unknowingly further the dynamics of white privilege. And while in this example, Vasel was sensitive to this mistake and attempted to compensate, there are many other streamers who are less proactive in their responses. Perhaps this is the true cost of the precarious labor paradigm that streaming is embedded in. Exhausted and underpaid laborers have little incentive and even less time to consider how their streams may be more inclusive. And because the onus of branding oneself falls upon these streamers as well—and many stream alone—they may also be so locked within the tunnel vision of their content cycle that they cannot innovate for the needs of diverse audiences. Thus, white privilege unerringly captures their content despite their best intentions.

This chapter advocates that the theoretical framework of white geek privilege is useful for better understanding how streamers of geek media work to keep BIPOC content creators out of their communities. Understanding white geek privilege helps us to better contextualize the cultural backlash toward inclusivity in geek spaces and to understand how the politics of geek culture speak not only to a beleaguered geek masculinity, but to a community dynamic that has thrived on the toxic dynamics of white privilege as well.

Notes

1. In her book *Watch Me Play*, T. L. Taylor relates live streaming both to a history of television production and discusses how some streamers operate as if they are their own autonomous television studio (Taylor 2018, 138).

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2. The critical media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that in neoliberal economies, the paradigm of branding extends to the individual. She writes, "In the context of brand culture, the individual is a flexible commodity that can be packaged, made, and remade—a commodity that gains value through self-empowerment" (Banet-Weiser 2012, 17).

3. *Critical Role* is rather explicit about this. It offers a value statement here: https://critrole.com/community.

4. For examples of this, see this interview that Goldie Chan conducts with Phoenix (Chan 2019).

5. Vasel has produced an almost four-hour-long video detailing the site's history and his work as an organizer in this space (https://youtube.com/watch?v=5gQAqxoFj7I).

6. Intriguingly, many of Vasel's early game reviews were crowdsourced through the community play groups that he curated through his work with youth as a teacher.

7. See https://kickstarter.com/projects/tomvasel/the-dice-tower-2015-season-11.

8. Although Vasel did it first with "Board Game Breakfast," the content was still prominently white men until it was merged with Garcia's short-lived yet diverse "Board Game Blender" community in 2017. Garcia continued to produce Blender videos, but would often host alone, while many of the diverse members of his community would go on after that point to submit to "Board Game Breakfast."

9. You can find this Reddit thread here: https://reddit.com/r/boardgames/comments/6v7bji/the_dice_tower_podcast_changes.

10. You can find these critiques here: https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1919416/are-tom-and-erics-weekly-podcast-used-be-released.

11. Despite these threats, *The Dice Tower* continued to raise more funds in its 2017 and 2018 Kickstarters.

12. Vasel's response in full can be found here: https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1919416/are-tom-and-erics-weekly-podcast-used-be-released.

13. Kevin Lause comments on Vasel's response here: https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1919416/are-tom-and-erics-weekly-podcast-used-be-released.

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8 Toxic Community Policing: Weaponizing Moderation Tools on Twitch

Andrew Zolides

If one thing unifies all digital media platforms, it is the fact that they must, to some degree, moderate content. Moderation has become "an essential practice in the production cycle for commercial websites, social media platforms, and media properties that solicit content from users" (Roberts 2019, 33). Even if companies wish to avoid moderation or hide its practice, platforms cannot escape it for a myriad of reasons: political, economic, cultural, legal, and simply technological. To be succinct, "Platforms must moderate, while also disavowing it" (Gillespie 2018, 5).

While moderation has become more openly discussed, there is often still confusion over its actual functioning. A large contributor to this confusion is the difficulty and nature of moderation at the scale at which these platforms operate. The amount of data in the form of text, images, videos, metadata, and more is astonishing, and so is the filtering, categorizing, and regulating of that data. Yet live streaming platforms have an even more difficult task in moderating—the issue of liveness. When content is not only produced live but also meant to be *consumed* live, moderating concurrently is virtually impossible at the scale required. Consider the labor of censors of a live television broadcast multiplied by the thousands, and one can begin to see the magnitude of the task.

The most common response to these challenges of scale is utilizing community-based moderation. In this approach, community standards are published, revised, and established as a semilegal contract between user and platform to create rules and guidelines for the creation of content and interaction. Community-based moderation, then, cedes the *enforcement* of these guidelines primarily to the user base itself as a first line of defense, usually through features like flagging and reporting of suspected violations/

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violators. Community-based moderation may also include channel moderation, where users are able to create their own guidelines for user-run communities on the site (e.g., Facebook pages, subreddits, and Twitch streams), albeit ones that must still adhere to sitewide rules. The result is a form of citizen-policing where platforms "take advantage of the user base by deputizing users into the moderation process" (Gillespie 2018, 77) creating a sort of "digital posse" to deal with the Wild West of cyberspace.

Yet what if the deputized user base is divided in its interpretation, application, and agreement with the community's standards? More important, how does the identity/ideological makeup of the user base lead to uneven enforcement of community standards? An inherent flaw in the reliance on community moderation is that "flagging systems can also be gamed, weaponized to accomplish social and political ends" (Gillespie 2018, 92). In the case of Twitch, those ends are a part of a larger cultural battle over the gendered nature of gaming.

Twitch's struggles with content moderation stem from two concurrent issues: the difficulty of scale in moderating live streaming content, which necessitates a community-flagging approach, and internal community division particularly around issues of gender and sexuality. This is evidenced in the site's frequent changes to its community guidelines, particularly regarding sexual content and harassment. While these changes often work to better clarify standards of sexual content and even attempt to protect those who are victims of harassment on the site, the relegating of enforcement to the community itself can lead to exploitation.

For example, after Twitch updated its community guidelines in 2018, the "boob police" (D'Anastasio 2018) began harassing women on the site, with threats to report streams for supposedly breaking these updated policies. This toxic community policing sees the tools of user-based moderation—specifically flagging and reporting—being weaponized to attack and harass marginalized users rather than protect them. To be clear, not all forms of community policing are toxic; toxic community policing is uniquely thus because it takes moderation tools whose stated purpose is to protect users and instead uses them to attack and harm them. In attempting to define acceptable behaviors and limit toxic ones through community guidelines, platforms can actually create new tools for toxic engagement with unintended and ironic consequences.

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With these powers of moderation often comes a lack of responsibility, or worse a perverting of these tools in an attempt to silence perceived "outsiders"—regulating performances of the self with normative understanding of what it means to be a user on the site. In terms of Twitch and its deep ties to geek/gaming culture, this often means attacking and challenging nonhegemonic forms of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality.

A closer analysis of the toxic community policing on Twitch shows clear connections between institutional policies and digital affordances surrounding content moderation and an ideology of misogyny. Specifically, this platform analysis of the content moderation of Twitch highlights how both the infrastructure of the site and its policy rhetoric work in tandem to allow toxic community policing to perpetuate.

This chapter argues that institutional moderation policies that empower users must also account for the more harmful effects of that empowerment. Clearly defining and understanding the functioning of toxic community policing can enable scholars and platforms alike to better identify, assess, and respond to this increasingly common form of digital harassment. The discussion concludes with an examination of possible pitfalls of community-based moderation and how to avoid them, while still acknowledging the hope behind this form of live streaming moderation.

What is at stake in community-based moderation is a "subtle cultural privilege" (Gillespie 2018, 8) that affects and in part determines the live streaming culture itself. This is certainly true in the case of Twitch's unique culture, built both on moderation practices and larger contexts of gaming/geek culture. As T. L. Taylor (2018) notes in her study of Twitch, "Harassment is the flip side of the positive processes of community management" (221). What happens when this empowerment and sense of ownership over the site's cultural identity lead to an ideological battle over that very identity, with the very tools of moderation becoming weapons in the fight?

Twitch's Trouble with Gender

Twitch has long struggled with gender on its platform, from the homogeneity of its user base, to instances of gender-based harassment and assault, and its function in the larger gendered discourses of gaming culture. Scholars have long studied the ways that gender, masculinity, femininity, and

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the spectrum in between are understood within gaming culture broadly and Twitch specifically (Shaw 2012; Chess 2017; Salter and Blodgett 2017; Zolides 2021). While originally serving more of a niche role focusing on live streaming gameplay, sometimes with commentary added, the site has expanded its scope both in terms of its user base and the genres and topics of its content—yet still remains intrinsically tied to gaming culture. Gaming culture's gender problems were exemplified most notably in the emergence of Gamergate in 2014, when a form of toxic masculinity emerged with "a campaign of systematic harassment of female and minority game developers, journalists, and critics and their allies" (Massanari 2017, 330) under the guise of a vague concern over journalistic ethics. These acts of "symbolic violence" against women in gaming serve to "reinforce and maintain hidden, invisible boundaries of gendered and racialized hierarchies" (Gray, Buyukozturk, and Hill 2017, 2).

This form of maintaining gender-based boundaries occurs on Twitch in a variety of ways, but it has been most prominent and harmful in its attacks on so-called titty-streamers (Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019). This form of "gendered gatekeeping" common to nerd/geek fandoms (Scott 2019, 17) specifically targets female live streamers with claims of using sexuality to grow audiences. These women are accused of generating "lower-quality," sexual content that affects the cultural capital of Twitch, gaming and the genre of live streaming itself. Notably, the concerns over lost audiences reveal an economic component to these gender-based attacks that shows a close link between the social, cultural, and economic forms of online capital.

The debates around women's bodies on Twitch extends as far back as 2013, where women were harassed and condemned for "occupying the same space [as male streamers]" and being called "camwhores" (Hernandez 2013). These actions were legitimized in the mainstream press, including a 2017 BBC report wherein parents were "expressing alarm at how much of a screen supposedly showing in-game action is focused on a woman's body" (BBC 2017). What are at stake in these claims are the limitations of performances of femininity and sexual identity. Rhetoric around terms like "titty streamer," exists to "limit what versions of femininity are acceptable for women video game streamers" (Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019, 478).

While the rhetoric is powerful itself, it is when corporate and technological infrastructures are realigned in response *to* these claims that we see a different power. Twitch has acted in response to these "debates" around sexual content

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over the last several years to try to better communicate and enforce community standards, while also navigating a highly motivated and tech-savvy user base that could subvert and pervert those very mechanisms. Yet "the way that Twitch defines sexual content has a direct effect on the ecosystem of live streaming more broadly" (Ruberg 2021, 2). One of the main processes through which this direct effect is enacted is toxic community policing.

The term "toxic community policing" builds on the work of Adrienne Massanari and what she terms "toxic technocultures," defined as "toxic cultures that are enabled by and propagated through sociotechnical networks such as Reddit, 4chan, Twitter, and online gaming" (Massanari 2017, 333). What is crucial for Massanari in the formation of toxic technocultures is, as the name suggests, the interplay between the technologies upon which they exist and the underlaying cultures that ferment the behavior. For Twitch, there is the combined technology of community flagging of live streaming and the larger online gaming culture where toxic masculinity thrives. In many ways, the toxic community policing on Twitch is a natural outgrowth of movements like Gamergate: a purported concern over ethical community standards hiding a more insidious campaign of harassment in order to police identity and the supposedly traditionally masculine domain of video gaming.

Twitch's Changing Moderation Policies

As a live streaming platform, Twitch moderation utilizes several approaches. The site primarily focuses on community flagging, where users are tasked with identifying content and users that they feel violate the community guidelines; these reports are then sent for further review by workers, automated systems, or both. This is in addition to tools that exist within individual channels and communities that allow hosts to create unique rules for their own streams. Here, enforcement can take the form of warning users or banning them from participating, or affecting the methods in which they can participate (e.g., limiting chat or other interactive features). These community methods are ultimately subsumed under the larger policies and community guidelines that Twitch enforces overall, where flagging still holds an outsized impact.

Toxic community policing emerges specifically from the flagging/reporting system. Twitch and other large platforms rely on this form of moderation

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so heavily due to the sheer scale of moderation required; indeed, the best way to handle an enormous amount of content is to utilize the platform's equally enormous resource: its user base. This system is not reliant *solely* on users, however, as platforms like Twitch utilize "ghost work," where sites help enforce content policies using "people and software working together to deliver seemingly automated services" (Gray and Suri 2019, ix). At stake is the frequent invisibility of this labor, which can involve underpaid, exploitative conditions where humans are required to assess and judge a flagged piece of content quickly.

Reliance on reporting by users can be especially problematic when one considers the voluntary and specious nature of flagging itself. Due to being voluntary, "users who deputize themselves to flag content are those most motivated to do so. This raises questions about the nature of that motivation" (Gillespie 2018, 129). While those motivations may include things such as concern for public/platform health, cultural sensitivities, and more, they can also be guided by the types of ideological battles discussed previously over the very identity of the platform itself. In the case of Twitch, this is precisely how toxic community policing emerges: deputized users manipulate the tools of moderation—specifically flagging and reporting—in order to harass and overwhelm the Twitch response team (and the ghost work it relies upon) in the hope of weeding out what they perceive as unwelcome identities and content from the site. Toxic community policing, therefore, contributes to the exploitation of this already overtaxed and invisible workforce operating at the second level of the process. The goal is to overwhelm an already overwhelmed system to, ideally, discourage or remove people from the platform entirely.

One of the more publicized and robust changes to Twitch's community guidelines regarding sexual content came in 2018. An official announcement on the Twitch Blog on February 8 specifically emphasized the need for updates around issues of harassment, hateful conduct, and sexual content, with most space spent on the issue of sexual content, specifically attire and clothing. As the post states, "Attire in gaming streams, most at-home streams, and all profile/channel imagery should be appropriate for a public street, mall, or restaurant" (Twitch 2018). Like many community guidelines, this type of language is broad and open to interpretation—and thus exploitation by the community enforcing them.

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The guidelines themselves go into more detail, noting public spaces as the standard for attire, and thus what constitutes inappropriate sexual content. But this language ignores the specific context of most live streaming, as most are performed within one's private home. For instance, cosplaying can be seen as appropriate to the context of playing a video game or attending a fan convention, but the attire within the game may not be appropriate in generalized "public spaces." Suffice it to say, appealing to a broad sense of a public appropriateness is how Twitch reinforces a hegemonic ideological system, and more important, it provides enough open-endedness for community users to enforce the guidelines broadly, and even maliciously.

Turning to the actual community guidelines (from December 9, 2020), there are some key updates that, while providing better representation of a variety of identities and forms of masculinity/femininity, still contain some elements of gendering that can lead to toxic community policing. The sections are divided into three main components showing the areas of most concern to Twitch's moderation: harassment, sexual content, and music. Music primarily concerns itself with issues of intellectual property as a way to protect the liability of Twitch with regard to copyright holders. The result is a more legal, boilerplate discussion of policies that is also easier to enforce via automated screening rather than community flagging.

Harassment, on the other hand, has had the most updates in recent years (with a new, large-scale update in January 2021) due in part to the types of gendered assaults mentioned previously. Yet it is not coincidental that updates to the sexual content policies are frequently met with new forms of harassment, which then must be considered. What ultimately occurs is a process of constant updates and reframings—never fully formed but always in process—to address new dynamics introduced by the community in response to the previous changes.

Moderation Posses

After the February 2018 updates to the community guidelines mentioned previously, reports came out of a "self-appointed anti-boob police" (D'Anastasio 2018) traversing the site's live streams in an effort to seek out and punish perceived "outsiders." Ultimately, streamers were either reported for sexual content (based predominantly on things like attire, camera angles, or

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rhetoric) or they were threatened with being reported. More important, the beginning of this activity immediately following the guideline updates shows a correlation between the events, emphasizing how the empowerment of a group to enforce guidelines gave agency to those seeking to police identity first and foremost.

The groups performing this toxic community policing can perhaps best be described as "posses"—civilian law enforcement deputized by a higher authority to police the citizenry. In this case, the platform itself acts as a higher authority and the community guidelines become a system in which power is transferred, and, ideally, rules are dictated for how best to administer this "justice" for the sake of platform health and safety. But just like the posses of the Wild West, these groups are liable to misappropriation of these law enforcement powers for the purposes of harassment and ideological domination.

The link between the guidelines and these actions can be seen in the language and methods used by these posses. A streamer who was subject to this harassment, She Snaps, described a common occurrence by saying, "They'll make comments on my camera angle and say, 'Good thing it's not too high—I'd have to report you'" (D'Anastasio 2018). These types of comments make direct reference to the guidelines, legitimizing the actions of the toxic community police by referencing a higher authority. It is in this perversion of a document meant to protect that toxic community policing can be seen at its most insidious. One of the ways that harassment is often hidden and dismissed in all forms is by arguing that it was done with some authority or permission granted from a higher power; in doing so, the harasser avoids liability while also shutting off more direct forms of recrimination.

The case of Quqco garnered mainstream media attention and exemplifies the process, purpose, and priorities of toxic community policing. Quqco is an art streamer who live streams the drawing of her anime/manga-inspired works while also wearing and discussing cosplay. In September 2019, Quqco's account was suspended for three days after a deluge of reports were received on a stream of her drawing while wearing cosplay of the character Chun-Li from *Street Fighter*. The stated reason for the suspension reflected the language in the community guidelines, citing "sharing or engaging in sexually suggestive content or activities" (Espiritu 2019).

What is important about Quqco's story as it relates to toxic community policing is how the process was, according to her defense, mass-orchestrated by followers of the subreddit /r/livestreamfail. As she put it to NBC News,

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"Very recently, I've been on—there's a subreddit called 'LiveStreamFails.' Unfortunately, I caught the attention of that subreddit, which has a lot of angry men" (Rosenblatt 2019). Quqco specifically references the gender and tone of those on these sites, emphasizing the gendered toxicity that plays into these mass-reporting actions.

The subreddit, interestingly enough, has since updated its own moderation policies (section 1.5) to include restrictions against what it calls "witch-hunting," which it describes as "large-scale action against a particular person or group of people, e.g., calling for people to mass report a Twitch channel" (Reddit 2022). It is difficult to know precisely how such a statement entered into these guidelines, but it is significant that this specific action is provided and fits with the type of action that Quqco alleges led to her suspension.

These actions go beyond just the suspension of accounts or bullying women off the site, as they often lead to future negative impacts on personal and professional lives. For example, Quqco had her booth removed from TwitchCon that year, a key fan convention that helps streamers grow their audiences and make direct money from selling merchandise. Cases like these remind us that the actions of a few, via toxic community policing, go beyond the virtual platform; they affect the livelihoods and economic viability of the site and its users, engendering a dominant/oppressed dynamic for those in and out of the perceived "normative" framework of the site.

When events like this happen and get mainstream publicity, Twitch has responded in both official and unofficial capacities. Official company channels generally state that Twitch does not comment on individual cases of suspension or other moderation decisions, a practice that is fairly standard in the industry. Yet unofficially, former Twitch employees have also come to the company's defense, like a former head of influencer marketing, Jason Maestas. Following the news surrounding Quqco, Maestas took to Twitter to downplay the efficacy of "brigading" (mass-reporting), saying, "Every reported incident is reviewed by humans, notably for reality (did it actually happen) and context. 1 or 1000 reports doesn't sway a decision" (Maestas 2019). This defense does not clarify anything as to the details of the Quqco story, nor does it address the issue of mass reporting itself. Rather, it sidesteps the issue to respond to a related but different claim about the impact of multiple reports versus one. In the end, more reporting leads to more moderation, and as seen in the example of She Snaps, even the *threat* of reporting is enough to be harassment.

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Diving into data regarding the accountability and enforcement surrounding community-based reports of all kinds reveals troubling numbers. Near the end of 2020, Twitch released its first-ever global Transparency Report. In it, the company reiterates the difficulties of content moderation on a live streaming platform, noting, "The vast majority of the content that appears on Twitch is gone the moment it's created and seen . . . Content moderation solutions that work for uploaded, video-based services do not work, or work differently, on Twitch" (Twitch Transparency Report 2020).

Perhaps the most striking revelation from the data is in how different types of reports are enforced or not, and at different rates. Showing an increase in total user reports across a variety of categories, the numbers show that "less than 15% of all reports led to enforcement" (Sinclair 2021). Going further, reports of "Hateful Conduct, Sexual Harassment, and Harassment" account for the second-highest category (after "Viewbotting, Spam, and Other Community Violations"), and yet only about 2 percent result in any action (at minimum, a warning). On the other hand, reports of "Adult Nudity, Pornography, and Sexual Conduct" come in fourth position, with roughly 2.5 percent resulting in action (Sinclair 2021).

In sum, actual enforcement against claims of sexual conduct as well as harassment are minimal, and yet it appears that Twitch does take action against sexual conduct at a slightly higher rate than harassment, perhaps signaling an emphasis in priorities. It is possible to see these numbers in Twitch's Transparency Report as a defense against the problems of toxic community policing—namely, lower enforcement might in fact mean that the company does *not* frequently act on what could be malicious uses of community reporting, like toxic community policing. However, as examples like She Snaps, Quqco, and numerous others show, whether one is actually suspended or banned is often irrelevant to the goals of these actions. Merely the threat of punishment gives undue power to those in a toxic community that seek to regulate women's bodies and performances of gender on the platform, and the community guidelines and reporting features can serve as tools of that power.

Perhaps in response to these incidents and data, harassment via mass-reporting was specifically admonished within the community guidelines as of December 9, 2020, stating, "Harassment has many manifestations, including stalking, personal attacks, promotion of physical harm, hostile raids, and *malicious false report brigading*" (Twitch 2020, emphasis added).

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Yet it is unclear how "false report brigading" is defined or identified, nor the specific mechanisms of enforcement in use.

A newer "Hateful Conduct and Harassment" policy went into effect on January 22, 2021, in an attempt to specify even further the process for reporting, identifying, and punishing for harassment on the site, but there are still wide gaps in clarity, particularly around this style of toxic community policing. Much of this new policy goes into describing forms of harassment, noting the most severe cases surround issues of targeted harassment based on protected characteristics like race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and others.

Yet these updates do not make any mention of "harassment via moderation tools" or types of toxic community policing. Indeed, there is actually *less* reference to such action, due to the removal of a section on "malicious false reporting," seemingly downplaying the issue. What is clear is a lack of attention and direct rhetoric toward this type of behavior, something that this chapter argues is inevitably tied up in any form of community-based reporting moderation. Live streaming platforms are stuck with the issue of moderation at immense scale, so a reliance on community-based moderation is understandable. Yet all communities must deal with certain toxic elements (some more than others), and these flagging systems must account for this inevitable reality. While there is no immediately obvious solution, it is clear that toxic community policing must be at least recognized and identified for what it is and when it happens so that attention may be paid by platform companies, their workers, their users, and the larger legal apparatus under which they all operate.

Detoxifying Community Moderation

Toxic community policing can become part of content moderation on digital platforms that relies predominantly on a large scale of user-generated content. Community-based moderation is often promoted as a democratizing force (in theory) and can be easily marketed as such in policies that emphasize the value of user communities. In other words, these approaches to moderation are not only about answering an issue of scale, but appealing to the user base on a cultural and ideological level.

Platforms and the companies that operate them are in a bind both technologically and culturally; they must rely on communities to help moderate themselves due to the problems of scale, but the cultural and ideological

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divisions within those communities create opportunities for exploitation. In the example of Twitch, we see a "toxic technoculture" (Massanari 2017, 333) become empowered via community-based moderation and can thus participate in toxic community policing, where the very tools meant to benefit the community are used to harass, oppress, and stifle those outside the perceived dominant framework.

Moderation must occur, and community-based moderation is unlikely to go away as an option. Rather than eliminate the entire endeavor due to toxic community policing, platforms, users, and academics must turn to more cultural and structural forms of change rather than new technologies like artificial intelligence or advanced flagging. Similar to the ways that traditional law enforcement is regulated, digital media companies may start looking at creating internal affairs agencies for their user base, organizations within companies meant to oversee community flagging and reporting irregularities. There must also be harsher penalties and enforcement for this inappropriate use of flagging, as suspensions are not enough. Since toxic community policing frequently relies on coordination among users across platforms, so must companies synchronize their efforts to allow better regulation across platforms. Unified ethical and regulatory standards for moderation across digital media, especially live streaming, would go a long way toward curbing this perversion of moderation.

So long as toxic cultures exist, and so long as communities are relied upon to moderate content, toxic community policing will inevitably occur. But with a better understanding of how and why it functions, how affordances are manipulated, and the similarities across digital platforms, the companies responsible for running these sites can begin to address the problem. Like with any complicated issue, all solutions come with new problems. But identifying the harmful action and acknowledging it constitutes a powerful first step.

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Broadcasting Gender and Sexuality

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9 The Friendly, Funny, and Bizarre Queer on Live: Queer Live Streaming in South Korea

Jin Lee

Introduction

Live streaming has been popular in South Korea (hereafter Korea) since the early 2000s, initially having developed as vernacular cultures around the local media-streaming platform AfreecaTV (Song 2018), and recently evolving across platforms, including the Naver V app (King-O'Riain 2020), and the world's most popular video-streaming platform YouTube (Heo, Kim, and Yan 2020). Live streaming is frequently practiced by young LGBT YouTubers who publicly disclose their sexual identity and brand their YouTube channels with such identities through hashtags (e.g., #Koreangaycouple), content titles (e.g., "Gay Couple's Honeymoon Video"), and the content itself. First being developed by a few pioneering male gay YouTube channels, such as CHANNEL GIMCHEOLSOO, Open.Kr, and Yeol Lee (TWOTEN), which have become popular gradually since 2016, LGBT YouTube channels increased around 2019–2021, mostly focusing on live streaming content. These LGBT YouTubers live stream frequently (e.g., four times a week) and prolongedly (e.g., from one hour to even four hours per broadcast). Considering the dominant antiqueer sentiments in Korea (Han 2016; Nayong 2018), it is worthwhile to study how these people live stream and make their online presence visible while striving as queers in a homophobic society.

This chapter explores media practices of Korean LGBT YouTubers for visibility during their live streaming, which I call "queer live streaming." I address two questions: First, how do the LGBT YouTubers organize their content for queer live streaming? Second, what are the sociocultural meanings of queer live streaming? To answer these questions, I focus on three media practices that are frequently exercised in queer live streaming:

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(1) "storytelling the everyday" with their audiences; (2) "performing their gigs" to entertain audiences; and (3) *ssulpulgi,* which involves unraveling their queer anecdotes. This chapter argues that these practices make queer live streaming a locus to build a sense of community between LGBT YouTubers and their audiences and subvert heteronormativity with frivolity, but at the same time result in the sexualization and consumption of LGBT as items for fun and pleasure in the attention economy of YouTube. The data presented here are developed from the textual analysis of the digital estates of young LGBT YouTubers in Korea and long-term digital ethnography.

Homophobic *and* Queer-Friendly Korea

Antiqueer sentiments are dominant within South Korea when it comes to human rights issues, but ironically LGBT images are favorably consumed in media culture. According to the Pew Research Center's report on national attitudes toward homosexuality, Korea is one of the countries showing the lowest acceptance rate of homosexuality among high-income countries (Poushter and Kent 2020). Not only is same-sex marriage forbidden, but also a bill to ban discrimination against gender, sexuality, disability, race, and others has been sitting on the table at the Korean National Assembly since 2007 due to backlash from conservative Christian groups (Jung 2020). Left without any legal and institutional protective measures, sexual minorities in Korea show a significantly higher prevalence of depression, and suicidal ideation and attempts than the general population (Yi et al. 2017).

Contrary to the dominant antiqueer sentiments in politics and society, cultural scenes are welcoming LGBT images, particularly images of male gay couples. Originally influenced by the Japanese subculture Yaoi in the late 1990s, a subculture of fantasizing male-male romance has developed among young women in Korea, which is now visible in the mainstream media culture as well (Kwon 2019). So-called boys-love (BL) content is favorably consumed and produced in young women's subcultures and K-pop cultures. Not only do K-pop fans create and consume fan factions of their male stars engaging in homoromantic relationships with other male stars, but star agencies and media industries also make their business by producing BL texts and appealing to niche demands for BL (Kwon 2019). Media scholar Jungmin Kwon (2019) finds political implications from the

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BL culture, including its potential of reversing heteronormativity and forging queer solidarity. Yet some scholars criticize its mirroring fantasy of heterosexuality, in which homoerotic relationships are imagined along the line with gender scripts featuring love between a feminine male character and a masculine male character (Hong 2008; Zhou, Paul, and Sherman 2018).

In these contexts, Korean internet celebrities who publicly identify their LGBT identities have gradually entered social media scenes, extended BL culture, and built a new subculture for queers online. LGBT content is now a popular sight on platforms like YouTube, in which such nonheterosexual influencers exhibit their identities "authentically," using new media technologies like live streaming, rather than creating "filtered" or "fantasized" queer images.

Queer Social Media, Live Streaming, and *Yingyeo* Culture

Online communities and social media platforms like YouTube have afforded various ways for LGBT users to communicate with those with similar identities and to raise collective voices for social change via feelings of intimate connections (Cavalcante 2019; Lucero 2017). Given that live streaming contributes to forging and facilitating a "consistent community" between participants through a sense of "liveness" (King-O'Riain 2020, 4), LGBT YouTubers' live streaming content may also provide a relatively convenient way to build queer communities online through its unique sense of "liveness" that is circulated among audiences and streamers on the platform.

However, LGBT visibility on social media, including queer live streaming, should be discussed through a multidimensional approach considering socioeconomies in the media industry and culture. In the late-capitalist culture, where one's unique identity becomes a means of *branding* the self and generating fame, minority identities are strategically curated on media to garner more attention from and appeal to a niche for diversity while conforming to social norms rather than challenging them (Banet-Weiser 2012; Gray 2013). Within this context, nonnormative sexual identity may be *effective* in beguiling audiences and competing for attention on social media when it is presented pleasantly and entertainingly. Gay YouTubers often perform their sexualities in an "acceptable" manner of "get[ting] over their marginality" to capitalize on their identities within media culture

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(Lovelock 2017). In this manner, LGBT identities on social media are *authentically* calibrated, manufactured, and practiced in line with the attention economy that runs through social media cultures (Abidin 2017).

Indeed, Korean live streaming culture is already structured in line with the attention-centered economic principles. Live streaming via platforms like AfreecaTV and YouTube works within networked economies wherein networked relations between streamers and the audience and consumers facilitate various businesses and activate the flow of capital like money, attention, and visibility within the cultures. For instance, YouTube's Super Chat donation (and similarly, AfreecaTV's *Byulpoongsun* [별풍선] system) illuminates how live streamers monetize their intimacies with their audiences and consumers for their media business (Guarriello 2019). To generate views and to captivate the eyeballs of audiences in hopes of their monetary donations, streamers engage in clickbait content and sensational and excessive actions, such as the infamous media practice of binge-eating (also called *mukbang* [먹방] in Korean), violence, or sensual body moves, which constitute the infamous media vernacular culture, *yingyeo* culture, in Korea (Kim 2017; Song 2018).

Yingyeo culture [잉여문화, meaning "surplus culture" in English] refers to a culture where young people—who are not considered to be contributing to the economy because they remain unemployed and idle—call themselves *yingyeo* [surplus] in a self-deprecating manner (Song 2018). The *yingyeos* are widely considered "social misfits" for their lack of socioeconomic, cultural, and educational capital and their failure at social competitions like marriage, employment, and education (Lee and Abidin 2021, 4–5). By binge-watching others doing absurd things online, the *yingyeos* construct their own vernacular culture centering on instant pleasure and unproductiveness, wherein they can temporarily escape from the unpromising realities, as evidenced in the proliferation of *mukbang*, game broadcasting, and pornlike misogynistic content online (Lee and Abidin 2021; Song 2018).

Within *yingyeo* culture, the audiences of live streaming content are often reported to occupy the position of power by almost enforcing streamers to do whatever they are asking for, exercising their economic power in the money donation system during live streaming (Song 2018). The power dynamics shape the "monstrous" culture of violence, pleasure, and fun in line with attention economies within media environments (Kim 2017). Within this context, it is worthy to study how LGBT people who have historically been

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marked as "abnormal" and "exotic" in Korean media scenes (Jin Lee 2013) position themselves through/or with their identity on social media through live streaming within today's brand culture.

Queer Live Streaming

This chapter draws on a yearlong ethnography that involves a textual analysis of queer live streaming content and in-depth interviews with LGBT YouTubers from 2019 to 2020. I have followed twenty-two LGBT-identified YouTube channels since 2019 and interviewed seven of their creators, to understand their concerns and practices as LGBT YouTubers. The twenty-two teams include eleven gay male couples, five lesbians, five trans women, and one bisexual woman. Sometimes together with their romantic partners and sometimes individually, the twenty-two teams live stream on YouTube regularly and later post edited versions of their live streaming content (also called "live highlights") on their channels.

Live streaming is crucial for the LGBT YouTubers in this study in relation to their economies and nonnormative identity. Dia, who runs the gay couple YouTube channel Hyugayso with their partner Dinner-Gury, explains that live streaming is the only option available to them to make earnings from YouTube as a gay man. This is echoed in other LGBT YouTubers in my interviews. On YouTube, people can make income either through participating in sponsorship deals or directly through the YouTube Partner Program system (YouTube 2020), which allows users to monetize their content when they meet certain requirements (e.g., 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 watch hours) (Lee and Abidin 2021, 4). Hour-long live streaming is useful for new aspirants to meet the 4,000 watch-hours criterion relatively easily. For LGBT YouTubers in Korea like Dia, however, it is particularly important because it affords a chance to continue their business despite their nonnormative sexuality within the heteronormative YouTube ecology. Dia states that "advertisers don't propose sponsorship deals to queer channels, to avoid any controversies, like backlash from antiqueer Christian communities. They don't want to be in trouble for people like us."

In this vein, the viewer donation system during live streaming appears to be a lucrative model for them to supplement earnings from YouTube that they could have made if they were—as Dia criticizes—"just normal heterosexual YouTubers." Although their income from donations fluctuates

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and is not predictable, some of the LGBT YouTubers make up to $1,000 at times from donations during one live streaming session. Thus, many LGBT YouTubers are led to do the extensive labor of live streaming frequently and prolongedly.

Yet, to compete with the increasing inflow of queer-identified YouTube aspirants, which has been notable during the pandemic, the LGBT streamers need to develop media strategies and make their content unique in tandem with their "LGBT brands." To captivate viewer eyeballs, the LGBT YouTubers exercise various media practices and performances, which I call "gigs." Gigs are crucial elements of queer live streaming culture, through which the streamers and audiences exchange values and capital, including entertainment value, intimacies, money, and attention. These gigs can be categorized into three genres: (1) storytelling the everyday, (2) performing queer gigs, and (3) *ssulpulgi*. In this manner, queer live streaming serves as a queer community where the streamers and audiences collectively work together and resist heteronormativity with frivolity.

Storytelling the Everyday

The LGBT YouTubers adopt various YouTube practices, often from nonqueer YouTubers, and they do not necessarily limit themselves to their sexuality. "Storytelling the everyday" is one of the media practices that content creators commonly employ (Reade 2020). Content creators broadcast their everyday lives and share private and personal details with their audiences and followers, which help them perform authenticity and build intimacy with them (Reade 2020; King-O'Riain 2020). The storytelling practice is also found among the LGBT YouTubers, but often in relation to their nonheterosexual identities. It has an additional function for the LGBT YouTubers, in that it helps liberate themselves from the "queer markers" by interacting with their audiences/followers with solidarity.

Rangdoong, who runs a YouTube channel as an HIV-positive gay person, says that live streaming provides an avenue to vent his thoughts and feelings and a way to feel intimacy and solidarity with others in the same situation. During live streaming, not only does he reveal his secret—HIV-positive status—but also he shares his mundane daily life with audiences, such as his work, his college life, and even his dinner menu. The storytelling during live streaming allows Rangdoong and his audiences to put their "ordinariness"

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back into their lives, which has not been conventionally appreciated for gay men by the dominant HIV/gay stigma in the society. The storytelling is reciprocally practiced both by the YouTubers and audiences and followers, in a manner that the audience/followers share their personal stories and concerns about identity, and the streamers often play as counselors by listening to the stories, suggesting tips and solutions to handle issues. In turn, queer live streaming functions as a friend community where people forge a sense of intimate connection; get to know each other deeply, including very private relationships; and provide emotional support.

However, to make live streaming an intimate community, both audiences and streamers are required to practice the "emotion work" (Hochschild 1979) of managing their feelings within the broader YouTube ecology. Content creators must present themselves as friendly and intimate and manage their feelings so as not to interrupt the *flow* of their content (Abidin 2017; Reade 2020). This emotion work may be present for many YouTubers in general, but is doubly so for LGBT YouTubers because of Korean society's dominant anti-queer sentiment. For instance, the male gay YouTuber KimDdolddol responds very gently, not showing any feeling or emotion, to homophobic comments that regularly appear during live streaming: (in response to the comment "you dirty faggot") "You cannot say 'dirty' to a person, I look pretty today. I did my hair today and am wearing a beautiful suit. Please don't say like that, okay?" (KimDdolddol 2020). Likewise, the LGBT YouTubers in my data tend to lay bare their personal feelings during live streaming and manage any controversial issues of their LGBT identities on the personal levels, so as not to disturb their audience or disrupt their streaming.

Performing Queer Gigs

The LGBT YouTubers also perform unusual, hilarious, and ridiculous gigs around their sexuality, which I call "queer gigs." Their gigs aim to create an intimate and humorous atmosphere throughout their live streaming to generate attention, and to curate their LGBT identity in their own way against social stigmas and stereotypes. Many LGBT YouTubers echo in the interviews that LGBT YouTube is already a "red ocean," so they must try various things to compete for attention, especially given that they all live stream around the same time at night (8 p.m. to 12 a.m.). By performing something memorable and fun to watch, like performing androgynous or

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feminine K-pop dance routines (see Oh and Oh 2017), or something absurd, like playing a recorder with your nose, the LGBT YouTubers establish their channel brands and have their audiences *settled* in their branded channels.

Yejiju is a famous lesbian YouTuber known for her hilarious queer gigs. Among various funny things that she shows during her live streaming, her impromptu show is notable. For example, she sings her own song, *yeojohma* [여좋마, an abbreviation of "don't love women" (여자 좋아하지 마세요)], which sarcastically criticizes heteronormativity, which now plays as a jingle with her videos. During her live streaming one day in 2020, she learned that there was a homophobic program from a church that aimed to "cure homosexuality." To make fun of the program, she suggested, "Then we can make and sing a song there," simply repeating the homophobic narrative "don't love women," but finishing the song with a punchline "please don't love women, because those women are all mine" (Yejiju 2020c). By sarcastically reversing the homophobic narrative, she resists heteronormativity with frivolity. The counternarrative against homophobia is elevated to more humorous and visible levels as she often performs this gig in variations, such as dancing in safety vests and holding police light sticks as if she is a police force who protects lesbians from homophobic Christians (figure 9.1).

Notably, her frivolous queer gig is sometimes performed *collectively* with her fans—whom she nicknames "ladies"—through live streaming as her



Figure 9.1
Screengrab of Yejiju's *yeojohma* dance with police sticks (Yejiju 2020a).

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fan-audiences actively participate in making her live streaming queer content rather than just passively consuming it. Yejiju's fan-audiences make various versions of the song "Don't Love Women," including a piano version, a Christmas carol version, a jazz version, and a dance club version, and amplify her original content and counternarrative message as Yejiju uploads them to her channel.

Similarly, Yejiju's fan-audiences participate in other queer gigs through the subsection of live streaming. Every other Wednesday, Yejiju runs a subsection where her audiences send random pictures of their ordinary lives and Yejiju guesses their sexual orientations by looking at the pictures. For instance, one audience member sends a picture of an ice cream treat and Yejiju guesses that she is a lesbian, as a small part of the ice cream looks like the English capital "L," signifying her lesbian identity (Yejiju 2020b). By participating in the absurd but hilarious quiz content, the fan-audiences also challenge heteronormative essentialism and prove that "queers are everywhere."

However, since these gigs are dependent on one's creative abilities, not many LGBT YouTubers can develop funny queer gigs and maintain high view counts for years. Many LGBT YouTubers in the interviews state that they have many worries about how to manage their live streaming content, how to expand their viewership, and how not to lose their subscribers. While their nonnormative LGBT brands can yield a number of views and subscribers relatively easily at the beginning, those without the creativity to develop unique queer gigs are likely to fall behind their YouTube competition and may not gain much profit from their work. For this reason, some LGBT YouTubers have temporarily left YouTube live streaming or made their content private and redefined their live streaming as an intimate place for just their best friends (e.g., Yeol Lee 2020).

Ssulpulgi: Unraveling Their Queer Stories

Some of the LGBT YouTubers "sell" their queer stories during live streaming through another queer media practice, *ssulpulgi*. *Ssulpulgi* is a kind of gig that entertains audiences with their glib ability. *Ssul* [썰] is a Korean vernacular that refers to someone's unusual anecdote. People on the internet use expressions like *ssulpulgi* [썰풀기] or *ssulpunda* [썰푼다] when they relate their anecdotes to draw people's attention, which is widely found in the AfreecaTV live streaming content and *yingyeo* culture. Live streamers tell humorous monologues and sexual jokes as if they are doing stand-up

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shows; and audiences donate money when the stories are funny or the streamers respond to their requests for *ssuls* (Kim 2017; Song 2018).

Queer *ssulpulgi* is somewhat different from other queer live streaming practices mentioned here, in that those queer *ssuls* instigate audiences' curiosity with sensational topics as to LGBT sexuality and bodies, rather than encouraging audiences' participation. It can also work as a double-edged sword within *yingyeo* culture, where the number of views and the amount of donations are determined by how sensational and provocative the content is (Kim 2017). Some popular LGBT YouTubers who have more than 100,000 subscribers and do live streaming both on YouTube and AfreecaTV practice *ssulpulgi* as a way of selling their identities as their brands to attract people's attention. YouTubers like Pungja and Ggodja, who identify as trans women, are the best examples.

Pungja is one of the most successful trans-identified YouTubers, recording 506,000 subscribers as of January 2021. She is known for her *ssulpulgi*, wherein she tells funny stories about her life as a trans woman. Her *ssuls* include her experience at transgender bars, her coming out to her boyfriend's parents, and her close friend's mistreatment of her as an exotic sex toy. During *ssulpulgi*, she uses vulgar and straightforward language and profanity to vividly deliver her feelings of anger, fear, and frustration that she experienced when her sexual identity was stigmatized and sexualized. During her narration of her queer anecdotes, *ssulpulgi*, audiences also attend to her stories, get upset and feel bad for her, and criticize patriarchy and heteronormativity: "do they have a trans-friend as an accessory? I'm so pissed off!" (PungjaTelevi 2020b); "trans identity isn't a sin ㅠㅠ [crying emoji in Korean]" (PungjaTelevi 2020a).

Through Pungja's unique *ssuls*, Pungja and their audiences gather and develop a sense of solidarity against transphobia, while Pungja herself accrues views and donations. Indeed, when Pungja shares her *ssuls*, the more resonating and funnier they are as to her trans identity, the more donations she tends to receive from her audiences. While her trans woman *ssuls* spark discussions about stigmas against trans people and criticize the working of heteronormativity in our personal relationships, they can also be used as clickbait to stimulate people's curiosity about unknown and exotic queer stories, in line with the old media convention of exoticizing sexual minorities in Korea (Jin Lee 2013).

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Ggodja is also popular for her *ssulpulgi* gigs—particularly *ssuls* around sex. Her *ssulpulgi* content covers her confirmation surgery, her work experience in brothels, and her getting several plastic surgeries, including breast enhancement and nose reconstruction. Although her *ssuls* illuminate the distressing reality of how trans women are sexually objectified and how difficult it is for them to continue their lives in the face of sexual stigmas, her *ssuls* are mostly practiced as a way of sexualizing her trans body. For example, her most viewed content (over 280,000 views as of December 2021) tells how she masturbates and how different her masturbation is after the surgery: "[After transition] it becomes complicated, I need to prepare a lot and use both hands to have an orgasm. But when I was a man, it's so easy, you just hold and shake yours—aargh!" (Ggodja 2020). When she tells the *ssuls* about her trans body, it is almost impossible to read comments on the live chat screen as many people comment with excitement and donate money so they can hear more. During live streaming, the queer solidarity that is often found in other YouTubers' queer live streaming content is rarely seen; Ggodja and her audiences only interact via donations, in that she tells her *ssuls* and people send her money to hear more sex-related stories and jokes, in which queer reality and resistance are overshadowed by the pleasure-seeking *yingyeo* culture.

When social norms and morals are transgressed for instant pleasure and fun in *yingyeo* culture, such transgressive acts often entail today's online hate discourse and online sexual assaults targeted at social minorities (Kim 2017; Song 2018). Within this context, Ggodja's trans body is consumed as an exotic item of live streaming. She presents her body as a bizarre object that is constantly molded into an artificial woman through ongoing plastic surgeries. This is done not only through *ssuls* about her confirmation surgery, but also through visual presentations of herself; she constantly appears on screen with a swollen face with bandages and bruises from ongoing cosmetic surgeries. As she appears as an exotic trans body in this manner, some audiences explicitly express their desire, saying "[her vagina] must look sexy since it's artificially made," and donate money to her via Super Chats. She then continues to illustrate the look of her genitals, aware of the audiences' positive reactions and continued donations. As her trans body functions as clickbait content and spectacle that can be looked at in exchange for money, queer politics in queer live streaming, such as community-building

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and resistance, is broadly dismissed by society yet consumed for *yingyeo* pleasure and humor.

Conclusion

Through various gigs, LGBT YouTubers occupy live streaming space as a queer community. By storytelling about their everyday experiences, the LGBT YouTubers and their audiences find intimacy, remain connected, and casually check up on each other to lend support. To attract attention and win more views in the competition of queer live streaming, LGBT YouTubers further develop their own queer gigs by satirizing homophobia. By participating in the gigs that YouTubers are doing, fan-audiences also help live streaming continue smoothly, which fundamentally and frivolously resists heteronormative essentialism. *Ssulpulgi* content also provides a queer place of destabilizing heteronormativity and raising queer awareness.

However, as live streaming is also run through the monetary donation system and governed by broader sociocultural principles, including attention economy and *yingyeo* culture, such resistant queer live streaming may end up reinforcing the dominant heteronormative perspective, which consumes queerness as an absurd and exotic flavor for fun and pleasure. In the money donation systems that many LGBT YouTubers depend on for their living, queer bodies are often displayed on YouTube as spectacles to watch, responding to audiences' demands in *yingyeo* culture. No matter how queer and resistant queer gigs are, they are often decontextualized but consumed for pleasure and fun.

A few famous trans YouTubers were embroiled in a scandal in 2019 when a rumor about their prostitution spread online. Some of them derived fresh content from such rumors and practiced *ssulpulgi* about the reality of trans bars and brothels, all of which resulted in controversies but yielded profitable outcomes in terms of view counts, donations, and comments. While the visibility of LGBT YouTubers has increased thanks to such scandals and media personalities like Ggodja, it is doubtful whether this visibility can raise queer awareness and help other sexual minorities come out of the closet.

I conclude this chapter by citing trans human rights activist Edhi's comment from an interview. As a counselor of trans youths at the LGBTQ Youth Crisis Support Center, DDing Dong, she is skeptical of the increased visibility of queer YouTubers because "LGBT youths are significantly affected

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by these YouTubers. And when these YouTubers just talk about their experiences with prostitution, the LGBT youths feel frustrated, thinking that the only job available to them is still selling sex." Although friendly, funny, and bizarre queer live streams allow sexual minorities to construct their subcultures, when they expand and are incorporated within the money-centered and attention-seeking mainstream culture, such subcultural characteristics of resistance and politics are superficially consumed. Then where is safe for sexual minorities to find intimacy and feel connected with a sense of liveness? Considering the increasing popularity of LGBT live streaming content among queer and nonqueer youths, it is urgent to discuss what protective measures we can develop to maintain LGBT live streaming as a safe queer place and how we can help LGBT people on social media exercise their queer creativity.

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10 Tip the Queens! *Black Girl Magic* and Streaming Queer Pleasures

Christopher J. Persaud

In the popular imagination, gay nightlife venues have long been spaces for queer people to explore their identities and pursue pleasurable activities in relative safety. The sociologist Jason Orne (2017) argues that gayborhoods and their entertainment institutions don't simply celebrate differences—they create them. In claiming space beyond mainstream bounds, gay places are rich sites on which alternative queer cultures can grow and flourish. But what happens when these crowded dance floors, intimate bars, and dark back rooms are unavailable? If going out is no longer possible, how might queer nightlife traditions like the drag show, dance party, and fundraiser play out online?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, live streamed instantiations of queer nightlife have become ubiquitous, offering what Marko Djurdjić (2020) describes as a reprieve from the isolation of quarantine that allows attendees "to re-interpret and recreate the spaces that we can't live without." The digital nightlife event series *Club Quarantine* has received a good deal of mainstream press coverage for its near-daily convening of young queer folks streaming themselves on Zoom from bedrooms, living rooms, and basements (Colyar 2020; Goldfine 2020). Queer influencers and content creators have taken to hosting fundraisers and charity entertainment events through live streaming platforms, funneling tips and donations to community groups and direct mutual aid funds. Drag artists have pivoted to mixing preproduced music videos with live lip-syncing on Twitch, taking advantage of audiovisual and monetization affordances on the site to support themselves. In many ways, the rapid uptake of different live streaming formats for queer nightlife purposes is unsurprising, given the long history of queer people being early adopters of internet technologies to connect with one another and build community on a global scale (Gross 2003;

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McGlotten 2013; Campbell 2014). In what follows, I present a case study of *Black Girl Magic*, a live streamed nightlife event series, through which I examine the mediated coconstruction of queer nightlife by performers and audiences, Black drag as social criticism, and the role of pleasure in queer community-building practices.

Black Girl Magic is a monthly show starring an all-Black cast of drag artists, which ordinarily took place in person at Roscoe's Tavern in Chicago. The show's host and cofounder, The Vixen, is an alum of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and a mainstay of Chicago queer nightlife. At the beginning of the pandemic, the organizers quickly pivoted to producing a live streamed version of *Black Girl Magic* on Twitch.tv and later distributing the recordings through the Open Television (OTV) intersectional distribution platform (Christian 2018; OTV Team 2020). Drag performers in the *Black Girl Magic* series, united by their shared membership among the global Black diaspora, use a variety of costume, musical, and visual styles that reference and celebrate Black women entertainers, artists, celebrities, and historical figures. Event organizers took advantage of internet distribution to showcase a variety of national and international drag performers that they otherwise wouldn't have been able to bring together in person in Chicago.

Throughout this chapter, I examine the nine monthly shows in the *Black Girl Magic* series that were live streamed on Twitch.tv in 2020. I discovered the *Black Girl Magic* live streamed events through my personal connections in the Chicago drag community and took it up as a supplementary part of my digital ethnographic work on Twitch drag (Persaud and Perks 2022). I was able to catch five of the nine shows live on Twitch and watched the other four as recorded events on OTV. For me, a scholar of queer media and cultural production, *Black Girl Magic* was a window into the changing terrain of queer nightlife toward live streamed events during the COVID-19 pandemic given that, as drag queen Vinegar Strokes put it before beginning her musical theater set on the April 2020 show, "everywhere is closed, Broadway is closed, West End is closed, and my legs are unfortunately closed as well!" Moving between thematic and textual analysis of real-time observation, recorded video productions, and social media posts, I explore how entertainers and audiences coproduce the mediated queer nightlife experience of the *Black Girl Magic* drag performance series.

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Reading and Viewing Drag Live Streaming

Queer Media Studies and Live Streaming

Entertainment media are part of what the communication scholar Larry Gross (2001) calls the "electronic nervous system" of contemporary society, where communication and media technologies are increasingly the dominant means through which we come to know the world beyond ourselves. Film, television, music, and more recently, the internet, social media, and new media like live streaming enable audiences, communities, and relationships with creators to develop that otherwise might never have. These mediated avenues of information, education, and pleasure are the media by which people come to understand experiences that they might never personally live. Queer media studies scholars have long been interested in topics like media representation, audience interpretation and reception, subcultures, and creative cultural production by and for queer people (e.g., Russo 1987; Sender 2005; Benshoff and Griffin 2006; Ruberg and Shaw 2017; Shaw and Persaud 2020). This case study builds on this body of literature by examining live streamed queer nightlife as a text of queer cultural production to be read and as a site of contested queer community.

There is an emergent body of scholarship on live streaming, as the edited collection in which this chapter is located exemplifies, which focuses on popular culture and social life. While T. L. Taylor's *Watch Me Play* (2018) is perhaps the best-known example with lay readers, I am also in conversation with culturally engaged research on live streaming and questions of race, gender, and sexuality (Gray 2017; Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019; Ruberg and Lark 2020). Moreover, this work connects with literature on internet microcelebrity that centers the interdependence of content creators and audiences, as well as the intimate labor that sustains their fluctuating relationships (Senft 2008; Marwick 2013; Abidin 2015; Baym 2018).

Situating Drag in Queer Nightlife

Drag has long been an integral part of queer nightlife, but beyond showcasing gender fuckery, camp aesthetics, and distinctly queer points of view in the here-and-now (Muñoz 2009), it is also a means to commune with queer pasts. While much attention has been paid to drag as explicit gender performativity (Newton 1979; Butler 1990), it has also been framed as a performance practice that draws on nostalgia and queer affect to collapse

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historical distance in service of queer materiality (Crookston 2021). In particular, lip-synching, which the vast majority of *Black Girl Magic* performers do during their sets, is a dramaturgical tool that connects contemporary local LGBTQ communities with their historical antecedents (Farrier 2016). In this way, queer nightlife centered around drag is a means to build and refract community across time and space.

Many drag performers and artists in the digital age have become adept at appropriating networked communication technologies to their own performance and self-representation ends, contributing to what Lingel and Golub (2015) call "technological seamfulness." Showcasing a mix of real-time and prerecorded drag performances and leveraging distribution platforms like Twitch and OTV to put on a digital version of *Black Girl Magic* constitute yet another example of this practice. While some performers in the *Black Girl Magic* series have been on *RuPaul's Drag Race* (or even won it), as I argue later in this chapter, the mediated live streamed space of the series resists postracial politics, overt commercialization and cooption by established culture industries, as well as the idea that there is a singular notion of what drag should be and do.

In a post–*RuPaul's Drag Race* world, where the Emmy-winning international reality television empire propels drag artists to fame and fortune, scholars have examined how the mainstream representation, reception, and transformation of drag have shaped popular culture and modern queer nightlife alike. As Eir-Anne Edgar (2011) has written, the *RuPaul's Drag Race* series constructs a particular vision of "successful" drag that leverages feminine stereotypes, queer historical references, and gender performance that ultimately forecloses more critical and complex cultural negotiations with gender and sexuality. To that end, Alyxandra Vesey (2017) has argued that *Drag Race* contestants are thrust into a complicated position fraught with neoliberal and postracial politics as they navigate reality television and recording industry expectations. Both of these pieces of scholarship demonstrate how *RuPaul's Drag Race* has platformed drag and queer nightlife aesthetics in a way that strips them of their subversive and radical queer politics, while simultaneously creating an avenue through which some drag performers might ascend to mainstream pop stardom and celebrity status.

To that end, while Feldman and Hakim (2020) have noted that the mainstreaming of drag has been largely beneficial for traditional culture industries like television and music, there is little evidence that drag's ascent in

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popular culture has platformed the transgressive politics in which the queer art form has historically been immersed. From a sociological standpoint, McCormack and Wignall (2021) examine the perspectives and experiences of British drag performers, suggesting that drag has become a legitimate mainstream creative career in the popular imagination even as the reality of its precarity, financialization, and labor difficulties is obscured. At the same time, the mainstreaming of drag has introduced new avenues for drag performers to explore activist interests and explicitly political aesthetics in front of much larger audiences than those to which they have historically had access. Renee Middlemost (2019, 2020) explicates how Bob the Drag Queen and Sasha Velour (recent winners of the American *RuPaul's Drag Race* show) have leveraged their newfound mainstream celebrity and digital media savvy as drag activists, adapting a long history of employing drag performance and persona in support of LGBTQ causes. Following this, the uptake of drag in popular culture has the potential to platform some drag performers who are interested in making activism and celebrity advocacy a central part of their personal brand.

With these studies in mind, I would argue that drag has become a contested object for both scholars of queer media and cultural production and sexuality studies, where mainstream visibility and access to the financial and social capital of legacy media have complicated what was once an underground subversive queer cultural touchstone. To be clear, queer nightlife is neither inherently utopian in its roles in LGBTQ community construction, nor is it entirely disconnected from the disciplining forces that govern representations of queerness in everyday life (Adeyemi, Khubchandani, and Rivera-Servera 2021). Yet drag (and many aspects of queer nightlife generally) requires audiences and performers alike to step into a temporary zone of creative bricolage and fabulousness that foregrounds queer political possibility (Moore 2018).

"Coming to You from Her Living Room, Honey . . ."

Drag performances in *Black Girl Magic* are set in a variety of backgrounds, including softly lit living rooms, colorful light projections on unplaceable blank walls, fully realized indoor and outdoor narrative short films, frenetic mélanges of popular media and queer underground art, and frequently some combination of all the aforementioned. These diverse stages are

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fundamentally constitutive of and contribute to the political commentary, aesthetic viewpoints, and semiotic dimensions of drag performances in the live streamed series.

Throughout the show, The Vixen's interludes connect with viewers (figure 10.1), both those watching live on Twitch and those who will watch the recordings at a later date, describing how much labor goes into producing a digital drag show, the talent and creative vision of performers, and the broader significance of creating a digital space for queer nightlife when the opportunity to occupy physical space is foreclosed. Given the creative control over audiovisual presentation that the live streamed drag show affords, many drag artists opt for highly produced music video productions where they are performer, audio engineer, and video editor alike. Drag artists in *Black Girl Magic* engage in a wide variety of entertainment practices including lip-syncing, comedic acting, dramatic monologues, poetry readings, a cappella vocal medleys, and esoteric performance art. Next, I outline three broad themes from the live streamed *Black Girl Magic* 2020 shows and offer an exemplary illustrative vignette for each to give a sense of the kinds of performances that audiences experienced. Notably, each of these themes highlights the underlying social criticism that permeates *Black Girl Magic* concerning intersectionality, racial justice, and Black cultural production.



Figure 10.1
Streamer and drag performer The Vixen addressing viewers from her living room.

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The first theme concerns historical homage to Black women civil rights movement icons, artists, and organizers like Fannie Lou Hamer, Maya Angelou, and Josephine Baker. As The Vixen regularly reminds the audience, the live streamed drag show is intended to celebrate the life and legacy of Black women across time and space. To this end, many performers develop elaborate set designs, costumes, and sonic environments that place their drag in conversation with a particular iconic Black woman in history. One such example from the April 2020 show is the Chicago drag queen Miss Toto's fantastical interpretation of Harriet Tubman, filmed in a sparsely furnished apartment and an outdoor woodland location (figure 10.2). The set opens with a supercut of film and documentary representations of her life before cutting to Miss Toto in a green-and-white housemaid-style outfit cleaning, sewing, and doing other domestic labor while Britney Spears's "I'm A Slave 4 U" plays in the background. After a short bit of sexy choreography, the shot changes to show her typing a message on an iPhone to "BLACK PEOPLE," telling them to meet her down by the river signed "xo, Harriet Tubman." The next scene shows Miss Toto running around an open field barefoot with a red lantern, while "C'mon 'N Ride It (The Train)" by Quad City DJs starts playing loudly, clearly a reference to the famed Underground Railroad. The latter portion of the set depicts an emotional



Figure 10.2
Miss Toto dancing in a field as Harriet Tubman during *Black Girl Magic*.

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lip-sync performance to Carly Rae Jepsen's "Run Away with Me" as Miss Toto splashes through a creek, soaking the hem of her dress.

Pan-African, Black Power, and Afrofuturist aesthetics are common reference points for drag performers in *Black Girl Magic*, which follows their popularity in contemporary Black cultural production more generally. This second theme attends to creative representations of a global Black diasporic identity that pull inspiration from twentieth-century Black American arts and culture movements. One example of this genre is Amber St. James's performance during the June 2020 show, where the bearded queen begins her set with a heartfelt lip-sync in kente cloth and rainbow makeup with a matching headwrap (figure 10.3). The African American actress Jenifer Lewis's protest song "Take Your Knee off My Neck" plays loudly, notably penned in summer 2020 in response to George Floyd's murder at the hands of a police officer in Minnesota. St. James's performance then moves to another evocative post–George Floyd song, "I Just Wanna Live" by Keedron Bryant, whose sudden social media virality propelled the Black thirteen-year-old boy into a record deal with Warner Music. Throughout these transitions, as her set finishes with a medley of upbeat gospel music, St. James deftly uses rainbow props and colorful African prints.

Referencing contemporary Black women entertainers like Beyoncé, Missy Elliott and Janelle Monae was a common audiovisual foundation for drag



Figure 10.3
Amber St. James performs gospel and protest songs in kente cloth.

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performers in the live streamed version of the show. This third theme is particularly distinct, as these performances were the most likely to leverage popular culture references, Black queer culture memes, and Black femme aesthetics. Halfway through the July 2020 show, The Vixen introduces the nonbinary drag artist Maxi Glamour by discussing their work as a community organizer in St. Louis. Maxi Glamour's set then opens with a medium shot of them dancing and posing as Janet Jackson's "Rhythm Nation" steadily plays (figure 10.4). Jackson has described the song as a piece of consciousness-raising social criticism, commenting that "I know a song or an album can't change the world. But there's nothing wrong with doing what we're doing to help spread the message. . . . If personal freedom has political implications and if pleasure must be part of any meaningful solution—and it really must—there's nothing wrong with it at all" (DeCurtis 1990). Maxi Glamour's energetic performance visually traces this social justice narrative as the scene glitches between their color-blocked dancer outfit, an Afrofuturist cyborg, and footage of recent unnamed protest before displaying with "DEFUND THE POLICE" as outro text.

While some fans and performers of live drag in nightclubs and elsewhere have framed "digital drag" as a lesser way to experience the art form, others have praised it as a way to elevate the medium into a full-fledged



Figure 10.4
Maxi Glamour pairs music and dance in a digital performance emphasizing social justice.

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audiovisual production (Framke 2020). The digital drag performances showcased in *Black Girl Magic* are largely prerecorded, and individual performers were free to represent their sets through a wide spectrum of production and form. Some chose to foreground the webcam aesthetic of watching a drag show framed in a horizontal or vertical shot that focused on the performer's body, while others took advantage of the prerecorded format to produce a fully realized short film that had a distinct point of view. *Black Girl Magic* did not seem to impose any particular production guidelines for performers, which afforded performers a great deal of creative agency. In this way, the pandemic-accelerated explosion of digital drag combines the subversive gender-fuckery of the drag performance tradition with the networked affordances of the live streaming platform to create a distinct kind of referential new media art and queer nightlife experience.

"Venmo, PayPal, Whatever, Tip the Queens!"

A running refrain from *Black Girl Magic*'s host The Vixen throughout all the shows was the importance of supporting the Black drag queens, transgender men and women, and nonbinary artists that make up its cast. Given the historical (and ongoing) intersectional marginalization of Black queer and trans people within LGBTQ and mainstream entertainment spaces, being an audience member with the means to offer financial support to *Black Girl Magic* performers was framed as a potentially reparative act. The overlay effects of the live streamed entertainment production on Twitch allowed performers to display their digital payment addresses (PayPal and Venmo primarily) while their clips were playing. In addition to Twitch's paid subscription and bits features, viewers were encouraged between sets to donate to individual performers or to a collective account to be distributed to the entire cast.

Certainly, some drag queens who have participated in *RuPaul's Drag Race* have been able to convert their television spotlight into steady streams of performance and creative production income, but the vast majority of drag artists do not make a living solely from their entertainment work (Kravitz 2018). To that end, The Vixen's steady reminders about the importance of paying for drag surface how being a queer public figure doesn't necessarily convert visibility into income. During all nine shows, viewers were prompted between each set by The Vixen and the Twitch chat moderators to monetarily

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support performers or relevant charity causes through tipping, purchasing merchandise, and donating to fundraisers. As an example of the show's commitment to community care, Shangela (another *RuPaul's Drag Race* alum) appeared toward the end of the June 2020 show to promote Feed the Queens, her partnership with the Actors Fund to raise money to distribute for food assistance to drag queens who are out of work due to the COVID-19 pandemic shuttering nightlife venues all over the US (Bonner 2020).

At the same time, The Vixen often acknowledges that the audience, presumably mostly queer and trans people, were likely to be disproportionately affected by the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Posting about the live show on social media, encouraging loved ones to check out future shows, and supporting local Black drag artists are presented as fine alternatives if providing monetary support to *Black Girl Magic* was not possible. Taken together, I would argue that these moments also highlighted the ambivalent relationship toward being a spokesperson that many queer internet microcelebrities experience, compounded by the reality that they are not generally compensated for this affective and activist labor until they have a very large platform with a mainstream audience (Abidin and Cover 2019; Duguay 2019; Persaud and Perks 2022).

Alongside this narrative that encourages viewers to financially support the Black drag artists providing entertainment, many of the performances across the nine shows engage in explicit and implicit messaging around Black empowerment, racial solidarity, and social critiques. In particular, the June and July 2020 events repeatedly referenced the summer racial justice, Black Lives Matter, and antipolice brutality protests that happened across the US (and internationally) in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and its entry into a long line of mediated "black witnessing" practices (Sharpe 2016; Richardson 2020). During a break in the June 2020 show, The Vixen momentarily put aside her upbeat host persona, noting that she was inspired by the diverse coalition of queer people around the country protesting and organizing for Black lives. The Twitch chat and social media commentators expressed their support for these efforts, highlighting the ways in which audience members were clearly engaged with the social justice ethos of the show. Later shows in August 2020 and beyond opened with a highlight reel including a scene where Black drag queens marched through Chicago with messages like "SIGN A FUCKING PETITION, DONATE TO BAIL FUNDS, AMPLIFY BLACK VOICES" flashing across the bottom of the screen.

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The proliferation of digital drag shows like *Black Girl Magic* has made clear the ways in which the monetization tools of live streaming, web video, and social media generally can be leveraged to encourage audiences to financially support LGBTQ nonprofit organizations, mutual aid initiatives, and performers directly. While I anticipate that digital drag will not supplant in-person drag performances in contexts where physical gatherings are possible, it is a salient example of the ways that digital communication technologies can be put to work to materially support queer communities.

"This Ain't No Regular Drag Show—If You're in My House, You Show Love!"

In addition to celebrating Black cultural production, furnishing social criticism, and underscoring the importance of paying drag artists for their performance labor, *Black Girl Magic* cultivates a community of care that centers pleasure. Moderators in the Twitch chat and The Vixen herself on-screen regularly reminded the audience that they should refrain from being toxic or otherwise disparaging about the drag performers, given the drag fandom's known issues with disparaging Black drag artists who don't conform to their expectations. Reminders to engage in self-care and community care are recurring commentary from the Vixen, in the context of the protests, policy dialogues, and other activities (especially those opposing anti-Black racism and racial violence) in the US following the events of summer 2020. For the audience, the performers in *Black Girl Magic* occasionally use their sets to comment on how the digital drag show was a way to connect with queer community that had been largely inaccessible due to the pandemic. Many drag artists (and recent research) acknowledge that isolation and separation due to COVID-19 have been especially hard for some queer people who rely on queer nightlife and leisure spaces to socialize with each other and physically embody their ideal selves (Anderson and Knee 2021).

As The Vixen repeats again and again, the drag series was inseparable from the radical notion that Black women, Black artists, and Black people deserve to be materially supported and honored for their contributions to popular culture. There is no *Black Girl Magic* without the political vision of the Black Panthers and the Combahee River Collective, the visual aesthetics of Afrofuturism and the global Black diaspora, and the musical genius of Beyoncé, Janet Jackson, and Aretha Franklin. These dimensions also contribute to reading

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Black Girl Magic as an example of what André Brock (2020) defines as Black cyberculture, or "speculative cyborg Blackness mediated by the digital" (17). While the digital drag show era is unlikely to replace in-person drag nightlife entertainment, *Black Girl Magic* exemplifies the central role of drag performers, their distinct political positions, and their cultivation of audiences that have a shared sense of queer community beyond any singular physical space. Taken together, mediated queer nightlife events are crucial avenues through which queer people might experience pleasure and community care when their physical options are foreclosed or otherwise out of reach.

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11 BabyRage: Playing while Pregnant in Live Streaming

Amanda L. L. Cullen

Women are no strangers to objectification, especially in the space of live streaming. In this chapter, I present a case study wherein live streaming acts as a new context in which pregnant bodies are scrutinized, and the participation of women is complicated in digital entertainment media. Video game live streaming has quickly become one of the most widespread and influential components of digital media and online communities today. Live streaming platforms like Twitch have increased the visibility not only of video games and players more broadly, but also of players who often have been overlooked in gaming culture, like pregnant players. Furthermore, the rise of video game live streaming has further complicated the question of video game representation by simultaneously presenting both in-game characters and live streamers themselves as objects of representation on screen. I perform a close reading of an interaction between a pregnant streamer and a dozen active viewers in her channel who were communicating with her while she played a horror game live on camera. I situate this interaction against the horror game that the streamer was playing, *Silver Chains* (2019), which features a narrative about monstrous motherhood. I argue that stereotypes about women and pregnancy in games and streaming influenced the interactions between streamer, viewers, and gaming content.

Reading Abjection in Streaming

Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the streamer by the pseudonym Brigid. I came across Brigid and her channel on the live streaming platform Twitch.tv one day in August 2019 as part of the participant observation I was engaged in for my dissertation on women's labor in live streaming. I was searching through the top categories for that day, and I noticed a horror

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game that had just been released, *Silver Chains*. Because my research interest is specifically in women who live stream their video game play and I have a personal interest in horror games, I decided to watch the first streamer whom I perceived to be a woman in their thumbnail and who was running a *Silver Chains* stream in English. When I joined the channel, Brigid had 102 viewers and an overall following of approximately 60,000 viewers. Of those 102 viewers, I observed that only about a dozen were active, meaning that they were regularly engaging the streamer or each other in conversation. Her chat rules at the time were "keep swearing to a minimum, no posting without permission, no spamming, be respectful and friendly." Brigid was visible on the screen from the chest up, streaming against a green backdrop that allowed her to present herself against the game screen. She was engaging and adept at performing exaggerated responses to this new horror game for her audience, which kept me in the channel past the point when I had planned to move on.

Being present for that extra time is what allowed me to capture the interaction I relate here, which I have read for its themes of motherhood, monstrousness, horror, and objectification. My approach is modeled on the recommendations of Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Tanenbaum for applying close reading techniques to games and gameplay experiences. Here, I treat both the game itself, *Silver Chains*, and the conversation between the streamer and viewers as media and apply close reading as a process of "detailed examination, deconstruction, and analysis" (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011, 289). As Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum have argued, the reading or viewing subject of any piece of media arrives with experiences and even preconceived notions that influence their approach and which aspects they respond to and how they create a relationship with media. I argue that in this case, the reading of the streamer made by the viewers was influenced by expectations that are established by the format and norms of live streaming itself; the expectation of watching someone live their life every day, performing for your attention, and that you, as the viewer, are free to comment on everything you see and hear.

Much of the work of streaming is about the "public embodied performances of authentic, natural feeling" (Baym 2018, 17). Streamers work extremely hard to make impersonal relationships feel personal to their viewers, often sharing intimate details about their lives. Many streamers

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even broadcast from their bedrooms, which further sets up an expectation of emotional access and intimacy between viewer and streamer (Ruberg and Lark 2020). I demonstrate how the pregnancy of a streamer set against the subject matter of *Silver Chains*, which features a narrative of a monstrous mother combined with live streaming viewer expectations that they are welcome to make emotional demands of streamers, created a situation in which viewers felt that it was appropriate to ask macabre questions of the streamer about her pregnancy, turning her into an object of fascination, and even abjection.

Streaming Bodies, Pregnant Bodies, Public Bodies

Pregnant bodies are especially subject to cultural and technological discipline in the public domain, as I will demonstrate in my close reading of Brigid's live stream. Pregnant women are frequently disciplined to accept intrusions on their boundaries, integrity, and autonomy (Kukla 2005). These intrusions take a variety of forms, including the unwanted advice and invasive questions that I will describe here. Stereotypes and common perceptions about women in live streaming also feature a preoccupation with the bodies of women. This work adds to the literature on gender, video games, and live streaming by demonstrating how the social practices and technical affordances of video game live streaming can position a pregnant body as an object vulnerable to public scrutiny because those structures are already predisposed to doing this to the bodies of women more generally.

Women Live Streaming

Video game live streaming has rapidly become a popular and professionalized way to earn money online and through play (Woodcock and Johnson 2019), which presumably means greater opportunities for women to move into public spheres and demonstrate their capabilities as video game players. However, research on diversity in live streaming has shown that live streaming platforms are social spaces where gender stereotypes are perpetuated or even amplified (Nakandala et al. 2017; Vitak et al. 2017). In a survey of Twitch viewers, Lena Uszkoreit (2018) found that viewers believe that skill and personality are crucial factors for men to be successful streamers, but the most important criterion for women's success was physical

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attractiveness. Previous research done by this author has demonstrated how women's bodies are placed in opposition to video games and streamer authenticity (Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019). Visibility in streaming for women often means facing viewers' preoccupation with their appearance, especially their bodies. This is evidenced by the popularity of the term "titty streamer" to denounce the participation of women (Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019) and claims by viewers that women who breastfeed while streaming are only doing it "for the views" (BadLucy123 2020). Performing publicly as streamers exposes women to systems that attempt to critique and control them on the basis of their gender, as well as their bodies posing a risk to the integrity of the streaming meritocracy. The work of streaming is already a precarious embodied experience—frequently involving several hours of sitting in place, focused on a task while attempting to be personable—but women are forced to be extra attentive to the work that their bodies are doing. Indeed, publicly playing and streaming as a woman continues to be "not just a leisure activity but also a political act" (Consalvo 2019, 87).

Pregnant Bodies as Public Objects

My analysis primarily builds from Rebecca Kukla's argument that cultural and technological practices in contemporary North America have constituted the pregnant body as public space (Kukla 2005, 284–285). First, Kukla suggests that the pregnant body has become public domain because it is subject to civic surveillance and concerns of civic responsibility. With increasing efforts to grant rights to fetuses and the medicalization and quantification of pregnancy, the pregnant body becomes public property subject to "quotidian social surveillance and discipline" according to social norms for appropriate pregnant behavior (Kukla 2005, 294). Kukla describes pregnancy as a technic wherein pregnant bodies are beholden to a process of self-disciplining, bodily management, and public reporting and recording of various statistics about themselves, like their weight (296). I argue that there is a similar technic of streaming in which streamers must concern themselves with self-disciplining, managing their bodies, and engaging in public demonstrations of appropriate behavior (Ruberg and Cullen 2020). These concerns are compounded for women streamers, who are already subject to increased pressure and surveillance to behave appropriately due to viewer expectations for their appearance (Uszkoreit 2018) and debates about how their bodies may offer unfair advantages in streaming success (Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019).

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Second, pregnant bodies have become narrative spaces in the sense that they are presumed to be a template that is shared and constrained to explain all experiences of pregnancy (Kukla 2005, 285). The "pregnant body," Kukla suggests, "becomes in effect a public narrative character" (285). Live streaming, as it exists on Twitch, is absolutely a public narrative space. There are stories that streamers tell viewers about the culture and the platform, and there are stories that streamers tell about who can be a streamer and how they should behave (Ruberg and Cullen 2020). Streamers are encouraged to pursue narratives and self-branding practices that transform them into "more authentic" versions of themselves, also known as "personas," often according to gendered stereotypes (Woodcock and Johnson 2019; Ruberg and Cullen 2020). Kaceytron is a famous example of a streamer who has adopted a persona that plays into, exaggerates, and contradicts the "girl gamer" stereotype (Consalvo 2019). Streamers are also expected to open the stories and spaces of their lives to their public viewing audience as they attempt to build communities that will accept and support them (Baym 2018). One consequence of this focus on building intimacy for women streamers is that they frequently find themselves being objectified by viewers (Nakandala et al. 2017; Uszkoreit 2018), and in the case of this pregnant streamer, abjectified.

Monstrous Femininity and Representation in Video Games

Video games rarely feature positive representations of pregnancy and motherhood in games. One possible explanation for this is that senior game designers are mostly men, so the narratives of video games focus more on exploring fatherhood (Gray 2017). Mothers in games are often absent, deceased, or depicted as monsters. Kate Gray (2017) described this trend as a "sinister obsession with the corruption of motherhood" based in a terror that pregnancy and motherhood make someone "unpredictable, chaotic, untrustworthy." Barbara Creed (1993), in her work analyzing depictions of femininity in film, stated that "all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (44). Things that are abject are things that highlight the fragility of boundaries—things that are disturbing and invite a perverse pleasure (Creed 1993, 9–10). For many, pregnant bodies are abnormal and even horrible due to the way they change (Kukla 2005), and thus people are compelled to control them. This visceral anxiety communicates

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itself well through the visual medium of games. As Sarah Stang (2018) has argued in her close readings of monstrous women depicted in video games like *The Witcher* and *God of War*, the power of the abject and its ability to invoke horror lie in its ability to disrupt and disgust the hegemonic, patriarchal realm of order and law (20). The abject as a conceptual framework and a background of monstrous pregnancy in games, combined with theory on pregnant bodies as public bodies and attentiveness to women's bodies that already exist in live streaming, allow me to demonstrate how a pregnant body seen in a video game live streaming context is not only subject to general surveillance, but also primed by that context to invite a kind of fascination that is objectifying.

Streaming while Pregnant

I found Brigid playing *Silver Chains*, a first-person horror game that explores the house and story of a woman who is the primary suspect in the murder of her children. Before, during, and after the conversation given here, Brigid was interacting with objects in the house that referenced a mother's madness and the death of children. There were regular jump scares, encounters with ghosts, and notably a cutscene where Brigid and her chat discover the mother has been lynched and left hanging in a tree.

After this particularly intense moment in the game, Brigid stood up in front of her camera to reveal she was pregnant. The conversation here presents my analysis of the transcript that I made of the resulting conversation about her pregnancy that Brigid had with approximately a dozen viewers in her channel. Brigid was replying verbally to comments and questions that viewers were typing in her chat. The transcript presented here follows that conversation thread, interrupted by my analysis and discussion. It does not include a simultaneous conversation that Brigid was also having with some viewers about the game, although the two conversations overlap occasionally.

"It looks like I have a beach ball up my top," Brigid jokes as she stands and gestures to her abdomen. "Like I literally ate a soccer ball." Brigid is inviting the viewers to share in her humor about her appearance. Viewers respond:

Viewer A: Looks weird to me

Viewer B: We can't wait to hear of your arrival

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Viewer C: Quite the baby bump

Brigid: Yes, because I'm quite pregnant now

It is not clear here if Brigid is responding to both the comment about the size of her "baby bump" or the fact that it "looks weird," but viewer A obviously felt comfortable telling a pregnant woman that her body was weird. When confronted with the physical reality of Brigid's body, viewer A immediately called out how it defied expectations in a masculine logic of rigid boundaries. In addition, in this case, viewer A may have been encouraged to share their comment by the pseudonymity that viewers have on Twitch and the assumption that Brigid, as a streamer, is a kind of public figure. The comment from viewer B and the expectation that Brigid will tell her viewers about the birth also speaks to how much streamers and pregnant women are expected to share information about their lives in public. The conversation continues:

Viewer D: Can you dance while pregnant?

Brigid: What do you mean? I don't think I'd want to dance. Is it possible to do so? Of course!

Viewer D is using Brigid to engage with the public narrative of pregnancy (Kukla 2005) by asking her if it is possible to dance while pregnant, expecting a pregnant woman to do the work of educating them about pregnancy as well as sharing something about herself. Again, this seems to also be combined with an expectation from viewers that streamers strive to be transparent and honest (i.e., authentic) about their lives. I also read this as a request to get Brigid to dance on camera while she is pregnant, presumably for the amusement of the viewers. This speaks to expectations that viewers have for streamers in general, but more specifically the expectation that women streamers will use their bodies to entertain viewers through dancing and similar activities (Uszkoreit 2018). Then:

Viewer E: Are you pregnant?

Brigid: What gave it away?

Viewer F: No, she ate a soccer ball. Didn't you hear?

Viewer D: She's 33 weeks pregnant

Brigid is still attempting to engage her viewers with humor about her pregnancy, humor being a common tool that streamers and women use

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to manage their viewers and redirect attention. However, this part of the conversation also illustrates how public the quantification of Brigid's pregnancy has been (because viewers know how long she has been pregnant). The chat continues:

Viewer G: Are you getting an epidural?

Brigid: I don't know yet. We'll see how it goes.

Viewer G: You should

The question from viewer G about the epidural speaks to a reality that, because Brigid is both a streamer and visibly, publicly pregnant, a Twitch chat becomes an appropriate context for asking what many would consider a personal question about Brigid's birthing plan, and then offer unsolicited advice. This is related to an overall feeling from Twitch viewers that whenever a woman's body is visible in streaming, it is obviously inviting public comment. Here, Brigid's viewers are using her to explore the public narrative of pregnancy, but also to explore their own feelings of fascination and horror with pregnancy. At this point, Brigid has finished stretching, sat down at her computer, and resumed playing the game. Suddenly a loud noise is heard on screen, trigged by a donation notification. Brigid is visibly startled. The chat responds:

Viewer H: Chat is going to scare the baby out with scare donos [donations]

Viewer I: First baby born live on Twitch lol

Viewer D: Not sure Twitch would allow births on stream, but they do allow breastfeeding now

Viewer J: I'm sure most people don't want giving birth streamed to thousands of people

The prospect of scaring Brigid into early labor or giving birth live on Twitch becomes a source of some amusement for some of her viewers. This is perhaps not dissimilar to the fascination that many have with reality television shows about pregnancy (Kukla 2005); pregnancy is treated as something horrible that nevertheless invites an audience—in other words, something abject. The chat continues:

Viewer D: Did you know you can get pumps to bottle your breast milk so baby can still have all the nutrients

Brigid: Of course I know that. It's still a big thing to do though.

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Yet another viewer attempts to explore the public narrative of pregnancy through Brigid while she is trying to work (she was a full-time streamer at the time that this conversation occurred) by presuming to educate Brigid on her own pregnancy. Viewers consider answering questions like these to be part of Brigid's job as a streamer, as well as something that she should expect to do due to her pregnancy. During this entire interaction, Brigid is doing her best to emphasize the fun of being scared while playing a horror game:

Viewer K: Spams "BabyRage" emote

Viewer G: What is baby's name?

Viewer K: "BabyRage" emote

Brigid: You'll have to wait and find out

Viewer L: We'll know when there's a birth announcement. Can be stressful enough waiting for baby, let alone hearing everyone's opinions on every little thing!

Brigid: Yeah, with people like, "I don't like that name. I knew someone by that name and she was awful."

Viewer G: Are you waiting for birth to find out gender

Brigid: No, we're having a girl

Viewer D: And we don't find out the name until its born

The BabyRage emote (figure 11.1) is typically used to call someone out for "acting like a baby" (behaving petulantly or immaturely), but in this case, a viewer was using it to reference Brigid's pregnancy and their desire for more information. Viewers are asking Brigid to publicly share information about her baby, like potential names and its gender. As a streamer and a pregnant woman, Brigid is multiply interpreted as a public person/space/body, and viewers expect her to share in the intimate details of her life. Indeed, the



Figure 11.1
The BabyRage Twitch emote, which depicts a blurry close-up of a crying baby.

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final comment from viewer D is almost petulant, as if questioning and judging Brigid's desire to keep even one aspect of her pregnancy private.

Viewer K: Can you die giving birth?

Brigid: Can you die giving birth? Well, you can die doing just about anything dude. What a question! Oh dear. Yes, you can die giving birth. You can but it's quite rare. And you can die doing anything dude.

Viewer L: What a question

Viewer I: Some strange questions in chat today

Viewer M: What a horrible question

Viewer N: Horror games bring out weird questions in chat

Viewer K: sorry

Viewer O: Another scare like the last one and you'll have the baby live

"Can you die giving birth?" would be a "horrible question" to ask someone who is pregnant in any context. On the surface, the question reads as another innocent attempt to have Brigid speak to the narrative experience of being pregnant. But I was struck by viewer N's comment that "Horror games bring out weird questions in chat." It occurred to me that this question, much like viewer D's request that Brigid dance while pregnant, was likely a deliberate attempt to get a reaction out of her to entertain the viewers, spurred on by her similar reactions to the content of the horror game she was playing. Viewer K likely knew that they were asking an inappropriate question, and it would upset Brigid and other viewers. This conversation actually continued in this vein for a few more minutes, with one viewer asking Brigid if women's bladders get weaker after giving birth and another viewer telling her that caffeine causes miscarriages. Instead of being treated like a person with a right to privacy, Brigid and her pregnancy together became a public object of abject entertainment, as well as a lens for exploring the narrative of pregnancy during this video game live stream.

Conclusion

I will admit that I had some concerns writing this. In a way, the interaction I witnessed was like watching a horror game within a horror game, but I was aware the whole time that I was watching this happen to a real person in real time. Many streamers come to expect, and even accept, intrusions into their

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personal lives (a horror all its own), but it seemed as if these viewers were choosing to play with Brigid's private life and her emotions because her pregnant body in this gaming space stood out as unusual to them. I immediately identified what I observed as worth discussing, but I did not want to further dehumanize this streamer or her experience, which she managed with grace and humor. Several times throughout the conversation, Brigid attempted to redirect the energy of her channel through humor, but it was not clear to me if that was her way of working through how uncomfortable she may have felt or, alternatively, if she was so used to these sorts of questions, as both a woman and a streamer, that she felt comfortable laughing it off as part of her job.

What this interaction in a live stream demonstrates is how an overlapping of contexts where bodies and identities that are subjected to scrutinizing and disciplining behaviors that enact marginalization (streaming, pregnancy, playing games as a woman) can create an intersectional abjectness. Being visibly pregnant and a woman in a sociotechnical environment that commoditizes intimacy put Brigid in a position where her viewers felt comfortable asking her to answer uncomfortable questions about her body. The atmosphere of the horror game itself—a narrative where a mother is accused of murdering her own children—further encouraged viewers to discuss maternal pain and infant death with a pregnant streamer. Reality shows about pregnancies have contributed to the normalization of openly discussing personal choices and procedures when it comes to pregnancy (Kukla 2005, 297), and streaming has normalized interactions where emotional management and the sharing of personal information are expected from women. Women streamers and pregnant players should not have to stand in as representatives for entire groups of people, but they are frequently treated that way by viewers.

As unusual as this interaction may appear to be, I want to point out two things about it that emphasize the need for continued research on the experiences of streamers. First, this kind of interaction and stigmatization is the everyday experience for many women and others in streaming with marginalized identities who are visibly different (see chapter 5 of this book; Johnson 2019; Gray 2020). Second, there are many intersections of abjectness to be found in streaming because there are still many ways of living that appear to invite both fascination and revulsion. Together, these two points suggest an urgent need for research that understands how the bodies

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of women, people of color, individuals with disabilities, and queer folk are caught up in these cultural industries that promise to celebrate the authenticity and diversity of experience, but instead constrain or tokenize these bodies according to cisgender white heteromasculine logics. People living in these intersections, therefore, are not only struggling to extract any benefit from these systems while still being denied participation in the surrounding industries and cultures, but their experiences are also being commodified and packaged for entertainment to benefit the status quo of streaming culture. The economy and culture of streaming demand both intimacy and vulnerability, but the social and technical infrastructures place the burden of managing the potential harms of visible difference in streaming on streamers themselves.

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12 Shout-Outed: Pronoun Hazards in Live Streamed Esports Events (A Conversation with Sasha "Magi" Sullivan)

Matt Knutson

Introduction

This interview with Sasha "Magi" Sullivan was conducted in the fall of 2019 over email. Magi is known as a competitor in *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, a Nintendo GameCube game from 2001 that is still played as an esport today. Until 2020, *Melee* tournaments were predominantly played in person, and those tournaments that attract national and international competition (known as "majors" and "supermajors") could bring in viewing audiences in excess of 100,000 through Twitch. (In-person tournaments were discontinued during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and they have resumed only recently; the two years of online-only tournaments did not surpass previous events in viewership.) At its peak, the competitive *Melee* scene supported perhaps two dozen full-time professionals and at least as many semipros, largely through live streaming content creation on Twitch—as well as contracts with esports teams, sponsorships, and tournament winnings. A biannual ranking system conducted by the community rates the top 100 competitors worldwide; making the top 100 is a remarkable milestone in a *Melee* career, and discursive practices in the community regularly site this ranking system ("So-and-so, a top 20 player . . .").

At the time of this interview, Magi had risen to prominence in *Melee* for recently breaking into the top 100 and for her strong performance at Genesis 6 (a supermajor tournament with world-class competition). There, she defeated longtime professional and top 5 player Mang0 on stream; this stunning upset gained her a new level of recognition across the community. At this time, she was known to be transgender in her local *Melee* scene, and yet she was presenting as male at live streamed tournaments. Because

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of the high visibility of live streamed competitions, and because her personal safety depended on the stability of her living situation at her parents' house, Magi did not deem it safe to present as female or be gendered as female by commentators ("shoutcasters" in esports) during live streamed tournament play. Through social media, Magi had been public about her preference to be referred to at tournaments as simply "Magi" or by male or gender-neutral pronouns. However, any shoutcaster who knew her to be trans but had missed her stated preferences not to be gendered as female in commentary could unintentionally jeopardize her personal safety with a simple "she." The precarity of her situation was only exacerbated by her strong performance in 2019; as her prominence in *Smash* grew, so did her personal risks during tournament play.

Magi's case reminds us that the conditions of visibility in live streaming remain fraught. Moreover, a little knowledge of another's gender identity can be a dangerous thing: if one insists on using the ostensibly "correct" pronoun(s) when failing to do the due diligence of finding out their preferences, the person in question may be outed in personally damaging ways. The interview illuminates details of her personal story, as well as the scope of the issue: Magi has been in contact with other trans players seeking her advice about managing pronoun use and coming out within a community that live streams its tournaments. Journalists, tournament organizers, and scholars would be well advised to listen to Magi's account and reflect carefully on the stakes of inadvertently outing someone on stream when key communication of preference has not first taken place off stream.

By the end of 2019, Magi had risen from number 97 to number 43 on the *Melee* rankings and moved out of her parents' house. In the summer of 2020, she came out to her parents. She actively competed in the online *Melee* scene amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and currently, she continues to stream and compete in the game.[1]

Interview

How long have you been playing Melee competitively, and at what point did you land on Falco?[2]

I started playing competitively in early 2014. I didn't start with *Melee* and actually started with *Project M*, and picked up *Melee* in August of the same year. Because I played Link in *Project M*, I started off by playing Link/

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Ganondorf in *Melee* for a couple of months, but eventually landed on Falco whenever I decided that I wanted to play a technical, aggressive character that wasn't as fast as Fox.

What are your current Melee aspirations?

I think right now I'm just trying to make up for inexperience. I spent a majority of my competitive career in Louisiana, so I was sheltered from a lot of different characters and styles that exist in the greater *Melee* scene. By the end of the year I would like to cement my spot in the Top 50, and depending on how these next two or so months go I will hopefully feel like I can push for a top 20 spot. In the end, I just want to be the best player that I can possibly be.

Can I ask what you're studying and what your career aspirations are?

I was originally a sociology major, but now I am a general studies major (which basically just means three minors). The three minors are sociology, business administration, and economics. I honestly have no real interest in careers, and I'm only really getting a degree so I have something to fall back on if my aspirations in esports fall through.

At this point, the match you played that got the most attention/recognition from the community was against Mang0 at Genesis 6 (February 2019). What was that match like for you? Were there any unexpected consequences of upsetting a fan favorite player early (especially at Genesis, where Mang0 has so much history)?

It was certainly a life-changing moment for me. Throughout the weekend, I joked with my friends about my bracket at Genesis, and how I would really like to beat Mang0 because that would let me avoid all the floaty players I had in loser's, and be left with only Foxes and Marths. I remember when the first game started how I kinda had a small moment where I was like, "Oh god, I'm actually playing against Mang0." Thankfully, I've sort of trained myself to not let things like that affect my play, and from that moment on, it was just focusing on the set itself and things that I can do to beat him. One funny consequence was that people think I play red Falco because that's the color I chose during that set, but I've always been a neutral color Falco, I couldn't take it away from Mang0 though.

At what point did you start to promote the title of "prettiest Falco" for yourself?

I heard a fighting game player refer to themselves as a very "pretty" player because of how their play looked aesthetically, and once I saw their

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gameplay, it made a lot of sense to me in relation to my gameplay. It also just so happened to be that I was figuring out my gender identity around the same time, so it kinda ended up being a double meaning.

At what age did you discover you might be more comfortable identifying as female? Can you describe your experiences transitioning?

I found out what the word really meant in October 2016. It took a lot of overcoming internalized transphobia and other shitty things that I was taught growing up, but one day it clicked and it's been like that ever since. It's been a positive experience overall, I recently started "socially" transitioning in my friend groups and the internet. It's still going to be a while until I'm fully comfortable being able to transition full time at school/in public in general, but hopefully that time will come soon. For now, I'll at least get to exist as who I want to be on my streams and at tournaments.

Living in the Deep South has, I would imagine, its own obstacles for queer people coming out. Moreover, Gamergate appeared not long after you started playing competitively. Did your location and/or social activities have an influence on the timing of your coming out?

Living in the Deep South definitely influenced me a bit. It also didn't help that my brother already came out as gay to my parents, and they weren't accepting of him at all. Although the state is pretty awful toward LGBTQ+ members, there are at least a lot of resources and a growing community in Louisiana that is making existing a little bit easier. Coming out to the *Smash* community was pretty easy honestly, I knew my scene was particularly liberal, and I was only worried about maybe someone deciding to be transphobic and others following suit, but my scene has been amazing and honestly at this point, is my family. The internet/online community in particular never really fazed me either, I just know the spaces to avoid, and I'm generally happy, aside from the random people that decide to go out of their way to tell me I'll never be a "real woman" or whatever.

What you say about friends becoming family—I know that's often remarked on as common to a lot of LGBTQ+ people's experiences. Beyond the Smash scene, have you gotten active in Gay-Straight Alliance or other queer advocacy groups/organizations?

Not really, I am a part of a local trans Facebook group for Louisiana, but outside of that I haven't really gotten that involved with any groups outside of *Smash*.

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Can you say a bit more about what your transition meant before the "social" phase and what this has entailed? Your previous Twitlonger post advising commentators about pronoun usage testifies to your experiences with transitioning in different personal spheres at different rates. I'm curious to hear more about this.

My transition when I lived at my parents' place was extremely awkward. Basically, I came out to a small group of my friends before I came out to my parents, and I wanted to keep it that way for a while. Eventually they did of course end up finding out, and reacted pretty much exactly as I would expect them to. After that I completely came out to my state's *Smash* scene, and then I ended up making a Twitlonger explaining why I still would prefer people to use he/him or they/them pronouns when referring to me, since my parents were already watching my live sets when I sent them the link (plus I used to get very uncomfortable when people used my preferred pronouns while I was still presenting male).

This created the super awkward dynamic of transitioning in different spaces with limited resources. I usually just told people to use they/them pronouns, but if necessary to use he/him pronouns, especially if they were visiting my parents' house with me. My friends that I hung out with all the time understood my situation completely, but some of the acquaintances and nonactive members were really confused or just completely uninformed, so there were a lot of people that I just didn't really bother explaining it to and just let them use whatever they were used to. And then of course, there were the random occasions where I actually got to present as female and just be who I wanted to be, but those were pretty rare, considering how difficult it was to get ready and then go back to looking "normal" again before going back to my parents' place. AND IF IT WASN'T AWKWARD ENOUGH, it just so happened that I started performing really well out of state. Slowly my popularity really starts to rise, and now I'm relatively well known in the community for being a hidden boss that happens to be trans. THEN I get ranked and make the waves around that I'm the first female top 100 player, THEN I beat Mang0, and NOW I have hundreds of people supporting me and helping me move out of my parents' place, all while my parents are completely oblivious to everything and I just pretend that I'm the manly man that they wanted me to always be. Looking back on it, it certainly is one of the strangest circumstances to exist in, but it was my life, and it was normal for me.

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Were there any times when you were concerned that a commentator or someone else would out you in a way that your parents would notice? Or did tournament organizers (TOs) keep their commentators well informed enough to avoid this circumstance?

I was worried, and it actually ended up happening, but thankfully my parents didn't really make too much of a fuss about it and kinda just let it slide. Honestly I don't really know if it was a conscious decision to ignore it or if they just didn't connect the dots somehow. Either way, it has always been a concern for sure.

If there had been repeated references to you as a "she," do you believe your parents would have pressed you on this and raised more of a fuss? Would they have kicked you out/cut you off financially?

They would have certainly caused a fuss, and it's hard for me to say whether or not they would have cut me off 100 percent. It would've been a mess no matter what, but my parents may have been merciful and compromised some deal with me so I wouldn't get kicked out. This is a question I've asked myself many times, and it's pretty hard for me to say what would've happened in reality, but for my safety I assumed that they would have kicked me out 100 percent.

Do you know of others who are currently or were previously in circumstances like yours? I know that your situation is and was unique, but I imagine other folks are in a state of transition (I just saw an announcement from SonicFox coming out as genderqueer) in which they may not be ready to out themselves beyond their close friends yet.

I actually have a pretty large group of trans people that are in similar situations. A lot of the people who follow me are in very similar situations, and I get a lot of messages from people who are in similar spots who ask for some advice or just offer words of encouragement for our struggles.

What advice do you tend to give them? Or does it vary greatly case by case?

It usually does vary case by case, but I try my best to always pass the message that, "If I can do it, so can you, I am not a special person that was born with the ability to cope with my situation; this is a skill you can learn." My main goal is to reassure them that they can do it, and if they need any specific advice, then I could certainly pass on any knowledge I have to them.

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What can TOs and competitors take from your experiences to best communicate pronoun preferences, especially in times of transition?

What I usually tried to do is contact the TOs or the stream team and asked them to read my pronoun twitlonger. I think most people can just make a quick blurb about their situation, but generally I've had a positive experience with TOs/stream teams listening to my instructions. I'm sure as long as trans players try to inform the TOs about their situation, then they should be safe from any mishaps, and I hope TOs continue to listen!

Melee is now old enough to vote—it's ancient in the world of esports. Do you see the competitive community sustaining this game from eighteen to, say, twenty-five years old?

It depends on what you mean by sustain. I believe that people will play this game for at least another fifty years, but I'm not sure if majors will exist for the entire time. The community is die-hard; almost all of the players will talk about how we can't find any game that satisfies us as much as *Melee* does, so I find it hard to believe that people will ever STOP playing the game. I just don't know if tournaments will be able to justify us because it's hard to say how the popularity of the game will last, or if Nintendo decides to cut off streams for us once and for all or something like that.

Closing Note

Magi's comment about being the first trans player and the first woman in the top 100 for *Melee* should remind us of systemic issues in gaming, and in esports in particular, which prevent representative gender participation in such spaces. It is critical that in responding to the successes of competitors such as Magi we (as academics, journalists, community members, etc.) are not overeager to promote their visibility without first diligently ascertaining their preferences. The work of moving esports toward more equitable participation and visibility remains vital; this interview serves as a reminder that, like any well-intentioned efforts, such work can be fraught whenever visibility becomes perilous to the visible. Magi's comments on others who are in similar spots to hers should emphasize the pervasiveness of this issue. Closetedness often persuades a cisgender/heterosexual public that the absence of evidence is the evidence of absence. As such, testimony from folks like Magi, whom live streaming makes newly public, should

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correct common misunderstandings about who is playing, how much of a good thing visibility is, and what someone else's best interests are with respect to pronoun usage.

Notes

1. I would like to offer a special thank-you to Magi for her time in sharing her experiences with me and for her support of this scholarship.

2. This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity and readability.

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Designing the Live Aesthetic

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13 "We Play *Dungeons & Dragons*!": How Actual Play Live Streams Have (Re)shaped the *D&D* Gaming Community

Emma French

The impact of live streaming on the digital gaming industry has been extensively documented (Taylor 2012; Taylor 2016; Johnson and Woodcock 2019). However, this new digital medium has also massively reshaped the tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) community. Live streaming facilitates "actual play": real-time TTRPG gameplay, conducted between a cast or group of friends, often knowingly performed as a serialised fictional narrative for their audience.

Using *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) as a case study, I will demonstrate how the participatory elements of live streaming culture have altered the demographics and modes of participation available within TTRPG communities. *D&D* actual play streams such as *Critical Role* (2015–), *Sirens of the Realms* (2017–), *Dimension 20* (2018–), and *Rivals of Waterdeep* (2018–) have widened participation in *D&D* by increasing its visibility. Following the proliferation of live streamed *D&D*, sales of the introductory *Starter Set* increased by 50 percent in 2017, and 60 percent in 2018 (IGN 2019, 3:53–3:57). The vice president of the *D&D* franchise, Nathan Stewart, claims that "over half of the new people who started playing [*D&D*] Fifth Edition" since 2015 did so "through watching people play online" (DeVille 2017). Actual play streams are immensely popular. The most successful, *Critical Role*, had amassed 68 million views when hosted by *Geek & Sundry* (2017), and 632,000 total followers since transferring to an independent Twitch channel in 2019 (TwitchTracker 2020). It is rapidly becoming its own transmedial franchise, with an animated series on Amazon, published comics and its own games company, Darrington Press.

However, live streaming has not just expanded *D&D*'s community of practice; it has made it more accessible. Streams offer an alternative path

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of entry to *D&D* subculture, bypassing the game's traditional structure and established gatekeeping mechanisms. Through their instructional showcasing of *D&D*'s rules for viewers, streams induct newcomers into *D&D* gaming culture. The types of players promoted through streams also have shifted perceptions of *D&D* player and wider geek identities, making them more inclusive. Furthermore, the creation of serialized, "endlessly deferred" narrative (Hills 2002, 98) broadens *D&D*'s "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2013) to include an array of fannish practices, offering new modes of engaging with the game beyond playing.

Actual Play Live Streams as Mentorship

The structure of *D&D* gameplay previously encouraged—even necessitated—a more insular subculture. TTRPG scholar Daniel Mackay describes the typical *D&D* play experience before digital innovations: "The sessions would take place in my basement or at another player's house, . . . averaging five to six hours . . . [and] depended upon when we could get everybody together" (Mackay 2002, 20).

This conforms to stereotypes of *D&D* players as socially isolated and insular, popularized in mainstream media such as *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019) and *Stranger Things* (2016–). Mackay (2002) portrays TTRPG gamers as "sequestered" and "divided" from the rest of the world, operating in a secluded and separate sphere (84). Three modes of participation are documented: gameplay at home within a small, continuous friendship group, at a club/recreation center, or—on the largest scale—at a gaming convention. All three involve gatekept boundaries. For an interested individual, access to gameplay relies upon them knowing at least one other person (or a group of friends) willing to join or to invite them to a preexisting group, enabling their engagement. A club or convention presents opportunities to foster such relationships, but it relies on the attendee being able to financially afford, travel to, and feel welcome in these environments.

Even as late as 2014, Esther MacCallum-Stewart also describes *D&D* as "actually rather socially difficult to play." Elaborating on Mackay's structure of "ideally fix to six players," MacCallum-Stewart (2014a) notes that these players must "have similar understandings of what the game is about" (181). Communal understanding is another way that *D&D* subculture tends toward self-regulation, or self-policing and gatekeeping. In *D&D*, players

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play characters within a fantasy world. They encounter various scenarios, and their characters' responses to them are mediated by dice and by a referee, known as the Dungeon Master (DM). The DM's flexibility as human adjudicator—capable of interpreting all actions and responding dynamically—means that "a player could think up any possible action . . . no matter if it was explicitly foreseen in the rules" (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 83). This freedom means that definitions abound of what a *D&D* game can and should be. Jennifer Grouling (2010) identifies "three types of gameplay—the dramatist, simulationist, and the gamist" (150): players place emphasis on character interaction, immersive worldbuilding, and game mechanics and combat, respectively. But definitions of what gameplay should entail extend beyond these simple preferences, also encompassing acceptable actions and social behavior within the secondary world, and between players. While the internet has afforded *D&D* certain networked innovations, such as roleplay chatrooms or websites like Roll20.com, which enable remote play, individuals must still establish expectations of acceptable play. They must find groups who agree with their definition or conform to those already in place. As with TTRPG conventions, participation relies on feeling like you are welcome and accepted.

Using actual play live streaming as an introduction to *D&D* gameplay circumvents many of these barriers to entry. Actual play streams feature preestablished groups of players for an interested viewer to engage with, anonymously and remotely. The surge in their popularity means there are numerous streams to choose from. Viewers can select groups whose understanding of the game matches their own, those they simply find entertaining or, through the composition and established social mores of the group, make them feel welcome and represented—the importance of which will be explored later in this chapter.

Live streams provide an alternative means of educating and inducting oneself into *D&D* subculture. Viewers may consume actual play media solely on a narrative level, enjoying the heroic story of the campaign. However, T. L. Taylor (2018) notes that watching live streams is often aspirational: a wish to learn skilled gameplay from "professionals" (39). When *D&D* is performed in real time, it showcases players navigating *D&D*'s complex rule system and mechanics. Actual play can therefore also be "instructional" (MacCallum-Stewart 2014a, 185), allowing viewers to learn without the same intense buy-in described by Mackay.

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Playing *D&D* (or *D&D 5th edition*, considered the simplest version of the game) requires a working knowledge of the basic rules detailed in the 300-page *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook* (WotC 2014c). It may also require an understanding of the *Dungeons & Dragons Monster Manual* (WotC 2014b) and *Dungeon Master's Handbook* (WotC 2014a) if the participant wishes to be the DM, managing and refereeing gameplay. Although these guides are readily available, disseminated on various websites and even made freely accessible by Wizards of the Coast (WotC), this reinforces the fact that this level of knowledge is expected of everyone. Navigating these rules is often difficult when one is unfamiliar and unpracticed: Stewart has admitted that newcomers often feel like "you have to cross all these hurdles [just] to be a fan" (IGN 2019, 4:53–4:56).

Live streams show these extensive rubrics being practically applied. Unedited live streams such as *Critical Role*, whose sessions typically run for four-plus hours, demonstrate players interacting with routine combat rules. More complex disputes are also workshopped when resolving complicated narrative events: for instance, the "interesting physics experiment" of what happens when a Wall of Fire spell clashes with a wall of "non-magical" water ("Duplicity" 2019, 1:22:01–1:26:12). *Dimension 20* places narrative weight on *D&D*'s essential mechanic, the dice roll, by introducing the "Box of Doom" with its own close-up camera whenever a player's roll will have a particularly dramatic effect on the story. Viewers gain understanding of each mechanic through its incorporation in the wider narrative.

Actual play uses *D&D*'s mechanics and the risk of failure to enhance the stakes of their storytelling. But streaming these elements unedited also allows viewers to learn the game's rules second-hand, seeing how they operate within a dynamic, real-time context. *Critical Role*'s Laura Bailey explains, "My favourite analogy for it was: no one would play football if they were handed the rulebook for football" (IGN 9:59–10:04). Making *D&D* into a spectated event instructs viewers in the game system, without prejudice, derision, or frustration from other players. It is telling that *Critical Role*'s main, continuing sponsor is "DnD Beyond," an application designed to streamline *D&D*'s many rulebooks into an accessible digital toolkit and prevent players being overwhelmed by the game's complexity.

Furthermore, as MacCallum-Stewart (2014a) notes, "*D&D* games can vary wildly from purely spoken role-play to meticulously detailed movement on maps and charts" (181). The variety of streams available, spanning from

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rules-light comedy to serious high-fantasy storytelling, demonstrate that there is no right way to play. This can prevent viewers who eventually wish to participate from being daunted if they do not, for instance, enjoy the heavily numerical aspects of *D&D*'s rule systems, or from self-rejecting after a bad experience with a group or play style that they did not gel with.

D&D's High-Profile Players

Actual play live streams have expanded the *D&D* community of practice by educating viewers, lowering the threshold for understanding gameplay. They have also diversified the subculture by visibly broadening who is included within *D&D*'s player demographic. This is achieved through the exposure of certain "nerd celebrities," who inadvertently—and sometimes deliberately—become representative *D&D* players through their streaming presence.

As with the gamer (Consalvo 2012; Taylor 2018) and geek (Salter and Blodgett 2017) identities that it comprises, the stereotypical *D&D* player is often represented as a white, cisgender, usually straight man. Mackay, who used his personal *D&D* game as a representative case study in his scholarship, described a group of male friends: "Wesley as Dom Ixhil Contelliat, Josh as Minya Mardin, Neal as the crazed korred Kurgo Shinsplinter, Darren as Gwendolin the Mad Mage, and me, the gamemaster" (Mackay 2002, 21). Despite extensive convention attendance and observation of numerous games, Mackay's account of *D&D* from the 1980s to early 2000s makes no reference to nonmale players. This exemplifies a bias within his own autoethnography, but one which—when treated as representative within the academic tradition—demonstrated the privileged position of white men within the *D&D* subculture of the time. Even MacCallum-Stewart's account of *Acquisitions Incorporated*, a spectated *D&D* game performed at the PAX Prime gaming convention, documents a 2011 cast of all-male "nerd celebrities": Wil Wheaton, Jerry Holkins, Mike Krahulik, Scott Kurtz, and Chris Perkins (MacCallum-Stewart 2014a, 176). MacCallum-Stewart considers them to be *D&D*'s brand ambassadors, reinforcing the fact that until recently, the *D&D* player community still visibly presented as male and white.

The means by which the presumed white, heterosexual, and male geek identity has been maintained at the detriment of women and other minorities has been addressed in both game and fan studies (Consalvo 2012; Taylor 2018; Salter and Blodgett 2017; Wilson 2018). *D&D* subculture is already

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insular for the structural reasons discussed in the previous section. When combined with identity policing, its "invite-only" system and reliance on maintaining small, close groups offer unique methods by which to exclude outsiders. *Critical Role* DM Matthew Mercer has noted how the social mores of *D&D* facilitate this: "If you weren't already in it, there was already this kind of predisposition that it was super difficult to get into . . . People just bounced off the idea so easily and [only] those who were gently brought in by a friend . . . discovered it really wasn't that hard to engage with" (The McElroy Family 2020, 13:19–13:33).

Mercer focuses on benign misconceptions around *D&D*'s complexity—however, his wording hints at how *D&D* can also be maliciously exclusionary. Only those "gently brought in by a friend" continue to engage. This statement alludes to anyone who does not find their introduction gentle—perhaps even facing active harassment—as well as those who are never invited to the table in the first place. In many ways, *D&D's* structure physically embodies the "painful irony at work in game culture," in which "a space for outsiders" strictly gatekeeps entry in order to secure its own identity (Taylor 2018, 234).

The players who have gained the most exposure through live streaming are markedly different from the presumed stereotype, and this has shifted cultural perceptions around *D&D* substantially. *Critical Role*, the most popular actual play stream, presents a new brand of "nerd celebrity" (or as they introduce themselves, "nerdy-ass voice actors"). The stream celebrates their three female players, Laura Bailey, Ashley Johnson, and Marisha Ray. They have also actively distanced themselves from the presumed straight white male "geek." Since June 2019, their merchandise store offers a Pride T-shirt featuring *D&D* dice in the colors of LGBTQIA+ flags, with the words "Don't Forget to Love Each Other," placing the cast's catchphrase into a new social justice context ("Beneath Bazzoxan" Critical Role 2019, 9:11–9:22). They similarly leverage their stream's popularity to promote guest players of color, including Aabria Iyengar, Mica Burton, and Khary Payton. Already nerd celebrities through their professional careers as voice actors, their newfound status as *D&D* influencers works to alter geek identity.

Perceptions of this cast refute exclusionary gatekeeping. Deborah Ann Wohl praises their welcoming attitude toward new players: "They're good, nice people, . . . they're not elitist, they're not any of that" (IGN 2019, 7:36–7:43). The *Critical Role* stream is staged as inclusive through its imperfections.

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Unedited gameplay, including mistakes, is showcased alongside pop-culture references, in-jokes, and "blooper" moments. The focus is not necessarily on gaming skill (beyond their talent as actors), but instead on the domestic interactions within an established group of friends, stressing *D&D*'s social aspects. Viewers' sense of inclusion is rooted in the cast's personas. While video game streams use direct interaction with fans through functions such as Twitch's text chat to build a sense of community (LaRell Anderson 2017), actual play does not typically include this. Instead, player-to-player interactions are foregrounded, and chat remains solely for discussion and speculation among fans. However, the cast also make choices to include their audience in their friendship group during the stream through direct address and recurring in-jokes. The most notable example is the stream's closing catchphrase, "Is it Thursday yet?" Scheduling conflicts are often cited as the main obstacle to *D&D* gameplay, and this phrase reframes the stream's serial broadcasting schedule as simply a group of players all eagerly awaiting the next time they play *D&D* together—an anticipatory atmosphere in which viewers are included.

Although *Critical Role* remains predominantly white, its popularity has paved the way for streams that make deliberate statements about the diverse, intersectional forms of geek identity. These include *Sirens of the Realms*—an all-female cast playing as a girl-power bard band—and *Rivals of Waterdeep*—a stream featuring only POC actors. Both examples are notable as they are hosted on the official DnD Twitch channel curated by Wizards of the Coast, demonstrating a marketing effort to broaden concepts of who can play *D&D*. In 2020, no actual play live streams hosted by the official DnD channel featured an all-male cast—showing a massive shift from the brand ambassadors endorsed by Wizards of the Coast in MacCallum-Stewart's account of PAX 2011.

These members of the *D&D* subculture have always existed, but live streaming has boosted their visibility and made *D&D* approachable for a broader subset of people. MacCallum-Stewart describes performed *D&D* as not only instructional, but also endorsing certain modes of play as "correct" (MacCallum-Stewart 2014a, 183). By promoting diverse brand ambassadors, live streams build and validate a multifaceted and inclusive geek identity. Satine Phoenix, the female, bisexual, and Filipina DM of *Sirens of the Realm*, has described her streaming career as motivated by "representation, right? Representation is a big deal . . . [it becomes] a sucker punch to the world saying,

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'guess what? So many other people are playing this'" (The McElroy Family 2020, 14:22–15:05). If a person sees themself represented in actual play, they may overcome not only the daunting aspects of the *D&D* rule set, but any feelings of exclusion. "By being out there," Phoenix argues, "all these other people come out of the woodwork" to join her (The McElroy Family 2020, 15:06–15:14). Marisha Ray has similarly described *Critical Role*'s aim to improve accessibility: "[A] mission in the company . . . [is] to lower the barriers of entry to storytelling" (CNET Highlights 2020, 19:10–19:18).

D&D as Endlessly Deferred Narrative

The statement that *Critical Role* makes "storytelling" more accessible demonstrates another way in which actual play streams have modified *D&D* subculture. Through their formation of participatory cultures that are predominantly engaged with a stream's fictional narrative, actual play is creating a variety of ways for individuals to interact with the *D&D* game product, many of which do not actually involve playing.

In many ways, the *D&D* system functions as a microcosm of game studies' wider debate of narratology versus ludology. It can be a rules-heavy or narrative-heavy game (or both) depending on the preferences of the players and DM, with divergent interpretations of gameplay acknowledged within its own flexible structure. As previously discussed, when hosting or joining a game, players secure a consensus on what they want from gameplay, whether it be "storytelling, playing a role, simulating a world, or achieving goals and progress according to rules" (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 49).

Such flexibility means there are multiple forms of "gaming capital" available to *D&D* players (Consalvo 2007). It can be earned from expertise in *D&D*'s complex rules, but also (and sometimes simultaneously) through a dedication to strong roleplay, compelling character choices, or a DM's storytelling skill. *D&D*'s extensive backlog of paratexts detailing additional rules and settings may fit in with the traditional assignation of gaming capital as "expertise in gaming and knowledge of everything related to [the] games" (Consalvo 2007, 20). However, as Consalvo (2007) notes, gaming capital is a "highly flexible" (184) currency that changes according to what is assigned significance within the subculture itself. This is where actual play streams have a particular impact. As actual play shifts the purpose of

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D&D gameplay toward story creation, the types of gaming and "subcultural capital" (Thornton 1995) that earn players status also shift.

Successful actual play shows typically involve strong roleplay and compelling narrative, relying on investment in character, plot, and worldbuilding to sustain viewers' interest. While ludic skill—such as a creative or knowledgeable use of powerful spells or combinations of abilities—provides entertainment, players are more often praised for how they enhance fictional narrative. For instance, while Laura Bailey's decision to nonviolently defeat an opponent using an insignificant, novelty magical item—the Dust of Deliciousness—in *Critical Role*'s "Misery Loves Company" made expert use of in-game mechanics, it was mainly praised for how it served the narrative. Bailey was perceived as remaining true to her character, Jester, foregrounding her traits of trickery and kindness alongside her love of confectionary. By having Jester remain her "usually charming self" under pressure, weaponizing aspects of her roleplay performance, Bailey earned the title in one fan's eyes of "the undisputed Queen of *D&D*!" (Grizbehr 2020). Such affective forms of gaming capital have always been available, but the consumption of actual play live streams as serialized fiction renews their significance as currency within *D&D* subculture.

Treating actual play streams as serial entertainment foregrounds *D&D*'s ability to generate "endlessly deferred narrative," which Matt Hills (2002) identifies as a method for fostering fan participatory culture (98). Speculation surrounding endlessly deferred narrative is something that *D&D*'s episodic gameplay structure naturally enables: not only can campaigns last for hundreds of sessions/episodes, but *D&D*'s dice roll mechanics mean that no outcome is certain. The ultimate narrative end point, as well as any story beats along the way, are always in flux. With viewers and players on-screen constantly speculating about how in-game decisions, dice rolls, and the overarching plot threads are going to resolve, new modes of *D&D* participatory culture emerge around a stream's narrative and its fictional player characters.

While *D&D* live streaming encourages individuals to play *D&D*, it also lowers the barriers to participation by enabling viewers to engage with the game through other fannish practices: extensive discussion on social media, the transformative use of stream content in gifs on Twitter and Tumblr, and the creation of fan art and fan fiction. These practices have long historically complimented *D&D* gameplay, with character artwork and/or written documentation of campaigns commonplace since the game's inception (Mackay

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2002; Zagal and Deterding 2018). But such works were typically created for the pleasure of the individual player or their small five- or six-person community, not on this new, networked scale of transmedial fandom.

As previously discussed, Twitch's chat function is used differently within actual play streams, as a space for viewer commentary and speculation of a session/episode as it unfolds. It can also allow viewers to express their affective responses to a particular real-world player, in-game character, or in-game romance. Fannish speculation has become such a key part of *Critical Role*'s community that their streaming schedule includes "4-Sided Dive" and "Critical Recap," shows devoted to discussing pivotal in-game events, character motivations, and predictions surrounding wider narrative trajectory. Streams such as *Critical Role* and *High Rollers* (2016–) have celebrated their fans by conducting a fan art gallery in streaming breaks, meaning that viewers and fans gain recognition from both the cast and wider audience through their fanworks.

Developments in engagement make *D&D* more accessible. The shift in gaming capital caused by live streams, which rebrands *D&D* as predominantly a storytelling medium rather than a complex, rules-heavy game, circumvents certain biases surrounding skill. It makes *D&D* subculture available to anyone with a predisposition toward or prior engagement in fannish practice, and broadens the types of participation available to interested individuals. Henry Jenkins (2013) has argued that "male interest around transmedia" typically manifests as "information hunting and gathering," while creative and transformative engagement are "feminine fan pleasures" (xxvi). Although needlessly gendered, the two streams of fannish practice that Jenkins identifies here are useful because actual play enables *D&D* to encompass both. Live streaming means that fan "information hunting and gathering" occurs within a wider transmedial context—no longer solely focused on the contents of *D&D's* extensive paratexts, but also on pivotal moments across multiple streamed narratives. CritRoleStats.com tracks "stats, lore, and anything that can be quantified on *Critical Role*," and encourages fans to voluntarily aid in their data collection (CritRoleStats 2015). Actual play has also encouraged viewers to apply transformative, creative fan practices to *D&D*, replicating the emotional investment of a TV/media fandom. Both these new modes of participatory culture circumvent the need for gameplay entirely, broadening the subculture to engage media fan circles.

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Conclusion

The popularity of live streamed *D&D* gameplay is having a sizable impact on *D&D*'s gaming culture. *Critical Role*'s Sam Riegel notes: "It's been a running joke for . . . decades now that all D&D players are 'basement dwelling nerds.' But I think that shows like ours, and ours particularly, has changed that perception" (Whitten 2020).

Actual play media circumvents *D&D*'s insulated or exclusionary aspects, skewing away from "basement dwelling nerds" in favor of a networked, global fandom. Live streaming is now a means of introducing individuals to the game, bringing it into the mainstream at a time when other geek pursuits have also achieved wider visibility and popularity (Salter and Blodgett 2017). Performing gameplay in real time improves accessibility by instructing those mystified by the game's complex rules. High-profile, celebrity members of *D&D* subculture—not only those made famous by chance through successful streams, but also those selected and curated through deliberate marketing decisions—have broadened perceptions of the *D&D* gamer identity. By stressing the importance of narrative already present within *D&D*, the subculture extends beyond gamers, appealing to the speculative and affective investment of media fans and coopting their practices.

But actual play live streams are not simply altering the gaming subculture—they are altering the gaming product itself. When the *D&D* publication *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* (D&D 2020) was released, its YouTube and Twitch promotion campaign involved cameos from diverse nerd celebrities such as Mica Burton, Tanya DePass, and Omega Jones, all of whom rose to prominence as players through live streaming (D&D 2020). *Critical Role* has also been directly acknowledged by Wizards of the Coast through its publication of *The Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* (WotC 2020b). While this may simply be a decision by Wizards of the Coast to capitalize on the new revenues that actual play's popularity has generated, it shows that these live streams have the ability not simply to promote, but also to alter the game product with which it is engaging.

This is important, as it means that actual play's efforts to shift the geek identity away from the presumed white male "basement dwelling nerd" may be successful. Alongside Wizard of the Coast's legitimization of players from a diverse range of backgrounds through their live streams and promotional campaigns, 2020 saw direct action taken against previous exclusionary

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behavior in the blog post "Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons." In this article, the company acknowledged its problematic handling of race within the *D&D* rubric and highlighted its plans to correct it (Wizards of the Coast 2020). Not only is actual play changing *D&D's* participatory culture, it is altering its cultural artifacts. While *D&D*'s fan base has always had input into the franchise's development, rarely has direct interjection from fans focused on making the game more progressive. As more people interact and engage with *D&D* because of actual play, the game itself comes under closer interrogation. Problematic aspects which may have passed unnoticed and unremarked upon by the all-male—or at least all-white—echo chamber that Mackay describes circa 2002 now face scrutiny. Thus, the product is changing itself accordingly, continuing to make the subculture more accessible and inclusive, and ultimately capitalizing on an unprecedented means of free promotion and market growth.

As actual play live streams broaden the range of customers that *D&D* can market itself to, it may enact real, seismic change to the mainstream perception of geek identity, and contribute to a push for diverse representation within geek subculture as a whole.

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14 A Year in *The Arena*: Academic Live Streaming and Competitive Play

Evelynn Kersting, Janelle Malagon, and Casey O'Ceallaigh

The seminar space is incredibly valuable for the burgeoning scholar. Discussions with inquisitive, dedicated peers under the watchful eye of an experienced professor often bring interesting ideas to the forefront of the student's mind, inspiring them in their pursuit of knowledge. Unfortunately, due to increasing class sizes and the high cost of higher education, this kind of space is often barred from people not pursuing a postgraduate degree. The University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee is home to the streaming collaborative Serious Play, which seeks to make that private space public and give a glimpse of the seminar room to an audience, while allowing them to be part of it. Serious Play is made up of graduate students and professors who host weekly community programs based on the schema of the graduate seminar, albeit on Twitch, rather than in the classroom. For three years, the authors of this chapter collaborated to air *The Arena*, a weekly live show where we play esports and competitive games, discussing important topics in the study of competitive play. In this discussion, we look back on our years running *The Arena*, distilling our experience into potent lessons about the affordances and challenges of academic streaming. These perspectives stem from our individual and collective experiences as video game players, scholars, and streamers. We ran *The Arena* during the formative years of our development as scholars, and it gave us a greater appreciation for our field of study, opening doors to ideas that we might have never considered before streaming together.

On *The Arena*, we leverage each other's experiences to generate discussion, asking questions that encourage players to both examine and express the thought processes behind their in-game actions. We have a loose definition of "expert," but typically one of us takes this role and is prepared

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to teach our peers about that week's game or topic. Others take the role of "students," receiving foundational context that is not usually available when playing a game for the first time. These discussions tend to highlight knowledge hidden to those who may not recognize the value in what they read as an unremarkable action. We are, first and foremost, a community of learners. We have used *The Arena* as a space for sharing other scholars' work, engaging in broader critical discussions, and for tracking changes in the way the academic community understands competitive games. As games scholars, much of our work and lessons are transferable to a streaming platform like Twitch, which helps to both make academic conversation accessible and challenge the boundaries of traditional academic space. *The Arena*, conceived to create a kind of public seminar, has not just been rewarding for our audience, but for us as well. As graduate students, we essentially gained experience in *running* a seminar and the traditional benefits of *being* in a seminar once a week.

Just as graduate seminars have required readings, these streams feature a scholar or text of the week, typically something that we read recently. In this chapter and our streams, certain theorists have grown to prominently define our community's approach to competition and play. We approach competitive games as social objects. Drawing from Arjun Appadurai's discussion of "The Social Life of Things," we interrogate "the knowledge (technical, social, aesthetic, and so forth) that goes into the production of the commodity; and the knowledge that goes into appropriately consuming the commodity" (Appadurai 1988, 41). For the former, we use interviews of game creators to better understand their reasons for various design decisions. For the latter, we take the position of Michel De Certeau (1984), namely that the creator's intent is often less important than the way a media object is used by its audience. Competitive games are played in ways contrary to developers' intentions—breaking a game, after all, is a great way to win it. As a result, our discussion revolves around the communities that play these games: we believe that each has its own idiosyncrasies, and we trace lines from design to community even when such relationships may appear opaque. We invoke Thomas Malaby's various contingencies as defined in his article "Beyond Play," such as performative, stochastic, and semiotic, as ways of understanding how competitive games work as ongoing processes—always changing (2007).

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The dynamic nature of competitive games requires us to consider change as the primary action they take over time, and in turn, this is a consistent axis that our conversations revolve around. As with other academic communities, we have formed a lexicon of our own that we use to analyze the games that we play on stream, developed out of personal experiences and wider scholarship. This lexicon is core to the work of *The Arena* because over our years hosting the show, we each became comfortable contributing to its informal academic and methodological framework. In this way, one of the strengths of long-running informal academic contexts like *The Arena* is the opportunity to synthesize the professional, academic, and personal interests of each of the hosts.

In each of the next three sections, we reflect on a particular thematic month of streaming: fighting games, speedrunning, and board games, respectively. We selected these themed months because they illustrate the difficulties that our community faced and the lessons that we learned from them, whether in our attempt to replicate the seminar space publicly or in response to COVID-19. These stories demonstrate how academic streaming communities can make space for both critical discourse and personal growth. We learned the importance of community learning, the value of apprenticeship, and the unique possibilities that streaming affords in creating bridges between different communities and discourses. *The Arena* highlights how the environment of an academic stream can benefit both the public audience and the hosts themselves. Ultimately, we hope to show that the creation and nurturing of this space reflect what academics have known since Plato: we are stronger in discussion with one another than apart.

Fighting the Fear of Failure—Janelle

The Arena is not a traditional seminar with high stakes and expectations, but rather a dedicated space seeking to make the academic seminar accessible by inviting rigor without perpetuating burnout or vilifying failure. Because of social contingencies like skill disparity, simultaneously approaching new games and pitching ideas in this setting felt insurmountable at first. Trained as a literary scholar in print-driven departments, I had no exposure to critical game studies before haphazardly discovering the discipline during the first week of my PhD program. How was I supposed to play and critically

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discuss these games that I knew almost nothing about, let alone on stream, and in front of my new friends and colleagues? Similar anxieties permeate seminar classrooms and can stifle student participation. In both cases, time, practice, and an open mind eased these fears.

Consistently being the novice in the room made me a humble learner, and it also led me to ask questions that prompted other hosts to critically examine their own gameplay. Through this process, skill disparity became a *feature* of our show rather than a flaw, because of the productive conversations that the expert/student dynamic can inspire. Skill disparity became a point of conversation for us because while there was a significant skill gap between all the hosts and guests, we always enjoy the spirit of competition. As a result, we kept returning to these questions: Why and how is competition enjoyable? How do we reckon with skill disparity in our own experiences, and how much does winning influence enjoyment? To help ground this discussion during fighting game month, Evelynn shared a fan-translated interview with the *Super Smash Bros*. creator Masahiro Sakurai (Sourcegaming 2015). In this interview, Sakurai explains that he sought to create a fighting game that removes the high barriers of entry typical of the genre. Traditional fighting game series like *Street Fighter* and *Tekken* are notoriously difficult to play well. Sakurai attests that for a new player, being defeated by someone with clearly superior skills isn't enjoyable, and it could easily turn beginners away from the genre, or social play altogether.

Despite Sakurai's assertion and the fact that an arcade or a seminar room might feed the fear of failure, my odds of winning against my friends do not determine whether I enjoy streaming *The Arena*. Rather, the stream's academic context and our dedication to inclusivity helped me feel at ease losing by landslides or taking upward of twenty minutes to execute a single combo. The feeling of disjointedness between myself and the controller when playing fighting games proved frustrating, but it only stoked my desire to improve. I found my footing in approaching our titles from the perspective of an apprentice—eager to learn but fully aware of the uphill climb toward proficiency.

For all the many hours dedicated to them on *The Arena*, fighting games remain an enigma for me. By the time we streamed a month of fighting games in November 2019, I hadn't even officially joined as a cohost—at best, I was a series regular, and *The Arena* provided my first venture into critically discussing video games. This month of grappling with fighting

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games demonstrates one of the significant opportunities afforded through academic streaming, although it also highlights one of its challenges. Put simply, confronting and overcoming feelings of inadequacy as a student and scholar in a public-facing forum while learning a new skill can be as challenging as it is rewarding. Reflecting on this month has revealed how *The Arena* facilitated a space for me to familiarize myself with a genre that I might otherwise never devote critical attention to, while providing a framework for tangling with new games: *The Arena*'s special blend of public practice. We validated our practice by live streaming our successes and failures, and then archiving evidence of the practice on YouTube. This instilled an ethic of legitimizing practice as a necessary step for contributing to critical game studies.

While not entirely absent in traditional seminars, the informality of live streaming led to entirely organic and off-the-wall conversations, especially when we played new games together. We closed out our first fighting game month with a near-comical equalizer in terms of skill: *Bushido Blade* and *Nidhogg*, two unconventional, sword-based fighting games (Lightweight 1997; Messhof 2014). *Nidhogg* was relatively easy to pick up, and I won a fair amount of my matches for the first time *all* month. Learning games together on stream usually involves a scramble for instructions online, which were unavailable for *Bushido Blade*, turning our play into a complete free-for-all. With only a vague idea of what to do, we quickly discovered that games of *Bushido Blade* can last anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes, often ending in an unexpected one-hit kill. We chose our weapons and maps with the same logic: "What's this one like?" The serious tone and complex controls of *Bushido Blade*, paired with our roles as novices, made for a hilarious stream: shouts of shock when Daniel unexpectedly stops running aimlessly and lands a one-hit kill, and mixed cries of congratulation and sympathy after a drawn-out battle. Where *Nidhogg*'s controls were straightforward and accessible, *Bushido Blade*'s complexity challenged the whole group. As opposed to the institutional and somewhat constraining space of a seminar room, the low-stakes and affirming space of our lab subverted the anxieties of learning new games as a group and broadcasting our failures to a live audience.

Playing fighting games for a month on stream robbed me of my fear of failure. As a consistent apprentice who mostly won on technicalities for reasons beyond my own understanding, each *meaningful* victory carried with

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it the hardship and frustration of all the failures that had built up to that point. By intentionally practicing games, I play poorly, and taking on the role of novice in each episode, I not only learned how to approach unfamiliar genres critically, but I also found my place in conversation among people with far more experience, echoing lingering anxieties from graduate seminars in which I felt similarly out of my depth. I came in with little experience playing games socially or competitively, let alone with any kind of extensive referent for playing fighting games. By the end of the month, while I could not catch up to the years of experience that my cohosts had already put in, there were notable improvements—I found my style of fighting, which helped future practice, and overall I benefited from an informed understanding of the genre, even if I don't win any matches. Fighting game month became a successful experiment in how practice and apprenticeship in a supportive environment, no matter the frustration and failure along the way, work as their own modes of expertise.

A Month of Speedrunning *Celeste*—Evelynn

Discussing multiplayer games is practically a prerequisite of *The Arena*, as our goal is to explore the contingencies and possibilities that come from esports and competitive play. So it may surprise you to learn that we spent an entire month playing the single-player game *Celeste* (Maddy Makes Games 2018). *Celeste* is a beautiful game about a woman climbing a literal mountain, and it is a game about self-doubt. However, we were less interested in the game's plot. There was a competition afoot: a race to climb *Celeste*'s titular mountain. In January 2020, our theme was speedrunning, and I volunteered to be our runner. While I was excited to try, none of us had speedrun a game before. We decided that *Celeste*, a popular speedrunning game, was a perfect fit. By the time our first show of the new year rolled around, I had gotten the hang of running the game. Over the month, I played *Celeste*, in its entirety, at least once each day. As I displayed my progress on our weekly streams, we discussed what speedrunning is, how one learns to speedrun, and what it means to be a competitor.

The first thing that struck us when speedrunning was just how embodied of an experience it is. I was acutely aware of the controller in my hands when attempting to perform exacting technical tasks routinely. Speedrunning replaces the puzzle of "how?" with "how quickly?" It makes excruciatingly

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clear the disconnect between what the player intends to do and what their inputs told the game to do. Yet this source of frustration while learning turns to satisfaction when mastered. Embodiment extends beyond control: every time I approached a new personal best (PB), I could feel my heart beating in my chest, a nervous energy that made my hands and body shake with anticipation. In this feeling, I am not alone. Even the most accomplished runners experience similar symptoms. Many include a heart rate monitor while they stream their attempts, numerically translating, in real time, their embodied experience, often exceeding 150 beats per minute when on a great pace. From speedrunning, we learned not to neglect the embodied experiences of competitors, as well as to consider how much a player's time and energy, failure and success rest on the precise movement of anxious hands and fingers.

An important lesson that we took from speedrunning month was just how much time it takes to play a game in as little time as possible. Speedrunning is a technically demanding endeavor that requires full attention and a significant amount of effort to learn how to do well. After my first few runs, where my time dropped precipitously from four hours to around one, I only saw marginal improvement from run to run. The climb toward mastery is filled with plateaus; when players hit these walls, they must step back and adjust their play to improve. I learned all that went into such climbing because I did the climb myself, and as a result, we had a much deeper understanding of what it takes to speedrun. Our discussions during this month of play centered around *time*: strategies to save time, total times of runs, mistakes that lose time, and the many hours of practice that it takes to successfully speedrun a game. Any theoretical discussion of speedrunning might include time because it is the primary metric of success, but the reality of the hours and minutes required was made all the more palpable by my continued efforts to achieve a PB and my colleague's engagement with that quest. Later, time would become the central topic of my dissertation, partially because of our discussions surrounding it on *The Arena*.

In our last stream of the month, we took a step back from broadcasting live *Celeste* attempts to watch speedruns of some of our favorite games and discuss broader topics within the community. We kicked off this discussion by playing the *Celeste* world record run and my PB side by side, showcasing the beauty of high-level speedrunning. While watching popular runs, we discussed the relationship that glitches have to speedrunning, highlighting how speedrunning is not just a competition, but a way to resist a game's

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architecture. We considered how the landscape of the speedrunning community always changes, with new strategies being discovered, categories being created, and records being broken. Finally, we talked about how the majority of players aren't competing against each other, but rather against themselves. That pointed to a greater realization: in *any* competitive game, the first competitor whom one faces is not someone else, but oneself. It is in testing oneself and one's limits that one grows as a player, and other players are there to offer inspiration, encouragement, and competition. Speedrunning displays this clearly because when one sits down to play, the most salient competition is between oneself and one's potential.

While I may have been the one with her hands on the controller for much of the month, I would not have had nearly as much stamina or enthusiasm without the encouragement and discussion I got from my peers and Twitch chats. Every time I achieved a PB off-stream, I messaged Casey and Janelle and received positive feedback, inspiring me to keep going. When we went live, they carried much of the discussion so that I could focus on performing. Their questions encouraged me to learn more, not just about *Celeste*, but also about the community dedicated to playing games at blistering paces. I did not start this journey as an expert, but from my desire to explain ideas and concepts to my friends, I got closer to being one. I am grateful for the help that I received along the way–seasoned players joined our chats to give advice and reflect on our questions. I also sought out other *Celeste* streamers to ask questions about their process, and the community's publicly available guides were helpful in getting started. I became an intermediary between our academic group and the speedrunning community, sharing the language of both to generate a common ground for discussion.

A single month of streaming speedrunning resulted in an entire chapter of my dissertation being devoted to discussing it. As is often the case with *The Arena*, these streams are only the beginning of our interest in the various topics that we explore. By discussing speedrunning with Twitch chat and each other, we made accessible to one group (speedrunners) academic discussions on the nature of competition and play, often evoking Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux's *Metagaming* (Boluk and LeMieux 2017). For scholars, these streams are a gateway to the fairly esoteric pursuit of speedrunning, making legible an activity that is often obscured beneath many layers of technical jargon, hard-to-find information, and rapidly changing, but rarely publicized competitive landscapes. Streaming seminar–esque

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discussions about the discipline for five weeks allowed us to attend to those rapid changes, showcasing how "live scholarship" can be more accessible and attuned to the needs of digital game culture.

Public Learning and You—Casey

During the COVID pandemic, we struggled to find games to play together; among other issues, not all of us could stream from home, some games cannot be played online, and distanced play required us to have three copies of a game instead of one. Behind the scenes, we discussed issues of financial accessibility to games, and the solution that we found in June was traditional board games. There are many ways to play games like chess and Go online, and these platforms are accessible on multiple fronts: many are free to play, they include tutorials, have multiplayer options, and most computers can run them. However, our plans were disrupted. Due to the increasing protests against police brutality, we canceled half of the month's streams. We felt that it was important to observe these injustices and to participate in our local communities instead of our virtual one. Despite these interruptions, board game month proved to be insightful in several ways: first, it demonstrated how Twitch is a twist on the public arcade space. Second, instead of us being the experts for Twitch chat, we let Twitch chat be the experts for us. Finally, we practiced public-facing learning by streaming our introduction to the game of Go.

Out of the three *The Arena* showrunners, only Evelynn had some experience playing Go. We began our first stream using the lesson mode of Online-Go (OGS) to learn the game (OGS n.d.). While Janelle and I learned the basics, Evelynn reminisced about her experience playing the game while living in Asia. Twitch has a preexisting community of Go players, and they joined our stream. We were pleasantly surprised when we had a significant number of new viewers who gave us tips and strategies while chatting with one another about their own experiences playing Go. I often considered Twitch as a remediation of the domestic-social gaming experience, but this month proved that Twitch remediates the arcade space as well. Strangers visited our stream to watch a game they love, much like how arcade-goers might mingle by their favorite games to watch how others play. Instead of a cacophony of game sounds and idle chatter in the arcade vying for attention, Twitch chat provided a different take on this experience: beautiful,

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visual chaos. We struggled to distinguish advice from side chatter as we read chats while playing one another. Eventually, we played matches against our audience, forming friendships built by a chance meeting in a game space. It is easy to feel obligated to have a sense of professionalism and perfectionism while on air, but by harnessing Twitch as a public game space more so than a broadcasting platform, we situated ourselves as fellow players of Go rather than as broadcasters. Although we occupied both roles at the time, this positioning made it easy for us to pass our roles as experts to chat.

Because most of the participants were more experienced players than we were, this month was an aberration from our normal method of show hosts taking turns as the expert while Twitch chat and other hosts engage with them. In many Twitch streams, the streamer is the main source of entertainment and typically knows the game better than the average viewer. For instance, one of the most popular Go streamers primarily broadcasts lessons. However, our stream was flipped—our viewers in chats were the teachers. They coached us and challenged us to matches. Although we did not solicit their help in the stream title, the stream naturally evolved to a point where we had several returning viewers across the weeks who appeared to be more invested in teaching us and talking strategy than being entertained by us showing off our clunky, nascent abilities of playing Go. In subsequent months, we invited Twitch chats to take the role of expert. For example, while playing *Power Rangers: Battle for the Grid*, we included "come teach us!" in our stream title, which brought in participants who joined to give tips (nWay 2019). Streaming Go showed us how communities can be built through streams in which participants can see in real time how their knowledge of a game assists those who are just starting.

The lessons we learned this month can be applied beyond streaming board games. Many scholars note that a large part of Twitch's allure is interacting with the streamer. They focus on the streamer's role of information-giver and moderator of content. However, if the chat is coaching the streamer through different maps, then they dictate which combos to attempt, which maps to play, and which items to interact with—these choices shape the player's first run of the game. You cannot unplay your introduction to a game. Learning through Twitch allows us to digitally have the experience of learning to play from an older family member or arcade guru. Having the chat as the expert opened us up to consider different ways to navigate our streams, invite participation, and learn games. In many aspects, failure and

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lack of mastery may feel like a poor reflection of ourselves when our shortcomings are put on display for strangers to see. However, in this context, we facilitated the building of communities through learning a game rather than relegating that experience to private spaces. Our greatest takeaway from this is that being a learner on Twitch depends on a trustful relationship between streamer and chat, and more scholarly work has yet to be done on the chat's role on the platform.

We found that our experiences streaming Go echo something that we discovered from previous streams—it is the amateur's perspective that illuminates things that go unseen. Novice players illuminate what the expert may take for granted or even consider mundane. However, these fresh eyes yield questions that often generate meaningful discussion, which prompts experts to view beginners' questions through the seasoned player's lens. The larger connection that we can draw is that we are better together than we are alone: as Janelle and Evelynn demonstrated, without community, how we play and understand games would not be as impactful, multifaceted, or fun.

Conclusion

We've streamed *The Arena* for almost three years. We were all in PhD coursework during at least some of this time, going to actual seminars for actual credit. Yet we found ourselves not just going to class, but also actively organizing a virtual seminar for ourselves and others. The experience was stretching. Many of our ideas simply did not work out. Sometimes we spun our wheels trying to uncover meaning that wasn't there. Other weeks, our streams were stunted by technical difficulties. We underestimated just how much of an appetite there is for explicitly academic content on Twitch. At times, we were too eager to follow trends in the esports scene, and the resulting discussions felt rushed or half thought out. Sometimes we took the roles of "teacher" and "student" too literally, with streams that looked more like a tutorial for how to play a game rather than a fruitful discussion of the game's mechanics and meaning. Nevertheless, these ventures proved useful in other ways—spinning our wheels encouraged us to return to the show with renewed energy to counterbalance the frustration of underwhelming performances.

We feel that *The Arena*, and Serious Play as a whole, model healthy academia. Doing these shows on our own or spending this time in personal

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study would not be nearly as interesting, engaging, or rewarding for us as scholars. The simple fact is that *discourse* is what makes an academic environment valuable; it is the wellspring of profitable thought. A seminar is valuable because you're in a room with like-minded people who are not singular in opinion or disposition, but are unified in their desire to grow and learn. Live streaming, then, affords a unique methodology for testing academic ideas in a public context for an audience, mirroring the frustrations and victories of the academic research process, but in a playful, supportive setting. *The Arena*'s process of contending with failure and trying again demonstrates how collaborative academic streaming can work as a methodology for interrogating play. Weeks where our energy was low, where phrasing our ideas during competitive gameplay was too many things to do at once, where we simply "didn't have anything smart to say" and just played, all still work toward a model for academic work that does not shy away from failure and rather follows the active interests of its participants.

For those looking to start their own live stream seminar space, the humble desire to learn, discuss, and occasionally fail is all you need. Though we do recommend bringing some friends with you! The relationships that *The Arena* cultivated are the most valuable thing that we gained from this experience. As we learned from moving the show online due to COVID-19, the technological affordances of a computer lab are not requirements for creating an academic streaming environment. This kind of thoughtful space is too often relegated to closed-off college classrooms on weeknights. By making it accessible to a public audience, not only can academic streamers benefit from the added scholastic activity, but so can those who tune in, and together you'll both learn something, continuing the promise that earnest discussion has fulfilled for thousands of years.

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15 "Thou Shall Never Use a Fire Stone on Eevee": *Twitch Plays Pokémon* and the Articulation of Game Brands as Cultural Texts

Michael Anthony DeAnda

Introduction

On February 12, 2014, a developer in Australia using the moniker "The Streamer" launched *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. In this experiment, The Streamer retooled an emulation of the English *Pokémon Red* (Game Freak 1998) to allow collaborative control of the avatar in the game through Twitch. In this novel metagame, The Streamer developed a script to mine commands from the Twitch chat function and process them through the emulator, resulting in spectators becoming players. An event that "shook the world" according to Twitch (2016), *Twitch Plays Pokémon* reenvisioned live streaming, offering it as a site of collective play. This experience was the first of its kind and has since sparked several other "Twitch Plays" of popular titles, in which an uncapped number of participants control a game and this autonomous system serves as the content of the stream.

According to the fan-developed *Twitch Plays Pokémon* wiki, which is found in the subreddit, the first run-through of *Pokémon Red* took 16 days, 7 hours, 45 minutes, and 30 seconds to complete and, at its peak, over 120,000 users were playing simultaneously. Because of the overwhelming number of players feeding commands into the game, the avatar, "Red," would pace, open up the start menu, and attempt to use items, often during inopportune moments. To provide context for this absurd gameplay, players started a group on the social media site Reddit, where they developed a narrative. The subreddit has since developed to include the archive of the lore in a wiki, which includes the lore, timeline, and selected fan art developed from several *Twitch Plays Pokémon* experiences. What began with a frantic avatar constantly and incorrectly trying to use a Moon Stone, an

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item used for evolving certain Pokémon, on a Pidgey, a bird pokémon, during battle became a messianic tale of good and evil.

In this chapter, I situate the gameplay and the collaboratively developed narrative of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as cultural palimpsests of the Pokémon brand. By studying the collaborative play of the game and with storytelling, I locate alternative logics and pleasures beyond fun, winning, and mechanics of playing games, even among a massive number of players. Rather, my study of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* emphasizes alternative pleasures related to games, including frustration, celebration, wonder, and trolling. From this collective gameplay, I consider the opportunities for streaming platforms to develop shared memories and collaborative meaning-making. In my investigation of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, I situate this experiment as a fan-made paratext of the brand, and I argue that video game brands are not static in their messages but rather are dynamic living texts because of the fine balance of coauthored meaning-making. I emphasize that streaming platforms as transformative play spaces for fans to continue breathing life into these cultural texts, making apparent these coauthoring processes between commercial and consumer entities.

I begin with an overview of the Pokémon games and branding to address how the Twitch modifications, allowing collaborative play of *Pokémon Red*, are not in tension with the brand. Rather, through the various applications of seriality, I consider how the Pokémon brand gains traction when activated through fan-created content. I then complicate this discussion by articulating how these modifications disrupted the expected gameplay, opening up avenues to consider alternative pleasures at play. I use the collaboratively generated narrative to discuss some of these pleasures. In understanding the ways that *Twitch Plays Pokémon* exemplifies this symbiotic fan/corporate relationship, I underscore that video game brands are not static in their messages but rather are dynamic living texts because of coauthored meaning-making.

Collecting, Trading, and Serializing

Satoshi Tajiri designed *Pokémon* to reflect a nostalgic childhood activity of collecting and trading beetles. Several design decisions reflect this core experience of collecting and trading (*Time* 1999). To begin, the player sets out on an adventure with one of three starter Pokémon with the goal

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of becoming the Pokémon champion by earning eight gym badges and winning the Pokémon League. To succeed, players must develop a well-rounded party of up to six Pokémon by exploring the different areas within the game. These areas have various pokémon, demonstrating an emphasis on exploration as a necessary activity for collecting different creatures. The Game Boy, a handheld console, made it possible to play these games on the go. Colocated players may trade pokémon by using link cables. To date, each Pokémon title comes with version-specific Pokémon; thus, trading must be done if any player wants to collect all the available Pokémon. Distributing various pokémon across different titles highlights how the experience of trading shaped the design of the games; having two games, each with version-specific Pokémon, requires players to seek out and trade with others. Tajiri even considered trading beyond the boundaries of the game, such as swapping physical items or labor for beloved pokémon (Alison 2006, 197). Furthermore, certain pokémon evolve to their next form only when traded. The call to adventure, the considerations of hardware, and some evolution mechanics all emphasize how collecting and trading shaped Tajiri's design thinking of *Pokémon*.

Twitch Plays Pokémon launched nearly sixteen years following the English release of *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Blue* (Game Freak 1996 [Japan], 1998 [US]). Since then, Pokémon has grown into a large transmedia brand across anime, video games, toys, manga, clothing, books, and mobile apps. Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux (2017) identify how seriality, objects arranged in a spatial or temporal series (177), manifests in computing (177), isolated gaming (180), and commercialism (189). Reading the Super Mario brand through Marc Steinburg's concept of new seriality, "a mode of consumption which is itself serial: a character is consumed in its many object forms, as pieces of a constantly expanding universe" (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 100), they unpack how the brand's potency lies in its "multiplication and cross pollination in numerous projects and media experiments" (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 190). Pokémon, like Super Mario, gains power in similar ways, as transmedia brands that affect the ways that they structure and repeat in quotidian experiences. While not sanctioned by the Pokémon Company, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* still activates the Pokémon brand, and seriality becomes a central gameplay component. Importantly, the ideologies driving Tajiri's initial design of the game translate into this online experience: collecting and socializing map onto the aspects of collaborative play,

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involving strategizing and meaning-making; and exploration provides the premise for the topsy-turvey journey.

The original games for Nintendo's Game Boy used the directional pad to move the avatar or the cursor in menus, A to select and interact with objects and nonplayer characters, B to return, Start to open the menu, and Select to rearrange items in certain components of the menus. The simple material affordances of the Game Boy allows a straightforward approach to the emulated commands. Using the VisualBoyAdvance emulator for *Pokémon Red*, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* relied on a script that mined Twitch's chat log for input commands and delivered them to the game, displayed in the streaming window. In this interface, "a" translated to the A button; "b" to the B button; "up," "down," "left," and "right" to the appropriate buttons on the directional pad, respectively, and "start" opened the menu.

Importantly, in live streaming, this modification blurred the lines between spectators and players, allowing thousands of players to contribute to Red's fate simultaneously. By disrupting the privileged logics of gaming, this modification foregrounds "serialized play," which I define, drawing from Boluk and LeMieux's study on seriality in *Metagaming*, as play experiences in which player actions are algorithmically collected and arranged and then processed according to protocol. Rather than immediate feedback loops, a common feature of game time as Christopher Hanson studies, the game processed commands in the order that players fed them into the chat. Hanson argues that immediacy in games bonds the game's time to our own time, forming an enlivened game centering the player. By activating the game, players become aware of themselves as players. In *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, processing slowed the time between inputting the commands and executing them, thus upsetting the immediacy of the feedback loop. Responding to Hanson, I see how this disruption exemplifies a play space in which players do not get a sense of themselves individually as players, but rather as a collective body enlivening the game together in a carnivalesque assemblage. The community at play called itself "The Hivemind" to address the coalescence of many players into one collective in-game agent, Red. In *Twitch Plays Pokémon* lore, The Hivemind is referred to as "The Voices." As a result of serialized play, tasks that would be simple for individual players, like cutting trees and navigating the ledges outside Cerulean City, proved tedious and even detrimental for The Hivemind. The average time

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to complete the main storyline of this title is twenty-six hours (HowLongToBeat), and yet it took the collective sixteen days.

Collaborative Meaning-Making as a Method of Play

Having discussed the novelty of the modification in the previous section, I now move to focus on *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as fan-authored, exemplifying fans as creator-consumers. Here, I consider how the disruptive play drove players to make meaning from this experience, locating it through developed lore. These behaviors all point to what Stuart Hall (2001) would refer to as "denotative"; these are literally the actions that The Hivemind performs. Yet The Hivemind transforms gameplay at the connotative level through their interpretations of denotative actions using storytelling and art to create lore. Such narrative development emphasizes the connotative levels of games as playful moments that also reflect back on meaning-making processes of gameplay experiences. For this study, denotation and connotation offer ways of attending to the components that contribute to the meaning-making processes of this serialized experience. I use these contexts to observe the various pleasures at play in *Twitch Plays Pokémon* and the meaning that developed from these interactions. Each reveals a particular feature about the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* phenomenon that contributes to fan elevation of this game as a paratext of the *Pokémon* brand. For this analysis, I focus on the fourth day, during which players released their starting pokémon, a Charmander.

In addition to disrupting the expected feedback loop common in games, serialized play instigated some unusual and tedious avatar behaviors: pacing, giving Pokémon unusual strings of characters as nicknames (such as naming the starting Charmander "ABBBBBBK": nicknamed in the lore as "Abby"), discarding items, listening to Bulbasaur's cry on the pokédex, and trying to use the Helix Fossil, an item that players can give to a scientist encountered later in the game to revive into an ancient Pokémon.

Leading up to the release of Abby, The Hivemind needed a Pokémon able to transport them across water, with a special move, "Surf." Identifying two possible solutions, players opted to chance obtaining Eevee, a pokémon able to evolve (hence the name) into one of three pokémon of different types, in Celadon City and purchasing a Water Stone to evolve it into a Vaporeon,

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a water-type pokémon capable of learning Surf. However, serialized play got in the way of purchasing the Water Stone, and The Hivemind spent all of their money buying PokéDolls and a Fire Stone, which evolves Eevee into Flareon, a fire-type pokémon. In addition to missing the mark, Flareon in the first generation games is considered the worst of the three "Eeveelutions" due to its stats in conjunction with its typing. Having failed at obtaining a Water Stone, players decided to store Eevee in the computer to make room for another pokémon. In addition to depositing and withdrawing creatures, a player may use the computer to release pokémon, meaning that they are forever irretrievable and unusable. Because of serialized play, this game feature proved an anxiety-inducing crapshoot for The Hivemind. While trying to deposit Eevee, The Hivemind also released Abby.

This outlines the denotative moment of gameplay experienced by The Hivemind on Twitch. Yet it also provides a key to analyze the development of playing with player-developed narrative connotations, a site in which players become the authors of a storyline. When trying to account for their failed attempt at getting a Vaporeon, players reimagined Eevee as "The False Prophet," who incites failure in the hellscape that is serialized *Pokémon*. However, this quest ultimately failed, resulting in the loss of money and Abby. Notably, the lore connotes the release of pokémon as death. This narrativization alludes to McKenzie Wark's (2007, para. 148) argument that narrative is an interface through which we come to understand the allegories and meanings embedded in the code of games. Thus, because of the topsy-turvy game play, the created narrative provides an excuse for the failure to meet the privileged expectations of players and games. Put another way, the collaboratively developed narrative emphasizes the ways in which players engage in making sense of serialized play. Eevee, originally believed to provide a crucial asset to allow Red to continue his journey across water, a "savior" figure who also alludes to the biblical story of Jesus walking on water, betrays Red.

The narrative serves as a mechanism for players to make sense of the carnivalesque games. Dennis Saleebey (1994, 352) notes that "[c]ulture is the means by which we receive, organize, rationalize and understand our experiences in the world"; narratives are a way of presenting and forming meaning from these experiences (353). This approach to narrative in turn must account for different trajectories. Jerome Bruner (2000, 53) therefore proposes two forms of narrative: one that perpetuates a canon and another

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that accounts for anomalies. Bruner's two narrative forms are at play in the fan development of an accompanying storyline for *Twitch Plays Pokémon*—specifically, the second form accounts for the reconfigured mechanics turning gameplay into a hectic experience. These micronarratives, operating together to connote meaning from gameplay, incite a larger narrative through which players wrestle with their unexpected gameplay situation. Players use narrative as an alibi to account for the divergence from individualized playthroughs of the game, the disruption of normative feedback loop cycles, and then this informs the developing canon significant to this experience: the lore of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. Invoking Saleebey, this process then accounts for the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* narrative reflecting back upon the cultural text that is the Pokémon brand.

The names created by The Hivemind emphasize the underpinnings of this story of good and evil that harken especially to Christianity. The lore of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* involves several key characters in addition to Eevee and the evolved Flareon, dubbed "The False Prophet," the Helix Fossil, "Lord Helix," and Pidgeot, or "Bird Jesus." Rather than developing the religious narrative from the ground up, the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* community deployed established religious iconography to structure their interpretation of the serialized play, allowing their story to become immediately legible as its own cultural text (Saucerman and Ramirez 2016, 88). The mass investment in the storytelling and canonization of the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* experience emphasizes the development of fan culture specific to the game.

The alternative pleasures present in *Twitch Plays Pokémon* invite us to look to the other spaces of this experience, not as surrogates to the game, but as powerful spaces of meaning-making. The narrative and fan art reveal the level of dedication of some players to *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. Not only are they willing to endure the tedious experience of serialized play, but they also actively respond to the game by developing further artifacts representing the collective understanding of the game. Inherent in the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* experiment is an interesting take on Tajiri's original design concept behind *Pokémon*: collecting. In contrast, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* minimized collecting pokémon, especially because of serialization and fear of having to use the in-game computer. Rather, the modification emphasizes the collective play among players, to quote Boluk and LeMieux (2017), the "model of a hundred thousand billion fingers" (204). With the gameplay, narrative, and art of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, this group engagement reveals

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a greater process of player-engaged meaning-making—indeed, creating a culture—out of the game experience.

"Gamefreak-Senpai Noticed Us"

In the previous section, I analyze how *Twitch Plays Pokémon* was a phenomenon that grew into a subculture of fandom. I now shift my focus to *Twitch Plays Pokémon* in relation to the larger *Pokémon* brand, arguing that the modification acts as a paratext of the brand due to its exposure. I use *Twitch Plays Pokémon* to articulate *Pokémon* as what Yochai Benkler (2006) refers to as "hybrid media ecology," how multiple producers and audiences interact with each other to create systems of power and responsibilities through media, meaning that the commercial and fan entities invested in *Pokémon* interact with and negotiate the meaning of the brand in complex ways. As such, fans have agency, not merely as consumers, but also as cocontributors or coauthors.

Integral and tricky to articulating the fan agency among brand identities, especially Pokémon, is, as Rebekah Willett (2004, 239) identifies, how the Pokémon brand draws success from being "'poached' by different people for different purposes." *Twitch Plays Pokémon* is one such example of several different people poaching Pokémon as a cultural text. Studying how children use Pokémon as a storytelling vehicle, Willett (2004) concludes that this brand "thrives in children's culture by providing [a] variety of subject positions for children to adopt as they perform and play with their identities in a variety of contexts in their daily lives" (239). This aligns with Boluk and LeMieux's discussion of Mario as a serialized transmedia brand that is activated across many forms and integrates into, if not reconfigures, quotidian rhythms. The Pokémon brand gains similar traction through the varieties of contexts from both corporate and player-made spaces.

By garnering attention, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* yielded effects into the larger Pokémon fandom, evidenced by its page on Bulbapedia and the list of the "10 Commandments of Pokémon," the ninth of which is "Thou shall never use a Fire Stone on Eevee" (Lepetit and Jhall 2015), referencing the evolution of the False Prophet. While this sentiment echoes the understanding that Flareon is the worst of the three first-generation Eeveelutions, the framing of this as a "commandment" elevates this from gameplay, harkening to the religiosity that colors the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* experience. Such

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mingling of this subculture within the larger Pokémon fandom positions *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as a fan experience and validates it among Pokémon fans as a text within the fandom. This is significant, as not all methods of conveying fannishness or contributing to a fandom are seen as legitimate (Busse 2013). Rather, this modification was recognized in articles intended for the larger *Pokémon* fandom.

Nintendo and the Pokémon Company have also nodded to *Twitch Plays Pokémon* in their own products. For example, Nintendo used "twitchplayspokemon" as a promotional code for three cards in *Pokémon Trading Card Game Online* during the 2014 Pokémon World Championship. Lord Helix, the holy deity of the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* lore, has since been more prominent in Pokémon games too. In the French release of *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* (Game Freak 2014), Brawly, the Dewford Town Gym Leader, says [translated], "I discovered the secret of true power by staring at a Helix Fossil for days and days." This is a nod to *Twitch Plays Pokémon* players articulating that Red was seeking advice from the Helix Fossil. In this same game, the chair of Devon Corp, Mr. Stone, sits in his office, which has a painting of an Omanyte, the pokémon rewritten in lore as "Lord Helix," behind him.

There are very curious stakes in Nintendo's nod to *Twitch Plays Pokémon*—ones that speak to navigating hybrid media ecologies as the producers and consumers of transmedia brands. Jenkins's (2008) study of how Lucasfilms navigates *Star Wars* branding showcases the tensions of the corporate-consumer media ecology. Jenkins discusses similar happenings with *Star Wars,* in which fans took advantage of the transmedia elements of the brand to add new meaning to the story; as these fan creations gained popularity, Lucasfilms pushed back and started regulating the *Star Wars* brand more heavily. In contrast to Jenkins's example, when responding to *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, the Pokémon Company faced a decision to either push back on *Twitch Plays Pokémon* for copyright infringement or allow it to continue. Either action would cause ripples for the larger brand. Unlike the *Star Wars* brand management, *Pokémon* validated their fans' participation in contributing to the meaning-making of the brand.

On the one hand, Nintendo leverages *Twitch Plays Pokémon* to market itself, articulating the culture developed around this title and pulling those who contributed to it into the larger Nintendo brand. On the other hand, Nintendo thus legitimizes *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as a paratext to the *Pokémon* brand—as part of the canon—with this move. Specifically, to understand

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these Easter eggs, one must be familiar with *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. So *Twitch Plays Pokémon* is not only relevant to *Pokémon* fans, but it now has bearing on the larger *Pokémon* industry, another point of reference and cultural touchstone of *Pokémon,* in addition to manga, anime, and games.

Twitch Plays Pokémon gained so much public attention that it forced the voices and creations of fans into the spotlight, requiring the larger Pokémon brand and Nintendo to heed this player-created phenomenon, destabilizing the industry as the sole contributor of meaning to Pokémon. "Convergence," as Henry Jenkins and Mark Deuze (2008, 5) explain, must be understood both as corporate-driven and consumer-driven. From the consumer-driven perspective, fans challenged the ownership of the *Pokémon* brand and experience through the development of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. Yet the corporate-driven aspects of convergence here account for how Pokémon, as Willett argues, benefits from being poached in consumer creations because these activate the brand, allowing it to further penetrate the day-to-day experiences and rhythms.

Conclusion

In 2014, Twitch was given the *Guinness Book of World Records* designation "Most users to input a command to play a live streamed videogame" because of the 1,165,140 people who participated in *Twitch Plays Pokémon* over the course of the experiment between February 12 and March 1, 2014 (Guinness World Records n.d.). In 2014, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* shook streaming culture, online gaming, and Pokémon through an experience that reimagined how one might consider live streaming and play, and who has agency in these spaces. In 2016, Twitch announced the inclusion of a "Twitch Plays" category on the site, citing *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as a groundbreaking cultural text as the inspiration. In addition to their promotion of several other "Twitch Plays" games, Twitch formalized the definition for this category as: "1) Autonomously running games that utilize Twitch live streams as the primary mode of content delivery. 2) Interactive experiences that gives the Twitch audience control over 'player' actions in the game. 3) Uncapped number of potential participants. No picking and choosing" (Twitch 2016). Notable here is that the popularity of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* not only elevated it as a paratext of Pokémon, but also created the foundation for a type of live streaming that inspired an entire style of content.

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Importantly, The Streamer envisioned *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as an experiment for crowdsourcing gameplay, but the response from players demonstrates, as T. L. Taylor argues, play as transformative work. Concentrating on the meaningfulness of live streaming as sites of the convergence of leisure and labor, play and work, audiences and producers, Taylor argues that live streaming highlights the transformative nature of play. Here, she underscores the need to complicate how we study commercialized platforms by analyzing how people create experiences and content for their personal fulfillment and for others to enjoy (Taylor 2018, 82). The various ramifications for Pokémon and Twitch reveal *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as a transformative site of play. By reimagining Twitch as a platform through which viewers become a united hivemind of players, The Streamer created a space that complicates the how we consider content in live streaming, who creates this content, and what kinds of pleasures are derived from these participations.

The new seriality of Pokémon accounts for its presence and ability to exist as both a corporate brand and beloved player artifact, while it is thriving because of the convergence of the multiple activations by commercial and audience entities. Furthermore, it reveals how the brand translates into a communicative vehicle in corporate-consumer and consumer-as-producer dialectics. At the corporate level, it is a brand that is carefully managed so as to be profitable. However, fans also localize, interpret, and remix the brand. *Twitch Plays Pokémon* gained greater public attention—so much so that Nintendo even leveraged the fan artifact to its benefit, simultaneously elevating this remix to a brand paratext: to understand the Easter eggs, one must be familiar with the lore. This exemplifies the symbiosis of fans and corporate industry in convergence cultures through which both breathe life into, interpret, and preserve cultural texts, brands.

Serialized play transformed both Twitch and *Pokémon Red* from commercial artifacts into a popular and groundbreaking game experience that inspired future developments in live streaming and in Pokémon. Considering new seriality as a mode of consumption, the serialized play of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* disrupted the cadence of how poaching helps brands integrate into the quotidian, instead becoming a moment in which this remix reflected back into the larger brand of Pokémon. As a form of transformative play, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* emphasizes game brands as cultural texts that players consume and coauthor through reflective and interpretive making.

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16 Emoting Culture on Twitch.tv: The Removal and Reinstatement of PogChamp

Nathan J. Jackson

Visual paralanguage is arguably one of the central elements of digital communication. Memes, emoji, and gifs (both animated and not) all carry enormous amounts of unspoken information that can be readily decoded with the right knowledge. In this chapter, I discuss Twitch's platform-specific emoji—emotes—by focusing on the events surrounding the changes to the PogChamp emote in 2021. After describing the history of PogChamp, I set up the politics of the decision to alter the emote as an indirect response to the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021. I argue that emotes exist and are understood in relation to broader social and cultural arrangements. Through the evolution of PogChamp, its use across the platform, and the steps taken by Twitch to distance the values of the platform from those of PogChamp's face, I trace the corporate decision-making process through the desired perception of the platform. Within this evolution lie clear attempts to redress issues of representation and visibility that have long been a part of streaming culture on the platform, inherited from hegemonic identity traits that have historically dominated gaming culture. Through PogChamp, I show how emotes are social and cultural artifacts that perform essential work to the success of the platform and reflect and respond to events occurring well beyond the bounds of the platform.

What Are Emotes?

In this chapter, I take Twitch as a case study to demonstrate how emotes function as social and cultural artifacts. Arguably, the most popular live streaming platform in the world, Twitch has enough attention and a long enough history to warrant examination here. Although this chapter is focused on Twitch, where emotes are an important part of the culture, economy, and

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mundane user practice, the relationship between visual communication tools and broader culture persists across other digital platforms—live streaming and not. There are different types of emotes that dictate who can use them and where they can be used. These include the following:

- *Global* emotes—these can be used by anyone with a Twitch account in any stream.
- *Subscriber* emotes—these are streamer-specific emotes that can be accessed for a monthly subscription fee. While subscribed to a streamer, a spectator can use subscriber emotes in any stream.
- *Third-party* emotes—these are facilitated by external platforms like BetterTTV (BTTV) and FrankerFaceZ (FFZ). They can be used only in streams that have been connected to these services and are visible only when spectators have the appropriate extension installed in their browser.

It is worth noting that there are other types of emotes that are significant to the economy and culture of Twitch in their own ways; however, only those just listed will be discussed in this chapter. Just like emoji, emotes are more than just pictures. They are used to color the text of a chat message, often to clarify the intended tone of a message. For example, the Kappa emote is a grayscaled image of one of Justin.tv's (Twitch's predecessor's) original Internet Relay Chat (IRC) engineers, Josh DeSeno, that is recognized across the platform as indicating sarcasm. Sometimes emotes are used in isolation to communicate a specific reaction, like the LUL emote, a play on "LOL" that depicts the late video game reviewer and Twitch streamer John "TotalBiscuit" Bain laughing (figure 16.1). Emotes like this are performative in an Austinian sense, namely "in saying what I do, I actually perform that action" (Austin 2013, 22). The action is an expression of an emotion or affect that a spectator wants to communicate to a streamer or other spectators. By



Figure 16.1
LUL (left), LULW (middle), and KEKW (right) emotes.

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sending "LUL," I am signaling laughter or laughing virtually (even if I'm not laughing). In this sense, an emote (noun) is used to emote (verb). Following this line of thought, I refer to emotes as "virtual" speech acts.

Many third-party emotes consist of variants of other emotes. These can look quite similar but have different connotations that emerge through customary use. For instance, LULW and KEKW are both third-party emotes that indicate laughter (figure 16.1). The "W" stands for "wide" and refers to the specific framing of the subjects' faces as used in these emotes. LULW is a rotated and zoomed-in version of LUL, and KEKW has the same framing of the face of the Spanish actor and comedian Juan Joya Borja, whose laughter during an interview with Jesus Quintero in 2007 went viral. Different streamers and stream collectives have different preferences among the three. Some Twitch users feel that KEKW is toxic and is used in a way that laughs at a streamer rather than with them. In contrast, others express opinions about a natural progression from LUL to LULW to KEKW. While there isn't any universal agreement about connotations associated with each of these emotes, it is largely agreed upon that they do have different connotations. Through the rest of this chapter, I will use PogChamp to extend on this notion that these small images function as more than just virtual paralanguage, but are instrumental in defining and communicating values and the culture of Twitch. More than this, they demonstrate connections between platform features, user practices, and the external cultures within which Twitch users operate.

Emotes, Sociality, and Gaming Cultures

The body of literature on live streaming continues to grow substantially, following its popularity. Scholars are producing a broad range of work on the practice and, as one of the central features of the Twitch platform, emotes are relevant to much of this.

Sociality, and the subsequent sense of community within streams, plays an important role in the way that users engage with Twitch. A shared vernacular, in particular a shared *understanding* of the shared vernacular, is critical to any sense of online community. That is to say that emotes can become bonding tools for Twitch users. This in turn leads to an increase in viewing time and following and subscribing to particular streamers (Sjöblom and Hamari 2017). The connection between social interactions and financially contributing to streams is strong (Hilvert-Bruce et al. 2018), and this

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is heavily reliant on how emotes are treated within specific streams. The treatment of PogChamp ruptured some of this sociality, as streamers and spectators alike discovered the bounds of their comfort with the emote as its connotations were heavily and abruptly altered. While stream interactions are tempered by the style and foci of the streamer's communication (Giertz et al. 2020), and hence streamers have a reasonable amount of control over collective communication, spectator agency still plays a significant role in characterizing stream interactions. This sentiment is echoed in recent studies that emphasize copresence within live streams (Diwanji et al. 2020) or consider live streaming as a coperformance between users (Li et al. 2019). In other words, how a particular stream collective navigates the kind of cultural shift represented by the PogChamp in this chapter is a negotiation between streamers and spectators.

The economic and social impacts of emotes as a platform feature are significant, particularly because of their relationships with identities of both their subjects and their users. As mentioned in the previous section, emotes are vernacular tools that characterize communication on the platform (Ford et al. 2017). But more than that, as I have previously argued, they are memetic and become mobilized to define and perform collective identity (Jackson 2021). This is apparent through the existence and distinct uses of emote variants. T. L. Taylor (2018) observes the importance of the identity emotes' subjects when she notes the racist applications of the TriHard emote (figure 16.2)—depicting the Black streamer Trihex—often used in situations where Black characters appear in games. To add to this, the global emote cmonBruh depicts a Black person (whose name is not widely known) performing a facial expression of confusion, concern, or disbelief (figure 16.2). A more ambivalent emote, cmonBruh is often used to flag a particular stream comment as racist. This use aligns well with the name, as



Figure 16.2
The cmonBruh (left) and TriHard (right) emotes.

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one could almost imagine the performative "Are you serious?" depicted by the facial expression. However, this emote also has racist uses identical to those of TriHard. One of the great difficulties surrounding emotes like these is that representing the diverse Twitch user base lends visibility that is easily abused (and becomes abusive)—a challenge that I will discuss in more detail when recounting the PogChamp narrative. To combat this, activism around diversifying live streaming spaces and practices has arisen in response to the values underpinning these offensive emote uses. For example, AnyKey's GLHF (meaning "Good Luck Have Fun") pledge (Brewer, Romine, and Taylor 2020), which has its own visual tag: the GLHF badge that appears next to users' names in chats.

There is an essential movement within game studies to resist the dominance of what has been called the "default" player: white, cisgendered, heterosexual, able-bodied, young, middle-class men (Chess 2017). As Twitch is mostly known as a video game live streaming platform, it has inherited this notion of a default user, which heavily informs the reception and use of emotes that represent marginalized users and thereby perpetuates their marginalized status. Kishonna L. Gray (2017) asserts that by not fitting into the default identity of the platform, people of color disrupt the norms of Twitch simply through their presence—their mere presence is an act of deviance. Mia Consalvo (2018) describes the trangressive play that live streaming enables through a case study of Kaceytron, who simultaneously meets and resists gendered assumptions around gaming capital and skill. Mark R. Johnson (2019) examines the costs and benefits of streaming as a career for those with chronic conditions. Extending this beyond users to platform governance, Cullen and Ruberg (2019) and Ruberg (2021) uncover the sexual politics woven into the very fabric of live streaming platforms through their policy documents. When a moment of social crisis occurs, like the events leading up to changes to PogChamp, the platform's architecture—including users' values, attitudes and identities, and platform policy and features—is mobilized to react.

Introducing PogChamp

PogChamp is a global Twitch emote, characterized by a face with an open mouth and eyes wide in excitement. One of the earliest Twitch emotes, the face of PogChamp until January 2021 was Ryan "Gootecks" Gutierrez (figure 16.3). Gutierrez is known for cofounding Cross Counter TV—an online

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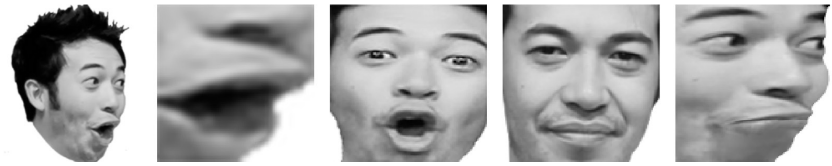


Figure 16.3
From left to right: PogChamp (up to January 2021), Pog, PogU, WeirdChamp, Pause Champ.

network dedicated to fighting game content—and his history of competitive fighting game play, most notably in the *Street Fighter* series. PogChamp is another example of emotes as virtual speech acts, as the facial expression is intended to communicate how the user is feeling. Specifically, PogChamp is associated with hype—an excitement/anticipation hybrid. The emote often follows a success or skillful display in-game, when it allows spectators to share in the success, or a generally exciting occurrence in-stream.

PogChamp has also sprouted several third-party variants (figure 16.3). These depict Guttierez, though they are typically used to emphasize different constituent elements of hype. For example:

- Pog—An extreme close-up of Gutierrez's mouth, indicating greater excitement than PogChamp.
- PogU—The same facial expression but facing the camera, indicating more surprise than PogChamp.
- WeirdChamp—A different facial expression, communicating a judgment that what was said was weird or odd.
- PauseChamp—A different facial expression that suggests more anticipation than PogChamp (e.g., waiting for the streamer to notice something that the chat has already seen).

As was the case with LUL, some of these uses vary among stream collectives, particularly PogChamp, Pog, and PogU, which can be read quite similarly. PogChamp and its variants have become interwoven with hype on Twitch.

Not Very Pog: The Removal of PogChamp

Following the death of a woman during the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, Guttierez tweeted the question, "Will there by civil

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unrest for the woman who was executed inside the Capitol today or will the #MAGAMartyr die in vain?" (figure 16.4). Although Guttierez is not officially affiliated with Twitch, the face of one of their oldest and most popular emotes inciting violence in this way was a step too far. In an active effort to disassociate the platform with Guttierez's message, Twitch decided to remove the PogChamp emote (figure 16.5). Importantly, in their tweets, they acknowledge the importance of the emote to Twitch culture and its association with hype.

Following the removal of PogChamp by Twitch, FFZ also removed all emotes depicting Guttierez except Pog, while BTTV has opted to keep these emotes in circulation. Part of Twitch's announcement of the removal of PogChamp included a commitment to "work with the community to design a new emote for the most hype moments on Twitch" (figure 16.5). This recognizes the void in Twitch vernacular left by the sudden removal of the emote. Rather than being immediately noticed, however, there was a ripple effect, as spectators attempted to use PogChamp in vain, informed each other of the removal and its reasoning, and formed opinions about whether it was the "right" thing to do or not.

Adjusting to this change presented challenges for previously PogChamp-heavy streams. Apart from managing the loss of a prominent part of their vernacular, these streamers also had to manage the grief of their stream collective. Some spectators responded with anger toward the platform or anger toward Guttierez, while others had to come to terms with the fact that they had had no idea who Guttierez was, and that there were people behind the faces that they had been using to express their emotions on Twitch. This last point often led to discussions of the LUL emote, as many users don't



Figure 16.4
Guttierez's tweet inciting violence following the storming of the US Capitol.

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Figure 16.5
A series of tweets from Twitch's official Twitter account announcing its justification of the removal of PogChamp.

realize that the emote's subject died of cancer in 2018. The general dynamics within streams and around PogChamp on Twitch echoed the arguments around the storming of the Capitol that were occurring off the platform, in the real world. In this way, not only was the removal of PogChamp in response to an event beyond the bounds of the platform, but it was also reflective of social and cultural arrangements off the platform. Bearing this in mind, streamers had to decide if and how to discuss the change—something that was particularly difficult for those who make a point of avoiding any sort of political or generally contentious subjects during their streams. The stream collective also needs to decide how it wants to move forward. Does it continue using the PogChamp variants on BTTV? Does it settle for Twitch's promise of an alternative? Does it find its own alternative?

The seemingly simple case of PogChamp's "removal" presents a significant complication for live streaming practices on Twitch. While it isn't unusual for vernacular to change over time, this sudden endowment of additional meaning—the association with an explicit encouragement of violence—added new layers of meaning to Guttierez's face in chats. Every time it appeared, questions of whether the user didn't know what had happened, or whether they knew and simply didn't care, arose. The newly entrenched politics of PogChamp demonstrates Twitch's place within broader cultural arrangements. And although this politics wouldn't change, another layer of complexity would be added when Twitch lived up to its promise to revive its expression of hype two days later.

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Whose Hype Is It Anyway?

Starting on January 8, 2021, PogChamp had a new face every twenty-four hours. The faces were primarily those of popular streamers, chosen to present the diverse range of Twitch users, including a range of gender and sexual identities, races, and geographical locations. What they held in common was the name "PogChamp" and the facial expression of each subject. Each day until January 19, Twitch promoted the PogChamp of the day on its Twitter account. On this day, Twitch tweeted a generic video flagging the rotating emote. From then on, PogChamp received less and less attention from Twitch until February 12, when the official Twitch channel hosted an event called The PogChampening. During this event, viewers voted for one of two choices for the next permanent PogChamp. The first choice was the most used creator PogChamp, which was the streamer UmiNoKaiju. The second choice was another emote that served as PogChamp on January 19, KomodoHype (figure 16.6), an image of a Komodo dragon with its mouth wide open. During the period of rotating PogChamps, KomodoHype became a community favorite expression of hype—so much so that it won the vote and became the next permanent PogChamp.

Hype is a popular internet affect, and the loss of PogChamp means that a new form of expression is required. Being a global emote—one of Twitch's

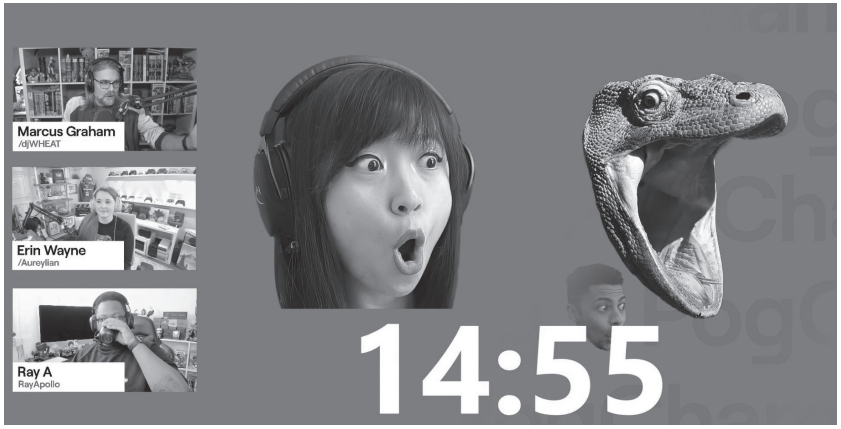


Figure 16.6
The countdown for the vote between UmiNoKaiju and KomodoHype for the next permanent PogChamp during The PogChampening.

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oldest emotes, in fact—PogChamp was used and recognized across the platform, and establishing a widespread alternative was unlikely to happen quickly, if at all. This may have been part of Twitch's motivation when the decision was made to switch from entirely removing the emote to replacing the image. In this way, the association with Guttierez's comments and the raiding of the US Capitol was destabilized, but the vernacular tool still maintains much of its core. To conclude this chapter, I compare the intent with the execution and examine exactly how the final decision to change PogChamp plays into the broader culture of Twitch and relates to events and values beyond the platform.

When Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster (2019) examine the discriminatory rhetoric of "titty streamers," they find that the pejorative term is employed by Reddit users to undermine the labor of women streamers. The term actively works to marginalize them and neglects the reality that "all live streaming is a kind of body work" (12), just valued differently depending on whose body is being seen and the nature of the work. When they discuss the language associated with sexual content in Twitch's policy documents, Cullen and Ruberg (2019) similarly find that certain bodies are delegitimized, adding that "[b]ecause they inhabit bodies that others perceive as sexualized, women streamers are presumed to . . . represent rule violations waiting to happen" (7). This two-pronged attack on women streamers is especially important when considering emotes that represent these bodies, as it affects how users read and deploy those emotes, as discussed in relation to TriHard and cmonBruh. The idea of a daily PogChamp plays into this as well, as assumptions about others' bodies are inherited by and enacted through emotes.

There has been (at least the appearance of) an effort to remedy issues of marginalization on Twitch. Twitch has highlighted multiple issues targeting and events celebrating its minority streamers, and in January 2021, the platform began to enforce its updated Hateful Conduct and Harassment Policy. The decision to highlight a diverse range of creators through daily PogChamps is both consistent with this and, in many ways, a step further due to the visibility of PogChamp within streams. By representing a body, emotes carry identity markers that frame how they are interpreted in streams. These markers reflect the identity of the streamer as an individual, so the daily PogChamp solution provided a new kind of representation and visibility to groups and streamers that may otherwise never receive

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such attention on the platform. Unfortunately, as I previously mentioned, visibility—particularly in the form of emotes—is easily abused when the context is left in the hands of users who don't share the values of the creators.

Of course, this isn't the only issue with the solution that Twitch chose. By preserving the name of the emote and the facial expression, the daily PogChamps bolstered Gutierrez's presence on the platform. Each PogChamp became an intertext that referred back to the original emote and its variants—which were still in circulation thanks to BTTV. Further, the existence of the daily PogChamps led to other creators commissioning their own PogChamp subscriber emotes in the hopes that maybe one day they would be chosen as the daily PogChamp. Even if these were named differently, the combination of the facial expression and the existence of an increasing number of PogChamps made the references clear. The association between the emote and the values that the "removal" of the emote was intended to isolate were still present and strong. By changing the emote in this way instead of removing it entirely, Twitch arguably had not changed anything.

Also, for all of Twitch's clearly considered efforts to promote diversity and provide visibility to its marginalized creators, Twitch users voted for a lizard. Perhaps this is because marginalized creators felt that the representation was tokenistic and insufficient. Perhaps voting against a human replacement for Guttierez and for an emote that already existed under another name was a mark of resistance to change or diversity. Perhaps KomodoHype had already taken the place of PogChamp for many users, so this vote was formalizing a decision that had already been made informally by users. Or perhaps Twitch users just like Komodo dragons. Amid all of this uncertainty, however, it is very clear that the final result was anticlimactic.

Despite this anticlimactic conclusion, the PogChamp revamp clearly demonstrates how live streaming culture does not operate in isolation on the platform, but rather reflects and responds to external occurrences and values. Further, this moment in live streaming history exemplifies how the values of participants in live streaming culture are made visible through the features of the platform and their evolution. While Twitch has the power to alter platform features to celebrate diversity among its users, those features will ultimately be employed by users to express their own values. Twitch has a responsibility to its user base to continue supporting its marginalized creators, but it also needs to account for the targeted harassment that accompanies visibility for many of those creators.

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In this chapter, I've presented a marker of PogChamp's 2021 shift and its significance to the culture of Twitch, even as its impact fades. I have reflected upon the importance of emotes to the culture of the platform through PogChamp, and discussed how changing the emote affected user behavior and awareness of cultural issues external to Twitch. PogChamp's removal and subsequent change unpack some of the complexity of social and cultural arrangements surrounding emotes, enabling new insights into their functions. Better understanding of these arrangements opens the door for more nuanced examinations of the relationships between Twitch's corporate identity, user agency, and representation on the platform.

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Revolutionizing Cultural Production

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17 Live Streaming as a Cultural Industry

William Partin

In fall 2019, the gaming live streamer Tyler "Ninja" Blevins appeared on season two of FOX's game show *The Masked Singer*, disguised as an oversized ice cream cone and singing Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road."[1] The episode was an unusual collision of online celebrity, borne of social media platforms, and legacy media. Why, exactly, was a creator best associated with streaming video games on Twitch and YouTube warbling on prime-time television alongside celebrities like Wayne Brady and Johnny Weir? And what can this episode teach us about the relationship between legacy media and online cultural production?

Less than two decades after Twitch's first round of seed funding, live streaming has become a commercially and culturally significant form of online media production.[2] Although a full literature review is beyond this chapter's scope, there's little doubt that scholars interested in live streaming have always been aware of its commercial dimensions. Early studies of camming on uStream and Live stream (Senft 2008) or rebroadcasts of sports on Justin.tv (Bruns 2009) recognized that live streaming was part of a wave of novel forms of cultural production made possible by the internet. Others linked live streaming to participatory culture, such as Henry Jenkins's (2006) well-known book that has come to refer to modes of vernacular cultural production that could disrupt the hierarchies of legacy media by "democratizing" creative work. More recent work has built on these foundations by examining the actual labor conditions of streamers and the political economies they act within, as well as accounting for live streaming's explosive growth during the 2010s. These days, there can be little doubt that live streaming is exemplary of a broader "platformization of cultural production" (Nieborg and Poell 2018) in which digital platforms

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like Twitch and YouTube have become key intermediaries for the production, monetization, and circulation of cultural content.

Even so, live streaming's status as an industry is a comparatively recent phenomenon and underdiscussed. What is at stake when seeing live streaming not just as a commercial activity, but as a cultural industry? Scholars often reach for the metaphor of the toolbox, a ready-to-hand repository of theories and methods waiting to be matched with research questions. Although useful for thinking about a multiplicity of approaches, it obscures an important fact: theories and methods do not simply provide ways of looking at a predetermined object. Rather, they construct what that object is in the first place. In this sense, seeing live streaming as a cultural industry is not simply a matter of bringing new perspectives to familiar empirical territory—it means being reflexive about how that territory and its problem space are themselves transformed by the tools we have to study them, for better and worse.

In what follows, I don't offer new data about live streaming. Instead, I want us to think about how the cultural industries approach constructs a problem space that expands both the empirical and theoretical horizons of current research into live streaming. In my view, it is also an opportunity to think about the uneasy relationship between so-called legacy media and companies like Twitch. What is *actually* new and distinctive about these new stewards of culture, and what is simply familiar dynamics in a new context? Applying the cultural industries approach helps us see that live streaming is, perhaps, not quite as disruptive as its beneficiaries claim. That's not to say *nothing* is new, but instead it's to situate live streaming in a historical trajectory that sees the actually existing live streaming industry as neither necessary nor impossible.

The Cultural Industries Perspective

If culture refers to "the signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored" (Williams 1981, 13), then cultural industries are those "institutions that are most directly involved in the production of social meaning" (Hesmondhalgh 2018, 483).[3] Typically, cultural industries have included sectors like journalism, book publishing, music, film, television, and, more recently, digital games. More recent scholarship has expanded

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this category to include "social media entertainment," Stuart Cunningham and David Craig's (2019) term for content created by influencers and other creators who primarily make and distribute their creative output on social platforms, including (but not limited to) live streaming platforms.

At first glance, the term "cultural industries" recalls Frankfurt School's notion of the "culture industry," most clearly articulated in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 1977). But there also some important distinctions as well, and these distinctions reflect the ways that the concept has grown in sophistication over the last century. Tracing these offers a way into thinking about Twitch's place in this history and scholars' attempts to understand it.

Like many Marxists of their generation, Adorno and Horkheimer found themselves struggling to make sense of capitalism's endurance despite its material inequities. Because purely economic explanations were insufficient, they turned toward studying culture as a key means by which capitalism reproduced itself. As a result, their account of the culture industry was deeply pessimistic. In their view, the "low culture" that emerged from Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley served the ruling class by turning the "masses" into "cultural dupes," dousing their revolutionary spirit and naturalizing capitalist hierarchies. Although this perspective's elitism and unsophisticated view of media effects have been heavily critiqued, it still captures something important: the cultural industries are important because they play a vital role in human sense-making, shaping what individuals think about and how they think about it.

Later research preserved the Frankfurt School's understanding of the importance of culture, but it sought to challenge the school's unitary view of cultural production, pessimism, and binary of high and low culture. The French sociologist Bernard Miège (1989), for example, illustrated how the culture industries were hardly consistent in their production processes—what worked in publishing houses had only passing relevance to film production. (Hence the term "industries" rather than "industry" is used.) Moreover, although the commodification of culture had its discontents, the fact remained that the relative autonomy given to filmmakers, novelists, and musicians meant that they sometimes created commercially successful work that challenged rather than reinforced dominant values—a significantly more ambivalent dynamic than envisioned by Adorno and Horkheimer.[4] Finally, Miège and others also illustrated how cultural producers often

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resisted commercial pressures from executives in order to maintain autonomy over their work, meaning that the total commodification of culture envisioned by Adorno and Horkheimer was not complete, but rather was contested.

Meanwhile, across the English Channel, the emerging field of cultural studies (from which the "cultural" of "cultural industries" is derived) retained the Frankfurt School's interest in cultural production, but rejected its binary of "high" and "low" culture. Instead, it saw all cultural products and practices as being part of the production and transformation of everyday life (Grossberg 2010). Among other things, this approach gave agency to the audience members whom Adorno and Horkheimer had largely imagined as a pliant, undifferentiated mass. Through concepts like the "encoding-decoding" framework (Hall [1984] 2003), scholars operating under the aegis of cultural studies sought to illustrate that consumers make meaning out of cultural products in ways that do not always resonate with the producer's intentions. Popular culture, then, became one site of struggle, where tensions between dominant and subordinate cultural forms are played out.

In pulling on these diverse strands of thought, we should see live streaming as complex, contested, and ambivalent in the way that other cultural industries are. This opens up a new set of questions: How does one's (social, economic, political, geographic, etc.) position within the live streaming industry shape the experience and outcomes of live streaming? How do the affordances and policies of different platforms alter creative production? (*Complexity.*) How do streamers adopt or push back against dominant values, whether expressed in terms of content moderation (e.g., by playing with the "limits" of platforms' terms of service) or broader social norms? How do they negotiate tensions with platform owners, investors, and sponsors when these invariably arise? (*Contested.*) In what ways does live streaming offer new forms of creative expression to creators, even as platformization represents a new means of commodifying culture? How do creators make sense of and live with the contradictions between "passionate work" and material instability in live streaming? (*Ambivalent.*)

None of these questions have easy answers. However, taken together, they suggest a useful baseline for thinking about live streaming that places it within a longer trajectory of cultural production and recognizes that the experiences of creators and their products are complex, contested, and ambivalent.

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Technology and the Cultural Industries

All that said, the fact remains that today's most prominent live streaming platforms are relatively recent inventions. In fact, a key theme in contemporary cultural industries literature is how and the degree to which cultural industries are being transformed by digital technologies, especially digital platforms. Most scholars in this area agree that this relationship is composed of both change *and* continuity. Taking seriously the role of technological artifacts means thinking through what is distinctive about platform-based cultural production, while remembering how the long tradition of cultural production informs the creative activities of professional live streamers.

Technological innovation has always had a dynamic interplay with cultural production. Cultural producers experiment with and adopt novel technological artifacts, for reasons both creative (e.g., novel ways to express ideas) and pragmatic (e.g., cheaper production techniques). On the other hand, new technologies of distribution, whether radio or eBooks, offer Intellectual Property (IP) holders novel means of controlling the circulation of cultural content. This is particularly true of the last few decades. Increasingly powerful forms of media infrastructure regulate the movement of audiovisual signal traffic (Parks and Starosielski 2015), while digital distribution platforms like Disney+ act as gatekeepers for consumers hoping to access cultural content (Lotz 2017).

Beginning in the 2000s and accelerating in the 2010s, large technology firms have become increasingly active in the industrial production of culture. In some cases, as with Amazon and Apple, these companies have set out to create (or acquire) in-house studios capable of creating movies, television shows, and video games that can compete directly with industry incumbents. More significantly, however, these companies have offered services that host user-generated content beginning (arguably) with Google's acquisition of YouTube in 2006. Live streaming platforms like Twitch, YouTube Gaming, Mixer, and Facebook Live fit squarely within this trajectory. Some were packaged with tools (Partin 2020) that let streamers monetize their streams, which spoke to the commercial-cultural ambitions of these platforms.

The development of platforms like YouTube and Twitch were accompanied by a robust set of discourses from corporate public relations units, journalists, and academics alike that these services would "democratize" cultural production by giving ordinary people the means to make and distribute content and relegate the hierarchies of legacy media to the dustbin of the

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twentieth century. By and large, the more utopian predictions of the 2000s have aged poorly. Although sites like YouTube are framed as digital public spheres, antidemocratic content has flourished on these platforms not in spite of but (in part) *because of* the contrast to legacy media (Lewis 2020). Likewise, these platforms are hardly nonhierarchical. Not only do platforms routinely shape what viewers see through content moderation and algorithmic sorting, they also treat creators differentially based on their value to platform owners (Caplan and Gillespie 2020). Moreover, despite promises of decentralizing cultural production, their political economies of platforms are arguably even more concentrated and centralized than those of legacy media conglomerates.

Simultaneously, as my opening anecdote suggests, legacy media firms have embraced at least some aspects of live streaming. Not only have elite streaming celebrities like Blevins integrated with legacy media (e.g., by being signed by Creative Artists Association, appearing on *The Masked Singer,* etc.), many traditional celebrities have adopted Twitch. For example, Jordan Fisher, who achieved fame as a child actor, frequently streams on Twitch and is currently represented by the gaming influencer agency Loaded. This suggests that predictions about the destruction of the fourth estate, whether celebratory or panicked, have been somewhat exaggerated. Instead, more viable research questions should attend to where, how, and to what ends platform-based cultural production is becoming entangled with legacy media formations, and to what effects.

Distinctiveness of Cultural Industries

So far, I have offered a quick sketch of the cultural industries perspective, the special role that information communication technologies play in these industries, and the relevance of both to live streaming. Before turning to live streaming in earnest, I want to point to the features that make cultural industries distinctive not just in their outputs, but also their structure. The cultural industries scholar David Hesmondhalgh (2018) identifies a number of problems—such as the unusual structure of many misses offset by fewer megahits, high production costs but very low reproduction costs, etc.—that together shape cultural industries and the characteristic solutions that these industries have evolved to address them.

To see live streaming as a cultural industry, we might begin by asking how these questions translate to the network of platforms, streamers, firms,

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and fans that, together, we know as live streaming. Some of these analytics are, to be sure, more relevant than others—some, in fact, are very difficult to map onto live streaming. Yet even those that sit uneasily point to the productive play of continuity and discontinuity between traditional and platform-based cultural industries. Being attentive to where these analytics are useful *and* where they struggle can help us think through the distinctiveness of live streaming.

For purposes of space, I do not address these individually. Rather, I try to group them around two key themes that I think are the most revealing: (1) the dialectic of commerce and creativity (which is continuous when compared to twentieth-century cultural industries) and (2) the riskiness of live streaming (the relation to legacy media of which is somewhat more fraught).

Live Streaming as a Cultural Industry

Balancing Commerce and Creativity

While Western ideas about artistry have historically lionized creatives who show indifference or outright hostility to commercial pressures, the reality is that all cultural producers act within *some* kind of political economy. Whether they are market-based, grant-based, government-funded, or paid through patronage, the various means by which the material needs of creatives are met have always been enabling of cultural production, even as they are constraining in other ways. This dialectic of creativity and commerce runs deep and is not inherently problematic, although some arrangements surely are. Nevertheless, what is clear is that all creatives make choices about what kinds of cultural products are or are not commercially viable in a given context. The specifics may vary from time to time, place to place, creator to creator, but no one is truly independent.

This marks a clear point of continuity between cultural industries and live streaming. Professional streamers rely on many forms of revenue (Woodcock and Johnson 2019) that streamers must consider when making choices about what to stream, with whom, etc. For example, gaming live streamers select the titles they play on air based not just on their personal interest or creative whims, but also their audience's preferences, promotional deals with game publishers, and the popularity of a given title. Likewise, streamers modulate their on-air personas based on their revenue streams. The rise in donations, for example, pushed streamers to prioritize "relational labor"

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(Baym 2018), fashioning themselves as cultural producers worthy of viewer-patrons' financial support. Similarly, beyond meeting the basic content moderation standards of a given platform, streamers make strategic choices about their branding based on their audience and sponsors. For example, Blevins declared that he would no longer swear on air in order to cultivate a "family-friendly" image that could attract sponsors who market to children. Such negotiations are a testament to the fact that live streamers, like influencers as a whole, are not inherently more independent than cultural producers working in legacy media industries. Rather, they exhibit many interlocking and sometimes contradictory dependencies on audiences, sponsors, platform owners, and game publishers.

These negotiations take place within a cultural economy in which discourses and performances of authenticity are highly prized. Even so, "authenticity" is a notoriously fluid concept and often masks the power dynamics of how online creators are perceived. For example, the gendered and racialized dimensions of authenticity mean that the balancing act between creativity and commerce is experienced differently by different streamers (Gray 2016; Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019). More recent work on live streaming has begun to examine the complexity of these negotiations in practice and how they are mediated by issues of class, subculture, and social identity, but it remains a rich topic for further study.

(Re)distributing Risk

A defining feature of cultural industries is that they are financially risky, which shapes most aspects of cultural production and distribution. Traditionally, "risk" in cultural industries refers to the financial risk assumed by investors when funding the production of cultural goods. It is broadly understood that the majority of cultural goods lose money due to the fickleness of consumer tastes and the tendency of stars and genres to fall out of favor and indeterminacy in the production process (a great script, after all, is not guaranteed to become a great movie). As a consequence, cultural industries have developed characteristic strategies for mitigating this risk. For one, they focus on established formats and brands, which accounts for the high number of sequels, reboots, and cinematic universes available to consumers today, as well as television formats that can easily and cheaply be replicated across regional markets. Moreover, they "overproduce." Because most cultural products will lose money, firms in the cultural industries must invest

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in multiple products simultaneously to see what resonates with consumers. Under this logic, a small number of high-performing hits will outweigh the modest losses incurred on the majority of output, leading to overproduction in the cultural industries.

How does this resonate, if at all, with live streaming? It's complicated. For one, the cultural products that demand the assumption of risk are difficult to compare. Rather than discrete products whose, say, ticket sales can be measured against production and marketing costs, live streamers create synchronous, spontaneous video sessions that may last anywhere from a few minutes to many hours. So rather than see risk as being manifested in a discrete product, I want to argue that risk, however borne, enables the creation of a *body of work* by live streamers that will support advertisements, donations, and subscriptions. In this sense, we ought to think about the totality of streamers' output and what kinds of financial risk make it possible. So, instead, we might ask: Where is financial risk in the live streaming industry located? How is it distributed, and where does it accrue? Who bears it, how much, and through what legal and/or technical mechanisms? What impacts does this have, whether on creators, platforms, or other stakeholders?

One place to start is to consider the kinds of risk borne by individual streamers working on established platforms. Traditionally, cultural industries are capital-intensive businesses. Even a low-budget indie movie or small digital game can cost six or seven figures to produce, while high-end productions routinely stretch into the hundreds of millions—amounts that few individuals can afford to bear. By contrast, advocates of online cultural production have emphasized its low barrier to entry, often favorably pulling on the rhetoric of democracy and creative independence in the process. And it is certainly true that one can easily stream to an audience of millions from one's bedroom using consumer-grade hardware. In practice, however, it is easy to understate the degree of investment that is required to sustain a career in live streaming. As live streaming has grown in popularity, so have production values for well-funded streamers. All things being equal, many audiences now expect streams with high-definition 1080p resolution at 60 frames per second, alongside high-quality audio and multiple camera setups. In rare cases, elite streamers build elaborate in-home studios reminiscent of daytime television soundstages. So, while it is undoubtedly true that a Twitch stream's production costs are considerably lower than those of traditional cultural industries, they are not as low a barrier as they might seem.

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Existing research on the political economy of influencing has found that the majority of creators live highly precarious lives. To be sure, this externalization and individualization of risk is a feature of neoliberal organizing in general (Weil 2014) and is particularly acute with respect to platform labor (van Doorn 2017).[5] While many creators subscribe to ideas about "passionate work" and "doing what you love" in order to cast materially unappealing conditions as acceptable (or even desirable) (Duffy 2018), a robust body of journalistic and academic writing illustrates how the vast majority of creators, even among professionals, do not live glamorous lives. Moreover, many creators experience many of the risks of fame (stalking, harassment, privacy violations, etc.), but receive little in the way of protection.

All of this is undoubtedly true of live streamers. There's little doubt that live streamers lead economically precarious lives (Johnson and Woodcock 2019) and must contend with the constant threat of fraud and a largely unregulated industry that tolerates considerable amounts of grift. Moreover, live streamers are largely responsible for all of their own purchases, investing in significant and risky upstart costs that are not guaranteed to pay off financially (even if live streaming can be rewarding in other ways). Nor do live streamers receive much in the way of benefits from platforms. The "always online" dynamics of live streaming forces many full-time streamers to spend upward of sixty hours a week live, with every hour they are not on air leading to lost revenue in the form of unmade donations, unwatched ads, and lapsed subscriptions. Finally, live streamers often find themselves at the whims of capricious and contradictory content moderation choices that, in the extreme, can lock them out of their primary source of revenue.

At the same time, this risk is *generally* not shared by platform owners. Although an individual streamer may take a considerable loss after investing time and money in an unsuccessful live streaming career, this loss is felt far more acutely at an individual level than an institutional level. Platforms are very efficient at redistributing risk and responsibility downward and outward, a key dynamic in their drive toward centralization and monopolization (Pasquale 2016). Moreover, the policies that Twitch enacts regarding content moderation as part of a broader program of platform governance are often highly self-serving. For example, the company's compliance with Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) takedown requests and strikes means that the risk of streaming copyrighted music as part of a broadcast is not borne by the platform, but by individual streamers (Taylor 2018).

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Likewise, attempts to keep the platform ad-friendly often dictate content standards in ways that magnify the existing power dynamics; for example, the advent of "hot tub streams" has inaugurated a new debate about the overregulation of women's bodies on Twitch.

Increasingly, however, streamers are not the only stakeholders in live streaming to bear the risk of broadcasting through a kind of overproduction. Prominent talent agencies, such as FaZe Clan, will sign large numbers of up-and-coming streamers. While only a few turn out to be major stars, their outsize success offsets the comparatively minor cost of signing streamers who do not grow in popularity. Similarly, Twitch provides access to its platform free to all potential streamers, incurring modest fixed and variable capital expenditures in the process but producing an enormous repertoire as a result. Only a handful of these streamers will turn out to be bona fide stars, of course, but the losses of minor and casual streamers are well worth the expense.

All that said, it is clear that there are some contexts in which established platforms take on considerable risk. In the late 2010s, as YouTube Gaming and Mixer emerged as competitors to Twitch, these services' parent companies (Alphabet, Microsoft, and Amazon, respectively) frequently entered bidding wars with streaming talent agencies like Loaded and FaZe Clan to secure exclusivity rights to popular streamers, deals that often stretched into tens of millions of dollars. Similarly, platforms have often found themselves paying for media rights to esports tournaments like Overwatch League, for which Twitch reportedly paid $90 million for two seasons of exclusivity. Such expenditures place considerable pressure on platform *owners* to recoup their investments, a situation similar to the legacy industries that they once sought to disrupt and very different from the political economy of other platforms. (Uber, of course, is not paying enormous exclusivity fees to drivers to stop them from joining Lyft.) Rather than this risk being manifested in the creation of a discrete product, however, this kind of investment lays claim to a future body of work that will, ideally, support future advertisements, donations, and subscriptions.

The exceptional exclusivity fees that elite streamers could demand in the late 2010s have settled considerably, especially following the shutdown of Mixer in 2020. Nevertheless, these kinds of deals are a reminder that while platform owners often attempt to externalize risk to dependents, they can rarely escape it entirely. In that, there are some conditions in which live

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streaming platforms have more in common with "business as usual" in the cultural industries and less in common with the financial arrangements on other labor platforms.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the cultural industries approach and what I believe it can offer to the study of live streaming. It is clear that live streaming constitutes some kind of cultural industry, insofar as live streamers are symbolic creators who produce social meaning. Thinking about the continuities between other cultural industries and live streaming provides a number of opportunities for new lines of research into live streaming, especially with respect to how streamers navigate the tensions between creativity and commerce and the differential distribution of risk in creative production.

Even so, when thinking about many of the phenomena that make cultural industries distinct from other sectors, such questions do not always translate easily to live streaming. This creates opportunities to rethink or add nuance to key assumptions in cultural industries research and how those assumptions do and don't change at a moment when digital platforms are becoming an increasingly powerful force in cultural production. At the same time, it is clear that as live streaming has developed from a commercial activity into a complex industry with multiple stakeholders, it has taken on many of the characteristics of legacy media industries that many once hoped that it would defy.

Notes

1. He was duly eliminated.

2. In this chapter, my focus is on Twitch, due to its outsize economic and cultural influence on the livestreaming market.

3. This section is indebted to Hesmondhalgh's historiography of cultural industries research.

4. This observation can help us make sense of why the Condé Nast publication *Teen Vogue* runs explainers on Karl Marx, or the Korean conglomerate CJ Entertainment funded and distributed the anticapitalist film *Parasite* (2019). Rather than do mental gymnastics to expose how these are secretly an instrument of the ruling class, we can simply point out that cultural industries are—and have long been—full of these kinds of contradictions.

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5. At the same time, precarious work has been a norm in cultural industries for many decades due to oversupply and the gigcentric nature of many forms of cultural production.

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18 Cultures of Precarity and "Grinding" for Audiences on Twitch.tv

Charlotte Panneton

Twitch.tv gives an innate promise to its 7.57 million active monthly broadcasters (TwitchTracker 2022): if you put in the work, you can get paid to play video games on-stream. It's the celebratory rhetoric that underpins the world's largest video game–oriented streaming site, where millions of users gather to chat, play, entertain, and create together. But this rhetoric tends to obfuscate a competitive economy of attention, a politics of discoverability and algorithmic hierarchies, and a lingering impetus for continual growth. Paired with an underlying sense of precarity, Twitch's platform logics and affordances incite an almost compulsive fixation on viewership metrics among its streamers.

This chapter explores how Twitch's commercial and platform logics incentivize streamers to "grind" for audiences, and how this practice is normalized in streamers' discourse about their métier. I examine the ways in which the practice of grinding can be attributed to Twitch's tiered and conditional monetization structure, as well as its gamification of streaming activity. This grind reflects how streaming activity is transformed in the advent of platform-mediated cultural production, as measures of success on Twitch become aligned with the platform's operational premise and metrics. What results is the integration of grind into Twitch's larger narrative of self-actualization and aspirational entrepreneurialism, in a way that dually obscures the tendency toward overwork and self-exploitation as streamers "grind for views."

I want to approach the question of grind by first situating Twitch within Nick Srnicek's (2017) concept of platform capitalism. Srnicek argues that platform capitalism encompasses a form of twenty-first-century capitalism wherein firms have moved toward the use of flexible labor and lean business models (2017, 42). This form of enterprise is characterized by the emergence

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of online apps and platforms, adapted to the reality of digital automation, the Internet of Things, and the on-demand economy. Prominent forms of platform capitalism include Uber, Airbnb, Facebook, YouTube, Amazon Web Services, and Spotify. These platforms generate revenue by facilitating user interactions and activities, while capitalizing on data extraction and exerting control over core app architectures and affordances (Srnicek 2017, 48). As is the case with platforms hosting user-generated content, the design of platforms must consider profitability, accessibility, and sustainability, while balancing the interests of its three main constituencies: users, professional content producers, and advertisers (Gillespie 2010, 353). Consequently, the process of platformatization means that "whether professional or amateur . . . contemporary cultural labourers are beholden to platform governance frameworks and must consequently adapt to their recurrent 'tweaks,' including to their algorithmic systems" (Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg 2019, 2).

As a platform, Twitch acts as an intermediary infrastructure, connecting streamers and viewers while leveraging its niche monopoly over game-oriented live streaming content. In its intermediary position, Twitch retains the ability to modulate key affordances, including stream quality, discoverability and visibility hierarchies, monetization conditions, and user interaction opportunities. Twitch's platform infrastructure naturally has a generative quality: it enables streamers to easily connect with viewers and allows streaming communities to proliferate with returning viewers, while framing this activity as autonomous, flexible, low-risk, and entirely playful. However, this same infrastructure can also be prohibitive and latently influence the activity of its users, streamers, and viewers alike, as it relates to content moderation, copyright regulation, ad placements, donation methods, and the ability to monetize activity.

Twitch's infrastructure and its resulting sociotechnical affordances are necessarily aligned with its operational premise (i.e., its business model and subsequent design considerations). Twitch aims to attract new and returning viewers to its platform because its revenue stems primarily from its cut of channel subscription payments, advertising, and the sale of its "Bits" platform currency. To continue attracting this viewership, Twitch must cultivate high-quality, user-generated streaming content. It does so by using platform affordances to reward emergent and popular streamers and promotes an elite slice of these streamers as their platform brand. In turn, Twitch's

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operational premise fuels a sort of productive aspiration for new and casual streamers, setting a standard for growth and viewership.

Grinding in Games and Grinding on Twitch

As Twitch's platform affordances incite streamers to continuously grow their audiences, I contend that this manifests into a practice of grinding. In its gaming analog, "grinding" refers to the repetition of in-game acts to progress through a game or unlock achievements. This is generally done by laboriously repeating the same short-term acts or quests to gain experience or level up, obtain items, or complete action items, such as checklist objectives or side quests. The amount of grinding found in a game is usually a product of its design and mechanics: grinding in games can be utilized to control the pacing of a game or to extend the duration of the player's engagement. And while grinding requires a significant and deliberate investment of time and effort on the part of the player, grinding presents an inherent, long-term incentive, wherein a future reward is promised for the present action, and this makes the grind seem worthwhile (Morrison 2011).

Similarly, "grinding" on Twitch refers to streamer activity oriented toward a sense of progression, with dedicated, metric-focused efforts aimed at attracting and retaining viewers, followers, and subscribers per targets established by the platform. Grinding on Twitch is framed as a necessary part of aspirational or serious streaming, requiring the accumulation of hours on-stream, stream-hours watched, concurrent viewership, monthly stream quotas, and strategic on-stream game selection. In practice, grinding on Twitch appears in many forms. It can be as simple as displaying a follower or subscriber count/goal on a stream overlay. It can also be linked to incentives negotiated between the streamer and in-chat viewers for hitting certain metrics (as in "sub-a-thons," discussed later in this chapter) or rewards when certain metrics are hit (e.g., twenty-four-hour streams, matching gift-subs, subscriber's choice, etc.) Much like its gaming counterpart, the impetus toward grinding on Twitch is underlined by a long-term incentive, a promise of growth and reward that will make up for the streamer's dedicated, laborious effort.

This chapter is particularly interested in observing how grind is encouraged by Twitch's platform affordances. Twitch users tend to grind for viewership and status, as both are long-term incentives aligned with the platform's

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operational premise, prompted by way of metric or objective-based progression systems. This discussion details two overarching platform affordances, understood in relation to Twitch's operational premise and its position as an intermediary between streamers and viewers; it focuses on the way that streamers orient their activities around Twitch's tiered, conditional monetization structure and its gamification of streaming activity through game-like achievements. This approach is partially informed by Hector Postigo's (2014) work on the impact of technical affordances vis-à-vis digital labor on YouTube, a comparable platform that also operates on the basis of user-generated content and aspirational entrepreneurialism rooted in metrics of success. Postigo (2014) notes that "considering how technical architectures, their design and their use are shaped by social practice is important, because it give insight into how otherwise little noticed or 'natural' elements of the participatory/labor space actually serve as strong influences of action" (335).

Monetization and Gamification

While streamers cannot initially make money from their streaming activities on Twitch, the platform's Affiliate and Partner programs make monetization features available to streamers as their audiences grow. Once conferred Affiliate or Partner status, streamers gain access to key monetization features, including the enabling of channel subscriptions, cheering via bits (Twitch's platform-based currency), game and product sale commissions, and advertising revenue. However, Twitch's monetization structure is both tiered and conditional. To begin monetizing their channel, streamers must qualify for the necessary program (first Affiliate, and then Partner) by meeting set criteria, underlined by various metrics measured by Twitch's platform affordances. In 2020, qualification for Affiliate status requires streamers to have at least fifty followers, as well as an accrued 500 minutes of broadcast time over a month, in addition to seven unique broadcast days with an average of three or more concurrent viewers (Twitch 2020). The Affiliate tier is set as an intermediary between casual streaming (nonmonetized) and admissibility to the Partner program (full monetization). Qualification for Partner status requires streamers to have streamed for twenty-five hours within a month, with twelve unique broadcast days and an average of seventy-five or more concurrent viewers. However, meeting these criteria does not immediately enable on-stream monetization features; rather, it

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only allows streamers to apply for Affiliate or Partner status. Streamers must wait for their invitation from Twitch, which is sent out on a rolling basis for Affiliate status, or after application adjudication by Twitch staff for Partner status (Twitch 2020).

There are several implications inherent to this form of tiered and conditional monetization as it relates to the concept of grind. The underlying logic of Affiliate and Partner programs is that if an individual streamer puts enough work into their stream, they will be given the opportunity to see a monetary return for their continued efforts. Much like grinding in video games, grinding for audiences on Twitch is validated by a long-term incentive, a future reward (herein monetization options), or a promise (herein status) that justifies the more arduous and unrecompensed work done in the present. And the path toward this incentive is represented by key metrics, quantified objectives set by Twitch as a platform, which themselves become representative of worth and success.

Another important platform affordance to consider is Twitch's gamification of streaming activity, which is presented to streamers via the Creator Dashboard's achievement system. "Gamification" refers to the implementation of game design mechanics in nongame contexts. Mimicking systems commonly found in role-playing games (RPGs) and massively multiplayer online (MMO) video games, the use of achievements in gamified contexts is meant to signify progress based on task completion and can be implemented as a de facto form of expectation management, communicating what is expected and desirable (Khalid 2014). As such, Twitch's creator achievement system turns channel activity, including streaming time, follower and subscriber counts, concurrent viewership, and chat activity, among others, into metrics, and thus measurable achievements. Twitch introduced achievements to help streamers grow, set tangible goals, and provide transparency vis-à-vis their progression toward Affiliate or Partner status (Twitch 2020).

There are obvious parallels to be found when comparing the process of grinding for achievements in video games and grinding for achievements on Twitch: both turn routine actions into quantifiable objectives, both use achievements as a measure of success, and both are used to induce an intrinsic sense of progression in players/streamers.

Processes of gamification in nongame contexts import key motivational affordances from achievement systems in video games, as achievements are meant to compel players to complete objectives within and beyond the

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scope of a game's main narrative or questline (Rey 2014). Twitch's achievement system is adapted specifically to suit the needs of its operational premise. The completion of creator achievements encourages streamers to spend more time on-stream, to stream more frequently, to engage with their chat more actively, and to cultivate a returning viewership. The achievement system (figure 18.1) is also utilized to monitor progression toward monetization opportunities, with "Building a Community," "Path to Affiliate," and "Path to Partner" achievement tracks. These tracks are acutely aligned with Twitch's larger mission of cultivating high-quality and engaging streaming activity: the achievement system both motivates streamers and sets the standard.

Further, gamification and the playful quantification of activity are both acutely attuned to the needs of late capitalism and the modus operandi of platform capitalism. Per Jamie Woodcock and Mark Johnson (2017), gamification is not a benign process, and it is "currently implemented has become complicit in supporting and even further developing the economic relations of neoliberal capitalism" (543). To this end, the basic appeal of gamification in nongame contexts is to influence and direct the behavior of consumers and producers in a productive (and valuable) capacity; for

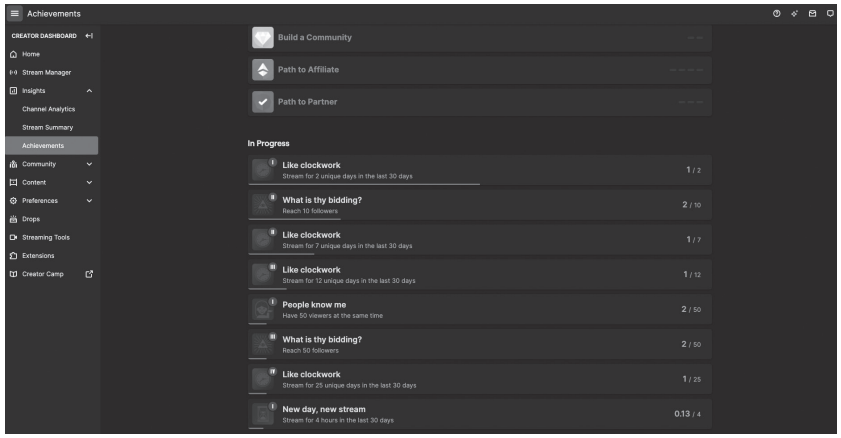


Figure 18.1
An individual user's streaming activity is recorded and quantified via the achievement section of Twitch's Creator Dashboard. These include basic metrics for follower counts and streaming hours, as well as progression-oriented achievements aimed toward Affiliate and Partner status.

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Twitch, this means inciting continuously productive (and valuable) activity from its streamers (Rey 2014). The use of conditional monetization systems and gamified metrics are also representative of the way platform capitalism construes productivity and work as being voluntary, flexible, mobile, autonomously goal-oriented, and, eventually, the basis for self-actualization (Srnicek 2017). I would contend that understanding the phenomenon of grind, the key platform affordances that actuate grind, and the underlying impetuses for platform capitalism together complicate and challenge the celebratory discourses of aspirational entrepreneurialism that inform streamer activity on Twitch.

Twitch operationalizes and determines notions of success, new features, and new opportunities through these tier systems and achievements. What makes a successful channel is based on any number of factors, including a streamer's personality and performance, game selection, use of technology, quality and appeal of overlays and graphics, chat engagement, streaming consistency, aesthetics and branding, external social media presence, and others. But, perhaps more important, success on Twitch is also quantifiably conditional: tiered and achievable metrics frame success on the basis of follower counts, subscriber counts, number of people engaging in chats, hours streamed, and hours watched. These factors are what primarily determine a streamer's ability to monetize their channel and access key community-building features (in particular, subscribers and emotes), which have corollary impacts on a streamer's visibility, discoverability, community maintenance and viewer retention ability, and social standing on the platform.

A Culture of Grind and Precarity

Thus, if success is contingent on a streamer's ability to meet certain metrics, then grind becomes a symptom of, and a response to, precarity on Twitch. "Precarity," in this context, denotes a particular sense of insecurity and dependence on uncertain circumstances stemming from platform use. On Twitch, this precarity is more pointedly experienced by streamers who stream in an occupational capacity, as the platform constitutes their means of livelihood. For full-time streamers, their material, social, and psychological well-being is tied to the platform and the conditionality of its affordances. And yet, while occupational Twitch streamers attract the platform's core viewership, and they constitute the platform's most important

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revenue stream, they are only provided a few tools for quantifying their activity beyond metrics. Per the logics of platform capitalism, platform workers are not guaranteed income, given benefits, or provided any protection from changes or challenges internal and external to the platform. Therefore, streamers' sense of stability stems primarily from metrics. For professional streamers, "audience-based data analytics carry meanings that are financially, socially, and affectively interpreted" (Bingham 2017, 277). This, in turn, means that many streamers must ground their aspirational activity (if nonmonetized) or livelihood (if monetized) on key metrics.

Key metrics tend to permeate the performance of streaming in any number of ways. Anthony Pellicone and June Ahn's (2017) study of streaming and cultural production aptly addresses the emergent tensions that arise between what streamers consider metrics of success and the desire to have fun in the performance of play. They note: "The friction between quantified metrics (e.g., viewership), and intangible metrics (e.g., having fun) . . . seemed to coexist in the conceptions of [streamers'] practice . . . most [streamers] still appeared cognizant of the quantified metrics of the system, and followed them to some degree as they set goals for their streams" (Pellicone and Ahn 2017, 4870). And so the question remains: how does the concept of grind, as incited by Twitch's platform affordances and as a response to underlying precariousness, figure into larger live streaming culture?

One answer to this question is that grinding has become a normalized practice among aspirational streamers on Twitch. Integrated into Twitch's current of entrepreneurial and aspirational rhetoric, the grind is construed as one of those necessary processes required for the long-term incentive: to have a successful and self-actualizing streaming career. Grind materializes in streamers' everyday practice (see figure 18.2). The most subtle of these grind tendencies is when a streamer places a subscriber or follower count or target metrics as part of their stream overlay. The streamer might set a specific target for themselves and their viewers, with a target number of new followers or subscribers in a given period of time. This may also be reflected in the streamer's stream title, expressing that their desired counts or targets as part of a larger project ("Path to Affiliate/Partner!," "!subgrind," "Almost at 5k!," "Day 10 Grind").

Some streamers may even incentivize incremental gains in followers or subscribers by following up with rewards for each target hit. On Twitch, intense periods of activity that try to drive up follower and subscriber

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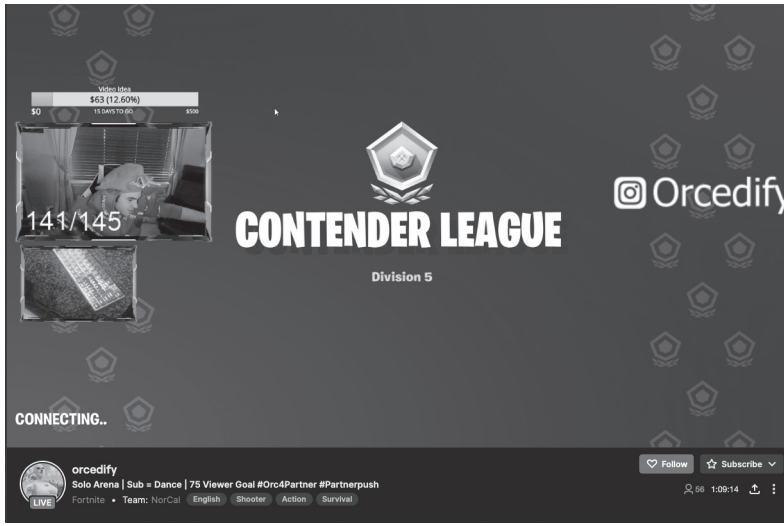


Figure 18.2
A screenshot of Orcedify's December 9, 2020, *Fortnite* stream. Noticeable features of grind include the streamer's subscriber count and goal overlay (141/145), subscriber incentives (Sub = Dance), donation incentives ($500 goal for a "video idea"), and explicit goal setting (75-viewer goal and the "push" toward Partner status).

counts include "sub-a-thons," which reward streamers for hitting certain tiered follower or subscriber quotas selected by the streamer (subscriber's-choice game selection, matching gift-subscriptions, unique nongaming activities, personalized messages, giveaways, gameplay tweaks, etc.). Another common practice is streaming for twenty-four hours straight, with new follower or subscription counts adding time and extending the duration of the stream. Streamers may also incentivize subscriptions when working toward unlocking more "emote" slots (customizable, channel-specific emoticons for use in chats). The grind is always construed as productive and future-oriented.

The integration of grind into Twitch's celebratory rhetoric subsequently obfuscates tendencies toward self-exploitation and overwork. Given the way that Twitch's discoverability algorithms privilege channels with higher viewer counts, aspiring streamers starting out on the platform may find themselves streaming to no one. The myriad of guides available to beginner streamers tend to emphasize streaming choices that maximize visibility and appeal to potential audiences, but the reality is that many streamers can barely get their streams off the ground after months of consistent

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broadcasting. The streamer Sean Burke shared that in his first months of streaming, he was disheartened with his lack of viewership. Burke expressed that "I [initially] kept internalizing the viewership numbers to mean that I was the problem, that I wasn't funny enough, that I wasn't good enough at games": by the end of his first year on Twitch, he managed to get an average of ten concurrent viewers while streaming (Hernandez 2018). Moreover, while aspiring streamers may be feeling the consequences of particular platform affordances, stream guides tend to frame this lack of viewership as surmountable with more time and effort.

Even if successful in getting their channel off the ground, full-time or Partnered streamers, especially those whose livelihoods depend on their streaming activity, must contend with a continued viewership grind. Full-time streamers very publicly "find themselves in the contradictory position of working at what they profess to be their 'dream job' while simultaneously experiencing working conditions and/or a general climate of anxiety, frustration, and the dis-empowerment of individual, privatized self-exploitation" (Gurevitch 2016, 194). As the streamer Ben "ProfessorBroman" Bowman expressed:

> I've been streaming full-time on Twitch as my career for four years. Growing my channel at the start involved a mind-crushing 12–16 hours of streaming every day, seven days a week, all year, for two years. This was the only way I could maintain growth . . . I already felt like I was losing control of my channel with only one day off. Sub numbers dropped, follows slowed down, and every metric I had been tracking for so long seemed to scream at me every Saturday saying, "Get back online or you'll throw away all your hard work!" (Bowman 2017)

Despite the fact that platforms modulate measures of success through metrics and platform affordances, Bowman's reflection here alludes to the way that platform-mediated cultural production holds streamers accountable for their own activity and resulting sense of success. As such, streamers internalize success as being a result of adequate self-regulation, work and investment in their activity. The same standards construe failure as a lack of self-regulation and an insufficient sense of enterprise (Storey, Salaman, and Platman 2005).

Grind by Design and Streaming Futures

The practice of grind on Twitch is intricately tied to the platform affordances that operationalize and quantify success, but the onus is firmly on individual

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streamers when it comes to realizing this type of success. These affordances and the larger dynamics of platform capitalism together sustain the discourses of aspirational entrepreneurialism inherent to streaming culture on Twitch, as the "emphasis on work ethic from the streamer ties in with the broader trend of deindustrialisation: the decline in long-term management employment and the growth of precarious service work" (Johnson and Woodcock 2019, 345). Thus, for both aspiring and full-time streamers, the concept of grind is used to reconcile the public performance of streaming as fun, creative, flexible, and autonomous with the private reality of streaming as competitive, entrepreneurial, self-exploitative, and, most of all, precarious.

And the grind is framed by streaming culture as an inevitability. Some stream guides have suggested that streamers simply embrace the grind: "You should think of Twitch [like playing video games]—each follower, viewer or subscriber milestone you reach is like beating a game, but everything you do leading up to those milestones should be the actual fun part. There's no gratification in the number itself. If you want to truly last in the long haul, fall in love with the mundane grind, not the far-off rewards" (Twitch Playbook 2019).

Addressing problems of grind and subsequent self-exploitation on Twitch will require significant changes to the way that the platform is designed and operated, and materializing these changes will require streamers to organize. Cecilia D'Anastasio (2017) has proposed the creation of a professional trade organization for Twitch streamers, similar to the Internet Creator's Guild, as a way to collectively organize, aggregate knowledge, share common issues and frustrations, and express emergent solutions to Twitch directly. While mobilizing and convening independent workers can be a difficult process and might not guarantee the financial security or collective bargaining power of a traditional labor organization, the idea of an organization, of any kind, may provide the type of leverage needed to influence decision-making processes made by the platform, especially given that Twitch's operational premise relies entirely on the work of these streamers. On the horizon, the Screen Actors Guild—American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) has expressed a desire to extend its union protection and benefits to video-based influencers creating branded content, which could include Twitch streamers with game-related brand affiliations or sponsorships (Grayson 2021). These protections may only apply to full-time and sponsored Twitch streamers, but it provides another

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opportunity to leverage valuable streaming activity and insist on changes to platform affordances.

As for a more immediate response to the impetus of grind and quantified success on Twitch, streamers may find inspiration from Victoria O'Meara's (2019) work on engagement pods on Instagram. Engagement pods are grassroots communities that agree to mutually like, comment, share, or otherwise engage with each other's posts in order to game the platform's algorithm into prioritizing their content. They are a strategy utilized by Instagram influencers to navigate and resist the precariousness of platformized cultural production resulting from algorithmic processes on the platform that determine user visibility. According to O'Meara (2019), participation in these engagement pods is "intended to improve circulation and audience engagement metrics, to share information concerning algorithm changes, or to control appearances to advertising partners" (8), providing an alternative, and perhaps more immediate, form of organizing among platform laborers and users.

It may be possible to envision a similar strategy for Twitch streamers. Twitch has several native affordances that could be reappropriated for the purpose of cooperative engagement, including the platform's "raid" function, which allows streamers to end their broadcast by sending their current audience to another live channel, and its "stream team" function, which allows streamers to become members of groups based on shared games, practices, and interests. The use of these affordances, in addition to external communication channels, may provide an avenue for deliberately coordinated action, with the ability to mutually boost viewership numbers, follower counts, and chat engagement so highly valued by Twitch, as well as influence individual visibility and discoverability on the platform. If Twitch's larger culture of precarity, overwork, and self-exploitation results from the gamification of streaming activity and grinding for key metrics, then this form of community-coordinated and cooperative engagement may present a way to effectively game the system back.

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19 Games Done Quick, Organizational Presence, and Speedrunning Identity

Robyn Hope

Speedrunning is a digital gaming practice in which players try to finish games as quickly as possible. In the past ten years, speedrunning has seen a meteoric rise in popularity, not only as a play practice but also as a spectacle. Many speedrunners practice and perform on Twitch.tv, a live streaming service that allows players to broadcast their runs to anyone with an internet connection. As the speedrun community formed and grew, so did organizations and websites devoted to its achievements and events. This chapter concerns one such organization, Games Done Quick (GDQ), a nonprofit group that raises millions of dollars annually for charity through hosting and live streaming speedrunning marathons. While GDQ produces programming throughout the year, including smaller marathons and weekly showcases, two major events—Awesome Games Done Quick (AGDQ) in January and Summer Games Done Quick (SGDQ) in June—serve as the cornerstones of their fundraising. During AGDQ and SGDQ, speedrunners meet en masse at hotel conference centers, and players showcase their runs to one another, and to viewers across the world, over several days.

Over the past decade, the growth of live streaming on Twitch.tv and the growth of speedrunning have been essentially symbiotic. Speedrunners were some of the earliest practitioners of live streaming: this drew speedrunning audiences to Twitch.tv, just as regular Twitch audiences were drawn to popular speedrunners. This relationship continues to benefit both parties. Live streaming is now ubiquitous in speedrunning, to the point where the majority of speedrunning records are documented and verified via live streams, as are thousands of hours of practice and record attempts. Meanwhile, speedrunning streams, and GDQ events in particular, remain some of the most popular attractions on Twitch. AGDQ and SGDQ now

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regularly attract hundreds of thousands of viewers and raise millions of dollars for their two partnered charities, Médecins Sans Frontières (known in English as Doctors without Borders) and the Prevent Cancer Foundation. Due to the reach and influence of its two major marathons, GDQ shapes how speedrunning is perceived and understood, both inside and outside speedrunning culture. Many new fans are introduced to speedrunning through AGDQ and SGDQ, and thus GDQ codifies their experience with the subculture: "[I]n the minds of many, speedrunning is GDQ" (Wallach 2019). In this chapter, I will trace the origins of the organizational presence of GDQ and explore how it has asserted its influence on the speedrunning community through a complex network of actors and infrastructure. Over time, the GDQ organization has gained sufficient power to influence how we understand speedrunning.

Organizational Communication

I use an organizational communication framework to understand the relationship between GDQ and the speedrunning community. Recent organizational communication theories argue that organizations do not exist as a unified "thing"—rather, they come into existence through the organization's actions, images, and policies (Fairhurst and Putnam 2004). Every time an organization attaches their logo to a letterhead, sends out a tweet, recruits or rejects a member, or performs a task, it is making itself present—bringing itself into existence. As such, these different elements are typically called "presentifications" (Fairhurst and Putnam 2004). This theory implies that organizations can be incarnated in multiple ways, and, in fact, that "being present . . . implies continuous negotiations over how the organization should be (made) present" (Cooren, Brummans, and Charrieras 2008, 1346).

By using this framework, I am not capturing exactly what GDQ is, but instead creating a map of the forces that the organization exerts when it makes itself present. In their codifying study of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Cooren, Brummans, and Charrieras (2008) discovered that MSF's different presentifications were often in tension with each other, or even contradictory (2008). Their study focused on the presence of MSF in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and they gathered data on everything from MSF-branded jeeps to conversations between MSF representatives and local community leaders.

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I applied Cooren, Brummans, and Charrieras's methodological framework to GDQ, recording and evaluating its various presentifications. Their study also provides evidence that MSF managed to influence the "organizational presence" of entities beyond itself; it changed the operation of the Congolese medical system and how it was perceived by its patients. I argue that GDQ has achieved the same thing in the speedrunning community, altering how this community is understood and how it operates. Finally, by pleasant coincidence, MSF has a direct tie to GDQ: it is the recipient of all the funds raised by GDQ's SGDQ marathons. This highlights another similarity that helped steer my research. Both MSF and GDQ were formed for an altruistic purpose, and conflicts often arise between altruistic goals and the practicalities of their execution. Alongside these useful similarities, the largest difference between GDQ and MSF is also worth highlighting: namely, GDQ operates primarily online. Although GDQ does have a nondigital presence during its marathons, audience members may experience GDQ's presentifications entirely through its live streams. GDQ's presentifications are geared toward executing a handful of intensely complex live events with high technical demands. The organization must coordinate their roster of speedrunners; their consoles, emulators, controllers, and gaming apparatuses; the audio and video feeds for the live stream; and a digital donation tracker and chat room. A live event of this scope—especially one trying to raise money from viewers—must also meet the demands of an audience and provide an entertaining spectacle. GDQ's presentifications are complex, public, and technologically extensive. The need to meet these demands sometimes creates moral tension with GDQ's altruistic goals and with community-minded speedrunners.

My primary resource is the extensive online archive of GDQ videos: every single GDQ marathon has been uploaded, in its entirety, to YouTube. This includes much of the pregame and postgame commentary, as well as the panels at more recent events. GDQ events are the primary arenas where GDQ makes itself present, and everything from the layout of the Twitch interface to the rules and restrictions are relevant presentifications. GDQ's social media presence is also carefully curated; most notably, the GDQ Twitter account, @GamesDoneQuick, tweets updates throughout its events and the speedrunning off-seasons. GDQ also presents itself through branding, logos, and a mascot. For perspectives on GDQ that were less curated, I sought articles, ethnographies, and direct interviews with speedrunners, both in

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academic work and the popular press. Several speedrunners have also shared their own opinions on the history and social utility of GDQ—and on speedrunning in general—on independent YouTube channels. The work of Karl Jobst and SummoningSalt, two veteran speedrunners who have taken to making YouTube documentaries about the history of their practice, proved particularly invaluable. In reviewing these archives, I was guided by a handful of primary research questions: How has GDQ presented itself over time? Do these different presentifications create tension with each other? Finally, have these presentifications affected how speedrunners understand their practice and their community?

2010: Origins of the Organization

GDQ began on New Year's Day, 2010, on a couch in the basement of the speedrunner Mike Uyama. This first iteration of the event, then called Classic Games Done Quick, was meant to be a panel at a larger convention, MAGFest, before it was relocated to Uyama's basement. Considering the technical difficulties and the unexpected change of scenery, the marathon—which, even then, raised money for charity—was a surprising success. The decision to raise money during the live stream was inspired by other gaming charity marathons, including Desert Bus for Hope (Wallach 2019). This first success encouraged Uyama to repeat the occasion the following year, and from there, GDQ grew exponentially both in viewership and donation totals. By 2015, GDQ was incorporated as a nonprofit.

Although the organization has grown massively, certain aspects remain the same as its earliest incarnation. The primary goal of GDQ's events is still to raise money for charity: GDQ now organizes impromptu marathons for disaster relief (such as 2020's Corona Relief Done Quick (CRDQ), done to provide aid for those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic). The other decade-long consistency is "the couch." As each runner streams their run during GDQ events, they are accompanied by a couch (panel) of two or three commentators, as well as a host who will announce incoming donations and read their accompanying comments. Some games are accompanied by incentives, which encourage donors to spend money on extra challenges, bonus games, or cosmetic elements of speedruns. Both of the two major GDQ marathons typically last five days, with runners continuing to play overnight. Due to demands from their affiliated charities, runners

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who participate in GDQ streams are prohibited from swearing or making overtly political statements. Some games with violent elements or cursing are permitted at GDQ, but players will often warn viewers to look away or cough loudly to cover curse words in dialogue. As performers speedrun, they are expected to narrate what they are doing, explaining the game's glitches and strategies to the GDQ viewers.

2011–2014: Finding Their Feet

The format of the Classic Games Done Quick panel held promise. One year later, GDQ hosted their first independent marathon, AGDQ. This event deviated very little from the mom's-basement tone established by the Classic panel, but this was the point in history where the original panel's choices started to become the marathon's conventions. The signature couch returned. Some of the names on the roster of AGDQ 2011 (carcinogen, sinister1, Essentia, PJ) became recurring GDQ figures. The first TAS (Tool-Assisted Speedrun) showcase—a TAS being a theoretically perfect speedrun performed by emulation tools—occurred at SGDQ later that same year. Equally notable were the differences between the 2010 panel and the 2011 marathon. The word "Classic" had already been removed from the event's name, to signify that speedrunners could run games of any generation. AGDQ 2011 underlined this by opening with *Super Mario Galaxy 2*, a game that had been released a scant seven months earlier. These early decisions of presentification—including TAS showcases, newer game speedruns, and the couch—signified a very particular kind of inclusivity, best described as an inclusivity of taste. All games were welcome; all attendees and viewers were received with the casual friendliness of an after-school local area network (LAN) party. AGDQ had yet to incorporate or acquire any official sponsors; at this point, it was still quite ragtag and homegrown, and this was a key part of its appeal.

This all-aboard attitude toward speedrunning was not necessarily the same across the entire community. Prior to the live streaming era, "[speedrunners] were few and far between, scattered randomly across the internet" (Jobst 2020b). They typically congregated in game-specific communities such as those around *Goldeneye 007* or *Mario Kart 64*. Of these prelive stream clusters, the *Goldeneye 007* community, also known as "The Elite," remains quite active, and its operation provides an interesting point of contrast to modern speedrunning groups. The Elite catalog prestigious records in

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Goldeneye 007 and *Perfect Dark*; the front page on its website boasts that it is "where the world's best gamers play." The Elite ranks players using a points system based on how many records each player attains, and because of this points system, "joining the Elite" is a more formal process than taking up speedrunning as a hobby. The moniker emphasizes prestige and selection—these speedrunners are "the elite" players among the masses. The Elite was built to cater to these specialists and their internal competition.

I mention The Elite because it provides an ideal contrast between what a speedrunning resource looked like prior to the live stream era. The Elite is not necessarily exclusionary, but through its website, ranking system, and even its name, it emphasizes different values. It leans toward competition rather than openness. Historically, in speedrunning, the valorization of skill took priority over inclusion. Speed Demos Archive stored recordings of prestigious speedruns across genres, but submitting to the archive involved an intense process of verification and adjudication. Speedruns were rejected if they did not look impressive enough to be shown in the gallery. While these groups were not seeking to exclude, they were not overly concerned with inducting newcomers, so the barrier to entry into speedrunning remained high. Speedrunning began to develop its own increasingly technical language, and it had no obvious centralized hub of definitions or guides. In the opinion of *Goldeneye 007* speedrunner Karl Jobst, the barrier between speedrunning reaching a point of broad appeal was the knowledge gap between speedrunners and the average viewer:

> [S]peedrunning needed a voice; an intermediary that would communicate complex ideas to the masses in a way that was easy to consume. Originally, this voice would come in the form of commentary during speedruns, like those seen at Games Done Quick (Jobst 2020b).

This "voice" is the first of the major shifts in speedrunning introduced by GDQ. Jobst's video essay uses a clip of Narcissa Wright speedrunning *Ocarina of Time* at AGDQ 2013, which is widely recognized as the codifier of the GDQ commentary style. In this run, Wright narrates both the history of the game's speedrunning techniques and the complex glitches she executes. Previous to Wright's run, commentary was more sporadic and tended to involve couchmates asking questions of the players as the game progressed; but even in their unrefined state, these explanations were part of GDQ's format. This stylistic choice renders speedrunning accessible to almost any viewer: regardless of how much you know about speedrunning,

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or even the game being played, you can enjoy a GDQ speedrun. This is a particularly important development for a charity event, which benefits from appealing to as many viewers as possible. The development of a GDQ narration style was all but a necessity before it could achieve the widespread reach that it currently enjoys.

Another facet to this shift—speedrunning's transition from a niche hobby to a spectacle with broad appeal—comes from the platform employed by GDQ: Twitch.tv. Live streaming was in some ways a necessary ingredient for a fundraising marathon, as commentators were able to track donations live, read donor comments aloud, and encourage more participation from the audience. As early as SGDQ 2011, viewers could donate to "incentives" that would affect the speedruns directly. Sometimes these incentives were cosmetic choices, such as picking a character skin; sometimes they affected gameplay, forcing the runner to complete extra levels or challenges. This was another way to take advantage of the liveness of the event: keeping viewers engaged via a bidding war or surprising them with a bonus incentive. This active engagement with an audience is, in the modern day, a well-established aspect of professional live streaming, recognized by both streamers and researchers. However, this kind of affective labor was very different from the way that speedrunners were accustomed to playing, which was typically alone and off-camera. Speedrunners were already experimenting with live streaming independent of GDQ, and they were some of Twitch.tv's earliest attractions (Jobst 2020b). Yet these early streamers were less familiar with, and less engaged in, the kind of audience interaction that characterized GDQ (and would come to characterize live streaming as a whole). Siglemic, a popular *Super Mario 64* runner from these early years, would often live stream record attempts with no camera or microphone and would still draw audiences of tens of thousands (Jobst 2020b). This type of skill-focused, low-interaction speedrunning still happens on Twitch, but it coexists alongside speedrunners who are more audience-focused—and, at least twice a year, it coexists with the extremely audience-focused position of GDQ.

While I have positioned GDQ as "audience-focused," the organization had yet to do any critical reflection on who constituted that audience. At this point in its existence, GDQ had no pressing reason to think about any other kinds of inclusivity beyond its initial gestures toward the inclusivity of taste, and as such, it was not exempt from the misogyny, homophobia, racism, and transphobia that still permeate online gaming spaces. The

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earlier iterations of AGDQ and SGDQ imposed no hard limits on language, which led to the famously foul-mouthed runner Werster using racial epithets during a *Pokémon* speedrun at AGDQ 2013. Neither was the speedrunning community outside of GDQ as inclusive as it imagined itself to be. When Narcissa Wright—a *Legend of Zelda* series speedrunner responsible for some of the most remarkable and influential speedruns in history—came out as transgender in 2015, the bullying and harassment that she suffered was so severe that she briefly deleted her Twitch account and removed herself from the community. The veteran speedrunner Trihex has also been at the center of a bigoted controversy, one which has spread to larger live streaming culture. A 2012 photo of Trihex is the source of Twitch's "TriHard" emote. While it is typically a benign expression of joy or excitement, it is also one of Twitch's very few emotes depicting a Black person. As such, the emote has become a shorthand for racists, who spam it whenever Black players appear on streams, or to make racist associations when laden signifiers like "watermelon" or "stealing" are mentioned (Winkie 2017). Trihex has released a statement claiming that he does not think the emote itself should be banned, but he is frustrated by its use as a racist symbol. Currently, no ban on "TriHard" has gone into effect, placing the burden of managing racist uses of the emote squarely on the shoulders of individual streamers and moderators (Winkie 2017). Conversely, players with bigoted views were able to establish themselves in speedrunning with minimal investigation or pushback. *Goldeneye 007* speedrunner Ryan White—a long-serving member of the Goldeneye Elite—was found spewing racist and misogynistic rhetoric in a private Discord server in 2018. GDQ would be confronted with these issues openly before long, as its exploding popularity would bring it into contact with larger public organizations.

2015–2021: Hitting Their Stride

The AGDQ marathon of 2014 was the first marathon to break $1 million in donations, more than doubling the total from the previous year. One year later, the unofficial GDQ organization became Games Done Quick, LLC. It received increased recognition from its charity partners—Médecins Sans Frontières and the Prevent Cancer Foundation—who began to send speakers and representatives to GDQ events. Reporters began to cover the fundraising "phenomenon." GDQ was quickly growing into a major cultural force, and

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with that shift came new challenges to the organization's presentification. With every shattered donation record, it became more and more difficult to maintain the "dad's basement" aesthetic of the early GDQ events.

One particular shift caused by GDQ's growing popularity was its ability to transform its performers into professional live streamers. Through many of its presentifications, it allies itself with charity and community, not with competitive gaming or professional development—but in practice, it is a significant economic force in the realm of streaming. It can make careers. The *Pokémon* speedrunner Keizaron gained 10,000 followers from a single GDQ run, which was enough for him to begin streaming full time (Wallach 2019). Live streaming is incredibly competitive, and GDQ may provide streamers with the boost in visibility that they need to earn and retain followers. However, a seat at GDQ is not a guaranteed catapult to fame. Furthermore, not every speedrunner is interested in performing the kind of social labor—or, for that matter, playing the kinds of games—expected of variety streamers (Wallach 2019). GDQ is also now large enough to be acknowledged by game developers; there are a handful of cases of developers hiring speedrunners straight out of GDQ to playtest their games (Wallach 2019). GDQ's popularity, and its willingness to serve as a platform for its performers, have given it a considerable economic and cultural foothold in digital production. This is not to say that speedrunners cannot become popular without GDQ, but GDQ has an unmatched ability to put its thumb on the scale.

Furthermore, GDQ demands performances of its runners that emphasize the showmanship skills of traditional live streaming. In a sense, GDQ has changed what it means for a speedrunner to be "good" at speedrunning. Forest Scully-Blaker's ethnographic research on speedrunners found that they identified two different kinds of "good" speedrunners—those with the best times, and those with charisma. GDQ's current submission criteria advocate for a balance of both, and also underline its self-consciousness of its own considerable cultural role:

> Your run is not only a representation of yourself, but a representation of the speedrun community to a wide audience . . .
>
> . . . We will take into account the content of the video you are submitting in its entirety. This includes the commentary of anyone featured in it . . . Has the runner performed a run at our event before? How did it go? . . . Is the game entertaining on its own merits? Does that entertainment value translate to a wider audience? (Games Done Quick Game Submission Guide)

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In evaluating not only the quality of play, but also the "entertainment value" of the games, the "commentary" of the runner, and the runner's previous "performances," GDQ emphasizes the need for their runners to be at least somewhat appealing to an audience. In emphasizing "representing" the community, it also suggests that speedrunners have an obligation to make a good impression. Some very popular GDQ runners, while not unskilled by any means, are more renowned for their comic flair or performance talent. Jokes, playfulness, and positivity are a major draw of the event. The runner tomatoanus brought cardboard props to his AGDQ 2020 run of the *Fallout* series and had one of his couch members put on five pairs of pants at once to demonstrate a glitch. The run garnered 1.1 million views on YouTube—well above average for GDQ runs. The *Ratchet & Clank* speedrunner Xem is a trained opera singer, and GDQ often includes donation incentives for him to sing after his runs. In YouTube comments and Twitch chats, runners are praised for remaining optimistic or keeping the crowd entertained. The representative character of GDQ may no longer be the geeky, welcoming basement-dweller of CDGQ, but rather the stylishly sarcastic Keizaron, who self-deprecates his way through his *Pokémon* speedruns behind a pair of ironic indoor sunglasses.

This showmanship is somewhat curated by GDQ, which has implemented increasingly strict regulations on what kind of behavior streamers can exhibit during their runs. Overtly political messages are not allowed, nor is cursing, in an effort to keep the streams family friendly. GDQ's rules on inclusivity of taste and its no-cursing rules sometimes come into amusing conflict, as alluded to previously: it is not uncommon to see violent, f-bomb-heavy horror games run by streamers restricted to G-rated dialogue. This particular paradox is usually managed by the streamer's own jokes, warnings to "cover your eyes, kids," and well-timed coughs. Managing cursing is one thing, but GDQ was soon confronted with a more insidious challenge.

As mentioned previously, bigotry and hate speech are as endemic to speedrunning culture as they are to gaming culture at large. In the past five years, however, GDQ has cracked down on bigotry with surprising strictness. While only a handful of streamers have been banned from their events, they are typically for egregious uses of hate speech or violations of the safety of GDQ attendees. These infractions do not need to occur on GDQ premises or even during a GDQ event. Trihex, the same streamer whose face is depicted in the TriHard emote, was banned for using a homophobic slur

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during a solo Twitch live stream. Ryan White—the *Goldeneye 007* speedrunner mentioned previously—was banned after private chatlogs of him using white supremacist vocabulary were leaked. While these two runners were apologetic, others—such as the *Final Fantasy* runner Luzbelheim, banned for a misogynist slur in his Twitter bio—have been more aggressive or resistant. As the other runners were banned for homophobia, misogyny, and white supremacy, these bans are in some sense an acknowledgment of the vicious treatment that many minorities receive in gaming communities, even in speedrunning. Some runners have criticized GDQ's bans as overzealous and the application of them as unclear. The case of Trihex—someone who both has been the victim of bigoted behavior and used homophobic slurs—highlights the eternally complex execution of such bans. In terms of presentification, the strict bans are vocal statements that the contributions of marginalized players are fundamental to speedrunning, and the safety of those members is paramount.

Beyond its bans, GDQ has actively tried to practice inclusivity in more impactful ways that typically require labor and time. GDQ hosts another marathon, Frame Fatales, specifically to promote speedrunners who self-identify as women in a subculture that is overwhelmingly dominated by men. In June 2020, the organization donated its Twitch subscription revenue to the NAACP as a show of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. GDQ tends to be swift and uncompromising in its response when marginalized members of the community are in crisis. Within two days of a shooting spree in Atlanta on March 16, 2021, that targeted the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, GDQ condemned the violence on its Twitter account and pledged upward of $10,000 to the cause (Games Done Quick, 2021). Even some of its more mundane presentifications are made to be inclusive: the GDQ mascot, introduced for SGDQ 2019, is a gender-neutral velociraptor named Velocity.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to say how much impact GDQ's bans have over the culture of speedrunning as a whole—particularly because, by coincidence, most of the banned runners had large followings outside of GDQ and retain those followings after their bans. Still, GDQ has repeatedly reaffirmed their rejection of hate speech and bigotry, and to a much greater extent than many other gaming subcultures. The objections of those who are dissatisfied with the bans have not made a notable dent in GDQ's attendance, viewership, or donation totals.

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Conclusion

In the same way that it is an oversimplification to see GDQ as the singular force pulling the strings of modern speedrunning, it would also be an oversimplification to deem GDQ an unequaled force for good in gaming subcultures. Neither is it a tyrannical cultural force to which speedrunners must submit if they wish to be popular; it is not all-powerful, and it would likely be passed over by speedrunners entirely if it did not facilitate their cultural needs. There has been some noise to the effect that GDQ is no longer a sufficient arena to promote speedrunning culture. Some runners (including Jobst) are eager to explore the possibilities of competitive speedrunning events or live, record-breaking challenges (Jobst 2020b). The development of these events will be interesting to watch. Part of the success of the charity marathon format was its natural overlap with some of the speedrunning community's untapped values. Speedrunners often characterize their communities as, first and foremost, friendly, inclusive, and fun (Scully-Blaker 2016, tomatoanus 2020). Those values were reified by GDQ in many of its presentifications and echoed back to the speedrunning community.

Of course, competition is also a part of speedrunning—leaderboards and world records would not be so meticulously maintained otherwise—but competition does bring with it a different set of values. Perhaps the competitive elements of speedrunning will continue to coexist with its fundraising events, or perhaps it will open up new dialogues about the values of speedrunning altogether. Organizational communication scholars ask us to picture organizations not as dictators of a culture, but rather to see cultures and organizations in dialogue with one another. In the case of GDQ, these dialogues are often carried out publicly and organically, and always with an eye toward their ever-expanding live audience. As we have seen, GDQ frames speedrunners as performers. For their own organizational purposes, they favor speedrunners who are skilled, well informed, and charismatic on camera; they have elected to ensure that their culture is as accepting of minority gaming populations as possible; and they have presented speedrunning as something that can and should be performed in a live setting. These characteristics did not necessarily emerge organically from speedrunning as a practice, but rather from GDQ's presentifications of speedrunning as a live spectacle. Neither are these characteristics hard and fast rules for anyone wanting to be a speedrunner, but even if they are contentious, they

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do influence our image of what a speedrunner "should" be. Due to GDQ's vast and persisting cultural power, the worlds of the live streamed performance and the speedrunner have become inexorably intertwined.

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20 Seeing Like the Streamers: Reprogramming the Panopticon

Johanna Brewer

> ANGEL DUMOTT SCHUNARD: Collins will recount his exploits as an anarchist, including the tale of his successful reprogramming of the MIT virtual reality equipment to self-destruct as it broadcasts the words: "Actual Reality—ACT UP—Fight AIDS!" (Larson 1996)

Platform companies have radically redefined early-twenty-first-century social, economic, and civic life. Global corporations like Amazon, Facebook, and Google now exercise their unprecedented power to shape the development of popular culture, transform modern labor practices, and challenge existing norms of governance. The idealistic aspiration of the past—that the internet would serve as a democratizing force and usher in a new more egalitarian age of humanity—has been replaced by a growing concern that we've unwittingly built a grand surveillance apparatus, a digital panopticon that is ushering in the dystopian future that science fiction has been warning us about since the mid-twentieth century. While those concerns are certainly warranted, and we will explore them in more detail here, this chapter offers an alternative imagining of our future—one rooted in observations about the ways in which live streamers resist the seemingly inevitable subjugation of platform capitalism.

The Oppressive Power of Platform Capitalism

Scholars, journalists, and activists alike have been increasingly sounding the alarm about the growing influence that networked platforms have on the material conditions of our lives. Many argue that the consequences for ignoring earlier warnings may be irreversible, as billions of people across

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the world now rely on these platforms for myriad personal and professional needs. Search engines and social media networks like Google, Facebook, and Twitter are among the most pervasive in their reach. These titans of modern communication make their money by collecting data about the behavior of their users and selling targeted advertising to other companies based on the information they gather. This extreme commodification of data extraction is recognized as the fundamental shift in economics that distinguishes platform capitalism from earlier forms of business (Srnicek 2017).

By recasting human experiences as valuable material to be mined and resold to other corporations, the dominant platforms of our time have effectively positioned their technological infrastructures as mass surveillance networks capable of influencing the behavior of their users. When the advertising algorithms of those platforms extend beyond altering the buying habits of a shoe shopper and begin serving them violent propaganda paid for by a hate group, the troublesome nature of their outsized influence becomes apparent. Indeed, some scholars argue that surveillance capitalism represents a form of social control so insidious that it threatens not only free speech, but democracy itself (York 2021; Zuboff 2019).

Besides impinging on the freedom of their users for the sake of profit, these surveillance-based platforms often exploit their workers, especially those whose labor is designed to be invisible. Unseen "ghost workers," whose task is to power the artificial intelligence and content moderation systems of these networked platforms, are often paid very low wages, exposed to traumatic media, and afforded little protections for their mental and physical health (Gillespie 2018; Gray and Suri 2019; Roberts 2019). Even those workers who engage in collective action, such as the Mechanical Turkers who perform microtasks on Amazon's crowdsourced labor platform, still struggle to be seen as deserving of a living wage by those who contract their services (Irani and Silberman 2013).

This devaluation of the workers powering networked platforms is a crucial element of surveillance capitalism, but it is not a new phenomenon. Critics of big technology corporations often invoke Michel Foucault's late-twentieth-century exploration of government control (Foucault 1977) to accuse them of constructing an entirely immersive digital panopticon designed to subtly alter their users' behavior and lull them into a state of complacent obedience. Although the fear of inadvertently submitting ourselves to a mental prison like *The Matrix* is certainly valid, it is crucial to remember that, as

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originally conceived by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century, the panopticon was first and foremost a system of control designed as a "means of extracting labour" (Bentham 1995). It is in fact this more historic logic that underpins the dominant gig economy platforms like Uber, TaskRabbit, and DoorDash. And while some have described the early-twenty-first-century shift in employment toward gig work as neofeudalism, we shall see later in this chapter that comparisons to the capitalist practices that shaped the "workplace of the early industrial age" will prove to be more salient (Ravenelle 2019).

To understand how live streaming might offer a means to resist or even reprogram the corporate panopticon, we begin by exploring the underestimated power that modern creative laborers have to influence networked platforms. Then we contextualize their clout by revisiting the strategies used by wandering women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to mobilize and organize for their rights: coopting the intertwined infrastructures of the cinema and the railway. Tracing the parallels between the cultural revolution of the industrial age and the challenges to platform capitalism that modern marginalized streamers raise, we demonstrate how personal surveillance has been repurposed as a progressive means to spark a twenty-first-century wave of societal change. Finally, by detailing the emergent values that unite a globally distributed network of inclusive streamers (i.e., women, people of color, LGBTQIA+, disabled folks, and their allies) who are collectively transforming both our society and the social media platforms that pervade it, we conclude with a reasonably optimistic imagining of our future that is rooted in the creative power of the present.

By revisiting the progress from the past, we find both evidence and inspiration. The protagonists of Jonathan Larson's (1996) *Rent*—a late-twentieth-century musical about struggling queer artists in the Lower East Side of New York City during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic—help us to envision how marginalized performers might use their talent to coopt technological platforms and share transformative perspectives with the broader public. Yet it is illustrative to remember that the cyberpunk aspirations articulated by Angel during the number known as "La Vie Bohème" owe their origins to Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*—a nineteenth-century Italian opera about wandering artists living nontraditional lifestyles in Paris—and in this chapter, we will shine a light on that long history of creative resistance.

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The Countervailing Force of Creative Communities

Although ghost workers and gig laborers are in danger of becoming a newly exploitable underclass, the experiences of those who make a living as content creators on platforms like Amazon's Twitch, Facebook's Instagram, and Google's YouTube present a less darkly deterministic fate. In his study of video creators who earn money through YouTube, Postigo (2014) highlights the ways in which the platform simultaneously exploits and empowers the artists whom it relies on to create the type of content that attracts viewers. He concludes that creative user-generated content platforms like YouTube cannot accurately be conceived of as solely extractive in nature. Nor, however, are they purely generative infrastructures that are beneficial to the workers and their communities.

Taylor's work tracing the rise of live streaming reinforces these findings by emphasizing the growing cultural significance of the medium. Her research shows that streamers who make a living by broadcasting their video gameplay on Twitch have been increasingly able to exert some influence on the policies and practices of the platform (Taylor 2018). By positioning their work as entertainment and likening their labor to that of filmmakers, actors, and musicians, content creators on networked platforms are able to use their artistic talent as leverage to negotiate better economic and material conditions in their digital workplaces.

It is clear, then, that not all networked platforms enact surveillance capitalism in the same way. While ghost workers and gig laborers are rendered invisible and interchangeable, depersonalized and often dehumanized, content creators are afforded visibility and assigned value for their unique creative talents, with those who attract large audiences often being positioned as the faces of a platform. That is not to say that content creators are immune to the economic precarity and absence of workplace protections that other gig workers endure; they certainly are confronted with similarly challenging conditions (Panneton 2020). Instead, I mean to draw attention to the ways in which the creative labor that drives certain types of networked platforms can act as a countervailing force against the oppressive power of surveillance capitalism.

Although strategically delegating responsibility and relinquishing limited control to gig workers is one of the distinctive ways that platforms expand

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their power (Vallas and Schor 2020), it is this very innovation of platform capitalism that may prove to be its own undoing. Many tech companies seek to "disrupt" an existing market by challenging established labor laws or standard economic practices, but the infrastructure and policies that they develop to do so vary greatly. This is because the precise form that a particular digital panopticon takes depends on the type of labor that it is designed to extract. Amazon constantly surveils its warehouse workers and delivery drivers, subjecting them to intense levels of algorithmic pressure and tightly controlling their labor process in order to fulfill its promise of one-day shipping to Prime customers. By comparison, streamers broadcasting on its Twitch platform are afforded much greater latitude in their work, never being forced to meet a quota.

Live streaming seeks to compete with more established forms of big-budget entertainment media by offering a new type of interactive audience experience to viewers and strategically off-loading the complexities and costs of its production to independent creative laborers. In an effort to attract the roster of celebrity talent that such a business model requires, platforms like Twitch cede an extraordinary amount of aesthetic, economic, and regulatory control to the streamers, betting that their avant garde content will also generate significant revenue. I argue that this seemingly minor mutation of networked platforms actually represents an evolutionary leap for civic life—one poised to upend surveillance capitalism as we know it.

The Industrial Infrastructure of Cultural Revolution

The proposal that a new type of media and its attendant technological infrastructure might have a transformative effect on society is not an entirely radical one, as it has already happened before, during the Industrial Revolution, the period to which platform capitalism is said to be a return. Like the modernization of the digital age, the Industrial Revolution unfolded in phases, beginning with a period of rapid urbanization in the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries that resulted in former agricultural laborers from distant communities becoming concentrated in factory-laden cities. Scott's high-modernist critique, *Seeing Like a State*, traces the schemes of governmental control that shaped these new urban centers emerging across Europe and North America (Scott 1999). He describes the ways in which

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city grids and central planning were used to subject citizens to a type of "panoptic legibility" that allowed states to more easily control their populations and exploit their resources (Brewer and Dourish 2008).

Despite the abstraction, dislocation, and depersonalization that these new city grids were designed to foster, urban wanderers in Paris, known as *flâneurs,* transgressed their intended purpose by solitarily strolling the streets and taking in the sights of the late nineteenth century to create personalized aesthetic experiences (Benjamin 1999). This unanticipated perspective of the gentleman walker offered a new form of "local legibility" that was so potent that some rulers feared that it would lead to sedition, but given that this privilege to move unencumbered and unaccompanied through the urban landscape was only afforded to well-off white men of the time, early *flânerie* unsurprisingly failed to incite a grand social revolution (Buck-Morss 1986). It did, however, open a new avenue for resistance which would shape the second phase of the Industrial Age.

From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, cities transformed themselves from isolated islands of gaslit urbanity to the bustling interconnected electrified metropolises that we recognize today. But among all the wonders of this age, it was the twin innovations of the moving picture and the locomotive that fundamentally altered the social mobility of more marginalized members of society. With the introduction of movie theaters into the arcades of Naples, women, who previously were not permitted to wander the city alone, suddenly had a legitimizing purpose to venture out on their own: taking in the sights at the cinema. Not only did they gather together in the public forums of their day to watch the first films, women were also among the first creators of silent motion pictures, many of which replicated the experience of traveling the world by rail (Bruno 1992). These well-heeled Neapolitan *flâneuses* repurposed this panoptic innovation to lay claim to the wandering gaze and panoramic perspective that had previously been the exclusive domain of men.

Early cinema legitimized the presence of select unaccompanied women in urban spaces, affording them new avenues of social mobility and cultural access. However, poor, unhoused, and LGBTQIA+ women of the time still struggled to move about freely, and safely, in society. In an act of rebellion against oppressive urban scrutiny, some of them donned traditionally masculine attire and sneaked aboard the frequently departing freight trains that hauled resources in and out of the cities. Passing as "tramps and hobos"

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(itinerant unhoused male laborers seeking work), these marginalized women rode the newly laid rails as stowaways, experiencing their own personal moving pictures framed by the windows of boxcars (Cresswell 1999). Even though their aesthetic journeys could be profoundly liberating, they often paid a high price for that freedom, enduring discrimination, harassment, and sexual assault from fellow travelers and employers alike.

Although the Industrial Age was fraught with exploitation, it was also a time of technologically fueled cultural mobility. By coopting theaters and trains, women of the Industrial Revolution were able to repurpose the capitalist infrastructures designed for panoptic legibility, to redirect society's gaze and gain greater access to the public sphere. Meaningful participation in civic life requires members of society to both see and be seen by others, to listen to and be heard by them. Women, who were previously confined to the domestic sphere to conduct the free labor of maintaining a household for factory-working men, achieved a level of public visibility that was so powerful that they were able to mobilize and organize the suffrage movement, securing their right to vote in many nations around the world by the early- to mid-twentieth century.

The Emergence of the (Re)programmable Panopticon

Together, the motion picture and the locomotive afforded unprecedented, unanticipated cultural and geographic mobility for women of the Industrial Age. These new technologies presented a hackable infrastructure that marginalized members of society could repurpose for their own ends, ones that stood in direct opposition to the logic of state control at the time that would have had them tucked quietly away in their domestic kitchens. Just like its industrial predecessor, the age of platform capitalism offers its own innovative frameworks of panoptic control, which in turn provide new opportunities for transgression. As we have seen earlier, creative labor and geosocial mobility often act as countervailing forces that push back against the pervasive control of states and corporations. Platforms designed to support live streaming inadvertently foster a particularly potent convergence of these ingredients for insurgence in their effort to capitalize on interactive entertainment. To understand why this type of panopticon is particularly "reprogrammable," we should first examine the mechanisms by which live streaming platforms oversee, extract, and profit from this novel form of entertainment labor.

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Networked platforms that feature creative products typically use the promise of a revenue-sharing model to entice independent artists to begin producing unpaid work for them. Generally, creators must reach a certain threshold of popularity (usually expressed in terms of viewers) for their work to be eligible for monetization, and unless they reach the point of becoming a partner on the platform, they are not compensated for their contributions. Early video-sharing services like YouTube combined user surveillance logics with broadcast television models and began generating much of their revenue through targeted advertising shown to viewers before they watched any of the independently created content on the site. Although only partnered creators could earn a percentage of that revenue, the more viewers their videos drew, the more ad money they received.

With the introduction of live streaming platforms designed specifically for the medium (like Twitch, Mixer, etc.), and later for existing video services (like YouTube and Facebook), a more complex patchwork of revenue generation followed, one modeled on older economic frameworks for supporting the arts, like patronage and busking. While partnered streamers receive some income from interstitial advertising, typically the bulk of their earnings come from a cut of the subscription fees and donations that viewers opt to pay through the platform to support them as content creators. The innovation of economic extraction that live streaming platforms seized upon was the opportunity to delegate to independent laborers not only the responsibility of creating an artistic product and cultivating an audience for it, but also the work of convincing those viewers to become paying subscribers.

The relational labor that artists perform to earn a living can create powerful affective ties with their audience (Baym 2018); seeking to capture and capitalize on this emotional energy (Partin 2020), live streaming platforms intentionally foster a direct connection between creators and viewers in a way that distinguishes them from other gig economy services. Most modern platforms use technology to mediate the experience between laborer and user in a way that often creates social distance between the individuals involved in a given interaction. Uber drivers, DoorDash deliverers, and TaskRabbit handypeople are all rendered interchangeable to their customers and interacting with them is largely impersonal. In these cases, users are not afforded the choice to support their favorite gig worker through the interface; instead, the platforms effectively erase the individuality of their laborers by structurally discouraging human connections with them. Live

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streaming services take a much different approach, embracing the uniqueness of their creators and their ability to cultivate meaningful relationships that raise material support, because they seek to profit from those talents.

Placing real-time human connections at the center of an economic engine requires the building of infrastructure to facilitate interpersonal interaction on a massive scale. At the same time, owing to the unpredictable nature of artistic popularity, live streaming platforms are often designed with low barriers to entry to encourage the experimentation and exploration that will generate new entertainment stars. As a result, visitors to Twitch's front page are immediately dropped into an active live stream, and everyone who signs up for an account can participate in streams as a chatter, fund their favorites, or start curating their own channel. At any given moment, over 100,000 streamers are broadcasting live feeds of themselves and their surroundings, while millions of viewers wander in and out of their curated virtual spaces, engaging in conversations with folks from across the world, and occasionally throwing a bit of cash to their hosts. While streaming on its surface may appear to be an innovative form of mass surveillance, a clever way of tricking millions of people into submitting to the panoptic gaze, most live streaming services, though it may sound counterintuitive, impose far less oversight than other networked platforms.

Amazon as a singular, yet massive, corporation creates an overarching panoptic view of the world through a variety of video surveillance networks, some of which it exercises much more control over than others. The driver-facing dash cameras that Amazon installs in delivery vehicles give workers no choice but to submit to their monitoring and respond to their performance demands. Similarly, their street-facing Ring doorbell cameras, although installed by homeowners, give passersby little say in the matter of whether they are being recorded and how that video may be used. The majority of networked platforms enact this nonconsensual form of surveillance—one that comes from without and above, to influence the behavior of workers and users. But streamers on Amazon's Twitch platform are never forced to go live: they make the explicit choice to turn their cameras on; and in deciding what the world gets to see, they each invert the panoptic gaze by broadcasting their own curated views in a kaleidoscope of personalized perspectives from the ground. By relinquishing creative control of the cameras to the streamers and encouraging them to engage in emotional labor with a global community to earn their economic support, live streaming

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platforms have given rise to a new mode of collective storytelling and civic engagement that is inadvertently affording geosocial mobility to marginalized folks on a previously unprecedented scale. Today, in the twenty-first century, women, people of color, LGBTQIA+, and disabled streamers are able to see and be seen by the world, and they are using the opportunity to project a radically new vision of reality.

Performing the Art of Personal Surveillance

Since 2017, I have been exploring how marginalized streamers use Twitch to create comfortable spaces for their communities. Over the course of this ongoing ethnographic study, I have observed thousands of hours of live broadcasts and interviewed women, people of color, LGBTQIA+, and disabled streamers, as well as their allies, in an effort to understand how they manage to foster safe and inclusive environments in the notoriously toxic landscape of online gaming. When I first began this research, the most striking thing I noted was that most of the welcoming communities I encountered lay outside the mainstream categories of current popular esports games like *Call of Duty, Fortnite,* and *League of Legends*. Instead, many of the marginalized streamers whom I found myself watching were focused on a very specific form of gameplay: speedrunning.

Speedrunners reimagine the obstacles in video games to find entirely unexpected pathways through levels, and by transgressing the intentions of the developers, they manage to create breathtaking journeys through virtual worlds and beat beloved titles at breakneck paces. Like the *flâneurs* of the early Industrial Age, who found unanticipated ways to traverse urban grids, speedrunners practice a form of in-game mobility that affords them a unique perspective that challenges powerful norms. And just as city life evolved when the cinema opened up the opportunity for strolling to a whole new class of people, speedrunning transformed from a solitary experience into a community endeavor when folks began live streaming their record-breaking achievements (for more information, see chapter 19).

When brought together through the new medium, speedrunners who had previously been outliers in the gaming community, typically grinding out runs at home for hundreds of hours in isolation, suddenly found themselves virtually accompanied by peers and fans alike, cheering them on during their real-time attempts. With their newfound visibility, many

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speedrunners, particularly LGBTQIA+ folks who had left mainstream esports spaces after facing harassment or discrimination, decided to use the drawing power of their seemingly superhuman gaming abilities to intentionally cultivate inclusive spaces online and in real life (IRL) that explicitly welcomed marginalized folks. The former community manager of Twitch, Jared Rae, once said: "What speedrunning on Twitch does, and what watching these types of events live does, is it humanizes inhuman abilities. Because it's not just about watching this flawless run anymore, it's about going on the journey towards it with this player" (Webster 2013). Some queer speedrunners and trans speedrunners choose to use the platform not just to take viewers on in-game journeys, but also to offer a first-person perspective of what it's like to be an LGBTQIA+ gamer navigating the real world. By providing visible representation, these highly skilled players humanize not only their incredible gaming ability, but also their marginalized identities.

After a year of studying the ways in which speedrunners were fostering inclusivity in their Twitch streams, it became apparent that this specialized subcommunity was not the only one concerned with broadcasting a more welcoming message on the medium. Tracing the networks of moderators, subscribers, and chatters that move among these "comfy" streams, and following the chain of streamer referrals from the first speedrunners I spoke with, revealed a surprisingly wide range of marginalized creative performers using the platform to cultivate inclusive spaces while entertaining their audiences. Through my research, I encountered casual players and variety casters who chat with their viewers while meandering through whatever game world they feel like exploring; musicians hosting interactive concerts, taking audience requests, or composing on the fly; artists revealing the details of how they create intricate paintings, drawings, or sculptures; crafters, chefs, and makers who give tips to their chats while they sew, knit, cook, saw, or solder; cosplayers who transform themselves into beloved game characters before viewers' eyes; travel and IRL streamers who offer a first-person perspective walking through the streets of a foreign country, delivering Uber Eats on a bike, or raising animals on a farm; and activists, journalists, and educators who talk their audiences through breaking news, scientific research, or historical reviews.

Creative laborers representing remarkably different disciplines and personal identities are using the same platform to bring visibility to their unique experiences, while building welcoming communities that provide material

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support for not only themselves, but also others in need. Marginalized members of society like women, people of color, LGBTQIA+, and disabled folks are choosing to turn a camera on themselves, often in highly personal spaces like their bedrooms or private workshops (Ruberg and Lark 2020), and asking viewers to join them in cultivating a cozy atmosphere of community-funded creative exploration. Every individual is motivated to go live for a different reason, but for those who have faced systemic discrimination or frequent harassment, the choice to show themselves to anyone on the internet and invite strangers in for conversation represents a brave and defiant act. Just like their industrial predecessors who rode the rails and created the first films, these modern pathbreakers enter the public fray and redirect the panoptic gaze in order to seize new opportunities previously out of reach. And although each marginalized streamer's journey is unique, many find themselves united by their shared drive to manifest a new version of reality—one in which folks like them are truly seen and actually heard, one where they can more meaningfully participate in both the online and offline worlds.

Revolutionary Values to (Go) Live By

As people from across the globe congregate in shared virtual spaces and contribute to the new emote-rich way of communicating on the platform (see chapter 16), I would argue that live streaming infrastructure is giving rise to a new form of glocal legibility that renders individuals from disparate cultures more accessible and understandable to one another through the continual construction of a shared platform patois. And as women, people of color, LGBTQIA+, and disabled folks add their unique perspectives to the evolving aesthetic language of Twitch, they often find themselves building common ground while they labor to collectively curate an immersive tapestry of experiences for a shared audience of supporters. The same system of control that allows a massive corporation to profit from the talents of independent artists also creates mutual visibility and material connection between the struggles of a trans woman speedrunning in rural Minnesota, the challenges of a Black tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) player from Atlanta, and the hurdles faced by a mixed-race couple in Thailand as they all try to move safely through the world and earn a living. One radically unintended side effect of building a digital panopticon that exploits creative, affective labor while incentivizing a crowdfunded, mutual aid economic

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model, then, appears to be the fostering of intersectional solidarity among previously disconnected communities.

By immersing myself in the multitudinous perspectives of the marginalized laborers cultivating comfy channels, I was able to see that the growth of inclusivity on Twitch is a completely decentralized movement that is nonetheless driven by a grassroots patchwork of streamers and viewers who are using the affordances of the platform to advance a similar set of values. This "comfy code" is made visible through the customizable aspects of the broadcast infrastructure and the collective actions of community members, and it offers a preview of how the live streaming panopticon can be reprogrammed. In the remainder of this chapter, we will briefly examine the tenets of the comfy code to highlight how they might offer a scaffold for sweeping social change.

The foremost value of the comfy code is the commitment to *be genuine and honest*. Members of inclusive stream communities believe that it is important to express who you really are and represent your identity by making yourself visible. This raw honesty is supported, and even incentivized, by the nature of the medium; indeed, one streamer I interviewed was emphatic about the distinctive power of unfiltered live interaction, saying, "People here want genuine connection. That's why we're all on Twitch. If we didn't, we'd be watching YouTube." Others I spoke with recounted that their choice to be more vulnerable and open with viewers acted as a catalyst for their community's growth. Engaging in this highly transparent form of relational labor not only attracts an audience, it also encourages affective ties and builds solidarity between workers and the public.

Streamers are keenly aware that as hosts, they set the tone for their space by how they act, and so marginalized creators often consciously *lead by example*. One spelled this out as follows: "I can't enforce respect. I can't enforce conduct. If you try, that's gonna fail. But, I try to encourage people, and lead by example rather than decree." Inclusive streamers model the behaviors that they want to see in the world; and when they notice a self-starting member of the audience pick up the mantle and do the right thing on their own, they typically tap those viewers to become their chat moderators (Seering, Wang, Yoon, and Kaufman 2019; Cullen and Kairam 2022). As streamers project their perspectives into the world, like-minded individuals are attracted to their curated spaces. And when some take on the work of community moderation to help perpetuate their shared vision, they find

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themselves developing novel systems of governance to regulate access to and speech within these new virtual agoras (Arendt 1959; Habermas 1989; Harney and Moten 2013).

Their emphasis on forging alliances means that marginalized creators *collaborate before competing*. Inclusive streamers generally believe that they are in it together and a rising tide lifts all boats. Rather than attempting to steal viewers from one another, they are more likely to share their audiences by "shouting out" (promoting) their fellow streamers in chats. Surprisingly, the speedrunners I've spoken to are among the most ardent supporters of collaboration in the inclusive movement, with one stressing to me that the most important takeaway from our interview ought to be: "The way a community speedruns a game is not to see who can have the fastest time, but to see how fast the game can go. Speedrunning is a communal effort." In other words, even though speedrunners are constantly trying to improve their personal records, they aren't trying to beat one another. They are attempting to collectively reach for a new achievement by pushing the known limits of a game. Such a turn from individualism to collectivism stands in stark contrast to capitalist values, and yet it is borne from engagement within the confines of the platform itself.

In fact, much of what binds comfy communities together is the way they *create and share knowledge*, whether about game-breaking tactics or just generally about life itself. Many of my participants described how they intentionally try to teach their viewers, both about the subject matter of creative content they produce and their personal identities. And at the same time, these streamers told me how much they enjoy being educated by their audiences. Summing this up nicely, one related: "I'm having the most fun when I'm learning from the chat about something. And for some people, the most impressive thing about my stream is that I can explain abstract queerness versus sexuality and gender queerness while playing a really hard *Mario* level." Inclusive streams on Twitch have become rich spaces for cultural exchange and communal education that reach across geosocial boundaries, erecting bridges over the entrenched societal divisions that are the legacies of centuries of state control.

Finally, and most crucially, inclusive streamers not only share information with one another, they also *pass on privilege*. These creative laborers often financially support their peers by subscribing to their streams and sending one another donations. In addition, they help streamers who are just

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starting out by using raids and hosts that boost the visibility of their budding channels. One of my participants described their motivation by saying: "I think it's important to spread the love and share viewers with people. I look for people who are on the cusp of having above-average viewership to host so they can be closer to hitting their goals." This grassroots tactic for building viewership ratings is radically different from the strategies of NBC or Netflix, and yet the features of Twitch's platform were specifically designed to support it. By using the affordances of the system, by playing the game of Twitch as it asks to be played, marginalized folks are redistributing power and influence according to new community-based logics.

The five tenets of this comfy code were developed within the language of live streaming on Twitch, under the watchful eye of the digital panopticon, and yet they represent a profound departure from the prevailing logic of surveillance capitalism. Historically, as new structures of control are advanced by powerful nation-states and massive corporations, marginalized members of society have channeled their collective creative labor through the affordances of the infrastructure designed to dominate them in order to catalyze waves of social change. They do so by repurposing panoptic innovations to project their own visions for a better, more inclusive reality out into the world—by defiantly making themselves visible and vulnerable as they demonstrate new ways of seeing and being in society. Tracing the emergence and ongoing spread of the comfy code on Twitch, I offer that we may be witnessing the first signs of the revolutionary reprogramming of a twenty-first-century capitalist platform.

Streaming toward the Point of Inflection

Throughout this volume, we have seen exciting evidence of the ways in which live streaming is having truly transformative effects on our culture, and in many cases, these are examples of how the comfy code executes itself. For example, despite their precarious economic status, creative laborers on Twitch, like the speedrunners of Games Done Quick (GDQ), have used the platform to raise millions upon millions of dollars for charity, often directing that aid to organizations that serve marginalized members of their communities. Further, through collective action, streamers have pushed the platform to make tangible changes to its infrastructure that increase the ability for marginalized folks to see and be seen by one another; and after

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an intense community campaign that included the building of the alternative architecture Peer2Peer.Live, Twitch relented to the demand for change and finally added identity-based tagging to its discovery engine. Women, people of color, LGBTQIA+, and disabled folks are coopting and cooperating this supposed surveillance apparatus to redirect society's gaze. Most recently, as Black Lives Matter protests erupted in a world that was entering a pandemic lockdown, we witnessed marginalized streamers and their allies redirecting the focus of their cameras to give millions of people miles away unprecedented abilities to connect in real time with grassroots resistance on the ground. Watching such creative reprogramming of the platform, we begin to see how live streaming echoes evolutions of the past, while offering a way to collectively visualize a more equitable networked future.

Social media, gig work, and big data, once the buzzwords of an egalitarian technoutopia, now evoke fears of subjugation, exploitation, and technocratic authoritarianism. Networked platforms mediate countless human interactions each day. From hailing a ride, to completing a chore, to having a night out, to taking a vacation, to finding food to eat, massive corporations increasingly vie to oversee and commodify each step that we take through our days. While it could easily seem inevitable that their all-seeing eyes will gain complete control over our choices, the introduction of live streaming into the online ecosystem has served as a potent injection of potential hope. Inclusive streamers are providing a wake-up call for those lulled into complacency by the corporate panopticon. By demonstrating how they enact alternative logics of community and care through the very machinery designed to exploit them, creative laborers have found a way to reprogram *The Matrix* from within. Rather than a singularity, we may be racing toward a more perfect plurality, and I for one cannot wait to see what we can do now that the world's gone live.

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University Press, 2018), *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (MIT Press, 2012), and *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (MIT Press, 2006).

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