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Watch Me Play

T.L. Taylor

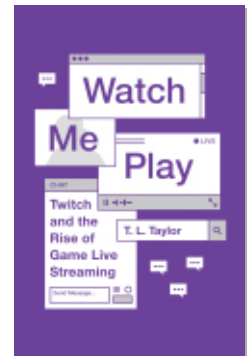
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Live Streaming as Media

While the winter weather of early 2017 had been less severe than usual, the weekend of March 11–12 proved frigid. This did not, however, deter tens of thousands from making their way to the Boston Convention Center to attend the annual PAX East convention. I was back again myself, mostly to help staff a table for AnyKey in the Diversity Lounge, but also to see what Twitch might be up to. The schedule had a number of panels on it with titles like “Streaming 101: Starting Your Quest” or “How to Broadcast Safely as a POC/LGBTQIA/Female ID’d Streamer,” revealing that live streaming was still a prime topic for gamers. I anticipated spending some time at the Twitch booth as well given that it was usually a great place to meet up with folks and get a big-picture view of how the site was situating itself broadly within game culture.

Even before I got on the expo floor, where various companies demonstrated games and hardware, I spotted something called the Twitch Prime Lounge. A couple of greeters welcomed in those of us passing by, noting that there were drinks in back and encouraging us to relax. The large purple-hued room was outfitted with screens broadcasting live gameplay, including coverage of the expo floor. Sofas, tables, and much-coveted electric outlets made the space a welcome stopover from the hectic convention. I spotted people playing board games, checking social media, chatting with each other, and watching the broadcasts. Perhaps the most interesting thing about the room was its focus on the nonstreamer. This wasn’t the usual VIP-streamers-only area but instead a free space for the rest of us. It signaled a

turn toward paying more attention to the mass of viewers and occasional broadcasters that the site garnered.

A small station was set up at the front of the room dedicated to teaching people how to stream. That little “how-to” area was a tip-off to the ongoing need that Twitch has to not only grow its audience but also bring new people into the content production process. The long tail made up of small channels matters for sustainability. While one of them might become the next big hit, they mostly generate the continual blips of activity that the platform needs. As Postigo (2014, 15) puts it regarding YouTube and other UGC platforms, they are

not unlike a bettor at a roulette table who is in the happy position of betting on all the numbers, where the payout *in aggregate* outweighs what appears to be an otherwise wild investment. Some numbers don’t pay, others pay a little, and some pay a lot. Some content types may thrive and then fade into obscurity, some commentators may be successful and then burn out, and some videos may go viral and others remain unknown. In aggregate, however, no matter what the scenario, YouTube the bettor always wins.

While large broadcasters and big esports tournaments draw impressive numbers that look good in press releases, the site banks on up-and-coming talent to keep it vital and buffer against the churn of content providers who taper off production.

The lounge also represented the clearest signal that Twitch was, indeed, an Amazon-owned company. Amazon Prime subscribers get Twitch Prime for free on linking their accounts, which gives them a variety of perks—ones that hopefully keep them coming back to the platform. Linking accounts ties users into an infrastructure that facilitates purchasing even more games and, likely almost as valuable, fosters data collection too. Even before I made it down to the expo floor, I began to see what appeared to be the next phase in Twitch’s development.

As I headed down the escalators, I knew what to look for: the glowing purple booth. I spotted it quickly, sitting up front and off to the side of the massive hall. Though the purple hue remained, it was offset this year by light wood and white accents, a bit more muted in overall effect. As I got to the space, it quickly became apparent that “booth” was entirely the wrong word for it. Instead what I found were, essentially, two separate structures. The space was huge, and I couldn’t quite tell in one glance where it began and ended. It wrapped around, with one of the sections housing

the main broadcast and viewing spaces, an autograph-signing area, smaller “Streamer Zone” broadcast booths for partners to go live from the convention, glassed-in meeting rooms, and small info tables. The other section—a raised platform with a huge interior area dubbed the Partner Lounge—was the VIP area where select people could meet and mingle, all on display. It was a far cry from the first small booth that I encountered back in 2013. It embodied not only Twitch’s growth but also its centrality in game culture and the multiple stakeholders—audiences and fans, content producers, game developers/publishers, advertisers, and sponsors—it had to juggle simultaneously. Like all PAX East’s events, it was a fantastic opportunity to catch up with many streamers and get a feel for the current conversations happening around broadcasting.

A day later, I found myself sitting on my living room sofa with my partner as we watched Twitch on our television via one of our game consoles. It was 11 p.m., and we had tuned in to a special broadcast happening live from South by Southwest in Austin. We usually don’t watch Twitch together, but we are both comedy fans, and one of our recent favorite shows, *HarmonQuest*, was going to do a live version on Twitch. *HarmonQuest* is an animated series that builds off Dan Harmon’s podcast, *HarmonTown* (which had also been the subject of a 2014 documentary). Harmon is best known for creating the television show *Community*, but he has been a longtime podcaster as well. The podcast had a regular segment where people played a tabletop role-playing game together—definitely an interesting audio experiment in and of itself. That slice was picked up to be made into a partially animated show on Seeso, a now-defunct paid service only available online from Comcast/NBCUniversal. The media twists and turns in *HarmonQuest* alone are fascinating: podcast to documentary to television production, all with one foot in major media and another in the geeky indie sphere. Paired up with being broadcast on Twitch, it was hard to resist watching this quirky mix of media productions coming together for a bit of an experiment.

The show broadcast that night on Twitch was awkward and even painful at times, though the pathos of Harmon and the wit of his guests kept it moving. It was bookended by Koebel, a popular Twitch streamer who does his own live tabletop role-playing game productions on the site, interviewing *HarmonQuest*’s own game master, Spencer Crittenden. It was a strange collision, both in the broadcast and Twitch chat. Although *HarmonQuest* comes out of the podcast and indie comedy scene, the experience and reputation of the performers was something quite different than what you usually see on Twitch. This wasn’t a broadcast in which the performers knew or even really

cared about what might be happening in chat. The connection between performer and audience, so central to many Twitch productions, just wasn't there. This was, despite not being a mainstream media product, much more like a traditional show than a typical Twitch one.

The chat itself echoed the strange and not entirely successful marriage at work in this venture. Serious Harmon fans who had swung by to watch were confused by and even disdainful of the Twitch wrapping. On the other side, some Twitch fans who knew little about *HarmonQuest* found it unfunny, and with Harmon's increasing level of drunkenness (which he is widely known for), even worrying, and perhaps behavior that broke the terms of service for the site. It was as if two subcultures colliding on a strange internet outpost didn't quite know what to make of each other and didn't entirely like being in one another's company. The *HarmonQuest* cast didn't even seem to know what Twitch was, and that was spun off into its own comedic riff. Twitch regulars satirically groused in the chat that *HarmonQuest* would never get "partnered."

The *Los Angeles Times*, musing about the growing popularity of watching tabletop role-playing game campaigns online, unknowingly anticipated this tension when commenting on the length of *HarmonQuest* compared to some other shows such as *Critical Role* or, I'd add, one of Koebel's own entertaining live role-playing game shows on Twitch. The author remarked that *HarmonQuest* "makes its ventures a lot less time-consuming and ups the watchability quotient by throwing in animated segments in digestible half-hour episodes. Gamemaster Spencer Crittenden approaches the show as just that—a show." As Crittenden put it, "We specifically thought about the way things might get edited" (quoted in Phillips 2017).

Yet the multihour broadcasts that you find on Twitch, their lack of editing, the interaction and familiarity between audience and broadcaster, and fact that it is sometimes exactly *not* "digestible" but instead composed of long stretches of affective, engaged performance and spectating goes to the heart of what distinguishes something like *HarmonQuest* from its Twitch peers. Live streaming programs, while riffing on the televisual, have developed their own unique set of conventions, practices, and pleasures. They have their own sets of celebrities, their own histories and forms of interaction with their audiences. Though the broadcast of a raw, unanimated version of *HarmonQuest* might have on the surface seemed perfectly suited to Twitch, it missed the mark at least in part because it was out of tune with the specific conventions and pleasures of the platform.

Perhaps due to the fact that I'd just come off the PAX weekend and was now watching this strange mix of media forms, I also began to think about

how the site was not entirely the same one that I had begun studying in 2012. Part of what happened in the intervening years is that experiments in the medium have grown to become conventions that themselves stand as unique televisual genres. Other instances of user-driven innovations have been pulled back into the very structure of the platform itself. Take, for example, the way donation systems went from being something that broadcasters created to support their endeavors to Twitch formalizing the Bits system, which while allowing audiences to donate money to a streamer, also gives the company a way to take a cut. And while it has certainly been the case that live streams offered tremendous grassroots marketing opportunities, the announced Amazon-linked “buy now” button to be embedded on channel pages sent a strong signal about the corporate commercial work they are made to do.

Even though variety streamers and esports production companies alike have been finding ways to broadcast gaming content to a global audience, the platform has begun to engage with more mainstream media forms, be it feel-good rebroadcasts of Bob Ross’s painting show, Julia Child’s cooking lessons, massive electronic dance music events, or as is happening as I write this, a *Power Rangers* marathon. I do not want to pitch a simplistic commercialization critique. Nor do I want to suggest that Twitch is trending toward just another mainstream media form. Indeed, part of what I have always found fascinating at the site were the ways that UGC producers have sought out revenue and professionalization, and would be thrilled to be considered an impactful personality alongside traditional media figures. And while there remain terrific vibrant forms of expression and production at work on the site, I do pause at the future of the platform as a space for expansive cultural expression. If Twitch simply becomes more and more of a marketing tool, or merely another branch of mainstream media distribution, and less a space of true transformative work, much will have been lost. Engagement that undertakes innovative performances, serious critique, challenging content, or modes that might not find a home elsewhere due to their unconventionality are critical for not only the vibrancy of the site but also its role in our culture.

Changing Media Industries

Over the decades there have been various prognostications about the “death of television,” particularly in the face of “interactive” entertainment. All seem to fall by the wayside as the years go by. Miller (2010, 19) argues that

it is silly to see the Internet in opposition to television; each is one more way of sending and receiving the other. The fact is that television has become *more* popular, not less. It is here to stay, whether we like it or not. I suspect that we are witnessing a transformation of TV, rather than its demise. What started in most countries as a *broadcast, national* medium, dominated by the state, is being transformed into a *cable, satellite, Internet*, and *international* medium dominated by commerce—but still called ‘television.’”

One of my interviewees early on said to me that, “television in its current form is thirty years from being totally extinct.” That phrase “in its current form” perhaps signals that they understood something many don’t. While the devices and conventions may change, the televisual is going as strong as ever. As another frankly put it, “I know for a fact I’m going to be watching this shit when I’m fifty years old. I know a lot of people who are in their late twenties that will completely agree with that statement.”

Of course, it would be a mistake to overlook the ways that these platforms and productions enact pushback and change on traditional media systems. With the rise of sites like Twitch as well as gaming more broadly, media tastes and forms of production are without a doubt shifting. UGC has become a critical component in our overall media world, and users are increasingly willing to consume these products much like any others. Alongside changes in traditional media consumption (from time shifting to “binge” watching) has been the rise of long-form and at times mundane game live streams in which viewers interact with broadcasters and each other. The line between audience and these (micro) celebrities gets breeched across a range of platforms, from Twitch to Twitter.

A more productive way of thinking about media transformations in light of the rise of gaming, UGC, and new production and distribution platforms is to see that there are circuits between traditional and new media spheres. People are still watching television and consuming traditional content *alongside* user-produced YouTube videos and Twitch’s game live streaming channels. The media mix is the key. Content, producers, and audiences flow across a range of devices, platforms, and genres.

Some mainstream media outlets are picking up on this. For example, ELEAGUE has a home on both cable and satellite television as well as Twitch, and ESPN has broadcast several esports tournaments. Twitch, working in the reverse, has also begun more experiments in pulling traditional media content back onto the platform, such as its broadcasts of

popular anime series. Some traditional media and sports stars have experimented with their own live streaming broadcasts, and Adam Silver, the head of the NBA, remarked that he'd like to see its games look more like Twitch (Kafka 2017).¹ And while we haven't yet seen any Twitch personalities make a big breakthrough to traditional media, perhaps that is to come. No matter what flows we find between content in these spheres, what is critical is that audiences seem to have adapted without too many problems to cobbling together their viewing across sites, devices, and various types of products. For many, the shift to producing content for other people—whether it is just friends and family or a larger audience—is increasingly common and not a big leap. The circuit is not just about viewing traditional or new media but moving between consumer and producer too. As one of the original funders of Justin.tv commented about live streaming platforms, “If this doesn't scare the shit out of TV networks, it's only because they don't understand it yet” (quoted in Rice 2012).

The Politics of Participation

This emergent flow is central to understanding our contemporary media space, and as Burgess and Green (2009, 79) put it, “Quietly bubbling away under the surface are the kinds of activities that might be recognized by feminist scholars of popular culture as the practices of cultural citizenship—mundane but engaging activities that create spaces for engagement and community-formation.”² Yet as I hope I have demonstrated with my discussion of things like harassment or regulation, game live streaming should not be seen as an unencumbered or utopic story of the triumph of grassroots engagement. Serious challenges to open participation as well as broader structural considerations around ownership and forms of labor remain.

Cultural studies scholar Graeme Turner, a critic of overly optimistic theories of media transformation, argues that any democratizing potential found within these new media forms is “an occasional and accidental consequence of the ‘entertainment’ part, and its least systemic component.” He writes that “the media industries still remain in control of the symbolic economy, and that they still strive to operate this economy in the service of their own interests,” which are decidedly commercial (Turner 2010, 16). As he and others contend, there is no “necessary connection” between these new forms and democratic frameworks (Andrejevic 2009a).³ While we may find much to be hopeful about in the practices that are arising on UGC sites, the critique is important to wrangle with.

Even proponents of participatory culture who see vibrant opportunities for everyday users to become active stakeholders caution against simplistic valorization of our contemporary moment. Jenkins (2009, 124), often seen as one of the strongest proponents of the growth of participatory culture, cautions in his reflections on YouTube that its

utopian possibilities must be read against the dystopian realities of a world where people have uneven access to the means of participation and where many are discouraged from even trying. If YouTube creates value around amateur content, it doesn't distribute value equally. Some forms of cultural production are embraced within the mainstream tastes of site visitors and the commercial interests of the site owners. Other forms of cultural production are pushed to the margins as falling outside dominant tastes and interests.

The "participation gap" that he identifies is a serious one. As we have seen in the case of game live streaming, profound issues remain regarding who is able to meaningfully create and thrive on the platform, much less participate in a broader esports media environment.

It is also the case, as I explored with regard to the transformative work of play in live streaming, that serious concerns remain in terms of the labor of new producers and engagements of fans. From the earliest moments of UGC and user activity in shaping the internet, critics have alerted us to thinking about the potential exploitation and appropriation that occurs within these spaces.⁴ They have cautioned us about the agility of commercial, commodified systems to inequitably trade on as well as regulate the passions and dedication of user producers, fans, and enthusiasts.⁵ Being attuned to the labor situation that these media producers face is critical.

I take this critique seriously and see many ways in which game live streamers precariously navigate between self-determination, creative expression, and meaningful interaction and structures always at work to capture as well as regulate their endeavors. In my conversations with them (as with many gamers over the years), I have found them to be acutely aware of this tension. Indeed, they are frequently insightful theorists of their own experience, identifying the ways that they dance between their own desires and legal or economic structures that are always one moment away from tossing them out of the system. They knowingly, and often with great pleasure, engage in forms of affective and performative labor on platforms that they recognize are never fully theirs to control. The challenge for us as researchers and scholars is to honor their experience as active meaning-making

agents who undertake complex navigations in everyday life, but not lose sight of serious forms of structural inequality and precariousness—ones that may also keep some from full participation in this space.

The Work of Play

One of the aspects worth lingering on a bit more weaves together these considerations of commercial media systems with the nature of gaming itself. Scholars Daniel Kreiss, Megan Finn, and Fred Turner (2011, 250) raise questions about how these new forms of production and engagement may have deeper corrosive effects, arguing,

Peer production in particular may undermine our private autonomy by extending our professional lives into formerly private arenas. Thus digital collaboration may tend to privilege commercial actors. Just as peer production makes it easy for individuals to bring together their private and public selves, it also turns formerly private pleasures such as playing games into forms of labor and allows work to enter into intimate domains.

They look to sociologist Max Weber's concerns about the effects of bureaucracy as having new salience for our modern participatory—yet commercialized—culture.

Though not game scholars, their concern is resonant with those who fear that the world of work, rationalization, or instrumentality threatens what is good about play. I am sympathetic. There are real ways in which digital gaming and live streaming is interwoven with fraught systems that may at times encroach on our agency and participation. We must certainly be mindful and critically reflective about the structures—from commercialization to legal regulations—in which our play and leisure are increasingly seated. This is something that I've tried to tackle throughout all my studies of gaming.

But at its extreme, this is an old argument in the study of play, going back to theorist Roger Caillois's 1961 work *Man, Play, and Games*, and it has profoundly negative effects both methodologically and theoretically. Caillois (2001, 45) writes about the "contamination" of play by reality, obligation, and professionalism, asserting that "what used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession. What was an escape becomes an obligation, and what was a pastime is now a passion, compulsion, and course of anxiety. The principle of play has become corrupted. It is now necessary to take precautions against cheats and professional players, a unique product of the contagion of reality." Scholar Tom Brock (2017, 322), picking up Caillois's suspicion that

professionalization corrupts pure play, looks at esports and maintains that the “perversion of *agôn* [competition] is a consequence of blurring work with play.” Within this model, game live streamers would surely sit in the same penalty box that Caillois has tossed so many others.

I have now explored over several projects the instrumentality of particular kinds of play, the work that players do, and the modifications that they make to systems to foster even more rationalized play.⁶ And while I share concern and caution regarding the ways that our gaming might be colonized and our agency limited, I am also accountable to situating player practices within participants’ own descriptions of the pleasure, creativity, social connection, aspirations, and authentic experience that so often accompanies the work of play. While one response to these data might be to theorize the respondents as dupes or unreflective about their own lives, or have the conceit that we as analysts are the only ones to see a bigger picture, I go another way.

I would actually turn *back* to Weber’s approach to understanding human action. As he writes, “We are *cultural beings*, endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and lend it *significance*” (Weber 1949, 81). One of the most profound components of Weber’s method and theory is that he understood the power of context, standpoint, and meaning making by individuals and groups. He saw the complexity between those and structural issues. Though one might argue that today’s gamers and live streamers are, like the Calvinists Weber so powerfully described, doomed to an iron cage of their own making, I am less convinced.

The work of play is often deeply transformative. It can be filled with difficult pleasures, enjoyable instrumentality, and complex negotiations between system, self, and others. It can modulate in complicated ways between freedom and constraint, self-direction and obligation to oneself or a community. And indeed when gamers do identify the pleasures of play as slipping away, feel that things have become too straining, or decide to convert back into hobbyists, it is typically tied to a range of factors all coming to a head, not a discrete designation based on a single property of idealized play.

Sociological studies of digital gaming highlight how simplistic, individualistic, and dichotomous in their handling of the world some of our older theories of play have been. If we leaned more on anthropologists of play like Linda Hughes (2006), who in the 1980s was already doing these valuable studies, or Phillips Stevens (1978), or scholars of serious leisure like Robert Stebbins (1982, 2004), who all offer richer accounts that avoid dichotomous formulations, we would discover interpretative frames that

help us think about the complexity of meaning and experience in play and games.⁷ Though our games exist in specific contexts, and we are ourselves a product of particular moments, through our individual and collective action, we also create authentic meaning, make social connections, and can enact real transformations.

A move to interrogate simple work/play dichotomies through the lens of live streaming might have the side benefit of prompting a more meaningful consideration of our labor and leisure writ large. Looking at how people are creating experiences and content for their own fulfillment *and* the pleasure of others and their communities can provide insight into the complexities with which we navigate commercialized platforms. That we are doing this online, in networked environments, suggests we still have much to explore in our emerging media ecology.