PLAYING GAMES FOR OTHERS: CONSTRUCTING A GAMEPLAY LIVESTREAMING TYPOLOGY

Constructing a Gameplay Livestreaming Typology

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Abstract

Gameplay livestreaming is a rapidly growing area of new media through such platforms as Twitch and YouTube. When gamers choose to stream their gameplay, they regularly alter their play style to be more appealing to their spectators. This study examined the variation in play styles for gameplay livestreamers to construct a usable typology. The foundation for the typology is rooted in prior research that identified streamers generally being either experts or entertainers. The expert-entertainer spectrum provided to be insufficient in properly representing how streamers present their gameplay on stream. Therefore, standard streams refer to streams that are definable by their orientation toward expertise or entertainment. Nonstandard streams are streams which provide characteristics sufficiently unique to distinguish them from the expert-entertainer spectrum.

Introduction

Video game broadcasting continues to promote novel forms of gameplay. Gamers by the thousands are expressly altering their approach to gameplay to include onlookers. Onlookers are not a new element to gameplay. During the arcade boom of the 80s and 90s (Lin & Sun, 2011; Taylor, 2012), arcade patrons would often spend more time waiting to play games than playing. Family members and friends also regularly gather around a console to play games together, with the majority spectating while the minority plays. Gameplay livestreaming is an entirely new phenomenon. Unlike gamers at arcades or on consoles, streamers must prioritize their spectators to ensure a continued audience. Streamers will, therefore, take on one of the streamer roles.

As with any other form of entertainment media, various types, or genres, arise to meet the individualized needs of the consumer better. Prior research into streamers as digital buskers identified streamers are falling along a spectrum between experts and entertainers (Leith, 2015). The motivations of viewers can differ based upon where the stream falls along the expert-entertainer spectrum. Most gameplay experts are parts of esports. There are many ways in which esports compare to more traditional sports (see Taylor, 2015). In sports, fans often sought out professional athletes to learn more about them and the game they play (Gantz, 1981; Wenner & Gantz, 1998). By streaming, esports athletes are about to do precisely that while simultaneously removing some of the common barriers that traditionally existed between athletes and fans. The closer fans feel toward their favorite athletes, the more likely they are to enjoy watching them play (Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989;

Zillmann & Paulus, 1993). Sports, including esports, are also watched because fans find them entertaining (Gantz, 1981; Wenner & Gantz, 1998). Streams more heavily favoring the entertainment end of the spectrum may drastically differ in their approach to gameplay and audience. For example, will gameplay or viewership be more critical to the streamer? Past research into parasocial relationships has found that respond favorably when media figures break the fourth wall, even when not speaking directly with them, becoming more loyal to the media figure (Auter & Davis, 1991; Horton & Wohl, 1956). These interactions can also prove to fill a need for social interaction (Horton & Strauss, 1957; Horton & Wohl, 1956). It should, therefore, prove beneficial to construct a streamer typology guided by the expert-entertainer spectrum, providing individuals with the actionable categories necessary for future research.

Methodology

This study sought to construct a typology for streamers by analyzing stream content. Channel selection was limited to partnered, English-speaking channels which streamed gameplay. Gameplay did not need to the be the primary focus of the channel; however, the analysis of these channels would only occur during gameplay segments. Limiting channel selection to partnered streamers (i.e., streamers who demonstrated the ability to stream regularly and maintain a sufficiently sized audience) ensured that streamer characteristics were reflective of their actual characteristics. Channel selection and analysis occurred over a six-month period, allowing for more singular occurrences and channel changes over time. The analysis included the selection of approximately 500 channels.

The study employed grounded theory methods to analyze the selected channels. A researcher collected data over six months from livestreams and archived videos-on-demand ("VODs") for open coding. Selective coding began once trends began to arise from open coding. It was during the selective coding process that the expert-entertainer spectrum was considered, while relevant. Resulting categories became a typology through organization.

Stream Categorization

Data analysis produced several intriguing findings regarding the types of streamers. Most importantly, analysis quickly revealed that most streamers, like the platform, were not monolithic. Selective coding and typology building, therefore, adapted to seek to explain streamers by the types of streams they broadcasted as opposed to broader streamer identity. The expert-entertainer spectrum was therefore slightly modified to expertise-entertainment and streams which adopt an identity superseding the spectrum became a unique category. The inclusion of a stream into the more nonstandard group does not exclude it from the standard expertise-entertainment grouping.

Standard

Most streams fall within the previously discovered expert-entertainer spectrum and classified as standard streams. Standard streams are divided between the expertise and entertainment groups based upon which characteristic it prioritizes. Each of these categories, though built from a spectrum, are constructed to be mutually exclusive within the standard group, though they may overlap with future nonstandard stream types.

Expertise. At one end of the spectrum, there are expertise streams. Expertise streams are streams in which the skill level of gameplay is the principal focus of the stream. The construction of such streams

is highly diverse, including tournaments, individual professionals, and speedrunners. Tournament streams generally include many gamers, while professional and speedrun streams tend to be more individualistic.

Tournament. Broadcasting tournaments have contributed heavily to the growth of Twitch. Tournaments consist of both gamers and tournament staff (e.g., casters and analysts). The structure of tournaments streams separate stream personalities and the audience, with the only regular audience member interaction being with the occasional tournament staff member. Tournaments also vastly differ in size. For example, DreamHack regularly broadcasts major tournaments in *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* ("*CS: GO*"), *Hearthstone*, and *StarCraft II* on their channels. Twitch also makes it easier to broadcast smaller tournaments. Games with a smaller competitive scene, such as *The Binding of Isaac: Afterbirth*, can host their tournaments online with the hopes of reaching new viewership.

Point-of-view. A byproduct of growing competitive scenes and the ease of broadcasting has also promoted instances of point-of-view ("POV") streams. *League of Legends* and *CS: GO* tournaments have included team POV streams to complement the primary streams. Team POV streams allow for fans of a particular team to spectate just the team they are interested in watching, as opposed to swapping between the teams at the discretion of the staff producing the stream. Online tournaments can also use POV streams as a tool for validation or a method for casting many concurrent individuals. *Hearthstone* often makes use of both cases. For example, Rat Race was a tournament in which a field of participants would race to legend, the highest-ranking group on the *Hearthstone* competitive ladder, over a 24-hour period. Participants were required to stream to ensure that they were not having multiple people play on the same account and so that tournament viewers and casters were able to select which participant they would like to spectate freely.

Professional. Outside of tournaments and practice, many professional also either choose or are required to stream regularly. Professional streams are therefore streams in which the streamer is verifiably an expert in the game they are streaming and the streaming content is generally leaning toward expertise instead of entertainment. Expertise is characterized by either presently or previously being on a team or by competing in high-level competitions for the streamed game. The first streamer to break 100,000 subscribers (i.e., paid followers) is a former Halo pro who has continued with a professional team but is now playing high-level *Fortnite*. Former professionals, such as *League of Legends'* Imaqtpie and Scarra still nearly exclusively play the game they professionally, and at a high level.

Game designers and developers are also able to utilize the Twitch platform for presenting their game to a broader population. Expertise is not restricted to high-level gameplay, though many game developers are highly-skilled in their gameplay. Streams by developers can give expert insights into their games regardless of mechanical skill.

Non-professional. Along with professionals, there are many streams which exhibit expertise but are produce by non-professionals. Non-professional players come in several common variations. Highly skilled streamers who play matches against professional players but are not involved with professional esports. Many competitive games, such as *StarCraft II*, *League of Legends*, and *CS: GO*, have laddering systems in which players of comparable skills will play against each other in hopes of winning and

reaching a higher ranking. Teams regularly recruit players from these ladders. High-ladder players may also have no interest in going professional and, instead, prioritize streaming their gameplay.

Not all games have a competitive edge that lends itself to professional esports; nevertheless, there are individuals who put a similar amount of time into their games as professionals. A common approach to this would be streamers who add new challenges when they replay games. For example, LobosJR is an expert *Dark Souls* player who will continually return to the franchise for a new challenge run. *Minecraft* is another game that is not inherently competitive but has streamers who are unmistakably experts at the game.

A popular form of non-professional gameplay is a speedrun. A speedrun is an approach to gameplay in which the gamer attempts to complete a level, game, or set of objectives, in the shortest time possible. Speedrunners are also unique from most gamers since they have been historically required to record their gameplay to validate their completion times. Sites like Twitch were only a natural outlet for speedrunners to stream to document their runs. Trihex, the face of the TriHard Twitch emote, started streaming his speedruns in 2011. Speedrun streams are mostly a streamer attempting to play through the selected game as quickly as possible until either completion or a significant mistake. Once the streamer has finished the game or made a mistake, they will reset the game and begin again. It is not uncommon to see a speedrunner repeatedly replay the early levels of a game for hours in hopes of getting the ideal start. Attempting perfect runs also profoundly affects a streamer's ability to interact with chat, with a streamer mostly narrating their actions and addressing questions they commonly encounter until they reach more autopilot sections within the game.

Entertainment. Because expertise, by its nature, is a small subset of individuals, the majority of Twitch streamers prioritize entertainment to either compensate for or complement whatever skill they have in the game. Most of the entertainment streams are considered variety streamers, streaming any number of games, while there are examples of non-expertise single-game streamers who either exclusively, or nearly exclusively, stream a single game. There is also a small, yet growing, population of celebrities classified within this group.

Variety. The typology classifies most streams as variety streams. Namely, a streamer who either plays a recurring set of games or continually plays new games is considered a variety streamer. Variety streams are the streams from variety streamers. Unlike with the expertise streams, a viewer is more likely to watch a game they are uninterested in when they are sufficiently interested in the streamer. Variety streamers are also more likely to catch waves of new viewership when the game they are presently streaming lines up with the interest of their new viewers. A perfect example of variety streaming is CohhCarnage who will regularly play through entire franchises of a game to line up with the launch of a new game but will rarely stream a game he had previously played without it aligning with the release of new content, such as downloadable content ("DLC"). Streamers who run regular shows on their streams, such as itmeJP and the late TotalBiscuit, will often do variety streaming during other times. Some variety streamers are also former single-game streamers, either professional or entertainment, that converted into variety streaming. Some noteworthy examples of this are Destiny, who was known for *StarCraft*, and Sodapoppin, known for *World of Warcraft*.

Single-game. A unique type of entertainment streamer is the single-game streamer: streamers who nearly exclusively play a single game on stream. Single-game streamers generally fall into two

categories: casual and competitive. Casual single-game streamers are the most common. For example, open-world games like *Minecraft* provide streamers like Bacon_Donut, Darkosto, Deadpine, and Matrixis over a thousand hours a year of distinct and moderately diverse gameplay. Competitive single-game streamers are rare in the entertainment category as most individuals good enough to maintain an audience on Twitch while only playing one game is either a professional or retired from professional play. *League of Legends* is an example of a competitive game which has several full-time entertainment streamers. SirhcEz, BoxBox, and Cowsep are popular streamers who have never been professional but have found strong viewership by mixing their brand of entertainment with moderate mastery of a few champions. The first and only female streamer to presently reach a million followers on Twitch, Pokimane, was a *League of Legends* streamers until she converted to a *Fortnite* streamer.

Celebrity. As with other new media, Twitch has begun to see celebrities actively using their platform. Deadmau5, the DJ, regularly streams himself in his studio or playing *PlayersUnknown's Battlegrounds* ("*PUBG*"). Demetrious "Mighty Mouse" Johnson, MMA fighter, is also a regular streamer on the platform. Along with musicians and athletes, celebrities on Twitch includes actors and television and web personalities. Coding identified celebrities as a unique category within entertainment as their celebrity status overshadows whether they are single-game or variety streamers.

Nonstandard

Along with the standard streams which reflect predominantly upon where the streamer sits along the expertise-entertainment spectrum, nonstandard streams are more concerned with the structure of the stream. It is also important to recognize that despite analysis reaching theoretical saturation, it is unlikely that these categories exhaustively represent both the present and future state of streams on the Twitch platform. Some of these categories are rarely occurring, meaning there may be other rare occurrences that were undiscovered during channel selection and there is an ever-growing number of channels seeking to make creative use of the platform.

Educational. Though inherently similar to expertise streams, educational streams produce unique dynamics between either streamers or streamers and viewers. The two primary forms of educational streams are coaching and teaching. Coaching streams consist of at least one expert player and one less skilled player. The streamer can fulfill either role and does not have to be a rank amateur. It is not uncommon to have one *Hearthstone* professional coach their specialty deck or class to another *Hearthstone* professional. It is also possible to get experts in different games to coach each other, such as *World of Worldcraft* and *League of Legends* experts teaming up to coach each other. Streamers can also be hired by amateur, non-streamers to be coached, with the coaching occurring on stream.

Streamers can also utilize the platform to teach their viewers. Teaching is a common motivation for expertise streams; however, there are instances when teaching can extend beyond common gameplay explanations. The streamer Day9 teamed up with a couple friends from his time as a graduate student in game design to create a recurring show called *Mostly Walking* in which they teach game design while playing adventure games. This approach to teaching viewers is unique in that the expectation of instruction is increased knowledge instead of greater skill.. Similar techniques can be employed to teach several topics, including STEM.

Mobile. Though far from conventional, there are mobile streams which are more ambulatory by

nature. Playing a mobile game does not make a stream mobile. Perhaps the best example of mobile streams is during the Summer of 2016 when *Pokémon GO* was at peak popularity and streamers would broadcast from bars, parks, and restaurants. Though mobile streams are presently extremely uncommon, as gaming companies continue to figure out augmented reality, it is possible that games like *Pokémon GO* become more common and have lasting popularity as games for streaming.

Playerless. There are sporadic cases in which a stream is considered playerless. Playerless means that the individual or individuals on the stream, if any, are not the players. The most famous example of this is a channel that began early 2014 called TwitchPlaysPokemon ("TPP"). TPP invited viewers to issue commands in chat that a program would then input into the streamed *Pokémon* game, which was *Pokémon Red* at launch. Variations of this approach to gameplay streaming have since been duplicated, including several streams in which DisguisedToast allowed viewers to play games on his *Hearthstone* account. Another example of playerless is SaltyBet which removes the human element entirely, regularly streaming AI-driven gameplay.

Podcast. In general, podcasts and talk shows have been a regular staple of Twitch. Most of these podcasts take on a traditional talk show setting, with videos of each guest showing on screen through the broadcast. Northernlion developed the *Northernlion Live Super Show* ("*NLSS*") which formalized the habit of streamers playing games while communicating with a group of other streamers. The *NLSS* is ultimately a three-hour podcast with gameplay as a loose accompanist. Northernlion and his guests would make comments about the game they were playing together as necessary but would mostly communicate about a range of topics. Spinoffs of the *NLSS* were also created by some of its regular guests, such as the *NoNLSS* and *Squares*, though the dataset did not include other formalized podcasts that included gameplay.

Roleplay. A surprisingly common stream type discovered through content analysis was roleplay. Roleplay, in this sense, does not refer to roleplaying games, but to the streamer roleplaying. There are two common ways for a streamer to roleplay. First, streamers will often create characters on a server for an open-world game, like *Grand Theft Auto: Online* ("*GTA:O*") and then interact with others on the server as if they were the created character. A roleplay streamer that came to popularity in 2017 is SheriffEli, a *GTA:O* streamer who roleplayed a sheriff on a roleplay server. Another example of a roleplay stream is when the streamer adopts a personality that they are always using when on stream. Roleplay streamers who take on the more macro approach can choose to include costumes and props, like a DrDisRespect, or be subtler, like a Kaceytron. The subtle approach requires viewers to be aware of the roleplay to understand the stream and the accompanying chat fully. Regardless of the type of roleplay, gameplay will largely vary from how the streamer would traditionally play the game.

Tabletop. Tabletop gaming, including board games and role-playing, is increasingly popular on Twitch. Coding identified tabletop as a unique category for this typography since they are not natively digital games and the stream generally consists of a group of players. Though some games are played virtually through tools like *Tabletop Simulator* and D20, the gameplay and streams are still highly distinct from other streams. For tabletop role-playing games, streams can have all players in the same room and include no virtualization, such as GeekandSundry's *Critical Role*, or players can be connected virtually and utilize D20 for everything from dice rolling to map projection, such as itmeJP's *RollPlay*.

Telethons. Streamers regularly raise money while streaming. Most of the time, raising money is a byproduct of the stream; however, there are several major telethon-style streams on Twitch. A few of note would be Games Done Quick, Desert Bus, and the Yogscast Jingle Jam. Each of these, along with many others, occur over several days and raise millions a year for various charities. Since raising money is the prime directive, gameplay is secondary. Even Games Done Quick, which is a bi-annual event of speedrunners, prioritizes entertaining viewers and reading off donations over completing the game as quickly as possible. Many of these telethons also bare similarities to tournaments, wherein the casters and not the gamers are the one most closely connected to the audience.

Virtual. Similar to mobile streams, virtual streams are examples of streams when the streamer moves beyond the standard gameplay structure of sitting in front of a screen and playing a game. Games like *Beat Saber* invite streamers to stand up and move around the virtual space. Without modification, streamers are separated from their chats and will, therefore, communicate less regularly with them. The physicality of some virtual reality ("VR") games also creates another barrier to more traditional streaming behavior. Even more sedentary VR games, such as *Star Trek: Bridge Crew*, do not require the physicality but still have the physical barriers between the streamer and their computer.

Conclusion

After analyzing thousands of streams from hundreds of channels over many months, two things have become increasingly evident. First, the content from most streams is similar once you account for its relation to the expertise-entertainment spectrum. Second, streamers are continuing to find impressively creative ways to make use of the Twitch platform. Similar characteristics should be true of other gameplay livestreaming platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Mixer, with the uniqueness of each platform providing for the greatest potential creativity of the nonstandard stream types.

Researchers should use this typology as a guide for their future research. The typology is most beneficial for research that seeks to understand streamer or viewers differences based upon either the content they produce or consume. Additional work with the typology would be necessary if any gradation or quantification were necessary. For example, the typology defines a single-game streamer according to their percentage of play. A single-game streamer can, therefore, be someone who, over a year, streams one game at least 90% of the time or streams one game 30% of the time while streaming no other game more than 5% of the time. Developing such strict definitions for each of the categories; however, more user-friendly definitions were constructed to provide for the greatest opportunity for building a common language when discussing stream types. New typologies must also be considered to better represent streamer identity, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality.

References

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