Livestreaming in theory and practice: Four provocations on labour, liveness and participatory culture in games livestreaming

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Abstract

Although livestreaming has been technically possible for years, the recent surge in popularity was primarily driven by the broadcasting of videogames. In the past two years, gaming-centric livestreaming platforms such as Twitch.tv (US based) and Douyu.tv (China based) took off as not merely novel media platforms but a ubiquitous everyday entertainment for millions among other media platforms such as YouTube and Netflix. Livestreaming converges liveness (live broadcasting) and participatory culture (social interactions) on an unprecedented level. This panel considers firstly, how livestreaming problematizes the concepts of liveness in contemporary contexts of broadcasting over wired and wireless internets compared to the televisual age. And secondly, the panel asks how livestreaming induces various forms of participatory culture which encourages the platform to be a space both of play and productive activities.

Introduction

Although livestreaming has been "technically within the realm of the possible" [1] for years, the recent surge in popularity was primarily driven by the broadcasting of videogames. In the past two years, gaming-centric livestreaming platforms such as Twitch.tv (US based) and Douyu.tv (China based) took off as not merely novel media platforms but a ubiquitous everyday entertainment for millions among other media platforms such as YouTube and Netflix. Livestreaming converges liveness (live broadcasting) and participatory culture (social interactions) on an unprecedented level. Firstly, livestreaming problematizes the concepts of liveness in contemporary contexts of broadcasting over wired and wireless internets compared to the televisual age; secondly, livestreaming induces various forms of participatory culture which encourages the platform to be a space both of play and productive activities. As a panel, we will contribute four different perspectives on the subject of livestreaming in both theory and practice.

In contrast to the rhetoric surrounding both the availability and the simplicity of use of livestreaming technologies, game broadcasters (from professional-amateurs to irregular livestreamers) reveal the personal and significant efforts involved in maintaining a regular channel as hidden labour curtailed off from their viewable performance. Here we present four cases which reveal and discuss the labour involved in negotiating livestreams, and how particular constructions of labour intersect with the concepts of both liveness and participatory culture within spaces of networked play/production. Firstly, liveness, in particular impromptu live performances, is often valued as a superior form that resists the contrivances of conventional television. Contemporary livestreaming platforms complicate this sentiment as the very personal/social aspects of human interactions are proactively commoditized. Secondly, Henry Jenkins, discussing the relationship of participatory culture in networked society, positions users as having more producer and consumer control over their media, and with that "...greater roles to play, in the key decision making institutions of their time" [2]. The collective studies presented here contribute to this constructive position, as well as deeply complicate how participatory cultures are at work within cultures of games, with particular attention to the notion of "shared well-being" [3] of players entangled in an economy of eyeballs and deeply entrenched in laddish media sports cultures.

Emma Witkowski: Livestreaming, participatory culture, and gender politics at the edge of e-sports

This paper considers the practices of young women who livestream their high performance play on the North American game broadcasting platform Twitch.tv. These players represent cultural producers, e-sports fans, championship game winners, and regular competitive players broadcasting their play. Key themes produced in this research surround issues of networked access and participation, gender politics, and performance in mainstream e-sports, which are discussed from qualitative research with seven players who broadcast regularly in 2013 - 2015. During this time their viewership numbers ranged from under 50 to over six thousand per session, and they broadcast with a variety of motivations, incentives and awareness of their practice

and mainstream e-sports in mind. In turning to Twitch broadcasting, as an alternative path towards involvement in mainstream e-sports, the productive labour of the participants is deeply engaged with DIY aesthetics and participatory culture. Through these performances, interconnected realizations and concerns around women and e-sports are voiced by the women who negotiate this new outlet of media sports culture everyday [4]. In situating the everyday experiences of women who play at the high performance level of computer game play, alternatives to mainstream e-sports are revealed through dynamic human-non human relationships, which alter traditional forms of participation and remuneration in this new media sports ecology. Such practices go beyond revealing the changing relationships of female players as resourceful player-producers; through a lens of participatory culture, they also highlight the ongoing inequities for women within high performance game spaces and online gaming cultures [2].

Daniel Recktenwald: Donation Alerts on Twitch.TV: Commodification of Community and Attention

This talk will discuss subscriptions and donation alerts on Twitch.TV as a phenomenon between community interaction and commodification of attention [5]. It will present how participants frame themselves, their viewers and "donations". Although their responses express a genuine desire for social interaction, there is also an instrumental motivation to "grow". Twitch.TV's website and its third party services such as donation alerts, lead to situated practices that commodify the social interaction. On Twitch, there are major asymmetries in the visibility and potential for participation between streamers and audience members. The audience is collectively typing into a shared chat window. Audience members can never be sure that their chat message will be read by the streamer. In this situation, donation alerts become a short cut out of this competition into the perceptual focus in the center of the screen. The economic exchange is a precursor for a more prominent linguistic and social interaction. These findings demonstrate the need for a continual skepticism towards overly optimistic promises of participatory culture in the new media [6].

James Manning: Don't Play Videogames

This paper will argue that participating in livestreaming is an efficient means to negotiate the (constitutive) inefficiencies present in videogames [7]. Often it is purported that a central pleasure associated with videogames is the nontrivial effort required to play them, the actions required to transverse the 'text' as a subset of ergodic literature [8]. Livestreaming problematises the idea that controller-in-hand play is a necessary part of videogame consumption. Whilst videogames are built to be configured through play [9, 10], livestreaming provides opportunity for (non)players to participate in playing videogames without having to negotiate first-hand the affordances of the game-system. As such, livestreaming reaffirms the observation put forward by [11], that participating in videogame play extends beyond the confines of the human-computer interface. Playing videogames is often arduous and repetitive work [12]. As such, the practices of regulating gameplay through deferral to other players' expertise is nothing new [13, 14 & 15], nor one begotten by the recent proliferation of consumer-level broadcasting technologies. This paper will situate livestreaming as a continuation of such practices, suggesting that one of the virtues of livestreaming is that it provides an opportunity for participants to invest in the various configurative practices of gameplay without necessary 'playing' themselves.

Zhang 'Dino' Ge: Ideology of Liveness and falsification of the ontological "Live"

This paper aims at deconstructing the core concept of liveness, as emphasized in internet based livestreaming media today, via an investigation of historical production of meaning of liveness in theatre and television. Liveness is not, perhaps never, immune from contamination of mediation as the ideal of a "purity of absence of mediation" [16] might be an ideological product of our highly mediatized present society rather than a loss of the pre-digital state of "retained authenticity" [17]. The rise of livestreaming dotcom TVs such as Twitch.tv and Douyu.tv, as opposed to television, is not necessarily a sign of the return of the Immediacy or the arrival of Immediacy via the internet but an allusion to the underlying argument that the televisual is "organic part of the social fabric" [18] in our society. The overarching dichotomy of the Live/thus Real and Representations/thus mediatised is thus replaced by analysis of liveness in each particular case, namely historical television and contemporary livestreaming/digitalised television.

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