

Journal of
• Virtual Worlds Research

jvwresearch.org ISSN: 1941-8477

Futures

October 2015

Volume 8, No. 2



Volume 8, Number 2

Futures

October 2015

Editor in Chief & Issue Editor

Yesha Sivan,
Tel Aviv University, Israel

Coordinating Editor

Tzafnat Shpak



The JVWR is an academic journal. As such, it is dedicated to the open exchange of information. For this reason, JVWR is freely available to individuals and institutions. Copies of this journal or articles in this journal may be distributed for research or educational purposes only free of charge and without permission. However, the JVWR does not grant permission for use of any content in advertisements or advertising supplements or in any manner that would imply an endorsement of any product or service. All uses beyond research or educational purposes require the written permission of the JVWR. Authors who publish in the Journal of Virtual Worlds Research will release their articles under the Creative Commons Attribution No Derivative Works 3.0 United States (cc-by-nd) license. The Journal of Virtual Worlds Research is funded by its sponsors and contributions from readers.

Journal of Virtual Worlds Research

jvwresearch.org ISSN: 1941-8477

Volume 8, Number 2

Futures

October, 2015

The eSports Trojan Horse: Twitch and Streaming Futures

Benjamin Burroughs

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA

Paul Rama

Brigham Young University Hawaii, USA

Abstract

This paper argues that one potential future in gaming and virtual reality can be found in streaming media and technology. The streaming space of Twitch.tv is both “real” and “virtual”, blurring the boundaries between the game space, social networks, and face-to-face communication. Streaming ruptures a hard distinction between the real and virtual worlds. Scholars of virtual spaces need to take seriously streaming media as a site of research, and the affordances of streaming as networked, mobile, and curated. Twitch represents a space for unpacking the social and commercial realizations of an emergent streaming culture. Virtual world research needs to continue to push the boundaries of research into games and gaming culture. We argue that an important part of that future involves the liminal space of streaming and eSports between the real and the virtual.

“Here’s what’s going to get me off the air. If I am ever forced to cover guys playing video games, I will retire and move to a rural fishing village and sell bait. You want me out? Demand video game tournaments on ESPN because that’s what appeared on ESPN2 yesterday.”

-Colin Cowherd, ESPN Talk Show host

1. Introduction

In April 2015, ESPN2 broadcast the finals of the Heroes of the Dorm competition, which had Arizona State University facing off against UC Berkeley for bragging rights, top of the line gaming rigs, and all expenses paid college tuition. This mainstream cable-broadcast eSports event highlights the growing interest in competitive gaming as a culturally valued and potentially profitable form of

spectatorship. Streaming, as a mode of distribution, blurs the boundaries between the production and consumption of gaming and virtual worlds.

This was not the first time the Entertainment Sports Programming Network (ESPN) has televised an eSports competition; in 2014 ESPN3 broadcast “The International” Defense of the Ancients 2 (DOTA 2) (Valve, 2013) championships, which took place at the sold-out Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, California. Attracting the attention of ESPN is impressive; however, multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games like Heroes of the Storm (HoTS) (Blizzard, 2004), Defense of the Ancients (DOTA 2), and League of Legends (LoL) (Riot Games, 2009) are a regular draw for gamers & gamer-spectators worldwide on the popular gameplay streaming website, Twitch.tv. Gamer-spectators include gamers, game casters, and gamecast viewers. A gamer-spectator can be all three, or any combination of the three. At the time of this writing, a visit to the Twitch.tv directory reveals the more established games such as DOTA 2 and LoL to be among the most popular games, garnering over 120,000 viewers at any given time during the day (Twitch.tv, 2015). A quick snapshot of Twitch viewer activity during the October 2015 League of Legends World Championships shows spikes in excess of 725,000 viewers (Twitchapps, 2015). DOTA 2 maintains a healthy viewership (alternating between 3rd and 4th most popular game during the month of October 2015), while the newer Heroes of the Storm continues to grow in streamer and viewer interest.

Twitch is the fourth-highest website in peak Internet traffic in the United States and offers gamers a multitude of live-streaming gamecasts to choose from--the most popular channels featuring multiplayer online battle arena games or MOBAs like League of Legends (LoL). These broadcasts often dwarf the viewership of traditional media outlets (an estimated 27 million people watch or play LoL each day) (Sherr, 2014). For example, the third season championships of League of Legends garnered more viewers on Twitch than the BCS national championship, NBA finals, and World Series (Schwartz, 2014). Recent scholarship and attention to eSports has touched on the topics of game play, motivation, culture, and ethics (Burroughs, 2015; Combs, 2007; Kaytoue, et. al., 2012; Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011; Taylor, 2012). While it may appear as simply a validation of eSports (now that ESPN and other traditional media outlets are taking an interest in major video gaming events), the larger storyline developing is the consumer-driven, grassroots rise of Twitch as the de facto source for gamer-spectator entertainment. Traditional media is trying to sow threads into an already well-developed and established tapestry of gameplay and virtuality.

This paper argues that one potential future in gaming and virtual reality can be found in streaming media and technology. Games have been examined as social spaces, mirroring reality in creating a myriad of rich cultural experiences (Burroughs, 2014; Rama et. al., 2012; Rama, 2014; Steinkuehler, 2007). The streaming space of Twitch is both “real” and “virtual”, blurring the boundaries between the game space, social networks, and face-to-face communication. Hamilton, Garretson, and Kerne (2014) argue that Twitch is a site for participatory play and emerging forms of community. Scholars of virtual spaces need to take seriously streaming media as a site of research, and the affordances of streaming as networked, mobile, and curated. Twitch represents a space for unpacking the social and commercial realizations of an emergent streaming culture. We argue that an important part of that future involves the liminal space of streaming and eSports between the real and the virtual.

2. The Rise of Twitch and Streaming

Just as games have shown an amazing increase in popularity over the past 20 years, eSports have also risen in popularity. In 2014 two massive players in the digital content market, Amazon and YouTube, vied for control of Twitch, with each offering hundreds of millions of dollars to buy the video games streaming website. Twitch was eventually acquired by Amazon in 2014 for 970 million

dollars (Welch, 2014). Twitch is a live-streaming platform that offers anyone the chance to start their own channels and begin to stream their game-play. What is somewhat unique is that Twitch allows game streamers to show themselves playing and commenting with the audience in real-time, which ranges from tens to thousands of concurrent viewers.

The ESPN broadcast and the Amazon acquisition of Twitch.tv represents a seminal moment in the maturation of streaming technology and gaming as traditional industry gatekeepers, vie for position within this burgeoning media industry space. Traditional media is attempting to tap into a nascent, yet emergent streaming industry. However, beyond signalling a moment of broader adoption and recognition from traditional industry gatekeepers about the legitimacy of competitive gaming and streaming, Twitch.tv signifies an emergent present and future for “real” and “virtual” games.

Recognizing the significance of streaming in gaming culture and affinity spaces, both Microsoft and Sony announced the integration of Twitch streaming directly from their next generation gaming consoles, the Xbox One and the Playstation 4 (Twitch.tv, 2013). This represents a massive push forward for Twitch and live game streaming as it opens up an untapped source of potential game streamers and even broader adoption as dominant mode of video game consumption. As noted on the Twitch site when streaming for the PS4 was announced:

“According to the Entertainment Software Association, “Fifty-one percent of U.S. households own a dedicated game console, and those that do, own an average of two.” With Twitch coming to both the Xbox One and PlayStation 4, odds are Twitch is going to be in a lot of living rooms in the very near future. We’re paving the way for *every gamer* to become an avid broadcaster, and putting those streams in front of more eyeballs than you’ve ever imagined. We thank you all for helping make this possible and we’re looking forward to seeing Twitch on next-generation consoles this Fall.” (DiPietro, 2015, italics added for emphasis)

This also allows for a more accurate representation of streaming and gaming culture, particularly in terms of demographics. Whereas streaming was once limited to PC gamers and those of a higher socio-economic status who could afford machines capable of streaming and playing the latest games at the highest settings (see, e.g., Andrews, 2008), streaming is now open to console-only gamers, which represent a large gamer population and social impact. As Twitch CEO, Emmet Shear succinctly sums up, “Live broadcasting has continued to grow in popularity, but sharing your console experience has never been this easy” (Twitch.tv, 2015).

3. Conclusion

The rise of streaming technology and distribution has resulted in a concomitant cultural shift in gaming. In reflecting on the future, Twitch represents both the present and future of gaming. These cultural shifts raise significant questions for the future of real and virtual worlds. What is the future of learning and apprenticeship in an era of streaming technology? While YouTube remains a strong source of gaming content generation and discussion (especially with the proliferation of Minecraft), many YouTube casters have migrated to Twitch.tv, capitalizing on the affordances of streaming. This raises questions about real-time versus produced production and their implications on the generation of expertise. Twitch influences the construction of expertise and learning through game play. Twitch and game streaming are important to gamers in an affective relationship, which in turn makes audiences want to participate and stream their own gaming experiences. Twitch and streaming constitute communities of practice where the roles of mentorship and apprenticeship take part in the production of learning.

No literature currently exists on the cultural or industrial impact of streaming on gaming and the video game industry. While Taylor (2012), in her seminal book *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and*

the Professionalization of Computer Gaming, delivers the most comprehensive accounting of the competitive e-games landscape to date, her research ends before the rise of streaming as both a technological affordance and transitional force within gaming. Research into virtual worlds can begin to account for the “real” economic and industrial ramifications of virtuality on media industries, in conjunction with studying cultural and social impacts.

Streaming and mobile technologies allow for new forms of video games that fundamentally change the constitution of the gaming sphere. As the line between consumption and production within the magic circle of the game space continues to blur, articulations of participatory culture are augmented. Twitch is an ideal space to study audience adoption and participation within streaming sites, but also the industry’s re-articulation of the video game space that solidifies streaming as a dominant mode of spectatorship, participation, and play.

References

- Andrews, G. (2008). Gameplay, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status in Two American High Schools. *E-Learning*, 5(2), 199-213.
- Burroughs, B. (2014). Facebook and FarmVille: A digital ritual analysis of social gaming. *Games and Culture*. Vol. 9 (3), p. 151-166.
- Burroughs, B. (2015). *Streaming media: audience and industry shifts in a networked society* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Iowa Research Online.
- Combs, N. (2007). A Culture of Mistrust in EVE Online. *TerraNova*. Retrieved from http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2007/11/culture-of-mist.html
- DiPietro, M. (2015). Twitch confirmed for Playstation 4. Retrieved from <http://blog.twitch.tv/2013/08/twitch-coming-to-ps4/>
- Hamilton, W. A., Garretson, O., & Kerne, A. (2014, April). Streaming on twitch: fostering participatory communities of play within live mixed media. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1315-1324). ACM.
- Kaytoue, M., Silva, A., Cerf, L. Meira, W. and Raissi, C. (2012). Watch me Playing, I am a Professional: a First Study on Video Game Live Streaming. MSND@WWW’12, ACM Press.
- Lee, D., & Schoenstedt, L. J. (2011). Comparison of eSports and traditional sports consumption motives. *ICHPER-SD Journal of Research*, 6(2), 39-44.
- Rama, P. S. (2014). *L2 Spanish Learning via World of Warcraft*. Retrieved from University of California, Irvine.
- Rama, P. S., Black, R. W., van Es, E., & Warschauer, M. (2012). Affordances for second language learning in World of Warcraft. *ReCALL*, 24(03), 322-338.
- Sherr, I. (2014). Player tally for ‘League of Legends’ surges. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://blogs.wsj.com/digits/2014/01/27/player-tally-for-league-of-legends-surges/>
- Schwartz, N. (2014, December 1). 27 million people watched the 'League of Legends' World Championship (more than the World Series or NBA Finals). *USAToday*. Retrieved from <http://ftw.usatoday.com/2014/12/league-of-legends-worlds-viewership-esports-world-series-nba-finals>
- Steinkuehler, C. (2007). Massively multiplayer online gaming as a constellation of literacy practices. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 4(3), 297-318.

- Taylor, T. L. (2012). *Raising the Stakes: E-sports and the professionalization of computer gaming*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Twitchapps. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://stats.twitchapps.com/#>
- Twitch.tv (2013, November 19). Watch Twitch on your Xbox One. Retrieved from <http://blog.twitch.tv/2013/11/watch-twitch-on-your-xbox-one/>
- Twitch.tv (2015). Twitch announces Xbox One integration. Retrieved from <http://blog.twitch.tv/2013/06/twitch-announces-xbox-one-integration/>
- Twitch.tv (2015). Retrieved from <http://www.twitch.tv/directory>
- Weiss, T., & Schiele, S. (2013). Virtual worlds in competitive contexts: Analyzing eSports consumer needs. *Electronic Markets*. Vol. 23(4), p. 307-316. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12525-013-0127-5>
- Welch, C. (2014, August 25). Amazon, not Google, is buying Twitch for \$970 million. *The Verge*. Retrieved from <http://www.theverge.com/2014/8/25/6066295/amazon-reportedly-buying-twitch-for-over-1-billion>