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## The eSports Trojan Horse: Twitch and Streaming Futures

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### 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.

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