

## Mark R. Johnson and Jamie Woodcock 'It's like the gold rush': the lives and careers of professional video game streamers on Twitch.tv

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## **'It's like the Gold Rush': The Lives and Careers of Professional Video Game Streamers on Twitch.tv**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the lives and careers of video game live broadcasters, especially those who gain their primary real-world income through this practice. We introduce the dominant market leader - the platform Twitch.tv - and outline its immensely rapid growth and the communities of millions of broadcasters, and tens of millions of viewers, it now boasts. Drawing on original interview data with professional and aspiring-professional game broadcasters ('streamers'), we examine the pasts, presents, and anticipated futures of streamers: how professional streamers began streaming, the everyday labour practices of streaming, and their concerns and hopes about the future of their chosen career. Through these examinations we explore the sociotechnical entanglements - digital intimacy, celebrity, content creation, and video games - that exemplify this new media form. Live-streaming is an online practice expanding in both production and consumption at immense speed, and Twitch and its streamers appear to be at the forefront of that revolution.

### **Introduction**

Playing video games is a full-time occupation for our respondent, P1. Before finding this career, he dropped out of university twice, worked minimum-wage jobs, and was unemployed

for almost half a decade. He then discovered the possibility of broadcasting ('streaming') himself playing video games over the internet. It then became apparent that other people would actually watch him play, and that this could be monetised, transforming adventures in virtual worlds into real-world income. 'When I first started streaming, there wasn't any money involved, [...] there were just people doing it because they loved to do it', he explains. As time went by his games 'channel' grew in popularity, and the various means provided by streaming platforms for bringing in money began to bear fruit. The career path of streaming, he says, remains very new and open to innovation and disruption, and there are few ways to predict who will capture the interest of an audience: 'it's like the Wild West, it's like the Gold Rush, there's still no real way to succeed. There's no 'this is how you get viewers'. You can be whatever you want.' He emphasises the personal value of being his own boss and streaming whatever hours he chooses, but also states he is live for six or seven unbroken hours five days a week, alongside many further hours spent behind the camera; it is a time-consuming career that depends upon regularity and reliability, much like the scheduling of traditional television broadcasts, whilst also evoking freedom and self-actualisation. 'It has changed my life', he says with clear enthusiasm and excitement. 'I get to travel the world, [...] I've paid off all my student debt, I get to meet people, I come to America quite often.' He does acknowledge uncertainty over the future of this career - 'It's a very tough industry. It's very competitive' - but remains unabashed in relating the transformation of his life: 'Everyone thought I was a drifter, [but now] people can't believe my success, [...] they're so happy for me. People are so happy that I'm living the dream, that I am my own boss, and that I get to play computer games every day. That, in a way, is a bigger value than the actual money.' Ultimately, he concludes, streaming has 'given me a reason to live, almost. This is my life.'

The website on which he broadcasts his video game play, *Twitch*, is the dominant market leader in live-streaming. *Twitch* was recently purchased by Amazon for almost \$1bn

and has become emblematic of shifts within the digital media economy towards an increasingly central role for content creation: in 2015 approximately *two million* people streamed regularly on average each month, producing over 450,000 years of video, and there were normally over half a million people watching channels at any one time (Twitch, 2015). Through *Twitch* anyone with access to a computer or games console, a reasonably fast internet connection, and a game can broadcast gameplay to a global audience. The streamer's channel (see *Figure 1* below) can include a webcam that displays the player's face (and therefore emotions and expressions), a chat box to interact with viewers, pop-up notifications of donations or 'subscriptions' (when viewers agree to give monthly financial support to the streamer), animations or pictures, hyperlinks to their presences on other social media sites, titles and bands of music playing on their stream, and so forth. The most successful streamers have over or close to one million "followers" and regularly pull in tens of thousands of viewers, demonstrating the scale of the phenomenon and the ability of these technical affordances, and the personalities and practices of streamers, to accrue substantial visibility and celebrity status.

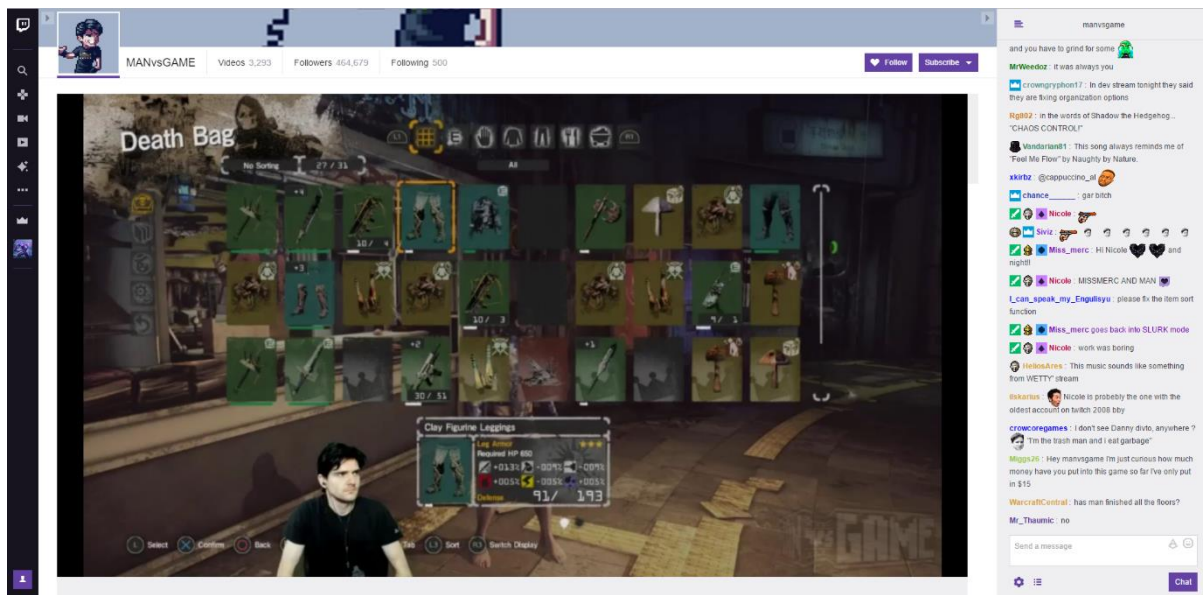


Figure 1: Twitch Broadcast ( <https://www.twitch.tv/manvsgame> )

In this paper we will examine for the first time the lives and careers of those like P1 who make (or are aspiring to make) their primary source of income from the live broadcasting of video games on *Twitch*. In doing so we will seek to understand how streamers navigate the transition from a non-streamer to the aspirational goal of becoming a *Twitch* “professional” (one who earns their primary income on the platform), and how these individuals understand their own practice and the wider emerging media ecosystem they both exist within and help to construct. Drawing on original interview data with thirty-nine experienced and in many cases full-time video game streamers (twenty-four directly quoted in this work), the paper examines the past, present, and future of the live-streaming career path: firstly, how streamers first started streaming and the increasing presence of games and games culture within a range of different cultural and economic media ecosystems; secondly, the particular kinds of (often strenuous and difficult) work and labour that professional and aspiring-professional streamers must engage in to be successful; and thirdly, the perspectives of these new media workers on the future of their streaming activities, and the future of streaming *per se*. In doing so this paper aims to more fully open up the practice of streaming for future research, and develop our understanding of the freelance workers whose investments of time and effort have enabled the growth and professionalization of this contemporary media phenomenon.

### **Understanding Twitch: The Existing Literature**

The interwoven elements at play in the *Twitch* phenomenon - of digital intimacy, celebrity, community, content creation, media production and consumption, and video games - make *Twitch* a rich site for study. However, as a result of its newness and novelty, it has seen minimal sociological investigation to date. Live-streaming has, however, been already defined as a media phenomenon through which ‘anyone can become a TV provider’ (Pires & Simon,

2015:225), broadcasting themselves and their activities to a potentially large crowd of online viewers. Initial research into the phenomenon to date has tended to focus on why viewers *watch* others stream video game play, and the psychological motivations and interests of those who spectate the activities of others (Sjöblom and Hamari, 2016). Spectatorship has always been a part of video game culture more broadly (Taylor, 2016b), but those studying streaming have argued that streaming has given a newfound *intimacy* to game spectatorship (cf. Taylor, 2016b). This is a result of the *live* broadcasting of content, the ability for viewers and broadcasters to chat in real-time (Nematzadeh et al., 2016), and the development – via the technical affordances of *Twitch* and the behaviours of viewers - of tightly-knit communities around each broadcaster. These communities offer a feeling of closeness to one's preferred digital celebrities (Carrigan et al., *Forthcoming*) rarely matched in other media forms – *Twitch*, as Churchill and Xu (2016:223) argue, has consequently become 'more than just an entertainment medium; it is the home of the largest gaming community in history'.

These elements all make *Twitch* a rich site for the study of contemporary media spectatorship and consumption, and the communities that arise around those practices. However, as the above comments from P1 illustrate, there is also a highly unusual and contemporary form of *employment* to be found within this 'protoindustry of social media entertainment' (Cunningham & Craig, 2016:5412). Such employment is rapidly growing as a career path for those who achieve financial success in their game broadcasting. Particular demographics have already been seen to dominate the practice: streamers from the United States, for example, tend to be adults under the age of twenty-five, earning under fifty thousand dollars annually, and predominantly but not exclusively male (Quantcast, 2016). This is comparable to those who compete in professional video gaming (Taylor, 2012), another new media industry enabled by the play and broadcast of video games. Nevertheless, those who make up this streaming demographic have not been examined beyond simply these

demographic markers, and why they pursue streaming careers is entirely unexplored. We are therefore without data to understand the careers and aspirations of these new media workers, or how the lives of young people are being transformed through their streaming practices. This paper offers a first step towards answering these questions.

## **Methodology**

Interviews were carried out during the three-day 2016 ‘TwitchCon’ event in San Diego, for which *Twitch’s* European division provided us with ‘Special Guest’ passes that ensured access to all areas of the event. TwitchCon is an event with attendance in the thousands, designed to enable broadcasters to meet their fans, fans to meet their favourite broadcasters, and the sale of numerous first-party and third-party goods and merchandise. These were semi-structured interviews (Schmidt, 2004), in which we questioned respondents about their lives as streamers, their experiences of “professionalization” towards becoming full-time earners on *Twitch*, and their personal reflections on the platform and the rapid growth of streaming as a practice. We acquired thirty-nine interviews with ‘partnered’ streamers, those who are popular enough that they earn part of the advert revenue on their streams, can offer viewers the opportunity to subscribe, and can also gain income through players ‘cheering’ for them (financial micro-transactions), by securing merchandising deals, by joining an ‘Affiliate’ program with Amazon (for those in the US), and through ‘tips’ or ‘donations’ from viewers via off-platform sites such as Paypal. Of these partners, approximately half streamed as their full-time source of income, the majority of the remainder were streaming as part-time income and aspired to quit their other jobs, and a small number maintained non-*Twitch* jobs and used the platform for pleasure and additional income. Interviews lasted up to half an hour, and were facilitated primarily through

our own recruiting during the conference, and in a small number of cases with the assistance of *Twitch* staff (who helped find gaps in the schedules of the most famous streamers).

Our sampling strategy therefore relied on the guidance of insiders, along with deliberately seeking out a range of participants. This started from an understanding of the gendering (Harvey & Fisher, 2013) and racializing (Gill, 2010) of new media work, as apparent on *Twitch* as any other media platform (Gray, 2017:355), and research should thereby ensure that their voices are granted equal attention. We therefore attempted to seek out a range of different views from partnered streamers, particularly looking for potentially marginalised perspectives. Transcripts totalling over fifty thousand words were coded by the authors in keeping with a grounded theory methodological orientation (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), designed to allow any and all themes to arise from the data with minimal intervention from preconceived notions. Through this process it became clear that three temporal themes were at the forefront of streamers' thinking about their activities, and structured their reflections on their streaming careers. These are the origins and motivations behind their streaming activity, the particular forms of labour required for everyday successful streaming, and streamers' perceptions of the future of both their streaming activity and *Twitch* itself. It is these we examine in this paper.

However, we should also note limitations of this initial study, which is part of an ongoing multi-year research project into live-streaming. We focused here on one event and on successful streamers; this was because we sought primarily to examine the processes of "professionalization" and career-development by those who pursue *Twitch* streaming as their primary source of income. The largest annual gathering of those who make their full-time income from the practice, and those who aspire to do so, was an obvious research site. However, numerous other avenues of research presented themselves during the study, three of which are particularly clear. Firstly, the examination of those who constitute the long tail of



*Twitch* (millions of non-professional streamers); secondly, those who stream the range of non-video-game *Twitch* content; and thirdly, how demographic differences shape *Twitch* experiences for its users. Future publications from this research project will address such questions, but our focus here is on the lives and careers of those who make, or seek to make, a full-time income from their streaming practice. These interviews on these topics offer the broadest scholarly examination of the experiences of professionalized and professionalizing streamers to date, something that has previously been held back by a lack of access to the professional and aspiring-professional community. Our ability to attend the most important annual event in the streaming community, and to have unlimited access offered by *Twitch*, resolved these difficulties; by talking directly to streamers in person, we are able analyse the phenomenon through the perspectives and life stories of those pursuing these distinctive new career paths.

### **How do people become streamers?**

We begin by examining the origins of streamers, who recounted several different routes into the practice. The first dominant path into *Twitch* we uncovered was through streamers' existing experiences, and in some cases employed work, within 'eSports' or professional competitive video game competition. Professional gaming is a practice that has grown substantially in recent years, supported by the easy broadcast of tournaments through *Twitch* (Hutchins, 2008:857), as well as deep grass-roots movements. Over a hundred million people watched eSports tournaments in 2015 (Kresse, 2016) that awarded over \$65m in prize money; such growth represents the 'legitimization of gaming as spectator sport' (Taylor, 2016a:115). Following from such a definition we consider streaming to be the legitimization of gaming as a spectator *activity* more broadly, and *Twitch* opening up a space for 'communities of practice'

(Burroughs and Rama, 2015:3) where people learn to play video games. In the case of *Twitch*, these are comprised of ‘gamer-spectators’ (Hamilton *et al*, 2014:1315). They provide an important opportunity for competitive players to learn and improve, and given the high skill levels required for such competition, there is a clear motivation towards both streaming and watching streams. For example, P2 starting streaming because they were ‘a competitive Counter-Strike player’ and ‘watched eSports’, whilst another respondent P3 had been a ‘shoutcaster’ - someone who commentates over competitive play online, rather than a formal tournament context - for several years. They had found success in this area, before then ‘stepping back’ into a producer role, producing ‘a variety of different online leagues and tournaments as well as work[ing] with *Twitch* almost every day [to] help just create more buzz within the community of *Twitch* in general.’ This crossover between eSports and streaming was also found with P4 who organised live tournaments of *Super Smash Brothers Melee* (2001) and streamed the game, along with P5, who broadcast tournaments and built their stream while assisting a major eSports team with their publicity. This route of entry into *Twitch* represents an extension of existing eSports behaviours into a more personalised and individual form, through the growth of streamers’ own eSports channels, and the application of existing digital skills into a new potentially profitable context.

The second route into streaming identified from the interview data was getting into streaming via other online platforms that are not necessarily themselves ‘gaming’ platforms, but have many gamers active on them, and with communities that integrate closely with wider gaming culture. Gamers have long socialised via the communities that spring up in the ‘mediated environments’ (Dalisay *et al*, 2015: 1414) of virtual online worlds; for lots of our interviewees, *Twitch* was a logical expansion of such existing social ties and obligations. Many interviewees had come to streaming via *YouTube*, the dominant world-leader in video uploading and sharing, with a strong gaming community that is over a decade old. Given their

overlap in video production, this was not surprising, whilst interviewees stressed the desire for *live* feedback and viewer interaction being a key part of their transitions into *Twitch*. P6 had begun their career making videos on *YouTube*, but they ‘didn’t really enjoy the feedback’ because it ‘wasn’t instant’, so they tried *Twitch*; ‘the moment we started we had a few viewers, and automatically knew that it was something suited more for our style, having the instant feedback’. Similarly, P7 emphasized that *Twitch* has ‘great ways to interact with your viewers’, and they wanted to expand their existing work on *YouTube* ‘to a new platform in a way that’s engaging’ and helps their viewers ‘connect with me as a creator’. The connectivity of *Twitch* was clearly a strong draw when contrasted with existing platforms, allowing people to connect with those they had already forged social gaming ties with.

Alongside *YouTube* other routes from other kinds of gaming practice were also visible, such as coming to streaming via *Reddit* (a popular news aggregation and discussion website with a strong gamer presence), via games blogging across a range of platforms and desire to connect more closely with one’s fans, and ‘modding’ - the practice of programming alterations to existing games and then distributing those ‘modded’ (modified) versions. P8 was previously a games blogger, but then ‘discovered *Twitch*, and I decided that talking about games and getting the immediate feedback was so much more fun than writing a blog post’ and having to wait for a period before any feedback came through; another respondent, P9, transitioned from being a creator of *Minecraft* mods, stating that ‘I basically started streaming just to show people how to make mod packs in *Minecraft* and that quickly escalated’. Similar but somewhat distinctive was the story of P10, who said that they were ‘found’ by the ‘right person’ who advertised them heavily in the gaming community on *Reddit*, resulting in a massive influx of traffic to their channel which launched them rapidly to their current success, going from starting streaming to being a *Twitch* partner in under a month - an incredibly short length of time for a process that takes years for many thousands, and can feel unattainable indefinitely

for millions of others. Gaming communities are complex and often multi-site social phenomena (Seay et al, 2004), and such routes into *Twitch* demonstrate the ready transition of gamers from one medium of gaming culture into another, and the ability to bring in fans that one had already accrued on other platforms, whilst connecting more easily with new fans.

Interviewees therefore presented stories of being deeply involved in another gaming practice or community, and moving over to *Twitch* as the logical extension of existing behaviours. Considering both of these paths - involvement in the competitive gaming industry, and involvement in digital gaming culture and content production - it is clear that *Twitch* streaming is not a self-contained phenomenon. It is deeply interwoven with the convergence of existing platforms and practices through which gamers both produce and consume content, but *Twitch* in all cases has given a new *immediacy* and (perceived) *intimacy* between the producer and the consumer. Content creators from other digital domains and communities are shifting towards *Twitch* for these reasons, and these moves represent a shift towards content that promotes 'social presence' - the degree to which a medium conveys the actual presence of those who are communicating (Short et al, 1976). *Twitch* is live, with its broadcasters visible on webcam, with conversations possible through the near-instantaneous chat window, and the ability of viewers to take actions visible on the channel (donating, subscribing, and so forth). These affordances of the platform are all ways for both streamers and viewers to enhance their visibility to the other, and *Twitch* is thereby extremely appealing for those already creating game content and seeking more intimate interaction with their viewers; such potential has led the way in the adoption of *Twitch* by those who are now professional or aspiring-professional streamers.

## **The Work of Streaming**

Once people have opened their *Twitch* channel, what is streaming actually like? Our interviews explored streamers' experiences of work and labour in streaming, and it was immediately clear that previous experiences outside of *Twitch* had fundamentally shaped interviewees' attitudes to streaming. There were streamers who had worked – or continued to if they were not streaming full-time – as a software developer, graduate teaching assistant, stay-at-home parent, IT technician, registered nurse, teacher, sales manager, freelance graphic designer, public relations employee, and casino dealer – or were previously unemployed or studying. A number of interviewees had actually studied related degrees in higher education, such as journalism, film production, communication, and radio production. However, there were also streamers with less related educational backgrounds like political science and economics, and urban planning – although this degree choice did make more sense when we discovered that the interviewee had a passion for city-building games like the recently-released *Cities: Skylines*. Other than the interviewee who had studied streaming for their Master's dissertation, the application of traditional university education to online streaming was more complicated than a simple transition of skills or interests. As P11 explains:

[My degree] was good in the sense that I practiced creating content, [but] I would hope that I am correct in assuming that, very soon, we'll see maybe modern versions of the education that I took, [such as] an education that's saying 'we want you to create content online'.

The lack of formal training or education on offer to streamers meant that many had developed their abilities independently. For those who grew up with digital technologies, this was not seen as a challenge. For example, 'I learnt it by myself [...] and just by getting into it, doing it every single day, you will get used to of it and you learn more' (P12), whilst another interviewee, P4, described themselves as 'mostly entirely self-taught. There's enough

documentation online for anyone to become a streamer'. Similarly, P13 was keen to explain that their channel 'specifically was the first to do 720 [a high-definition video format] and [...] the video guy told us we couldn't do it, so we did it.' This particular demonstration of technical knowledge, particularly when they had been told it was not possible, comes from a 'passion for pushing things stronger, faster, making the stream better, the community and all of that.' Technical skill, as Kirkpatrick (2004:23) has pointed out, is important in 'contemporary computer culture', just as Taylor (2006:72) has noted that 'power gamers' place a high value on 'technical skill and proficiency.' Skills were seen as central to both streaming and streamers' senses of self-worth and ability, but skills and knowledge taught in a traditional *university* environment, even one meant to prepare the individual for a range of jobs including those that might be within the digital economy or new media, seemed inadequate, inappropriate, and simply unnecessary.

The amount of working time that the interviewees devoted to streaming was significant, often far more than the thirty-five hours that, for example, equates to full-time employment in the United Kingdom. P14 explains that they were streaming 'fifteen hours a day to launch things [...] I mean my first three months of *Twitch* was nearly every waking moment', while P15 would stream 'say 70, over 70 hours a week' and 'not take a single day off aside from those main critical days, emergency so on so forth.' Many of the interviewees balanced – or at least had to balance – streaming alongside other forms of paid work. For example, one streamer worked eight hours as a registered nurse, would 'come home and stream eight hours, sleep like four [laughter]' (P16). This experience was compared by P13 to working in IT with upwards of '90 hour weeks.' Although they explained they still do that many hours as a professional streamer, 'the difference is, the work that I'm doing now is 100% passion driven.' This kind of work ethic was stressed as part of the necessary process of becoming partnered by *Twitch*, but extremely hard to sustain in the long term. For example, P5 explained they would 'wake up

around 7. I had to go to work 9 a.m. then I came back home at 6 p.m. when I started my stream and I streamed till 1 or 2. So it was really just exhausting [be]cause I had no time for myself.’

For those streamers that successfully maintained such an arduous schedule and became partnered, there was then a tendency to reduce the amount of time streaming – although this did not necessarily mean less work overall. For P17 it would be around four hours each day, between ‘2 to 6 [...] so a good amount of time.’ Another very successful streamer explained that ‘generally I wake up in the afternoon. I have a cup of tea, some biscuits, some breakfast. Then I just stream whatever I feel like, whatever I’m into.’ The benefit of streaming was that they were their ‘own boss. [...] I can make my own hours. [...] I average between six and seven hours five days a week’ (P1). However, in addition to the activity of streaming, ‘there’s a lot that goes into it behind the scenes’ (P1). This involves general preparation for the stream: what game is going to be played, ensuring the technical aspect set up and calibrated correctly, discussion topics, and so on. There are also administrative tasks like answering emails, and maintaining contacts and networking, all of which become increasingly central as the popularity and reach of one’s channel grows. The time investments towards the acquisition of celebrity status are large in any domain (Wajcman, 2015) and we see this trend reflected very strongly in the substantial temporal investments made by both aspiring streamers seeking to build a channel, and already-successful streamers seeking to maintain one.

In addition to the discussion of the number of hours worked, many interviewees addressed what makes a successful streamer - this is a particularly interesting topic given the newness of the game streaming phenomenon and the flexibility of career path we have already commented on. As P14 explains, ‘if you’re a little bit of a social butterfly I think streaming works really well’, a comment which contrasts sharply with pop-cultural tropes of videogame players as quiet, reclusive, and introverted. Others provided quite vague advice, like ‘what has

helped me do that I don't really know... probably consistency, like always having a schedule and sticking to it' (P17). Having a regular slot in which viewers can find the stream was clearly important, making it different to other Video on Demand (VoD) services like *YouTube*. In other interviews more abstract factors were credited with success, such as being '100% passion driven and the huge difference between [traditional work is that] my workload is more, it's more stressful in a lot of ways, it's harder, it's heavier because you're chasing a dream' (P13). Many streamers discussed setting themselves targets – numbers of viewers, becoming partners, subscriptions and so on – and that this could push a streamer forward to become successful. For example, P15 explained that: 'I had a lot of goals set and I wanted to meet those goals so I did whatever it took to meet them.' Such discourses reflect an internalisation of the metricisation of success according to the 'popularity principle' (Van Dijck, 2013), a feature of online platforms of this sort whose algorithmic structures emphasise hierarchy and competition, with those at the top attaining a disproportionately high volume of attention and interest compared to those at the bottom. Understanding that rewards are distributed in an extremely top-heavy fashion, streamers were both aspiring to reach those heights, and reflecting back with varying degrees of criticality upon what they thought it would take in order to obtain those goals.

There was therefore also clear neoliberal subjectivity presented in the interviews, through which streamers argued that hard work, in streaming, is automatically rewarded. For example, 'it's basically the hard work you're willing to put in' (P18); 'in the end it's all about you and it's all about you working your hardest' (P15); 'there's no shortcuts of this platform or any kind of content creation but it's absolutely worth the time you put in' (P7); and 'basically the end of the day we're entrepreneurs in this environment because we are our own bosses' (P9). This is a development of what Cunningham and Craig (2016:5413) have analysed as 'a rapidly professionalizing and monetizing wave of diverse, multicultural, previously amateur



content creators from around the world’ who have successfully ‘harnessed these platforms to incubate their own media brands, engage in content innovation, and cultivate often massive, transnational, and cross-cultural fan communities’. This emphasis on work ethic from the streamer ties in with the broader trends of de-industrialisation: the decline in long-term management employment and the growth of precarious service work. This has taken place alongside an ‘effective strategy of subjectification’ which encourages people to see themselves as ‘companies of one’, as ‘individuals for whom every action, from taking courses on a new computer software application to having their teeth whitened, can be considered an investment in human capital’ (Read, 2009:30). Success is seen as the ‘result of accomplished self-regulation’, whilst failure is a ‘symptom and consequence of a failure of self and self-regulation – the failure of insufficient enterprise’ (Storey et al, 2005:1036). In this way the act of playing video games – albeit now in front of an online audience – has become an option for the hardworking ‘homo economicus’ (the supposed rational economic man), that Foucault (2008:226) defines as ‘an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself.’ The platform has therefore provided the opportunity for the hosting and development of an incredibly driven layer of young people seeking to make a living from the broadcasting of their own game playing. As we have shown in this section, this far from a straightforward process, and it is clear that it entails a multiplicity of skills, practices and engagements that go far beyond simply ‘playing games’.

## **The Future: Twitch, and Twitch Streamers**

### ***Streamer Futures***

Having considered the past - how streamers begin streaming - and the present - what they do when they stream - we then turned to streamers’ perceptions of the *future* of their practice. The

responses fall into two groups: perceptions of the viability of their individual futures (if any) on *Twitch*, and their thoughts on the future of *Twitch* and streaming as a whole. In the first instance, all streamers we interviewed except two (who were retired and planning retirement from streaming) were strongly committed to continuing streaming as long as possible. This included statements that ‘I’ll stream as long as I can’ (P5), ‘I would love to pursue this no matter what and if I could, and if I wanted, I would love to stream for the rest of my life’ (P15), and ‘I love doing what I do, and I hope to continue it for some more years to come’ (P12). Such comments demonstrated that despite the substantial amounts of time and effort investment needed to stream successfully, alongside the emotional and background labour, streamers still tremendously enjoy their work and want it to continue indefinitely. Skalski et al (2011:394) argue that ‘a certain sense of achievement, control, and self-efficacy is associated with playing computer games’, just as Ryan et al (2006) argue that the impact of games on personal well-being is strongest when players feel competent and skilled during play; drawing on such understandings, we therefore suggest that the feeling of being a skilled and competent *streamer* is one that brings a strong sense of self-actualisation and personal well-being, and that such feelings merit the time and effort investments they require.

However, despite their commitment to and enjoyment of the career path, almost all respondents felt a clear sense of precariousness in their streaming activities. P19 emphasised the importance of having what they called a ‘backup plan’, essential because ‘I know realistically that I’m not going to be able to be a streamer forever’. They suggested this could be due to being unable to stream any more, or if streaming for ‘whatever reason is not viable’ in the future; similarly, P13 put an equally high value on ‘stability’, which they defined as ‘getting that constant income to make sure that I have my nest egg’ in case of ‘accidental things’ that might end a streaming career. Shedding light on such perspectives, P12 stated ‘I don’t think anybody can say [where] live-streaming, eSports or YouTube will end up in five, ten

years’, whilst P20 said ‘we will see how long the industry lasts’ as a prelude to discussing their own long-term plans for remaining part of, or leaving, *Twitch*. All of these comments demonstrate a strong awareness of the fundamental *newness* of streaming as a career path, and - although (as we explore below) streamers took great pride in this newness - streamers were concerned about the long-term viability of such a disruptive new media form.

Interviewees in turn proposed explicit backup plans - P19 intended to do more charity work and convert their existing charity-focused *Twitch* channel into a non-profit, or work for another non-profit they already support through their gaming; P13 was looking for jobs at *Twitch* or a third-party company working with them, and saw streaming as a route into such a career; a third P15 proposed transitioning out of streaming into mentoring those who wanted to stream professionally, which was echoed by P21 who claimed that many streamers they had spoken to were thinking along similar lines. The most astute streamers are therefore *already* trying to position themselves for an escape from such a precarious career, whilst also trying to make the most of this career opportunity whilst it lasts. Such a pressure - even if it means sacrificing a job all seem to enjoy so deeply - shows how these streamers have not escaped the contemporary dynamics of work, but have replaced them with a new set of precarious relationships. Where individuals from *Reddit*, *YouTube* and blogging used those platforms to transition into *Twitch*, so too are many streamers now seeing *Twitch* as a way to transition *out* into other more career paths seen as more stable such as the games industry, or working for the *Twitch* itself instead of supporting oneself via *Twitch’s* broadcasting platform. Under the pressures of the contemporary contradiction and precariousness of career opportunities, *Twitch* streamers see this *enjoyable* career as only a transition into some less enjoyable, but more *stable*, alternative. The idea the enjoyable one might also remain stable seems unlikely to these new media workers, and they are actively preparing themselves for what they see as a highly uncertain future.

## *Platform Futures*

Interviewees also commented about the future of *Twitch* and streaming alongside their own place(s) within it. All interviewees expressed strong agreement on two major points: firstly, the feeling that current streamers were in on the ‘ground floor’ of a massive new media platform and global social phenomenon, which made many streamers feel quite privileged; secondly, the common belief that *Twitch* and streaming would only continue to grow in future years, deploying a range of justifications for this belief, and that *Twitch* represented the earliest stages of a world-changing technological trajectory that would expand years or decades into the future. The first of these - the feeling of ‘being there at the start’ - was most clearly espoused by P13, who framed this in terms of another highly-competitive employment domain:

We're just in the brand new stages of this new [streaming] explosion, so now a professional streamer [is] way more plausible than saying ‘I'm gonna be a professional NBA player’ or ‘I'm gonna be a professional baseball player’. It's way more reasonable to think that you can be a professional streamer.

This belief was repeated by many respondents. ‘*Twitch* was the first one to really take things seriously and really streamline live streaming for gaming,’ P22 stated, implicitly noting that although the technology is not new, the strengths of *Twitch*'s particular platform are distinct. ‘They’re the pioneers’, they added, and that ‘everyone looks to *Twitch* [...] because *Twitch* is the best’. P23, meanwhile, stressed that they believed *Twitch* could not be usefully compared to *YouTube* anymore and had developed its own, unique, new media ecosystem, and that the commonality in video recording and distribution was surface only. They emphasised the rate of change in *Twitch* as a young service that ‘changes every six months’, just as P21 said ‘Its been a wild ride’ about the first few years of the platform. In turn, looking to the future,

‘the only thing I can see’, stated P16, ‘is *Twitch* just growing and growing even bigger and bigger.’ This was echoed by P24 who stated ‘I see [*Twitch*] continuously growing with giving more options’, P9’s comment that ‘there’s so much growth and potential in [the] technology’, and P5’s belief that ‘The potential [of *Twitch*] is enormous, so I think it’ll grow even bigger’. P7 stated that ‘the possibilities are endless for *Twitch*, and that's what I love’, a perspective implicitly echoed by the prediction of P19 that *Twitch* might one day become a ‘live replacement for a regular TV’. Interviewees therefore believed that *Twitch* was in its early days now, and they were proud to be streaming at this moment in time, but that in the longer term *Twitch* was all but destined to become a major global media force.

The discourse of *Twitch*’s present sociotechnical innovation and the profound future impact it should have is most richly expressed in the comment of P7, who drew upon broader historical conceptions of innovation and disruptive technological change to express their feelings on the importance of *Twitch* to the digital media ecosystem:

It's like the equivalent of Alexander Bell, I think his name was, laying down the first telephone lines back in the 1800s, 1700s, whenever it was. I think that's what we're doing right here, right now with Twitch, and that's something I want to be a part of.

The same respondent later added that the ‘gaming industry is laying the foundation for every single technology aspect that we have’. Although these seem extreme comments to make, they are only a little more dramatic than those of other respondents; whilst interviewees varied in the strength of their certainty that *Twitch* was on the ground floor of massive new media

change, they were united in that certainty *per se*. Such narratives of predicted technological development - from a new invention into a widely-used technology - serve to emphasize the 'legitimacy' (Barnes, 1974:140) of new inventions, such as live game streaming. As Bourgonjon et al (2016) argue, such statements are 'constitutive of both the personal and social construction of the impact of video games', and we see here streamers attempts to position their activities as more than mere 'play', and within the domain of broader and highly-impactful global technological and media changes. By articulating confidence in the importance of *Twitch's* innovations and anticipated future impacts, interviewees were legitimising their own practices - and the large volumes of time streaming requires - through presenting them as the start of a new historical epoch in media production and consumption. We can understand the motivation behind these discourses further through Kirkpatrick's (2016:1439) observation, after studying the early decades of gaming culture, that 'gaming cannot escape the logic of its field, which determines that it will always try to be something more and better than gaming' in its quest for broader cultural legitimation and acceptance. Such beliefs are clearly still extant in the era of streaming, and these discourses of streamers should be understood as a further presentation of this same desire for gaming and play - often trivialised pastimes - to transcend their current places in wider society.

### ***Personal Futures and Company Futures***

To conclude this final analysis section we now briefly note an intriguing tension in the interview data. We have demonstrated here a clear emphasis upon feelings of *precariousness* expressed by our respondents about their long-term *Twitch* careers. When considering the future of *Twitch* as a company, however, the opposite was the case, where comments ranged from the generally optimistic to the borderline techno-utopian. This contradiction articulates

an important tension observed by professional and aspiring-professional streamers, which we suggest is indicative of a keen understanding of the dynamics of new technologies, and specifically new technological industries and their knock-on effects upon labour practices: innovative companies and inventors can profit tremendously from technologies and new forms of work that leave those actually performing the work or using the technologies ever more precarious or insecure. Streamers can consequently be seen as belonging to what Standing (2011) calls the ‘precariat’, a class of people with perpetually insecure careers. Many such individuals work in what has been termed the gig economy (Friedman, 2014), entailing flexible and non-permanent arrangements with employees (Weststar, 2015), or with privately-owned platforms such as *Twitch*. This is also the case within the related career path of eSports, where professional players are precariously employed whilst eSports as a whole only continues to grow in economic value (Author(s), Forthcoming). Streamers, like those in these other domains, are clearly aware of this tension, and it is already affecting their reflections upon their careers and their plans for the future. Subsequent longitudinal research, however, will be required to unpick these anxieties in more detail and how - if at all - they shape the co-evolution of *Twitch*, and its streamers, in the years and decades to come.

## **Conclusion**

Before I could walk I've been playing video games, and it's a passion of mine,  
so I wanted to turn that passion to paycheck. (P15)

Computer games have become an inescapable part of our overall media culture (Dalisay et al, 2015), and examining gaming activities is consequently crucial for understanding an increasingly media-saturated society (Thompson, 1995). The growth of cheap and effective communication media, meanwhile, has enabled a small number of performers to obtain global

celebrity on a far greater scale than ever before (Freeland, 2012). Such media industries are a rich site for studying these ‘enterprising’ and independent careers (Storey *et al*, 2005:1049), and let us examine the distinctive features of digital ‘cultural work’ at a moment when successful creative workers are seen as exemplary entrepreneurial citizens (Gill & Pratt, 2008:1). In this paper we have brought together these concerns with games media and digital celebrity by examining the lives and careers of those who broadcast themselves playing video games as their source of full-time income, and those who aspire to such a goal. Drawing on original interview data we explored how streamers entered this career path, the work of streaming, and the future of streaming and their own channels. In doing so we uncovered how *Twitch* slots into the ongoing convergence of digital and online media platforms, the strenuous yet rewarding labour of becoming a professional broadcaster, and the complex mix of anxiety and confidence streamers have about the future. Streaming shows no signs of shrinking in the immediate future as more and more become embroiled in the practice as both consumers and producers, whilst even in this initial investigation we have identified a number of tensions that will shape its growth in the coming years. In this paper we have only begun to unpick the complexities and entanglements of such a platform, but it is clear that greater study of live streaming will offer us new insights into the distributed production of our contemporary media environment, and the lives and careers of those who labour to produce it.

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