

Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: streaming video games on Twitch.tv

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Article begins on next page

Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: Streaming Video Games on Twitch.tv

A recent pew internet survey on teens, social media and technology finds that YouTube is the most popular online platform for teens (Anderson and Jiang, 2018). This illustrates a growing trend of both viewing and creation of video in social media apps illustrated by the fact that at least 64% of internet users are watching online videos daily globally with 85% watching in the United States (Statista, 2018). In response to this growing demand for video, many of the major players in social media apps; Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat have been adding video capability to their features in order to keep up with each other in this trend. Watching videos on YouTube and sharing them on one's Facebook timeline has been possible and popular for some time, but a more recent growing trend is live streaming. Facebook Live, Instagram Stories, Periscope (Twitter) and Snapchat's video snap all allow for real-time sharing through video, inviting audiences to experience the moments as they happen. Since this column's previous discussion of live streaming apps (Anderson, 2017) the use of video streaming has continued to grow on the various platforms (Richter, 2017). The popularity and importance of capturing and archiving these live-streamed moments on these apps continues to grow, providing people with the ability to record and share events that had not previously been shareable; from capturing funny family moments to praising good Samaritans to instances of oppression and harassment. While all of these social media apps allow for quick and easy sharing of video, some are more robust than others for longer content and for the archiving of the content. Instagram and Snapchat's video features are best for quick videos to share snippets of one's day and are usually ephemeral, disappearing upon viewing or within 24 hours. Periscope, YouTube Live and Facebook Live are useful for sharing longer events, streaming concerts, talks, events or chronicling one's day to day. These streams are viewable later when archive settings are

selected. While many people are using these apps to share their moments with followers or to record events for viewing later, some are using this technology for a very specific purpose; to watch and share the playing of video games.

The number of active video gamers worldwide increases every year as access to a variety of games and gaming platforms increases with new technologies. Statista estimates 2.21 billion gamers worldwide in 2017 with an estimate of 2.73 billion by 2021 (HKExnews, n.d). In 2015, 49% of American adults played video games, and that number is likely to have increased since the report (Duggan, 2015). These gamers are playing on different equipment ranging from gaming consoles, handheld consoles, laptops, tablets, desktops to smartphones. A used game and console market, smartphone apps, and re-releases of retro games has also contributed to making gaming more accessible and desirable. The billions of people playing the games are also spending time watching others play the games or recording and streaming themselves playing these games. Many of the most popular and largest earners on YouTube gained their following and continue their success with videos of video game play (Lynch, 2018). The early gaming videos were recorded, edited and then uploaded. The editing process allowed for streamlining the content, shortening the actual time of game play and giving the audience instruction and commentary on the games. The earliest forms of these video game streaming events were known as “Let’s Play” videos, or “LP”. LP videos are generally walk-throughs of a specific game, demonstrating the play and skills needed for completion with accompanying video or screenshots. They include commentary that is often humorous. While many LP videos show a play through of a video game they should have other unique elements that make them attractive to viewers such as personal anecdotes or highlights of special skills or bonuses. When done well, these videos can be “tools for education, criticism and vicarious enjoyment” (Lee, 2015). The

exact origins of “Let’s Play” videos are inexact, but according to the Let’s Play Archive [1] these videos began around 2006 when people were posting videos of gameplay to the internet forum Something Awful [2], an internet forum that has contributed largely to internet culture, from Let’s Play videos to memes to NSFW (not safe for work) content that spreads to other internet forums such as reddit and 4chan. These LP videos began to appear on YouTube as YouTube gained users and more popularity. There has been some disagreement and controversy regarding copyright and fair use of the game sounds and images (Taylor, 2015). While these videos are still referred to by some as “Let’s Play” videos, the ubiquity of streaming game playthrough and increased platforms where they exist has given this term more of a historical or nostalgic nuance.

The number of gaming video content viewers has been steadily increasing with 609 million reported in 2016 and a projection of 743 million by 2019, with the largest number of gaming video content viewers is in Asia, with Europe and the United States following behind (HKExnews, 2018). The content that is being viewed is quite vast, covering any and all games from the most popular to the retro. A sub-genre of video game play that has also led to the rise in video game content viewing and streaming is that of eSports, video games played as a professional sport. eSports are competitive tournaments of video games that often take place in large stadium like settings. Usually played by professional players, there are large monetary rewards for wins and potential sponsorship. This aspect of the gaming industry has been growing exponentially since it moved from a “niche past time to a hugely popular phenomenon that has seen explosive growth” since 2012 and the rise in streaming video is attributed as a factor in this growth (Tassi, 2012). The eSports industry is expected to grow even more in 2018 with revenues increasing 38% from 2017 (Perez, 2018a). The popularity of competitive gaming, both playing and watching is no longer limited to small groups of gamers. eSports now mirrors more

of the traditional sport communities; the sports channel ESPN has a website dedicated to eSports [3], players receive sponsorship, fans can buy merchandise for their favorite teams, players receive awards and gamblers can bet on the results. Over 70 American institutions of higher education now offer scholarships for players to join their varsity eSport teams (Blumenstyk, 2018) and eSports has its own non-profit membership association, The National Association of Collegiate eSports (NACE) [4].

Whether watching the competitive play of an *Overwatch League* [5] or the nostalgia of watching someone play a beloved retro game, viewers and streamers have a variety of different platforms to use. In many cases, streamers choose to stream across multiple platforms in order to magnify their audiences. The most popular website for this content is Twitch.tv which outperforms its closest competitor, YouTube, with 49 percent of gaming video content revenue for 2018. (Statista). YouTube Gaming [6] was launched in June 2015 as Google's competitive alternative to Twitch. More widely known for its on demand service, YouTube sought to make live streaming a focus with this new product (Seitz, 2015). YouTube Gaming continues to grow at a faster rate than Twitch with a monthly active streamer base increase of 343 percent during 2017 in comparison to Twitch's 197 percent (Perez, 2018b). Even with this kind of growth, YouTube Gaming still has a lot of catching up to do with 308,000 concurrent viewers in the fourth quarter of 2017 and Twitch leading the pack with 788,000 (Perez, 2018b). Other much smaller and less popular competitors include Facebook's recent gaming platform [7] and Microsoft's Mixr [8].

As the most popular platform for streaming of primarily gaming content, Twitch.tv is becoming more well-known even outside of gaming communities. Twitch.tv is an online service that began as a place for viewing and streaming gaming content on a variety of consoles and

formats. The early origins of Twitch stem from the creation of Justin.tv, which was a live streaming service founded in 2007. By 2010, the gaming category on this site was the biggest and most popular, prompting the founders to focus on streaming of gameplay and starting the gaming section under the name Twitch (Lien, 2014). In 2014, Justin.tv was shut down by the founders and shortly after that Twitch was purchased by Amazon for \$970 million dollars, outbidding Google and surprising many in the industry who assumed it would end up as part of YouTube rather than as its competitor (Peckham, 2014) Since 2014, the platform has expanded its content beyond just gaming and more recently, turned back towards its roots of vlogging through an IRL (in real life) format (Hall, 2016). It has also continued to grow exponentially in viewership during this time. As of January 2018, Twitch boasted 962,000 average concurrent viewers, a 26% growth from December 2017, drawing more viewers than both CNN and MSNBC during that time period and those 962,000 viewers are watching the active streams of about 550,000 streamers (Seitz, 2018).

Twitch is available as an app for Apple or Android, a desktop application, via a web browser, on different gaming consoles and on streaming devices such as Chromecast. It is not just a viewing platform, but functions as a social network as well, as users can friend each other and join different communities. Additionally, the live chat function during the streams provides the opportunity for engagement and connection between the streamers and the viewers as well as amongst the viewers. The desktop application features voice and video calling functionality and the ability to create private servers for additional forms of communication (Shaul, 2017).

While the majority of the streams available are gaming related, videos are not limited to gaming content and the range of viewing content topics is expanding and include music, comics, painting, miniatures, cosplay, dance and knitting. There have been special events that are not

gaming related like a Mr. Rogers Marathon (Freitas, 2018) and a Pokémon marathon (Haasch, 2018) in attempts to draw bigger audiences both outside of and within the already established gaming communities.

Streaming on Twitch can be done using the application on tablets, smartphones and consoles, which records the gameplay on the specific device. Most streamers however do so from desktops using third party Open Broadcast Software [9]. An update to the mobile app in 2017 enhanced ability to live stream directly from a mobile device, primarily for the IRL streamers (Halpin, 2017).

Viewers have a number of different ways to find content on Twitch. Featured live streams are presented to the viewer along with suggestions for live feeds, based on settings and previous viewing. Users can choose to follow specific channels, hosts (streamers), games or communities. These are available in the Following section for quick access. Friends that are followed will appear in this area as well along with suggested content to follow, based on preferences and friends' preferences. A browse section provides the option of discovery by category, primarily games but also by communities, channels and creative communities. The creative communities contain content that is not dedicated to gameplay.

While anyone can view much of the content on Twitch for free, there are incentives for subscribing to streams (4.99 for Amazon Prime members, more for non-members). Subscribers receive bonus content which includes different emotes (emojis) to use in the chat, badges, access to the social media information of the hosts (Snapchat, Instagram) or additional content. Subscribers gain more direct access to their favorite hosts through these subscriptions, and hosts make additional income through this revenue model.

The Twitch streams and communities are as varied as the gaming content available and with that variation will come some mature and, in some cases inappropriate content. The Twitch Terms of Service [10], like most online platforms prohibit use of the services by anyone under 13. Additionally, they state that anyone aged 13-18 should be viewing under the supervision of a parent or legal guardian. The onus is on the streamer to identify if their content is for mature audiences and a notification warning pops up before one can continue when this is the case. While the community guidelines [11] seek to address sexual, malicious, and obscene content, there is evidence of violations both in the streaming content and in the accompanying chats. There is no option to filter out NSFW (not safe for work) content beyond the trust that the streamer has disclosed mature content. Despite the presence of community guidelines, as with any online community there is evidence of these guidelines being broken. As with any online community Twitch is not free from bullying, harassment and bad behavior. The gaming community and society at large continues to reel from the effects of Gamergate, an anonymous online harassment campaign of women in the gaming community. Women who stream on Twitch can find themselves the recipients of inappropriate requests and expectations while not being taken as seriously as their male game playing counterparts (Convery, 2017).

The popularity of video game streaming and video game content viewing is apparent in the growing statistics presented. Libraries and librarians should be aware of this growth and consider the opportunities and implications. A literature review on the topic will show that libraries and librarians have been discussing, promoting and supporting video gaming for several years. Libraries have created game and console collections for their patrons, gaming events are organized, exhibits showcase current and retro games, and books on or about video games are added to collections. The importance of staying up to date on gaming trends is not new to

libraries and librarians. The ability to inform and even assist patrons about these problems provides more opportunities to engage with them. There is potential for incorporating these platforms into workshops and programs; from how to's to forming communities, creating content or even hosting an eSports tournament. The growth of eSports has caught the attention of both college and public libraries. King Library at Miami University in Ohio has partnered with the university's Armstrong Institute for Interactive Media Studies to create an eSports arena within the library, housing the new varsity eSports program. Jerome Conley, dean of University Libraries expresses how "libraries have always been the glue that brings people from various disciplines together, and as the emerging field [becomes established], we're really proud that the library is sitting at the table" (Enis, 2017). According to a recent article in *American Libraries* some public libraries have begun to hold competitions and set-up computers to meet the needs of the eSports players (Inklebarger, 2018). Libraries don't need to take the step of creating an Esports arena to be sitting at these tables, but they should certainly be aware of the trends and platforms that their patrons, students and users are familiar with in order to seek out opportunities.

Twitch is described as "potent entertainment" showing an unfiltered human experience and providing a parasocial relationship between the host and the audience ("Twitch and Shout"). This can be said for just about any of the gaming platforms that provide the same features such as chat and subscriptions. The promise of connection, social capital and monetary gain drive both the viewers and the streamers. This is a growing model for communication and engagement and libraries and librarians should be aware and thinking about how to respond. The potential for streaming video platforms is not new to the profession which has embraced them with live streamed events, tutorials, and marketing material. While these platforms described are focused

on gaming, there is potential for these newer models of streaming services in an educational context. Payne et al. note that “Twitch represents a unique learning paradigm that is not perfectly represented in previous technologies because of its “ground-up” evolution and the opportunity for novice instructors to educate mass audiences in real-time over the Internet while enabling interaction between teachers and learners and among learners” (Payne, 2017). Burroughs and Rama (2015) propose that the streaming space of Twitch.tv blurs the boundaries between real and virtual, between game space, social networks and face-to-face communication. As libraries continue to grow, change and develop with technology, they too find themselves as a place that blurs the boundaries between virtual and real and should be aware of the potential of these live-streaming apps to foster communities and communication.

1. <https://lparchive.org/history>
2. <https://www.somethingawful.com/>
3. <http://www.espn.com/esports/>
4. <https://nacesports.org/>
5. <https://overwatchleague.com/en-us/>
6. <https://gaming.youtube.com/>
7. <https://www.facebook.com/FacebookGaming/>
8. <https://mixer.com/>
9. <https://obsproject.com/>
10. <https://www.twitch.tv/p/legal/terms-of-service/>
11. <https://www.twitch.tv/p/legal/community-guidelines/>

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