

The ludospectator: Reconstruction of a hybrid, fluid and unstable identity

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Abstract

One of the mutations that the video game has undergone is its alteration, evolution and synthesis into game-video: the video game performance act is transformed into a spectacle, a post-television genre to be consumed on another screen. Here, the player takes on multiple forms, approaching a hybridised spectator identity where, as performer, observer, viewer, player and actor, he does not present a crystallised role and identity, but rather a fluid one. The research focuses on Twitch.tv, a platform designed to encourage long-term financial and emotional support from viewers through social aggregation practices. The aim of this contribution is to outline the new spectator identity generated and imposed by Twitch through the analysis of the platform's own recognition modes, expressed by the content creators operating on it and by the reference audiences.

Keywords

Twitch, identity, game video, ludospectator

1. From video to game video

This paper investigates the new spectatorial and ludic identity originated as a result of the institutionalisation of videogame live streaming practices and phenomena, which inhabits its ever-expanding culture and sub-cultures. In order to profile and identify this new hybrid, fluid and unstable identity, it is necessary to review the relationship video game and the active user – the player –, the passive user – the spectator – and the new media ecosystem conceived and disseminated by digital audiovisual platforms. In this paper, the term 'platform' does not only refer to the digital object as such, but also to the explicit relationships encompassed between different elements: the users – as distinguished between streamers (the creators) and viewers –, the design, the dynamics related to their functioning, the engagement mechanisms and the underlying rhetorics [37, 26].

Since the late 1990s, one of the mutations that the video game has undergone is its alteration,

evolution and synthesis into game video. Matteo Bittanti and Enrico Gandolfi (2018) define game video as “a range of audiovisual paratexts created by means of video games, originating from an alternative and subversive use of (software) text” [5]. Mia Consalvo (2007) states that video game culture encompasses “a wide range of discourses, texts and practices that go beyond video games themselves” [9]; referring to the literary work of Gérard Genette (1997), she defines these new media objects as 'paratexts', including both institutional production materials – guides, tips and tricks – and user-generated content – fanart, reviews and audiovisual forms involving the display of one's skills [15].

The game video is cause and effect of an ecosystem in transition: the video game performative act is transformed into a spectacle, it becomes a post-televisual genre to be consumed on another screen – different in size, accessibility, fruition. By this mean, it is possible to argue that the spectatorial act encapsulated and granted by game video has been inherited by much longer-standing forms of spectatorship, as humans have

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been watching other humans play since the dawn of history – and more recently in this context through eSports [43], chess tournaments or TV game shows [44]. For example, the reproduction of an eSport event inherits the representative paradigms that characterised the first editions of the 'World Game Championship', inaugurated in 1982 at the Twin Galaxies arcade in Ottumwa, albeit with some differences [45]. Since it is no longer a matter of challenges in virtual worlds anchored to cabinets, the stage has a double identity: there is a real stage where the players are placed with their stations – consisting of computers or consoles and their screens – and a virtual stage, i.e. the video game within which the challenge takes place, whose scenarios are projected onto a larger screen.

The growing popularity of the game video phenomenon, precisely defined by Getomer, Okimoto and Johnsmeyer (2013) as the act of “watching others play” motivates the investigation into the identity worn and assumed by the user of live audiovisual forms [16]. The presence and evolution of an entertainment culture closely linked to the video game has led Game Studies academics and theorists to the definition of the so-called video game culture. Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne deCastell (2020) state that “there is no such thing as a single video game culture: those involved occupy very different worlds even when they share the same spaces and times” [20]. According to Maria Törhönen et. al. (2020), the development of such a culture has been driven by the emergence of new technologies, the advent of digitisation, the introduction of video game consoles into the home environment, the development of the internet infrastructure and the constant convergence of computer technology, media products and human interaction [39].

The success of the video game as an entertainment product has led to creative and aesthetic drifts based on an alternative use of the game text and the consequent proliferation of game video content, leading to the development and institutionalisation of game video culture – a new cultural industry – which has coined distinct social phenomena and digital aesthetics – and meta-cultures originating from a rib of the video game medium. According to Nicholas Thiel Taylor (2016), “the passive audience associated with conventional media is now giving way to new, more agile forms of media consumption, as exemplified by the figure of the interactive user of live streaming platforms such as Twitch” [46].

2. Twitch: interactivity and interpassivity

Twitch is a live streaming platform belonging to the Amazon Inc. group that develops with a focus on the 'live' transmission of video games, played by users (streamers) at amateur, professional and competitive (eSport) level. T. L. Taylor (2018) describes the peculiarities of Twitch, emphasising how, through monetisation and social aggregation practices, Twitch gives rise to a further sub-culture of video gaming and game video, the *game live streaming culture* [37]. As Daniel Reckenwald (2017) states, live streaming is a “new media genre that combines the transmission of activities with cross-modal visual communication” [31] and fits within the definition of 'digital plenitude', “a universe of media products and practices (made up of remixing, sharing and critiquing) so vast and varied that it cannot be described as a coherent whole” [6].

In these digital spaces, the game video constantly generates communities attached to certain creators, and generalist audiences similar to those of the television medium. It is therefore crucial to emphasise and deepen the relationship created between the new (plat)forms of communication and other audiovisual media, reflecting on the interactivity and interpassivity of audiences. The term interpassivity was first coined by the Austrian cultural critic Robert Pfaller [29]: it defines an opposite concept to that of interactivity, and implies 'a pleasure of delegated consumption'. Interpassivity occurs when the subject transfers his or her ability to react passively to the other. Amongst the examples defining interpassivity, the author emphasises the recording of a live television programme at the moment when the viewer has no possibility of enjoying it – because in another place: consumption of the live broadcast is delegated to the recording tape, whereby the viewer stores it, without ever being watched.

To that effect, it is possible to identify the television medium as the predecessor of Twitch, who adopts the production languages and fruition dynamics of the older medium. The site finds its cultural foundations in what Lawrence Lessig (2009) has called 'remix culture' – i.e. a form of production that involves the use of existing visual documents (texts, images and videos) to create something new [25]. This approach exploits material originating in other media, whereby

reticular and 'liquid' modes of operation that specifically characterise the identity of the web are adopted in film, television, music and literature. In this sense, Twitch's core business is represented by 'participatory cultures' – an expression introduced by Henry Jenkins (2016) to indicate and define the link between digital technologies and user-created content, the power relations that have emerged between media industries and their consumers in relation to the development of digital platforms since the new millennium [19]. Within the ecosystem promoted by sites like Twitch, Jenkins states that “fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content”.

Given the architecture, configuration and functioning of live streaming technology, the aim of this contribution is to identify, define and profile the identity of the site's consumer user. In particular, the study of Twitch leads to the identification of a new type of audience, the 'ludospectator'.

3. Post-spectatorship, performance and identity: a survey

It is no longer possible to refer to the player as a mere consumer of the video game medium; in a more or less decisive form, he is at the same time player and viewer of the game within a cultural, social and economic circuit. Within the digital ecosystem promoted by online audiovisual sharing platforms, the concept of spectator changes to that of 'viewer'. In a society where the 'user' is both 'used' as a profiled unit and a source of data storage, the figure of the spectator is replaced by that of the viewer.

The existence of a spectator-player duality and the consequent profiling of the 'ludospectator' derives from the constantly increasing presence of native ludic-audiovisual paratexts of platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, which are able to go beyond the videogame in terms of accessibility, fruition and cost. Moreover, the number of streamers on Twitch is steadily increasing, as are the numbers of viewers, a result of the social effects of the recent global pandemic, which has affected both the production and the enjoyment of live streaming content. In fact, as a result of the need to spend more time at home, the presence in front of screens and within the network has grown significantly, generating a greater demand for content to be enjoyed live.

In order to identify the characteristics of the 'ludospectator', the starting point of the research was a two-year data collection phase, carried out on digital spaces where dialogue about the content enjoyed on Twitch stagnates, and initiated through questionnaires circulated months apart. These made it possible to collect data about the consumption identity of video games and video gaming and about the demographics of the users. Data were collected by means of quantitative research tools – anonymous questionnaires – within the same user group three times at one year intervals each. The first data collection took place in July 2020, the second in July 2021 and the third in July 2022. The users who participated in the research belong to Italian online communities active on Twitch on a daily basis.

Table 1
Data collected between July 2020 and July 2022

	Sample 2020	Sample 2021	Sample 2022
<i>N</i>	1419	600	421
Age	24.4	24.9	Text
Male (%)	92.7	91.7	87.1
Female (%)	7.1	6.7	10.5
Other (%)	0.2	1.6	3.4
Weekly play hours	19.5h	21h	20h
Weekly watch hours (game video)	18h	20h	24.5h
Weekly watch hours (YouTube)	13.5h	12h	10.5h
Weekly watch hours (Twitch)	4.5h	8h	14h
Daily watch hours (Twitch)	0.40h	1.10h	2h
% of streamers	24.7	26.7	37.9
% of spectators	75.3	73.3	62.1
Hours spent watching since COVID (%)	+19	+22	+25

The data collected demonstrate a progressive interest in game live streaming culture, which has inevitably grown as a result of the recent global health crisis: this has conditioned the experience and dynamics related to the practices of representation and perception of the 'ludospectator'. In this times, the activities of individuals – both producers and viewers – have become simultaneously 'localised' and 'decentralised': widespread spectacularization, aesthetic capitalism and visual hypertrophy are just some of the distinctive features of the everyday digital environment, characterised by increasing interactivity, intermediality and immersiveness.

Based on what I have observed so far, I was able to sketch the spectator identity of the Twitch user according to the four different identity parameters defined by Bauman [47]: the 'ludospectator' has the connotations of 'Author', 'Player', 'Spectator' and 'Actor'. As an author, he is able to elaborate, produce and distribute content by proposing a new and unique point of view, appropriating a language that crosses the video game medium. The shoes of player and spectator are perpetually worn by the 'ludospectator' and allow him to oscillate from one role to the other, alternating between expressions of activity, interaction and reciprocity, passivity, observation and distance, as coined by the video game and game video. Finally, as an (inter)active entity within platforms such as Twitch, the 'ludospectator' is also an actor capable of generating forms of performance. Recalling the definitions proposed by Newman regarding the game video object, the presence of a performance “to be captured, encoded and preserved” is thus evident (Fig. 1).

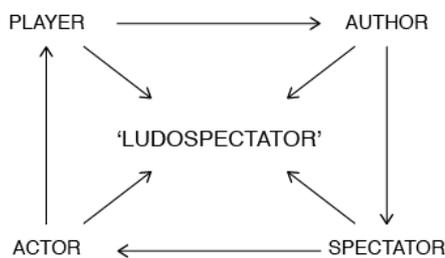


Figure 1: The four parameters of the 'ludospectator'

Trying to trace the profile of the 'ludospectator', and therefore of the new spectator identity promoted by the game live streaming

culture, through the analysis of Federico Scarpelli's studies (2021) it is possible to state that the relationship between spectator and player is in fact constituted by a mobile and plural 'game' of widespread social recognition processes [34]. Furthermore, the identity generated by the combination of performance and recognition processes is an element that catalyses the previously mentioned forms and is defined as a provisional, hybrid and ever-changing identity, filtered through multiple elements. In other words, the observation conducted so far has not allowed me to give a single face to the identity of the 'ludospectator', but to define it as a flux that adapts, changes and alters according to the contexts and manipulations to which it is subjected. In particular, the identity of the 'ludospectator' attests to and corroborates Vincenzo Romania's claims [33], who describes the concept of identity as follows: “intangible substance, abstract, difficult to define, liquid, in constant movement, nevertheless of fundamental importance for individual and collective subjects. With the strong emphasis that all sociological theories have placed in recent years on individualisation, subjectivation and the self-direction of individual behaviour, identity cannot be considered something granitic, stable or worse still, acquired or ascribed at birth”.

4. Discussion

The genesis of an unstable identity that defines the user of the platform is due to the very essence of Twitch, to all intents and purposes a mobile target and complex system, dense with processes, professionals and networks of relations in constant change and adaptation. Studying its production and fruition phenomena, hierarchies, formal and informal relations, trades, routines, habits and forms of innovation, audience ideas and more or less explicit logics therefore requires the adoption of an ethnographic method 'enriched' with other elements, together with specific cautions and attentions. Future studies on Twitch that set themselves the goal of identifying and examining its users' behaviour must take into account that classic participant observation, with periods of viewing practices and professional cultures, must make the effort to identify a field with very blurred and redefining boundaries, traversed by multiple flows of people and roles: the researcher will have to 'immerse' himself or herself often in the flow of digital content in

constant transmission, but only for very short periods, forcing them to investigate the relationships between professionals and production and distribution processes in a strategic way, maximising the opportunities for contact and dialogue with insiders without influencing their activities too much.

5. Limitations

This study is the result of an exploratory investigation that is still ongoing and is scheduled to be completed in autumn 2023. Only then will it be possible to trace the path of Twitch among players and viewers, which was traced in the years immediately following the pandemic event and which, as demonstrated by the data, report an increase in the enjoyment and production of content within the game live streaming culture. The dialogue between those involved moves from place to place, from channel to channel, from chat to chat, hampering a slavish investigation of individual communities.

As this study is focused on understanding the consumption of game video content and its effects on the creation of an identity, a survey was considered a suitable method for data collection, providing an effective way to collect personal perceptions and views of reality, but with certain limitations. The main limitation of an online survey is that the self-reported responses cannot be monitored in any way as the responses are made in an unsupervised and possibly distracted environment.

The objective of this work is subject to future variations, due to the nature of Twitch and the dynamics that characterise the behaviour of its creators and users. As already seen, Twitch shows itself as a rapidly evolving context. Suffice it to say that in the third quarter of 2022, the platform's audience favoured categories other than gaming, where the personality of the creator is placed as the focus of the content; it is no coincidence that the very design of the platform emphasises 'physical' interaction, rather than focusing only on video games. Moreover, the very regulations of Twitch.tv are rapidly updating and directly affect the production of content and consequently its enjoyment by the audience. Following this initial analysis, the latter appears as multifaceted, versatile and multifaceted, defined by multiple interests generated in parallel with the emergence of new trends, platforms and products.

6. Conclusion

This contribution is to be understood as a work-in-progress report, lying somewhere between a theoretical essay and data-based research. The objective is to identify a new spectatorship model that emerged with the culture of game live-streaming and that inherits the spectator canons of television, cabinets arcades and sports tournaments, bridging an existing gap in the definition of the identity of the contemporary spectator, with a strong focus on the interactive experience, defined as the decisive key to analysing the new spectator form assumed by network users [46].

The study design involved the formulation of data collection tools aimed at the qualitative analysis of the experience of individual users, formulating an initial sequence of results, discussed at the end of the contribution. At this point in the work, only tangential use has been made of the collected data, the intention being to formulate a spectator theory based on these.

The constant exploration of Twitch.tv, together with a form of participatory observation, will be essential to further circumscribe the analysis, identifying and distinguishing static and/or dynamic themes, processes and behaviours in which the activities of the audience stagnate. These will be useful in the drafting of further data collection tools, keeping in mind that quantitative data will provide an overview, while qualitative data will add detail and give a 'human voice' to the survey results. Finally, given the not yet fully defined boundaries of Twitch.tv, the methodology could be updated and restricted to specific contexts.

Ethnographic observation could also ensure a more in-depth insight into these activities. However, it should be noted that the intensity of this behaviour combined with its private nature, would make the use of these research methods difficult and provide further limitation to the study of this topic. Another limiting factor of this study is the geographic targeting of the survey, as it focuses on consumers in Italy

7. References

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