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The imperative to be seen:
The moral economy of celebrity video game
streaming on Twitch.tv
by Mark R. Johnson, Mark Carrigan, and Tom Brock

Abstract

In this paper we examine the pursuit of celebrity through the live broadcast ('streaming') of video games as an expression of an emerging moral economy of contemporary digital capitalism. Live streaming is a novel form overwhelmingly found amongst young people disproportionately harmed by the economic crisis, and we propose that the contraction of employment opportunities is giving rise to a strong imperative to be seen, which finds an outlet in the practices of self-presentation, self-promotion and entrepreneurial enterprise that are central to financially-successful live streaming. We first outline relevant contemporary economic conditions, the disproportionately high prizes at the top of career paths, the attendant lures of fame and fortune, and how the politics of play have been affected by these changes. We then explore Twitch.tv (the leading game live streaming platform) as our case study, covering how streamers make themselves appealing, market themselves, profit, and how the platform's affordances are interwoven into these questions. In doing so, we present Twitch as illustrative of the broader phenomenon of 'digital celebrity' and argue its practices reflect changes in work opportunities and social identity. In particular, we show that Twitch is a platform that allows neoliberal aspirations to play out through competitive performance.

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Introduction

When a cultural form is novel, it can too easily be treated in an isolated frame of reference that renders opaque its connections to phenomena either anterior or concurrent. Our argument in this paper is that the live broadcast of video games (referred to henceforth by its common title of 'live streaming'), specifically by

those who have become celebrities through this practice and those who *aspire* to become celebrities, should be seen as an expression of an emerging moral economy of digital capitalism [1], which in turn needs to be understood as part of a long-term transformation of labour markets and of capitalism itself. These changes have intensified in recent years, with the widespread imposition of austerity policies, implemented with the stated belief that a voluntary deflation in wages and prices, along with cuts to the state's budget and debts, will serve to restore competitiveness (Blyth, 2013).

However, such policies can only be understood in terms of a broader political and economic context in which they come to be seen as tenable (Seymour, 2014). The immediate antecedent to their adoption is of course the financial crisis of 2007–2008, with the subsequent development of policy representing a striking process of improvisation by formerly over-confident elites (Sorkin, 2009; Varoufakis, 2016, 2013). But their intellectual and institutional roots extend much further back, constituting an elaborated form of doctrines which are far from new [2], in response to a crisis which has been gestating within the capitalist economy since at least the 1970s (Crouch, 2011; Streeck, 2014). What were once invisible trends have now, suddenly and precipitously, become visible (Sassen, 2014).

This raises an obvious question: how should they be theorised? This paper is intended as a contribution to such a project, through the case study of a highly novel moral form, one overwhelmingly found amongst the young people who have been disproportionately harmed by the economic crisis (Allen, 2016). Video game 'streamers' are individuals who are largely between 18 and 30, earn less than US\$50,000 a year (although highly successful streaming celebrities make far more), and are generally politically inactive (Quantcast, 2016); such a demographic profile invites many questions about both the lives of aspiring streamers, and indeed for understanding why they might have become interested in making a living from the practice in the first place. Our concern with this paper is not however with the origin of the crisis, but rather with the moral economy it is giving rise to and how people cope with it. We wish to consider how a *contraction of opportunities* is giving rise to an experienced *imperative to be seen*: the possibility of fame comes to be seized upon as a way to ensure one's future security under bleak circumstances, usually in the absence of any clear idea of how the hoped for end state will be brought about.

We will analyse celebrity streaming practices in these terms, as an intended vector of self-transformation but, in reality, for most a vortex which can only reliably equip a small number to manage the demands of a precarious future. The imperative to be seen does not occur in a vacuum, but intersects with the emergence of digital platforms with their own distinctive politics (Ask, *et al.*, 2019) and political economies (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). In this paper we use the case study of celebrity streaming to address the broader question of how people attempt to *cope* [3] with the emerging realities of digital capitalism [4], as well as how these endeavours will feed back into the changes which are generating them. Our argument is that the imperative to be seen leaves people ripe for (self) commodification by platforms whose primary focus is on the *accumulation of attention*, leaving them inclined to nurture and promote those figures who demonstrate a capacity to win the attention of others.

The growing lure of fame and fortune

The language of occupational opportunity is a potent one within Anglo-American capitalism, with corresponding ideals of the "American dream" and "meritocracy" exercising a profound influence over respective national conversations. In so far as these ideas are experienced as plausible, it reflects a cultural awareness of the financial and social rewards accorded to those who have reached the pinnacle of their fields. The expectation of extremely high salaries for high-ranking professions has now been normalised across most advanced economies [5]. Finance was obviously an originator in this respect, yet in recent years the already steadily increasing salaries and bonuses in finance have been superseded by annual incomes in hedge funds and private equity that are reliably in the millions.

This has been accompanied by a cultural celebration of such figures for 'striking out on their own' [6]. Those billionaires who embraced public works, particularly those who are current or former tech prodigies, enjoy a prominent public profile as a result both of the allure of perceived technological innovation and their diverse philanthropic entanglements (Losse, 2012; McGoey, 2015; Vance, 2015). Perhaps more influentially, the stratospheric incomes of celebrities across a range of fields mingle with the minutiae of their daily lives in a media culture dependent on celebrity, even if manufactured from the lives of 'ordinary people', in order to satiate its structural demand for content (Turner, 2010).

The reality of such a prospect is more questionable for most. The high-profile beneficiaries of the two Silicon Valley 'gold rushes' [7] have helped engender a culture of frantic networking and compulsive self-marketing in which we can find countless aspirants for each success story (Marwick, 2013; Garcia Martinez, 2016). Global celebrities enjoy their global status as a function of 'superstar effects' which preclude all but a small number reaching this status. Digitalisation has facilitated the possibility of dominating what is for the first time a genuinely global cultural marketplace, but the economic rewards are distributed in a *winner-takes-most* fashion [8]. A figure like Lady Gaga, who earned US\$170 million through 137 shows performed in 25 countries over the space of a year, represents an obvious beneficiary of this process.

However, the same process that facilitates this global audience also weakens the music industry as a whole. As Freedland [9] observed, 'Cheap and effective communication has allowed a few performers to achieve global celebrity more quickly and at a greater scale than ever', but it has done so in a way which

concur with a contraction of the opportunities available to aspirants within these fields, as well as in some ways directly intensifying this process. The rewards available to those able to achieve recognition as the 'best' within their field are greater than ever, while the opportunities available to aspirants within these fields are contracting, in some cases precipitously.

Under these conditions, the demand for desirable career paths vastly outstrips the supply. This trend has been compounded since the crisis as financial necessity has led increasing numbers into freelancing as a matter of necessity, as well as second-jobbing or multiple-jobbing as they struggle to pursue their aspirations (Conor, *et al.*, 2015; Taylor, 2015). The rapid expansion of digital employment platforms in the so-called 'gig economy' suggest a significant expansion of such precarious autonomy, rather than its diminution (Dyer-Witthof, 2015; Scholz, 2013). The future looks bleak for many, and we are arguing that novel forms of life project — such as the aspiration to become a celebrity live streamer — should be investigated in these terms.

In relation to this increasingly foreclosed future, it becomes significant that *digital* communications and social media have profoundly expanded the means through which one can seek to 'be seen': as Marwick [10] points out, '[b]efore the Internet a prospective self-brander was limited to putting up fliers at grocery stores, knocking on neighbours' doors, buying advertisements in the local paper, or attending potentially inaccessible industry only events'. To ensure one's own visibility, cultivate a public image and seek to ensure that image is received in the intended way is straight-forwardly much more viable than was previously the case: there are more means through which to do it, there is often little cost involved [11] and the platforms in use have become taken for granted parts of everyday life.

With this said, we must also recognise how, as Gregg (2011) puts it, 'social media were sold as the solution to the problems of the contemporary workplace', with the discourse of self-branding presented as 'career protection in uncertain times'. The problem arises because '[e]ven uniqueness starts to sound the same when everyone is trying to perform it', and 'Brand You' was 'never conceived for a mass audience, not to mention a time when every other mid-ranked knowledge worker was competing for a dwindling number of jobs' (Gregg, 2011). This intensifying dilemma *within* the working world constitutes a broader moral economy in which 'being seen' becomes progressively more important while it becomes increasingly difficult to stand out from a crowd of similarly oriented others. It is within this context that we now address the live streaming of video games and the aspiration to become a celebrity streamer as: 1) an escape from contemporary working conditions for young people, and 2) an extreme example of the economic and cultural impetus towards self-propelled visibility.

The psychology of play and its politico-economic context

In order to begin understanding the appeal of turning to *play* as one's *career*, we need to look at the psychology of play and the broader context regarding leisure, labour and the use of one's time, with which it is interwoven. In psychology, play is often defined in terms of its internality: intrinsic rewards that have to do with one's own personal development, such as the desire to overcome an obstacle, find a meaningful philosophy for life, or simply enjoy one's use of time (Deci, 1975). In recent years, however, it has been suggested that we are witnessing the decline of play for these intrinsic reasons, particularly as young people increasingly turn to extrinsic goals as a locus of control (Gray, 2010). Extrinsic goals are those that have to do with material rewards and other people's normative judgments: they include goals of high income, status as well as attractive looks or favorable personality traits. It has been argued that this focus towards externality is attributable to generational increases in anxiety and depression, particularly as children and young people find it harder to establish an internal locus of control (Twenge, 2010).

In other words, a culture of materialism has ushered in a decline in the 'free activity' of play, which by definition affords young people with opportunities for introspection, and to establish a sense of self-control over their own interests and competencies. Without it, they become reliant on the assurances of others — particularly adults who establish external goals on their behalf, but also the judgements of those on social media and beyond — as to the value of their 'play'. Parents also tend to have a limited knowledge of gaming careers (Jiow, *et al.*, 2018), although some are aware of the employment options in the field, and the associated kinds of work and dedication they can require.

Many games (whether or not streamed on Twitch, our central case study) operate in a similar manner. They provide an external locus of control which players supposedly consume in order to actualise a sense of 'individualized, episodic progress' (Molesworth and Watkins, 2014). What this means is that many games are designed and developed to encourage repetitive acts that help players experience a sense of control and achievement (Grodal, 2000). These experiences then provide working people with an escape from 'real' life through the establishment of ever-more productive virtual identities: what Kirkpatrick (2013), paraphrasing Boltanski and Chiapello, calls the 'streamlined gamer'.

Viewed in this way, commercial *games* are seen to provide the conditions of possibility for *productive* lifestyles. Young gamers spend their days collecting items, power-ups, and experience points with the intention of becoming ever more powerful and controlling ever more successful avatars. They find ways to become efficient producers for the realm or world in which they inhabit, often racing against the clock to collect the most resources, defeat their competition, or accrue other metrics of digital success. The prospect of 'celebrity streamer' as a life project finds normative grounding in this disposition, while still being reliant on

other factors to explain its elaboration into a life project. For a deeper history of the relationship between video game media and the activities of their players as mediated by live streaming, see Taylor (2018); but our interest here is in drawing out the practices of streamers on Twitch to consider the moral imperatives which underscore them, especially regarding the need to be seen and its connections to neoliberalism, time and productivity.

It should now be obvious that these dispositions also provide an affective ground state for the same skills demanded by a neoliberal political economy. Workers are expected to undertake repetitive tasks, often at short notice, and with the intention of maximizing their productivity to 'win' — that is, be the most efficient — within a competitive setting. Perhaps Wark (2007) describes it best when they suggest that commercial games are analogous to the rat-race that characterises neoliberal capitalism: players are carefully attuned to the idea that whilst the system is precarious [12], as long as they play their best, they will always have a chance at winning. Discussion surrounding games as a whole increasingly acknowledge that playful activities are being enlisted to 'do work' (Walker, 2014), and as such the professionalization of computer gaming should be seen as operating in a similar manner: offering those with the skills of good gameplay a glimmer of hope within a market that is excessively competitive and financially insecure (Taylor, 2012; Bayliss, 2016).

This is very much the case in live streaming, where broadcasters who aspire to success not only need to be autonomous and instrumental in the ways that they mediate the competing demands of this market, but must align themselves with neoliberal entrepreneurialism if they are to succeed (Johnson and Woodcock, 2017). The aspirational player-and-streamer must find ways to exploit the emerging economic opportunities that professional gaming affords, including connecting themselves with corporate sponsors, and investors (Woodcock and Johnson, in press). From this perspective, when play becomes an extrinsic reward, its values may be considered 'corrupted' (to borrow from Brock, 2017), as its motivation becomes purely instrumental: a question of directed labour that leads to revenue (Sotamaa, 2007), rather than a question of undirected leisure.

It is therefore clear that the move into professional play as an extension of the precarious circumstances that feed the contraction of employment opportunities in older forms of work. Play in the digital economy is not always liberating, but on the contrary, can compound the motivation of neoliberal capitalism to orientate its subjects towards extrinsic, that is, productive goals. Where this game is presented as a level-playing field, within which anyone can participate, the reality is quite different.

With the conflicting intrinsic and extrinsic values of play in our contemporary cultural-economic context established, the next section of this paper will describe Twitch and live streaming in more detail, contextualising our later discussion of these dynamics. As the clear market leader in live broadcasting, Twitch (the platform) has become all but synonymous with live streaming (the practice), and analysis of one is impossible without the other.

Live broadcast and the growth of Twitch.tv

We therefore now come to explore live streaming itself, and setting the groundwork to understand the celebrity dynamics manifested on the platform within the contexts of capitalism and extrinsic play previously outlined. Twitch.tv is a Web site that enables video game players from around the world to broadcast their gameplay, live, to a theoretically unlimited number of people. This live element distinguishes it from video sharing site YouTube, which — although YouTube has a rarely-used live function — is overwhelmingly focused on the uploading of previously-recorded video content. Equally, while gaming is one of the most viewed segments of YouTube, gaming dominates on Twitch, with all but the smallest handful of live streamers focusing on digital (and in some rarer cases analogue) play. Recently purchased by Amazon for US\$1bn, in the last five years it has become the world's 30th most visited Web site, with over 500,000 years of video broadcast by around two million broadcasters in each of the last several years. On Twitch, anyone who wishes to 'stream' their gameplay creates a 'channel' on which they can stream any game content they desire (within a small number of content restrictions and legal requirements), with viewers players able to switch rapidly between channels whenever desired (Spilker, *et al.*, 2018). Twitch is also, of course, connected in diverse ways to wider ecosystems of game production and game consumption (Taylor, 2018; Johnson and Woodcock, 2019), although these are beyond our discussion here.

The most basic stream simply shows the game being played by the player, giving viewers the exact same vision of the game as the player themselves gets on their computer screen. A slightly more complex streaming setup will consist of two components — the game being broadcast, and a webcam showing the person playing the game. This allows viewers to see the person commentating over the game, to observe their facial reactions, and potentially to see something of the room they broadcast from, their microphone and so forth. More sophisticated streaming setups can include a bespoke graphical layout within which the game and webcam are positioned, hyperlinks to the streamer's social media profiles, various trackers that monitor recent donations or how many viewers have 'subscribed' to the channel today (Johnson and Woodcock, in press), or textual information about the channel such as the streamer's schedule or the name of the game they are currently playing.

Twitch channels also vary immensely in size, therefore creating a wide spectrum of audience sizes that a streamer can influence on Twitch. The smallest streamers have only a handful of viewers at any one moment, whilst the most successful celebrity streamers can reliably bring in tens of thousands of viewers every time they broadcast. On larger channels, streamers — as we will see later — have developed, both alongside Twitch and under their own initiative, a range

of methods for monetizing and gaining profit from their channels. This has got to the point that *celebrity* streamers are now able to make a full-time living, in many cases an income substantially above minimum-wage, from playing video games and broadcasting this play online (Johnson and Woodcock, 2017).

At first glance, therefore, Twitch appears to be an exemplary platform for those who want to have a career 'doing what they love' (if that is playing video games), which brings with it the appeal of thousands or even millions of viewers, substantial income, and personality celebrity visibility within a rapidly-growing new form of media production. However, just from this description we can, without preempting later analysis, immediately begin to identify a number of potential concerns. For example, the hard and extraordinarily competitive conditions to be found in 'esports' ('electronic sports', which is to say professionalised video game competition) such as those explored by Dal Yong Jin (2010) and T.L. Taylor (2012) should sensitise us to the kinds inequalities likely to emerge here along lines of gender, sexuality, and race. These are spaces that strongly reward those who hold to a hegemonic white, able-bodied, heterosexual masculinity, and can be challenging to negotiate for those who do not.

In turn, the easy metricisation of 'success' in terms of follower counts, subscriptions and donations is an example of what van Dijck (2013) calls the 'popularity principle': the architecture of the platform incites participants towards become 'more successful' as operationalised through these metrics and data (*cf.*, Partin, 2019). Such a temptation does not of course dictate that all participants approach streaming in this way (*cf.*, Archer, 2007), but we can see *encouragement* as an emergent property of the design, inciting participants to dispose themselves towards the pleasures of the platform in a specific range of ways. What is striking about the case of streaming is how the criteria through which we might perform assessments of competence or ability, towards ourselves or others, find themselves naturalised within the architecture of the platform itself (Marres and Gerlitz, 2016; Marres, 2017; Rogers, 2013).

By isolating these criteria, in which personal 'success' and platform 'popularity' tend towards being conflated [13], we can begin to ask wider questions about the social and economic conditions under which such an intensely metricised pursuit comes to be perceived as worthwhile to subjects and as a potential contributor to their well-being (Sayer, 2011).

Having outlined Twitch and posed questions about the dynamics of labour and celebrity that might be present on the platform, we now look to analyze its unique dynamics of activity and behaviour, its appeal to young people, and the new careers and forms of celebrity it has enabled. To do so we will intertwine further discussion of the platform with further analysis of our contemporary socioeconomic conditions. Specifically, three elements of our earlier discussion demand our particular attention in the subsequent analysis.

Firstly, the newfound ubiquity of highly public hagiographies of 'independent', 'self-motivated' and 'disruptive' celebrity individuals across a range of employment fields, who are praised for their abilities to transcend ordinary career paths and become highly visible in their respective areas (Aschoff, 2015).

Secondly, the concurrent actual *contraction* of such opportunities, especially for young people, and the rise of a system which emphasises the need to advertise one's abilities and optimise one's time in the pursuit of fame alongside or as an alternative to traditional forms of labour (Gregg, 2011; Standing, 2011). With so many professional gamers in their twenties, we should pay particular attention to the status of professional game-players as 'young adults and early labourers' [14], with these demographic markers significantly shaping their experiences.

Thirdly, with the increasing pooling of wealth and power in smaller and smaller circles, the presence of disproportionate rewards available to those who are able to reach such heights; it is against the background of this winner-takes-all economy that the aspiration towards celebrity increases in salience as a life project (Hacker and Pierson, 2010), and can be seen reflected in a significant percentage of the two million regular broadcasters on Twitch.

The promise incipient within the emerging moral economy of digital capitalism rests on such a contradiction between the normalised aspiration for such heights, and the impossibility of those heights for all but the smallest number, and it is to how this promise plays out on Twitch to which we now turn.

Competitive performance through Twitch architecture

As we have already noted, there are several million channels on Twitch, with an average of two million individuals broadcasting from their channels every month. No precise figures exist on the number of *professionals* within this number due to both the lack of data collection and the inevitable terminological ambiguity about the concept of the 'professional streamer' (one's primary income, or sole income, or some other metric?), but at least a few thousand individuals (Johnson and Woodcock, 2017) are able to meet their full economic life requirements through Twitch streaming, although a much larger number (at least tens of thousands) make a meaningful additional income from the practice. This number is growing as the service continues to grow, and as Twitch continue to add new ways for broadcasters to generate revenue (Partin, in press; Johnson and Woodcock, in press).

In principle, all streamers start from the same point as being unknown and un-viewed. Although many successful streamers had successful careers elsewhere (such as within professional competitive gaming, or on YouTube prior to moving to Twitch) [15], other big names had no fame prior to their Twitch careers, an

observation that does much to implicitly encourage new aspirational streamers. All face comparable mundane challenges in terms of the investment of time required to have any chance of achieving visibility (Wacjman, 2015), privileging those able to rely on familial resources in a manner homologous with the intern system (Perlin, 2012). It is one thing to stream in one's spare time, but quite another to have the existing security to prioritise streaming for weeks, months, maybe even years, without it yet becoming profitable.

However, reaching the apex of success requires differentiation from the masses of other players somehow, and in studying these methods of differentiation we will observe the precariousness of such labour in a world where streamers have approximately a one-in-a-thousand chance [16] of achieving a career through these means (*cf.*, Guarriello, 2019).

All streamers who broadcast as anything more than a leisure activity compete to commodify their streaming time (*cf.*, Sotamaa, 2007), become the most visible, and thereby the most financially successful. We propose that there are two distinctive forms of streamer competition, which we identify as being 'community' competition, and 'general' competition. We begin with the former. Two illustrative examples of community competition can be found amongst 'speedrunners' and poker streamers. Speedrunning is the practice of 'completing a game as quickly as possible without the use of cheats' (Scully-Blaker, 2014). Speedrunning communities have created detailed leaderboards for the practice, and although speedrunning took place before the advent of Twitch, it is only in the last five years that it — like all streaming more broadly — has risen in popularity and importance.

Many speedrun streamers pull in thousands of regular viewers consistently, but a higher-level overview of speedrunning practice in the last five years on Twitch shows clear fluctuating interest in streamers based on their current successes in speedrunning a particular game. As leaderboards change so too do the players who are watched and thereby generate income, and thus players are pushed towards the labour required to acquire world records in these highly-competitive games.

Although not a 'video game' in the traditional sense, there are also numerous streamers on Twitch who broadcast their real-money play on online poker sites, with the stream on a delay of several minutes in order to avoid their competitors simply opening the stream in order to see their cards. In the last two years an informal competition has emerged between these streamers, who are normally either professional poker players or former professionals, to see who can win the most *live on stream* in a single session.

At time of writing, the largest 'cash' to date is around US\$450,000 of real money won in a single session, but it seems unlikely this competition will cease any time soon. The streamer who achieved this received greater visibility than he had previously enjoyed and seems to have benefited from this fame. The relationship between celebrity and wealth is clear in this example, where the two reinforce one another through poker profits boosting channel visibility, and channel visibility boosting income. The rich become richer (*cf.*, Freeland, 2012) because prior success is such a potent resource to be leveraged into differentiating oneself further in the pursuit of more success.

However, streaming nevertheless maintains the enticing possibility of instant success for *anybody*, and being catapulted into that highest echelon of most visible, and most financially well-off, broadcasters. Tracking leaderboards in speedrunning or tracking profit earned in a single session on poker both represent the metricisation of success noted by van Dijck (2013). By managing to rise to the top of these metrics, even previously unknown streamers can rapidly become disruptive and visible celebrities who rapidly rise from nothing to sudden substantial fame on the back of their sudden success and consequent noteworthiness. There are dozens, or perhaps even hundreds of communities on Twitch of this sort, all of which have their share of superstars, aspirants, and those in the middle. This enables streamers to pursue visibility through various paths — yet all are, nevertheless, competitive.

Digital celebrity and competitive work personas

Given the challenge of attaining high status, the relevant cultural question however is how and why such *outliers* — the successful, professional streamers — come to be (mis)represented as a potential *norm*? Celebrity is an inherently untenable aspiration when it is collectively pursued. As Goffman [17] wrote, by 'fame' we 'refer to the possibility that the circle of people who know about a given individual, especially in connection with a rare desirable achievement or possession, can become very wide, and at the same time much wider than the circle of those who know him personally.' By definition only a handful of people within a field can enjoy fame in this sense, and the competitive dynamics of differentiation mean the 'price of entry' is continually rising. This means that 'building a commodifiable work persona' [18] is an essential part of the streaming process, because 'digital profile management has become integral labour in its own right' [19]. Such management entails not just the cultivation of fame but presenting an image of fame and success as appropriate, earned, and so forth.

Moving beyond specific communities to consider streamers as a whole and what we call *general competition*, numerous methods have emerged for boosting the visibility and profitability of one's Twitch channel. Firstly, some have come to undertake particular stream challenges, such as streaming for long volumes of time, as a method for gaining interest in their streams. A 24-hour stream to celebrate some special event — a round-number of subscribers or followers, or the

release of a new game particularly relevant to the streamer — is not uncommon. Some streamers have even gone further and 48-hour streams have been known to take place. Such 'extreme' and transgressive practices that undermine the assumptions of a normal working day even more than Twitch does ordinarily are increasingly common methods for gaining particular attention, and notoriety, amongst streaming viewers. These are a form of 'representational labour' [20] which is designed to show viewers the reliability of a particular streamer, the interest of their channel, and therefore the sense in tuning in to their broadcast as opposed to those of others.

This escalation of competition compounds the practical challenges posed by celebrity streaming as a life strategy, with the price paid in order to stand a chance of 'being seen' tending to rise continually due to the logic inherent in the architecture of the platform itself. As Striphas (2015) noted, many social media platforms are presented as a democratization of culture. However, as a result of how all algorithms function, which is to say the opaque sorting and prioritization of data, we are left with a 'mystification' of culture into a black box we lack access to, and the contraction of culture into what is deemed preferable by a large 'crowd' — a crowd which, in actual fact, is an algorithm. Twitch has deployed a range of methods for gaining publicity for new streamers, and has employees whose jobs are specifically to identify and nurture those with the potential to 'go pro' (become professional streamers), but these valuable attempts at a healthy and ordered kind of support nevertheless exist alongside the ever-present potential to boost one's publicity by other means.

To turn to the above examples of streaming practice, it goes without saying that remaining awake for such periods of time is not healthy. The competition on Twitch is so fierce that it can potentially be challenging to mental and physical health (Johnson, 2018), but such risks are — for some streamers — part of the one-upmanship of broadcast competition. Twitch is very clear in not endorsing this practice, but does not explicitly prevent the existence of long streams. More strictly managed is the (declining) tendency for some streamers — predominantly female, but also male — to attempt to recruit viewers to their stream by showing a lot of flesh. In the case of men this meant physically fit streaming shirtless, and in the case of women it meant streaming with only a bra on one's upper body, or a very low-cut top and an appropriately angled webcam. The current stricter rules are still navigated by streamers pursuing these strategies, but are more restrictive than they once were.

All of this is what Goffman (1959) calls a 'cynical performance' — the use of ploys to gain advantage over a consumer. Irrespective of any concerns around such choices, we can clearly see this behavior — and its unplanned emergence through the collective ideas of broadcasters — as the kind of independent 'striking out' discussed earlier, whereby streamers wishing to differentiate themselves from the millions of competitors have to find something unique they can offer that other streamers and their channels cannot, even if it comes with its own risks and concerns.

Given the extreme competition likely to ensue in a rapidly growing field with little to no barriers to entry, it is possible that these practices are but a foretaste of things to come. Again we see the tension within digital capitalism's moral economy, as a celebration of individual 'success' goes hand-in-hand with cut-throat competition which leaves self-subordination deemed a worthwhile practice by many (Wark, 2007).

Time, productivity and neoliberalism

Nevertheless, even for those who stream 'healthily' and/or stream within the limits set out by Twitch, the entrepreneurial use of *time* as a resource remains essential. Successful streamers tend to be very constant in their broadcast timings with a clear and unchanging weekly schedule; they tend to stream regularly, with numerous professional streamers running a show on their channel every single day of the week barring unexpected 'real life' occurrences. These two forms of regularization are designed to teach viewers that their channel will broadcast often and reliably, and to maximise the impact that each unit of time spent broadcasting has: the more one broadcasts, the more 'value' each broadcast has in boosting visibility, as well as all broadcasts together serving to boost visibility, in a snowballing effect. The temporal autonomy necessary for such activity runs contrary to a prevailing state of 'non-stop inertia' experienced by those who are unemployed or under-employed (Southwood, 2011). The regular exercise of reflexivity relating to one's use of time is an important factor in achieving success. But the prospects for this are limited when much work is experienced either as accelerated or as slowly exhaustive of temporal resources (Agger, 2004; Sharma, 2014; Rosa, 2013).

The methods by which streamers monetise their streams are also intriguing, and also merit elucidation (Johnson and Woodcock, in press). Twitch streamers can be broken down into three economic categories: those who stream without any monetization on their stream, whether Twitch's integrated 'subscriber' system or their own donation systems (*cf.*, Jiow, *et al.*, 2018); those who stream with monetization but do not make enough money to stream as their primary income; and those whose streams are monetised and successful enough to bring in enough money to live off. As noted at the start of the paper, any stream that is attempting to monetise itself will rarely consist of only live gameplay. Most will contain live webcams, extra textual information, a custom layout and visual aesthetic, and text that automatically updates for a new followers, or — when a channel is more popular — a new subscriber. These make streams look more professional and bring a clear neoliberal entrepreneurial dimension to the practice by monetising acts of self-work (Dardot and Larval, 2013).

Subscriptions and donations are two of the primary methods by which streamers earn their income, and in both cases streamers have found resourceful ways to maximise the inclination of viewers to give the money through these two different avenues. Some streamers come up with unique collective nouns for their groups of subscribers ('the wolf pack', 'the army', 'the freedom fighters', 'the nerds'), whilst others perform special things when someone subscribes, such as placing a pin on a physical world map in their room with the streamer's location, saying something special including the subscriber's name or another action that can only be 'triggered' through a subscription and is personalised towards the specific subscriber. In some cases a special sound clip will play from a particular film, piece of music or game.

Such streamers have thereby even turned the act of *giving them money* into a game (Johnson and Woodcock, in press), which serves as another form of interaction between the streamer and their viewers. Some channels list the 'Top Donator' or 'Latest Subscriber', encouraging viewers to donate more, or subscribe, in order to have their name displayed on screen (until it is trumped once more). This is an example of what Chris Rojek (2015) calls 'presumed' or 'parasocial' intimacy: a modern version of what Goffman called the 'nod counts' of the familiar stranger, which is to say a way to get recognition without actually getting to truly *know* the person on an intimate or empathetic level. In this way streamers transform more traditional forms of human interaction into a form of revenue generation, with surface-level personalization giving a sense of real relationships between broadcaster and viewer(s).

Given this supposed intimacy, streamers have been known to comment on social media outlets on the paradoxical relationship they have with their viewers who both feel a part of the streamer's life and yet remain geographically and emotionally distant, and the concurrent necessity of presenting a certain intimacy in order to foster the connections that will make one a popular streamer. In this sense, the striving of the aspirant celebrity streamer should not be seen as lonely, but rather as intensely *connective*, if not necessarily social (van Dijck, 2013).

There is therefore a wealth of systems available to streamers, under their own stream or under the aegis of Twitch, for monetizing their broadcasted gameplay and transforming streaming activities into 'productive' labour (Witkowski, *et al.*, 2016). Although each of these methods may seem trivial by itself, the combination provides two things: firstly, a number of ways by which viewers can support their favourite streamers, offering at least one method that will hopefully appeal to each viewer; secondly, what we might understand as a complete collection of elements a viewer can 'collect'. The acquisition of one encourages the acquisition of others, and this is thereby somewhat comparable to the expansive storytelling of transmedia franchises with elements of the same fictional world being relayed across a wide range of media that require different forms of engagement or expenditure by the reader (Long, 2007; Scolari, 2009), and in turn the broader capitalistic drive towards acquisition in general and specifically the acquisition of all possible game content within other virtual worlds (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2003).

The greater the number of ways to engage with a streamer, the greater the chance that a given viewer will engage with at least one, and that having done so they will be inclined to engage with others. Equally, the imperative to be seen reflected in all of these practices designed to maximise visibility and viewer retention function as a means to *legitimizing* the system these practices exist within. All of these elements combine to encourage a particular kind of aspiration: the feeling of a successful *performance*, and the instrumental expectations of gaining followers and thereby earning 'success' on a granular and gradual level. As such, all of Twitch's quantified modes of 'success', far from unique to streaming platforms, find an affinity in the dispositions of late modern youth.

What, however, can we say of those who do not make it? As we have noted, the future for many appears to be one of breaking into the upper echelons of their career of choice, or accepting a working life without the forms of occupational security which post-war social democracy sought to achieve [21]. As one new element of this trend we have examined the methods by which streamers strive for the small apex of celebrity and full-time income available with the highest possible success upon the Twitch platform. However, with several million regular streamers and only thousands of partnered streamers — only a percentage of whom make enough to quit any other forms of income — we might ask: what happens to those who strive, and perform all the steps above, but still don't 'make it'?

It is clear that these individuals are left more precarious for having made the effort but failed. This effort could have been committed to other forms of employment or skills training designed to make them more employable, but by committing to the long and regular hours, and the substantial mental and physical commitment of a streaming career, they have effectively prevented themselves from exploring other options. The optimizing of their time in pursuit of fame also works to preclude them from being responsive to other opportunities and employment options, a core part of the discourses of contemporary capitalism. Pursuing a streaming career is therefore simultaneously a point of immense potential value for aspirants and one with few formal barriers to entry, but one where only the smallest apex of streamers achieve that level, and the majority are left with fewer alternate options than they had before their striving for that goal. This makes live streaming an exemplary site of study when it comes to the employment and cultural conditions of young people in the present economic climate, and how the pursuit of the highest success intersects with the challenge of achieving any career security at all.

Conclusion


This paper has drawn on examples of video game live streaming in the digital economy to conceptualise the moral and economic imperatives that underwrite (digital) celebrity today. It has shown how 'fame' operates to create precarious working relations within the digital economy through the frameworks of 'neoliberal entrepreneurialism' and the aspiration for 'celebrity'. What we see is that the contraction of work opportunities in traditional sectors of work (service jobs) prompts a move into the digital economy as a coping mechanism; this is a field that is presented as egalitarian, but which actually obscures power relations that structurally disadvantage later comers, as well as those who do not have the resources needed to fit the imperative to be seen. Computers have fundamentally altered the 'technological processes of capital' [22], tilting many of these towards highly-competitive, celebrity-driven, almost monopolistic (or at least highly exclusive) forms of labour such as live streaming. This, in tandem with the overwhelming youth of those pursuing it, make it an important line of critical enquiry.

It is difficult to politicise the power relations of this digital political economy, as the language of contemporary streamers is couched in moral terms. There is an elective affinity between the life project of the aspirant celebrity steamer and a cultural blurring of the boundaries between 'play' and 'work'. The former is a process facilitated by digitalization and incited by digital capitalism, while the latter is a longer-term change that manifests on a number of levels, not least of all in the changing culture of workplaces (Cederström and Fleming, 2012). Political economists have offered alternative ways to structure and organise the means by which labour is financially recompensed online, but more care is needed in tackling its moral dimension if we are to appropriately address the systems that underwrite digital celebrity.

We consequently propose two primary outcomes from this paper. Firstly, we have presented video game live streaming and the emergence of celebrity from the practice as an illustrative case study of the broader phenomena outlined in the previous sections with regards to digital celebrity, neoliberal aspiration and the contraction of work opportunities. Given the growth of the platform, this is an important time to begin understanding these wider political economic entanglements of Twitch, in order to situate future analysis as live streaming, most likely, becomes even more influential and therefore an even more appealing career path for many. Secondly, these theoretical orientations help us to understand the particular culture of Twitch, the varied range of performative competitions that play out on the platform and some of the more striking (and even potentially damaging) practices that streamers partake in as a means to get ahead. The platform has come to exemplify numerous elements of contemporary competitive labour in its ordering of time, bodies, attitudes and efforts, and therefore helps us understand the behaviours of those who do decide to explore this income path.

We should stress that Twitch as a company is unambiguous in condemning, or at least not endorsing, the various controversial or potentially damaging working practices of the sorts we have outlined in this paper, but that the allure of digital celebrity and the process by which celebrity can (supposedly) be attained force many of its aspirant users into competitive spectacles that range from the relatively mundane — leaderboards, high-score competitions, and the like — to the more problematic. Popular discourses surrounding live streaming construct it as 'fun' yet 'lucrative', and it is these discourses that generate the extreme levels of competition, and extremely rare numbers of highest-level success, we have explored.

More broadly than the phenomenon of live streaming, the relative deprivation of many young people under contemporary neoliberal labour conditions is compounded by the disjuncture between their education levels and the reality of the work available to them [23], with many young people reduced to mere 'click-workers' [24] in the digital economy. Structural questions about occupational opportunities are increasingly obscured by cultural ones concerning individual morality, specifically with regard to the level of work and effort that individuals are expected to put in in order to climb to the top. Gerrard (2014) has argued that education and training become important moral markers, signaling a willingness to develop the self in order to better fare on the labour market. This desire for self-improvement and in turn the place of self-improvement as a method towards fame and financial success finds a strong outlet in the world of video game live streaming, existing as it does within a domain that requires no formal qualifications, minimal start-up costs, involves the play of leisure activities as the foundation upon which such a career will be built (*cf.*, Sotamaa, 2007; Johnson and Woodcock, 2017), and has the demonstrated capacity to result in six-figure incomes and tremendous levels of digital fame.

These elements combine to offer a (very obvious) appeal, which in turn leads to the particular streaming phenomena outlined in this work, reinforced by the affordances and structures of streaming Web sites. Bauman (2004) has dramatically proclaimed an epochal shift in which 'unemployed' as a fleeting condition has given way to 'redundancy' as a perpetual possibility; streaming seems to offer not just a way out of such a situation, but a way to actively turn one's spare (or redundant) time to career benefit without prerequisite training or substantial investment. It has consequently become a distinctive and hotly-contested new source of digital celebrity, and one that brings with it particular dynamics and practices that merit our scholarly attention. 

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Notes

1. We understand 'moral economy' in terms of the mutual imbrication of the 'moral' and the 'economic'. In our case study, this helps us identify the relation between a particular kind of moral form (the aspiration towards streaming celebrity) to a particular kind of context (the austerian 'death of the future'). Furthermore, this is a relation facilitated by socio-technical innovations that are themselves deeply implicated in socio-economic transformation. Thus the question of *what matters* to someone, as well as how it comes to matter, can be a frame through which to explore much broader questions of social and economic change (Sayer, 2011).

2. See for instance Harvey (2005), Mirowski (2013) and Srnicek and Williams (2015).

3. Attempting to cope in this sense implies the formulation of plans and projects, no matter how untenable or unlikely some of them may be (Archer, 2007). However, the exigencies of daily life under some circumstances may preclude coping in this sense, as the day-to-day challenge of survival precludes much of the future-orientated thinking we discuss here, at least for tracts of time when someone struggles to, for instance, secure shelter (Desmond, 2016; Judah, 2016).

4. A description we use to designate the emerging phase of capitalism in which digitalisation has left finance beyond the direct control of financiers, transformed the experience of everyday life, established the ascendancy of data capital and characterised by a growing domination by a small number of expansionary and increasingly oligopolistic technology firms (Archer, 2014; Lewis, 2015; van Dijck, 2013; Wajcman, 2015).

5. Sassen, 2014, loc 373–388.

6. Freedland, 2012, p. 120.

7. This is Peter Thiel's (2014) term, offered as someone who has been a beneficiary of the initial dot com boom (1998–2000) and the subsequent 'Web 2.0' boom that gave rise to social media. The norm that figures such as Thiel enter venture capital, something made possible by their earlier successes, illustrates the intensively winner-takes-all dynamics of digital capitalism.

8. Marres, 2017, p. 61.

9. Freedland, 2012, pp. 108–109.

10. Marwick, 2013, p. 185.

11. In the sense of fees for access to goods and services, as opposed to the vast quantified of unpaid labour entailed by such self-branding activities.

12. Zolides, 2015, p. 44.

13. Recognising that streamers are not *passively moulded* by systemic imperatives opens up an important range of empirical questions. How are these metrics understood at the everyday level of what Couldry (2014) calls 'social analytics'? How do orientations towards them vary at different points in the careers of streamers? Does it become more difficult to sustain a purely playful orientation, in isolation from considerations of quantifiable success, as the moral career of a streamer progresses?

14. Zolides, 2015, p. 43.

15. See Johnson and Woodcock (2017). Studying the cross-pollination of celebrities and Internet visibility across multiple content creation platforms is a rich direction for future enquiry, and will shed further light upon many of the theoretical concerns — self-promotion, digital celebrity, the cultivation of the image of the self-motivated individual, and so forth — elucidated in this paper.

16. There are approximately two million people who stream regularly and well over 20,000 'partnered' streamers, which is to say streamers who communicate directly with Twitch and gain significant benefits when attempting to make an income on the platform.

17. Goffman, 1963, p. 68.

18. Zolides, 2015, p. 42.

19. Zolides, 2015, p. 43.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Standing, 2011, loc 353.

22. Dyer-Witthford, 2015, p. 42.

23. Standing, 2011, loc 34.

24. Holts, 2013, p. 31.

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