eSports and Streaming: Twitch Literacies

Hannah R. Gerber

As I walked into the monthly university eSports LAN (local area network), players were setting up computer towers and powerful gaming laptops in rows on long tables in preparation for an all-night game play session. The background noise of multiple humming computers and light chatter was interrupted by punctuations of laughter as friends greeted each other after the winter break, slapping high-fives, playfully shoving each other, and catching up on their latest gaming breakthroughs. Snippets of conversation floated above the din and provided an insider perspective into the latest champions in the popular multiplayer online battle arena Leagues of Legends.

I glanced around the dimly lit room, and near the center, at the front table, Jerry (all names and gamer tags are pseudonyms) was setting up a complex system of a computer, smartphone, headphones, and a large microphone, which he began to test to ensure that his Twitch channel was streaming on the main projection system at the front of the room (see Figure 1). Jerry, gamer tag RocketDog, is a diamond-ranked player in a team-based multiplayer first-person shooter game called Overwatch, a top member of his university’s Overwatch competition team, and an avid video game streamer.

Video game streaming is a complex digital literacy practice that is fast becoming a popular pastime among eSports players. Video game streaming requires streamers (video game players who broadcast their play in real time to online crowds) must simultaneously negotiate multiple modes of communication (reading, writing, listening, speaking, and presenting; for more on this concept of metamediation, see Gerber, 2008). Streamers must manage the expectations of their viewers by simultaneously reading the chat channel and responding to their viewers, commenting on their own game play, offering entertaining performances that keep viewers returning, and often selecting appropriate music to play in the background—changing it on the fly to accommodate shifts in game play—in order to keep their fans coming back. Part disk jockey, part game critic, part entertainer, the video game streamer is a paragon of a modern digitally literate individual.

eSports, Schools, and Scholarships

No longer considered lonely individuals playing video games in their parents’ basement, gamers are a diverse demographic with a near even split between male and female players. Contemporary video gaming is part of a collaborative, inclusive, and diverse market, and eSports is a driver in revolutionizing that market (Sax, 2017; Siglin, 2015). They have been called “the sport for the digital generation” (CNNMoney, 2016, n.p.), and the increasing commercial interest in eSports has the attention of

Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

Figure 1
Jerry Setting Up His Twitch Channel to Live Stream His Team’s Overwatch Game During a Monthly LAN

HANNAH R. GERBER is an associate professor in the Department of Language, Literacy, and Special Populations at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX, USA, e-mail hrg004@shsu.edu.
schools and universities. Several universities, such as Robert Morris University, the University of Utah, and the University of California, Irvine, are offering eSports scholarships for talented eSports players. Currently, there are 40 universities offering over 4 million dollars in scholarships for eSports players (Kozachuk, 2017). Although not all universities offer scholarships for eSports, universities often have successful club teams. These teams engage in various tournaments that provide scholarship money to players, such as the Heroes of the Dorm competition centered on the popular multiplayer online battle arena Heroes of the Storm.

As university eSports is beginning to thrive financially, high school eSports is also a growing market, with various organizations dedicated to its development, such as High School Starleague (http://hsstarleague.com/), High School eSports League (http://www.highschoolesportsleague.com/), and eSports for Education (https://es4e.igames.gg/). Some university eSports teams are engaged in mentoring high school students into the collegiate eSports scene by hosting summer training camps for high school and middle school students and using these camps as a launch pad for developing year-round coaching and mentoring programs of high school players by collegiate players (Gerber, Pasquini, Sweeney, Munoz, & Ellis, 2017). As it moves into high schools and middle schools, eSports is beginning to reach younger demographics.

**eSports and Live Streaming**

The financial market appears big for eSports, although college scholarships are available only to top players and through tournament winnings, thus not every high school or collegiate player will win money in tournaments or receive a funded education as a scholarship athlete. Yet, the vast world of eSports offers opportunities for all players and moves beyond the financial reward of competitions and scholarships into other arenas, such as live streaming. Streaming can allow players to earn money through advertisement revenue, subscriptions, and sponsors; top streamers, such as PewDiePie, make millions a year streaming, and others, like Jerry, earn enough to buy new gear for gaming and books for class. Through live streaming, eSports players have the opportunity to engage in communities that are fan driven and collaborative and tap into a host of digital literacy practices.

Live streaming, in general, is a growing trend, with people sharing their normal day-to-day routines with their family, friends, followers, and fans on websites such as Periscope (https://www.pscp.tv/) and Facebook Live (https://live.fb.com/). The popular streaming site for video gaming is Twitch (https://www.twitch.tv/). eSports live streaming is “networked, mobile, and curated” (Burroughs & Rama, 2015, p. 2), providing gamers a platform on which they can engage in participatory practices with “live mixed media” (Hamilton, Garretson, & Kerne, 2014, p. 1315) around their favorite video games. Streaming allows gamers to build a following and a community around their favorite video games. As Jerry told me,

I got a total of 84 viewers in just one day. It was amazing. I was just streaming....It took off, and everyone [in the Internet Relay Chat—IRC—channel] was like, like, “OMG, you’re amazing,” “You’re great,” “You should stream this game forever.” And then I started becoming a streamer, and that’s...how I started to stream.

Streaming services also allow gamers to interact with one another in ways that promote apprenticed practice via a system of peer review called VOD (video on demand) review. A VOD review is past streamed content that is then watched by another player to provide constructive feedback to the original player. Carlos, a member of his university’s eSports club, enjoys doing VOD reviews because you get to see people grow....It’s basically like teaching or tutoring someone, but telling them step-by-step the formula of what they can do [to be better]....Like, for example, with Jasmine/Stardust, she streams her League of Legends on Twitch, but I don’t watch it [when she is live streaming]. That way, I don’t know what happens, and then she’ll send it into me [via a link to watch], and then I will watch, and that’s when I say, “Here it is. Here is what you need to do.” And then I will take some notes and give her feedback. Other times, I will be in game, and I will click “spectate” [a button] and take notes. With my coaching, she has moved from Bronze [a lower ranked level] to Silver [a midlevel ranking].

Because streaming is a prevalent practice among eSports players and offers multiple ways to interact with game play—from producing a stream, to watching a stream for new ideas of game play, to coaching other players through VOD reviews—it is important to be familiar with the largest streaming platform for video game play to offer guidance and assistance to gamers, whether they are gamers in an English class, an after-school video game club, or on an eSports team. Twitch is the largest streaming platform for gaming, although there are others, such as YouTube Gaming (https://gaming.youtube.com/) and Smashcast (https://www.smashcast.tv/).

**Twitch**

Twitch originally began as Justin.tv, a website dedicated to streaming the daily activities of its cofounder...
Justin Kan. After a brief stint of a 24/7 live broadcast of Justin's life, the company allowed other live streaming channels, including live streaming video game play. In 2011, Justin.tv was rebranded as Twitch and focused solely on video game live streaming. In 2014, Amazon bought Twitch for $970 million dollars (Kim, 2014).

Twitch is available for streamers on computer, mobile devices (Android and iOS), PlayStation 3 and 4, and Xbox 360 and One. Twitch boasts the largest streaming site for video game streaming, with over 1.5 million streamers and over 100 million visitors a month. Users can watch live streams of video game competitions, search for and watch streams related to their favorite video games, and watch replays and past streams.

Within the Twitch community, there are various members and roles. Streamers are those who are live streaming, or broadcasting, their game play. Viewers are those who are watching the streaming content. Streamers screencast (share) their game play and have a webcam that relays an embedded video of them playing (thereby allowing viewers to see their facial expressions) and use a microphone to provide audio explanation of their game play (see Figure 1). If a viewer enjoys a streamer, he or she can become a follower (by clicking “follow”). If a follower enjoys a stream, he or she can become a subscriber and pay a monthly subscription fee (of which the streamer gets a portion). Subscribers often get access to extra content and additional contact with the streamer that is not provided to regular nonpaying viewers. Furthermore, subscribers often get ad-free viewing.

Additionally, each Twitch channel also has an embedded chat stream, or IRC. Viewers often interact with one another within the IRC, and sometimes streamers will react or respond verbally (through audio) to comments and conversation occurring within the chat stream. Some viewers act as moderators for the streamer, which allows the moderator special functions and authority within the stream, such as banning viewers who are being abusive and/or inappropriate in the IRC. The top streamers, or those with a large number of followers, are often invited to become Twitch partners, allowing them a portion of the ad revenue generated from the ads that play during their stream. As Jerry said, “streaming is for everyone. Whether you are a streamer, or you watch a stream, or you interact with a stream through moderating, it is just where gamers learn.”

Conclusion

eSports is a rapidly growing pastime for students, middle school to college, and video game live streaming is a pervasive activity within eSports communities. Live streaming allows gamers access to the “networked, mobile, and curated” (Burroughs & Rama, 2015, p. 2) world of streaming video game play in ways that allow them to engage in apprenticed practice and community building. It is important for teachers, advisers, and mentors to be aware of the streaming practices that occur within eSports communities and of streaming platforms, such as Twitch, to know the activities in which their students might be engaged.

REFERENCES


The department editor welcomes reader comments.

STERGIO BOTZAKIS is an associate professor in the Theory and Practice in Teacher Education Department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA; e-mail sbotzaki@utk.edu.