

What's in a Stream? Understanding Video Gamers' Perceptions regarding Streaming and its Legitimacy

Completed Research

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ABSTRACT

Video game streaming – live interactive broadcasts of gameplay on online platforms such as YouTube, has emerged as an important phenomenon in the world of video games, with leading streamers attracting the viewership of millions. The public's perception of streaming, and its legitimacy, is still very much undecided. We seek to understand gamers' and streamers' normative perceptions of streaming. Employing an extreme case study methodology, we analyze the Reddit discussion threads and streamers' video-blogs following the decision of a game producer, Altus, to restrict streaming of its Persona 5 game. We reveal ambiguities amongst community regarding the nature of streaming, with perceptions ranging between streaming as a broadcast of game, a creative performance, or a community activity. Further, we discover the factors that influence gamers' perceptions regarding streaming legitimacy. We discuss implications for HCI and IS research and practice.

Keywords

Video games, streaming, streamers, gamers, perception, norms, legitimacy, online community, co-creation, case study.

INTRODUCTION

Video game streaming is a hugely popular media phenomenon consisting of a person openly video live broadcasting herself playing a video game to the online audience (Nascimento et al., 2014). Streamers' role, however, is not limited to merely broadcasting their gameplay. They moderate the community around their streams, demonstrate their gaming skills, and entertain the crowd by their performative behavior. The stream audience, too, is not limited to the role of the passive viewer. Streams include online chat features where

viewers can socialize while watching the stream by commenting on the actions of the streamer in real time and replying to each other's comments.

While providing their commentaries and content to the broadcast, the main activity of the streamers is the broadcast of a real video game, which is a game developer/publisher's intellectual property. Naturally, the company may want to protect its intellectual property from unauthorized use. Thus, the company may be incentivized to limit or control streaming activities around their products.

However, streamers do not tend to ask permission before streaming and companies may perceive streaming as a form of piracy or illegal broadcast and pursue legal actions. The company may worry that the game exposure created by the streamers to the game community, including revealing plot twists, characters, and possible gameplay actions may hurt in-house marketing and community-building efforts. Streamers may object and refer to their stream as a derivative work, as the original game is "transformed and played in an entirely new manner" (Johnson & Woodcock, 2018).

In the absence of the definitive legal base, conversations regarding normative understanding and ethical considerations by the parties involved in streaming become crucial to navigating the streaming landscape. The objective of this study is, thus, to shed light on how the gaming community understands streaming and its legitimacy.

To address our goal, we utilized the extreme case approach and identified an exemplary case in which a game-developing company has tried to regulate the streaming of their game product. We found that the event at hand yielded a multifaceted discussion that highlighted the complexity of the streaming product and platform ecology as well as the disunity within the gaming

community regarding the legitimacy of streaming practices.

RELATED WORK

Previous studies have noted the complex nature of the streaming practice, highlighting how it combines and builds upon several media channels, including video games, linear broadcast, and social networking (Kaytoue, Silva, Cerf, Meira, & Raïssi, 2012). Some studies have chosen to emphasize the co-creation and collaboration practices behind streaming due to the reciprocal nature of the interaction between viewers and streamers as well as the immediacy of feedback and the communal and social networking embedded features (Hamilton, Garretson, & Kerne, 2014).

Another stream of explore users' motivations to stream. Studies have recognized that both extrinsic and intrinsic motivational sources exist simultaneously. Intrinsic enjoyment from streaming was found to be one of the defining reasons why a person undertakes streaming activities at all (Bingham, 2017). The ability to earn money from streams serves as an external motivator for streamers to engage in online broadcasting (Freeman & Wohn, 2018; Friedländer, 2017).

Streaming practices are related to the field of online fandom which has been receiving growing attention from HCI researchers (Fiesler & Bruckman, 2014; Fiesler, Morrison, Shapiro, & Bruckman, 2017; Johnson & Luo, 2017). Previous studies in the field of HCI have shown that reusing content may be proven as an ambiguous terrain for online fan communities, one which is not easily navigated using laws or community policies. Part of the reason that such a model is so complex is that legitimacy assessment is hugely context-specific and relies heavily on interpretations of relevant laws of different states and countries (Jackson, Gillespie, and Payette, 2014). In such cases, social norms regarding content appropriation may play a large role (Fiesler & Bruckman, 2014).

Even though decades of case precedent have clarified various areas of fair use, fan fiction and co-created creative content are not often litigated. Therefore, communities are required to continue making sense of specific cases, even when clear laws are not set. In this study, we show that streaming communities are not stranger to this challenge, but it is the debate itself over the legitimacy of fair use that helps us flush out the essence of what is considered a stream as well as to recognize the factors of streaming practices that help community members assess their legitimacy. In particular, we ask:

RQ1: How do people perceive streamers' practices and their legitimacy?

RQ2: What factors of streaming influence the normative views of the community regarding its legitimacy?

METHODOLOGY

The case in the center of our study developed in approximately three months starting on April 4th, 2017. On that date, the Japanese-based game developer and publisher studio Atlus published a post on their website directed towards the gamers who wanted to stream their new game – Persona 5, and defined the restrictions on the content that is allowed to expose to the general public via streaming. The company recommended avoiding streaming past a certain event within the game story, effectively limiting the streaming to only the first few hours of the game. The company warned that failing to comply to their recommendations may result in streamer's personal account ban. The company explained that by imposing such strict restrictions on streaming they help to avoid spoiling the game story for the general gaming public before they have a chance to play it for themselves.

In the days after Atlus's decision to impose control on streaming, a heated discussion has developed in general and gaming-focused online forums, particularly on Reddit and Twitter. Subsequently, the conversation developed into the discourse of the legitimacy of streaming practices, the general nature of streaming, and its role in the contemporary gaming culture.

Data Collection

The primary source of the data used in our study is Reddit – one of the biggest online discussion platforms. The raw data for the current study was collected in the form of the comments that users provided on the Persona 5-related Reddit threads within the three gaming communities: r/gaming, r/games, and r/truegaming (overall 748 threads with 33,401 comments). The search focusing on the discussions around the particular Persona 5 streaming restrictions topic resulted in 12 directly related threads with a total of 1996 comments.

To gather the opinions of the *streamers*, we additionally searched Youtube platform for streaming videos using the keywords "Atlus", "Persona 5", and "streaming" in the video headlines. This search process resulted in roughly 4,800 video entries unrelated to past streaming sessions. Among them, we selected only the entries with more than 1000 accumulated views for further screening. Overall, we analyzed the most popular Persona 5-related video blogs from eight different bloggers with about 280,000 views combined.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the collected material strictly following the thematic analysis procedure recommended in Braun &

Clarke, (2006), with two coders engaged in the analysis. The findings here present the insights and interpretations as the result of the deep analysis and discussion of the emerged analytical themes.

FINDINGS

Overall, the analysis of the discussion suggests that the community is split in its perceptions of streaming and its legitimacy. This uncertainty resulted in the community descending into the more fine-grained argument on the different factors that may shape legitimacy's perceptions. Namely, the discussions in the community forum highlighted key factors such as streamer's monetization, the scope of the stream, and the structure of the game being streamed.

Legitimizing Streaming via Analogies: Broadcast, Performance or a Community Act

The perception of streaming as a linear broadcast of a video game versus online performative act emerged around the question of who owns the streaming experience. Those community members that supported the company largely did that on the premise that the video game is the intellectual property of the company developer/publisher. Therefore, the company can legitimately dictate how the broadcast is produced and streamers must obey. The perception of streaming as broadcast leads Reddit users to explicate the notion that streaming is a mean of pirating the content. Why would people buy the game when they can watch it all on YouTube?

The opponents built on the concept of interactivity and argued that video games are not a linear medium, and gamer is not a mere spectator but has an active role influencing how the game plays out. Therefore, the combination of player's actions and choices during the game makes the gaming experience unique to this specific person.

"Altus makes a game but I play it. I can put a gameplay on YouTube and [...] my inputs make it a different thing" [Reddit, r/games, Atlas Threatens To Go After People Who Stream Too Far Into Persona 5, 2017-04-05]

If each game playing session is unique, streaming can be considered a performative action. Therefore, the logic goes, the stream does not belong to the company but rather to the performer.

A large part of the community opposes the decision by Atlas due to the perception of streaming as an online community, which should be out of the company's control. Such community members explicate that rather than being a crowd of one-time watchers, the stream visitors are mostly the persistent community of viewers

united around the streamer. The main incentive of such viewers is to interact in the chat, not to watch the specific game being played. Conceptualizing streaming as a community leads the Reddit members to perceive the company as attempting to censor public voice, and they strongly object such behavior. However, for their opponents, being part of a community does not entail that one is now immune from legal and normative regulation.

It is indicative that the community could not come to a united opinion regarding their perception of streaming within the larger video game eco-system. This is corroborated by the streamers themselves acknowledging this ambiguity:

"it's important to remember that Streaming exists in a sort of nebulous copyright area...[...] we can do it so long as the companies in question don't come after us. It's an uncomfortable place to be." [YouTube entry: persona 5 streaming restrictions, 2017-04-05]

Factors Affecting the Community's Perceptions of Streaming' Legitimacy

Monetization. The important factor that informed the attitude of the community members to streaming was monetization of streaming. Monetization refers to the ability of the streamer to receive direct monetary gains from their activity. Commonly, streamers choose to monetize their activity by inserting advertisements from the external companies into the streams, which periodically interrupt the broadcast, similarly to the practices in traditional media. Monetization seemed to affect the opinion of the community about streaming legitimacy and steer it towards supporting the company rather than a streamer. Once the streamer monetizes the content, he or she produces, the decision on whether this activity is legitimate or not belong to the company maker of the game.

Streamers, while concurring with the general gaming community that streaming can be viewed as a commercial activity, do not perceive this as something that limits legitimacy. Streamers often consider their activities as a full-time vocation, making the monetization of the content their primary source of income.

Scope of the stream. Another aspect of streaming that augmented the discussion on streaming legitimacy was the extent to which the game content is exposed during the streaming and how it is organized in the stream. The community outlined the distinction between two general types of stream: the first type exposes a full (or significant part) of the game by streaming its complete walkthrough (i.e. "let's play"), whereas the second type features snippets of the gameplay and randomly organized portions of the story in a non-linear manner. During lets plays, the streamer typically broadcasts an entire game for

several hours, days, or weeks, depending on the game length. The viewers "tune in" to the streamers' channel and experience his or her journey through the game, commenting on the player's actions, and expressing their encouragement.

"Let's Plays may introduce some people to a game, but for most it's an avenue to view the story without buying it. Glad studios are finally getting over the b%^& that is "free marketing" from let's plays. Hope other studios soon follow suit."* [Reddit, r/PS4, A Note on Persona 5 and Streaming, 2017-04-06]

Much of the community members refer to let's plays as the source of spoilers. If streaming is spoiling the game content to those who have not yet played the game, it harms the company by cannibalizing the sales of the game. Therefore, it is illegitimate, and the company is in its rights to limit streaming.

However, many community members disagree with the view that streaming is spoiling. Typically, they explained that streaming, particularly in Let's Play format, is a great contributor to fostering public's interest in the game by increasing awareness of the community and contributing to the decision to buy the game.

For this part of the community, streaming is instead a preview of the game that serves the public by informing it about the product. It serves as a mean of game promotion as effective as the official marketing if not more. Subsequently, the Reddit members conclude that by restricting streaming, the company not only fails to protect the sales of their product but even loses more as a result. We found that this notion is even more pronounced in the community of the streamers themselves.

Video game structure. One of the main distinctions outlined by the forum members about their perception of a stream as legitimate was not just how much it disclosed but what type of game it decided to showcase. Typically, there are story-based games where the player's primary goal is to play in order to advance the plot progression and skill-based games where the player's primary goal is to acquire a particular set of skills and enact them to win.

Most community members agreed that the profits of skill-based games are less affected by streaming when compared to story-heavy games. To them, streaming such games may overly expose the narrative plot and twists and thus ruin the experience. However, many players opposed the notion that the streaming of narrative-based games is illegitimate. Many forum members explicated that the player has a choice whether to watch the stream of the particular story-heavy game or not and thus can effectively protect herself from spoilers if she wishes so.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the case when a game-producer tried to force limitations on the streaming of its video game after it was released in the US and Europe (months after its original Japanese release). This case allowed us to more deeply understand the gamers' community perceptions regarding the legitimacy of streaming practices by analyzing the discussion emerged on Reddit and Youtube platforms around the case. Our analysis has surfaced three competing interpretations of streaming: streaming as a form of performance vs. form of broadcast vs. the engagement with a fan community. Additional themes that have emerged from our analysis shed light on the factors that influence legitimacy perceptions, namely monetization practices, exposure of the game content and the game structure itself.

Our investigation confirms that the same conceptual dimensions of streaming as user-generated content and TV broadcast emerge within the gaming community as were identified by the previous literature (Taylor, 2015; Kaytoue et al., 2012).

We hope to add to the existing knowledge by demonstrating how the perceptions of a stream as broadcast, performance, or community are not only different but are also perceived as contradicting by the community members. We argue that future academic effort should be directed on understanding and conceptualizing streaming as a novel social phenomenon of its own that is not reduced to the mere sum of its components.

Fundamentally, we demonstrated that the consumer of streams is being transformed into a co-creator of value based on the initial firm offering. Previous literature on co-creation in video games mainly focused on the phenomenon of the video game "modding", co-creating game additions and enhancements (Banks & Humphreys, 2008; Poretski & Arazy, 2017), and had identified the positive effect of this form of co-creation on the sales of base video games. Increasingly, the research also started to identify streaming as an additional form of co-creation in this domain (e.g. (Smith, Obrist, & Wright, 2013)). We provide evidence that the streaming community increasingly views itself in this light too.

We also hope that our findings will help practitioners to understand which games and types of streams can provide mutual benefits for the company and community. The firms are encouraged to provide practical support for the streaming community: sharing access to information, providing technological tools for communal production, and establishing social platform for collaboration.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, streaming is an emerging phenomenon with substantial economic and societal impact. Streaming fuses three different communication modes: it can be understood as one's broadcasting on a personal TV channel, a creative performance, or the act of engaging with a community. Given these multiple interpretations, streaming does not adequately fit any existing legal framework. In the absence of clear guidelines, firms are struggling to manipulate the community of uninvited co-creators and gamers endeavor to navigate the uncharted legal terrain. This ambiguity is dangerous, and thus the phenomenon of streaming begs for regulation that would guide firm-producers, streamers, and viewers.

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