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BLEEDING PURPLE, SEEING PINK: DOMESTIC VISIBILITY, GENDER & SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN THE HOME STUDIOS OF TWITCH.TV

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Introduction

From greenscreens in the bedroom to webcams on refrigerators, household surfaces underlie the broadcast of personality on Twitch.tv, Amazon's \$15 billion platform for live video entertainment. This paper examines how *homemaking* and *visibility* are co-conceptualized in the labour of gendered and racialized game live streamers in Canada and the United States. Extending feminist and social reproduction theorizations of housework to the home studio-based live streaming, I detail how the convergence of house- and sight-making on Twitch.tv reifies the gaming industry's historic reliance upon unremunerated spousal and familial support (Bulut, 2020; Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, 2006).

Drawing from a virtual ethnography of Twitch creators' domestic spaces in North America (n=12), I document the staging of household and familial visibility in relation to Twitch's affordances of on-demand broadcast and play. From this data, I argue the converging geographies of labour, leisure, and living demanded by Twitch represent more than ancillary sites to visually recomposed play(ers) as "web-ready" for live platform(ization)s (see: Helmond, 2015). Rather, the management of a domestic timespace on Twitch represents a worker's struggle for autonomy over the means of cultural production in social media entertainment (see: Craig and Cunningham, 2019).

Methodology

From April to October 2022, I conducted semi-structured interviews and live participant observation with 12 racialized and/or gendered streamers in their home studios to understand the co-relationships between digital labour and domestic play in platform content production. Recruitment for this project took advantage of my pre-existing networks cultivated in gaming communities and social media. I deployed a snowball sampling method, relying on my initial participants to pass along the study information

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(Atkinson and Flint, 2001). The original call for participants reached out adults above the age of 18 who met the following qualifications: (1) used Twitch to gain income from streaming of games, (2) performed this work from their residence and (3) were of historically marginalized gender and/or race in the North American context.

I also drew upon emerging philosophies of “patchwork ethnography” (Günel et al., 2020) to (re)construct the shared experience of streaming through short-time field visits, observation, interviews, and institutional analysis of platform transformations. This ethnographic method addresses and ameliorates the always-already blurred re-combinations of “home” and “field” that became ever more entangled during the uneven telework economies of the global pandemic. Interview topics focused on work routines, spatial relationships to worksites, and the role of domestic objects in the staging of livestreams.

From this participant data, I organise my approach to streaming labour’s relationship to home infrastructures under three modalities: (in)visibility, intimacy, and temporal management. How marginalized Twitch streamers calibrated opacity between their live broadcasts and their homes—from animation suits to greenscreen backgrounds and even codewords to alert cohabitants they webcams were recording—revealed the affinities between platform aggregation and domestic privatization on local and global scales. Visibility, in short, becomes a family project.

Theoretical Framework

Visibility has become a salient term to conceptualize the self-presentational work of platformed creators (Abidin, 2016; Petre et al., 2019; Poell et al. 2021). Simultaneously, terms like “invisible labour” into bywords for the historically unpaid, devalued status of labour categorized as “women’s work” in the digital age (Jarrett 2015; Terranova 2000). To Mark Johnson and Jamie Woodcock (2019), what distinguishes Twitch from the other world-leading video platforms is this technocultural emphasis on real-time recording as “not used to hide the labour of the worker, but rather to very *visibly* show a content creator to a global audience” (p. 3; emphasis mine).

Yet for creators on Twitch who are systematically marginalized by racism and sexism, however, domestic visibility is fraught. Toxic gamer cultures alter the experience of “being seen” on Twitch into precursors for harassment, stalking, doxing and scandalous raids that layer labour in professional play (Chan and Gray; 2022; Guarriello, 2019; Ruberg and Cullen, 2020). Drawing from participant data, I relate Twitch streamers’ relationship to platform visibility across two domains: domestic labour and digital leisure.

Findings of this study contextualise the housework of live streaming within the lineage of unenumerated social reproduction in the games industry. Spouses have played a vital role as public narrators of experience and exploitation across the games industry (Bulut, 2020; Dyer Witheford and de Peuter, 2006; Pettica-Haris et al., 2015) As the infamous blog confessions of “EA Spouse” and “Rockstar Spouse” AAA studio “crunch” have revealed, the precarious glamour of careers in games has been historically sustained by networks of feminised work and social reproduction--work that sustains at the home and sites beyond the AAA studios. Well before the ascent of Twitch, the domestic and home

studio space that been proved vital in the widespread of computational gaming cultures (Harvey, 2015; Nooney, 2012). Yet gaming's reliance on unpaid familial work done at home speaks to upon recent studies of domestication's prevalence to the immaterial labour of content production as a form of "digital housekeeping" (Li 2022; Kennedy, 2015).

Visualizing the career and domestic biographies of Twitch streamers are intertwined, I argue that the collaborative and homemaking affordance of self-broadcasting activities associated with Twitch are best understood as belonging to the same genus of domestic labour and its slippages towards privatized caretaking within the familial home.

Contributions

Decades after American scholar Louise Kapp Howe (1977) coined "pink collar" to describe the traditional assignment of cleaning, cooking, and care as women's work gender still colours our experiences of labour valuation. Early 2010s concerns that social media would constitute the "pink ghetto of tech" (Levinson, 2015) illustrate the vulnerability of platform self-promotion to these regimes of casualization through coding certain work as feminine (Duffy and Schwartz, 2018). Confronting the affinities between the processes of domesticity and platformization in Twitch streamer visibility, this paper reframes Twitch slogan of "Bleed Purple" as more than a playful work ethos, branded by emojis and emotes. Rather, this paper proffers Twitch as a vital case study on why social reproduction and feminist theories are integral to deepening our understanding of platform work, in and beyond the home.

During this pandemic, many participant streamers in this study found themselves enlisted as familial and friend group content managers, performing the relational labour (Baym, 2015) of maintain family ties and networks through the shared broadcast of play. This work of helping families see each other through play over Twitch was cited as a starting point for their ongoing careers in professional gaming before audiences. The coordinating of family along these lines' gestures to an integral and yet to be fully understood role of social reproduction politics in supporting the widespread production of ludic experiences. Understanding the home studio, and its attached familial partners as invisible networks on Twitch will be fundamental to advocacy of guaranteed minimum work conditions in professional play within a heavily saturated market with little support from platform companies, like Amazon, themselves.

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