The platform politics of hateful play on Twitch

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Extended Abstract

In this essay, we argue that the term "hate raiding" requires clearer definition within digital platform studies scholarship to combat efforts to apply the term to anti-brand protests (Murphy & Jarrett 2024). To render our definition, we use critical game studies scholarship (Trammell 2023, Giddings & Harvey 2018) to analyze how the conditions of reciprocity and play on Twitch.tv (Twitch) produce the conditions for hate raids to occur as playful (Scholl 2024), non-antisocial behavior. In other words, we insist that hate raids should not be viewed as transgressive acts of play, or morally motivated forms of networked harassment (Marwick 2021), arguing that this type of harassment is a consequence of ludic economics in general (Giddings & Harvey) and the sociality cultivated on Twitch in particular. Through thoughtful discursive, infrastructural, and rhetorical analysis of Twitch.tv's branding and platform governance, we demonstrate that hate raiding is not a bug, but in fact a feature of the live streaming platform.

Since its inception in 2011, Twitch's brand, its engagement and its moderation practices have been intertwined with a sense of play. The name 'Twitch' is derived from a sudden in-game movement made in an instant and as a brand, Twitch was a purposeful move away from Justin.tv's more generalized live streaming brand (Taylor, 2018: 53). In the time since its launch, Twitch has grown to encompass many activities outside of gaming, including 'in real life', music and creative livestreams (Johnson, 2024: 19). What has remained prominent since Twitch's creation and has set it apart from numerous rival video platforms though, is its brand centered around playing, which is tied to the gaming industry.

We analyze how Twitch's platform infrastructure and governance policies are situated within a developed sense of play and neighborly reciprocity. The infrastructural

affordances and limitations of a platform informs how digital user practices are simultaneously shaped by and reshape the platform itself (Brock, 2018). One of the inherent challenges facing Twitch is its status as a social media platform with a distinctive level of immediacy, participation and play, coupled with its governance practices mimicking a game. It is this continuous balancing act that is integral to Twitch's brand popularity and monetization (Jackson and Johnson, 2024), but from a moderation perspective, it accentuates what Gillespie (2010; 2018) calls the challenges of platform politics. One such way that this reciprocity is encoded into Twitch's streaming platform is through a construction of neighborliness between users. Twitch establishes the concept of a "neighborhood" existing on the platform through their direct training modules (Creator Camp) available to new content creators (2022). We discursively analyze these training materials, demonstrating how Twitch rhetorically constructs the conditions for neighborliness as a form of governance on the platform.

Neighborliness operates under a few key presumptions rooted in reciprocity: a sense of respect between parties and an understanding that neighbors inhabit a shared place and thus have stake in that place's health and wellbeing (Stuckey, 2013: 19–20). Neighborliness within the Twitch community echoes the collaborative way in-game communal norms develop in gaming spaces such as MMOs (Nakamura, 2009; Steinkuehler, 2006). For example, in Steinkuehler's ethnographic research in Lineage I, she found that high level clans codified and enforced a set of community norms to protect newcomers to game, compensating for an imbalance in the game's design (2006: 202). Twitch utilizes neighborliness to foster similar collaboration across the three key user roles (streamer, viewer, and moderator) to develop a social decorum for governance of the platform. This governance is predicated on an assumption of neighborly reciprocity, where each individual role receives a benefit from the other playing their part to contribute to a "healthy" platform ecosystem.

Within the context of this reliance on neighborliness and reciprocity as the foundations of enforcement on Twitch, we return to raiding as a playful practice on the platform and what occurs when that playfulness is abused. In raids, there exists a double-edged function that can be both reciprocal and warmly embraced, as well as exploited and potentially threatening (Meisner, 2023). With millions of Twitch users, each possessing agency to reciprocate and disrupt in playful ways, this form of social governance merits in-depth study. We examine two specific raiding phenomena: the anti-BIPOC and LGBTQ+ hate raids occurring on the Twitch platform in 2021-2022 and the Hogwarts Legacy "hate raids" of 2023. By placing these phenomena in contrast to one another, we illuminate the specifics of play and reciprocity within raiding as a digital user practice. Additionally, it highlights the dangers of using "hate raid" to discuss raiding actions that are not inherently tied to forms of oppression and bigotry targeting historically marginalized populations. This scholarship intervenes in several conversations regarding transgressive play, digital user practices, and platform governance.

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