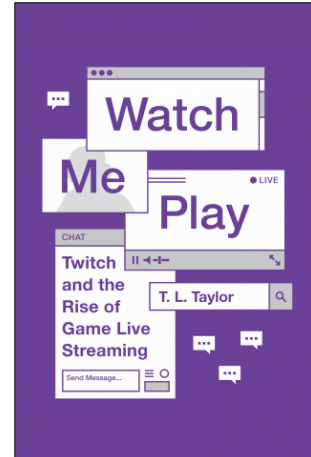


T. L. Taylor, **Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming**, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018, 328 pp., \$80.00 (hardcover), \$27.95 (paperback).

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Sociologist T. L. Taylor offers an excellent, thoughtful, and thorough discussion of the increasing role of live game-streaming in participatory and broadcast culture. While the title suggests a narrow focus on the live-streaming platform Twitch, the book is anything but. The author situates the rise of live game-streaming in the history of televisual culture harking back to times of families sitting in their living rooms watching television together. Taylor argues that live game-streaming did not suddenly spring out of nowhere, rather, it is the next phase of shared broadcast experiences that generations have known whether around the radio, TV, or game consoles.



Taylor relies on qualitative social science methods to gather her evidence, from observations of the platform she studies to interviews with various stakeholders to archival work about other televisual experiences as well as Twitch's development. It is not an ethnography in the sense of "being there" for the reader, partly because important portions of the book are about analyzing the institutional factors that influence participant behavior, and partly because the author does not follow and recount the personal experiences of any particular game-streamer in great depth or detail. Rather, she offers examples of many participants, some from their living rooms, some through their screens, and many through a detailed discussion of the institutional and cultural contexts that sometimes encourage while at other times discourage certain types of participation.

Like so much of digital media, Twitch, and live-streaming more generally, is an ever-evolving phenomenon. From that perspective, it is a considerable challenge to write a book, which is not a dynamic medium. Nonetheless, Taylor captures very important phases of the practice's development, details that may otherwise easily get lost to history if not documented. In that sense, the book is reminiscent of John Battelle's *Search* (2005), which chronicled important phases of Google's development in its early years with details that would be hard to unearth a decade later when the company has transformed in so many ways. To that end, analyses of the development of relatively new forms of media—even when fully embedded in a historical trend—is crucial so that documentation, reflection, and contemporary critique of such phenomena is not lost to disappearing technical formats and forgotten experiences.

This is one of those rare and valuable books that offers an in-depth evaluation of a specific phenomenon, while also being relevant well beyond that one case. Moving to this second aspect, it is

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interesting to see how ethnographic methods and sensibilities needed to be sometimes stretched to account for a global phenomenon without losing attention from its cultural and organizational nuances. Even if one might expect that video game culture defines Twitch, details about cam culture are nicely tied to celebrity culture that appears to shape streamers' behaviors. Beyond a certain level of necessary exhibitionism, and a lot of staging, this environment replicates the tendency for 'the winner takes all' outcomes, which we see repeatedly with platforms and in the attention economy more generally (e.g., Hindman, 2009). Despite the fun many streamers declare to have, theirs are not easy lives. While few become successful, and raise the bar of expectations for the global audience, many juggle different sources of income and jobs just to keep afloat.

One of the impressive aspects of the book is that it tackles its subject at different levels of analysis. We read about the users, both streamers and their audience community members, but we also receive an analysis of institutional-level factors such as how businesses evolve with this new form of broadcasting as well as how legal institutions challenge and shape them. Approaching the topic from these multiple levels of analysis makes for a more complex story wherein the author shows how digital innovation, contrary to heroic accounts of business leaders, is a collective and distributed phenomenon with no one leader. Studies of social movements, as Taylor herself notes, can be helpful in explaining the dynamics given their sensitivity to values, practices, and forms of sociality.

From the legal perspective, the author analyzes the complicated ways in which streamers navigate transforming, remixing, and building upon copyrighted material while copyright owners struggle with where to draw the line between what is in their interest to allow versus not. Even if this is clearly a work on a matter in constant flux, it seems reasonable as a take-home message that people are left on the margins of what copyright allows. This results in players adding their contributions through the staging of their performance—camera angle, dress code, lighting, sound, environment in the room—rather than through the alteration of the game's core content. Importantly, streamers add value to game play and create unique personas through their style of annotating their in-game actions, e.g., through jokes as well as their particular interactions with their community members.

Taylor also discusses in detail the great value that community managers bring to keeping the comment streams—an important part of the live streams—engaging and free of harassment. Community members often do this without compensation despite the fact that considerable labor can be involved in managing hundreds if not thousands of people's commentary in real time.

On the point of harassment, much has been written about how women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQIA community can face considerable hostility in the world of online gaming (e.g., Fox & Tang, 2014). This is no different when it comes to live game-streaming, as Taylor describes through some examples. The book could have benefited from a more focused section on this topic despite its treatment of the issue. This is perhaps a function of how the book is structured: rather long chapters with two levels of subheadings that are not always obvious to follow. Perhaps book parts by level of analysis could have been split into smaller chapters by topic to guide the reader better and to allow for more focused discussion of certain phenomena such as harassment.

In a similar vein, it would have been helpful to see a more targeted discussion of privacy issues especially in light of Amazon's purchase of Twitch and its increasing integration of services on the streaming platform with its buying platform. But it is hard to argue for more material given how comprehensive the book already is in many ways. Perhaps future work by this scholar or others who follow can tackle some of these issues in more depth.

This book should be of interest to both scholars of participatory media and broadcast media, i.e., most media and communication scholars. Beyond them, anyone who has an interest in online organizing, such as sociologists, would find relevant insights even if video games are of no interest to them at all.

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