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From Virtual to Physical: Video Game Streaming Communities

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CAPSTONE TEXT

From Virtual to Physical: Video Game Streaming Communities

Tiffany Williams can feel a cold coming on, but that's not going to stop her from making an appearance at the Bowlmor in Times Square. It's Friday night and the 31-year-old is heading down from the Bronx to meet up with friends for a New York Comic Con after-party.

That morning, working her day job in the shoe department at Macy's, she's just another millennial making ends meet in the city. But here, on the dance floor, drink in hand, dispensing hugs to several friends and gaming acquaintances, she's Cresta Starr, a video game streamer on the live video streaming site Twitch.tv with a small but loyal following.

"To me, it's just another level of friendship," Williams said. "We can play video games online [...] and I'm still hanging out with someone I care about," she said.

The image of a solitary person playing video games in a basement is being quickly dispelled by the phenomenon of live video streaming. "Some of us do take showers," one Comic Con attendee joked.

With roughly 15 million unique daily visitors and more than [three million unique broadcasters](#) each month, Twitch.tv has become a global force. Since it launched in 2011, its viewership has grown more than 90 percent.

Streaming video games has become the new virtual arcade.

Some people stream to improve their own gaming skills. Some do it for actual fame or fortune, playing for the thousands of fans logging on to watch their stream every day. A select few land major brand sponsorship deals with companies like Discord or Razer. But for many, it's to visit with friends they've made from playing online.

As Cresta Starr, Williams has developed a virtual family. At first, people harassed her because of her race. Not one to be bullied, Williams persevered. Over time people who visited her channel would stick up for her when trolls started bothering her.

She has roughly 3,000 followers and, on a good day, about 15 viewers watching her stream. By comparison, the most popular streamer, Ninja, has millions of followers, with some half a million viewers each time he streams. But for Williams, it's a start. Her dream is to become the Oprah of video games, but for now she is content to be the friendly face and hilarious laugh that greet those who enter her Twitch channel.

PULL QUOTE:

"I've met so many great people that I talk to day in and day out," Williams said. "I couldn't imagine my life without them."

VIDEO STORY “*The Upstart*”

Gaming and Social Connectedness

Recent research suggests that live broadcasting video games can actually foster a sense of community and bolster personal connections. Social scientists in Finland found that people aren't interested in video game streaming solely for entertainment and information as much as they're also motivated by social connectedness.

The researchers collected data from over 2,200 online self-report surveys. Participants between the ages 16 and 49 ranked certain themes like social support, sense of community and meeting new people. Less than four percent were female, but lead author Max Sjöblom said the disparity in sex “did not impact the motivations markedly,” and that it was in line with other estimates of gender distribution among video game stream users.

The study found that “a desire for social interaction and a sense of belonging to an online community were the most consistent and strongest motivators of live-stream engagement.”

And it's not just audience members who benefit from live streaming video games. Broadcasters can also improve their gameplay when they're engaging with other people.

“Oftentimes, when we talk about video games, we talk about them as if they're an isolated activity, [but] video games have always had a very social element to them,” said Nicholas Bowman, who studies media psychology at the Interaction Lab at West Virginia University.

In a 2013 study, Bowman focused on how people perform when a live audience watches them play a game. He found that every participant who played the game in front of people performed better, regardless of their gender or game experience. A live audience triggers people's dominant responses, such as mental rotation and hand-eye coordination, prompting them to play better.

“The argument is that when you're around other people, it's a very arousing experience,” he said, meaning that people become motivated by knowing others are watching them perform.

This is the same reason people play well in front of crowds when they're playing sports, he said. This is called “the mere presence hypothesis.” It suggests that whenever we're around other humans, it's a motivating experience because we're suddenly aware that other people are in our space. As Bowman noted (the gendered cliché notwithstanding), no man is an island completely unto himself.

AUDIO STORY “*At the Convention: RTX Austin 2018*”

SOUND BITE VIDEO CAPTIONS:

Indie Game Designer:

1.) For Austin-based indie game designer, Michael Molinari, feeling connected to his chat audience is what drove him to create his latest game, Choice Chamber. “The idea for Choice Chamber literally started with: I want to make a game that I can play with people in the chat room of a Twitch broadcast,” said Molinari. In the game, audience members type commands into the chat, like “higher,” “double” or “pogo,” that will help the person playing the game build a bridge, effectively allowing the viewers to play the game, too. The streamer cannot advance without the assistance of viewers.

Professional eSports Athlete:

2.) Chris Bani is a professional eSports athlete on the Houston Outlaws team. For over a year now he has been playing Overwatch, which is a popular team-based multiplayer first-person shooter video game. On an average day, his team will practice for eight hours. Bani considers himself a pro-gamer.

Overwatch Fans:

3.) Twitch is a billion-dollar-platform where people can produce or watch a variety of subject matter. While the main draw is to watch live streaming of video games, it has also become a site for people to congregate online. In addition to watching streamers play games in real time, spectators engage in conversation with both the players and other spectators.

RTX Convention Attendee:

4.) Online video game streaming is becoming more than just a hobby — it’s a social phenomenon. Millions of people are logging on to Twitch to connect with their friends across the world. Live broadcasting is creating a global virtual arcade.

ABOUT:

I didn’t grow up playing video games — I had a Tamagotchi, but that was about it. When I first heard about Twitch, I was confused. How could people just sit and watch other people play video games? But then I met Cresta and her friends. They showed me how they’ve formed online communities. I realized there’s a lot about the video game world I had no idea about. Through streaming, people chat about their lives, ultimately forming friendships and even romantic relationships, too. And they don’t just stay in the virtual world. Streamers and spectators meet up at convention halls, bowling alleys and

nightclubs, where they drink, dance and play video games with each other. For the uninitiated, this project is an introduction to that world.