

***This is the author’s version of “*Watch me play: Twitch and the rise of game live streaming* [book review],” published in *New Media & Society*. The final version can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820939317>**

TL Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2018; x + 298 pp.; ISBN 9780691183558, \$27.95 (pbk)

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In *Watch Me Play*, sociologist T. L. Taylor provides an in-depth analysis of game live streaming, with a focus on the Twitch platform. She is interested in the transformation of private play into public entertainment and the rise of networked broadcasting. Taylor’s work is informed by several years of fieldwork, including visits to Twitch’s San Francisco, interviews, archival work, and netnography. *Watch Me Play* especially shines in its different levels of analysis and its use of multimodal techniques—from talking with streamers to analyzing corporate models—which allows the author to paint a holistic portrait of game live streaming.

Taylor is mainly interested in broadcasters who have been working toward making live streaming their full-time job. Throughout the book, she distinguishes between “variety broadcasters,” who are known for playing several games, and “esports players,” who share their hours of practice of a single game. The book mostly centres on variety broadcasters, though it does contain a chapter on esports broadcasting. This is not really surprising considering Taylor’s previous monograph on esports (see Taylor, 2012) and does not come up as a problem in *Watch Me Play* considering the length of the chapter dedicated to that topic.

Watch Me Play is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction and presents one of the core aspects of live streaming: the chat window. For Taylor, the chat window plays a central role in making live streaming a new form of networked broadcast: it allows streamers to interact in real time with their audience and creates a feeling of togetherness and immediacy of connection. Through the chat window, Taylor argues, the audience is integrated into the show.

Chapter 2 provides a historical account of the rise of live streaming from the angle of media production and Internet cultures, and with a welcome attention to the history of television. This comparative framework is reflective of Taylor’s deep belief in media mix to better understand our current media space. “Cycling across devices, from large-screen home TV to an iPad or PS4 is not unusual” (p. 26), she argues, and live streaming is just “one more node in the mix” (p. 26). Chapter 2 is also strong at situating the rise of live streaming within participatory culture, social networking, and contemporary capitalism. Taylor challenges the rhetoric of the passive viewer and highlights that audience members on platforms like Twitch are not only decoding what they watch; they are also filling the chat window with questions and reactions in a way that is reminiscent of the cheering of supporters in a sports stadium.

In chapter 3, Taylor examines in more detail the idea that private play has transformed into public entertainment and the performative experience it entails. She explores how game live streaming often leads to full-fledged shows that follow a series of conventions and take the form

of serious productions. Taylor's distinction between variety broadcasters and esports players proves to be particularly useful in this chapter to understand how they respectively form their streamer identities: whereas variety broadcasters entertain through humour or theatrical performance, esports players do so through game expertise. Taylor provides a strong line of argument to demonstrate how this work is rooted in an affective economy where emotions are commodified and play must be passionate. This has a crucial role in creating a feeling of connection between streamers and their audience and is necessary to receive donations.

Along with chapter 5, chapter 3 also examines Twitch from a social justice angle. It shows that despite the prevailing discourse that Twitch is a form of open and participatory media, women, LGBT+ folks, and people of colour who stream often face hostility and harassment. Taylor highlights the innovative strategies these folks come up with, from moderating each other's streams to advertising channels that provide safe spaces. While this section of chapter 3 is a welcome contribution to the current conversation on injustice and oppression online, an entire chapter dedicated to that topic (instead of having this topic covered in two different chapters) might have allowed the reader to better appreciate Taylor's contribution to this ongoing field of research.

Chapter 4 builds on Taylor's (2012) previous work on esports and focuses on the impact of networked broadcasting on esports players, organizations, and tournaments. Although esports and industry professionals once hoped that esports would be broadcast on television, Taylor shows that a new discourse has emerged. This discourse emphasizes that television is no longer necessary and that streaming provides a certain independence from traditional media structures. That being said, television continues to impact esports as a broadcasting frame to follow, and Taylor shows that what might appear as a desire to "ditch" television is more reflective of a desire to abandon an old network era model and pay attention to the Internet and on-demand viewing. In addition, chapter 4 contains a few words on advertising and the imagined audience of esports (i.e., men age eighteen to twenty-five); unfortunately, Taylor's argument in this section gets a little lost in a critique of quantitative methodologies.

In chapter 5, Taylor continues her exploration of injustice and oppression online, with an emphasis on community management. Taylor's broad definition of community management allows for a holistic look at the different forms of governance that regulate the "networked broadcasting frontier" (p. 212), from Twitch's code of conduct and algorithmic regulation to the use of toxic behaviour to keep marginalized groups away from the platform. Of special interest to me was the discussion on adult content and the unfair censorship of many of Robert Yang's games due to their sexual content. On that matter, Twitch's policies seem to be rather opaque and discriminate against what is seen as the "wrong kind of sex" (Yang, 2016). Taylor also addresses Twitch's 2014 controversial dress code, which was targeting female streamers. Although the dress code was later changed to be more flexible, Taylor rightfully points out that it was originally implemented only a few months after GamerGate launched and played into the panic around "fake gamer girls."

Chapter 6 takes the form of an epilogue. Taylor concludes by reflecting on the future of Twitch and game live streaming. She raises fascinating questions regarding the future of the televisual, which she sees as going as strong as ever, and the limits of participatory culture. She also ponders about the next phase in Twitch's development now that it is an Amazon-owned company. She ultimately writes: "I do pause at the future of the platform as a space for expansive cultural expression. If Twitch simply becomes more and more of a marketing tool, or merely another branch

of mainstream media distribution, and less a space of true transformative work, much will have been lost” (p. 256). That being said, she ends on a positive note and highlights that still much work needs to be done if we truly want to understand live streaming beyond the work/play dichotomy.

Overall, *Watch Me Play* shows that writing an accessible and engaging monograph without ever losing in analytical depth is possible. Taylor successfully synthesizes years of research and weaves interviews with streamers and industry actors into large conversations on public and private play, corporate business models, and law and policy. Throughout the book, I found myself fascinated by esports broadcasting and how it comes to emulate sports channels, or by live streamers questioning Twitch representatives about the possibility of getting retirement funds. On a few occasions, Taylor provides classificatory frameworks to describe the motivations of streamers or spectators, or to illustrate how revenue is generated in esports. While some might find these classifications a little simplistic, I would highlight that they provide researchers with a vocabulary to talk about game live streaming and open the door for further comparative analyses of technology, culture, and media.

Watch Me Play truly shows that game live streaming is an “assemblage of actors, technologies, and practices” (p. 28). It will prove invaluable to students and researchers interested in video games and digital cultures, comparative media studies, organization ethnography, and the digital social sciences.

References:

- Taylor, TL (2012) *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
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