Valorant and the Platformization of Free-to-Play Games: Framing the Work of Content Creators as a Cultural Commodity

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Abstract

By studying the early development stages of the free-to-play game *Valorant* (Riot Games, 2020), this research draws connections between game studies and recent platformization research. Traditionally, game scholars have treated the game industry as focused on selling premium-priced games. An alternative approach presents games as services that attempt to foster a long-term relationship with the player base. This paper zooms in on the latter, by studying the role of livestreaming in the service model of digital games. This sheds light on how service games can become intertwined with participatory modes of production, which benefits the longevity of service games. It points to a situation in which games, users, and platforms together make up one coherent system. The deployment of sociotechnical system scholarship identifies mechanisms that have been put in place to facilitate the interaction between users and platforms. With that in mind, this paper presents a qualitative content analysis of Twitch streams using a transcription method in which content creation is considered vital to the proliferation of the platform ecosystem. This work contributes to a growing body of literature bridging the fields of platform studies and game studies by taking into account the extended cultural practices and paratexts of both livestreaming and videogames.

Keywords

Platformization; platform ecosystem; free-to-play games; sociotechnical system; gaming capital; content creation; Twitch; *Valorant*.

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Introduction

This paper discusses the role of the content creator within the platform ecosystem surrounding free-to-play (F2P) games. As the term implies, F2P games do not cost anything to play but generate income from smaller sales of added content. Some games do this blatantly, for example, by integrating paywalls for specific parts of a game, while other games simply offer paid cosmetic enhancements. The year 2020 saw the introduction of a new F2P game, *Valorant*, the latest installment developed by F2P-veterans Riot Games, known for their popular title *League of Legends* (2009). *Valorant* is exemplary of the F2P business model, characterized by enabling wider demographical access to the game and simultaneously lowering the threshold to pay for additional content (Alha et al., 2014). Simultaneously, Riot Games has uniquely amplified its wide demographical access by moving to the livestreaming platform, Twitch. Livestreaming platforms often serve as promotional tools for games (Taylor, 2018, p. 21), but the relationship between *Valorant* and livestreaming goes beyond mere promotional purposes. Riot Games gave a small group of Twitch streamers exclusive access to the beta version of the game two months before its official release. These streamers could, in turn, use so-called "Twitch Drops" to distribute access to their viewers randomly. Doing so assigned Twitch streamers the crucial role as distributors of content. Streamers thus not merely promote titles, but become part of the game production and reception ecosystem alongside games and platforms. In this paper, I will therefore examine the role of the content creator and Twitch as a crucial part of *Valorant*'s F2P model. In particular, I investigate the strategic deployment of streamers as distributors of content. I argue that this role of streamers marks the platformization strategy exhibited by *Valorant*. *Valorant*, as a platform for content creation, serves as an illustration of this platformized business model of F2P games via Twitch.

Platformization describes the penetration of digital platforms into the web, causing a reconfiguration of cultural production and circulation (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). According to Bogost and Montfort (2009), scholars in software studies understand platforms as computing systems through which the relation between platform and end-users can be studied. Nieborg and Poell (2018) expand this notion by studying the "complementors" (rather than end-users) as the suppliers of content. Complementors are, in this case, those who mediate between *Valorant* and its players through Twitch. The underlying idea with content creation in the context of platformization is that the production and circulation of content are in the hands of the platform, which is in turn dependent on its complementors and end-users. *Valorant*, with its platformization strategy, takes part in this push and pull dynamic between the platform and its users. Following Nieborg and Poell (2018), I consider the work of content creators vital to the proliferation of the

overall platform ecosystem—including *Valorant*—due to the state of co-dependency between platforms and (the work of) users.

This paper answers the central research question: "What are the roles of the content creator as a complementor within the platformization of *Valorant*?" The notion of the "complementor" points to the embeddedness of content creation within the platformization strategy of *Valorant*. It entails a focus on the agency of content creators amidst a sociotechnical system that is geared towards the commodification of interaction and spectatorship. This research contributes to the work on platform ecosystems, which aims to disentangle the complex relations between platforms and their users through a study of interconnected ecosystems of various platforms, conglomerates, and their users (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Central to my argument is Postigo's work (2016), which provides a concrete understanding of the sociotechnical system as the simultaneous use of a social and technical framework. Concretely, I examine how *Valorant* becomes part of Twitch's ecosystem through the work of content creators. I expand on previous works on platformization by studying how content creation can facilitate the platformization of F2P games. This is inspired by the work on games as services (Sotamaa & Karppi, 2010), on the extended cultural practices of games (Postigo, 2007; Sotamaa, 2010), and on gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007).

The main goal of this article is to develop a preliminary account of the platformized co-dependency between *Valorant*, Twitch, and, crucially, content creators. To do so, I analyze Twitch and its mechanisms as a sociotechnical system through a study of its affordances, informed by Postigo's work (2016). Then, I define *Valorant* and F2P games as services, building on the concept of the attention economy, in order to critically assess how Twitch commodifies content creation. Finally, I take up McGuigan's (2014) work on the "neoliberal self" to assess and critique the role of content creators as workers for the platformized system as a whole. Using several case studies—on Twitch's Drop mechanic, the Twitch Rivals tournament, and the so-called "hype train"—I demonstrate how this platformized co-dependency comes into being. I do so by means of a qualitative content analysis of several Twitch streams of *Valorant*, using transcriptions that address the specificities of content creation as part of *Valorant*'s platformization strategy.

Valorant as a Sociotechnical System

Because Twitch plays such an integral part in the distribution of *Valorant*, their livestreams offer particularly interesting case studies for this article. These case studies will demonstrate the tenuous power balance between Twitch as a platform, the content creators, and other human/non-human actors they engage with in and around streams. This idea is grounded in Langdon Winner's (1986) theory of technological

politics. Winner pushes away from technological determinism—the idea that humans are passive subjects to technological innovation and therefore social change—and instead "suggests that we pay attention to the characteristics of technical objects and the meaning of those characteristics" (pp. 21–22). Thus, Winner sees agency as something not exclusive to humans, but also technologies. Similarly, Niederer and Van Dijck (2010) argue that sociotechnical systems facilitate user behavior by coupling social conventions with technological affordances, elsewhere defined as the set of probable uses and meanings designed by a technological artifact (Postigo, 2016). The sociotechnical system focuses on the meaning that emerges from the coordinated interactions between humans and technologies.

The idea of sociotechnical systems helps to understand the relation between technicity and sociality. Postigo (2016) states that most technologies are undertaken as social practices, meaning that looking at such digital architectures from the perspective of either social affordances or technological affordances will generate different meanings. The two are inherently connected, but technological affordances describe what kind of technological use is afforded, whereas social affordances describe the social structure that emerges in interaction with a given technical structure. As a consequence, user-generated content (UGC), he says, wrongfully gives the impression that users have complete agency (p. 335). Instead, Postigo argues that the technological infrastructure of these platforms can transform UGC into forms of digital labor—labor in the sense that it creates an exploitative sociotechnical system that extracts value from UGC, what he calls "digital labor architectures" (p. 333). This can be explored further by analyzing the distribution of beta access through Twitch Drops.

The affordances of Twitch Drops range from providing access to content, to creating a form of cultural hierarchy. Twitch Drops automatically generate virtual content for viewers. Those who watch the longest have a higher chance of being rewarded with a Drop. The reward, in this case, is early access to *Valorant*. On a technical level, the Drop thus affords access. As a social affordance, the Drop's distribution of access functions as a currency among players. I argue that this signals an exchange of "gaming capital," as discussed in Consalvo's (2007) rewriting of Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory. Cultural capital means the collection of symbolic traits that one acquires to become part of a social class. Consalvo's theory discusses those symbolisms specific to gaming culture's social hierarchy. Gaming capital signifies a dynamic currency that addresses the interaction between players, industries, and various gameplay practices (Consalvo, 2007, p. 4). *Valorant*'s distribution of Twitch quite literally generates gaming capital as it integrates the streams as paratexts into its core business model. The Drop becomes a

tool for the promotion of the game and consequently rewards—and thus assigns tangible value to—the activity of watching.

Furthermore, Twitch Drops strengthen the position of what Postigo calls "stars" (2016, p. 345). He defines stars as those who create and maintain large follower bases and are vital to ensuring revenue generation from UGC. This is primarily a social status in which content creators can attain stardom within their respective communities. Games can function as sites for stardom to emerge through content creation (Postigo, 2016, p. 341). *Valorant* as a sociotechnical system has the potential of strengthening the position of already established Twitch stars by giving them the elite position as a distributor of beta access. It thus functions as a self-sustaining reputation system that assigns cultural value to content, similar to the one described by Niederer and Van Dijck (2010) with their example of WikiTrust. This is an extension for Wikipedia that color-codes edited parts of articles for their reliability. This extension creates an implied social hierarchy among users—a form of reputation—based on user behavior. As such, their study of WikiTrust serves as an example of how a "reputation system" can emerge as the result of the interaction between technologies and their users. In the case of this article, the commodification of viewership with Twitch Drops can translate into forms of reputation in a similar way. Twitch Drops not only distribute access to *Valorant* but also create a social hierarchy among audiences and potential *Valorant* players, dividing audiences between those who have exclusive access to the game and those who do not.

Valorant as a sociotechnical system orchestrates the interactions between streamers, viewers, platform and game. At the heart of this system lies a variety of both social and technical affordances that balance between the participatory potential of creating meaningful user engagement on the one hand, and more labor-infused affordances that serve the purpose of generating promotional value for both Twitch and *Valorant* on the other. This points to a potential pitfall of *Valorant* as a sociotechnical system, as it might reinforce inequalities between cultural workers, the participatory potential of meaningful content, and digital labor.

Gaming the System Through *Valorant*'s Beta Access

Digital platforms offer various ways for cultural producers to generate additional (automated) revenue streams. Simply put, the closed beta sells the idea of exclusivity of playing *Valorant*, which transforms viewership into a valuable commodity. Petre et al. (2019) argue in their work on "platform paternalism" that the downside of automating cultural practices is that it affects content creators' labor conditions. The concept of platform paternalism describes a moral boundary-drawing process between legitimate strategic action and illegitimate algorithmic

manipulation. The authors argue that platform paternalism establishes a double standard: platforms can be credited for their innovative use of automated mechanisms, while similar strategies are often judged as unduly manipulative when deployed by cultural producers (Petre et al., 2019, p. 9). The Twitch Drop can be seen as an example of an automated process that can be manipulated by system-gamers for their personal benefit. Consequently, it also affects labor conditions of streamers and potentially strengthens inequalities among cultural producers.

The public outrage that emerged a few weeks after the initial release of the beta version of *Valorant* illustrates the precarious position of the content creators in the platform ecosystem. The streamer Asmongold (2020) accused *Valorant* streamers of "gaming the system" by using the "Twitch Drops Enabled" tag while broadcasting pre-recorded footage of *Valorant* content. He claimed that several streamers were broadcasting pre-recorded material under the false pretense of being live while farming viewers using the Drops mechanic. The accusation of gaming the system refers to the use of algorithmic manipulation in the process of cultural production without the streamers making the content themselves. While the idea of platform paternalism describes the platform as leading this campaign of accusing system-gamers, this example features the content creators themselves leading the discourse.

The public outrage presents viewership as the main commodity generated by *Valorant* as a sociotechnical system. Streamers can game the system by making use of the exclusivity of the beta access Drop to increase their viewership as well as that of the game. For streamers, finding one's "niche" is fundamental to their success as content creators. A new game can offer a serious opportunity to dive into a new niche and therefore also a new audience. *Valorant* is particularly suitable for this as it offers the Drops as crutches for viewership by giving audiences extra incentives to watch *Valorant* livestreams. The way the Drop is used and exploited shows the power dynamic that emerges between Twitch, *Valorant's* developers, and content creators, potentially affecting the labor conditions of the latter. The use and misuse of the Drop to gain an advantage shows that there is significant value in finding an audience for *Valorant.* Content creators are showing an awareness of the overall value and scarcity of viewership, which is commodified through the Twitch Drop.

Games as Services and the Attention Economy

In the earlier paragraphs, I described carefully arranged roles that streamers play in *Valorant*'s distribution via Twitch. This situation of co-dependency potentially transforms the content creator into a cultural commodity (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Drops can play a fundamental role in this transformation. This is in line with the idea of the attention

economy, which treats attention as a scarce commodity (Davenport & Beck, 2001). Terranova (2012) argues that attention can become a form of capital that can be accumulated, measured, and exchanged (p. 2). One way of seeing the attention economy in practice is through systems that can measure, commodify, or otherwise facilitate the exchange of human attention. In other words, the attention economy relies on mechanisms of automatization that generate value from human attention. Twitch has carefully crafted such an attention economy with the way streams and games are categorized, as each game is listed as its own category in the "Browse" section. These games are primarily listed hierarchically based on the number of concurrent viewers; therefore, on Twitch, viewers are commodified as indicators of relevant or successful games. This mechanism aids the commodification of human attention and provides a tangible system for the exchange of this capital.

With *Valorant*, players as consumers are targeted through a model that has attention and investment as its primary focus. This is different from a more traditional approach in which the videogame console was the primary mode of distribution for game publishers. Nieborg and Poell (2018) argue that such an approach is particularly vulnerable to a "winner-take-all effect," in which a small number of premium-priced blockbuster franchises dominate the market. Conversely, *Valorant,* with its distribution strategy via Twitch, presents a different approach, in which not only game consoles but also digital platforms are used for distribution. Here, the focus has shifted towards gaining and sustaining the attention of audiences as the main concern, using digital platforms as distributors. The crucial involvement of digital platforms and their content creators makes it so that there is no winner-take-all effect. Rather than generating direct sales, *Valorant* aims to develop a sustainable player base and give them the incentive to invest in the game, as is embedded in the rhetoric of games as services (Sotamaa & Karppi, 2010). *Valorant*'s service model uses Twitch as the core infrastructure to generate such a sustainable relationship with players.

The Neoliberal Self and Content Creation as Work

This section delves into the affective labor that goes into the role of the content creator in distributing *Valorant*'s content. Affective labor refers to efforts intended to generate emotional responses from others. In this case, the labor is mediated by Twitch's transmission of an affective performance of streaming personas (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019, p. 816). While I problematize the precarious position of streamers as distributors of gaming content with *Valorant*'s platformization strategy, Twitch's involvement—with systems like Twitch Drops—can also offer profound opportunities for content creators to become successful entrepreneurs. In his work on the "neoliberal self," McGuigan (2014)

describes a shift from organized capitalism to neoliberal hegemony that brings about the transformation of the self, which is particularly prevalent in creative industries. It imagines the free play of market forces according to a "never actually existing model of 'perfect competition'" (McGuigan, 2014, p. 224). His critique is that this neoliberal subject—in this case, the content creator—is predicated upon a thriving free market structure celebrating the competitive freedom among individuals. The reality, however, is that the freedom of these subjects is enforced by larger power structures. An important aspect of the neoliberal self, McGuigan argues, is that the construction of the self is not a matter of free choice, but of "institutionalized obligation" (pp. 233–234). Following McGuigan, I argue that the "obligation" is, in this case, illustrated by content creators' economic and social dependency on the platform, enforced and amplified by platformization strategies such as the Twitch Drop.

Content creators as neoliberal subjects take up different roles in relation to games, Twitch, and their audience. With regard to the overall platform ecosystem, streamers work according to schedules that are standardized and attuned to when and how they can reach their audience. In their study on the careers of Twitch streamers, Johnson and Woodcock (2019) state that scheduling on Twitch—much like scheduling of television broadcasting—depends upon developing regularity. They also characterized streamers as "companies of one", displaying a sense of "neoliberal subjectivity" in their work ethic (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019, p. 344). This means that their work ethic is geared towards investing lots of time and effort, while at the same time providing reliability and regularity. Crucially, streamers also make conscious decisions about the games they play. Streamers can choose to be a variety streamer—meaning their "content" is in the variation of games played—or to be dedicated to one particular game (Taylor, 2018, p. 3). Livestreaming on Twitch does not happen in isolation, as the work of content creators is entangled in the broader ecosystem of Twitch, games, and audiences. Therefore, content creators take up different roles as they navigate between neoliberal subjectivity and platformized obligations. These obligations are prominently represented in the Twitch Rivals tournament, which is illustrative of the co-dependency between content creators, games, and Twitch.

Twitch Rivals Launch Showdown

Twitch Rivals is a tournament format that allows content creators to assemble teams and compete against other content creators. One of those tournaments is the "Launch Showdown" event for *Valorant* which took place in the first week after the game's launch. Most of its participants—primarily professional players—were already affiliated with esports organizations and other (FPS) games. Given that Twitch Rivals

functions as a mechanism to generate additional viewership through a competitive format, I argue that this tournament demonstrated the aspirations of Riot Games for *Valorant* to be recognized as a competitive game.

Twitch Rivals provides an opportunity to build a community surrounding a particular game. Riot Games profits from these tournaments as they draw in a large number of content creators with their respective audiences. Content creators themselves enjoy an increased spike in spectatorial engagement through the centralized event while also stabilizing their role as important figures in the community. Consequently, this also points to a pitfall of Twitch as a sociotechnical system, as it reinforces inequalities between cultural workers. The hierarchy among content creators is reinforced during Twitch Rivals. The opaque invitational structure of Rivals—in which it remains unclear what the invitation criteria are—creates an implicit social hierarchy among content creators, seemingly based on their level of dedication to *Valorant* as it is validated by Twitch. If that is the case, already established streamers are given more opportunities with occasions like Twitch Rivals, whereas smaller streamers are potentially neglected.

Valorant as a Service Game

The previous paragraphs illustrated the different ways that streamers engage in a relationship with *Valorant*. Streamers do not stream *Valorant* only because of the incentives to stream given by Rivals and Drops. Rather, *Valorant* has some distinct features that might make it appealing for livestreaming, in terms of its gameplay or its potential audience. *Valorant* is a tactical player-versus-player multiplayer game that blends the aesthetics and genre conventions of first-person shooters with the strategical nature of multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games. This particular genre mix is relevant because players and content creators often play various games within one specific genre. Consequently, *Valorant*'s envisioned audience and player base are most likely affiliated with the same spectrum of genres.

The game developers themselves make it clear that they are aiming to engage in a sustainable relationship with a dedicated player base. On May 20, 2020, looking ahead to the official launch, executive producer Anna Donlon and game director Joe Ziegler (2020) shared their mission statement reflecting on the beta, in which they present *Valorant* as a service:

> Closed Beta isn't for getting things "perfect" for launch—it's for making sure the right things are in place for us to *start* this journey together. We are moving VALORANT to launch because we want to *begin* this relationship of service and engagement, and that means taking the first *BIG* step. Please continue to hold

> us to high standards, and help us meet them. (para. 2, emphasis in original)

The developers thus present their game as a service game. *Valorant* is designed as a platform for numerous upgrades and value-added services, such as an in-game store for cosmetic content. For the service to function as such, the game needs a significant active player base. *Valorant* also provides a "community code" in which the developers describe an explicit set of guidelines on how to ideally behave as a player. In this code, Riot Games presents teamwork, fairness, and "thriving players" as core player values (*Valorant*, 2020). Riot Games thus creates an "implied player" (Aarseth, 2007) utilizing the rules and instructions provided by the community code, though the players retain the freedom to develop their own ways of playing *Valorant.* Furthermore, the phrasing of community guidelines resembles that of terms of service for platforms, which are similar sociolegal instruments to govern the relationship between platforms and users (Van Dijck et al., 2018, pp. 11–12). By combining the service model with a community code, the game establishes a clear focus on the player and their behavior. Considering streamers' potential to become opinion leaders in their communities (Sjöblom et al. 2019, p. 23), this declaration of intent by Riot Games thus gives streamers a pivotal role in the distribution strategy of *Valorant*. Their content functions as extensions of *Valorant'*s overall service-based game design, thereby illustrating the relevance of studying *Valorant* in relation to the overall platformized co-dependency between Twitch, *Valorant*, content creators, and players.

This rhetoric of service goes further than *Valorant* as an isolated game and becomes infused in the platform ecosystem as a whole. Thus, the first weeks before and shortly after the launch of *Valorant* can demonstrate how this relationship between streamers as content creators and games comes into being. In the next section, I will elaborate on my method of analysis.

Method

For this article, I performed a qualitative content analysis of Twitch streams of *Valorant* with a focus on the work of content creators. This analysis was conducted during the transition between the closed beta phase, which ended on May 28, 2020, and the official launch of *Valorant* on June 2, 2020. After the official launch, Twitch Drops no longer commodified viewership as it did during the beta. This means that after the official launch, Riot Games had to rely on the conscious decision of streamers, viewers, and players to invest their time in their game. Sjöblom et al. (2019) argue that dedicated streamers, as opinion leaders, seriously impact the attraction and maintenance of communities surrounding particular games. Streamers are thus important figures

leading the exchange of paratextual knowledge surrounding games on Twitch. With that in mind, my analysis focuses on the time period after the official launch to see which content creators dedicated themselves to working with *Valorant* and which roles they took up in this process. The chosen method serves the purpose of providing a detailed provisional account of the role of content creators in the platformization of F2P games via Twitch and how this role is adopted.

Many elements constitute "content" in Twitch streams, including the game that is played, how it is played, the narration of the streamer, and what the audience says. Recktenwald's (2017) transcription scheme of Twitch streams accounts for this specific construction of content on Twitch. Rather than keeping several types of content separate, Recktenwald proposes to pay close attention to the interplay between game activity, streamer talk, and audience chat in what he calls the "cross-modal communication" of streams (2017, p. 76; see Figure 1). These transcriptions are used to bring together the various forms of content into coherent units of information, providing one textual sample of different levels of communication for theoretical interpretation, as done by Fields (1988).

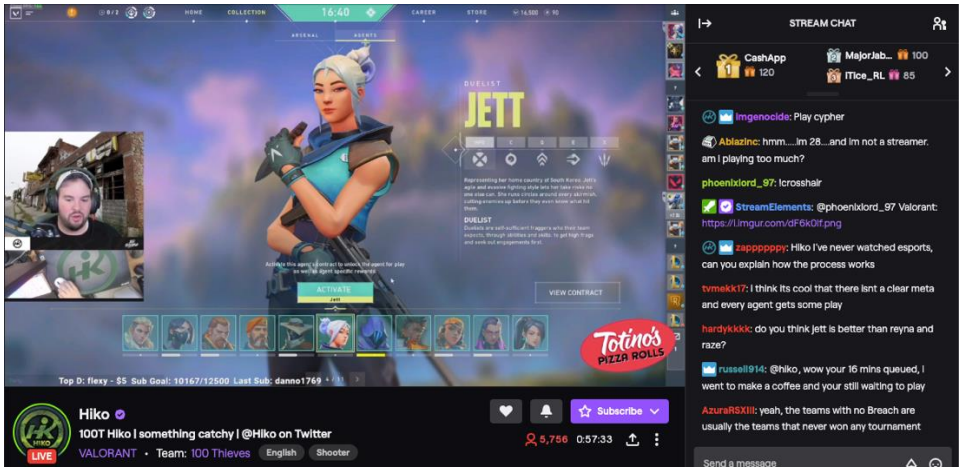

Figure 1. Visual representation of a Twitch stream. The stream consists of the webcam overlay (middle left), game activity (center/center left), stream information (bottom), and chat (right). Screenshot by the author.

This method aimed to investigate a small number of streamers and streams to perform a qualitative comparative analysis of the way content creators function as distributors of F2P games. The transcripts serve as proof of concepts for the analysis, providing detailed accounts of how we might characterize the role of content creators. The selection of content creators consisted of various streamers with different audience sizes to generate a balanced dataset with heterogeneous results. Many of these streamers were already involved with first-person

shooters (FPS) and tactical player-versus-player (PvP) games that are similar to the genre conventions of *Valorant*. The data was gathered the first week after the official launch of the game, between June 2, 2020 and June 9, 2020. I watched several broadcasts a day for an hour each and logged the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) in a plain text file (*.txt) for further reference. Where relevant, the IRC and audiovisual materials were transcribed using the scheme offered in Recktenwald (2017). Listed in Table 1 is an overview of the data gathered for this paper. The second column lists which game the streamer was affiliated with before engaging with *Valorant*, which gives an impression of what might draw streamers to this particular game.

Name	Affiliated games	Followers (April '21)	Hours watched	Stream dates
Fangetta	Variety	26.6K	1 hr	06/04/2020
Hiko	*Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*	1.4M	1 hr 30	06/02/2020
Kephrii	*Overwatch*, FPS games	563K	1 hr	06/02/2020
Oasisonoverwatch	*Overwatch*, FPS games	110K	1 hr	06/04/2020
Onscreen	*Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*	905K	1 hr	06/06/2020
TheGamingOwl	*Fortnite*	140K	2 hr	06/04/2020 06/05/2020
Valkia	*Call of Duty: Warzone*	295K	3 hr	06/03/2020 06/05/2020 06/06/2020

Table 1. Overview of the corpus.

The data came primarily from streamers (*N*=7) with a background in tactical FPS games, such as *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve, 2012) and *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016). Streamers often made their dedication to *Valorant* explicit by listing *Valorant* in their profiles or at least making their experience known by including their in-

game rank or level in the stream title. The research on the affordances of Twitch streams by Sjöblom et al. (2019) has provided relevant pointers for this study, specifically as an overview of the social affordances of the video stream. According to Sjöblom et al., streams can be characterized as stages for the emergence of micro-celebrities, as a place where streamers become opinion leaders, and as an opportunity to establish two-way communication with audiences. My research has attempted to broaden Sjöblom et al.'s scope by connecting their work to the specific relationship with *Valorant*, the sociotechnical system, and the platform ecosystem.

Analysis

Valorant: Dead or Alive?

During TheGamingOwl's stream on June 4, 2020, a chatter posed the question of whether the game is "dead" (see Table 2). These are games that do not have enough active players, which results in empty game lobbies, long matchmaking times, and bad server coverage. The discussion in the excerpt reveals that a discussion about "dead" games is about more than the practicalities of playing a game. As was suggested later by another member of the audience, the person commenting might have been "trolling" (trying to get a response by being contrarian, offensive, or obnoxious). Nevertheless, the debate that followed reveals the audience's perspective on games as services and the attention economy on Twitch. It shows the interplay between the game as a technology and the kind of social practices it affords.

Source	Text
VALORANT	*Round ends, streamer is spectating and turns to chat.*
CHATTER 1	Is this game dead already? As many people say.
STREAMER	Dead? What do you mean dead? Who says that? Who the hell says this game is dead?
CHATTER 2	What?
CHATTER 3	People say that on everything.
CHATTER 4	It just came out. How is it dead?
CHATTER 5	Yeah, what?
STREAMER	Who's smoking that crack? The game just came out. [laughs]. How is it dead?

CHATTER 6	The game has millions of players.
STREAMER	That's what I'm saying.
CHATTER 7	Him and 3 other people
VALORANT	*Next round starts*
CHATTER 6	Everyone is playing, not watching.
CHATTER 3	Ow [*Overwatch*] has been dead for 7 years you still get a game in 2 mins.

Table 2. Transcription of TheGamingOwl's stream on June 4, 2020.

The comment that "everybody is playing, not watching" signals a rhetoric of "dead" games phrased in terms of attention and viewership. This discussion shows that *Valorant* needs both an active player base and active representation within the livestreaming ecosystem. The connection to the attention economy is implied in the rhetoric of "dead" games. Although such rhetorical instruments do not directly commodify or automate attention as such, the overall platform ecosystem does contribute to the development of this type of vocabulary that categorizes games relevant to the livestreaming ecosystem.

The idea of playing over watching, in this case, also refers to a certain degree of fan investment. TheGamingOwl's community is, as Jenkins (2006) states about interactive audiences, "held together through mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge" (p. 137). The audience expressed a sense of rivalry towards other games and their communities, in this case, *Overwatch*. This characterizes the way players and audiences define themselves and others as communities and the role of the streamer as an opinion leader of their community (Sjöblom et al., 2019, p. 23). More importantly, this interaction also characterizes the social practice of streaming games, in which defining oneself in relation to other streams, games and their respective communities is crucial.

Dividing the Player Base

On June 3, 2020, UK-based streamer Valkia and his teammates had been waiting to find a match to practice for an upcoming Twitch Rivals tournament for quite some time when he, his teammates, and the chat started discussing the matchmaking system (see Table 3). This discussion revealed certain issues with the current matchmaking system, caused by long queue times when trying to find matches with full teams ("five stacks").

Source	Text

VALORANT	*Main menu. In queue for matchmaking*.
STREAMER	Yeah, there must be hidden MMR [matchmaking rating] for this that's been taken from beta.
TEAMMATE 1	I had an hour queue yesterday. An hour queue, and then we played some boring game.
STREAMER	An hour queue!?
TEAMMATE 1	So that's why we stopped playing.
TEAMMATE 2	You're playing against a pro team when you want to chill right?
TEAMMATE 1	Exactly. You're playing "unrated" [non-competitive game mode] and there are teams practicing, trying out strategies. It's like, ah, I don't want *that*.
CHATTER 1	There could also be no other 5 stacks
STREAMER	[to chatter 1] Nah. The game's out now. There's definitely going to be another five-stack. A hundred percent. But it's just about match "Elo" for that. I don't really want to wait for an hour for a game. I feel like that's probably not good for a stream to be queuing for an hour.

Table 3. Transcription of Valkia's Twitch stream on June 3, 2020.

This excerpt reveals that the focus on competitive engagement can create a gap between competitive players and non-competitive players. In this case, Valkia struggled to find a match against similarly skilled players within the non-competitive "unrated" game mode. He suggested that the progress from the beta game had been transferred to the actual game, thus causing longer queue times and imbalanced matches. In their discussion, Valkia and his teammates felt that they were unwillingly queued up against professional players. The matchmaking system, as a sociotechnical "reputation" system (Niederer & Van Dijck, 2010; Postigo, 2016), aggravates the hierarchies among players and content creators. Zooming in on the affordances of a matchmaking system reveals a difference between the social implications and the technical affordances. By design, matchmaking systems are supposed to provide a level playing field for players. Simultaneously, matchmaking also creates a social order, therefore becoming a "reputation" system,

which reinforces hierarchies among players and thus hurts the community-building potential of a game. It characterizes the functioning of social affordances and technical affordances discussed by Postigo (2016). In this case, it means that, on a technical level, matchmaking systems merely afford matchmaking for players, whereas, on the social level, such simple systems create an implied social hierarchy. Such hierarchies are not inherently malicious to the community-building potential of a game, as they can be beneficial to the gaming experience. However, the excerpt discussed here reveals a malfunctioning matchmaking system that fails to separate casual players from competitive or professional players. In this case, failing to account for the heterogeneity of the game's player base can hurt the gaming community's experience with the game. Table 2, for example, reveals the social practice of defining players, games, and their communities based on a game's matchmaking system.

As was stated by Valkia's teammates, the lack of a competitive game mode at launch resulted in longer queue times, which was—as Valkia argued—"bad for viewership," again referring to the pressure of the attention economy. Furthermore, it harmed the playing experience, as both competitive and non-competitive players played a non-competitive game mode. Conversely, *Valorant*'s community code reveals the developers' intention of making a game that is suitable as a competitive playing environment, and ultimately as a game that could be played in esports—formalized gaming competitions. In this respect, the role of the content creator becomes one of distributing content that is in line with their community code and mission statement and, in this case, competitive in nature. Valkia's stream reveals that a malfunctioning matchmaking system hurts the potential of streamers to create content that is in line with the game's intended audience. More so than just aiming for high viewership, content creators also have the responsibility of making content that is in line with the expectations of both their audience and the game. This becomes clearer when looking at the first big event after the official launch: the Twitch Rivals Showdown tournament.

Automated Attention: The "Hype Train"

Another excerpt of Valkia's stream, this time during the Twitch Rivals group stage matches, shows that a "hype train" was activated while Team Valkia was on match point in the game (see Table 4). This case study serves as an illustration of how Twitch contributes to the proliferation of an attention economy that capitalizes on viewership. According to Twitch, a hype train is "a super-sized celebration when community members unite to support a streamer they love" (Twitch, 2020, para. 1). This is an automated process based on the social principles of audience engagement that celebrates affective investment of audiences—an investment which, according to Taylor (2018), "is

amplified and interwoven with an attention economy based in fandom" (p. 97). The hype train kicks off automatically after a spike in donations from different viewers in the channel, triggering a prompt with an animation on screen coupled with a loud soundtrack (see Figure 2).

Source	Text
VALORANT	*Round is playing. Streamer continuously communicating with his teammates via voice chat.*
TWITCH PROMPT	[CHATTER 1] is gifting 5 Tier 1 Subs to Valkia's community! They've gifted a total of 96 in the channel!
STREAMER	[CHATTER 1]! We got "gifted" coming in! Let's go!
GAME	Team Valkia wins round.
STREAMER	Nice! Let's go! [. . .] One More round!
CHATTER 1	Let's hype this biatch up Chooo chooo
VALORANT	*Final round starts (match point).*
TWITCH PROMPT	CHATTER 2 is gifting 5 Tier 1 Subs to Valkia's community!
STREAMER	[CHATTER 2] with the 5 gifted as well. Let's go, Rivals!
CHATTER 2	HYPPPPPEEEEEE Peopleeeee
CHATTER 3	hypeeeee
CHATTER 4	GET THOSE EARLY PICKS
CHATTER 5	So close to level 4
CHATTER 4	HYPEEEEEEE
TWITCH PROMPT	[CHATTER 6] gifted a Tier 1 sub to [CHATTER 3]! They have given 40 Gift Subs in the channel!
CHATTER 2	YASSSSSSSSSSSS
CHATTER 7	YESS [Chatter 6] LETS GOOO
CHATTER 4	YESSSSSSS

CHATTER 3	i fuckingg love uuu [Chatter 1]
CHATTER 2	TEAM TEAM TEAM TEAM TEAM TEAM VALKIA VALKIA VALKIA VALKIA VALKIA VALKIA
CHATTER 4	PogU. PogChamp. [Chatter 6] YOU LEGEND
VALORANT	*Valkia makes final two kills and wins round. Match won 13-11.*
STREAMER	Let's go baby! [stands up] Let's go!

Table 4. Transcription of Valkia's Twitch stream on June 5, 2020.

Figure 2. Image of Valkia's stream displaying Twitch's donation prompt while the "hype train" is activated. The prompt displays the notification with animated "emotes" blurring large parts of the screen. Screenshot by the author.

The hype train is automatically triggered by momentum within the audience that is perfectly attuned to both game and stream events as well as the audience's participation. In this case, the cross-modal interaction between different elements of the Twitch stream reveals how this platform—indicative of the attention economy—"preys on visuality" (Beller, 2006, p. 2). The simultaneous climax of both Valkia winning the game and the stream being "hyped" highlights the focus on visuality and spectatorship. The hype train functions as one of the mechanisms described by Terranova (2012), where attention is measured and even commodified—in this case, the hype train quite literally commodifies human attention in the form of "hype." The scarce resource of attention has, for a moment, been bundled into one climactic hype train. Such a micro-example then also points to the overall larger-scale principles on which *Valorant*'s platformized distribution strategy operates. In this case, the value of attention for *Valorant* is elevated through an event like Rivals, amplified with Twitch Drops, and measured with the hype train. The hype train mediates an emotional response from the audience

to the streamer, while at the same time generating economic value through the commodification of viewer engagement. It demonstrates how Riot Games—through the introduction of Twitch as a distributor and marketer—gives both Twitch and its users crucial roles in sustaining attention to *Valorant* for as long as possible.

Conclusion

This paper provides a preliminary understanding of the involvement of content creators in the livestreaming ecosystem. The F2P game model has proven to be particularly relevant in this respect due to the importance of the content creator in establishing the game as a service. *Valorant* does so, first and foremost, by giving Twitch streamers the role of distributors of content. The implication of "free" in the F2P model was also examined. It was found that streamers work for both Riot Games and Twitch. Riot Games benefits from the work of content creators as Twitch distributes their content, *Valorant*, to audiences and players. By researching the development of *Valorant*, this paper has provided an overview of the roles of several social and technological affordances. I discussed Twitch Drops as a fusion of technical affordances that primarily distribute access, and the resulting social affordances creating social hierarchy and reputation amongst content creators and players. I emphasized the vital role of the content creator, as revealed by their role as opinion leaders in their engagement with *Valorant*'s player base, matchmaking systems, and the way it is represented in Twitch Rivals. In the case of *Valorant*, the relationship between game and content creator first emerged during the closed beta, which signaled the beginning of this paper. Streamers became fundamental in building an audience both for themselves and for the game. Under the influence of a variety of sociotechnical systems—with attention and commodification as fundamental driving forces—the content creator was assigned a vital role in the promotion of the game and the fostering of a community as an opinion leader.

This paper aimed to develop a provisional understanding of the roles of content creators as complementors within the platformization of *Valorant* after launch. Content creators have proven to be crucial in the mediation of the interplay between players, audiences, platforms, and *Valorant*. On the one hand, streamers played a vital role as cultural commodities, since they were directly responsible for the promotion of the F2P game. On the other hand, content creators benefited from this process themselves, considering that the sociotechnical system provided a crutch for viewership and hype. Streamers will continue to play a fundamental role in building a sustainable service relationship with the game and the community, notably by developing affective audiences that are willing to invest in the game. Whether a game is "dead" or "alive" as a service is vital to the work of streamers, who adjust their

specific role as content creators accordingly and might influence the lifespan of games. The success of *Valorant* is thus determined by its functioning as a service and dependent on an ongoing relationship with viewers and players, most notably via Twitch.

Future research could help us understand and define the relation between livestreaming and digital games. Such a study could examine what makes a game relevant for livestreaming and vice versa. Doing so would generate a better understanding of how digital games are actualized in our contemporary mediatized society. Future studies could also focus on how games are facilitating the integration into streaming platforms, notably by looking at mechanisms such as streamer modes, spectator modes, and replay systems, all as part of a sociotechnical system.

This paper contributes to a growing body of literature on the cultural practices in and around videogames by providing a preliminary sketch of the roles that streamers take up as content creators for games. It shows that the livestreaming ecosystem might indeed help foster communities around games, but also potentially creates and aggravates hierarchies among players and streamers. In particular, the paper highlights the numerous ways in which content creation becomes work. The co-dependency between streamers and games—caused by platformization—sets the conditions for Riot Games and Twitch to extract both affective and economic value from content. The increased co-dependency between digital platforms and videogames in the game industry as a whole becomes a pressing subject for future studies as the position of content creators might become more and more compromised.

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