

# Introduction to the Special Issue on Livestreaming as Popular Culture

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On April 14, 1996, a college student named Jennifer Kaye Ringley launched JenniCam.org, a website devoted to displaying black-and-white digital photos of Ringley (Hart). Designed to refresh periodically, the site provided users with an intimate glimpse into Ringley's life, from the mundane (e.g., chores and conversations with friends) to the erotic (e.g., stripteases and sexual activity). At its height, the site generated seven million hits per day and even managed to crash the web (Krotoski). JenniCam's massive success, and the subsequent success of others who followed Ringley's footsteps, heralded the ubiquitous popularity of what we now commonly perform and refer to as livestreaming. Far from the "life-casting" of the late 1990s, livestreaming has emerged as an immensely popular form of entertainment during the first three decades of the 21st century. While the medium gained popularity for sharing videogame play, especially given the nominal use of streaming to broadcast esports competitions, livestreaming has long since outgrown its origins as a platform relegated to either gameplay or live vlogging. Across contexts, this method of sharing something of ourselves to a live audience has

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become a medium for community building, full-time financial subsistence, knowledge production, and creative collaboration.

Driven in part by advancements in digital communication technology (not to mention the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which necessitated a boom in accessible digital communication), livestreaming refers to online live broadcasts of anything from amateur home streamers who draw two or three regular viewers to beloved celebrities. Streaming functions as both a tool and method for artisans, social media influencers, and individual or gaming collectives alike to reach a global audience. Moreover, streaming intersects with almost every facet of popular culture, from videogames to movies and from live music to theatrical plays. This emergent practice has supplanted many forms of popular culture in the minds and hearts of younger generations, many of whom prefer unboxing videos to movies and would rather watch a Let's Play livestream than play the videogame itself. Given the enormous worldwide popularity of livestreaming, it is vital to consider the phenomenon of livestreaming through an academic lens. With this special issue, we hope to advance the work of scholars like T. L. Taylor, Stuart Moulthrop, Thomas M. Malaby, and others who set out to document and analyze the rise of livestreaming while also legitimizing it as a phenomenon worthy of study.

Building on Taylor's landmark study *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Live Game Streaming*, which helped legitimize academic inquiry into livestreaming, the essays in this special issue offer a wide array of research into various areas of livestreaming. By exploring the intersections between livestreaming, videogames, live music performances, archives, platform studies, and even the relationship between streamers and viewers through an array of methodological and theoretical frames, the contributors help to uncover the factors that have made livestreaming a popular activity with people around the world and from all walks of life. The issue begins with an introduction to the practice and study of livestreaming, followed by four essays that introduce cogent theoretical frameworks for understanding the elements of attention and play in livestreams. These theoretical interventions pave the way for the subsequent six diverse case studies which showcase the ever-widening scope of emergent livestreaming practices. The first three of these case studies focus on traditional video game streaming, while the latter three work toward refining the image of livestreaming practices which do not focus on gameplay.

We would like to thank each of this issue's contributors who all demonstrate an inspiring commitment to further legitimizing livestreaming studies. We are also

grateful to our fellow members in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Digital Cultures Collaboratory and the Editor of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* for helping us bring this idea to life. We believe this collection presents a dynamic vision of the present and future of livestreaming studies. This issue builds on the work of those who came before us and points the way toward new areas of inquiry that arise as livestreaming continues to evolve and incorporate other areas of both popular culture and life itself. The contributors to this issue all provide original and exciting insights into this thoroughly thrilling phenomenon that has come to influence nearly every aspect of contemporary society in a breathtakingly short amount of time. We trust that you, the reader, will find these essays useful to your own studies into livestreaming, and we hope that you will be inspired to step into the stream yourself, either through writing your own essay(s) or by switching on your webcam and going live.

### Works Cited

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