

Metagaming Attention: Defining the Metagame Through the Economy of Attention on Twitch

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“Play is never innocent or inconsequential.” (Mejia and Bulut 166)

In early 2015, I watched my first Twitch stream. By March 2015, I was a moderator for Geek & Sundry’s new Twitch channel. By the following January, I had launched my own channel. In my five years working on the platform, one constant has always been the importance of what Richard Lanham famously termed the economy of attention. On Twitch, those who succeed are those channels that amass the most attention through active viewers, those present for live Twitch streams. One of the most successful techniques used to both gain and increase attention for streamers has been the use of metagames.

When seeking to define metagaming, Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux admit “there is no unified definition of metagame” (10). Because the term’s exact definition and scope remain elusive in game studies, metagames demand further analysis. In this article, I will define metagames in terms of their deployment as strategies to garner attention, whether implicitly or explicitly. I assert that metagames can be understood as games that are designed to increase attention toward another artifact or event to which they are paratextual. While some analyze metagames as strictly “games about games” I take the approach that metagames are games which are meta, or, as stated in the Oxford English Dictionary, “a second order beyond” the original artifact, not just games but any artifact to which the goal is increased attention.

In contradiction to Boluk and LeMieux, who state “every game must have a metagame and every metagame must have a game” (6), metagames do not require games to be their central artifact. Think of drinking games for various movies. These games function as metagames for movies; the movie is the central artifact

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for the paratextual metagame. What is primary to these metagames is that their rules are created in ways meant to increase attention for a central artifact in a specific span of time. Similarly, metagames on Twitch are not paratextual to the games streamers play, but to the streamers themselves.

To demonstrate the utility of this definition, I will analyze metagaming practices on Twitch as powerful components of an economy of attention. On Twitch, these metagames are not paratextual, or “texts or artifacts that surround a central text, lending that central text meaning,” to games being played (Consalvo 177). That is, they are not games about games. Instead, they are paratextual to the stream/streamer. They are not meant to increase attention for a game, but for a Twitch channel and, in doing so, build capital for the channel. In *Watch Me Play*, T.L. Taylor states that “Both game developers and platforms build tremendous communities and capital by having users constantly engaging with each other, producing content, and deeply building value by their presence and interactions” (174). On Twitch, these interactions between audiences and streamers that build capital often take place in the metagame or as part of a metagame strategy.

On Twitch we observe an evolution of fan culture, blurring the lines between fan and cultural artifact, which simultaneously shifts expectations of what the cultural artifact is or should be. When we resituate metagames as the central artifact of study, metagames can be seen to be more than “games about games” and more specifically defined than “the only kinds of games we play” (Boluk and LeMieux 3). In this article, four types of metagames are explored: indirect metagame strategies, direct monetary metagames, metagames of chronocapital, and metagames of appreciation. Metagames are paratextual to a central artifact, an artifact which does not inherently need to be a game, and function to increase attention for that artifact. As Boluk and LeMieux argue, “The metagame anchors the game in time and space” (11). While our definition repositions metagames from being bound specifically to games, metagames still bind the artifact and participants in time and space. And this is how they function in the economy of attention.

Attention as Capital

The attention economy (Carey; Hyde; Lanham) is central to Twitch and it is through this economy of attention that the metagame is created. According to Lanham, economics is the study of the allocation of scarce resources (xi). By defining an economy based around attention, Lanham tells us that attention is both scarce and

a resource; scarce in that it is limited in nature and a resource in that it is both usable and holds value. Furthermore, Lanham states that the attention economy is “built on electronic information as its central wealth” rather than any physical good, making Web 2.0 and social media platforms predisposed to create economies of attention over other commodities (12). The attention economy “combines the power of a free market...with the cooperative ownership of the cultural conversation” (Lanham 13). Thus, an attention economy depends on active participation from the “market actors” while considering all potential participants as market actors. By analyzing metagames, defined as paratextual tools to increase attention for central artifacts, we may better understand how economies of attention are produced through the mobilization of an audience to active participation and interaction.

Active participation and interaction are dependent on the metagame of an artifact. “No matter how small, no matter how subtle, the metagame is never insignificant” (Boluk and Lemieux 9). For the purposes of this article, I focus on three Twitch channels featuring tabletop roleplaying games which foster community via metagames. Tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs) are ideal for this study as they are easily customizable and adaptable, lending themselves to easy insertion of metagames and clearer illustration of the dynamics at play on Twitch.

Twitch’s Active Audience

Twitch itself relies on streamers to draw in audiences and reconstitute those audiences as loyal fans and active members of the Twitch platform, thus putting the onus on the individual as market actor. It is important to note that Twitch characterizes its viewership as active. They claim that “Twitch is where millions of people come together live every day to chat, interact, and make their own entertainment together” and the very first sentence on their About page is “We saved you a seat in chat.” Both these statements privilege the audience, not the streamer, as the most important element of Twitch. So, while Enrico Gandolfi argues that, quantitatively, communication is not very high on Twitch in terms of the ratio of viewers to active participants in chat rooms, especially in larger channels, the rhetoric of Twitch itself emphasizes active communication as its highest priority. In addition, according to Hendrik Storstein Spilker, Kristine Ask, and Martin Hansen, “When choosing what type of channel to watch, the social aspect was frequently highlighted” (7). This makes clear that Twitch audiences

watch channels in which they feel bonds to the streamer and other members of the audience, something that is fostered through active participation and interaction. Channels which foster these bonds are therefore more successful in an attention economy.

Twitch also encourages audience members to become streamers, telling fans “Watch what you love, connect with streamers, and chat with tons of communities” and “Bring your passions; we’ll help you build a community around them” (“Twitch About”). The first statement follows an expected Twitch viewer’s progression, from passive viewer to building connections to streamers to interacting in the chat and with communities. The next quote appears directly below the first and is a call for new streamers, implying that audience members, once integrated fully as active viewers, should progress to the role of streamer.

In addition, Twitch is calling for members to become streamers based on their passions, not just limited to games. It is not important to be a good gamer, or a gamer at all, to be successful on Twitch. According to Twitch, all you need is passion and some work, and you can succeed. However, once audience members progress to streamers of their own channels they now must do the work of growing and retaining an audience who will, theoretically, one day become streamers themselves. This is the neoliberal metagame of Twitch.

When looking at metagames, audiences must be considered as potential players, not just as spectators of play. Boluk and LeMieux tell us that “Metagames reveal the alternate histories of play that always exist” (9) We need to consider the multitude of games that are concurrent within the space of a single stream and in a larger context, across Twitch in general. “Onlookers assist in enhancing and expanding gameplay when they accept the roles of focused audience members or learning apprentices, thereby turning play into public performance and supporting the showroom frame” (Lin and Sun 134). When we consider this quote in conjunction with metagaming on Twitch, we see the importance of the audience to the transformation of play to performance. Additionally, given the already established importance of interaction to a Twitch stream’s success, we see how performance functions to engage the audience themselves in play. While the streamer’s play is transformed to performance, the audience’s viewership is transformed to play.

Scaling Up: Metagames as Explored in Three Examples

I could have sworn the strange creature in the lake was going to attack us, but just as I warn my friends of its presence, the creature speaks in my head. It reminds me that we are friends, I have known it for my entire life. Why would it want to attack me? What a silly thought, Zulta. In the back of my head, I hear the echo of a familiar voice. I think I hear “I would like to remind you, if you would like to send anything to help the party NOT DIE, just scroll over the screen. There’s a nice little ZU shield. Press it and...” but then Eruna reminds me- “We’re not gonna die, Zulta. They’re friends.” I smile. The familiar voice seems to be screaming in my head that I’m in danger, but Eruna’s right. These are our friends. I watch Eruna as he sinks to the bottom of the lake, knowing he’ll be ok because our friend, the creature, said so. It doesn’t matter that Gorons like him can’t swim... (Zelda Universe 2019)

To reach a workable definition of metagames on Twitch, I observed three Twitch channels run by organizations of various sizes and through different positionalities: Zelda Universe (as a player/streamer on the channel), HyperRPG (as a moderator for the channel), and Critical Role (as a regular audience member). Although these channels enact their metagames in different ways, their playbour (Kücklich) contributes to and reinforces the definition of metagames as tools to increase attention of an artifact.

Zelda Universe (ZU) has the smallest community on Twitch of the three observed for this study. By the end of 2019, ZU had approximately 28 subscribers and 6,835 followers (personal communication, 2019). Its smaller size correlated with a lower budget. Channel streams were carried out in a streamer’s home, using self-purchased devices (webcams, microphones, games, etc) and the show observed here, *Realms of the Wild*, utilized video (Zoom for a small fee) and gaming (Roll20 for free) platforms to allow the cast to play and work together to entertain their audience.

Hyper Rabbit Power Go (HyperRPG) is an entertainment company operating on Twitch which calls its audience “thumpers.” The company launched its Twitch programming in late February 2016. By the end of 2019, HyperRPG had 1,368 subscribers (personal communication, 2019) and 93,902 followers (HyperRPG, 2019). While both ZU and HyperRPG emphasize the audience in their entertainment, HyperRPG has more resources for their streams. HyperRPG has multiple cameras, a professional microphone for each player, and a crew who can switch between shots, adjust lighting, and create transitions in real time. This, when compared to ZUs more static screen and fully digital production, creates an image of a highly professional setup that is closer to television filming than the origins of

Twitch streaming, in which a streamer would use a low-cost setup such as a webcam and free software to capture their face and gameplay.

Critical Role is even closer to traditional television than HyperRPG. While Critical Role (CR) now operates as its own company with 37,580 active subscribers (“TwitchTracker”) and 544,000 followers, it began as the most popular show on Geek & Sundry’s Twitch channel. Geek & Sundry (G&S) utilizes a television-esque set with three walls for ease of filming. There is a full professional film setup and crew, beyond HyperRPG’s limited crew, and sets can be changed out, creating a highly professional, traditional television show image for the audience but with chat interaction.

The Indirect Metagame Strategy. Heavily featured by Twitch from its inception, appearing on Twitch’s homepage during the show’s Thursday night episodes for approximately six months straight, CR quickly grew a separate fan base from Geek & Sundry known as the “critters.” CR’s live episodes far outpaced other G&S Twitch shows in terms of audience numbers, with tens of thousands of people appearing in the chatroom to watch the show live (compared to at most, a thousand or so for their next most popular content) (personal observation as Geek & Sundry moderator, 2015-2018). Due to its extreme popularity, Critical Role was able to separate from G&S in 2018 and now produces content on its own Twitch channel, later uploaded to its own YouTube channel, and shared on its own website where they also post fanart from critters and sell CR merchandise (as of July 2020 the website lists US, UK, and AU-specific stores for their goods). According to CR’s website

What began in 2012 as a bunch of friends playing in each other's living rooms has evolved into a multi-platform entertainment sensation, attracting over half million viewers every week. Now in its second campaign storyline, the show features seven popular voiceover actors diving into epic Dungeons & Dragons adventures, led by veteran game master Matthew Mercer. (“CritRole About Us”)

Critical Role’s emphasis on the players as “friends playing in each other’s living rooms” who just happen to have found large-scale success is carried out in their live content and is the central framing of their metagame strategy. The following is a transcription of an introduction done for a one-shot, a TRPG game that is wrapped up in a single session rather than taking place over multiple sessions of gameplay, originally performed around Halloween 2018 and uploaded to CR’s YouTube channel December 20, 2019.

Laura Bailey (GM): But first, before all that, let's get some announcements. Our sponsor, for the night, is...

Travis Willingham: Oh, I got it. Here, model this, Brian. Tonight's episode is sponsored by DnD Art and Arcana by Random House Publishing and Ten Speed Press. Gamers and game historians Sam and Michael Witwer, Kyle Newman, and Jon Peterson have taken on this massive archaeological effort to create a must-have book for anyone who has ever played or just loves DnD...So help support the show by grabbing your copy at critrole.com/artandarcana.

Laura: Sorry to interrupt you, but our poster is in this freaking book!

Sam Riegel: Wait, what? No, it's not.

Laura: Yes, it is. It's at the end of the book. (Brian begins flipping through to find it)

Sam: We're not an official thing, though. We're just a mom and pop thing; we don't really exist."

Here Travis gives the official sponsor speech, acting as the messenger and professional voice, while both Laura and Sam interrupt with more vernacular discussion (see Howard). Travis's official speech makes the goal of the exchange clear – to get the audience to buy the book. By framing it as a “must-have book for anyone who has ever played or just loves DnD” Travis is calling out to the entire audience who, as fans of CR, must also enjoy DnD. Laura emphasizes that a poster of the CR cast is in the book, seemingly too excited to let it remain unknown, and thus making a stronger case for fans of CR to buy the book. Sam follows up by denying that this is possible, emphasizing that they are “just a mom and pop thing” and downplaying their impact on *Dungeons & Dragons* and tabletop roleplaying games more generally. Sam's focus on the pedestrian image of the channel, just as with the PR message on CR's YouTube and website, is meant to better connect the audience to the streamer.

It is the metagame – played as a performance between the talent but utilized to create a better focus of audience attention. These comments are meant to be interpreted as “we are just like you” to a non-professional audience. However, there is also a necessary dichotomy in that Travis sticks to scripted content throughout the exchange, a message provided by the official sponsors of the episode, and ends with a reminder to visit the Critical Role website to purchase the product being advertised. The goal of this metagame is not to increase attention for CR's gameplay; the channel is quite successful. Instead, this metagame strategy is aimed

at increasing audience attention to CR as a company, visiting their website and buying the products they endorse and in which they are included. In this way, the cast plays their metagame through the dichotomy, simultaneously building connections to the audience with their vernacular discourse and urging audience members to spend money on the sponsored product through the official message.

The Direct Monetary Metagame Strategy. HyperRPG has also included sponsored content, though with less success than Critical Role. While HyperRPG has had contracts with comic book publishers (Valiant Universe) to produce a comic book RPG, and larger companies (Saban) to create a *Power Rangers* RPG, most of their pop culture RPGs are not sponsored content and are one-shots occurring during their HyperDrives. CR's original ties to Geek & Sundry precluded them from asking for their audience to directly contribute financially to the company and thus instead of playing direct metagames with their audience on their channel, as many streamers do, they play metagames which intend to increase auxiliary support for the cast, by directing them to their offsite resources (e.g., critrole.com) and sponsored content. However, HyperRPG has no such limitations and relies more heavily on direct audience contributions than sponsorships to continue operation (a more traditional model of earning additional capital from the audience). In fact, HyperDrives were devised as a monthly fundraiser with the singular goal of keeping HyperRPG running for another month. Thus, HyperRPG heavily depends on metagames based around monetary capital for the HyperDrive's (and channel's) success.

HyperRPG has had a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* roleplaying game, but they have also created one-shot games around *Pokémon*, *One Piece*, and the 80s movie cult classic *Gremlins* (to name just a few). During their *Gremlins* one-shot, played during the December 2019 HyperDrive, audience members could purchase numerous items for the players/game. Moderators for the channel would semi-regularly post the command !support, which would activate "Nightbot" to state which items were available for purchase and where audience members could go to purchase them.

“(In chat) parvus_sed_potens:!support It's not like we could ever have too many gremlins, right?”

Nightbot:\$10 add a #brightlight, \$25 a #holiday monologue, \$50 #water to add gremlins to the fight, \$50 #gremlin to add your own gremlin and 100 to add #batgremlin | oneshot.straylogic.com.” (“HyperRPG Chat”)

In the above quote, a moderator for the channel uses the “!support” command to advertise the “purchaseables” for the *Gremlins* one-shot metagame. Purchaseables are bought by audience members with the goal of having an in-game effect, whether for combat (#brightlight, #water, #gremlin, or #batgremlin) or roleplay purposes (#holiday or #batgremlin). The moderator also adds their own commentary when activating Nightbot. Though moderators are used across Twitch to moderate chat content and make sure the rules of the channel are followed, they also function as an intermediary between streamer and audience member, actively working to increase audience participation while the streamers play their game. Notably, when the moderator for HyperRPG used the command to activate Nightbot’s list of rewards that could be bought for the *Gremlins* RPG, they specifically encouraged adding more gremlins to the fight (“It’s not like we could ever have too many gremlins, right?”). The moderator is both encouraging the audience to work against the players, by adding more adversaries, and encouraging the audience to support HyperRPG by spending more money, therefore increasing the final total HyperRPG would earn from their HyperDrive. This call speaks to both audience members who want to financially support the channel and those who, though they may not be as willing to support the channel financially, are interested in impacting the game. Ultimately, the moderator’s encouragement functions as a motivator for audience members to participate in the monetary metagame, no matter their position.

Metagames of Chronocapital. Unlike HyperRPG, on ZU’s Twitch, they have crafted a metagame that is dependent on the live chat audience’s time rather than money, creating a time-based economy, or chronocapital, for their channel. Both ZU and HyperRPG read out donor names (though HyperRPG donations are monetary and *Zelda Universe* depends on chronocapital) to show appreciation. Players of *Realms of the Wild* on ZU will also read out funny or entertaining comments by chat members, thanking the member for the content. ImpInMyHead (Imp), an audience member who has watched nearly every episode of *Realms of the Wild*, is particularly helpful to both the players and the rest of the audience. Imp can often be seen in chat at the start of episodes saying things like, “Here’s something else you can do, folks...When you click on that lil shield when you mouse over the screen you can do things!”, but also is a prolific chatter, providing entertaining content for the channel (“ZU Chat”). In fact, while players of *Realms of the Wild* can be given points in the game in exchange for doing something unexpected, unusual, or highly entertaining, these points have been granted to audience members, mostly Imp, who do the same. While these “legend points”

given to the audience members cannot be redeemed as they can in the game, they function to elevate chat from viewing audience to active participant. When a chat member earns a legend point, other chat members increase their activity and creativity in their responses, hoping to earn a legend point of their own and becoming more invested in the game (and channel) in the process.

In addition, while the players show appreciation to audience members who contribute to HyperRPG and ZU, they also often solicit these audience members for more help, changing the dynamic of the original tabletop RPG from one among the players and GM to heavily reliant on audience intervention. In one episode, I (GreenEyedTrombonist), after receiving a legend point from Imp, began this exchange:

“GreenEyedTrombonist: And remember, if you would like to give us a legend point, or maybe a great fairy to heal some lethal damage, you can just pop on over and press that shield button. And it’s a reward!

Elias/Eruna: (Laughing during GET’s speech) Mash that shield button!

(In chat) ImpInMyHead: I’m gonna shut off that extension now :)

(In chat)VelvetBlondie: What, are you guys dying again?” (“ZU Chat”)

While another player, Elias, laughs during my speech and does a play on YouTube channels demanding people subscribe (“mash that shield button”), chat also jokingly interacts with my request, either stating they will no longer activate rewards (as a joke, given the smiley face Imp includes in their statement) or by joking that the party is about to die again. While my speech more explicitly calls the audience to action and makes the players’ dependence on audience intervention clear, the other three implicitly acknowledge the importance of the audience and the audience metagame to *Realms of the Wild*, by comparing it to the importance of YouTube subscribers, jokingly removing that support, or indicating how chat has helped the party live through previous difficult encounters. Furthermore, this highly contextualized everyday communication illustrates how players on Twitch shift from a player to streamer identity, and audience members shift from observers of the game to interactive participants, highly intertwined with streamers as co-players of the metagame.

Metagames of Appreciation. While metagames are enacted differently on each channel, all three channels studied here make a point to show appreciation to their fans. Both HyperRPG and ZU thank those who redeem rewards, whether those rewards were purchased with financial capital or chronocapital. CR does not directly allow fans to alter gameplay sessions and does not call their fans out during

the run of a game session. However, CR appeals to its fans by calling out their appreciation for fans and fan work at the end of the show through a digital slideshow of fan art.

This slideshow begins with the written comment “To the talented fans of critical role/ Thank you for sharing your incredible art with us” and displays fanart images, ranging from hand drawings to sculptures to GIFs, and more. The images are accompanied by music and author credit for each piece of fanart is displayed at the bottom of the screen. Over the final image, the written comment “Thank You!” is left. This is a specific call of appreciation to fans, working to strengthen bonds and loyalty to CR, but is also another call to action. Fans who make art are advertised by the channel and, in fact, previous fan art has been used (with permission) in CR products. Although the first written text is a callout to “the talented fans”, the language quickly shifts to “you” thus calling out fans who have yet to produce fanart to start producing and sharing their work (as well as encouraging fans who have shared work to produce more). This “you” also works as a call to new viewers of the show, encouraging them to become members of the community by purposefully displaying CR’s appreciation for the critters. The subliminal message of this metagame is clear: You want to produce fanart for CR and you want to be a critter.

HyperRPG and ZU both also share and call out fanart and fan-produced content around their shows. For both, this is most often seen as retweeting fanart and other content shared on Twitter, rather than as a giant slideshow in the outro. In addition, HyperRPG continually states that their focus is on the community. According to their Twitch page, “Hyper Rabbit Power Go is a hyperactive, interactive community-driven broadcasting channel” and “The thumpers are a welcoming and open community...All of Hyper RPG’s content revolves around the community and it will always remain that way” (“Hyper RPG Twitch”). While this dedication to the audience and community may be seen as admirable, it also mirrors and underscores Twitch’s central message: the audience, the chat, is the lifeblood of Twitch.

While streamers call out audience members to retain viewership and build loyalty, audience members are simultaneously trying to enact practices that will get them noticed, creating a metagame loop. As Mia Consalvo states, “We see a competition at work for viewers. That bid for viewer attention and the revenue they bring with them happens in multiple ways” (180). Note that, as displayed in the different metagames of HyperRPG and ZU, that revenue may appear as monetary

or chronocapital. While metagames may function along lines of monetary or chronocapital, depending on the level of consumerism possible (i.e. smaller channels are less likely to focus on monetary and focus more on chronocapital) they ultimately rely on the economy of attention to succeed, which contributes to Twitch's own metagame of transformation. "Both game developers and platforms build tremendous communities -and capital- by having users constantly engaging with each other, producing content, and deeply building value by their presence and interactions" (Taylor 174). This plays into Twitch's larger metagame of recruiting audience members and then transforming those members to streamers who enact their own metagames for views. Twitch, therefore, is in the market of monetizing attention and harnessing time as a form of capital, while relying on independent streamers as their primary market actors.

"It's Metagames All the Way Down"

While Twitch may be unique in that metagames are more easily displayed, the economy of attention is present across social media platforms. Since, depending on our perspective, it can be "metagames all the way down" (Boluk and LeMieux 15), the economy of attention present on these social media platforms functions via metagames. These metagames do not require games to be their central artifact. Metagames do not exist in conjunction with a central game but instead function as meta to any artifact, from movies to educational material to cleaning a room. Furthermore, the rules of these metagames are crafted to increase attention for the central artifact. On Twitch, rather than movies or games, metagames function as paratextual to streams and streamers, crafted to increase attention and retention for these channels.

Here I have covered the multiple metagames played across three Twitch channels: indirect metagame strategies, direct monetary metagames, metagames of chronocapital, and metagames of appreciation. While indirect metagame strategies do not call on the audience for immediate participation in the metagame, they rely on mobilizing the audience for the metagame's ultimate success. Direct monetary metagames engage the audience as a player who, through their monetary capital, gets to join and alter the game. Metagames of chronocapital do not rely on monetary capital, but the capital of time. These metagames rely on audience members to spend more time on the channel to impact the shows they watch. Finally, metagames of appreciation were seen across all three channels and function to bond

audience members closer to the channel, by thanking them for some active work they have done (helped the players, contributed monetary capital, created fan art, etc.) while also working to mobilize more of the audience toward these actions. And more metagames persist.

Ultimately, on Twitch, what we see is an evolution of fan culture which highly blurs the line between fan and the cultural artifact, while simultaneously shifting expectations of what the cultural artifact is/should be. By resituating metagames as the central element of study, we can move beyond a definition of metagames as “games about games” and recontextualize metagames as the primary mechanisms by which economies of attention function. Through this article we see how metagames are paratextual tools to increase attention for central artifacts and, by resituating metagames as the central artifacts of study, we better understand how they function through and around economies of attention. If it is metagames all the way down, it is strategies for garnering attention in an attention economy that we see. Metagames are attention strategies. Attention strategies are metagames. And so, it is through metagames the attention economy persists.

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