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Online Stars and the New Audience: How YouTube Creators Curate and Maintain
Communities

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in Information and Computer Science with concentration in Informatics

by

Nathaniel Lloyd Major

Thesis Committee:
Professor Bonnie Nardi, Chair
Professor David Redmiles
Professor Josh Tanenbaum

2015

DEDICATION

To

My wife Rebecca

For unlimited encouragement

(and free proofreading)

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Online Stars and the New Audience: How YouTube Creators Curate and Maintain Communities

By

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Master of Science in Information and Computer Science with concentration in Informatics

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Professor Bonnie Nardi, Chair

In recent years, YouTube has evolved from a platform of home videos and news media into a premiere platform for amateur content creators to create and distribute content. As YouTube continues to progress towards a media platform that promotes amateur creators and their content, the work and interactions of these creators becomes relevant as a study of the architects of digital labor. This thesis takes an ethnographical approach to examining creators within a certain subset of YouTube creators – video game Let’s Players – and analyzes their varying forms of interaction with three key points. First: the relationship and interaction between creators and their created content. Second: how LP content creators interact and work with other content creators, either within their own sphere or otherwise. And third: how creators interact and communicate with their audiences. This analysis and compilation of interview data is transferrable to other amateur content web platforms whose primary business model focuses on user-generated content.

INTRODUCTION

Video game commentaries, known colloquially as “Let’s Plays,” (hereafter referred to as “LP”) are a form of amateur video content created for and distributed on YouTube. This genre subset of YouTube is currently the most popular content on the service, with the bulk of the top channels and content being created for the service being affiliated in some way with the LP genre (Cohen, 2014). The biggest YouTuber, PewDiePie, is a LPer with over 35 million subscribers, and it is estimated he earns somewhere around \$2-4 million dollars per year in ad revenue (Makuch, 2014). Top videos are shared and re-shared more frequently than nationwide news stories (Croschaw, 2011). LPs and the amateur video scene on YouTube is quickly overcoming even mainstream media in terms of viewership numbers, with millions of hours of content being watched daily (Georgieva, 2011).

LP videos, be they from “big” creators and commentators or from smaller channels just starting out, vary in their presentation and creation of content. Some are designed to show performance or expertise of gaming prowess, others are created more as comedy routines with the video game portions being simply background video to the creator’s stardom (Hale, 2014). The videos are, in and of themselves, rich cultural artifacts. They represent a creator’s underlying identity, conflicts and allegiances within communities and to audiences, economic importance, values of self-worth, and creativity (Postigo, 2014). The popularity of the videos and their power to drive sales of games played (if created by larger LPers) has influenced the genre it was originally inspired from, driving development of games that are better “YouTube fodder,” such as Scott Cawthorn’s *Five Nights at Freddy’s* series (Supersnow, 2014). The ecosystem of LP video creators is also heavily influenced on sharing and responding to content created by others,

with one popular video or style quickly being a driving force for mimicry or replication from thousands of other LPers. Moreover, YouTube's subscriber system, and its comments, ratings, and communications systems generate interactions that are rich in subtext and full of meaning.

As YouTube's systems, algorithms, and metrics are constantly shifting, most research done on the topic becomes dated rapidly after publication. Recently, however, YouTube's systems have stabilized around a more creator-focused system, allowing for extended research on those creating content. In addition, most research focusing on YouTube has been primarily guided by a lens towards the viral – videos shared and re-shared at such a rate that the content spreads like a virus across social media, generating millions of views in only a few days – or focusing on the results, the outward facing portions of YouTube: the videos themselves (Jiang, Miao, Yang, Lan, & Hauptmann, 2014). As video trends change, content creators adapt their content to match, engaging in a constant battle to maintain relevance.

In this thesis, I focus on the creators of the LP content themselves rather than the videos they create. By using ethnographical methodologies, focusing on participatory and quantitative research methods, I examine how creators generate, maintain, and distribute their content. I also focus on community interaction between creators, as well as interactions between creators and their intended and current audiences. Meaning is found not only in these interactions, but with videos-as-expression in how it relates to the creators that generate and share them. Through this, creator interactions and their relationships with the medium, content, audience, and each other can provide further insight to the current status of YouTube's primary content generators, as well as look forward into the future for research into other spheres of user-generated content, both online and off.

Relevance and Format of the Thesis

The purpose of this research is to provide a broad and overarching look at how the rising group of YouTube content creators interact. Specifically, the focus is narrowed down to examine three core elements of what makes a content creator unique within their creative sphere when compared to other creative mediums: the relationship with their created content, the relationship with other content creators, and the relationship with their audiences. Previous academic research into online video sharing (YouTube or otherwise) has predominantly focused on the cultural impact of “viral” content, specifically how said content obtains its viral status, why this type of content is shared, and so on. Little to no research has focused on the *creators* of this type of video content, viral or otherwise. With YouTube and other online creative spaces growing exponentially over the past several years, it is imperative that research be done to analyze not just the content (and specifically content that has gone viral), but the people behind the content. Within these creative outlets, subcultures of creative teams are being formed, by either extension of video game fandom or simply video creators attempting to breach the scene. The content created for this sphere is in one part highly personal and another part designed for spreadability and commercial viability, with most creators opting to monetize and profit off their content. As this “creative fandom” extends into online video, its transition from a predominantly free fan clique to a marketable cultural phenomenon cannot be ignored. This research provides an initial step into how these creators interact, perceive their own content, and market themselves to a diverse and rapidly changing audience. By focusing on these key three points, we can analyze the particulars of this growing medium.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Content Creators, Fandoms, and Collaboration

As mentioned in the introduction, most research into YouTube or video specific content has been focused either on the viral (Jiang, et. all) or the economic functions of user-generated labor and its role within copyright, etc. (Andrejevic, 2009). While both these functions have slight relevance on the research done within this paper, stronger connections can be found with research done within the realms of fandoms, content appropriation, and the idea of grassroots ideologies present within the YouTube LP community. This thesis examines the culture of “geek” or “niche” content (specifically video games) and how it ties into the idea of making original content with copyrighted or appropriated content as background.

Content Poachers

The use of the term “poachers” with regard to fandoms appropriating content to create their own was a term coined by Henry Jenkins, specifically when addressing Star Trek fanfiction and fan creative creations (Jenkins, 1992), which was in turn based on a model devised by Michael de Certeau. “Poachers” were defined as those who “raided” previously created works (either literary or other forms of media) and would reconstruct or recreate different types of content from these pre-established characters and setting. These groups were not passive consumers of media, but instead active interpreters. Within fandoms, this would lead to large-scale creative content movements, such as fanfiction, fan-films, costume creation, and more. The idea of taking someone else’s work and modifying it, either slightly or monumentally, into a new piece of content that blended both the familiarity of the original creator and the creative tangent

imposed upon it by the poacher was fairly novel back in the 70s and 80s, when Trekkies (*Star Trek* fans) would appropriate the television show for their own creations. The concept of “borrowing” from already established content to create new forms of shareable creative content persevered, strengthened in particular by the advent of internet connectivity (Jenkins, 2006). With that, these borrowed interpretations of popular texts became less about personal creation and more about sharable media within fandoms, and on a much broader scale. The ability to share appropriated content was quickly a genre within its own right (going so far that the Hugo awards, the biggest awards in science fiction and fantasy, have a category for “fanzines”) (Hugo, 2015).

What Let’s Plays are will be defined in a following section, but it is enough to say that the idea of borrowing one’s creative content and applying another layer on top of it (essentially the “poaching” mentioned by Jenkins in regards to fan-edits and modifications in the 70s and 80s) is closely tied into this culture of “borrowed content as background.” While with LP’s the “content as background” is more literal (with the background video being actual game content, with often the only creative interaction of the creator being an audio overlay), the idea of creating and sharing crafted content based on previously established worlds and media falls exactly in line with Jenkins’ analysis of textual poachers. Additionally, the stories crafted by LPers are layered on top of the stories already created in the video games they’re playing, filling out the current story or expanding it into an entirely new one. While fan-fiction was textual poaching, LPs are video poaching, and both expand on the pre-created lexicon of fiction in new ways.

Participatory Culture

A similar bastion of research tying into Let's Play and YouTube video creation is participatory culture (Jenkins). Put simply, participatory culture is the idea that a backbone of many types of emerging cultures (fandoms, etc.) are based on the notion of participation within a creation sphere. Specifically, these types of cultures do not act just as consumers of media, but contributors and creators as well. While most of Jenkins' early work focuses more on the concepts of shared physical artifacts (such as fanfiction, costumes, role-playing, etc.), the advent of the internet moved these physical artifacts from offline to online. As once-physical artifacts became digital, they also in turn became more widespread. Participation went from a local to a global culture, with websites like FanFiction.net and YouTube facilitating in taking these poached creative cultural artifacts and allowing them to spread worldwide. Research within this growth often approaches an online cultural zeitgeist, created by online groups of self-identified cliques, which in turn create their own rules, regulations and cultures. In many ways, this echoes the notions put forth by Mark Deuze in regards to how online communities will establish, grow, and develop their own traditions completely isolated from the physical world (Deuze, 2011).

Online tools allow this hybridization of participatory culture and developed cultural establishment to flourish, particularly when it comes to sharing and compounding on popular, pre-established media connections (Ito, 2005). Research within this sphere has focused primarily on how users take popular narratives and adjust them accordingly to create new content (similar to poachers), but with an added emphasis on both the spreadability of the media (Jenkins) and the culture developed around it.

In this sense, the research demonstrated within this paper fits well within a body of research regarding participation culture, poaching, and media spreadability. That being said, research into participatory cultures often neglects a deeper examination of how creators within

communities build together, specifically in a digital scene (YouTube, LP, etc.). Additionally, YouTube is one of the first digital *only* participatory cultures, where it was devised online *first* and then migrated back into the physical world (similar to research done in online virtual worlds, but with an emphasis on content creation rather than interaction via game mechanics). Because of this, the culture surrounding YouTube is a unique one, particularly under the lens of previous research into these types of digital cultures.

Virtual Worlds, Collaboration and Meta-Design

Collaboration between individuals in a virtual space is a frequently researched topic, often focusing on virtual worlds such as Second Life (Koehne, B., Redmiles, D., & Fischer, G., 2011). The connection between virtual worlds and meta-design research is particularly relevant in this research when it comes to previous studies on meta-design as interactive art (Fischer, G., Giaccardi, E., Ye, Y., Sutcliffe, A. G., & Mehandjiev, N., 2004). YouTube mirrors platforms created specifically to limit conditions for the process of interaction. It allows for an amount of creative freedom and manipulation within its boundaries (freedom in content delivery, tagging, video quality, and more), and in turn the content uploaded to YouTube can shape the direction that the service itself will evolve. Part of this research hopes to dig deeper into these studies done on meta-analyses with YouTube as platform, how users interact with said platform (as users often interact with virtual worlds and other virtual spaces) and how that differs from traditional virtual spaces.

In a similar fashion, YouTube's use as a video distribution tool also doubles as a collaborative platform between individuals. Work done in Lord of the Rings Online (LOTRO) (Koehne, et. all) indicates that these types of interactive communities thrive on providing tools

that encourage strong cooperation between users. In LOTRO's case, the game itself was designed to encourage participation and user interaction within the game's ruleset. Systems designed by the games are created to intentionally force players to cooperate, as they would not be able to do so themselves. As such, a sort of meta-design evolves from this within the community, with collaborative work practices taking the form of wikis, FAQs, or other such tools created by users. This research into collaborative interaction and informal content generation on a meta-level is something this research hopes to discover and analyze when looking at YouTube content creators and how they work amongst themselves.

The concept of YouTube as a meta-design platform is not covered extensively within this thesis, but research into LP creators did reveal both parallels and differences between the YouTube community and other, more studied virtual spaces such as Second Life. These connections are mentioned as part of the discussion.

YouTube, Let's Plays, and Content Creators

Early Platform

YouTube is a free video upload and streaming service that went live in February of 2005, and was acquired by Google a year and a half later. The structure of YouTube is such that anyone can upload and display video, with a choice of whether to monetize said videos with advertisements provided by Google. If a video owner chooses to monetize a video, they receive a small payment based on ads viewed and clicked (a casual calculation is somewhere between \$3-\$10 per thousand "views," or clicks on the video). This ad-based service is how YouTube both subsidizes its high costs and encourages creators to develop content specifically for the platform.

YouTube as a social network has evolved since its inception, with early versions of YouTube akin to private file sharing services. Videos were generally available only to selected “Friends” or “Followers,” which the uploader had to approve before they could watch the content. Public content was presentable, but the videos stood independent of their creators. The platform’s general philosophy was geared towards two specific demographics: public videos where the creator/uploader didn’t matter, and private videos that creators only shared with select views of followers (Rotman & Preece, 2010).

As the site continued to grow, YouTube introduced a “partnership” program. With this, YouTube would find the most popular creators either on their own or via suggestion from already established partners, and then offer the creator a chance to “partner” with YouTube (YouTube Blog, 2007). This entailed a lift of the 15 minute upload limit, reimbursement for ad monetization, and the ability to add custom thumbnails. While no set subscriber/follower count was established by YouTube, fan consensus was that a creator had to have somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 subscribers in order to be considered for an offer (Cha, Kwak, Rodriguez, Ahn, & Moon, 2007).

Subscriptions

Around this time in 2007, other key changes happened to YouTube. The follow system was abandoned in favor of a new subscription system. Videos also had privacy options changed; rather than being only “public” or “for followers,” now videos had the option to be either Public, Unlisted (meaning those with a direct URL could visit it and it wouldn’t show up in the search engines/SEO), or Private (where only the creator could view it). This change from being a focus on YouTube as a video platform to YouTube as a creator-focused subscription system led to a

dramatic shift in content. Before that, YouTube was primarily used for either reproducing mainstream media (such as news reports, etc.) or for more private content (home videos, etc.). Now, with a subscription based paradigm, YouTube was focusing more on allowing creators to project themselves to large audiences, rather than niche groups. These creators no longer had to manually approve followers (which was changed to “Subscribers”), though they maintained control via bans. YouTube was opening up to become mainstream, and developed tools that supported independent content being made specifically for the platform. This design was mostly in response to the rise of public Vlogs, video bloggers who would amass large numbers of followers as they created content specifically for YouTube (Figueiredo, Almeida, Benevenuto, & Gummadi, 2014; Lange, 2007). With this change came a rise in video skit shows such as Smosh¹. These productions were amateur in quality, but gained momentum as a new media movement (Biel & Gatica-Perez, 2009). The changes in YouTube’s setup facilitated this shift of content, empowering creators to create original YouTube content and generate revenue from it (Makuch).

Algorithms – Pre 2012

The specifics of YouTube’s recommendation algorithm is a heavily-researched but tightly-kept secret. From the site’s inception, YouTube has been recommending videos based on the current content you are watching. On a rudimentary level, it has been shown that which videos are recommended come from specific things users can do when uploading videos. Tags, titles, and video description all contain keywords that both the YouTube search and the recommendation algorithm analyze when determining where the video “ranks” when compared

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/user/smosh>

to other videos with similar data. Research on virality of video content shows that there is a sort of “snowball” effect that YouTube puts into place once a video reaches a certain popularity (Pinto, Almeida, & Goncalves, 2013; Jiang, Miano, Yang, Lan, & Hauptmann, 2014; Gill, Arlitt, Li, & Mahanti, 2007).

From YouTube’s start in 2006 up to a key change in 2012, YouTube’s algorithm was most influenced by the “view count” of a video. View count simply counted when anyone clicked on a video in question, regardless of how much time the video was watched. Around this time, YouTube’s amateur content creation was split into two key categories: comedy sketches/highly scripted material, and vlogs (video blogs). The former consisted of channels like Smosh, which performed 5-10 minute comedy sketches, and JamesNintendoNerd², also known as the Angry Video Game Nerd, who posted bi-monthly comedy skits revolving around video games (Burgess, Green, 2013). The latter had a wide range of young adult “vlogging:” users recording themselves talking about a particular topic for a length of time in an often unedited format (Snelson, 2015). During this time, “clickbaiting” or “viewbaiting” (Nalts, 2011) became an issue, as simply earning that first click was enough to bump you up in the rankings. Sexually provocative thumbnails or tagging your video with more popular (but incorrect) tags were common signs of those trying to abuse the system to their advantage. This provoked YouTube to make a change to its system, one that would cause a complete shift in content.

Algorithms – 2012 to the Present

In 2012, YouTube altered the recommendation algorithm in response to the influx of view-baiting videos. While the specifics are still unknown, it was announced generally that

² <https://www.youtube.com/user/jamesnintendonerd>

YouTube videos are now recommended based primarily on watch time rather than individual views. Watch time also ties into retention, which is also tracked. If a video is watched for only a few seconds, it isn't enough to track a view and doesn't push it higher in the recommendation algorithm. In addition, the percent of what a video is watched (regardless of its length) is also taken into consideration (Game Theory). Most amateur YouTubers consider an average retention over 50% for the entirety of their views to be ideal.

This shift also tied video views to the channel, rather than having individual videos count on their own. The shift was described as “a way to encourage creators to build up their channels, not just one single video” which was also indicative of the shift in content that YouTube was experiencing around that time (Bausch, Han; Game Theory). While LP and other forms of video content had been on the service since 2008, its long length and niche audience often led to lower numbers of views, resulting in decreased promotion through YouTube's algorithms.

However, with the change focusing on compounded minutes watched across an entire channel, long-form content shifted into becoming more recommended than the usual short form. While previous videos had been focused on being short and re-watchable (comedy skits, vlogs, etc.) to farm clicks, now retention and longer videos that could keep user's attention for longer periods of time were more favored by the algorithms. This shift altered YouTube as platform from a medium designed for heavily edited, viral, shareable media clips that focused on quality and spreadability, to videos focused on retaining viewer's interest through longer video content. This allowed for an otherwise niche video genre, the Let's Play, to gain traction.

Let's Plays

“Let’s Play” media style is deeply rooted in experiencing a product, particularly a video game. In its most basic form, a Let’s Play video combines screenshots or video content from a video game the creator is playing, coupled with the sharing of said content with or without text, audio, or video commentary (Hale, 2014; Klepek 2015). While the root idea of compiling and sharing media based around playing a video game is the core premise of LPs, both the term and its ubiquity within gamer culture are relatively new phenomena. In order to understand the modern LP community, one must understand where it originated from, and how both the rise of widespread internet as well as amateur content creation led to its massive jump in popularity over the past half-decade.

Replay Culture

The earliest instances of LP style content occurred in the late 90s. Computer games (referred hereafter as PC Games) like *Quake* and *Unreal Tournament* were quickly growing in popularity, particularly amongst competitive fans. These PC games, which allowed for multiple players to compete against each other in online shooting matches, included the functionality to save match footage and replay it at a future time. As competition within the First Person Shooter genre (FPS) increased, the capturing and sharing of these replays for bragging rights became an online phenomenon. Entire sites such as QuakeLive.com and UTReplays.com were dedicated to distributing and sharing these replays. The phenomenon quickly spread to other genres of games, including the Real-Time Strategy (RTS) genre game *Warcraft III*. *Warcraft III*’s replays of both amateur and professional games became so popular that the site WCReplays.com began having contests highlighting the best “plays” of the week. In order to watch the replays, you’d have to

own a copy of the game in question, then save the specific file and watch it on your computer. The only commentary was the text description on the website, which would also be coupled as an included .txt file explaining times where the watcher could find key moments and highlights of the match (Hale).

As internet speeds increased and screen capture footage became more prevalent, users began to take multiple full-length replays and cut them down into specific “top plays” within the matches, and then compile this collection and upload it to replay sites in video format. Now users no longer needed to own the game in question to watch highlights of the gameplay, broadening the scope of accessibility. Replay sites began posting not the best replays of the week, but the best compilations created by users. This led to users getting more and more competitive and creative in their compilation creations. Some creators would craft their replays to tell stories, drawing the users in even further and constructing an impromptu narrative that overlaid the edited replay, mirroring what textual poachers had been doing for decades (Jenkins).

These narrative-driven replays expanded to the genre of “speedruns.” With speedruns, players attempt to beat a video game from start to finish as quickly as possible, recording their attempt and posting it online to compete with other users, sometimes with added effects, edits, or voice commentary. This idea of playing a game from start to finish and recording it on camera would eventually become the seed that grew into the modern YouTube LP.

SomethingAwful and LPs

The term “Let’s Play” was coined on the SomethingAwful.com forums in 2007, and is credited to Michael Sawyer (username “SlowBeef” on the SomethingAwful forums) (Saywer, 2013; Klepek). Original LPs were designed to provide user commentary and raw reactions to

plaything through a video game, often attempting to be informative in nature. Original “LPs” were crafted using only screenshots and text, with each installment being a later forum post on the SomethingAwful website. Because of the segmentation of each post, users could freely comment between installments. Frequently other community members would give feedback, offer encouragement, or even dictate the direction the LPer should take the game for the next installment. Games were played from start to finish with substantial community involvement, with author commentary being primarily there for information or narrative dictation, not for humor (“Let’s Play Rules Thread,” Something Awful, 2007). As stated by a LPer from the SomethingAwful forums,

“The main idea was to present a video game, start to finish, with minimal author interaction. We’d provide the screenshots and the commentary, sometimes humorous if we got stuck, but it was more an informative critique rather than something we wanted to be funny. YouTube LPers took that and said ‘hey, what if we just make jokes over the game and don’t provide anything interesting at all?’ and ran with it, and that’s what you get today. A true LP is one with minimal or no commentary, that shows off the game, not the person presenting it.” (“Let’s Play Sandcastle,” Something Awful, 2007)

The first video play-through was of *The Immortal*, also done by Sawyer, made to compliment his screenshot preview in 2007 (Sawyer). The video was primarily informative, with Sawyer providing commentary regarding the background of the game and comparisons with different system versions of the game. The video was uploaded directly as an attachment to the SomethingAwful forums, where users had to download and replay the video on their own computers to watch the content. The popularity of video LPs on the SomethingAwful forum

grew rapidly following this initial creation, leading to the screenshot LP being almost entirely abandoned in favor of video LPs (Devolution, 2015).

Let's Play on YouTube

As user-created video streaming websites grew in popularity, YouTube quickly became the go-to platform for SomethingAwful to post and share LP style videos. Stemming from both the LP style of SomethingAwful and the edited replays/speedruns, LPs expanded their scope from informative playthroughs of video games into a wide range of video content. New styles included “Pure” LPs, which were playthroughs with no commentary; “Comedic” LPs, which focused more on the recorder’s comedic reactions to the game rather than the game itself; and “facecam” LPs, where a user would record themselves on a webcam or camera and place the footage over the game while recording; among others (Hale). This coincided with the growth of Twitch.tv, a service designed for users to live-stream the games they were playing. They could do so either with or without a “facecam,” while providing active commentary and communication with their audiences (Smith, Obrist, & Wright, 2013). These were most reminiscent of the original SomethingAwful style LPs, which placed a good deal of importance on audience interaction driving the direction the LP would take.

The Rise of the Let's Play

As YouTube algorithms shifted more towards favoring long-form content and minutes viewed rather than specific clicks, LPers found themselves in a perfect storm of media distribution. Most LP sessions can span multiple episodes ranging in length from anywhere between ten minutes to two or three hours. The format was designed to encourage lengthy launch

sessions, with daily installments driving users to come back and watch the continuation of the game from start to finish. This fit perfectly with YouTube's alteration of their recommendation algorithms in 2008 and again in 2012, which quickly lead to LP channels rising in subscribers and watchers at exponential levels.

These videos required minimal effort to create (even when compared to Vlogs of the previous era) and could be of greater length as they were focused around playing a video game (and on average, most games run between 5-10 hours). Around this time, the game *Minecraft* also rose in popularity among pre-teens to new adults (mid-twenties), who are the primary consumers of regular YouTube media. *Minecraft*, a game where you harvest blocks that you can then use to construct buildings or other creations, quickly became the most uploaded content on the system, and the "Games" subcategory continues to have the most content uploaded to it every day (Plunkett, 2011).

Games-as-background for content was hardly a new phenomenon. JamesNintendoNerd and other sketch comedians such as JonTron³ and ScrewAttack⁴ had been creating scripted video content of this kind for years. However, with the algorithms no longer in their favor, the top spots in YouTube were soon dethroned by LPers, such as PewDiePie⁵, CaptainSparklez⁶, Markiplier⁷, NorthernLion⁸, and others (Crosshaw).

YouTube creators were aware of the switch, and many who had been popular before adapted. Smosh, no longer number one, started a "Smosh Games" channel⁹ where the personalities played games in a LP style. The channel has over 6 million subscribers. Animator

³ <https://www.youtube.com/user/jontronshow>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/user/screwattack>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/user/pewdiepie>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/user/CaptainSparklez>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/user/markiplierGAME>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/user/Northernlion>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/user/SmoshGames>

Arin Hansen (Egoraptor) and Jon Jafari (JonTron) combined efforts into a channel Game Grumps¹⁰, with over two million subscribers. Creators often did their LP channels on the side, still putting up their “usual” content on their main channels.

This also marked the shift of LPs from game-focused content to instead being commentator and creator focused. The most popular YouTube LPers are viewed as online celebrities, often attending conventions and travelling the world to visit with fans. Felix Kjellberg (PewDiePie), is the most subscribed channel on YouTube as of 2015, with over 35 million subscribers and videos generally gaining 1-2 million views within the first 24 hours (VidStatsX, 2015). Felix, as well as other YouTube LP celebrities, branches out into other forms of video production such as Vlogs, live action skits, and more. In their videos, cuts are not made to coincide with highlights in the game, but rather comedic highlights presented by the player. The focus of LP has shifted from being informative to being comedic, and centered primarily on the LPer rather than the game itself. In Another popular LP channel, “Game Grumps,” the LPers tell amusing anecdotes or jokes that have no connection with the game they are playing. In these cases, the game has become a backdrop to a two-man comedy duo, which is also evidenced by both these creators having a history in improvisational comedy.

The popularity of the LP form has influenced the design of some games. Video games are now being developed to particularly cater to LPers, as the biggest LPers can generate millions of viewers’ exposure essentially for free (Hale; Smith, Obrist, Wright). For example, the game *Five Nights at Freddy’s*, a horror game designed to make a player uneasy and then provide an abrupt scare, generated over 15 million views across multiple LP channels within the first 24 hours of its release. This led to *Five Nights at Freddy’s* becoming the top selling PC Game on Steam (a

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/user/gamegrumps>

PC Game delivery platform) for two consecutive weeks (Hernandez, 2015). In a similar vein, games that allow users to share their creative side are also popular amongst LPers. *Minecraft*, with its incredible freedom of creation, is exceptionally popular amongst LPers. With these videos, creativity and comedy is valued in equal measure, with LPers such as The Achievement Hunters and CaptainSparklez generating millions of views per video.

Conclusion

YouTube is currently the biggest distributor of video media on the internet (Bausch, Han, 2006). It is estimated that 300 hours of content is uploaded every minute, with hundreds of millions of hours of video viewed daily. With its changes over the years, it has gone from a niche site for reproducing important news stories and sharing personal videos, to a platform by which creators can design, produce, distribute, and profit off their video media.

These platform changes allowed for a specific subgenre, Let's Plays, to rise in popularity. While LPs originally began as more information-centered medium, they quickly diversified into a wider range of content (Devolution). While informative and critique-focused LPs are still prevalent (an example being YouTuber TotalBiscuit¹¹, with 2 million subscribers), the largest ones have shifted focus from the game itself to the personality presenting it. This history of where LPs came from and what they have become in recent years is important in understanding how modern LPers and YouTube content creators approach their content, their medium of choice, and interaction between both other creators and their audiences. (Rotman, Preece).

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/user/TotalHalibut>

METHOD

My methodological approach towards research into YouTube communities was both participatory and qualitative. This hybrid approach included watching the videos, playing the games the creators played on their channels, following commentators, creating videos of my own, and interacting with the communities. Following that, I conducted user studies via online interviews with the purpose of examining how a wide range of YouTube creators interact with each other and their audiences and to specifically address the research questions posed.

Participatory Interaction

As an early method of interaction, I started by subscribing to over fifty YouTube LP channels and following their growth patterns over the course of two years. During this time, I interacted with their respective communities, watched the videos, and sent the creators questions or comments via either the YouTube comment system, Twitter, or a specific subreddit. I additionally watched over 1000 videos as well as played the majority of the games featured on the channels. I segregated the varying creators into categories based on current subscriber numbers, which would change as some creators gained (or lost) subscribers over the course of the two years. I also met several in person at conventions as well as through direct contact over email or Twitter.

During the second year of following, I created my own YouTube channel and made commentary videos on my own¹². As part of this interaction, I communicated frequently and directly to several hundred LPers through both the /r/LetsPlay subreddit as well as over Twitter,

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/user/NathanvsVideoGames>

YouTube, and Facebook. Over the course of five months I created 150 commentary videos, posted daily. For each video I experimented with varying methods of sharing and marketing depending on the subject matter. I also used the videos as a catalyst to interact more closely with the LP community, posting videos for critique on the subreddit as well as offering critique when necessary. I both used and catalogued all the technical and social aspects that went into the creation and maintenance of a YouTube LP channel, as well as the associated community interaction. This included the video editing software required, microphone and camera hardware used, tagging systems, advertising features, video ranking algorithms, user comments, the like/dislike system, and so on. I attempted to participate in several collaboration projects during this duration, but unfortunately none ever saw fruition.

I took detailed field notes and memos on the videos, the commentary types provided, the specifics in user interaction, and the varying levels of community feedback based on the users. It was from this pool of community members that I drew my collection of interview participants.

Interview Participants

I recruited 20 participants, including 18 male and 2 female. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 30. Prerequisites for the study were that the participants had created and were actively maintaining a YouTube LP channel within the timeframe of the interviews. There was no subscriber count requirement for interviewing, with subscriber count range in the final participation pool ranged from 30 – 1,000,000+.

The majority of my recruitment was done through the /r/LetsPlay subreddit, social media outlets (specifically Twitter and Facebook) and through YouTube's direct commenting system.

Materials

I developed interview protocols to follow a series of questions that investigated a creator's previous YouTube experience as well as current procedures and methods. The intended goal was to cover a wide range of topics about YouTube content, specifically focusing on creator interaction with both their audience members as well as other creators within the community. I presented questions with focus on channel growth (including quantitative data, social media usage, standout moments, etc.), audience retention, knowledge of YouTube's recommendation algorithm, collaboration efforts, and so on. Interviews were conducted over both email and Skype audio/video software. For those done via Skype, I recorded audio using recording software Audacity, while the video was not captured.

Procedure

I conducted seven interviews over email, and the remaining thirteen voice interviews over Skype. Email interviews were conducted using a questionnaire sheet that was crafted to be used in conjunction with audio/visual interviews as well. Participants responded to the questions specifically over the email, allowing for informal conversation.

I conducted audio/visual interviews in a semi-structured fashion. Interviews were executed using the protocols and questions mentioned above, with the interview adapting based on user engagement. For those interviewed who had larger channels (subscriber counts >3000) or channels that had been around for longer periods of time (>1 year), additional questions were asked specifically focusing on growth or sustainability, respectively. Specific example questions included notable growth spikes, collaboration contribution to channel growth, direct audience interaction, and their perception of the medium and how to grow within it. Interviews were

qualitative in nature and encouraged participants to share any anecdotes or notable experiences as part of the interview process. Participants were also encouraged to share any or all analytical data with regard to their channel should it factor into responses with the interview questions. The basic framework of interview questions brought to each interview has been included in this paper as Appendix A.

Two of the twenty interviews were conducted with a YouTube conglomerate rather than a specific individual, consisting of a range of 4-6 creators in each. For these interviews, most groups chose to divvy up the questions amongst themselves.

Limits

While a broad spectrum of LPers were contacted, the majority (70%) of those interviewed for this study were in a 1-5,000 subscriber range, with a smaller number exceeding 10,000 subscribers (30%). This skewed participant data meant that information regarding specifics on how the largest LPers operated and interacted was limited to only a handful of interviews. This can be ascribed to the fact that, as mentioned in the discussion, larger YouTubers frequently form their own tightly-knit cliques, not breaking out into more communal-style communication and collaboration in areas such as the LP subreddit, LP forums, etc. Contact has to be made either through YouTube, Twitter, or via online channels. Additionally, larger YouTubers are frequently asked for collaboration, assistance, and interview requests from a large number of other YouTubers hoping to piggyback on their success, often resulting in these YouTubers ignoring any or all requests sent to them that aren't first vetted through larger organizations or from sources affiliated with YouTube. This led to somewhat skewed data,

which could be rectified by an increased pool to draw from for interviews, or longer integration within the community to make the connections needed to work with and interview larger LPers.

A surprising limit was the imposed age restriction. All interviewees were required to agree to a waiver indicating they were 18 years old. Many LPers, including several larger ones (400,000+ subscriptions) accepted invitations to interview but later had to withdraw as they were not yet legal age. By expanding the age demographic beyond simply 18+ LPers, I could dig deeper into the rising generation of stars that is moving into the territory of the 20-30 year old LPers that were predominantly interviewed.

Respondents were mostly male, with only a handful of female LPers contacted. The reason for this could be two-fold: interviewees were pulled from a LP community where it was known upfront that the interviewer would be male. Of the women interviewed, two commented that they were a bit uneasy initially at the prospect of being interviewed, even with audio-only online, by a man they didn't know. In addition, almost all commented that the LP subreddit is predominantly male, as is the LP scene on YouTube in general. Based on analytical data, men are the primary consumers of LP content, regardless of the gender of the LPer themselves (Hale). A closer look at how gender politics and relations work within the LP community by interviewing a wider spectrum of female LPers would be worth investigation as a supplement to this work.

Analysis/Results

Interviews were coded following no pre-established method, focusing primarily on trends throughout the various interviewees. Data was cross referenced with observations made in the field, in an attempt to develop grounded theory amongst repeated topics. Such repeated topics

included opinions regarding their own videos, videos created by others, momentum and audience growth, interaction with other community members, and so on. The data was then compiled and contrasted between users, and personas for each individual Let's Player were created. All data had to be anonymized post-analysis as per IRB requirements.

The overview of the participants as well as key points in their data analysis has been presented as Table 1.

Table 1 – List of Participants

Participant ID #	Sex	Age	Current Subs	Time on YouTube	Collaboration	Updates	Content Type	Miscellaneous
LPer #1	M	19	43	6 months	Close friends only	Daily	Comedy, critical analysis	Met NormalBoots at Magfest
LPer #2	F	20	12500	1.5 years	Close friends only, female only	2x Day	Critical analysis, top ten's, vlogs	Featured on Kotaku and IGN
LPer #3	M	24	11000	2 years	Multiple channels, have to be similarly sized	1-2x week	Minecraft short films, LPs of other games, vlogs	Retweeted by Notch, highly scripted content, family friendly
LPer #4 (group)	M	18-25	358	2 years	Conglomerate channel; works within itself	2-3x Day	Comedy	Group of 7 creators, each has own channels
LPer #5	M	30	720	4 months	None	2x Day	Let's Plays and tutorials, strategy games only	Family friendly
LPer #6	M	22	31	2 months	None	Daily, 4 days/week	Comedy	
LPer #7	M	24	301	1 year	None	3x Day	Long form, vblogs	Posts around 3-4 hours of content daily
LPer #8	M	28	500	1.5 years	Friend with 50,000 subs	6x week	Comedy, informative	Family friendly
LPer #9	M	22	1500	1 year, 3 months	10+, met through reddit	2x a day	Comedy, first impressions	Primarily informative content
LPer #10	F	21	150000	3 years	Other creators in same range	Daily	Comedy, informative	Has two channels; LP is the bigger one
LPer #11	M	27	275000	4 years	Conglomerate, sometimes with a larger conglomerate	Weekly	Scripted, comedy	Multiple channels, main channel is heavily scripted
LPer #12	M	20	809	6 months	No collaboration	Every 2-3 days	Comedy	Attempting to join a larger group

LPer #13	M	25	1,200,000	5 years	Collaborates within Minecraft server	Daily	Minecraft, comedy	Only works in Minecraft
LPer #14	M	19	170	4 months	Collabs with "mentor"	Every other day	Comedy, blind looks	Rarely collaborates
LPer #15	M	19	126	1 year	Minor collaboration projects	Daily	Comedy, informative	Informative videos generate most hits
LPer #16	M	N/A	860	3 years	No collaboration	2x daily	Comedy, retro games	None
LPer #17	M	20	1750	2.5 Years	Collaborates with all sizes	Usually daily	Comedy	Doesn't follow a theme
LPer #18	M	18	3239	7 Months	Collaboration with larger LPer	Daily	Comedy, Minecraft	Minecraft with larger YouTubers
LPer #19	M	N/A	17000	6 years	Partnership with Bentpixels	Daily	Minecraft, comedy, vlogs	Collaborates primarily in preset group
LPer #20 (group)	M-F	N/A	325	1 year	Internal collaboration	Daily	Comedy, challenges	Large group that has their own channels

DISCUSSION

The primary goal of the research interviews was to glean information regarding not only how LPers interact and generate audience members, but also how they interact amongst themselves. This notion of community amongst peers is something often studied amongst groups of fandom and content reappropriators (Jenkins, 2006), but viewed through the lens of YouTube content creation, specifically monetization, this sort of interaction gains new meaning. Specifically, YouTube's subscription and monetization services generate a casual environment of hierarchy, and these interactions between creators and how they view one another are imperative in understanding the culture created within the LP YouTube creator community.

But in order to best understand how creators interact and relate with their audiences and each other, the relationship between a LPer and their created content must be established. At the center of all forms of interaction within the LP community is the Let's Play itself, game footage reappropriated into commentary for comedy, critique, or otherwise. These artifacts of amateur created content provide the backbone for the entirety of YouTube content creator research, and how these artifacts are interpreted by the creators, their audience, and their peers is telling in how this maker culture develops, interacts, and grows.

Creators' Interaction with Content

Types of Content

Across all interviews, the idea of what consists of a "LP" style of content varied dramatically depending on the individual. For some, a "LP" video consists only of silent playthroughs of a particular game; the creator provides no creative involvement aside from particulars in how they play through the game itself. Others believe LP content should be

informative, providing information about the game while they traverse through it, either background history on the title or information that they learned through previous run-throughs of the game. The most popular style of LPs currently is one focusing primarily on comedy over the gameplay (Hale), with creator providing comedic insight as they play through the game, often isolated completely from the game they're playing. In this style, there is a distinct disconnect between the game being used as a base and the created audio/visual content of the LPer.

Whether or not a video series consists of a straight playthrough with no editing is also a point of contention amongst creators. Many consider anything aside from an unedited run of a game an "impure" version of a LP, and they ascribe such content to a category such as a "gaming comedy video," similar to such creators as The Angry Video Game Nerd or JonTron. However, most of the more popular YouTube LPers admit to editing their content, some providing extensive edits in order to trim it down to what they feel is the most spreadable content.

"I edit my videos down to the jokes, with a bit of filler in-between. Sometimes I'll keep some slower parts to help the pacing or if they tie into the game's story so the audience won't get lost, but other than that it's much smarter to edit it down to short bursts of comedy."

"Short bursts are what my demographic wants. I market to 9-14 year olds who play Minecraft. They won't appreciate a slow buildup or any sort of down time. It's gotta be 'joke, joke, joke' or they'll click off me and go watch PewDiePie." – LPer #9

Another conflict amongst the LP community is the inclusion of "Facecam." Facecam is where a player records themselves via webcam or other camera apparatus while playing the game. This allows those watching the game to also watch the player's reactions as they happen. Out of the top ten most popular LP channels on YouTube, seven of them use facecam, including the top channel across all of YouTube (PewDiePie). Perceptions on whether or not facecam is an

appropriate addition to a LP video vary from creator to creator. A common perspective is that users who record facecam are distracting from the game, and on top of that, it encourages the presenter to put on a fake presentation, knowing they are on camera. Creators wanting their content to be genuine is of constant importance, particularly with creators with smaller subscriber bases, so using facecam is often viewed as an affront.

“I’d never use facecam. It’s not only annoying, it covers up the game. But worst of all, it’s focusing the attention on you. So many people get facecam and just sit there, doing nothing. What’s the point? But even worse is when they fake their reactions to games like Amnesia [a horror game] to try and get attention and be ‘edgy.’ It’s fake, and the audience knows it’s fake, and it’s a level of narcissism that I don’t want tainting my videos.” – LPer #12

Others find success in facecam, and praise its positive uses. One creator with 2500 subs commented,

“Facecam allows your audience members to see that you’re a person. It adds a personal element that isn’t there. Without facecam, I could go to a convention and nobody would have a clue who I was. With the camera, people know I’m not afraid to show myself to people. It also makes you more aware of yourself, and lets you do better jokes. It’s a much more personal connection, and that’s why I think the bigger LPers all use facecam.” – LPer #9

As part of my own content creation, I developed Let’s Play videos of a variety of PC Games, both created by larger corporations (“AAA Games”) as well as indie games. I initially started without any type of facecam, but received feedback via YouTube comments requesting it. After adding the facecam, however, feedback provided by fellow Let’s Players (both on the /r/LetsPlay subreddit, various webforums, and via YouTube comments) was highly negative. The backlash from the facecam far outweighed the requests made, even spawning arguments in the

comments sections of some videos between viewers. Ultimately I continued with Facecam for comedic Let's Plays, while I removed it for those intending to be more informative, but the audience response was still highly polarizing.

Due to the wide range of content, nailing down exactly what currently constitutes a "LP" varies depending on whom is asked. However, all participants agreed that LPs center around video games, commentary about said video games, and a focus on both the player of the game and the game itself.

DIY vs Professionalism

A key facet in the creation of content is the hybridization of play and production. When creating commentary, a creator must first actually play the game in question. Even though the game itself was essentially already created, produced, and sold to the player, the final production is considered "made" by the LPer, and owned by them as well. As described by Hector Postigo, the commentators' immersion is "clothed in both artifact and play." This core idea is constrained by technologies present and the hardware available to the user, but the final content of commentary is claimed as their own ownership. In this regard, "play and production are unified processes." (Postigo)

All content on YouTube is split between amateur created content and professionally produced. Over the past several years, popularity of content has shifted from the professional side to the amateur-created side. While amateur content dominates both the most uploaded as well as the most talked about content, up until 2013 professionally content was still viewed more frequently across YouTube than amateur content (Burgess, Green). This shift was caused by both

the rise of LPers and the alteration in algorithms, leading to a cultural shift that favors amateur work (or amateur-appearing works) over professionally created content.

A common theme across LPer's interviewed, both as content creators and audience, is a distrust of "overly-professional" style YouTube videos. This is particularly relevant within the medium of gaming, with a shift from traditional journalism to online amateur journalism over the past several years leading to a rise in demand for more informal, amateur content (Bulkley, 2012).

Within this growing idealized vision of what "trustworthy" content on YouTube should appear as is not only the stigma against professionally produced (or professionally appearing) content, but also a requirement that the content be of a certain caliber. Frequent interview feedback on the importance of video from both creators and audience was that "your content must look like you care." Examples of poorly crafted content included having inadequate microphones or computers to capture the gameplay or voice at a high enough caliber. Post-production skills such as audio mixing or footage editing are also an indication of the creator "caring" about their content. Even /r/LetsPlay, a subreddit devoted entirely to helping growing LPers, has an entire weekday (Technical Tuesdays) devoted to critique of videos from a technical standpoint as well as providing technical assistance to all users. It is intended to assist creators in getting their technical content "up to par" with what is considered the minimum in terms of content quality. What exactly this bar is tends to vary from individual to individual, but uniformly the consensus included:

1. High quality audio for the commentator's voice. Users often recommend particular brands of high-end microphones even to those starting out.

2. HD video recording technology. This requires either a capture card to connect to a video game console, or a high end PC to run HD capture software in the background.
3. Post editing and audio mixing. All creators interviewed provided some level of post-production to their videos. The extent depended on the creator and the content they were intending to make, but having this type of skill was necessary. Frequently this required owning high-end video editing software such as Adobe Premiere or Final Cut Pro.

With these standards, an obvious paradox is discovered. As mentioned by one creator,

“You want your content to look like you care, but you don’t want it to look too good. Over produced, over edited stuff with what is obviously a team behind it seems less genuine. Once you’re using boom mics and setting up light screens, how are you any different from IGN or Gamestop [two professional gaming companies with YouTube channels]? You want to get as high quality as you can, but still within the scope of being amateur.” – LPer #11

While this goal is often repeated, it is rarely enforced. Once YouTube creators enter into conglomerates or larger creator groups (usually post-500,000 subscribers), the groups frequently suggest and provide more expensive technologies to produce the video content, resulting in a more professional look. Many creators enjoy flaunting these technologies as part of skits or mentioning the improvements in vlogs on their channel. These creators are often aware that they are alienating parts of their fanbase that want them to stay “amateur,” but to them the benefits outweigh the costs.

“I’m doing this because I love it, not because somebody is telling me to. If I have the opportunity to get better, I always will. And if some people leave, even more will subscribe when they see the rise in quality.” – LPer #13

This concept of “grassroots vs professional” within a media scene is hardly novel. As Henry Jenkins pointed out in his essay *Photoshop for Democracy*, it is a fairly common idea that “a narrow pipeline controlled by major media companies was unlikely to transmit ideas that ran counter to dominant interests.” (Jenkins, 2007) This notion that LPers were creating content that was arguably “rebellious” against more mainstream video game media sites (IGN, Kotaku, etc.) is a pervasive one, and when one further extrapolates this comparison it is clear how something as simple as how a video looks becomes a primary focus on whether a video is major media or made “of the people.” With content creators on YouTube differentiating themselves by being primarily counter-culture and isolated from big media, having any indication of convergence could cause their audience to generate a negative perspective of their content and, thus, lose said audience.

The constant struggle between the DIY amateur-style content and professionally produced content often has no bearing on the bulk of LPers. The majority of LPers are small (under 5,000 subscribers) and most don’t do LPing as a full time career, let alone make enough money to support themselves. Any equipment purchased is with intent that it will be used as a hobby, and so mid-range audio and visual equipment is considered satisfactory by most. The issue of audience perception regarding professional content verses amateur looking content tends to worry smaller, growing LPers rather than larger, more established ones.

This was also evidenced in my own video creation. Initially, videos were created using a cheap webcam microphone and poor recording software. Feedback was fast and swift from both the audience and fellow Let’s Players: the technical quality of the content was subpar and they considered it distracting. After purchasing a more expensive microphone and learning better recording techniques, as well as spending more time in Adobe Premiere mixing the audio and

video, these types of negative responses tapered off. Not a single commenter mentioned that the video has improved, they simply stopped critiquing. To both the audience and the fellow creators, I had simply met the minimum of what was expected.

Relationship with Created Content

Creators were asked which of their content they were most proud of, and as part of the same question were asked what video was most successful in terms of views. The two were rarely the same video. Most creators considered videos that they'd put the most work into to be their favorite videos, even if the video was unsuccessful. Many pointed out that they'd learned a lot by editing and splicing the video and felt they were able to express their creativity in a more fulfilling way. With regards to which videos were more popular, creators often cited videos that had been posted early on their channels, a few having videos that had gone viral, but often they spoke negatively of the videos. As one creator noted,

“My first video was a Minecraft video where I accidentally burned my house down. This was something like six years ago. It has around 3 million views, which is more than the rest of my channel's views combined. I hate that video. I just accidentally recorded it and posted it on the internet for my friends, and then it exploded. Now I create videos that take 40-50 hours of work and share it, and it'll get no views, while this house-burning video will continue to get watched. It can drive you crazy sometimes.” – LPer #2

Something all creators agreed upon was that the quality of their content was the core purpose of their channels. Creating content that best expressed their creative intentions was considered not only important for them as individuals, but a necessity for *anyone* trying to enter the medium. It is a return to the concept of “genuineness,” the idea that content must be both

amateur and professional, but above all must follow the tenants of being true to the creator's personality and vision. Failings are often seen as positive landmarks, and comparison points to show how far they've gotten. These comparisons even expanded beyond their own content.

“Often times I'll look up JonTron and watch his old videos back when he had as many subs as I do now and be like ‘this is where he was, here is where I am now. How can I make myself better?’ It's really motivating to know that they came from where you came from, and you can find a comparison to work off of.” – LPer #1

This devotion to being genuine is often even more important than popularity. Most smaller LPers will be quick to mention that they aren't doing it for the financial benefits, but rather because they enjoy doing it for fun and being part of a larger community. During the course of the interviews, I asked many times if they would consider collaborating or working with a YouTuber larger than them – which would almost guarantee a rise in views and subscribers – even if they felt the other YouTuber wasn't compatible. The response was unanimously negative.

“I've been reached out to a lot of YouTubers, some bigger than others, a few at 5,000 subs and one at 500,000 subs, asking for collaboration. So I'd watch their videos and talk with them and while I liked them as people, I just couldn't see me working with them...sure you could make a video that will maybe get you some subs but if you aren't compatible with them your jokes are gonna suck and the video is gonna suck. That's why I work with [the people I do] even if they're smaller, because you have to have that compatibility or the content will suffer.” – LPer #8

Adherence to content above all persists from both small to large YouTube channels. Larger channels frequently form self-conglomerates amongst themselves, with the criteria being

that their content meshes well together and they work well together for potential future cross-promotion. One LPer, part of a conglomerate that featured creators each with over 200,000 subscribers, mentioned,

“We formed the group because we liked each other. Would we allow new people in now? Maybe, if their stuff was good enough. But what really matters is that compatibility. We’ve turned down people even bigger than us to join [our conglomerate] because we felt they weren’t a good fit. We work with [a larger conglomerate] from time to time, but we didn’t join with them because we felt the content would suffer. A bit of crossover is ok, but not a lot.” – LPer #4

Content quality, in the eye of the creator, is by far the key factor when appraising one’s YouTube status. Because of this, creators not only take great care in being certain everything they put out is of the highest caliber, but also judge other YouTubers based on whether or not their content appears to have required the same effort.

“I get approached by guys with 30-40 subs saying ‘I want to collaborate!’ so I go look at their channel and they have facecam and the audio is awful and their videos say ‘BANDICAM’ [a free recorder] on the top and it’s like, ‘Are you even trying?’ But then I see a guy with only 3-4 subs and they’re really funny and their audio levels are great and videos are great and that’s the guy I’d much rather collaborate with, because he cares about the stuff he’s making.” – LPer #3

Spreading the Spreadable Media

A core factor in content creation is being able to spread said content. While research has been done on virility of content and what factors can assist in rendering a video viral, the truth of the matter is that most videos do not enjoy the privilege of being spread virally across multiple

media platforms. Because of this, LP creators frequently follow similar sets of procedures and guidelines when promoting their media, to varied success.

Social Media

Videos shared over Twitter and other social networks not only garner more views and reach overall, but also have increased likelihood of going viral (Yu, Xie, & Sanner, 2014; Abisheva, Garimella, Garcia, & Weber, 2014). Most LP content creators share this sentiment, with Twitter being the primary medium for sharing one's content.

"I use Twitter instead of Facebook because it's much less personal. You know that guy who has a new band and posts to Facebook all the time about it? You never click on that, it's annoying. But with Twitter, I'm yelling to the masses, not just people I know. It works a lot better." – LPer #1

Every LPer interviewed for this study had a Twitter account, and all shared videos on it. YouTube has a built in system that allows a video to automatically Tweet when it is posted, as well as share the link on Google Plus. While Google Plus integration was built into the videos, few YouTubers actually used Google Plus to share videos or communicate with fans. By majority, they felt the medium was inferior to other outlets for advertising.

The second most prominent social network for sharing videos was Reddit, though the relationship with the site provided mixed results. Reddit is a site where anyone can post a link to any kind of content they want, with the entire site being broken down into specialized "subreddits" for particular content (ex. /r/Minecraft is a Minecraft-themed subreddit, /r/Games is a game focused subreddit, etc.). Content is then curated by the site participants themselves through an upvote/downvote system. Popular content is upvoted and rises to the top of the page,

while less popular content is downvoted and dropped to the bottom (Shelton, Lo, & Nardi, 2015). An important rule of using Reddit is to be certain your content both is in the correct subreddit and follows the rules regarding self-promotion. Frequently, LPers have had their content deleted and accounts (and sometimes even channels) banned from posting on Reddit because it was in violation with a particular subreddit's rules.

Stinginess of audience leads to creators avoiding Reddit. As one creator pointed out,

“If Reddit likes you, then you can explode. But most likely they’ll hate you, and you’ll have to deal with a ton of negativity. Reddit is probably the most fickle place you can post your videos, even more so than YouTube itself, so you have to be very careful when posting on there.”

– LPer #17

Despite the high risk involved, most users reported their greatest success coming from reddit.

“I posted our Dragon Age: Inquisition videos to Reddit, and only a few hours later my video was in an article on Kotaku [a popular gaming site]. So I figured that the writer was actively scanning the Dragon Age subreddit for content, so I kept posting my Dragon Age videos there. Sure enough, the next day there was another article, citing Reddit as source, with another of my videos. This was then picked up by IGN [another large gaming site] and the channel and its videos exploded with viewers...”

But that rarely happens. I’ve posted content to Reddit all the time and had it downvoted to oblivion. It’s really both a right place, right time thing as well as a quality of content thing. If your stuff is good enough and you’re lucky, it’ll rise to the top.” – LPer #2

Reddit proved to be the best tool for the spreadability of my own LP videos during the time of research. Experimentation with posting videos to different subreddits (including posting

on subreddits that I felt would garner more negative attention than positive) showed that a post title need only be provoking in order to incite a large influx of views. At that point, the content of the video was overshadowed by the Reddit post itself, leading to some better videos being ignored for their bad headlines, while worse videos saw a surge in views. As a whole, Reddit proved to be not only fickle, but wildly subjective in what it approved, often removing focus from the content and instead transferring it to the specific Reddit post itself.

Aside from Twitter and Reddit, content creators also promoted their content on Tumblr, Instagram, and Facebook, though far less prominently. Major complaints included the inability to communicate with their audience as reliably, having to pay for more reach (particularly with Facebook), and the simple fact that the audience for their type of content was larger on the other two platforms.

Scheduling

When a creator posts their videos and how frequently is also an item of debate. Larger game critic and LPer TotalBiscuit has posted videos encouraging users that are starting out to go for “one video a day, but no more than that.” His argument is that too much content overwhelms the audience, and having a reliable schedule of just enough content is imperative for retention (Bain, 2014).

Feelings across interviewed creators was mixed. All LPers contacted agreed that some form of a schedule was important, many even stating it was the most important thing to have in regards to audience retention. Many posted their schedules as part of their channel descriptions, even having specific shows devoted to particular days of the week (ex. “Strategy Saturdays,”

“Minecraft Mondays,” etc.). It was frequently mentioned that if a day was missed in a projected schedule, it was important for the YouTuber to apologize to the audience for the neglect, or to offer some sort of explanation beforehand.

Failing to maintain a schedule can have significant consequences. Prominent LPer Markiplier, in March 2015, suddenly stopped uploading otherwise daily content. His YouTube channel, videos, and Twitter account was quickly overrun with dislikes, comments demanding content, users unsubscribing, and expressions of discontent. It was two days later when Markiplier recorded a video of him in the hospital, recovering from an unpredicted appendicitis, and explaining the lack of content (Fischbach, 2015). While most of the audience was satisfied with the explanation, many still insisted he “record content from the hospital,” and stay on schedule. Markiplier continued to post daily status updates concerning his health on Twitter and YouTube until he was well enough to return to his usually created content.

Content quantity per week was a divisive topic. Some felt TotalBiscuit was incorrect and often posted two 15-20 minutes videos a day. Others worked only weekdays, with Sundays being devoted to easier-to-produce Vlogs. Creators with content that required more editing would post smaller pieces of content bi-weekly, with large productions monthly. In general, however, all creators pointed out that when they were consistent, their subscribers and views gradually increased, whereas if they broke schedule or took breaks, the fallout was far more dramatic in the negative.

“I took a break for finals week at Uni[versity]. I posted a Vlog saying ‘Hey guys, finals are kicking my ass, I’m going to have to cut back on content for the next two weeks.’ Even though I said that, I lost subscribers that week, and even had one person message me asking

where the content was. If you have a schedule, you have to stick to it, no matter what.” – LPer #10

Consistency in posting is also tied into YouTube algorithms. LPer #7’s sentiments echo what the majority of interview participants pointed out:

“YouTube takes into account how frequently you post, and how reliably. If you keep posting once a day for two months, it’s going to favor you over somebody who just posts once every few weeks. Your channel is also favored if you uploaded a video that same day, so if you upload a video every day, you’ll always have the best chance of being spotted.” – LPer #7

Attempting to manipulate this advantage, however, was viewed as both deceptive and damaging to a channel.

“Could I break up a thirty minute video into six five minute videos and post them throughout the day? Sure. Would I have an audience after I did that? No way. No amount of algorithms will help you if your audience knows you’re just doing it for the SEO [Search Engine Optimization].” – LPer #12

As a whole, it is regarded that keeping a schedule and conveying that schedule to audience members is important, regardless of whether it is daily, weekly, or even monthly. What is most important is the communication or unspoken contract between creator and viewer, which facilitates trust between the two parties and encourages present and future interaction.

The Snowball

While a video “going viral” is frequently talked about in the media, creators who produce content regularly refer to it through a different term: the “snowball.” This is frequently considered to be not one, but a culmination of multiple events happening in quick succession. A

video receives an unprecedented amount of attention, either through social media or by the creator's own channel audience. This causes the algorithms to favor not only it, but the channel, which in turns leads to more views across the creator's body of work. This continues to influence YouTube's recommendation system, causing the video to be spread across social media and YouTube itself, growing and growing in size and resulting in a widespread jump of views, subscribers, and shares. This can persist from hours to years.

The specific time when a channel is "snowballing" is often up to debate. It was frequently stated that the top-tier YouTubers are in a "constant state of snowball," with the recommendation algorithms favoring them so that every new video they post essentially goes viral. However, a "lesser snowball" is attributed to smaller channels (those under a million subscribers), which is where their constancy continues to allow for a good growth curve, but without any massive notable spikes that might be seen with larger YouTubers.

Aiming for the snowball to happen is the most coveted goal of any small to moderate sized LPer. Frequently, creators commented that the reason they follow consistent rules in promoting their content (posting schedules, audience communication, etc.) is with the hopes that it'll eventually start building on itself and growth essentially go on autopilot. The core idea is that by doing a plethora of small things, eventually those small things will become trivial as social media shareability and the YouTube recommendation algorithm gain in importance. However, finding what causes a snowball to take off is a different matter entirely.

While most creators would initially argue that the most important facet to engaging the snowball effect was simply producing quality content, when probed further they would change their tunes and admit the system no longer favors that kind of approach.

“YouTube is designed to make the big get bigger and the smaller stay small. It’s just smart business. So until you’re past a certain subscriber point and YouTube is working for you, they’re actively working to push you down.” – LPer #6

The system also favored those who had been around long enough to garner a reputation.

“You hear stuff like ‘If you wanted to get into YouTube, you had to have started in 2009.’ While this isn’t true for everybody, it’s certainly true that it’s much harder now than it was back then. Back then if you got even one video with a ton of hits, you were essentially set for life. That’s what happened to JonTron. But now, you could get all the hits in the world and YouTube won’t care, because everybody is getting hits.” – LPer #1

The most contributing factor in the highest-viewed videos on a creator’s site was if the video had been spread by a more prominent public figure. Frequently, this figure was a YouTuber, either “Liking” the video on their channel, adding it to their Favorites, or retweeting the video over Twitter. The quality of the video’s content could vary completely from the rest of the content on the channel, but what mattered most was if the *individual* video had gathered enough attention to be worth a share from a larger social figure.

“I was basically a nobody, but one time I was playing Minecraft and saw that NorthernLion [a popular Minecraft YouTuber] was also playing. So I hopped on his server and asked if I could play for a while. We ended up becoming friends, so much so that I play on his servers and show up in his content. While he never directly works with me or even mentions me aside from when we visit in-world, from that small interaction alone I’ve seen my subscriber growth quadruple.” – LPer #9

While it was a general (if begrudging) unanimous agreement that it was almost a necessity to be noticed by somebody big in order to reach the critical mass point of growth, a handful of content creators still didn't believe that is enough.

“I got featured on [a large YouTuber’s compilation video] for Hearthstone plays, and after that went up the source video got like 6,000 views and I got several hundred subs. But over the course of the next few weeks I lost almost all of them, because Hearthstone wasn’t the core stuff on my channel, and people were like ‘Wait, why am I watching this guy if he isn’t what I think he is?’ ...I could have switched to all Hearthstone stuff and probably kept a lot of those subscribers or even snowballed, but that wasn’t the kind of content I wanted to make full time. People say I missed an opportunity, but I don’t regret not changing who I am just for more hits... that’s not why I do this.” – LPer #5

This experience of having a larger YouTuber bolster traffic to your channel happened twice during my time creating content. The first was when my initial video was linked on a comment of one of JamesNintendoNerd (The Angry Video Game Nerd)’s videos by an unknown poster. The comment was inflammatory, but still linked back to my video. This promoted a surge of angry viewers who watched the video, posted aggressive comments, and gave it a “thumbs down” rating. However, despite this negative backlash, the rise in views lead to more and more people watching it, resulting in a massive surge of both views and subscribers. Despite the scenario being negative, my channel benefitted from a large boost of content, going from 5 to over 100 subscribers in under 24 hours.

The second boost was through self-discovery. One video I created was a highly-scripted video game related song, designed as a break from the regular LP content. The song was linked on Twitter to several minor YouTube stars (each with around 100-300k subscribers) who were

all in a similar conglomerate. When one watched the video and commented, the others from the conglomerate did the same. These comments were also viewable by anyone subscribing to their channel, which drove a large portion of their audience base to the video. The song went “semi-viral,” netting several thousand views in just a few days.

Both of these videos proved to be the most successful on the channel, and both saw large spikes in subscriber growth. The effects of the song’s spread is still persisting, a year and a half after its post, with it gaining more views daily than all other videos on the channel combined.

Most creators agreed that you could have a prominent YouTuber retweet you frequently, but if content isn’t a good match or doesn’t maintain a certain quality, than a creator never gains subscribers. In the end, the idea of what causes a snowball was still believed to be entirely based on the content created, not on reliance on any other figure to promote it forward. This fits the prevalent ideology of “content before all,” but also fits the mindset of most YouTube creators that they have to make their own niche in the community. Admitting that their entire success could be reliant on someone else’s promotion undermines the idea that their content is serviceable enough to facilitate that success by itself, and it is frequently denied. However, when looking at analytical data of growth spikes across not only those channels interviewed but other prominent YouTubers, the quantitative data confirms the theory that being promoted by a larger YouTuber is the most successful method to initiate a subscriber and viewer snowball. And while some YouTubers (Markiplier, for example) manage to instigate the snowball from their own efforts (Markiplier’s “Five Nights at Freddy’s” video¹³ received viral spread and pushed his channel into a rapid rise in growth), the most frequent examples of YouTuber accounts created post-2009 gaining rapid growth comes predominantly from viral spread via other YouTubers.

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOztnsBPrAA>

Creative Expansion vs Specialization of Content

Considering the intimate nature creators have with their created content, it is curious to note the evolution of how channel content changes. As mentioned, content straddles the line between appearing amateur and professional as creators improve their techniques, equipment, and revenue, but even more telling is the change of content's form. As LPer #2, who has 15,000 subscribers, points out:

"I started out creating LPs, just basic stuff of me recording my voice over things. I had something like five different shows going on. But I noticed that some were popular and some weren't, particularly the Minecraft shows. So even though I enjoyed the other games, I cut down on them and focused more on my Minecraft stuff. It really helped my audience retention and growth." – LPer #2

Compromises in creativity in exchange for popularity and meeting audience expectations are common. While creators will often cite the rhetoric that "the content comes before all," frequently this idiom is trumped when it comes down to audience requests. All LPers interviewed checked their analytical data frequently, with many breaking down specific videos to the exact minute and second that they lost audience retention. Using this, they could modify their content to better fit the audience's needs, but at a sacrifice of their previous total creative freedom.

Many creators feel pigeonholed in by their choice of content, feeling that abandoning content that got subscribers into the channel would not only betray their audience, but also cause a lot of them to unsubscribe. In many cases, creators start with content that is either familiar to them or games that are already popular on YouTube, such as *Minecraft* or *Hearthstone* (an

online card game made by Blizzard). These games have very specialized audiences who frequently state that they only want content within that sphere. When a creator breaks out of the games that started their channel, audience members will react with negative comments, dislikes, and unsubscribes.

“I’ve actually started adding more content besides Minecraft to my routine,” LPer #2 adds, “because I’m worried about the longevity of Minecraft’s popularity. I love Minecraft, but if I’m looking at this long term it might not be as popular in 3-4 years. I have to be very careful, though, when I put up non-Minecraft videos. I say ‘Ok, don’t worry, this is just something I’m trying on the side, but you’re still getting all the same Minecraft videos.’ If I don’t, people freak out and get angry or unsubscribe. It’s like it isn’t what they signed up for.”

Creative control over content primarily diminishes as channels get larger. As audiences become more and more specialized, so does the content the creators make, pigeonholing them into a specific style of content, including editing procedures, games chosen, family friendly (or not), etc. When a creator specifically wants to create different content, the most common solution is to not post it on the channel in addition to the current content (even if it doesn’t alter the original content’s schedule at all), but instead create a secondary channel and post the content there.

“It’s a safe way to show you aren’t mixing both. Really, it’s so people who want the other type of content can sub to both, and if you only liked the original stuff you won’t see this new stuff on our feed. People get REALLY annoyed when stuff they don’t want shows up on their subscription lists [on the front page of YouTube]. It’s like this universal pet peeve.” – LPer #11

For smaller channels, however, creative control is still in the hands of the creators themselves. Smaller channels tend to follow the “throw everything at the wall and see what

sticks” philosophy, churning out multiple variations of shows in an attempt to find what is the most popular. This trend is so common that it’s recommended by veterans on LP communities such as /r/LetsPlay¹⁴. However, the eventual goal is still the same: to find content that is specialized enough to increase audience retention and subs. This idea of exploiting free creative liberty in order to eventually give it up in favor of more popularity and subscribers is a common theme throughout YouTube. At first, the content is all that matters. But as time goes by, content through the lens of the audience’s preference dictates the direction that channels will go.

Monetization of Content

YouTube abundantly pushes users to monetize their content. From the initial setup to every time a creator checks their Video Uploads window, YouTube is encouraging them to tack ads onto their content. YouTube Analytics’ main summary screen provides a breakdown of exactly how much each video has earned the creator, and the ever-helpful “New creator’s guide” has a specific bullet that will not go away until you turn on monetization for created videos. YouTube is in the business to sell ads on the creative content its users generate, as this is the only way the service can afford to keep video hosting free (even though it hasn’t turned a profit since it was bought by Google in 2006) (D’Onfro, 2015).

While the idea of generating income off created creative content is a popular one, a surprising number of LPers (mostly medium to small ones) have disabled monetization on their videos. Frequently, it is believed that “we wouldn’t make any money anyway” and as LPer #1 sarcastically commented *“If you make \$3 for every 1000 views [an often touted statistic] I would have made enough in two years to buy a coffee.”*

¹⁴ http://www.reddit.com/r/letsplay/comments/2q2q11/diversity_vs_focus_lets_have_a_discussion_on/

Another mantra is that smaller channels will turn on monetization when they hit 1,000 subscribers. The reasoning is two-fold across almost all creators. First, they feel as if they are simply creating content for fun not profit, essentially giving away their product, but would rather view it as a hobby and a way to gain audience. Second is that they unanimously agreed that advertisements can drive potential audiences away, especially if the videos come from a smaller channel. For them, the small monetary gains aren't worth the potential cost of audience, as well as the sense that they are tainting the "purity" of their content through commercialism.

Larger channels, however, fully embrace the culture created by advertising. As size increases and revenue earned by advertisements also grows, larger channels feel pressured to create content that not only meets their quality standard, but also can garner more clicks to generate more profit.

"I'd say I'm about half-way to doing this full time [with 12,500 subscribers]. It's an important point for me, because I'm on a growth curve up, but I have to be very careful or else I'll plateau. Once you realize you could do this for a living, your whole perception changes. You start taking it very seriously, looking at analytic data and demographic data and all that. You worry your content isn't up to par anymore, and spend more time on it, but still need to produce. It's stressful." – LPer #2

As part of my content creation, it is worth noting I never monetized my videos. I considered it for a time and queried fellow Let's Players regarding the opinion, and the unanimous decision was to hold off until you had at least 1,000 subscribers. While this was not any sort of hard or fast rule amid the community, I chose to follow it.

Larger channels are also often pressured to feature videos or games provided to them by companies or developers. It is well known that having a game featured on a high-traffic LPers

channel is a surefire way to increase sales. When approached, many larger LPers have to make the difficult decision between creating content because it is their preference, or featuring a game because the game's creator is paying them to do so. While most smaller YouTubers I spoke with said they would never hinder their creativity by "selling out," accepting promotional deals was fairly common amongst larger YouTubers, despite it being viewed negatively by both other creators and their audiences.

The relationship between monetization and content often influences the creativity of the content, as well as alters the perception of what the content is by the creators themselves. When not monetized, often creators view their created videos as simply diversions, or personal extensions of their personalities and creativity opened up to the outside world. The process is more for their own entertainment and the enjoyment of their small audiences. After monetization, general response from creators when speaking about their content was more meticulous and mechanical. Videos were shared around more amongst critique groups, not for fun but to ensure a level of quality that would ensure the channel would continue to grow and the video generate revenue.

Conclusion

Creators value their content tremendously, both for the creative freedom it allows and the fact it is the backbone of their channels. However, consistent changes to how they perceive, create, and advertise the content is evident as the channels grow. Smaller channels embark in a wide range of creative freedoms, creating content to their choosing in a variety of subjects and topics and advertising it to as many groups as they can. As they grow, however, creativity is funneled down into a more refined process, with successful creators focusing on target

demographics, maximizing monetization, and creating the best product they can. This shift, where artistic expression is sacrificed for the production of a product, ties together with previously mentioned issues regarding DIY verses professionally created content. With the desire to streamline content down to what can best be mass shared as well as appeal to their target demographics, content often loses its “startup DIY” look for a more professional flavor, which in turn can gain the ire of older fans or YouTube watchers seeking more amateur style content. While content might be king for smaller YouTubers, the audience, retention, and monetization of their creative product becomes the driving force as creators grow.

Creators' Interaction with Creators

Community

An important contingent of YouTube content creation in general is the idea of community. YouTubers frequently point out that when you are creating content for YouTube, you aren't creating it in a bubble. Over 48 hours of video is being posted to YouTube every single minute (YouTube Blog), and creators who interact and work with other creators stand to have the greatest chance of success in rising over the competition.

With any community, informal rules and guidelines are established and oft repeated. While YouTube does provide a Terms of Service - rules set by YouTube for users to follow - other unwritten rules are spread across YouTube community members are self-monitored by the community, and those who break the rules are also punished by the community. This follows, in a way, the theories presented by Mark Deuze, regarding trends and rules being set within digital cultures themselves, with their own values and principles. (Deuze, 2011). An example of such was mentioned previously, with the punishing of algorithm abusers and view-baiters by the community rather than YouTube itself.

While YouTube as a whole could be considered part of a singular "community as platform," smaller subsets within YouTube break down between creators. Often, creators will form smaller "conglomerate" groups, usually ranging in size from two to three up to dozens of YouTubers. Often times these conglomerates communicate with other conglomerates or YouTubers within a certain sphere. For example, conglomerates NormalBoots and Hidden Block, both groups focusing on scripted and unscripted gaming content, will often work together or interact both online or at conventions. Even larger subsets specializing in entire genres of work, such as LPs, will meet under singular banners in places such as the LP Subreddit on

Reddit, or on internet forums such as SomethingAwful or other websites (Devolution). Within these groups, rules and regulations are informally established that specialize on the subset of the content created. These groups also facilitate discussion, critique, sharing, and collaboration of videos and channels.

For most creators, being part of the community is a core part of being a LPer. One smaller creator pointed out,

“I have only 100 subs, and not a lot of views. Making videos is a ton of fun, but what I really like is that YouTube has facilitated a large community where I can meet new people and friends that share my interests.” – LPer #14

These sort of “mini-societies” online provide a basis by which creators can work together and communicate with both their audiences and with other creators. Communities aren’t closed; anyone can post be they a LPer, a critic, or just a watcher. These groups also police their own, encourage good practice amongst newcomers, and often times help lesser members gain more subscribers or audience. This is done either through collaboration (which will be covered next), advice, or sometimes financial support or gifts.

An important component of the LP community is the idea that all are equal, but with stipulations. Talking about subscriber count is generally discouraged as it constitutes bragging, unless directly tied into channel growth and used as advice to help others. This leads to a community with a large range of subscribers, from beginners with 1-2, to larger channels with users in the 100,000s. A prominent notion throughout the community is that “everybody was where you are, where you’ve been, and where you want to go.”

This notion dissolves, however, after groups reach a certain size. In interviews with larger channels on the topic of various subreddits and forums, many pointed out that they were slipping

into inactivity because they felt those types of communities “catered to newcomers.” Most had either rejected collaborations at that point as unsuccessful, or found a smaller group of higher-profile YouTubers to work with specifically within their conglomerate. As a channel with 30,000 subs pointed out,

“I don’t really go on the subreddit [/r/LetsPlay] anymore because...they’re all just new, you know? It’s all stuff like ‘How do I get audience’ and ‘What microphone do I buy’ and I don’t care about any of that stuff anymore. I’m an adult now, and they’re all still in diapers.” – LPer #2

When asked if they felt an obligation to help smaller YouTubers, the split became even more obvious. A channel with 1,750 subs responded,

“Absolutely, because I’ve been where they are. I wish someone had told me the stuff I know now, and I’m going to share that with whomever I find so they can, you know, skip the hard parts. I feel like I owe it to help the community and share what I’ve learned.” – LPer #17

Several LPers, most with over 10,000 subscribers, had a different response to the question.

“[Do I feel like I owe it to smaller channels to help them?] Absolutely not. Larger channels do have the power and influence to make a difference to smaller channels but there’s definitely no requirement...so many people are constantly emailing you asking for promotions, collabs, free stuff, etc. It can make you feel like people are just using you to get what they want.”
– LPer #3

The same user did relent and admit they tried their best to help smaller channels, however.

“There’s been a few smaller channels that I really enjoy their content so I’ve contacted them for collabs because I want to help them grow. I also tweet links to videos I enjoy. If the channels is smaller and I really like the content, I’m more likely to make an effort to promote it as many ways as possible.”

As subscriber count grows, the idea of helping or participating in the community shifts from being active within the community to promoting smaller videos or content that the users with more subscribers felt was “worth spreading.”

“If I see a video I really like, I’ll do everything I can to promote them. It doesn’t matter how many subs they have, what matters is that I like their stuff.” – LPer #10

This divide between YouTubers in size is a prominent theme found within both community and how creators interact, with the divide primarily being established by YouTubers bigger than 10,000 subs with further rifts as subscriber counts continue to increase. In the following sections, we will go into more detail regarding the splits between these different sizes of subscribers and how it influences potential collaboration.

Collaboration

Interviews revealed that, aside from casual interaction, collaboration is the most common method by which YouTubers, particularly LPers, form bonds and work together with other creators in their groups. A collaboration is most simply defined as two YouTubers, each with separate channels, crossing over into each other’s videos. The crossover could be slight (just a cameo) or more detailed (an entire episode or series together). Collaboration across YouTubers isn’t just limited to the LP community either; frequently in animation and comedy skits, more popular YouTubers and even celebrities can make cameos or collaborations with these groups.

As an example, Rap Battles of History¹⁵ (a channel devoted to having two historical figures “rap” to determine who is superior) is well known for enlisting both YouTube and television celebrities to play roles on their videos.

In general, collaborations are seen as beneficial in multiple ways. First, it allows for creators to expand their reach within the community and interact on a more professional and intimate level with other members of their groups. For example, many users on /r/LetsPlay will collaborate with other channels in one or two video runs, just to see how well they get along or work together, or even just for the sheer enjoyment of playing a game multiplayer. Second, collaboration allows multiplicative content creation. When doing collaborative videos, the video can be recorded from multiple perspectives (each perspective being the individual content creator). The same content is then posted on all creator’s channels, just with different editing or character perspective. This allows one chunk of content to serve multiple users without much extra work involved. Third, and perhaps the most important, is that creators use collaborative opportunities to share audiences. An unspoken rule of collaboration is that the collaborators featured in the video have their channels (or other forms of content) linked within the video description. Often creators will even link specific videos that their collaborators have made in a video end bumper or outro. This encourages their audiences to go visit the new channel and subscribe, and vice versa. As a mutually serving relationship, collaborations work very well at expanding channel growth.

As a tool, collaboration is considered one of the best ways to grow your audience. As oft repeated by interviewees,

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/user/ERB>

“If you can collaborate with somebody bigger than you, either a lot or even a little, you’ll see the change in your subscribers.” – LPer #8

“I want to collaborate with anybody who is cool. I don’t care how big they are. They help you, you help them, and you both get more subs. It’s the very definition of a win-win.” – LPer #15

With this culture of collaboration also comes several key caveats. The first is the mantra echoed by a subset of LPers that, even if a collab would be beneficial for subscribers, the content must always come first. Even very small LPers, who have the most to gain when it comes to any sort of collaboration, will turn down offers from larger channels if they feel it will harm the content.

“I’m fine going on anybody’s show. But I won’t post content to my channel if I think it’s bad. You have to have a chemistry with who you’re working with. For example, NorthernLion [a large LPer] has a sort of crazy, frantic humor. My humor is very dry and slow. Even if he came to me and asked me to collaborate, I’d probably say no. Not because I didn’t want the subs, but because I know the experience wouldn’t be that fun and the content would probably be bad.” – LPer #6

Even with this ideology, larger LPers frequently expressed concern about collaborating with smaller channels.

“I have hundreds of spam emails from smaller channels, saying things like ‘Check out this video!’ and ‘We should play Minecraft together!’ and I used to look at all of them and see the stuff they made, but now I’ve come to realize they don’t want me for my content or for me as a person, they want my subs. So I only collaborate with people who I really know or who put a

lot of effort on Twitter or through my Twitch [game streaming site] and so I know they aren't just doing it because they want to leech off of my success.”- LPer #13

Because of this, several larger LPers have cut off all communication with anyone asking for collaboration unless either they initiate the communication themselves or they know the other YouTuber personally. Multiple interviewees mentioned receiving a plethora of tweets and YouTube messages asking for collaboration. With larger channels essentially being the gatekeepers to a larger audience, many small channels consider working with someone big the easiest way to get to the top.

This idea isn't unfounded. Prominent YouTuber PewDiePie mentioned a smaller channel jacksepticeye¹⁶ in one of his videos, offering a link to the channel at the end, and jacksepticeye gained over 300,000 subscribers within 24 hours, leading to 1,200,000 subscribers gained within one week. YouTuber JonTron, who primarily worked in video game skits, formed the LP group “Game Grumps” along with Arin “Egoraptor” Hanson. When Jon left Game Grumps a year later, he had more than doubled his subscriber count.

Because of the known stigma with asking larger YouTubers to collaborate with you, the community has generated its own informal rule regarding when it is and isn't appropriate to ask another user for collaboration.

“It's called the zero and zero rule. Look at your sub count, and add a zero to the end of it. That's as high as you can ask. Then take a zero off. That's as low. So if you have 4,000 subs, ask somebody between 400 and 40,000. Then you won't feel like you're being used, and you also won't feel like you're using anybody.” – LPer #9

There are stipulations, however.

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/user/jacksepticeye>

“The idea of the ‘zero and zero’ rule makes sense as a smaller person, but as a larger person you in truth have all the power. With the subs I have, I can ask just about anyone smaller than myself and they’ll collaborate. I’m in charge at that point, because I’m the one with almost 300,000 subs. So that rule is more to stop smaller channels from bothering big channels, not necessarily to stop them collaborating with people under them.” – LPer #11

The idea of subscribers as a commodity and collaborations as a way of copying or taking subscribers is well known, but also not as important as some may think. As one YouTuber pointed out,

“The worst thing is ‘dead’ subscribers. These are subscribers that subscribe and then don’t watch anything. They might as well unsubscribe at that point, because they’re actually hurting your channel metrics. I’ve collaborated with big people before and gotten lots of subs from that, but my view counts don’t go up much at all. I’ve basically just got a bunch of subscribers that probably forgot they added me and don’t care about my stuff except that one collab video.” – LPer #7

Regardless, the high subscriber count does issue a level of prestige. As mentioned with the “zero and zero rule,” channels with larger subscribers (dead or active) have better opportunities to collaborate with groups in the larger spheres, and in turn get higher payouts with collaborations. This has led to stories of LPers who “buy” subscribers at sites that use automated online “bots” to view their videos en masse, and attempt to use their newfound prestige as leverage with larger YouTubers.

Larger YouTubers tend to err on the side of caution when it comes to collaborations. As they have much more to give, they also have much more to lose. In many ways, refusing to collaborate with smaller channels is more of a safety measure rather than general animosity

towards smaller groups. Should a larger YouTuber collaborate with a small channel and the content be poor, or the collaborator's content be poor, this is reflected negatively on both parties. As such, collaboration is almost always instigated when both parties feel they can both produce quality content as well as gain some sort of subscriber reach through the content.

This “hierarchy of collaboration” also ties into the notion of class-based segregation within the YouTube LP community, which is the subject of the next section.

Hierarchy and Class Structure

As mentioned previously, YouTubers with a high number of subscribers frequently refuses engagement or collaboration with YouTubers that have what is considered an insubstantial amount. Part of this has to do with subscriber commodity and how much is earned or lost based on the interaction. For larger channels, collaborating with creators smaller than they are is far less beneficial than collaborating with someone around the same size. In addition, even the larger YouTubers benefit from collaborating with someone higher above them.

One example is the two conglomerates NormalBoots and Hidden Block. Both consist of teams of five creators, each with their own channels and sub-channels. On average, Hidden Block's creators have around 200,000-300,000 subscribers, while NormalBoots has around 1-2 million. While members of the two groups are friends (some having even worked as editors for the other before splitting off), collaboration across the two cliques is fairly uncommon, and when it does happen it is often one-sided. Frequently Hidden Block posts references or shout-outs to NormalBoots in their videos, even linking to their channels. Usually the only form of reciprocation from the larger channels is a response in the comments. In addition, when collaboration videos are done between the two, it is always Hidden Block's team that takes

charge (as well as being the group that posts the collab video), while the larger conglomerates' members rarely post videos on their own channels involving them with the smaller groups.

The two meet frequently at conventions and often share convention spaces, but in the digital world, collaboration between the two differently-sized groups is meticulously organized and decided. While each conglomerate will frequently cross over within itself, between the two groups the collab is clearly one-sided. There is a definite semblance of a class structure at work, built on the “zero and zero” rule, that goes beyond just community and collaboration.

LPer #1, with around 43 subs, attended the convention MagFest¹⁷, which is a popular convention for internet personalities (including YouTubers) to attend. At this convention they met the teams of NormalBoots and Hidden Block, as well as many other prominent LPers. At the convention, more popular LPers were revered as celebrities, often having their own panels (complete with live audiences), booths, and events in which they starred. When the smaller YouTuber spoke with them on the side, he reported that,

“They were super encouraging and super sweet and super awesome. Some people when you tell them you’re a YouTuber they’re like: ”I have 100,000 subs, yuck.” But these guys even though they had all those subs they were still “Totally, I was there where you are right now four years ago and it’s a lot of work. But keep going and maybe you can work with us someday once you get bigger, and were very encouraging...I think [they] deserve everything they have right now because they have such good content.” (emphasis added).

What was most interesting is the idea that they would potentially be interested with working on projects with other creators, but only *after* the creator had essentially “earned the right” to work with them.

¹⁷ <http://magfest.org/>

Another LPer echoed this sentiment.

“They’re all really nice, and very encouraging, and I wouldn’t ever want to speak badly of them. But there’s definitely a divide, you know? They’re big and have so many subscribers, and you have nothing. I can’t blame them for not wanting to talk to or work with me, not until I get bigger and can prove I’m as good at stuff as they are.” – LPer #18

Larger YouTubers affirmed the divide, though a few were less cordial about it.

“There’s a lot of luck, absolutely, and I understand that. I’ve been very lucky. But I’ve also worked very hard, and made a lot of videos and done a lot of difficult things to get to where I am today. When you see these smaller channels that want to get in on your subs, that are like “let’s collaborate” or “can you give me a shout-out” or something, it just makes me sick. You have to do the work I did, and the work everybody else is doing. There isn’t any free ride to get to my level, just like I’m not just going to get a free ride to become PewDiePie.” – LPer #10

The divide becomes even more evident when presented with evidence of what initiates the YouTube “snowball.” As mentioned in a previous section, the idea of a channel “snowballing” is an indicator that a YouTuber has found success. Based on both interviews and algorithmic data, the best initiator for a channel to snowball is to have some sort of a connection or event tied to a larger YouTuber or celebrity. By simply being mentioned, collaborated with, or even retweeted, a LPer could go from gaining a dozen subs a day to hundreds or even thousands. As a now-12,500 subscriber creator, LPer #3 mentioned,

“[One of the biggest surges of growth was when] Notch, the creator of Minecraft, tweeted my video. It exploded, snowballing my growth both initially, with a smaller snowball continuing even to today. Once you get that kind of momentum going, you have to ride it out. The trick is the kick start.”

LPer #11, with 275,000 subscribers, agreed:

“People hate to admit it, because everybody wants to think ‘I can do this on my own!’ when in reality that isn’t the case anymore. You need a bigger YouTuber to notice you in order to get anywhere at a decent rate...and because of that, successful YouTubers are a valuable commodity, and they know it.”

The class structure appears to be built around two major factors: the quality of the content and the number of subscribers. Of these two, the interpretation of value varies wildly. Based on research done in this study, YouTubers with smaller numbers of subscribers perceived those with more subscribers as a higher class than their own. However, this was only after a certain threshold which varied depending on the YouTuber, but frequently fell in line with the “zero and zero” rule. On the same note, when comparing themselves to YouTubers of the same subscriber size, the subscriber count didn’t seem to matter as much as did the quality of the content. The competitiveness of the system turned more towards making better quality than their subscriber “neighbor,” whereas when looking at larger subscribers it appeared as more of a pipe dream.

A somewhat inverted reaction was found on users amongst the higher echelon of subscribers (500k+). For them, subscriber count higher than their own wasn’t important, but counts smaller than them weighed much more heavily. However, even a video with a low subscriber count could be worth “vetting” to their audience should it be determined to be of a higher quality. The importance of the product slowly outweighed the importance of the subscriber number, with exceptionally large YouTubers (1 million or more) conglomerating and associating with whomever they chose, either above or below their current subscriber count.

A final note in regards to perception of class within the YouTube structure is the two-part milestone of monetization. For many YouTubers, the choice to begin monetizing because they

have enough subscribers/views to generate revenue is a large step. It puts a divide within the smaller communities (around the 10,000 subscriber mark) where groups that are generating revenue are of a different class than those who aren't. The second milestone is when a YouTuber is able to quit his or her "real job" and create videos full time. For most, this is considered the point that the creator has "made it," securing them a position among the upper echelon of creators. Financial situations may vary, but we found that creators with as low as 30,000 subscribers were able to quit and subsist entirely off YouTube ad revenue. This adds yet another split in the class, one clearly dictated by financial security and using commodity outside YouTube's own creation (subscribers, views, and quality).

Conclusion

How creators interact with each other is telling into how they regard key commodities within YouTube's structure. With subscriber count as a pervasive metric across all content, creator perception of their own position within a self-created hierarchy heavily influences whom they interact with, collaborate with, and even the types of content that they create. While this study has scratched the surface of the specifics regarding how LPers interact amongst themselves and view others within the containing group, YouTube's systems and metrics are continuing to evolve, meaning that these connections or restrictions can be considered plastic. One thing is for certain, however: there is a definite perception of hierarchy that guides and controls anyone who decides to incorporate themselves within a YouTube creator's community, and specifically anyone who creates and distributes LPs on YouTube.

Creators' Interaction with Audience

“YouTube is really unique, you know? I mean, unlike mainstream media...I couldn't comment on Conan [O'Brian]'s videos and expect him to respond, but with someone on YouTube they'll talk back and communicate with you.” – LPer #1

Communication Centered Medium

YouTube's uniqueness as a delivery platform that facilitated grassroots-style communication between creators and audience is a well-understood and frequently stated underlying theme across all LP content creation. As stated by LPer #19,

“The audience is everything. It's the core of what you do, it's the core of YouTube. If you aren't speaking with them or talking to them, then what's the point? You might as well be watching regular TV.”

YouTube's comments system allows for a unique method of interaction between creators and their intended audience. The system is integrated through Google Plus, Google's social media platform, which allows for comments to be up or down voted, as well as responded to in comment “chains.” When comments are upvoted, they rise to the top of the list to be positioned closer to the video. When a creator responds or posts a comment to their video, YouTube flags it with a specific color, letting all the audience know that the creator is responding or commenting on the video. Frequently, responses from creators are often “upvoted,” which puts creator comments at the top of the page just beneath the video description. This system allows for the video audience to see clearly whether or not the creator of the video is responding to comments.

Along with being content creators, all of the LPers interviewed were frequent YouTube consumers. Many often mentioned following specific higher-level channels, both as pseudo-

mentors as well as being fans of their work. This watching and participating in the video community inspired them to try and create their own channels. In most instances, content creators had previously reached out in communication with YouTubers that they subscribed to, asking advice on how to start a channel as well as general questions about the content provided. It was a sentiment frequently repeated.

“You feel really cool when the [creator of the video] replies to your comment. There’s originally this sort of gap between you and the maker of the video, but when they respond it makes them feel like they’re humans, like you.” – LPer #1

Interaction between fans and actors or creators is hardly uncommon beyond YouTube. “Fandoms,” or groups of fans that admire or follow a particular object or selection of media, frequently meet together at conventions to interact with both each other and the actors/creators of the media they follow. Often times these types of interaction go little beyond a handshake or a photograph, and frequently more popular celebrities (like William Shatner of *Star Trek* fame) charge fans simply for a brief moment of interaction with them. Within an old media model, actors and celebrities are perceived in only two spheres: the version of them on camera, and the sanitized version of them presented during conventions, etc. With YouTube, however, the lines between audience members and creators are blurred.

“One of the coolest things about interacting with somebody like, Markiplier [who has over 2 million subscribers] is that you know you could be him someday. I couldn’t ever be Brad Pitt or whoever, but I look at Mark’s videos and am like ‘Hey, I do stuff like that, that could be me someday.’” – LPer #1

The DIY approach towards YouTube videos also requires a necessary communication with the audience. Nearly every LP channel, large or small, reported that they make an extensive

effort to communicate somehow with their fans, either via comments, responses, video shout-outs, or vlogs.

Everything in Service of the Audience

Content creators are inherently aware of how important audience is to maintaining their livelihoods. The most common comment regarding audience and audience retention was to “be genuine, be yourself, and don’t ever fake it.” Frequently, comments regarding audience focused on the idea of being “just another gamer” or “just another guy on YouTube like them.” What was most important to content creators when it came down to their audience was that their audience viewed them on the same level as they were.

The presentation of “I’m just a regular layperson like yourself” persists in the content created as well.

“It’s important that your content looks good, but not too good. People aren’t coming to you to watch IGN [a large games media corporation] or CNN, they’re here to watch you. They trust you because you are genuine.” – LPer #9

Content created under this banner must find the sweet spot between professional quality and amateur. Facecams are frequently focused on users in their homes or offices, with microphones and headphones visible, as well as shelves and other everyday objects littering the background. Smaller YouTubers frequently put images or posters of video games or other relevant artifacts in the background. Such background decorations are hardly elaborate and often consist of fairly common objects, furthering the idea that the creators of the videos are just another “regular person” like the watcher.

“Being genuine is the most important thing you can do. If you aren’t genuine, they [the audience] will know it, and they’ll leave you for somebody else.” – LPer #9

Communication: From Small to Large

A constant trend across all ranges of YouTube content creators was the importance of audience communication, but the larger the channels are, the more difficult this becomes. YouTube channels with a small number of subs receive very few comments, tweets, or other forms of communication with their fans. A LPer with around 2000 subscribers said he received around 10-15 comments or tweets a day combined and would frequently respond to all of them. When asked if he could see himself continuing to do this even if he got large, the creator responded,

“Eventually it’s going to get too big. But that’s why I Vlog [once a week]: to let the audience know I still care about them. I’d love to respond to every comment, but eventually that isn’t going to be possible. But for now, I’ll respond to anything. If somebody tweets me and says ‘Your video was hilarious!’ it isn’t much work to respond with a ‘Thanks!’ That shows that you care about your audience, and they’ll tell their friends you responded and hopefully you’ll get more people watching.” – LPer #10

This was evidenced by larger channels interviewed. LPer #3 has 11,000 subscribers said he received 50-100 comments and tweets a day. When asked if he responded to them all or made an effort to, he responded that:

“I try and respond to any that ask me a question. Often I get comments like ‘I loved the video!’ and...how would I respond to that? It just isn’t feasible for me to do all the work that I do and respond to every single comment on my channel or on Twitter, so I just respond to the ones that either seem important or ask specific questions.”

When asked if he felt he lost something important by not responding, the LPer’s answer was lukewarm.

“Not really. I used to respond to them all, but I think the audience understands. It is something I worry about, though, if I get any bigger I’ll be so busy with making content I won’t have time to respond at all.”

LPer #2, who has 12,500 subscribers, shared a similar sentiment.

“I try to respond to everybody who posts on my Tumblr if they ask a question, because I still want to be personal, you know? But for most videos on YouTube I don’t respond to comments anymore.”

When asked if they’d ever consider having someone else post comments for them, the respond was split depending on the size. The majority of the smaller LPers echoed LPer #3’s statement:

“I’d never have someone else respond. I’d rather not respond to comments at all then have someone else do it for me.”

However, in an interview with LPer #11, currently at 275,000 subscribers, the response was quite different.

“I don’t, but I do know most larger YouTubers either don’t respond or have people respond for them. For our website’s webforums [where most communication happens] we have community managers now that respond to most of them for us. They let us know if there’s something in particular that needs us personally responding, or if we see something we want to respond to we will, but honestly I just don’t have the time anymore...I’d rather have someone talk for me than nobody talk at all.”

LPer #19 commented that:

“I know larger YouTubers like PewDiePie have entire production teams and community managers. PewDiePie will respond to comments through his weekly Vlogs, which he says he

finds himself but I've talked to his community managers and they vet his emails and comments before he gets to them. I imagine that he just gets so much there's no way he could respond to them all."

It is a difficult transition from being able to respond to all comments to a selective or minimal response. However, most YouTuber creators are aware of this, and have methods put into place to continue to facilitate communication.

"Vlogs are a great way to respond to people if you can't get to all their comments," a 25,000 subscriber creator pointed out. "I know that's how PewDiePie primarily communicates with his audience. It gives the illusion that he's reading and responding to them, when in reality there's no way he's reading the thousands of comments he gets per video." – LPer #3

While smaller channels interviewed rarely did vlogs, growing channels frequently do. Of the channels interviewed, five of the seven channels with subscribers greater than 2,000 did some sort of vlogging on their channels, often using the opportunity to respond to specific comments or summarize what had gone on their channel over the past week and what content was to come.

"It's a great way to let your audience know 'hey, I'm just a regular guy, and here's what's going on in my life,'" said LPer #18 at 3,200 subs. "It lets people know that you're a person beyond just what you present in your videos, plus you can respond to them directly."

Comments and Discussion

YouTube comments are the primary means by which watchers communicate with the creators, and so shutting down those comment sections has a highly negative connotation.

"It was a big deal when PewDiePie shut off his comments. People were like 'If PewDiePie, the biggest YouTuber on the planet, shuts off his comments, what does that say about

the comments system on YouTube and what does that say about him and his content?’’ – LPer #12

Generally, however, while audience communication was perceived as a positive, most interaction happened outside of the comments sections on YouTube. Many users encourage interaction on other social media networks, the primarily one being Twitter, with Tumblr, Instagram, and Facebook also being avenues for discussion. YouTube comments, while viewed as a necessity, are often viewed as problematic or “toxic,” with commenters frequently posting lewd, offensive, or derogatory comments about the creator, the content, or other commenters in general.

“My biggest problem with YouTube? The Google+ comments. My second biggest problem? The Google+ comments. And my third biggest problem...let me see...probably the Google+ comments.

“The reason is it’s so easy to just have garbage everywhere. I can moderate the comments, but I don’t have time for that. If someone posts on my Twitter, they had to go through the effort of finding me and tweeting me, so I’ll respond. If they post on YouTube, it probably took them ten seconds. The same goes for Reddit: to respond there, they have to have made an account and commented, and the comment had to be good enough to not be downvoted away. On YouTube you have none of that. You can’t build communities with Google+, despite Google wanting you to do it that way. It’s much better to just take it somewhere else.” – LPer #15

Despite this animosity towards the comments being widespread across all creators, none of the interviewees had ever considered turning off their comments.

“Even if it got really bad, I’d just delete the comments, I wouldn’t turn them off. If you turn off your comments, it makes it look like you’re scared and don’t want people to talk about your stuff. If you want to live in a bubble, don’t put your stuff on YouTube.” – LPer #7

PewDiePie, who shut off his comments in July of 2014, later reinstated them in late 2014 after feedback from his 26 million fans pushed him to turning them back on. LPer #20, both a creator as well as a PewDiePie fan, pointed out that:

“When he turned the comments off, it felt like he was better than us. Like he’d finally gotten so big he wouldn’t talk to us anymore, like a real celebrity. It hurt. I kept watching, but it hurt. I’m glad he turned them back on.”

Seeking them out: Audience hunting and growth

A major issue for smaller channels was expanding to wider audiences. Frequently, however, YouTubers will go to social networks or comments sections to find their audiences on different mediums of interaction.

“I often watch my Twitter, and if I see somebody saying ‘Hey, I’m starting a Multiplayer Minecraft server, looking for people to join!’ I’ll just hop on. When I get there they’re like ‘Oh my god, it’s you!’ and I’ll be like ‘Let’s make something together!’ and we’ll play for a bit. I don’t record any of this; it’s just for fun. It’s great because then they tell their friends that I came to visit them, and then their friends start watching, and I can play with them sometime.” – LPer #5

Because video games frequently have inherent multiplayer capabilities that aren’t restricted by region, most LPers can reach out to their audience members through direct interaction with games. Games like *Team Fortress 2* (a free multiplayer shooting game),

Minecraft, and *Hearthstone* (a free multiplayer card game) were mentioned as games with which creators would play and interact with their audiences.

Other channels would use those opportunities to have “community events” where they’d play with a large portion of their fanbase and record the content and put it online. For example, Game Grumps will frequently post on its subreddit requesting users who owned a particular game to join up and play with them at a specific time. In addition, they asked the users to record the footage from their screens to give a different perspective, allowing them to use the material for future editing. Fans responded overwhelmingly in the positive, offering to edit the footage and even buy the game for others should it mean being part of the program. Content that was recorded by the fans was then used and credited to them in the video, usually under their online alias, but no other compensation was provided. When a fan was asked why they were so willing to give away the content they’d recorded for free, their respond was,

“I just wanted to play with them, and having them use my content felt really cool. I love the stuff they make and watching them, so playing with them was really something amazing. I told all my friends about it and shared the video saying, “Look there, at four minutes, fifteen seconds in! That’s me, on this video that has a hundred thousand views!” – LPer #8

Channels interviewed with fewer subscribers and diminished growth curves often didn’t participate in this type of interaction. While they’d respond to all comments sent to them, they frequently would play single-player only games, or would play games with just a select group of friends. One LPer who did primarily *Minecraft* content pointed out,

“I saw a dramatic increase in views once I made my server public [so anyone could join]. I invited fans to join the server in the video description, and a few would pop on and just

play with me. I didn't really seek them out; they just sort of joined, and with that I saw a small boost in subs.” – LPer #5

Interactivity via other mediums, especially with the promise that content would be used by the creator, went a long way in both increasing view retention, viewers watching, and an increase in video sharing and subs. By making the content directly relevant to a select group of audience members, the content became more spreadable, as well as projecting the image that the creators were just “one of the people.”

On YouTube, it is easy for any content creator to interact directly with an audience member (through comments, social networks, etc.) and this mindset is expected from the audience members. As one creator that was also a prominent watcher pointed out,

“When someone responds to your comments, even if they aren't huge, you feel good. You have a connection with them, like they're just another guy like you. I know some people who let feedback shape their shows, and that's also really cool. You feel like the audience and the creator are in this together.” - LPer #1

Shotgun Approach vs Target Demographics: Refining the Audience

As a creator's channel grows, so also does his/her methods of audience interaction. However, this isn't the only relationship between creator and audience that changes.

“When you get bigger, you realize that you have a target demographic. My demographic is 10-15 year olds who play Minecraft. They're going to want something totally different from a 15-20 year old who plays Minecraft. Before, I'd just make a random assortment of content which I thought was for everybody. But once I started getting subscribers, I looked at my analytics and realized I was much more successful with a specific demographic. So I tailored my content as such.” – LPer #3

A predominant notion between smaller YouTubers interviewed (1000 subscribers or less) was the idea of a “shotgun” approach, or stated more clearly by LPer #14: *“I just make anything and then throw it at the wall to see what sticks.”*

Most content from these creators is scattered, covering wider ranges of games, and not targeting any particular demographic. The notion of making their media sharable within a certain targeted group was rarely brought up with these smaller YouTubers, with the general consensus being, “I’m making content that I enjoy, and that’s what matters. I’ll find an audience that likes my niche.”

Some were even vehemently against changing content to meet analytical scores. LPer #15, with just under 150 subs, pointed out that *“If I just make what is expected or what is popular, then I might as well just admit to being completely uncreative. If I do facecam [like PewDiePie] and start screaming at horror games like a 10-year-old, I couldn’t live with myself. Would those videos do better? Probably; I’ve made one or two and they’re popular. But that isn’t what I want the channel to be.”*

The idea of the quality of the content trumping all has been discussed in previous sections, but its relationship with audience and demographics varies dramatically based on size. Larger YouTubers consistently admitted they look at analytical data, all the way down to specific timeframes within their own videos, to try and discover what works and what doesn’t. As creators “reverse engineer” what makes their own videos successful and what doesn’t, this leads to homogenizing of content, specializing it down for a very particular demographic.

“I tried a lot of stuff. I tried just straight gameplay. I tried streaming. I tried other types. But out of all of them, my scripted Minecraft content was the best. It was family-friendly, I put in

a lot of work on the editing, and it overall had the best retention. So I dumped the other projects and did just that.” – LPer #3

“The thing you must understand is this isn’t my first channel. I tried a ton of other stuff before ending up being successful. It wasn’t until I started seriously looking at both what other people made that was popular and what I made that was popular that my channel took off. Keeping the rest was pointless after that.” – LPer #11

The trend of refining content down to a particular audience seemed to happen at around the 2-5k subscription range. When I asked a user in that range why they were modifying their content and cutting shows from their channel, their answer was revealing:

“It’s trimming the fat. Back when I had 30 subs, I didn’t care; I’d put up anything. But now I know not only what the audience likes to watch, but what I want to make. So I’m going to do what I enjoy and what they enjoy, and all that other stuff can go away...”

Are people upset when you cut their favorite show? Yeah, they are. But you can wear them into the new stuff without much problems. You lose some subs, but you gain a lot more by specializing. And if you have too many shows, there’s no way you’re going to be able to keep up with it once you get, say, 15,000 subscribers.” – LPer #18

Real-Life Stars

As channels grow, so do their audience members, and so do venues to support them. Interactions between creators and their audiences in the physical world happen usually through conventions centered on Gaming and YouTube (such as MagFest or E3¹⁸). Often, creators are given panels to interact with large crowds of their subscribers, answering questions and talking

¹⁸ <http://www.e3expo.com/>

about each other and their channel. Frequently, conglomerates encourage their creators to interact with fans on this level, helping with panels and logistics.

“Polaris [a conglomerate] is great because it wants you to get out there. They help set up a panel and advertise that you’re going. You’re dead in the water without this sort of direct-fan interaction. It lets them know you still care about them, even if they’re one in a hundred thousand.” – LPer #11

It is often at these conventions that larger YouTubers can interact with smaller ones, though the interactions are often casual. When asked if a smaller YouTuber would ever be on a panel with a larger one, as either a fan or a fellow creator, the answer was unanimous. Unless they were previously friends or acquaintances, creators stayed within their own spheres, even in real life scenarios.

“There are some exceptions. ProJared, for instance, is just a straight up real dude. He’ll hang out with anybody and talk to anybody. He’ll give you advice on your channel. He told me ‘keep on working on it, and someday we can do something together.’ It’s really encouraging, both as a starting YouTuber and a fan of his, to know he understands...

“I talked to the NormalBoots guys at MagFest, and you wouldn’t believe how real they are. Normally when you tell people you’re a YouTuber they’re like ‘Yeah, ok, whatever’ but they were very encouraging, like ‘I know where you’ve been, I’ve done this all before. Just keep working at it and you’ll make it.’ It makes me an even bigger fan, and maybe someday I’ll work with them, you know?” – LPer #1

Conclusion

Audience is at the center of everything LPers create and do, and the interaction with said audience is as important as the content they create. Because of how YouTube as a medium works, audience interaction is imperative for any YouTube channel to see success, or to be considered successful by his or her creative peers.

Audience interaction isn't just limited to the YouTube comments, which most creators ignore due to negative perception and a lack of organization. Most respond to their audience members on other forms of social media, predominantly Twitter, but often times other networks such as Facebook and Tumblr. Users also post non-channel or YouTube related content to their personal social media, rarely segregating the "channel Twitter" from the "personal Twitter." This continues the perception of genuineness of the creator, and solidifies the fact that he or she is still "just like the audience" and part of the community.

However, as size increases, YouTubers have to adapt their strategies to continue to give the perception that they are still interacting with their audiences. Audience interaction often gets cut off on YouTube comments first, then Tweets, then is regulated to simply Vlogs. Playing or engaging with audience members in other mediums (online games, etc.) is also frequently cut down or reserved to organized "play dates" or even auctioned off in certain cases.

Finally, when a YouTuber reaches a high threshold of subscribers (usually 50,000+) they tend to stop direct communication almost altogether, only cherry-picking responses on Twitter and their forums. However, to continue with the illusion that they communicate with audience, they often vlog personal videos every week and often use this time to respond to particular comments. This continues to maintain the impression that every comment is read, when in reality only a handful are picked and then responded to.

The creator-to-audience relationship is core to amateur YouTube content creators' experiences – and often their success as well. But beyond simply gaining more subs, a creator will be perceived as more interactive and likeable and will integrate better with other creators if they communicate frequently with their fans. When users visit YouTube, they expect different treatment from the creative outlets they engage in when compared to more traditional media. And if a creator doesn't make payments toward this perceived debt, the audience member will disconnect and possibly even unsubscribe.

CONCLUSION

Summary

In this thesis, I have offered an initial glance into the specific relationships YouTube creators have with their content, their audiences, and each other. Hierarchy and class has been shown to play a prominent role in how YouTubers not only interact with each other but also perceive and share content that is both their own and others'. In addition, videos as cultural artifacts, particularly as an extension of a creator's creative intent, prove to be powerful motivators and important dynamic facilitators in a creator's self-perception, fellow LPers opinion, and audience approval.

A pervasive theme that emerges across all subsets and content relationships is how everything hinges on the subscriber count. Within that framework, almost all relationships (to content, audience, or others) can be judged. As a LPer starts from a small creator and grows in size, their opinions regarding their content will alter dramatically. The emphasis is still, however, on the size of the channel, and how size increases shift the way content is being made, the types of content, how that content is distributed, and what other creators they interact with. A summary of this connection with a broader generalization is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Content Creators and Size

Channel Size (In Subscribers)	Attitude towards audience	Attitude towards creators	Attitude towards content	Scale of collabs	Audience interaction	Social media interaction	Content style
Small (1-999)	Intimate	Helpers, critiquers, advisors	Wide variety, content quality above all, frequent creative experimentation	Any	Frequent, personal communication	Twitter, Facebook, YouTube Comments	DIY, equipment unimportant
Medium (1000 – 9,999)	Intimate	Helpers, self as mentor, tutor to smaller channels	Content quality important, transitioning to specialization, frequent creative experimentation	Any, vetted for content similarities	Frequent, personal communication, comments often vetted for trolls, etc.	Twitter, Facebook, YouTube Comments	DIY, equipment matters
Transitioning (10,000 – 49,999)	Close	Smaller circle of creators, begin discrimination based on size	Refinement of content, often transitioning to specialization, some creative experimentation	Within a specific range	Often responsive to direct questions, not to basic comments	Twitter, Facebook	Amateur, quality content, transitioning to professional
Established (50,000 – 250,000)	Reasonably close	Work primarily within conglomerates, similar sizes or larger	Specialized down to specific shows, minimal creative experimentation	Within a specific range	Rare responses to direct questions, general audience post interaction (video, etc.)	Twitter, Facebook, owned subreddit, all informal announcements	Professional level. Might have larger team on post-production / edits
Large (250,000 – 999,999)	Passing	Work only within conglomerates, established communication pool	Specialized. Little to no dramatic creative experimentation.	Only within known conglomerates	Vlog responses, infrequent communication via social networks.	Twitter, Facebook, subreddit	Professional level. Often has small support team for editing and post-production
Celebrity (1,000,000 – 9,999,999)	Distant	Primary interaction with creators also within own agency groups. Interaction with professionals only.	Highly specialized, high amounts of editing, scripting, and vetting. No creative experimentation. Content targeted to specific demographics.	Within conglomerates or media groups	Vlog responses. Potential celebrity appearances.	Vlogs, Facebook, subreddit, Twitter, no direct audience communication. Facebook often managed by another user	Highly professional, professional grade equipment, large support team
Star (10,000,000 +)	Very distant	Interaction only on established collaborations, often set apart by larger media conglomerate	Highly specialized, high amounts of editing, scripting, and vetting. No creative experimentation.	Only with other Stars	Vlog responses. No direct communication. Potential celebrity appearances.	Vlog responses. All social media managed by others (Twitter,	Highly professional, professional grade equipment, editing team, managing team, hired

			Content targeted to specific demographics.			Facebook, subreddit)	conglomerate and marketing team
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One of the most important findings of this research is the interconnectivity between content, audience, and creator and how each of these points contribute in shaping one another. As creators attempt to produce the best content they can, they also have to keep in mind several key factors. These include the quality of their content (making it serviceable but not too professional), the relationships and interaction with their audience members, how they fit within the larger community of creators, and so on. As channels grow and creators have more and more eyes on them, they feel obligated to continue that growth by following safe trends. This can often lead to homogenizing of content, which in turn changes perceptions of audience members, other creators, and how an individual creator interacts with both. This concept of ownership of content as well as the deeply personal relationship with it, and how that interaction changes as the channel grows is consistent across all types of LP channels. Knowing these changes and how that influences creativity and creation reveals much about how these LP creators view themselves, their content, and one another.

Overall, while this research has only touched on a subset of the media monster that is YouTube, it has taken a close look at the specifics found within the creator communities of YouTube. As LPers continue to grow in prominence and even influence the gaming industry, more and more creators will be drawn to this expanding media subsection, allowing for even more research as they create, upload, and watch millions of hours of LP content daily.

Future Research

As mentioned in the previous section, expansion of creators interviewed would be a key method to broadening the lens of YouTube creator research across multiple genres. Also, expanding the pool of interviewees beyond a predominantly male pool (by either seeking out more female LPers, or working within a YouTube community sphere that caters more towards female stars, such as vlogs) could prove beneficial in comparing and contrasting gender differences and approaches to YouTube. Some discrepancies were noted in the research found for this study, but as the interview pool was so small no definite research conclusions could be safely concluded.

YouTube is a constantly evolving platform, which means it is a veritable cornucopia of research opportunities. Specific topics mentioned within this research, such as perceived class structure, the value of video artifacts being perceived as amateur verses professional in content, and videos as creative artifacts of self-expression from creators are all examples of potential future research simply within this study. Beyond LP, there are thousands of prominent video genres on YouTube, each with their own communities, rules, hierarchies, relationships, and marketing techniques. These as well could and should be examined to compare differences.

Creative communities exist beyond YouTube, particularly within the amateur sphere. Research done and results found within this LP YouTube subsection have similarities to community research done within Kindle ePublishing communities, indie game communities, and more. Comparing how online creative mediums propagate, interact, and form communities cross media-type could prove interesting in discovering similarities or differences.

Lastly, YouTube as a medium is a variable platform, with algorithms and media trends shifting the types of content that is created, marketed, and distributed by the creators found within it. Research focusing on content creators of this rapidly-growing media behemoth could

prove fruitful in discovering how creators adapt to trends, modify their content and approach, and evolve as the media of the future continues forward in broad strides.

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APPENDIX I – Interview Questions

Topic: Preliminary questions

What type of content do you create?

How long have you been creating content on YouTube?

How many subscribers does your channel have?

How many views, on average, do your videos receive?

How often do you update your channel? Why?

What is the highest view count you've ever gotten on a video?

Topic: How creators interact between each other

What types of interaction do you have with other YouTube content creators/Let's Players?

How frequently do you engage in cross-promotion with other creators?

How many other creators do you work with?

What specific types of cross promotion do you do?

How frequently do you work with other content creators?

Are you part of a creator team, coalition, or agency? (Polaris, etc.)

(If yes) What types of cross-promotion do you engage in within your agency/coalition, etc?

Topic: How creators interact on social media

What (if any) social media sites do you use to promote your videos?

What kinds of promotion do you do on these sites (video posts, etc.)?

How do you communicate with your audience via these methods? Does it differ based on platform?

Which social media platform do you feel you've had the most success re: YouTube videos?
Why?

Topic: How creators interact with their comments/users on YouTube

How do you interact with your commenters on YouTube?

How frequently do you respond to comments?

How many comments do you get on average per video?

Do you manage the comments yourself or does someone else?

Topic: How creators interact with their comments/users on other platforms (Reddit, Webforums, etc.)

What other channels do you use to advertise your videos?

Do you have a personal website (in addition to YouTube)?

Do you have your own subreddit?

Do you have your own webforum?

How frequently do you engage with your audience on any of the above social platforms?

Topic: Sustainability

What do you do to address the issue of subscriber sustainability? What have you done in the past?

Are there any particular periods of growth or loss that you are aware of? Do you know what caused this?

Are there any other periods of growth of note worth mentioning?

Topic: Algorithms

How would you rate your knowledge of YouTube's recommendation algorithm?

How do you (if you do) use the algorithm to help promote your videos further?

What are some ways you are aware of for pushing a video up within YouTube's algorithm system?

Topic: General

Do you stream content? If so, do you cross post that content to YouTube?

What, if anything, do you feel has worked the best in promoting your videos?

What do you feel YouTube provides that is a benefit to marketing your videos?

What do you feel YouTube doesn't provide that could improve video marketing?