

11 BabyRage: Playing while Pregnant in Live Streaming

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Women are no strangers to objectification, especially in the space of live streaming. In this chapter, I present a case study wherein live streaming acts as a new context in which pregnant bodies are scrutinized, and the participation of women is complicated in digital entertainment media. Video game live streaming has quickly become one of the most widespread and influential components of digital media and online communities today. Live streaming platforms like Twitch have increased the visibility not only of video games and players more broadly, but also of players who often have been overlooked in gaming culture, like pregnant players. Furthermore, the rise of video game live streaming has further complicated the question of video game representation by simultaneously presenting both in-game characters and live streamers themselves as objects of representation on screen. I perform a close reading of an interaction between a pregnant streamer and a dozen active viewers in her channel who were communicating with her while she played a horror game live on camera. I situate this interaction against the horror game that the streamer was playing, *Silver Chains* (2019), which features a narrative about monstrous motherhood. I argue that stereotypes about women and pregnancy in games and streaming influenced the interactions between streamer, viewers, and gaming content.

Reading Abjection in Streaming

Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the streamer by the pseudonym Brigid. I came across Brigid and her channel on the live streaming platform Twitch.tv one day in August 2019 as part of the participant observation I was engaged in for my dissertation on women's labor in live streaming. I was searching through the top categories for that day, and I noticed a horror

game that had just been released, *Silver Chains*. Because my research interest is specifically in women who live stream their video game play and I have a personal interest in horror games, I decided to watch the first streamer whom I perceived to be a woman in their thumbnail and who was running a *Silver Chains* stream in English. When I joined the channel, Brigid had 102 viewers and an overall following of approximately 60,000 viewers. Of those 102 viewers, I observed that only about a dozen were active, meaning that they were regularly engaging the streamer or each other in conversation. Her chat rules at the time were “keep swearing to a minimum, no posting without permission, no spamming, be respectful and friendly.” Brigid was visible on the screen from the chest up, streaming against a green backdrop that allowed her to present herself against the game screen. She was engaging and adept at performing exaggerated responses to this new horror game for her audience, which kept me in the channel past the point when I had planned to move on.

Being present for that extra time is what allowed me to capture the interaction I relate here, which I have read for its themes of motherhood, monstrosity, horror, and objectification. My approach is modeled on the recommendations of Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Tanenbaum for applying close reading techniques to games and gameplay experiences. Here, I treat both the game itself, *Silver Chains*, and the conversation between the streamer and viewers as media and apply close reading as a process of “detailed examination, deconstruction, and analysis” (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011, 289). As Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum have argued, the reading or viewing subject of any piece of media arrives with experiences and even preconceived notions that influence their approach and which aspects they respond to and how they create a relationship with media. I argue that in this case, the reading of the streamer made by the viewers was influenced by expectations that are established by the format and norms of live streaming itself; the expectation of watching someone live their life every day, performing for your attention, and that you, as the viewer, are free to comment on everything you see and hear.

Much of the work of streaming is about the “public embodied performances of authentic, natural feeling” (Baym 2018, 17). Streamers work extremely hard to make impersonal relationships feel personal to their viewers, often sharing intimate details about their lives. Many streamers

even broadcast from their bedrooms, which further sets up an expectation of emotional access and intimacy between viewer and streamer (Ruberg and Lark 2020). I demonstrate how the pregnancy of a streamer set against the subject matter of *Silver Chains*, which features a narrative of a monstrous mother combined with live streaming viewer expectations that they are welcome to make emotional demands of streamers, created a situation in which viewers felt that it was appropriate to ask macabre questions of the streamer about her pregnancy, turning her into an object of fascination, and even abjection.

Streaming Bodies, Pregnant Bodies, Public Bodies

Pregnant bodies are especially subject to cultural and technological discipline in the public domain, as I will demonstrate in my close reading of Brigid's live stream. Pregnant women are frequently disciplined to accept intrusions on their boundaries, integrity, and autonomy (Kukla 2005). These intrusions take a variety of forms, including the unwanted advice and invasive questions that I will describe here. Stereotypes and common perceptions about women in live streaming also feature a preoccupation with the bodies of women. This work adds to the literature on gender, video games, and live streaming by demonstrating how the social practices and technical affordances of video game live streaming can position a pregnant body as an object vulnerable to public scrutiny because those structures are already predisposed to doing this to the bodies of women more generally.

Women Live Streaming

Video game live streaming has rapidly become a popular and professionalized way to earn money online and through play (Woodcock and Johnson 2019), which presumably means greater opportunities for women to move into public spheres and demonstrate their capabilities as video game players. However, research on diversity in live streaming has shown that live streaming platforms are social spaces where gender stereotypes are perpetuated or even amplified (Nakandala et al. 2017; Vitak et al. 2017). In a survey of Twitch viewers, Lena Uszkoreit (2018) found that viewers believe that skill and personality are crucial factors for men to be successful streamers, but the most important criterion for women's success was physical

attractiveness. Previous research done by this author has demonstrated how women's bodies are placed in opposition to video games and streamer authenticity (Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019). Visibility in streaming for women often means facing viewers' preoccupation with their appearance, especially their bodies. This is evidenced by the popularity of the term "titty streamer" to denounce the participation of women (Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019) and claims by viewers that women who breastfeed while streaming are only doing it "for the views" (BadLucy123 2020). Performing publicly as streamers exposes women to systems that attempt to critique and control them on the basis of their gender, as well as their bodies posing a risk to the integrity of the streaming meritocracy. The work of streaming is already a precarious embodied experience—frequently involving several hours of sitting in place, focused on a task while attempting to be personable—but women are forced to be extra attentive to the work that their bodies are doing. Indeed, publicly playing and streaming as a woman continues to be "not just a leisure activity but also a political act" (Consalvo 2019, 87).

Pregnant Bodies as Public Objects

My analysis primarily builds from Rebecca Kukla's argument that cultural and technological practices in contemporary North America have constituted the pregnant body as public space (Kukla 2005, 284–285). First, Kukla suggests that the pregnant body has become public domain because it is subject to civic surveillance and concerns of civic responsibility. With increasing efforts to grant rights to fetuses and the medicalization and quantification of pregnancy, the pregnant body becomes public property subject to "quotidian social surveillance and discipline" according to social norms for appropriate pregnant behavior (Kukla 2005, 294). Kukla describes pregnancy as a technic wherein pregnant bodies are beholden to a process of self-disciplining, bodily management, and public reporting and recording of various statistics about themselves, like their weight (296). I argue that there is a similar technic of streaming in which streamers must concern themselves with self-disciplining, managing their bodies, and engaging in public demonstrations of appropriate behavior (Ruberg and Cullen 2020). These concerns are compounded for women streamers, who are already subject to increased pressure and surveillance to behave appropriately due to viewer expectations for their appearance (Uszkoreit 2018) and debates about how their bodies may offer unfair advantages in streaming success (Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019).

Second, pregnant bodies have become narrative spaces in the sense that they are presumed to be a template that is shared and constrained to explain all experiences of pregnancy (Kukla 2005, 285). The “pregnant body,” Kukla suggests, “becomes in effect a public narrative character” (285). Live streaming, as it exists on Twitch, is absolutely a public narrative space. There are stories that streamers tell viewers about the culture and the platform, and there are stories that streamers tell about who can be a streamer and how they should behave (Ruberg and Cullen 2020). Streamers are encouraged to pursue narratives and self-branding practices that transform them into “more authentic” versions of themselves, also known as “personas,” often according to gendered stereotypes (Woodcock and Johnson 2019; Ruberg and Cullen 2020). Kaceytron is a famous example of a streamer who has adopted a persona that plays into, exaggerates, and contradicts the “girl gamer” stereotype (Consalvo 2019). Streamers are also expected to open the stories and spaces of their lives to their public viewing audience as they attempt to build communities that will accept and support them (Baym 2018). One consequence of this focus on building intimacy for women streamers is that they frequently find themselves being objectified by viewers (Nakandala et al. 2017; Uszkoreit 2018), and in the case of this pregnant streamer, abjectified.

Monstrous Femininity and Representation in Video Games

Video games rarely feature positive representations of pregnancy and motherhood in games. One possible explanation for this is that senior game designers are mostly men, so the narratives of video games focus more on exploring fatherhood (Gray 2017). Mothers in games are often absent, deceased, or depicted as monsters. Kate Gray (2017) described this trend as a “sinister obsession with the corruption of motherhood” based in a terror that pregnancy and motherhood make someone “unpredictable, chaotic, untrustworthy.” Barbara Creed (1993), in her work analyzing depictions of femininity in film, stated that “all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (44). Things that are abject are things that highlight the fragility of boundaries—things that are disturbing and invite a perverse pleasure (Creed 1993, 9–10). For many, pregnant bodies are abnormal and even horrible due to the way they change (Kukla 2005), and thus people are compelled to control them. This visceral anxiety communicates

itself well through the visual medium of games. As Sarah Stang (2018) has argued in her close readings of monstrous women depicted in video games like *The Witcher* and *God of War*, the power of the abject and its ability to invoke horror lie in its ability to disrupt and disgust the hegemonic, patriarchal realm of order and law (20). The abject as a conceptual framework and a background of monstrous pregnancy in games, combined with theory on pregnant bodies as public bodies and attentiveness to women's bodies that already exist in live streaming, allow me to demonstrate how a pregnant body seen in a video game live streaming context is not only subject to general surveillance, but also primed by that context to invite a kind of fascination that is objectifying.

Streaming while Pregnant

I found Brigid playing *Silver Chains*, a first-person horror game that explores the house and story of a woman who is the primary suspect in the murder of her children. Before, during, and after the conversation given here, Brigid was interacting with objects in the house that referenced a mother's madness and the death of children. There were regular jump scares, encounters with ghosts, and notably a cutscene where Brigid and her chat discover the mother has been lynched and left hanging in a tree.

After this particularly intense moment in the game, Brigid stood up in front of her camera to reveal she was pregnant. The conversation here presents my analysis of the transcript that I made of the resulting conversation about her pregnancy that Brigid had with approximately a dozen viewers in her channel. Brigid was replying verbally to comments and questions that viewers were typing in her chat. The transcript presented here follows that conversation thread, interrupted by my analysis and discussion. It does not include a simultaneous conversation that Brigid was also having with some viewers about the game, although the two conversations overlap occasionally.

"It looks like I have a beach ball up my top," Brigid jokes as she stands and gestures to her abdomen. "Like I literally ate a soccer ball." Brigid is inviting the viewers to share in her humor about her appearance. Viewers respond:

Viewer A: Looks weird to me

Viewer B: We can't wait to hear of your arrival

Viewer C: Quite the baby bump

Brigid: Yes, because I'm quite pregnant now

It is not clear here if Brigid is responding to both the comment about the size of her “baby bump” or the fact that it “looks weird,” but viewer A obviously felt comfortable telling a pregnant woman that her body was weird. When confronted with the physical reality of Brigid’s body, viewer A immediately called out how it defied expectations in a masculine logic of rigid boundaries. In addition, in this case, viewer A may have been encouraged to share their comment by the pseudonymity that viewers have on Twitch and the assumption that Brigid, as a streamer, is a kind of public figure. The comment from viewer B and the expectation that Brigid will tell her viewers about the birth also speaks to how much streamers and pregnant women are expected to share information about their lives in public. The conversation continues:

Viewer D: Can you dance while pregnant?

Brigid: What do you mean? I don't think I'd want to dance. Is it possible to do so? Of course!

Viewer D is using Brigid to engage with the public narrative of pregnancy (Kukla 2005) by asking her if it is possible to dance while pregnant, expecting a pregnant woman to do the work of educating them about pregnancy as well as sharing something about herself. Again, this seems to also be combined with an expectation from viewers that streamers strive to be transparent and honest (i.e., authentic) about their lives. I also read this as a request to get Brigid to dance on camera while she is pregnant, presumably for the amusement of the viewers. This speaks to expectations that viewers have for streamers in general, but more specifically the expectation that women streamers will use their bodies to entertain viewers through dancing and similar activities (Uszkoreit 2018). Then:

Viewer E: Are you pregnant?

Brigid: What gave it away?

Viewer F: No, she ate a soccer ball. Didn't you hear?

Viewer D: She's 33 weeks pregnant

Brigid is still attempting to engage her viewers with humor about her pregnancy, humor being a common tool that streamers and women use

to manage their viewers and redirect attention. However, this part of the conversation also illustrates how public the quantification of Brigid's pregnancy has been (because viewers know how long she has been pregnant). The chat continues:

Viewer G: Are you getting an epidural?

Brigid: I don't know yet. We'll see how it goes.

Viewer G: You should

The question from viewer G about the epidural speaks to a reality that, because Brigid is both a streamer and visibly, publicly pregnant, a Twitch chat becomes an appropriate context for asking what many would consider a personal question about Brigid's birthing plan, and then offer unsolicited advice. This is related to an overall feeling from Twitch viewers that whenever a woman's body is visible in streaming, it is obviously inviting public comment. Here, Brigid's viewers are using her to explore the public narrative of pregnancy, but also to explore their own feelings of fascination and horror with pregnancy. At this point, Brigid has finished stretching, sat down at her computer, and resumed playing the game. Suddenly a loud noise is heard on screen, triggered by a donation notification. Brigid is visibly startled. The chat responds:

Viewer H: Chat is going to scare the baby out with scare donos [donations]

Viewer I: First baby born live on Twitch lol

Viewer D: Not sure Twitch would allow births on stream, but they do allow breastfeeding now

Viewer J: I'm sure most people don't want giving birth streamed to thousands of people

The prospect of scaring Brigid into early labor or giving birth live on Twitch becomes a source of some amusement for some of her viewers. This is perhaps not dissimilar to the fascination that many have with reality television shows about pregnancy (Kukla 2005); pregnancy is treated as something horrible that nevertheless invites an audience—in other words, something abject. The chat continues:

Viewer D: Did you know you can get pumps to bottle your breast milk so baby can still have all the nutrients

Brigid: Of course I know that. It's still a big thing to do though.

Yet another viewer attempts to explore the public narrative of pregnancy through Brigid while she is trying to work (she was a full-time streamer at the time that this conversation occurred) by presuming to educate Brigid on her own pregnancy. Viewers consider answering questions like these to be part of Brigid's job as a streamer, as well as something that she should expect to do due to her pregnancy. During this entire interaction, Brigid is doing her best to emphasize the fun of being scared while playing a horror game:

Viewer K: Spams "BabyRage" emote

Viewer G: What is baby's name?

Viewer K: "BabyRage" emote

Brigid: You'll have to wait and find out

Viewer L: We'll know when there's a birth announcement. Can be stressful enough waiting for baby, let alone hearing everyone's opinions on every little thing!

Brigid: Yeah, with people like, "I don't like that name. I knew someone by that name and she was awful."

Viewer G: Are you waiting for birth to find out gender

Brigid: No, we're having a girl

Viewer D: And we don't find out the name until its born

The BabyRage emote (figure 11.1) is typically used to call someone out for "acting like a baby" (behaving petulantly or immaturely), but in this case, a viewer was using it to reference Brigid's pregnancy and their desire for more information. Viewers are asking Brigid to publicly share information about her baby, like potential names and its gender. As a streamer and a pregnant woman, Brigid is multiply interpreted as a public person/space/body, and viewers expect her to share in the intimate details of her life. Indeed, the



Figure 11.1

The BabyRage Twitch emote, which depicts a blurry close-up of a crying baby.

final comment from viewer D is almost petulant, as if questioning and judging Brigid's desire to keep even one aspect of her pregnancy private.

Viewer K: Can you die giving birth?

Brigid: Can you die giving birth? Well, you can die doing just about anything dude. What a question! Oh dear. Yes, you can die giving birth. You can but it's quite rare. And you can die doing anything dude.

Viewer L: What a question

Viewer I: Some strange questions in chat today

Viewer M: What a horrible question

Viewer N: Horror games bring out weird questions in chat

Viewer K: sorry

Viewer O: Another scare like the last one and you'll have the baby live

"Can you die giving birth?" would be a "horrible question" to ask someone who is pregnant in any context. On the surface, the question reads as another innocent attempt to have Brigid speak to the narrative experience of being pregnant. But I was struck by viewer N's comment that "Horror games bring out weird questions in chat." It occurred to me that this question, much like viewer D's request that Brigid dance while pregnant, was likely a deliberate attempt to get a reaction out of her to entertain the viewers, spurred on by her similar reactions to the content of the horror game she was playing. Viewer K likely knew that they were asking an inappropriate question, and it would upset Brigid and other viewers. This conversation actually continued in this vein for a few more minutes, with one viewer asking Brigid if women's bladders get weaker after giving birth and another viewer telling her that caffeine causes miscarriages. Instead of being treated like a person with a right to privacy, Brigid and her pregnancy together became a public object of abject entertainment, as well as a lens for exploring the narrative of pregnancy during this video game live stream.

Conclusion

I will admit that I had some concerns writing this. In a way, the interaction I witnessed was like watching a horror game within a horror game, but I was aware the whole time that I was watching this happen to a real person in real time. Many streamers come to expect, and even accept, intrusions into their

personal lives (a horror all its own), but it seemed as if these viewers were choosing to play with Brigid's private life and her emotions because her pregnant body in this gaming space stood out as unusual to them. I immediately identified what I observed as worth discussing, but I did not want to further dehumanize this streamer or her experience, which she managed with grace and humor. Several times throughout the conversation, Brigid attempted to redirect the energy of her channel through humor, but it was not clear to me if that was her way of working through how uncomfortable she may have felt or, alternatively, if she was so used to these sorts of questions, as both a woman and a streamer, that she felt comfortable laughing it off as part of her job.

What this interaction in a live stream demonstrates is how an overlapping of contexts where bodies and identities that are subjected to scrutinizing and disciplining behaviors that enact marginalization (streaming, pregnancy, playing games as a woman) can create an intersectional abjectness. Being visibly pregnant and a woman in a sociotechnical environment that commoditizes intimacy put Brigid in a position where her viewers felt comfortable asking her to answer uncomfortable questions about her body. The atmosphere of the horror game itself—a narrative where a mother is accused of murdering her own children—further encouraged viewers to discuss maternal pain and infant death with a pregnant streamer. Reality shows about pregnancies have contributed to the normalization of openly discussing personal choices and procedures when it comes to pregnancy (Kukla 2005, 297), and streaming has normalized interactions where emotional management and the sharing of personal information are expected from women. Women streamers and pregnant players should not have to stand in as representatives for entire groups of people, but they are frequently treated that way by viewers.

As unusual as this interaction may appear to be, I want to point out two things about it that emphasize the need for continued research on the experiences of streamers. First, this kind of interaction and stigmatization is the everyday experience for many women and others in streaming with marginalized identities who are visibly different (see chapter 5 of this book; Johnson 2019; Gray 2020). Second, there are many intersections of abjectness to be found in streaming because there are still many ways of living that appear to invite both fascination and revulsion. Together, these two points suggest an urgent need for research that understands how the bodies

of women, people of color, individuals with disabilities, and queer folk are caught up in these cultural industries that promise to celebrate the authenticity and diversity of experience, but instead constrain or tokenize these bodies according to cisgender white heteromale logics. People living in these intersections, therefore, are not only struggling to extract any benefit from these systems while still being denied participation in the surrounding industries and cultures, but their experiences are also being commodified and packaged for entertainment to benefit the status quo of streaming culture. The economy and culture of streaming demand both intimacy and vulnerability, but the social and technical infrastructures place the burden of managing the potential harms of visible difference in streaming on streamers themselves.

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Live Streaming Culture

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