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14 A Year in *The Arena*: Academic Live Streaming and Competitive Play

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The seminar space is incredibly valuable for the burgeoning scholar. Discussions with inquisitive, dedicated peers under the watchful eye of an experienced professor often bring interesting ideas to the forefront of the student's mind, inspiring them in their pursuit of knowledge. Unfortunately, due to increasing class sizes and the high cost of higher education, this kind of space is often barred from people not pursuing a postgraduate degree. The University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee is home to the streaming collaborative Serious Play, which seeks to make that private space public and give a glimpse of the seminar room to an audience, while allowing them to be part of it. Serious Play is made up of graduate students and professors who host weekly community programs based on the schema of the graduate seminar, albeit on Twitch, rather than in the classroom. For three years, the authors of this chapter collaborated to air *The Arena*, a weekly live show where we play esports and competitive games, discussing important topics in the study of competitive play. In this discussion, we look back on our years running *The Arena*, distilling our experience into potent lessons about the affordances and challenges of academic streaming. These perspectives stem from our individual and collective experiences as video game players, scholars, and streamers. We ran *The Arena* during the formative years of our development as scholars, and it gave us a greater appreciation for our field of study, opening doors to ideas that we might have never considered before streaming together.

On *The Arena*, we leverage each other's experiences to generate discussion, asking questions that encourage players to both examine and express the thought processes behind their in-game actions. We have a loose definition of "expert," but typically one of us takes this role and is prepared

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to teach our peers about that week's game or topic. Others take the role of "students," receiving foundational context that is not usually available when playing a game for the first time. These discussions tend to highlight knowledge hidden to those who may not recognize the value in what they read as an unremarkable action. We are, first and foremost, a community of learners. We have used *The Arena* as a space for sharing other scholars' work, engaging in broader critical discussions, and for tracking changes in the way the academic community understands competitive games. As games scholars, much of our work and lessons are transferable to a streaming platform like Twitch, which helps to both make academic conversation accessible and challenge the boundaries of traditional academic space. *The Arena*, conceived to create a kind of public seminar, has not just been rewarding for our audience, but for us as well. As graduate students, we essentially gained experience in *running* a seminar and the traditional benefits of *being* in a seminar once a week.

Just as graduate seminars have required readings, these streams feature a scholar or text of the week, typically something that we read recently. In this chapter and our streams, certain theorists have grown to prominently define our community's approach to competition and play. We approach competitive games as social objects. Drawing from Arjun Appadurai's discussion of "The Social Life of Things," we interrogate "the knowledge (technical, social, aesthetic, and so forth) that goes into the production of the commodity; and the knowledge that goes into appropriately consuming the commodity" (Appadurai 1988, 41). For the former, we use interviews of game creators to better understand their reasons for various design decisions. For the latter, we take the position of Michel De Certeau (1984), namely that the creator's intent is often less important than the way a media object is used by its audience. Competitive games are played in ways contrary to developers' intentions—breaking a game, after all, is a great way to win it. As a result, our discussion revolves around the communities that play these games: we believe that each has its own idiosyncrasies, and we trace lines from design to community even when such relationships may appear opaque. We invoke Thomas Malaby's various contingencies as defined in his article "Beyond Play," such as performative, stochastic, and semiotic, as ways of understanding how competitive games work as ongoing processes—always changing (2007).

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The dynamic nature of competitive games requires us to consider change as the primary action they take over time, and in turn, this is a consistent axis that our conversations revolve around. As with other academic communities, we have formed a lexicon of our own that we use to analyze the games that we play on stream, developed out of personal experiences and wider scholarship. This lexicon is core to the work of *The Arena* because over our years hosting the show, we each became comfortable contributing to its informal academic and methodological framework. In this way, one of the strengths of long-running informal academic contexts like *The Arena* is the opportunity to synthesize the professional, academic, and personal interests of each of the hosts.

In each of the next three sections, we reflect on a particular thematic month of streaming: fighting games, speedrunning, and board games, respectively. We selected these themed months because they illustrate the difficulties that our community faced and the lessons that we learned from them, whether in our attempt to replicate the seminar space publicly or in response to COVID-19. These stories demonstrate how academic streaming communities can make space for both critical discourse and personal growth. We learned the importance of community learning, the value of apprenticeship, and the unique possibilities that streaming affords in creating bridges between different communities and discourses. *The Arena* highlights how the environment of an academic stream can benefit both the public audience and the hosts themselves. Ultimately, we hope to show that the creation and nurturing of this space reflect what academics have known since Plato: we are stronger in discussion with one another than apart.

Fighting the Fear of Failure—Janelle

The Arena is not a traditional seminar with high stakes and expectations, but rather a dedicated space seeking to make the academic seminar accessible by inviting rigor without perpetuating burnout or vilifying failure. Because of social contingencies like skill disparity, simultaneously approaching new games and pitching ideas in this setting felt insurmountable at first. Trained as a literary scholar in print-driven departments, I had no exposure to critical game studies before haphazardly discovering the discipline during the first week of my PhD program. How was I supposed to play and critically

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discuss these games that I knew almost nothing about, let alone on stream, and in front of my new friends and colleagues? Similar anxieties permeate seminar classrooms and can stifle student participation. In both cases, time, practice, and an open mind eased these fears.

Consistently being the novice in the room made me a humble learner, and it also led me to ask questions that prompted other hosts to critically examine their own gameplay. Through this process, skill disparity became a *feature* of our show rather than a flaw, because of the productive conversations that the expert/student dynamic can inspire. Skill disparity became a point of conversation for us because while there was a significant skill gap between all the hosts and guests, we always enjoy the spirit of competition. As a result, we kept returning to these questions: Why and how is competition enjoyable? How do we reckon with skill disparity in our own experiences, and how much does winning influence enjoyment? To help ground this discussion during fighting game month, Evelynn shared a fan-translated interview with the *Super Smash Bros*. creator Masahiro Sakurai (Sourcegaming 2015). In this interview, Sakurai explains that he sought to create a fighting game that removes the high barriers of entry typical of the genre. Traditional fighting game series like *Street Fighter* and *Tekken* are notoriously difficult to play well. Sakurai attests that for a new player, being defeated by someone with clearly superior skills isn't enjoyable, and it could easily turn beginners away from the genre, or social play altogether.

Despite Sakurai's assertion and the fact that an arcade or a seminar room might feed the fear of failure, my odds of winning against my friends do not determine whether I enjoy streaming *The Arena*. Rather, the stream's academic context and our dedication to inclusivity helped me feel at ease losing by landslides or taking upward of twenty minutes to execute a single combo. The feeling of disjointedness between myself and the controller when playing fighting games proved frustrating, but it only stoked my desire to improve. I found my footing in approaching our titles from the perspective of an apprentice—eager to learn but fully aware of the uphill climb toward proficiency.

For all the many hours dedicated to them on *The Arena*, fighting games remain an enigma for me. By the time we streamed a month of fighting games in November 2019, I hadn't even officially joined as a cohost—at best, I was a series regular, and *The Arena* provided my first venture into critically discussing video games. This month of grappling with fighting

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games demonstrates one of the significant opportunities afforded through academic streaming, although it also highlights one of its challenges. Put simply, confronting and overcoming feelings of inadequacy as a student and scholar in a public-facing forum while learning a new skill can be as challenging as it is rewarding. Reflecting on this month has revealed how *The Arena* facilitated a space for me to familiarize myself with a genre that I might otherwise never devote critical attention to, while providing a framework for tangling with new games: *The Arena*'s special blend of public practice. We validated our practice by live streaming our successes and failures, and then archiving evidence of the practice on YouTube. This instilled an ethic of legitimizing practice as a necessary step for contributing to critical game studies.

While not entirely absent in traditional seminars, the informality of live streaming led to entirely organic and off-the-wall conversations, especially when we played new games together. We closed out our first fighting game month with a near-comical equalizer in terms of skill: *Bushido Blade* and *Nidhogg*, two unconventional, sword-based fighting games (Lightweight 1997; Messhof 2014). *Nidhogg* was relatively easy to pick up, and I won a fair amount of my matches for the first time *all* month. Learning games together on stream usually involves a scramble for instructions online, which were unavailable for *Bushido Blade*, turning our play into a complete free-for-all. With only a vague idea of what to do, we quickly discovered that games of *Bushido Blade* can last anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes, often ending in an unexpected one-hit kill. We chose our weapons and maps with the same logic: "What's this one like?" The serious tone and complex controls of *Bushido Blade*, paired with our roles as novices, made for a hilarious stream: shouts of shock when Daniel unexpectedly stops running aimlessly and lands a one-hit kill, and mixed cries of congratulation and sympathy after a drawn-out battle. Where *Nidhogg*'s controls were straightforward and accessible, *Bushido Blade*'s complexity challenged the whole group. As opposed to the institutional and somewhat constraining space of a seminar room, the low-stakes and affirming space of our lab subverted the anxieties of learning new games as a group and broadcasting our failures to a live audience.

Playing fighting games for a month on stream robbed me of my fear of failure. As a consistent apprentice who mostly won on technicalities for reasons beyond my own understanding, each *meaningful* victory carried with

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it the hardship and frustration of all the failures that had built up to that point. By intentionally practicing games, I play poorly, and taking on the role of novice in each episode, I not only learned how to approach unfamiliar genres critically, but I also found my place in conversation among people with far more experience, echoing lingering anxieties from graduate seminars in which I felt similarly out of my depth. I came in with little experience playing games socially or competitively, let alone with any kind of extensive referent for playing fighting games. By the end of the month, while I could not catch up to the years of experience that my cohosts had already put in, there were notable improvements—I found my style of fighting, which helped future practice, and overall I benefited from an informed understanding of the genre, even if I don't win any matches. Fighting game month became a successful experiment in how practice and apprenticeship in a supportive environment, no matter the frustration and failure along the way, work as their own modes of expertise.

A Month of Speedrunning *Celeste*—Evelynn

Discussing multiplayer games is practically a prerequisite of *The Arena*, as our goal is to explore the contingencies and possibilities that come from esports and competitive play. So it may surprise you to learn that we spent an entire month playing the single-player game *Celeste* (Maddy Makes Games 2018). *Celeste* is a beautiful game about a woman climbing a literal mountain, and it is a game about self-doubt. However, we were less interested in the game's plot. There was a competition afoot: a race to climb *Celeste*'s titular mountain. In January 2020, our theme was speedrunning, and I volunteered to be our runner. While I was excited to try, none of us had speedrun a game before. We decided that *Celeste*, a popular speedrunning game, was a perfect fit. By the time our first show of the new year rolled around, I had gotten the hang of running the game. Over the month, I played *Celeste*, in its entirety, at least once each day. As I displayed my progress on our weekly streams, we discussed what speedrunning is, how one learns to speedrun, and what it means to be a competitor.

The first thing that struck us when speedrunning was just how embodied of an experience it is. I was acutely aware of the controller in my hands when attempting to perform exacting technical tasks routinely. Speedrunning replaces the puzzle of "how?" with "how quickly?" It makes excruciatingly

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clear the disconnect between what the player intends to do and what their inputs told the game to do. Yet this source of frustration while learning turns to satisfaction when mastered. Embodiment extends beyond control: every time I approached a new personal best (PB), I could feel my heart beating in my chest, a nervous energy that made my hands and body shake with anticipation. In this feeling, I am not alone. Even the most accomplished runners experience similar symptoms. Many include a heart rate monitor while they stream their attempts, numerically translating, in real time, their embodied experience, often exceeding 150 beats per minute when on a great pace. From speedrunning, we learned not to neglect the embodied experiences of competitors, as well as to consider how much a player's time and energy, failure and success rest on the precise movement of anxious hands and fingers.

An important lesson that we took from speedrunning month was just how much time it takes to play a game in as little time as possible. Speedrunning is a technically demanding endeavor that requires full attention and a significant amount of effort to learn how to do well. After my first few runs, where my time dropped precipitously from four hours to around one, I only saw marginal improvement from run to run. The climb toward mastery is filled with plateaus; when players hit these walls, they must step back and adjust their play to improve. I learned all that went into such climbing because I did the climb myself, and as a result, we had a much deeper understanding of what it takes to speedrun. Our discussions during this month of play centered around *time*: strategies to save time, total times of runs, mistakes that lose time, and the many hours of practice that it takes to successfully speedrun a game. Any theoretical discussion of speedrunning might include time because it is the primary metric of success, but the reality of the hours and minutes required was made all the more palpable by my continued efforts to achieve a PB and my colleague's engagement with that quest. Later, time would become the central topic of my dissertation, partially because of our discussions surrounding it on *The Arena*.

In our last stream of the month, we took a step back from broadcasting live *Celeste* attempts to watch speedruns of some of our favorite games and discuss broader topics within the community. We kicked off this discussion by playing the *Celeste* world record run and my PB side by side, showcasing the beauty of high-level speedrunning. While watching popular runs, we discussed the relationship that glitches have to speedrunning, highlighting how speedrunning is not just a competition, but a way to resist a game's

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architecture. We considered how the landscape of the speedrunning community always changes, with new strategies being discovered, categories being created, and records being broken. Finally, we talked about how the majority of players aren't competing against each other, but rather against themselves. That pointed to a greater realization: in *any* competitive game, the first competitor whom one faces is not someone else, but oneself. It is in testing oneself and one's limits that one grows as a player, and other players are there to offer inspiration, encouragement, and competition. Speedrunning displays this clearly because when one sits down to play, the most salient competition is between oneself and one's potential.

While I may have been the one with her hands on the controller for much of the month, I would not have had nearly as much stamina or enthusiasm without the encouragement and discussion I got from my peers and Twitch chats. Every time I achieved a PB off-stream, I messaged Casey and Janelle and received positive feedback, inspiring me to keep going. When we went live, they carried much of the discussion so that I could focus on performing. Their questions encouraged me to learn more, not just about *Celeste*, but also about the community dedicated to playing games at blistering paces. I did not start this journey as an expert, but from my desire to explain ideas and concepts to my friends, I got closer to being one. I am grateful for the help that I received along the way–seasoned players joined our chats to give advice and reflect on our questions. I also sought out other *Celeste* streamers to ask questions about their process, and the community's publicly available guides were helpful in getting started. I became an intermediary between our academic group and the speedrunning community, sharing the language of both to generate a common ground for discussion.

A single month of streaming speedrunning resulted in an entire chapter of my dissertation being devoted to discussing it. As is often the case with *The Arena*, these streams are only the beginning of our interest in the various topics that we explore. By discussing speedrunning with Twitch chat and each other, we made accessible to one group (speedrunners) academic discussions on the nature of competition and play, often evoking Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux's *Metagaming* (Boluk and LeMieux 2017). For scholars, these streams are a gateway to the fairly esoteric pursuit of speedrunning, making legible an activity that is often obscured beneath many layers of technical jargon, hard-to-find information, and rapidly changing, but rarely publicized competitive landscapes. Streaming seminar–esque

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discussions about the discipline for five weeks allowed us to attend to those rapid changes, showcasing how “live scholarship” can be more accessible and attuned to the needs of digital game culture.

Public Learning and You—Casey

During the COVID pandemic, we struggled to find games to play together; among other issues, not all of us could stream from home, some games cannot be played online, and distanced play required us to have three copies of a game instead of one. Behind the scenes, we discussed issues of financial accessibility to games, and the solution that we found in June was traditional board games. There are many ways to play games like chess and Go online, and these platforms are accessible on multiple fronts: many are free to play, they include tutorials, have multiplayer options, and most computers can run them. However, our plans were disrupted. Due to the increasing protests against police brutality, we canceled half of the month’s streams. We felt that it was important to observe these injustices and to participate in our local communities instead of our virtual one. Despite these interruptions, board game month proved to be insightful in several ways: first, it demonstrated how Twitch is a twist on the public arcade space. Second, instead of us being the experts for Twitch chat, we let Twitch chat be the experts for us. Finally, we practiced public-facing learning by streaming our introduction to the game of Go.

Out of the three *The Arena* showrunners, only Evelynn had some experience playing Go. We began our first stream using the lesson mode of Online-Go (OGS) to learn the game (OGS n.d.). While Janelle and I learned the basics, Evelynn reminisced about her experience playing the game while living in Asia. Twitch has a preexisting community of Go players, and they joined our stream. We were pleasantly surprised when we had a significant number of new viewers who gave us tips and strategies while chatting with one another about their own experiences playing Go. I often considered Twitch as a remediation of the domestic-social gaming experience, but this month proved that Twitch remediates the arcade space as well. Strangers visited our stream to watch a game they love, much like how arcade-goers might mingle by their favorite games to watch how others play. Instead of a cacophony of game sounds and idle chatter in the arcade vying for attention, Twitch chat provided a different take on this experience: beautiful,

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visual chaos. We struggled to distinguish advice from side chatter as we read chats while playing one another. Eventually, we played matches against our audience, forming friendships built by a chance meeting in a game space. It is easy to feel obligated to have a sense of professionalism and perfectionism while on air, but by harnessing Twitch as a public game space more so than a broadcasting platform, we situated ourselves as fellow players of Go rather than as broadcasters. Although we occupied both roles at the time, this positioning made it easy for us to pass our roles as experts to chat.

Because most of the participants were more experienced players than we were, this month was an aberration from our normal method of show hosts taking turns as the expert while Twitch chat and other hosts engage with them. In many Twitch streams, the streamer is the main source of entertainment and typically knows the game better than the average viewer. For instance, one of the most popular Go streamers primarily broadcasts lessons. However, our stream was flipped—our viewers in chats were the teachers. They coached us and challenged us to matches. Although we did not solicit their help in the stream title, the stream naturally evolved to a point where we had several returning viewers across the weeks who appeared to be more invested in teaching us and talking strategy than being entertained by us showing off our clunky, nascent abilities of playing Go. In subsequent months, we invited Twitch chats to take the role of expert. For example, while playing *Power Rangers: Battle for the Grid*, we included "come teach us!" in our stream title, which brought in participants who joined to give tips (nWay 2019). Streaming Go showed us how communities can be built through streams in which participants can see in real time how their knowledge of a game assists those who are just starting.

The lessons we learned this month can be applied beyond streaming board games. Many scholars note that a large part of Twitch's allure is interacting with the streamer. They focus on the streamer's role of information-giver and moderator of content. However, if the chat is coaching the streamer through different maps, then they dictate which combos to attempt, which maps to play, and which items to interact with—these choices shape the player's first run of the game. You cannot unplay your introduction to a game. Learning through Twitch allows us to digitally have the experience of learning to play from an older family member or arcade guru. Having the chat as the expert opened us up to consider different ways to navigate our streams, invite participation, and learn games. In many aspects, failure and

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lack of mastery may feel like a poor reflection of ourselves when our shortcomings are put on display for strangers to see. However, in this context, we facilitated the building of communities through learning a game rather than relegating that experience to private spaces. Our greatest takeaway from this is that being a learner on Twitch depends on a trustful relationship between streamer and chat, and more scholarly work has yet to be done on the chat's role on the platform.

We found that our experiences streaming Go echo something that we discovered from previous streams—it is the amateur's perspective that illuminates things that go unseen. Novice players illuminate what the expert may take for granted or even consider mundane. However, these fresh eyes yield questions that often generate meaningful discussion, which prompts experts to view beginners' questions through the seasoned player's lens. The larger connection that we can draw is that we are better together than we are alone: as Janelle and Evelynn demonstrated, without community, how we play and understand games would not be as impactful, multifaceted, or fun.

Conclusion

We've streamed *The Arena* for almost three years. We were all in PhD coursework during at least some of this time, going to actual seminars for actual credit. Yet we found ourselves not just going to class, but also actively organizing a virtual seminar for ourselves and others. The experience was stretching. Many of our ideas simply did not work out. Sometimes we spun our wheels trying to uncover meaning that wasn't there. Other weeks, our streams were stunted by technical difficulties. We underestimated just how much of an appetite there is for explicitly academic content on Twitch. At times, we were too eager to follow trends in the esports scene, and the resulting discussions felt rushed or half thought out. Sometimes we took the roles of "teacher" and "student" too literally, with streams that looked more like a tutorial for how to play a game rather than a fruitful discussion of the game's mechanics and meaning. Nevertheless, these ventures proved useful in other ways—spinning our wheels encouraged us to return to the show with renewed energy to counterbalance the frustration of underwhelming performances.

We feel that *The Arena*, and Serious Play as a whole, model healthy academia. Doing these shows on our own or spending this time in personal

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study would not be nearly as interesting, engaging, or rewarding for us as scholars. The simple fact is that *discourse* is what makes an academic environment valuable; it is the wellspring of profitable thought. A seminar is valuable because you're in a room with like-minded people who are not singular in opinion or disposition, but are unified in their desire to grow and learn. Live streaming, then, affords a unique methodology for testing academic ideas in a public context for an audience, mirroring the frustrations and victories of the academic research process, but in a playful, supportive setting. *The Arena*'s process of contending with failure and trying again demonstrates how collaborative academic streaming can work as a methodology for interrogating play. Weeks where our energy was low, where phrasing our ideas during competitive gameplay was too many things to do at once, where we simply "didn't have anything smart to say" and just played, all still work toward a model for academic work that does not shy away from failure and rather follows the active interests of its participants.

For those looking to start their own live stream seminar space, the humble desire to learn, discuss, and occasionally fail is all you need. Though we do recommend bringing some friends with you! The relationships that *The Arena* cultivated are the most valuable thing that we gained from this experience. As we learned from moving the show online due to COVID-19, the technological affordances of a computer lab are not requirements for creating an academic streaming environment. This kind of thoughtful space is too often relegated to closed-off college classrooms on weeknights. By making it accessible to a public audience, not only can academic streamers benefit from the added scholastic activity, but so can those who tune in, and together you'll both learn something, continuing the promise that earnest discussion has fulfilled for thousands of years.

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Real Life in Real Time

Live Streaming Culture

Edited by: Johanna Brewer, Bo Ruberg, Amanda L. L. Cullen, Christopher J. Persaud

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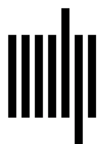

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