

18 Cultures of Precarity and “Grinding” for Audiences on Twitch.tv

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Twitch.tv gives an innate promise to its 7.57 million active monthly broadcasters (TwitchTracker 2022): if you put in the work, you can get paid to play video games on-stream. It’s the celebratory rhetoric that underpins the world’s largest video game-oriented streaming site, where millions of users gather to chat, play, entertain, and create together. But this rhetoric tends to obfuscate a competitive economy of attention, a politics of discoverability and algorithmic hierarchies, and a lingering impetus for continual growth. Paired with an underlying sense of precarity, Twitch’s platform logics and affordances incite an almost compulsive fixation on viewership metrics among its streamers.

This chapter explores how Twitch’s commercial and platform logics incentivize streamers to “grind” for audiences, and how this practice is normalized in streamers’ discourse about their *métier*. I examine the ways in which the practice of grinding can be attributed to Twitch’s tiered and conditional monetization structure, as well as its gamification of streaming activity. This grind reflects how streaming activity is transformed in the advent of platform-mediated cultural production, as measures of success on Twitch become aligned with the platform’s operational premise and metrics. What results is the integration of grind into Twitch’s larger narrative of self-actualization and aspirational entrepreneurialism, in a way that dually obscures the tendency toward overwork and self-exploitation as streamers “grind for views.”

I want to approach the question of grind by first situating Twitch within Nick Srnicek’s (2017) concept of platform capitalism. Srnicek argues that platform capitalism encompasses a form of twenty-first-century capitalism wherein firms have moved toward the use of flexible labor and lean business models (2017, 42). This form of enterprise is characterized by the emergence

of online apps and platforms, adapted to the reality of digital automation, the Internet of Things, and the on-demand economy. Prominent forms of platform capitalism include Uber, Airbnb, Facebook, YouTube, Amazon Web Services, and Spotify. These platforms generate revenue by facilitating user interactions and activities, while capitalizing on data extraction and exerting control over core app architectures and affordances (Srnicek 2017, 48). As is the case with platforms hosting user-generated content, the design of platforms must consider profitability, accessibility, and sustainability, while balancing the interests of its three main constituencies: users, professional content producers, and advertisers (Gillespie 2010, 353). Consequently, the process of platformization means that “whether professional or amateur . . . contemporary cultural labourers are beholden to platform governance frameworks and must consequently adapt to their recurrent ‘tweaks,’ including to their algorithmic systems” (Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg 2019, 2).

As a platform, Twitch acts as an intermediary infrastructure, connecting streamers and viewers while leveraging its niche monopoly over game-oriented live streaming content. In its intermediary position, Twitch retains the ability to modulate key affordances, including stream quality, discoverability and visibility hierarchies, monetization conditions, and user interaction opportunities. Twitch’s platform infrastructure naturally has a generative quality: it enables streamers to easily connect with viewers and allows streaming communities to proliferate with returning viewers, while framing this activity as autonomous, flexible, low-risk, and entirely playful. However, this same infrastructure can also be prohibitive and latently influence the activity of its users, streamers, and viewers alike, as it relates to content moderation, copyright regulation, ad placements, donation methods, and the ability to monetize activity.

Twitch’s infrastructure and its resulting sociotechnical affordances are necessarily aligned with its operational premise (i.e., its business model and subsequent design considerations). Twitch aims to attract new and returning viewers to its platform because its revenue stems primarily from its cut of channel subscription payments, advertising, and the sale of its “Bits” platform currency. To continue attracting this viewership, Twitch must cultivate high-quality, user-generated streaming content. It does so by using platform affordances to reward emergent and popular streamers and promotes an elite slice of these streamers as their platform brand. In turn, Twitch’s

operational premise fuels a sort of productive aspiration for new and casual streamers, setting a standard for growth and viewership.

Grinding in Games and Grinding on Twitch

As Twitch’s platform affordances incite streamers to continuously grow their audiences, I contend that this manifests into a practice of grinding. In its gaming analog, “grinding” refers to the repetition of in-game acts to progress through a game or unlock achievements. This is generally done by laboriously repeating the same short-term acts or quests to gain experience or level up, obtain items, or complete action items, such as checklist objectives or side quests. The amount of grinding found in a game is usually a product of its design and mechanics: grinding in games can be utilized to control the pacing of a game or to extend the duration of the player’s engagement. And while grinding requires a significant and deliberate investment of time and effort on the part of the player, grinding presents an inherent, long-term incentive, wherein a future reward is promised for the present action, and this makes the grind seem worthwhile (Morrison 2011).

Similarly, “grinding” on Twitch refers to streamer activity oriented toward a sense of progression, with dedicated, metric-focused efforts aimed at attracting and retaining viewers, followers, and subscribers per targets established by the platform. Grinding on Twitch is framed as a necessary part of aspirational or serious streaming, requiring the accumulation of hours on-stream, stream-hours watched, concurrent viewership, monthly stream quotas, and strategic on-stream game selection. In practice, grinding on Twitch appears in many forms. It can be as simple as displaying a follower or subscriber count/goal on a stream overlay. It can also be linked to incentives negotiated between the streamer and in-chat viewers for hitting certain metrics (as in “sub-a-thons,” discussed later in this chapter) or rewards when certain metrics are hit (e.g., twenty-four-hour streams, matching gift-subs, subscriber’s choice, etc.) Much like its gaming counterpart, the impetus toward grinding on Twitch is underlined by a long-term incentive, a promise of growth and reward that will make up for the streamer’s dedicated, laborious effort.

This chapter is particularly interested in observing how grind is encouraged by Twitch’s platform affordances. Twitch users tend to grind for viewership and status, as both are long-term incentives aligned with the platform’s

operational premise, prompted by way of metric or objective-based progression systems. This discussion details two overarching platform affordances, understood in relation to Twitch's operational premise and its position as an intermediary between streamers and viewers; it focuses on the way that streamers orient their activities around Twitch's tiered, conditional monetization structure and its gamification of streaming activity through game-like achievements. This approach is partially informed by Hector Postigo's (2014) work on the impact of technical affordances vis-à-vis digital labor on YouTube, a comparable platform that also operates on the basis of user-generated content and aspirational entrepreneurialism rooted in metrics of success. Postigo (2014) notes that "considering how technical architectures, their design and their use are shaped by social practice is important, because it give insight into how otherwise little noticed or 'natural' elements of the participatory/labor space actually serve as strong influences of action" (335).

Monetization and Gamification

While streamers cannot initially make money from their streaming activities on Twitch, the platform's Affiliate and Partner programs make monetization features available to streamers as their audiences grow. Once conferred Affiliate or Partner status, streamers gain access to key monetization features, including the enabling of channel subscriptions, cheering via bits (Twitch's platform-based currency), game and product sale commissions, and advertising revenue. However, Twitch's monetization structure is both tiered and conditional. To begin monetizing their channel, streamers must qualify for the necessary program (first Affiliate, and then Partner) by meeting set criteria, underlined by various metrics measured by Twitch's platform affordances. In 2020, qualification for Affiliate status requires streamers to have at least fifty followers, as well as an accrued 500 minutes of broadcast time over a month, in addition to seven unique broadcast days with an average of three or more concurrent viewers (Twitch 2020). The Affiliate tier is set as an intermediary between casual streaming (nonmonetized) and admissibility to the Partner program (full monetization). Qualification for Partner status requires streamers to have streamed for twenty-five hours within a month, with twelve unique broadcast days and an average of seventy-five or more concurrent viewers. However, meeting these criteria does not immediately enable on-stream monetization features; rather, it

only allows streamers to apply for Affiliate or Partner status. Streamers must wait for their invitation from Twitch, which is sent out on a rolling basis for Affiliate status, or after application adjudication by Twitch staff for Partner status (Twitch 2020).

There are several implications inherent to this form of tiered and conditional monetization as it relates to the concept of grind. The underlying logic of Affiliate and Partner programs is that if an individual streamer puts enough work into their stream, they will be given the opportunity to see a monetary return for their continued efforts. Much like grinding in video games, grinding for audiences on Twitch is validated by a long-term incentive, a future reward (herein monetization options), or a promise (herein status) that justifies the more arduous and unrecompensed work done in the present. And the path toward this incentive is represented by key metrics, quantified objectives set by Twitch as a platform, which themselves become representative of worth and success.

Another important platform affordance to consider is Twitch’s gamification of streaming activity, which is presented to streamers via the Creator Dashboard’s achievement system. “Gamification” refers to the implementation of game design mechanics in nongame contexts. Mimicking systems commonly found in role-playing games (RPGs) and massively multiplayer online (MMO) video games, the use of achievements in gamified contexts is meant to signify progress based on task completion and can be implemented as a *de facto* form of expectation management, communicating what is expected and desirable (Khalid 2014). As such, Twitch’s creator achievement system turns channel activity, including streaming time, follower and subscriber counts, concurrent viewership, and chat activity, among others, into metrics, and thus measurable achievements. Twitch introduced achievements to help streamers grow, set tangible goals, and provide transparency *vis-à-vis* their progression toward Affiliate or Partner status (Twitch 2020).

There are obvious parallels to be found when comparing the process of grinding for achievements in video games and grinding for achievements on Twitch: both turn routine actions into quantifiable objectives, both use achievements as a measure of success, and both are used to induce an intrinsic sense of progression in players/streamers.

Processes of gamification in nongame contexts import key motivational affordances from achievement systems in video games, as achievements are meant to compel players to complete objectives within and beyond the

scope of a game's main narrative or questline (Rey 2014). Twitch's achievement system is adapted specifically to suit the needs of its operational premise. The completion of creator achievements encourages streamers to spend more time on-stream, to stream more frequently, to engage with their chat more actively, and to cultivate a returning viewership. The achievement system (figure 18.1) is also utilized to monitor progression toward monetization opportunities, with "Building a Community," "Path to Affiliate," and "Path to Partner" achievement tracks. These tracks are acutely aligned with Twitch's larger mission of cultivating high-quality and engaging streaming activity: the achievement system both motivates streamers and sets the standard.

Further, gamification and the playful quantification of activity are both acutely attuned to the needs of late capitalism and the *modus operandi* of platform capitalism. Per Jamie Woodcock and Mark Johnson (2017), gamification is not a benign process, and it is "currently implemented has become complicit in supporting and even further developing the economic relations of neoliberal capitalism" (543). To this end, the basic appeal of gamification in nongame contexts is to influence and direct the behavior of consumers and producers in a productive (and valuable) capacity; for

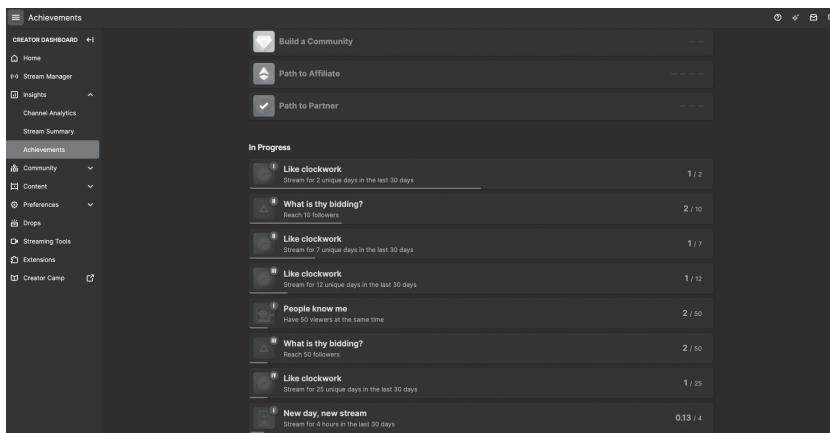


Figure 18.1

An individual user's streaming activity is recorded and quantified via the achievement section of Twitch's Creator Dashboard. These include basic metrics for follower counts and streaming hours, as well as progression-oriented achievements aimed toward Affiliate and Partner status.

Twitch, this means inciting continuously productive (and valuable) activity from its streamers (Rey 2014). The use of conditional monetization systems and gamified metrics are also representative of the way platform capitalism construes productivity and work as being voluntary, flexible, mobile, autonomously goal-oriented, and, eventually, the basis for self-actualization (Srnicek 2017). I would contend that understanding the phenomenon of grind, the key platform affordances that actuate grind, and the underlying impetuses for platform capitalism together complicate and challenge the celebratory discourses of aspirational entrepreneurialism that inform streamer activity on Twitch.

Twitch operationalizes and determines notions of success, new features, and new opportunities through these tier systems and achievements. What makes a successful channel is based on any number of factors, including a streamer’s personality and performance, game selection, use of technology, quality and appeal of overlays and graphics, chat engagement, streaming consistency, aesthetics and branding, external social media presence, and others. But, perhaps more important, success on Twitch is also quantifiably conditional: tiered and achievable metrics frame success on the basis of follower counts, subscriber counts, number of people engaging in chats, hours streamed, and hours watched. These factors are what primarily determine a streamer’s ability to monetize their channel and access key community-building features (in particular, subscribers and emotes), which have corollary impacts on a streamer’s visibility, discoverability, community maintenance and viewer retention ability, and social standing on the platform.

A Culture of Grind and Precarity

Thus, if success is contingent on a streamer’s ability to meet certain metrics, then grind becomes a symptom of, and a response to, precarity on Twitch. “Precarity,” in this context, denotes a particular sense of insecurity and dependence on uncertain circumstances stemming from platform use. On Twitch, this precarity is more pointedly experienced by streamers who stream in an occupational capacity, as the platform constitutes their means of livelihood. For full-time streamers, their material, social, and psychological well-being is tied to the platform and the conditionality of its affordances. And yet, while occupational Twitch streamers attract the platform’s core viewership, and they constitute the platform’s most important

revenue stream, they are only provided a few tools for quantifying their activity beyond metrics. Per the logics of platform capitalism, platform workers are not guaranteed income, given benefits, or provided any protection from changes or challenges internal and external to the platform. Therefore, streamers' sense of stability stems primarily from metrics. For professional streamers, "audience-based data analytics carry meanings that are financially, socially, and affectively interpreted" (Bingham 2017, 277). This, in turn, means that many streamers must ground their aspirational activity (if nonmonetized) or livelihood (if monetized) on key metrics.

Key metrics tend to permeate the performance of streaming in any number of ways. Anthony Pellicone and June Ahn's (2017) study of streaming and cultural production aptly addresses the emergent tensions that arise between what streamers consider metrics of success and the desire to have fun in the performance of play. They note: "The friction between quantified metrics (e.g., viewership), and intangible metrics (e.g., having fun) . . . seemed to coexist in the conceptions of [streamers'] practice . . . most [streamers] still appeared cognizant of the quantified metrics of the system, and followed them to some degree as they set goals for their streams" (Pellicone and Ahn 2017, 4870). And so the question remains: how does the concept of grind, as incited by Twitch's platform affordances and as a response to underlying precariousness, figure into larger live streaming culture?

One answer to this question is that grinding has become a normalized practice among aspirational streamers on Twitch. Integrated into Twitch's current of entrepreneurial and aspirational rhetoric, the grind is construed as one of those necessary processes required for the long-term incentive: to have a successful and self-actualizing streaming career. Grind materializes in streamers' everyday practice (see figure 18.2). The most subtle of these grind tendencies is when a streamer places a subscriber or follower count or target metrics as part of their stream overlay. The streamer might set a specific target for themselves and their viewers, with a target number of new followers or subscribers in a given period of time. This may also be reflected in the streamer's stream title, expressing that their desired counts or targets as part of a larger project ("Path to Affiliate/Partner!," "!subgrind," "Almost at 5k!," "Day 10 Grind").

Some streamers may even incentivize incremental gains in followers or subscribers by following up with rewards for each target hit. On Twitch, intense periods of activity that try to drive up follower and subscriber

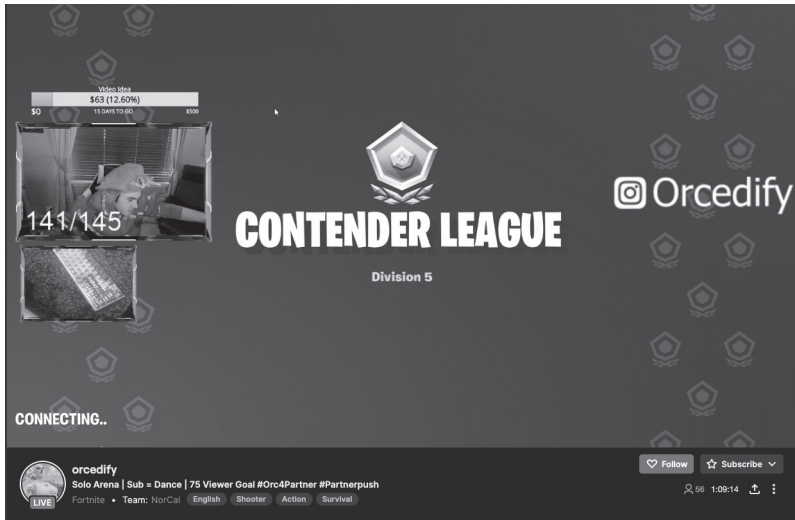


Figure 18.2

A screenshot of Orcedify’s December 9, 2020, *Fortnite* stream. Noticeable features of grind include the streamer’s subscriber count and goal overlay (141/145), subscriber incentives (Sub=Dance), donation incentives (\$500 goal for a “video idea”), and explicit goal setting (75-viewer goal and the “push” toward Partner status).

counts include “sub-a-thons,” which reward streamers for hitting certain tiered follower or subscriber quotas selected by the streamer (subscriber’s-choice game selection, matching gift-subscriptions, unique nongaming activities, personalized messages, giveaways, gameplay tweaks, etc.). Another common practice is streaming for twenty-four hours straight, with new follower or subscription counts adding time and extending the duration of the stream. Streamers may also incentivize subscriptions when working toward unlocking more “emote” slots (customizable, channel-specific emoticons for use in chats). The grind is always construed as productive and future-oriented.

The integration of grind into Twitch’s celebratory rhetoric subsequently obfuscates tendencies toward self-exploitation and overwork. Given the way that Twitch’s discoverability algorithms privilege channels with higher viewer counts, aspiring streamers starting out on the platform may find themselves streaming to no one. The myriad of guides available to beginner streamers tend to emphasize streaming choices that maximize visibility and appeal to potential audiences, but the reality is that many streamers can barely get their streams off the ground after months of consistent

broadcasting. The streamer Sean Burke shared that in his first months of streaming, he was disheartened with his lack of viewership. Burke expressed that “I [initially] kept internalizing the viewership numbers to mean that I was the problem, that I wasn’t funny enough, that I wasn’t good enough at games”: by the end of his first year on Twitch, he managed to get an average of ten concurrent viewers while streaming (Hernandez 2018). Moreover, while aspiring streamers may be feeling the consequences of particular platform affordances, stream guides tend to frame this lack of viewership as surmountable with more time and effort.

Even if successful in getting their channel off the ground, full-time or Partnered streamers, especially those whose livelihoods depend on their streaming activity, must contend with a continued viewership grind. Full-time streamers very publicly “find themselves in the contradictory position of working at what they profess to be their ‘dream job’ while simultaneously experiencing working conditions and/or a general climate of anxiety, frustration, and the dis-empowerment of individual, privatized self-exploitation” (Gurevitch 2016, 194). As the streamer Ben “ProfessorBroman” Bowman expressed:

I’ve been streaming full-time on Twitch as my career for four years. Growing my channel at the start involved a mind-crushing 12–16 hours of streaming every day, seven days a week, all year, for two years. This was the only way I could maintain growth . . . I already felt like I was losing control of my channel with only one day off. Sub numbers dropped, follows slowed down, and every metric I had been tracking for so long seemed to scream at me every Saturday saying, “Get back online or you’ll throw away all your hard work!” (Bowman 2017)

Despite the fact that platforms modulate measures of success through metrics and platform affordances, Bowman’s reflection here alludes to the way that platform-mediated cultural production holds streamers accountable for their own activity and resulting sense of success. As such, streamers internalize success as being a result of adequate self-regulation, work and investment in their activity. The same standards construe failure as a lack of self-regulation and an insufficient sense of enterprise (Storey, Salaman, and Platman 2005).

Grind by Design and Streaming Futures

The practice of grind on Twitch is intricately tied to the platform affordances that operationalize and quantify success, but the onus is firmly on individual

streamers when it comes to realizing this type of success. These affordances and the larger dynamics of platform capitalism together sustain the discourses of aspirational entrepreneurialism inherent to streaming culture on Twitch, as the “emphasis on work ethic from the streamer ties in with the broader trend of deindustrialisation: the decline in long-term management employment and the growth of precarious service work” (Johnson and Woodcock 2019, 345). Thus, for both aspiring and full-time streamers, the concept of grind is used to reconcile the public performance of streaming as fun, creative, flexible, and autonomous with the private reality of streaming as competitive, entrepreneurial, self-exploitative, and, most of all, precarious.

And the grind is framed by streaming culture as an inevitability. Some stream guides have suggested that streamers simply embrace the grind: “You should think of Twitch [like playing video games]—each follower, viewer or subscriber milestone you reach is like beating a game, but everything you do leading up to those milestones should be the actual fun part. There’s no gratification in the number itself. If you want to truly last in the long haul, fall in love with the mundane grind, not the far-off rewards” (Twitch Playbook 2019).

Addressing problems of grind and subsequent self-exploitation on Twitch will require significant changes to the way that the platform is designed and operated, and materializing these changes will require streamers to organize. Cecilia D’Anastasio (2017) has proposed the creation of a professional trade organization for Twitch streamers, similar to the Internet Creator’s Guild, as a way to collectively organize, aggregate knowledge, share common issues and frustrations, and express emergent solutions to Twitch directly. While mobilizing and convening independent workers can be a difficult process and might not guarantee the financial security or collective bargaining power of a traditional labor organization, the idea of an organization, of any kind, may provide the type of leverage needed to influence decision-making processes made by the platform, especially given that Twitch’s operational premise relies entirely on the work of these streamers. On the horizon, the Screen Actors Guild—American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) has expressed a desire to extend its union protection and benefits to video-based influencers creating branded content, which could include Twitch streamers with game-related brand affiliations or sponsorships (Grayson 2021). These protections may only apply to full-time and sponsored Twitch streamers, but it provides another

opportunity to leverage valuable streaming activity and insist on changes to platform affordances.

As for a more immediate response to the impetus of grind and quantified success on Twitch, streamers may find inspiration from Victoria O'Meara's (2019) work on engagement pods on Instagram. Engagement pods are grassroots communities that agree to mutually like, comment, share, or otherwise engage with each other's posts in order to game the platform's algorithm into prioritizing their content. They are a strategy utilized by Instagram influencers to navigate and resist the precariousness of platformized cultural production resulting from algorithmic processes on the platform that determine user visibility. According to O'Meara (2019), participation in these engagement pods is "intended to improve circulation and audience engagement metrics, to share information concerning algorithm changes, or to control appearances to advertising partners" (8), providing an alternative, and perhaps more immediate, form of organizing among platform laborers and users.

It may be possible to envision a similar strategy for Twitch streamers. Twitch has several native affordances that could be reappropriated for the purpose of cooperative engagement, including the platform's "raid" function, which allows streamers to end their broadcast by sending their current audience to another live channel, and its "stream team" function, which allows streamers to become members of groups based on shared games, practices, and interests. The use of these affordances, in addition to external communication channels, may provide an avenue for deliberately coordinated action, with the ability to mutually boost viewership numbers, follower counts, and chat engagement so highly valued by Twitch, as well as influence individual visibility and discoverability on the platform. If Twitch's larger culture of precarity, overwork, and self-exploitation results from the gamification of streaming activity and grinding for key metrics, then this form of community-coordinated and cooperative engagement may present a way to effectively game the system back.

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Real Life in Real Time

Live Streaming Culture

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