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NACVGM 2020 Retrospective

Thoughts on Organizing a Digital Conference

ABSTRACT The North American Conference on Video Game Music (NACVGM) has been held yearly as an in-person conference. NACVGM 2020 was originally scheduled to occur in April 2020 in Ithaca, New York. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many academic events in 2020 were shifted online, including game music conferences like Ludo2020 and NACVGM. The organizing committee for NACVGM decided to hold the full conference digitally as a live event. After hosting NACVGM 2020 live on his personal Twitch.tv page, Ryan Thompson explains the technical means that made it possible and offers a series of recommendations for other individuals considering shifting in-person meetings to online events. This reflection provides one perspective on hosting an academic conference during lockdown. KEYWORDS Digital scholarship, communication, online presentation, conference organization

The North American Conference on Video Game Music (NACVGM), an annual conference, was originally slated to take place in April of 2020 in Ithaca, New York. In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak that continues to affect many of us around the globe, that event was canceled and ultimately replaced with a digital event held on my personal Twitch.tv channel at www.twitch.tv/bardicknowledge on June 13–14, 2020.

I came to lead the virtual broadcast when Elizabeth Medina-Gray (in her role as the NACVGM 2020 conference host, and on behalf of the entire organizing committee) wrote me on March 8, asking if I could help with anything the committee might put together regarding a virtual component to the conference—at that time, none of us knew how drastically the next year would be affected. I sent the committee a bit of test-footage of a couple friends (Dana Plank and Karen Cook) reading their conference abstract as if it were their conference presentation, and based on that footage, I was asked to lead the event. Originally, I had planned to work with a small production team for the conference; by the end of March, it was clear that none of us would be able to travel, and I would have to run the conference from my home office.

I am extremely thankful to the editors of *JSMG* for inviting me to write a few words about the process for hosting NACVGM 2020 during quarantine, and to make some tentative suggestions for how things might be improved for the 2021 conference, which will also be a digital event. I hope this is illuminating and informative as others coordinate their own virtual events.

Before diving into those thoughts, a few disclaimers are in order, in addition to beginning this essay with a tremendous amount of thanks to the entirety of the

organizing and program committee for NACVGM. They performed an incredible amount of work preparing for every part of the conference that isn't digital: creating a CFP, selecting presenters, keeping calm during the onset of a global pandemic—the normal things expected of academic volunteers in 2020. In all seriousness, I am lucky to have been able to work with some of the finest people in our field.

First and foremost, I want to be clear that these comments represent my thoughts exclusively, not those of the entirety of the NACVGM organizing committee, and should be treated as such. Second, because I was the only person physically present at a production desk, I made several production decisions unilaterally; in 2021 I'll be working to be much more inclusive of the entire committee. Any suggestions I make about improving things should be read with that in mind, and they are subject to change based on meetings yet to be held. I would like to expressly thank Dana Plank, Karen Cook, and Julianne Grasso for serving as a constant sounding board for me as I made plans, and for assisting me during the event. Without the three of them, we would not have had a live event in 2020. Any success we had is shared between us and with the other members of the NACVGM planning committee. Finally, everyone involved should thank my wife, Addie Thompson, for her ability to quietly entertain and manage both of our children for two days so completely and successfully—I do not think they were heard or seen a single time during the conference proceedings.

BASIC PROCESS

Here is a list of the hardware and software I used in my home production studio as part of hosting NACVGM 2020:

- XSplit Broadcaster (broadcasting software)
- Skype, Discord, Zoom (communications software, Skype as primary)
- Elgato Stream Deck (production hardware)
- Audio-Technica AT2020USB+ microphone
- Logitech C922 webcam

NACVGM attendees saw only the end product of the live conference video on Twitch.tv. In order to produce the live video feed, there was a variety of communications tools and video software running behind the scenes, largely invisible to the general public. From a producer's perspective, there are at least two more major software choices to be made: the streaming software used to push the video to a destination, and the communications tools used to connect conference speakers to that video software (and therefore to the live audience) in real time. I'd like to briefly discuss each of those choices and suggest how I intend to improve upon them for NACVGM 2021.

PICKING A PLATFORM

Starting from the endpoint and moving backward, Twitch.tv was selected as a platform primarily out of sheer convenience. I (with Dana, Julianne, and Karen—see above)

stream there regularly, and we have a small audience of regular attendees, many of whom have ties to the larger community of musicians active in public social media spaces. This choice had a few meaningful results for conference structure.

First, because Twitch.tv is a public platform, there is no quick way to charge admission for access to the live feed of the broadcast. We therefore decided to not charge money for attendance to NACVGM 2020 partly because coordinating the infrastructure to meaningfully gate access was beyond what I could do in my home studio without significant external support or more time than I had to spend. Similarly, if I used what controls (via Twitch) do readily exist to gate access—for instance, limiting chat to channel subscribers only—there was no clear mechanism to determine how much of the money paid to my Twitch channel should be distributed back to NACVGM's accounts. I had no desire to create a monetary conflict between my professional volunteerism and my weekly hobby with my friends.

Second, using Twitch as a platform created—and guided answering—a question of what to do with the recordings of the conference. Should we archive them and host them somewhere, and if so, publicly or privately (only for those in attendance), and for how long? One NACVGM committee member raised a few important points: presenters to a "standard" in-person conference would not expect their presentations to be preserved for all time, and in the fields of musicology and music theory we often use conference papers as "draft" presentations for forthcoming article publications.

Keeping a permanent record of the proceedings was therefore tantamount to having these presentations do more than they were intended to do; at the same time, we wanted to have as accessible an event as possible for people who had slow or unstable internet connection options, and we wanted to provide a way to share our work with friends and colleagues multiple time zones removed from the east coast of the United States, for whom watching live would be an undue burden. We struck a middle ground during NACVGM 2020—my Twitch channel maintained on-demand, publicly accessible archival footage of the conference for three weeks, at which point the conference videos were allowed to expire in the spirit of conferences being temporary sites of gathering and presentation.

Finally, because Twitch is publicly accessible compared to a physical location, and partly because the channel has a public audience that does not overlap with NACVGM, we had larger attendance numbers than we usually would expect to see. Similarly, a few more people connected to professional game audio production stopped by than have in the past. I consider this a success overall.

PRODUCING THE BROADCAST

Moving backward into layers of production less visible to conference attendees, it was relatively simple to decide which streaming software to use—I teach a course on XSplit Broadcaster at Michigan State University, and unlike its major competitor OBS, XSplit has real-time tech support for individuals who pay for a subscription to the software. That's what guided me toward choosing it for MSU, and how I made the decision for
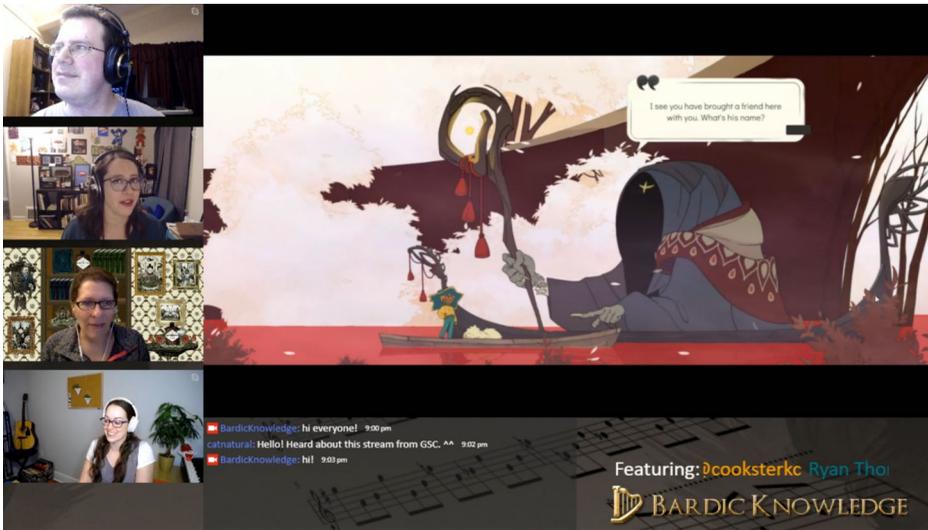
FIGURE 1. Image from weekly stream on twitch.tv/bardicknowledge, demonstrating how XSplit can separate one Skype call into its constituent parts, rendering them as individual video sources. Gameplay image from *Spiritfarer*. (Images of the stream co-hosts used here with their consent.)

NACVGM. The software worked well, and it scales well also—though again, the pandemic limited our ability to operate at any scale beyond my home office.

The decision that most impacted the stream was choosing Skype as our primary communications platform to connect presenters to the audience for the Q&A portion of each talk. Skype—as opposed to Zoom or Microsoft Teams—was chosen for technical reasons on my end as the stream producer. Skype can output each individual caller on a shared video call and a shared screen as separate video sources (via NDI video stream) that XSplit can then position and resize independently from the others. Figure 1 is a screenshot to demonstrate this setup, taken from a Thursday night stream with Dana Plank, Karen Cook, and Julianne Grasso—this example is used in lieu of a screenshot from NACVGM 2020 (those videos having expired, as previously explained), though the technical conditions by which each is prepared are identical.

The way that Skype captures and sends the video call to XSplit allows me to position Dana, Karen, Julianne, and myself individually—here in a vertical orientation. For NACVGM, I was able to have Dana and Karen on the call for just about the entire conference to help me behind the scenes—it was just a matter of turning off their video and enabling only the video of the presenter. In other video conference programs (Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc.), I would have had to ensure that the physical position of a window never shifted, or else I would have had to manually re-add Dana and Karen (who served as moderators and helped introduce speakers) every time a new person joined and exited the call, which would have slowed down proceedings.

For NACVGM 2020, some presenters pre-recorded a video presentation and appeared live only for the Q&A session following their talk. In that case, I was able to simply project the video file they sent me to the stream in a full-screen view. Others chose

FIGURE 2. Image of Elgato Stream Deck's configuration: folders of various macros, microphone and speakers on/off, resource management indicators, and sound effects—all instantly playable from the deck rather than having to navigate any one specific program or web browser. USB drive included for size comparison.

to present live, so I positioned their shared screen where *Spiritfarer* is, with their webcam image from Skype in the upper left where my image appears in Figure 1. There were a very few situations (usually involving Mac vs. PC conflicts, though we didn't specifically solve each case) where a presenter had difficulty with Skype; in those cases, I scrambled and used both Zoom and Discord to have folks share a screen with me that could be sent to the stream. Live-presentation video quality tended to be lower than pre-recorded overall, which I'll address at the end with my suggested changes for next year.

To manage all of these various video sources, regardless of their origin, I used an Elgato Stream Deck—a small production box of various presets and macros—that let me monitor computer health, trigger an "applause" sound effect that was popular at the conference, and run various aspects of the stream without having to switch active windows; in effect, it allowed me to make invisible a number of changes that would have required pausing and shifting stream elements around without it. A detailed explanation of how I configured it is beyond the scope of this brief essay (Figure 2 is a starting point), but I highly recommend the Stream Deck to anyone considering hosting anything with multiple changing video sources.

That basic process served to create what audiences experienced as the NACVGM broadcast. The stream went live for about four hours at a time, and I rebooted my machine during every large break to ensure that nothing would crash or give out while

we were all live (perhaps an unnecessary superstition on my part). This worked reasonably well, though there are places where we could improve it, both technically and organizationally.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE DIGITAL EVENTS

One such improvement might well be tied to our experience of the pandemic itself. In 2020 the Q&A session following each presentation was exceptionally supportive of most speakers—to a point where I felt the questions were somewhat watered-down. I am not in any way advocating for an oppositional challenging of speakers or an attempt to shoot down their arguments, but I believe past conferences have had more robust questions and discussions overall. It's my belief that a public forum (as opposed to a private, in-person conference where people have paid and traveled to attend) plus our collective desire by June to simply engage anyone outside our homes combined to yield a mentally supportive but relatively unchallenging set of discussions and questions for speakers. That might well have been what we needed, in fairness; but for presenters eager to be asked to articulate more challenging aspects of their presentations as they move from conference presentation to formal article, a few folks might have been underserved this year.

Another improvement would be how to resolve the conflict between the potential quality of a broadcast weighed against the technical accessibility of connection to presenters. For instance, a Skype call or shared screen is limited to about 30 frames per second (FPS) maximum, and many modern video games run at 60 FPS. The lower framerate on Skype (again, what NACVGM 2020 used) was most noticeable for those presenters who shared a screen live rather than submitting a pre-recorded video in advance. A live shared screen—regardless of communications software quality—is also vulnerable to variable rates of quality based on the internet speed of both host and presenter in ways a pre-recorded video, by definition, is not. In the future, I'll therefore be advocating for more people to create pre-recorded videos for ease of both production and quality.

Similarly, my webcam is capable of recording at a resolution of 1280x720 at 60 FPS—but it won't do that in Skype, Zoom, or Microsoft Teams. To render that resolution live to another person, I have to record myself (exclusively) in XSplit at 60 FPS, then bounce that feed out to NDI video input across the network, receive that feed onto the computer as a separate window, and share it over a high-resolution connection on the paid version of Discord, which allows 1920x1080 at 60 FPS screen sharing—it's designed to share high-definition gaming footage in conference, but not high-resolution video calls. If the previous sentence is intimidating, you're not alone in that, and the gains are not worth the input for most purposes. Using any paid service obviously raises the bar of entry too. Choosing between accessibility and quality is a constant decision, and one I hope to determine with the committee as we plan for NACVGM 2021.

I think that greater familiarity with the possibilities and limitations of online broadcasting as a result of many professors (including me) teaching online for this academic year will help things greatly for future online conferences. Going forward, we might well

be able to increase quality even if that requires more technical knowledge on the part of both conference hosts and presenters. Regardless of what choices anyone makes along these lines, I highly recommend requiring every presenter to do a tech rehearsal the month before the broadcast. This was optional for NACVGM 2020 rather than explicitly required. Every presenter who checked in with me prior to the official conference broadcast had far fewer issues arise than those who just read the instructions and joined the Skype call on the day of the event. As our own event begins to make plans for 2021, this will be my first suggestion for improvement.

One change I hope to see on the technical side of things is expanding the production team. For 2020's broadcast, absolutely everything ran off the same single computer. This invites opportunities for mismanagement on the part of the producer; there was at least one moment when a live speaker was briefly audible during their own pre-recorded presentation. Moving forward, I hope to expand this production setup to a team of two or three users running computers, which would create more stability and help compartmentalize the three audio sources that should not always be audible to the audience: live speakers joining the broadcast, pre-recorded materials airing to the stream, and stream moderators and co-producers organizing behind the scenes.

It is my hope that working more closely with the planning committee for next year will create a smoother, more professional experience for everyone involved. Having an entire year to conceptualize what this will look like, instead of just six or eight weeks, gives us a lot of advantages we did not have in the summer of 2020. I am striving to meet everyone's expectations and, with the rest of the NACVGM planning committee, put on an informative, entertaining conference in 2021. I invite anyone reading to please consider submitting to future NACVGM conferences—see our website at https://vgmconference.weebly.com for details and CFPs—and I am looking forward to continuing this work on behalf of our community of people invested in video game scholarship. ◼