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To cite this article: Mia Consalvo (2017) Player one, playing with others virtually: what's next in game and player studies, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34:1, 84-87, DOI: [10.1080/15295036.2016.1266682](https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2016.1266682)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2016.1266682>



Published online: 23 Dec 2016.



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Player one, playing with others virtually: what's next in game and player studies

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes current research in player studies, focusing on how play is a social activity, and how sociality is mediated and performed in a variety of settings. It starts by explaining the concept of tandem play and then moves to an exploration of gameplay that is performed for differently sized audiences via the Twitch.tv platform. Our research finds that even single-player gameplay can very often be a social activity. Additionally, how we perform gameplay is contingent on multiple factors, including where we and others are physically located, whether play is professional or amateur, and how particular play platforms shape our expectations for play and spectatorship actions.

KEYWORDS

Play; Twitch.tv; tandem play; gameplay; sociality

Keeping up with the constantly evolving game industry, player interests and choices, and global shifts in business and play practices are normal for a game studies scholar. We have witnessed the rise (and fall) of social games on sites like Facebook (such as *Farmville* and *Castleville*), the move to mobile and free-to-play as dominant models around the globe (Finnish development studio Supercell, the makers of mobile games *Clash of Clans* and *Clash Royale*, was just acquired by Chinese publisher Tencent for more than \$10 billion (Sinclair, 2016)), the coming of virtual reality, the ascendance of new distribution models like Steam and an explosion of games from indie, art, and other alternative creators. Although many of us don't use the term "gamer" to identify who we are or what we do, more people play games, on phones, on tablets, on PCs and Macs, around the world, than ever before. The types of games released are also becoming more diverse, and the rise of "toxic gamer culture" has also become an issue in the mainstream media (Singal, 2016). There is so much new and challenging in games and player studies to explore and study, it can be overwhelming simply to consider the possible choices. Yet one of the most interesting and perhaps important shifts has been in recognizing how we play games together in new and old ways—not simply on a couch or gathered in a persistent virtual space like *World of Warcraft* – but even with small, single-player games as well as with large and small communities from around the block and around the world.

For the past year and a half my research team has investigated "tandem play"—when two or more players engage with a single-player game together, moving through the game with a variety of potential motives (Consalvo, Begy, Ganzon, & Scully-Blaker, 2016). Tandem play isn't a new activity—it is something players have been doing as long as we've had single-player games and more than one person wanting to play that game. Kinder mentioned the practice briefly in 1991, when she wrote about the rise

of transmedia practices that co-evolved with the evolution and popularity of videogames in the US(1991). Talking about kids playing Nintendo games, she pointed out that single-player games weren't isolating children from one another—instead they were allowing them to help one another so that “the one who is the most advanced in a particular game [can] do most of the playing so the others can watch and learn new moves, or else they will let the novice do most of the playing while the more advanced player coaches” (p. 115).

The most obvious evidence of this activity—even with adults—is what occurs in “couch co-op” mode, where a pair of individuals sits together on a couch (or other furniture) and play a console game together in the same room. This allows for turn taking with the controller, shared commentary, banter, and help, as well as more spectators and potential players to join in as time and space allow. Other researchers have investigated co-located play before, although mainly confined to multiplayer games on systems like the Nintendo Wii that demand movement-based controls (Downs, Vetere, & Smith, 2015; Volda & Greenberg, 2009, 2012).

Another way that we have theorized tandem play occurring is via live streaming sites like Twitch.tv. Twitch is a free platform anyone can use to stream their gameplay as well as their voice and/or facecam streams via their own “channel” to an audience of unlimited size. More than a million people now stream their gameplay to more than 100 million viewers every month, with individual streamers drawing anywhere from one to hundreds of thousands of concurrent viewers (Brightman, 2015). While most of those viewers and streamers are engaged in competitive individual and team-based eSports games like *League of Legends* and *CounterStrike: Global Offensive*, a significant number of streamers also play through single-player games, sometimes to see how fast they can complete them (the community of speed-runners) and sometimes simply to enjoy, comment on, and critique them publicly.

Twitch only launched in 2011, yet its impact on the videogame universe is growing exponentially. Videogame enthusiasts that previously put videos of gameplay up on YouTube (Let's Plays) are now either also on or transitioning entirely to Twitch; prize winnings for competitions broadcast live on Twitch are in the multimillion dollar range, and videogame developers are creating games for individuals to play—and audiences to participate in with them—solely via Twitch. What does this mean for games and game culture? How we play is changing, suggesting that how we theorize and understand play must shift as well.

One entry point to investigate that shift is through re-examining the act of failure in games. Juul (2013) writes that failure can be defined as “the player working toward a goal, either communicated by the game or invented by the player, and the player failing to attain that goal” (p. 14). Yet Juul (2013) also argues that even though players dislike such failure, we also need the failure to learn and to prove that “we matter, that the world does not simply continue regardless of our actions” (p. 122). In a survey, he found that players actually enjoyed games less if they won too easily or experienced no failure while playing. But one thing Juul doesn't write about is how we perform failure, or how we witness failure in ourselves and other players, and respond accordingly.

Preliminary research investigating how a variety of streamers handle failure in games shows multiple strategies at work. For some streamers, failure is simply part of the

process of playing a game, and a way to hone and refine particular actions. For example, one of the streamers we observed in our tandem play study enjoyed playing *Dragon Age: Inquisition* on nightmare difficulty mode, which she cheerfully talked about while streaming. For Ashe (a pseudonym), character deaths, party wipes, and the Game Over screen were temporary setbacks to overcome, as she figured out optimal methods for particular battles. Ashe was also confident in her ability to prevail, and so didn't see failure as a problem or roadblock—it was one more challenge the game provided to her.

In our observations of streamers with large(r) audiences, failure may be more fraught, as more people are perhaps watching and assessing a streamer's skill at a particular game. In our viewing of variety streamers we have mostly witnessed streamers who ignore their failures, who comment on their failures as part of game play, or who joke about failure-related events in self-deprecating ways (Consalvo & Sugiarto, 2016). Likewise, streamer audiences can ignore such acts, or often join in the commiseration, and sometimes offer advice about how to improve strategies and tactics to succeed. Our (limited) viewing has not found any real anger from streamers about repeated or notable failures, and neither have the communities we observed engaged in harassment or abuse of streamers for their failures. It's key, however, to point out that these are variety streamers, who often draw viewers for their personalities as well as the games they play—this is an entirely different style of play than competitive eSports genres, or even speed-runners who are perhaps going for a new record for running a certain game. The toxicity of the eSports community on Twitch is notorious (Procter, 2015), particularly for how women are treated, both when they win and lose, but especially if they fail or make mistakes. These differences (and the very preliminary nature of this work) show how the performance of failure in games needs to be very carefully contextualized in order to be comprehensively understood. The pain that Juul describes relative to failure may or may not appear publicly in a variety streamer's broadcasts, whether they actually feel that discomfort or not. It also shows how audiences can shift a streamer's focus from progress within a game to more ludic discussion about it, as well as a focus on being playful, rather than instrumental in moving through a game space.

Another way to think about performing failure is to go back to Senft's work on home-camming and camgirls in the late 1990s—women who set up webcams in their homes that automatically uploaded still images to the web for others to view (2008). Senft's conceptualization of "microcelebrity" for understanding such actions is equally useful here—camgirls exerted significant labor to create a recognizable "brand" for themselves, to attract and engage viewers, and with which to build a particular type of community. At least some live streamers work hard to build a name for themselves—a brand—and to then attract a community that recognizes them for what they do—play videogames. One such streamer—Kaceytron—performs failure in provocative ways. The woman who runs the stream bills herself as a "professional girl gamer" and an excellent player. Yet her performance often undercuts that persona, but she steadfastly denies she is bad at games. Layered on top of her performance is her persona as a "boob streamer," who wears low cut shirts to gain viewers, and talks trash to her stream audience. Kaceytron's audience glories in her failures, but they are just one component of her projected persona.

Of course all games offer and all players experience failure, at least some of the time. How streamers manage that failure—by making it entertaining, gritting their teeth, and

dealing with it, using it to boost their brand; or overcoming it; and how their various communities respond to those failures are a few of the questions being studied, to see what's next in videogames and player studies.

Note on contributor

Mia Consalvo is Professor and Canada Research Chair in Game Studies and Design at Concordia University in Montreal. She is the co-author of *Players and their Pets*, co-editor of *Sports Videogames* and author of *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*. She has most recently published the book *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Context*, about Japan's influence on the videogame industry and game culture. Mia runs the mLab, a space dedicated to developing innovative methods for studying games and game players. She's a member of the Centre for Technoculture, Art & Games (TAG), and she has presented her work at professional as well as academic conferences including regular presentations at the Game Developers' Conference. She is the Past-President of the Digital Games Research Association, and has held positions at MIT, Ohio University, Chubu University in Japan and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

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