In May 2012, I was sitting on my sofa browsing the internet when I stumbled on a website showing a live feed of a *StarCraft* 2 computer game tournament taking place in Paris. In esports competitions, professional players compete in a formal tournament setting for prize money. Having done research and written a book on esports, I was familiar with game broadcasting attempts over the years, but this production particularly caught my eye. The event was taking place at the beautiful Le Grand Rex concert hall, and camera shots of an energetic, cheering audience of over two thousand people were interspersed with live feeds of the game competition. The strange world of *StarCraft*, populated and fought over by human Terrans, otherworldly Protoss, and creepy insectoid Zergs, shared screen time with the faces of the players, commentators, and audience that filled the large theater. Yet there was also another set of spectators—ones solely participating online. Along with thousands of others around the world, I was watching this match in real time over the internet. On our screens, alongside the video piping out from Paris, a chat stream (an old-school Internet Relay Chat [IRC] channel) flowed by with hundreds of people talking to each other about the event, and cheering through text and emoticons.

As someone who has not only studied gaming but also has roots in internet studies, virtual environments, and synchronous computer-mediated communication, my research ears perked up. What caught my attention was not only the spectatorship; it was also the forms of communication and presence among broadcasters and audience, both on-site at the venue and
distributed throughout the network. I was intrigued by the experience as a *media event*. This show was being broadcast to a huge global audience, and as I came to learn over the course of that night, was being talked about in a variety of other online spaces such as Twitter. I had my television on in the background, but soon turned the volume down. This game “channel” being broadcast on my laptop captured my full attention. It was immediately clear to me that I needed to explore this space more.

That feeling—that I was not watching alone but instead alongside thousands of others in real time—was powerful. It was a familiar, resonant experience for me. I’ve long loved television, especially live content, and even as a kid I felt its pull. I remember getting a small black-and-white television in my bedroom as a preteen, and staying up late to watch *Saturday Night Live* and tap into an adult world I didn’t have access to at that age. Breaking news frequently had the effect of helping me feel an immediacy of connection with a larger world. My father always either had on the evening news or a sports broadcast, and our family typically had the TV on from late afternoon through to bedtime. Beyond live shows, we constantly had on cartoons, sitcoms, and procedurals, and rather than going to the theater, watched most movies through it. The TV was an object our family shared and gathered around. We kept it on constantly. Much like Ron Lembo’s (2000) account of “continuous television use” (including his personal reflections on how TV was situated in his own working-class home), my personal and social experience of television has ranged from the mundane to meaningful. Sometimes it held my full attention, while at other moments it was simply background noise, offering a welcome ambient presence. Television was not only a presence in my family’s life; it connected me to the outside world, entertained and informed me, offered material for conversations with others, gave me broader cultural waypoints, and sometimes just kept me company.

This relationship with television is not, of course, unique to me. Scholars over the years have documented the profound role it can have in our lives—from politics, ideology, and mythmaking to socialization—structuring our domestic lives and mundanely offering its presence. Unlike some television scholars, I never undertook this object of my affection and attention as a site of research. It simply was. But that night, watching the game live stream and audience engaged alongside me online, I paused. Though I have remained a television viewer my entire life, like many I also came to spend a lot of time online and in gaming spaces. This broadcast seemed to weave together all these threads at once: it was an interesting collision of the televisual, computer games, the internet, and computer-mediated communication. Its
vibrancy as a live media product, both like TV and yet very much something else, was captivating.

Within esports—formalized competitive computer gaming—there has long been a quest to see gaming make the shift to television, despite many bumpy attempts over the years. The hope has been that if it could get into broadcast, not only would its legitimacy be signaled, but the audience for it could grow significantly. In my prior analysis of that industry, I briefly discussed the use of streaming media to broadcast competitive play, and remarked on how “social cam” websites like Justin.tv and Ustream were being utilized by gamers (Taylor 2012). These sites were typically hosting people simply streaming their everyday lives via webcams, offering amateur talk shows or even mundane “puppymension” channels where viewers could watch litters of sleeping newborn dogs. Yet some gamers were also gravitating to these sites, pushing their personal computers to crank out live video of their play to whoever wanted to tune in and watch. Though they didn’t easily fit in the model of expected use of the sites, they were there pressing it for their own purposes.

Things have since changed quickly in the world of live streaming. Twitch, a broadcast platform dedicated to gaming that spun off from the social cam site Justin.tv in June 2011, has in a handful of years dramatically reshaped the landscape. By 2017, the site boasted 2.2-plus million unique broadcasters per month with 17,000-plus members in the Twitch Partner Program and 110,000 “creators” in the Affiliates Program—content producers that receive revenue from their streams—and about 10 million daily active users (Twitch 2017b, 2017c). It hosts a wide variety of games from various genres. Major esports tournaments will, typically over the course of a weekend, reach millions of viewers. Variety streamers, those broadcasters who play a range of games, can pull in thousands of viewers per session. Though a thin slice of broadcasters get the lion’s share of the audience and smaller channels often only host a handful of viewers, browsing the site you can find hundreds of channels at any time of the day. Though most major televised sports events still trump esports live streaming in terms of audience size, and specific numbers for any single session should be taken with some caution, the overall growth of live streaming as a medium for new forms of broadcast and game content is indisputable.

Twitch is certainly not alone in helping build esports; other platform companies such as YouTube or Facebook, organizations like the Electronic Sports League (ESL), DreamHack, PGL, and Major League Gaming (MLG), and game developers such as Riot, Valve, and Blizzard have all tossed their
hat into the live streaming ring by producing and/or distributing broadcast content. A generation of game consoles, the PS4 and Xbox One, both launched in 2013–14 with functionality to support broadcasting your play through live streaming. And traditional media companies such as Turner have gotten into the mix via the ELEAGUE tournament, which appears on both traditional cable and Twitch. Hours and hours of gaming content are now produced and consumed every day, 24-7, via live broadcast over the internet.

Though speaking about “waves” in any domain risks obscuring the threads of continuity or earlier experiments that never caught on, it can be helpful in broad strokes to describe esports this way, especially for those who may not know much about gaming. The first wave (the 1970s and 1980s) was anchored in arcades and around home console machines where the local dominated. The second wave (the 1990s through 2010) leveraged the power of the internet for multiplayer connections and a more global formulation of the competitive space. That period also witnessed the power of networking as a means to jump-start an esports industry—one that largely had its eye on traditional sports as its model. The third wave (starting around 2010) has at its core the growth of live streaming that takes the power of networking we saw earlier and powerfully combines it with the televisual. It is during this period that esports has become not just a sports product but a media entertainment outlet as well.

Live streaming offers professional esports players and teams opportunities to build their audience, brand, and incomes, while streaming their practice sessions—often straight out of their bedrooms. Tournaments are leveraging the medium to expand the reach of competitive gaming by building global audiences largely based online (see figure 1.1). Being an esports fan suddenly became much easier with live streaming.

You no longer needed to download a game replay file, track down a video on demand (VOD) on YouTube and a niche site, or constantly search out tournament results after the event. Twitch hosted massive amounts of content, from practice time to tournaments. There you could also talk to fellow audience members, “follow” your favorite channels to receive notifications when broadcasters went live, and subscribe to channels for a monthly fee, which, among other “member perks,” would remove ads from the stream. With Twitch’s purchase by Amazon in 2014, “Prime” members eventually got additional benefits on the platform (such as free game content) if they linked their accounts. Having previously tracked the second wave of esports, the emergence of game live streaming illuminated for me how profoundly
**Figure 1.1.** The International grand finals, 2014. Teams selecting their match characters. The lower-right corner below the image shows the number of people currently watching (213,391), total views of the channel (38,693,102), and number of people who have specially tagged the channel to follow. The right side of the screen is a live chat window.
a televisual experience combined with the power of network culture could transform a nascent industry.

As I began spending more time on the site, however, I realized there was a much bigger project lurking. The growth of game live streaming wasn’t simply a story about esports but also about larger changes in game culture and sharing your play. While the competitive gaming activity on Twitch is tremendous, it’s not just esports that is finding a home in live streaming. The medium has offered players of all kinds an opportunity to build audiences interested in observing, commenting, and playing alongside them. Live streaming was allowing gamers of all kinds to *transform their private play into public entertainment*. While sites like YouTube have long tapped into this desire with the ability to distribute game videos, live streaming upped the ante by offering broadcasters the opportunity to interact with their audiences in real time through a synchronous chat window. Audiences—and their interactions with broadcasters—were themselves becoming integrated into the show. Game live streaming has become a new form of *networked* broadcast.

These non-esports broadcasters, typically called “variety” streamers due to the range of game titles they play (from new AAA releases to old Nintendo console games to niche indie games), are an important part of the platform. Frequently utilizing a green screen so their own face appeared overlaid onto the game, they were playing all kinds of titles in real time for a growing audience. Alongside the game and camera window, there is a chat space filled with audience members engaging with the broadcaster and each other (see figure 1.2). Rather than the kind of cheering you’d see in the chat pane during esports events, talk in these channels ranged from conversation with the streamer and others about the game or just everyday life.

While computer games make up the lion’s share of Twitch, over just a few years, channels have also sprung up covering nondigital gaming. Avid card gamers, such as those who play *Magic: The Gathering*, can be found practicing and competing. Old-school “tabletop” role-playing sessions are now being streamed, complete with innovations for visualizing player characters and dice rolls (see figure 1.3).7

Alongside these diverse and sometimes-experimental forms of broadcast play, Twitch has also become a place to share creative work (such as making cosplay costumes or art), cooking and “social eating” (where people simply broadcast eating a meal), and music (from practice sessions to full-scale concerts). And in a twist back to its Justin.tv roots, the platform introduced an “in real life” (IRL) broadcast category allowing people to stream their everyday lives.
FIGURE 1.2. MANvsGame broadcast, 2013.
FIGURE 1.3. MissClikks D&D broadcast, 2017.
What began as a platform to support digital gaming has quickly expanded to accommodate people who want to produce a range of creative content for others. Some of these broadcasts have small audiences of friends and family who watch, and others draw thousands or even millions over the course of a weekend event. Across the platform, participants are creating new entertainment products that mix together gameplay, humor, commentary, and real-time interaction with fans and audiences. As with esports broadcasters, some variety streamers are working hard to convert their playtime to a professional job through advertising, sponsorships, donations, and other forms of monetization.

Though deeply innovative, all this creative activity is not taking place entirely outside existing media industries. Game companies, suddenly attuned to the potential of broadcast to get their products in front of gamers and build interest in their brands, are experimenting with live streaming as a form of marketing and promotion. From hosting launch events to developer chats, a number of companies are utilizing the space as a new form of PR and support. Some developers, such as Rami Ismail of the Dutch indie studio Vlambeer, have integrated the platform into their design process. In addition to live broadcasting his development sessions of the game *Nuclear Throne* twice a week (including real-time conversation and feedback with the audience), early builds (distributed via Valve’s Steam platform) could be purchased through Twitch, and came with special chat emoticons and a subscription to the channel. Game developers, such as the Massachusetts-based studio Proletariat, focused on making a title specifically for live streaming. That game, *Streamline*, allowed broadcasters to play in a game with their audience members, who also voted on new conditions that would instantly appear in the game to challenge everyone (such as the ground suddenly erupting in flames, thus requiring the players to jump onto platforms).

Underneath it all, technology companies—from core platform developers to third parties that build broadcasting tools—have been working to build and sustain infrastructures for video services as well as create economic models that allow them to survive. Tough engineering and network infrastructure challenges, video compression technology, and large-scale customer management systems are all being wrangled with and developed across a global context. The tremendous emergent activity occurring via live streaming is fundamentally engaged with sociotechnical artifacts built by both professional and amateur developers.

Amid the innovation and experimentation lurk a number of critical issues. Decisions about how these platforms and technologies will function
is deeply interwoven with ideas about networked play, audiences, and the future of media writ large. As is the case with many user-generated content (UGC) platforms, advertising continues to be a prime model of monetization, but one that comes with its own set of persistent challenges—from ad-blocking software to ad inventories and concerns of oversaturation. On many UGC platforms, especially those that interweave original creative material with existing intellectual property, skirmishes continue to break out over ownership and regulation. The governance and management of these spaces as subcultures within a platform, hosting dynamic communities of practice, continues to pose vexing problems. And as is the case with a variety of internet and gaming communities, the tremendous creative energy driving innovation and new forms of culture is frequently in tension with existing legal or social frameworks that struggle to manage it. Though live streaming is transforming media production, distribution, and everyday practices, it continues to exist in legal and governance frameworks that are often deeply out of step with where the culture is headed.

Live streaming—from individuals broadcasting their gaming to the many people watching them—gives us a fascinating peek into when network and media culture collide with contemporary digital play as well as the future(s) of online producers and audiences. We are seeing the rise of a new form of networked broadcasting—one tied up with aspirations to transform otherwise-private play into public entertainment. But this emerging thread of game culture is also part of a larger change happening in media more broadly. From cord cutting to alternative paths of production and distribution, game live streaming is part of a larger transformation happening within the media industries.

**Games Matter**

In setting out to write this book, I felt the pull to make sure to anchor it in broader conversations happening outside game studies. From work on television to how the internet was affecting creative practice to sociotechnical systems, there is much to be leveraged back into understanding this slice of game culture. For many of us who came from traditional disciplinary training, this move is not unusual. We regularly, and fruitfully, look back to our home or other established disciplines to help guide us through the terrain of game culture, and hopefully that thread is evident throughout this book. But I want to make a brief call here for those various home disciplines to take games seriously as a site of valuable empirical data and knowledge creation,
and see games as now a decidedly central part of our media, networked, and sociotechnical landscape.

Game live streaming intersects many contemporary issues not only around media transformations but also larger considerations of cultural production and everyday users. Understanding this space helps us see the whole better. Over almost two decades of watching game studies develop as an area of research, I’ve seen it wax and wane in the attention of scholars outside the domain. While researchers in a variety of spheres became attuned to massively multiplayer online games (such as World of Warcraft) or virtual worlds (like Second Life) in the mid-2000s, far fewer have kept sustained attention to what is happening in game culture. The responsibility of this certainly partly lay at the feet of game scholars who have not always done enough to continually connect their domain to wide-ranging scholarship and public interest. But scholars outside game studies who are not paying enough attention to this area of study also bear some responsibility for our current state of affairs. This is not just unfortunate; it has serious consequences for our broader collective research agenda of understanding not only sociotechnical systems but how more traditional forms are changing too. Those who are interested in a critical analysis of platforms, emerging media, and civic engagement online can benefit from seeing how serious cultural matters are unfolding in what is otherwise thought of as leisure spaces.

Everyday life, filled with both work and leisure, is where people regularly navigate deeply political, culturally productive, sociotechnical systems. It is where politics comes at us sideways. While many are detached from what we might think of as serious civic engagement, all of us each and every day confront a range of critical issues in our domestic and work lives, among friends, colleagues, strangers, and family. Coming home and trying to tune out the “real world” by relaxing through various forms of leisure is a normal part of everyday life. Increasingly gaming has become one of those spaces. Players regularly encounter people from outside their own social worlds, and construct networks and online lives in concert with these systems. Yet games are now routinely tied to commercialized platforms, complex networks, and media infrastructures like never before. Companies, policies, and laws, addressing everything from intellectual property to standards of behavior, govern games. Users, owners, and systems co-constitute a space that in turn shapes experience. This means that those very moments when people are engaging in play remain some of the most politically infused spaces.

Much like sports or other forms of media, leisure is deeply tied to gender, race, and sexuality, social identity and community, normative models,
and complex systems of regulation. What is often cordoned off as “simply leisure” or “fun” is actually deeply central as well as formative in all our civic and political lives. Certainly some game studies scholars have been guilty of reifying the division through the notion of the “magic circle” of play. Frankly it has caused more conceptual harm than good. This has been a position empirically challenged not only by sociological studies of digital gaming but also the longer trajectory of play studies rooted in anthropology. What those early scholars found has only continued to be echoed in our current studies of digital gaming; our play and gaming is always inextricably linked to our everyday lives. Our identities, bodies, and social and political worlds are always tied up in it. In the same way that game scholars must pay attention to the context of play, those interested in what is frequently seen as the more “serious” side of our lives—the political or civic—can benefit from keeping an eye on leisure and gaming.

It is typical that in gaming and leisure spaces you can catch fore-shadowing glimpses of critical issues that will arise in the mainstream years, or decades, down the line. Think about how, for example, early studies of text-based multiuser dungeons (some of the earliest virtual worlds) were tackling the relationship between code, governance, and forms of participation. Game scholars have long wrangled with the interrelation between technology and social practice, how technological systems co-construct experience, including how forms of social control and order get embodied in systems.

Early game researchers also explored what it meant to have online social networks via games, through which communication, presentations of self, forms of embodiment, and the circuits between off- and online life were connecting us to friends and strangers. Though “social media” has become the dominant term of use to refer to our online experiences, early multiplayer worlds were some of the first to explore what it meant to live life online, and have our identities and social networks extended beyond the physical and geographic. Amid the riches of emergent culture in games, scholars studying gender, sexuality, and race in those spaces illuminated key nodes where socio-technological systems intersected more troubling behavior. They helped us understand how communities, platforms, and games foster systems of inclusion and exclusion tied up with offline notions about self and identity. They tackled how communities themselves policed borders, enforced particular forms of communication and behavior, and often harassed and excluded.

Game studies work tackled the rise of player productions before UGC shot off as a term in both academia and industry. Research on how average
gamers were creating content for other players—be it through game mods, videos, or web-based sites—offered an analysis of how typical configurations of producers and consumers were being disrupted. These kinds of activities in turn helped push inquiries into the iterations between platform and formal design and actual use, where UGC or practices were picked back up by developers to refine official products. Tied up with this has been a consideration of the growth of global commercialized platforms as prime nodes in people’s lives—something anyone now concerned about Facebook or Twitter can appreciate.

Game research has offered sustained and early explorations into what has come to be seen as some of our most important political and critical conversations. This has happened in large part because these issues are inherent within leisure and gaming; they are not separate from it. While some in game studies have tried to carve off the field as exceptional, this has been a mistake. There is much game scholars can learn from fields like sociology, anthropology, media studies, and science and technology studies (to name only a few). And likewise, there is a great amount that studying games can bring to those with an interest in the critical and political side of media, both old and new. Far too often, scholars have expressed to me that they are not “enough of a gamer” or are too intimidated by games to actually know what is happening in that research space. This is unfortunate; it’s a missed opportunity for all of us to be connecting up our work across “object” lines so as to watch for resonances or gaps, moments where our data and arguments bolster each other’s assertions, and places where they pose real challenges to it.

Our media lives are not cordoned off in discrete parts. One is not simply a television watcher, Twitter user, sports fan, or game player. Media and leisure practices take place across multiple platforms and communities; they intersect and inform each other. There is a circuit of practice, experience, and production at work. By default, any node is already entangled in the others. They are always multisited. Even if we hold a single object of analysis in frame (for example, my choice of Twitch as an anchor platform), we must be attuned to the assemblage that makes up our media lives in order to fully understand what is happening.

Play and gaming are deeply connected to the things that matter, and impact our lives. This means, ultimately, that gaming is a civic space, political domain, media sphere, and site of critical work, while simultaneously being a place of leisure, even rest and respite. Gaming cannot be set off to the side, a quirky outpost functioning as an academic novelty. It is a huge—indeed for...
many, the *most significant*—space where they engage directly in core cultural issues and debates. It shapes and deeply impacts mainstream conversations and culture. Games matter.

**Historical Snapshots and Methods**

When I first began this research project, I thought it’d be a one-off article, something to bring my work on esports, published as a book in 2012, up to date. It instead grew into this full-fledged case study of a particular live streaming site. But it is crucial to understand, as with many such projects, it is deeply situated in a particular historical moment. The fieldwork for this book primarily took place over the course of several years (2012–15) as early Twitch broadcasters were engaged in some of the first experimentations not only on the platform but also with live streaming more broadly. This was a time where esports organizations were taking so many nascent media practices from earlier periods and beginning to bring them to fruition. Variety streamers were working hard to carve out a set of creative practices, and in the case of so many I spoke with, aspiring to professionalize in ways that then were yet unimaginable. And my visits out to Twitch’s San Francisco offices began when it was still a small upstart company, not yet owned by Amazon, and living decidedly on the outskirts of game and tech culture.

The platform as well as gaming and media more broadly continue to transform and change, often quicker than any of us can keep up. While throughout the book I’ve tried to provide waypoints to some of these changes, the bulk of the data and analysis here should be seen as closely tied to this early period of game live streaming, just after the launch of Twitch. Much of what I chronicle are practices first and foremost undertaken by early adopters: those individual gamers and organizations that actively sought out live broadcasting, and pushed the form in fascinating ways. Over the last few years in particular, I’ve had the privilege of meeting many new scholars, frequently in the thick of graduate work, who are sure to provide us rich accounts of what this space looks like as it becomes more firmly seated into game and media culture. My hope is that this account, bound by time and platform, serves as a useful historical case that offers conceptual interventions and provocations—ones that future readers will find of interest alongside more contemporary accounts of this emerging media form.

As with my prior projects, this research is deeply anchored in qualitative social science methods and multimodal techniques that range from interviews to archival work. Given the unique challenges I faced in my prior
esports book with the research being spread across a large number of sites and domains, I decided fairly early on to go back to my methodological roots and primarily focus on a single platform: Twitch. I use it as a critical case—one that by digging deeply into it, allows for a rich specificity that speaks to broader contexts. This style is much more resonant with my ethnographic sensibility, and to be frank, given the heterogeneity on the platform itself, offered a valuable practical anchor to a phenomenon in deep transition.¹⁸

I’ve spent hundreds of hours watching live streams and capturing interesting moments, including the chat that accompanies a broadcast (typically through screenshots and notes). Sometimes these streams were one-off events, while other instances involved broadcasters I followed for a longer period of time, often subscribing to their channel. At the beginning of the project, I learned how to broadcast my own gameplay as a way of understanding the basic functionality of the site. Watching practices emerge, morph, change, and even die out on Twitch over several years has provided a fascinating opportunity. It has also given me an intriguing glimpse into not only the culture of the site as a whole—for instance, aesthetic or communicative conventions that arise and spread—but the diversity that exists among different channel subcultures as well.

Speaking about “live streaming on Twitch” is a useful way of holding a cluster of things together to try to understand a broader phenomenon, but also has analytic limits when one looks at the variety of practices and subcultures within given channels. I’ve long found Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star’s formulation of “boundary objects” incredibly useful in understanding gaming spaces, and the case of live streaming is no exception. They note that “boundary objects are those objects that both inhabit several communities of practice and satisfy the informational formational requirements of each of them. Boundary objects are thus both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (Bowker and Star 1999, 297). This framework is powerful when you are trying to understand how a variety of actors—company representatives, individual users, and third-party commercial interests—all engage in their own specific ways, many times fundamentally in tension with one another, but somehow still live alongside each other day to day. The provisionally cohered heterogeneity of game live streaming is perhaps one of the most important aspects to understand. It allows us to think, both critically and methodologically, about platforms as spaces of continuity across a site that simultaneously holds vibrant subcultural worlds that co-construct the culture at micro levels.
The research for this book also involved data collection via online forums, following people and discussions on a range of internet venues, and cataloging journalistic stories from both print and net-based media. One of the earliest lessons I learned in doing internet research is to go where the community leads. People rarely stay on one platform but instead use a variety of them to construct their overall online experience (Taylor 1999). This is also the case with live streaming, where participants leverage different outlets to assist their broadcasts as well as create and sustain communities. Internet users are savvy when it comes to cobbling together resources across sites to manage and enhance their online experience. My research in this project was likewise, by default, multisited and filled with “unexpected trajectories” (Marcus 1995, 98). While Twitch has formed the basis for the study, the work took me onto news sites, Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook. Like so many other internet-based communities before it, live streamers are avid catalogers and analysts of their own spaces and practices. Integrating these resources into the research has been crucial in understanding the ecology of streaming.

I’ve interviewed a range of game broadcasters (both via Skype and in person), from variety streamers who play lots of different games to professional esports players primarily focused on a single competitive gaming title. Because of my interest in how people navigate domains of “serious leisure”—putting in high investments, including time, money, and social networking—or seek to professionalize their gameplay and creative endeavors, I’ve concentrated primarily on broadcasters who have been striving to make streaming their full-time employment. I found people to interview through watching streams, attending events, and using the snowball method where people recommend others. I’ve done home visits to see setups and, on occasion, spoken with members of a streamer’s family, both of which have offered additional insight into how this media work intersects with domestic lives. I’ve interviewed people who run moderation teams, create graphics packages or bot technology, or do other behind-the-scenes work assisting broadcasters. I’ve also hosted public panels where streamers talk about their work and convened private workshops in my capacity as director of research for AnyKey, an organization focused on fair and inclusive gaming.19

My fieldwork has extended to looking at how esports organizations are being impacted and developed in light of live streaming, and I’ve been fortunate to be able to talk to some that are leveraging the medium to broadcast large tournaments. Many of them have been in the business of esports for years, and have tremendous experience with the challenges of broadcast and spectatorship. Their insight into the transformations happening in the
industry was valuable. In addition to a number of shorter visits “behind the scenes” to see esports media production in action, I got to spend several full weekends backstage at big tournament events watching technical, organizational, and production practices as well as talking to the professionals in the thick of work. Some of the most important wisdom I gained about the work of producing esports tournaments happened in these moments where I got to see media production unfold backstage. Being able to talk to people on the spot about how they were constructing and carrying out large events for global audiences offered tremendous insight. Having done research on some of these organizations for my prior book, I had the unique opportunity to see companies I was familiar with transition and integrate a new media form into their business. In many ways, these events provided me some of the most powerful glimpses into future media practices that weave together local events, global audiences, and internet distribution.

Beyond these focused offline opportunities, I got several chances to follow live streaming in broader public settings. I was able to attend the Penny Arcade Expo (PAX East) in Boston a number of times, thus giving me an opportunity to spend extended periods at the Twitch booth, meet and talk to a wide variety of broadcasters and fans, and situate streaming within a much larger game culture. I was also fortunate to attend the first three TwitchCons, the company’s own convention dedicated to streamers. That event proved especially valuable in seeing how the organization itself was working to build its community, educate broadcasters, and support fans. In several instances at these various events, I moderated panels that dealt with live streaming, which in turn opened up many additional conversations with conference goers. Convention exhibition spaces also proved to be an opportunity to see and chat with companies—audio/video (A/V) manufacturers, software developers, and even service providers—vying for the attention of a nascent industry of small media producers.

Finally, while an important part of the story I tell here is the work that individual streamers and esports companies are doing to produce content, my research has also been keenly attuned to broader organizations and technology. The institutions and structures that facilitate these productions play a critical role in understanding this space. Platforms and the institutions that manage them construct powerful conditions as well as boundaries for user engagement. I visited ESL’s Burbank, California, studio several times, including when it just opened and the technical infrastructure was still being laid out. I was also fortunate to be able to visit Twitch’s offices in San Francisco a number of times over the years and get to see it grow as a company,
adapting and iterating as its business did. I’ve spoken to employees and executives, who have offered great insight into their fast-changing world. While this book is not formally an organizational ethnography, I have been keenly aware of the significance that Twitch, both as a platform and company, has to any current analysis of live streaming. From technology to policy to marketing and economics, the organizational power of the company is a key part of this story.

Given the multisitedness of this project, there is no single answer for how I’ve handled issues around anonymization in this text. When it comes to individual participants, I have anonymized them, including those working at various organizations, when I am quoting from interviews or informal conversations. In instances where I am quoting streamers who were speaking on public panels or issuing public commentary on Twitter, I use their name and/or screen name (some prefer to keep their full name private for a variety of reasons that I discuss later in the book). I remain committed to the practice of anonymization because I see it as the best way of protecting those who are so generous with their time but control little of the outcome once they speak to a researcher. Even if they review drafts, which some of my respondents did, none of us involved can anticipate the consequences of publication and how readers will take up the material. For those who are building companies and livelihoods, particularly in precarious industries, utmost care must be taken, and I consider anonymization an important part of my ethical stance with this type of work.20

Organizational anonymization, however, offers additional challenges to projects such as this. Those of us who work in a case study mode often face how to attenuate the specificity of our sites for analytic necessity alongside protecting those who participate. As with individuals, we must balance our need to make larger arguments against the pull that naming people can have in a story. Because I have researched organizations in a domain with few competitors, and the specificity is actually important to the analysis, I am unable to anonymize the main platform of this inquiry, Twitch. Similarly, Turtle Entertainment and its ESL, which allowed me to observe work at major events, is difficult to anonymize. Its historical and organizational specificity within esports is crucial to this study, so I am unable to pseudonym it as an organization (though as with Twitch, individual interviewees are all anonymized). While I frequently double-checked facts with Twitch and ESL, or tested out arguments I was working on with a handful of especially helpful confidants, I did not provide the drafts of the work to either company to review ahead of publication. This was primarily driven by my wish
to have scholarly autonomy. I am tremendously grateful to each for opening their doors to me, and I’ve done my best to treat that access with care and respectfulness, while upholding the integrity of the research and findings. It is also my hope that other organizations will, through this work, see the value of letting researchers in.

**Structure of the Book**

In the following I explore not only networked broadcasting across variety and esports domains but also various organizational and technological issues at play in this emerging space. I pay particular attention to regulatory and policy issues arising within game live streaming, from dress codes to intellectual property concerns. In many ways, the structure of the book is like an hourglass: I open with some large-scale considerations around media change, dive into the cases of variety and esports streaming, and then move back out for a consideration of how governance and regulatory frameworks are at work broadly.

Chapter 2, “Networked Broadcasting,” opens with a look at changes happening with television production and broadcasting, and offers a historical framing of the rise of live streaming. I situate the development of game live streaming within broader trajectories of media production, internet culture and infrastructures, and gaming practices. I spend a bit of time talking about the networked audience as it is constituted via live streaming, exploring why people watch and how we might understand the work of audiences within this domain. I conclude with an overview of Twitch, a primary site gamers use to distribute their play to others.

In Chapter 3, “Home Studios,” I explore individual live streamers who are in the midst of building a new genre out of their gaming. These broadcasters best exemplify the notion I present in the book of transforming private play into public entertainment. While spectating another person’s play has always been present in game culture, the scale at which it is happening with live streaming as well as the broader media ecology and forms of monetization on which it is built all make these content producers a particularly important group to look at.

Typically based in home studios often located in a living room or bedroom, these streamers are developing new conventions for both game spectatorship and media broadcast. While most still hold day jobs, a number of them are pursuing full-time “professional” streaming, frequently supported by families or partners. These broadcasters navigate public and private spheres, weaving
together their play with commentary, humor, and even pedagogical qualities. Given that Twitch supports synchronous chat running alongside the video, the broadcasters are also typically engaging with their audiences in real time—chatting with them, answering questions, responding to feedback, and over the course of months or years, getting to know and be known by them. Having a successful channel can also require attention to other forms of social media. Managing a presence on Facebook, Twitter, or even YouTube can become an important part of the overall ecology of building as well as maintaining an audience. Finally, many live streamers have become incredibly adept at rapidly skilling up their video production skills and are typically “one-person shows.” Eventually these live streamers become not only content producers but also brand and community managers. Yet amid all the creative production and exciting engagement with audiences, the harassment and “virtual gauntlets” that women, people of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) people (not mutually exclusive categories) face when wanting to occupy these spaces remains one of the most significant areas to explore. This chapter looks at the challenges to the space as a form of open, participatory media.

While thousands of channels dedicated to all types of games have sprung up over the last few years, esports has been uniquely transformed by the growth of live streaming. Chapter 4, “Esports Broadcasting,” focuses on how the rise of networked broadcast has powerfully changed not only the everyday lives of esports players but organizations and tournaments. During the last decade, professional competitive gaming was intent on developing its spectatorship capacities to reach mass appeal and audiences. There have been a number of attempts to bring esports to broadcast television, usually with poor results. With the rise of platforms like Twitch, there has been a marked shift in how professionals in that scene approach the issue of spectatorship. Increasingly, the line they take is that they no longer need television—they have live streaming. Such statements are often framed as declarations of freedom from traditional media structures, an explicit turning away from what is sometimes seen as an out-of-touch sector. As esports organizations have often remarked in interviews over the last couple of years, they see their audience as primarily located online at computers and that is where they are going to reach them.

Whether it is the longtime esports player using the technology to broadcast to their fans or tournaments reaching millions of viewers over the course of a weekend, many of those invested in competitive gaming are using these platforms to continue to build a sports/media business. From the broadcast
of mundane practice time to high-end spectacles, live streaming is being used to grow esports. As a fairly new media space, it is offering a fascinating set of experiments where broadcasters sort out new genre conventions (from the use of cameras and overlays), attempt to monetize audiences, and develop new enterprises around this emerging media form. Professional gamers and organizations are engaging in media work like never before, and this chapter tells the story of how a form of labor as play meets broadcast head-on.

Whereas just a few years ago it was unclear how niche an activity this slice of gaming and its fandom would be, live streaming has been a boon to building audiences for esports, and the content is coming directly from individual players, leagues, and increasingly game developers themselves. Live streaming has proven to be a profound promotional tool for titles, and developers are taking notice. Average gamers not only become engaged with formal high-end competitive play, but it animates their own leisure choices. Audiences not only watch, for example, *League of Legends* tournaments; they play the game, buy characters that the pros use, and refine their own playful strategies.

This media growth has been energetically developed not only by solo broadcasters in their living rooms but also by large organizations with a worldwide reach. In just the space of a few years it has transformed gaming. Yet there remain key critical issues lurking in this new form of media production and broadcast. In chapter 5, “Regulating the Networked Broadcasting Frontier,” I examine how the tremendous creative energy and experiments discussed in the prior chapters contend with intervening organizations, regulations, and law. I discuss what I term the “regulatory assemblage” and in this chapter, move out to a macro consideration of forms of governance operating on the platform at several layers, from the social to the algorithmic.

I explore how various forms of community management function in game live streaming. This ranges from more positive inflections via grassroots channel moderators to the ways audiences enact social order, including destructively though things like distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks or outright harassment and hostility toward broadcasters. I also discuss how nonhuman actors, such as bots, come to do management work and increasingly form a crucial part of the sociotechnical space that makes up live streaming.

Beyond community management, I explore how policy and law are involved in the governance of game live streaming. I analyze how various codes of conduct on the platform have enacted structures of governance,
at times with serious pushback from members of the community. I dis-
cuss how policy gets embodied via sociotechnical artifacts of automated
enforcement. As with YouTube, there are increasing forms of algorithmic
regulation that monitor content and take often-contested action against
particular channels.

Underpinning so much of what we see in these generative UGC spaces
are laws that profoundly affect how live streaming is being handled by users
and platform developers alike. With intellectual property claims and dis-
putes, much is still in flux regarding ownership and rights in this space. Live
streaming activities remain fraught with issues around how we understand
transformative creative productions within a commercialized media sphere.
What is perhaps most critical in examining how this media space is being
governed right now is that conventions, norms, and precedents are being
set for a form of broadcasting likely to grow.

Ultimately this book asks what happens when people begin to transform
private play into public entertainment and an emerging media form of net-
worked broadcasting arises. The threads of sharing play and spectatorship
are at the roots of digital gaming, but live streaming weaves them into the
flow of this particular moment of media and internet culture. In chapter 6,
“Live Streaming as Media,” I reflect broadly on the growth of game live
streaming and potential media futures. I discuss the ways that marketing
and commercialization increasingly shape how channels are framed along
with the implications for live streaming as a form of creative cultural prac-
tice. I explore moments when Twitch finds itself host to more mainstream
endeavors as it grows as a media entity in its own right, sitting alongside
traditional outlets. I conclude with reflections on how the platform has, in
some ways, turned back to its earliest roots with the inclusion of creative,
music, and even IRL forms of broadcasting. Though this book focuses on
game live streaming in particular, it hopefully participates in broader critical
conversations we continue to have around technology, culture, and media.