

“forcing 100 people to live in total isolation”

Let’s Plays in the Time of COVID-19

My thesis is on the migration of YouTube Let’s Play-ers to Twitch livestreaming. In it, I argue for the importance of “fantasy” in understanding the internet of today. Although I look at a contemporary and still-unfolding migration, I was not able to address the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on this industry. In this presentation, I will be looking at how YouTube Let’s Play-ers have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, and what this reveals about YouTube itself.

First, I would like to define a few key terms. A “Let’s Play” is a video documenting the playthrough of a videogame with commentary for entertainment. A person who makes Let’s Plays is called a “Let’s Play-er.” The original and primary platform for Let’s Plays is YouTube. Let’s Plays have become an incredibly popular form of media, especially for younger audiences, and are a prominent part of gaming culture and industry today. People watch Let’s Plays for a variety of reasons, including to learn about new games, as a source of entertainment, and to feel a sense of community.

The driving force behind the migration explored in my thesis are the flaws of YouTube’s monetization system. Content creators who are partnered with YouTube are eligible to receive a cut of the revenue generated by ads playing on their videos. To have ads on your videos and make money off those ads is to be “monetized.” This enables YouTube content creators—including Let’s Play-ers—to make an income off this work, some even making enough to do this full time as their sole source of income.

There is one important detail however—not all content is eligible for monetization. Content which fails to meet YouTube’s guidelines for “advertiser-friendly content” will be demonetized, meaning the creator will not be able to make money off of it. Beginning in 2017 and continuing to this day, the “Adpocalypse” is a significant trend of demonetization as a result of YouTube’s efforts to become more “advertiser friendly.” The Adpocalypse has been widely criticized, and many content creators have been quite vocal about losing large chunks of their income as a result of it—income that they rely on for rent, groceries, and other necessities.

YouTuber “Graystillplays”—or “Gray” for short—is known for his Sims 4 experiment Let’s Plays. In them, he subjects his Sims households to various deadly or game-breaking tests until only one sim remains. This includes forcing sims to run on treadmills until they die, forcing sims to livestream until they die, and forcing sims to live in a house so large their AI is unable to function. Five out of the six most recent videos, however, have been centered around quarantining, social distancing, and isolation. The first of these videos, titled “forcing 100 people to live in total isolation,” was published on March 25th. In it, Gray puts 100 sims into their own cubical-sized rooms with everything they need to survive, and watches as the sims’ apparently death-driven AI causes them to light themselves on fire or starve to death one-by-one. He begins the video by saying:

With all of the social distancing going on, I thought it would be a good opportunity to force my sims to deal with the same torture that the rest of us have. I say torture, [but] I never really went outside to begin with. People are like

‘Gray, you can’t go out anywhere, you can’t see any people—do you know what that’s called?’ and I’m like ‘it’s called Wednesday.’

Although clearly making a joke about social distancing guidelines due to the COVID-19 outbreak, Gray never says the words “COVID-19” or “coronavirus.” In fact, you’ll notice that many other Let’s Play-ers have made similarly themed videos, yet all are missing explicit mention of the coronavirus. The coronavirus becomes a sort of “elephant in the room” of these outbreak and quarantine themed videos. This is happening because YouTube has been demonetizing videos that make any mention of COVID-19.

YouTube has explicitly stated that all videos focused on the coronavirus outbreak will be demonetized until further notice. In their advertiser-friendly content guidelines, YouTube provides a list of eleven categories which are basis for demonetization. They have categorized the coronavirus outbreak as a “sensitive event,” which falls under their “Controversial issues and sensitive events” category. Understandably so—over two-hundred thirty-three thousand people have died as a result of the coronavirus with no end in sight. Still reeling from the ongoing “Adpocalypse,” however, some have claimed YouTube is simply “looking after their advertisers” by doing this—ensuring their advertisers that their ads will not be played in front of content that could tarnish their image, shielding YouTube from revenue lost by pulled ads. However, I believe that YouTube is also doing this as a way to discourage misinformation. If they were not demonetizing videos on the coronavirus, creators could capitalize on the popularity of the topic, and would be encouraged to pump out click-bait-y videos to rake in ad revenue with no regard to accuracy. Preventing misinformation is “simply the right thing to do,” but it has the added benefit of reinforcing YouTube’s image as a responsible, trustworthy

platform and tool for society. Additionally, the image of YouTube profiting off a tragedy could be harmful to their brand, so it is in their best interest to prevent it. By allowing content on the coronavirus to still be shared while preventing its monetization, YouTube tries to strike a balance between platform responsibility and freedom of speech.

Nonetheless, content creators want to be able to talk about a recent event. Many find relief from these strange and stressful times in comedy—getting to watch Gray’s elaborate Sims 4 experiments might help you find some humor in the fact that we are all locked inside all day long. Additionally, the coronavirus outbreak is a “trending” event, meaning videos about it are more likely to garner greater attention and thus bring in more revenue. To get around this, “social distancing” and other terms have become a euphemism for coronavirus. In this peculiar phenomena, we can see this tension between Let’s Play-ers tendency to follow trends and a tip-toeing around YouTube’s policies—a tension between content creators’ need to make money and YouTube’s own prerogatives as a business.

On their “about” page, YouTube lists their “four essential freedoms”: freedom of expression, freedom of information, freedom of opportunity, and freedom to belong. People should be able to speak freely, to have easy and open access to information, to succeed on their own terms, and to find community—it is YouTube’s stated goal to enable this all. In my thesis, I argue that YouTube’s brand, exemplified by this “about” page, feeds into fantasies about the potential of the internet. Specifically, YouTube poses itself as the realization of early, utopian visions of the internet as a tool for democracy. Ingrained in this is the notion of YouTube as a responsible platform—a positive tool for society which has a duty to discourage misinformation. YouTube’s tenant of “freedom of opportunity” is clearly about YouTube’s

partner and monetization system. YouTube can point to countless content creators who began producing videos as a hobby and now make a successful living doing what they love as proof that, indeed, YouTube provides a platform for individuals to succeed economically. However, the Adpocalypse shows these promises for what they are today—mere fantasy. I'm not criticizing YouTube for demonetizing coronavirus content—I personally believe it is the right thing to do. But this unique moment helps to reveal larger, ongoing issues with the platform and the internet as a whole. Content creators are still free to share coronavirus content, they just cannot make money off of it. Some are calling this censorship, and so it begs the question: how free is “freedom of expression” when economic necessity runs our lives? What happens when actually ensuring “freedom of opportunity” is no longer profitable for YouTube, but perpetuating the fantasy of it is?

Full-time Let's Play-ers occupy an odd position in this pandemic. As Gray joked, Let's Play-ers already work from home, their work schedule largely unaffected by lockdown mandates. With the world on pause, many people—particularly young students—are free to watch more content than ever. If they succeed in bypassing YouTube's demonetization of coronavirus-themed content, Let's Play-ers may be one of the few groups of common individuals who benefit economically from this situation. In these strange times, those of us who have the privilege of social distancing can relate to Gray's odd household of Sims—Florida Man, Bab Ross, Australian Man, Elis Dee, Claire Danes Loves Pudding, and Tim Horton—as they suffer from social isolation, poor cooking skills, and a chronic inability to find restrooms.

Thank you.