Why Would Google Want to Buy Video-Game Livestreaming Site Twitch?

By Ben Davis

Photo: Christopher Anderson/Magnum Photos/New York Magazine

It's 11:30 p.m., and I'm sitting in front of the computer watching Bill and Jason Munkel race frantically around an abandoned factory. This is Call of Duty: Ghosts, and the majority of the screen is taken up by the jittery first-person view of an intricately realized war zone—usually it's Jason's POV until he gets killed, at which point it switches over to his dad.

Their faces, broadcast via webcam, are inset one above the next, and tonight they're having difficulty flushing out their foes—in fact, they're getting picked off pretty consistently. "You can tell they're pieces of shit," Bill growls about his enemies. "Come on, you piece of shit. Don't lay down like a jerk-off. Move."

A comments bar at the far right is in constant motion, maintaining a flow of supportive banter and trash talk from loyal viewers, like me:

"What's your guys favorite map?"

"I feel another papa rage on!"

"Jason, i graduated last Tuesday. Have you graduated yet Jase?"

"U GUYS R GONNA FAIL"

"I wish my pops would play cod with me that must be fun."

Jason is a skinny, fast-talking 18-year-old. His dad, Bill, is 58, with a gruff Jersey vibe. Two years ago, Bill lost his job as a manager at an auto-parts shop—it was, his son remembers, a tough time. But in the space that opened up, they decided to make goofy videos on YouTube dedicated to their Call of Duty sessions, and soon they found Twitch, a livestreaming community devoted to games, where they began keeping a regular schedule last year as Fathersongaming, broadcasting from their Elizabeth, New Jersey, home.

What they're broadcasting has no real narrative. In fact, it's pretty much the same thing over and over again: They challenge other players online, then hunt them down or get executed in a barren, pixelated arena. They are not even extraordinarily good at gaming, just passionate, and it takes a while of acclimating yourself to realize that their easygoing father-son rapport is the main attraction; like watching a dad play catch with his son, only you're watching them mow down enemies together with fantasy

machine guns. A sort of idyllic picture of family intimacy for a bunch of gaming voyeurs who seem to connect to the world more and more through their screens.

Bill and Jason's Call of Duty exploits have made them minor gaming celebs. More than 157,000 have "followed" their channel, meaning they had bookmarked it for regular viewing; overall, Bill and Jason have 7.5 million views on the site. Their gameplay is regularly punctuated by announcements of new "subscribers," fans who pledge $4.99 a month to support the "FSG Nation." They actually make money doing this—not a ton, but enough to make a meaningful contribution to Jason's college fund.

But last year, the Fathersongaming stream was lagging. They were still broadcasting on Xbox 360 consoles, rather than the newer model Xbox One. "Our computer was taking a poop; we had to fix that to keep streaming," Jason recalls. Money was still tight; Bill has only recently found a new job at a dealership. "We were not in a position to buy it, because, keep in mind, Xbox Ones were like $500."

"We have to double everything," Bill chimes in—one device for each of them.

Then, Jason remembers, someone in the comments made a suggestion that the FSG Nation could pitch in. "Within two hours, we had enough money to get our Xbox Ones and stream them the next day."

"I was crying that night," Bill says. "I was literally crying."

"I still don't understand it," Jason adds. "That was just amazing."

They're not the only ones who don't understand. Livestreamed game broadcasting is not very well understood by the nongaming public, but it's probably one of the big video-game stories of the last few years—maybe one of the big media stories of the last few years, period. And Twitch is at the very center: It debuted as a freestanding site in the summer of 2011, kicking off with 3.2 million unique views in a month, and now claims more than 45 million unique monthly visitors, with more than a million "broadcasters" streaming their gameplay. Viewers average 106 minutes per day, and 58 percent of the audience spends more than 20 hours on the site every week—almost a full day spent streaming play or watching

other people play. According to one analysis, the site already accounts for almost 44 percent of all live content watched on the internet (the WWE website comes in second with 17.7 percent). During its peak hours, according to another report, Twitch accounts for the fourth most traffic on the internet, behind only Netflix, Google, and Apple. And last month, news stories circulated that Google's YouTube division was in negotiations to buy Twitch for a reported sum north of $1 billion.

YouTube, which was bought by Google for $1.65 billion as the linchpin of a video empire, is still much more massive than Twitch, but it is well aware of the threat, and of the value of the gaming audience: PewDiePie, a clownish Swede, has regularly found himself the single most popular thing on YouTube thanks to goofy gaming clips.

Twitch's explosive rise seems, even in retrospect, pretty unlikely. It sprang from the side of another site, Justin.tv, founded back in 2006 on a premise that would have once sounded like performance art: "lifecasting." Early broadcasts featured co-founder Justin Kan with a camera on his hat, broadcasting himself at bars, at meetings, hanging around his apartment. After a while, Justin.tv transcended Justin himself, expanding to cater to things that people actually wanted to watch live, much of it user-generated: other homespun forms of reality TV; the occasional - celebrity appearance or major event like the E3 electronic-gaming expo; and, most notoriously, a lot of pirated live sports content. (Justin.tv became briefly infamous in 2008 when a Florida 19-year-old live-broadcasted his suicide.) It was in no way specifically intended to serve as a hub for game watching; that just happened. But today, streaming has become so important to gaming that new plug-ins have been integrated into both the new Xbox and the new PlayStation so that users can livestream their play directly. Matthew DiPietro, Twitch's VP of marketing, says that this is essentially the company's picture of the future of gaming: streaming as the default.

As you might expect, Twitch is ruled by the passions of young men. Some just use it as a social network, watching and communicating with their friends as they bond over any one of the dozens of titles currently in vogue (Dark Souls II, Minecraft, Hearthstone)—the same thing you do with friends in your basement, only remotely. "Speedrunning," a form of competitive play in which people set out to beat popular games in record time, is big. (In January, Awesome Games Done Quick raised more than $1 million for a cancer charity, performing such feats as a blindfolded

speedrun through Mike Tyson's Punch-Out.) And there are surreal, only-on-the-internet events, like the one back in February when a million people participated in a communal game of Pokémon Red over two frenetic weeks called Twitch Plays Pokémon.

By far the biggest draw, however, is "eSports": professional, competitive gaming. In October, the world championship for the most popular eSports title, League of Legends, set a new high-water mark. Riot Games Inc., which publishes LoL, reported that 32 million fans worldwide watched Korea's fearsome SK Telecom T1 stomp China's Royal Club in a clean 3-0 sweep to take the $1 million Summoner's Cup, an event that sold out the Staples Center in L.A. In July, the championship for another popular title, Defense of the Ancients 2, will be held at Seattle's Key Arena. Ten thousand tickets sold out almost immediately.

But wait: just how weird is all this? Twitch may seem to put us in an uncanny valley of alienation and atomization out of some dystopic cyberpunk fable. But then, millions of people have no problem being insanely invested in games in which grown men in tights run around in circles—watching as though something quite profound hung on the outcome. It's not deep meaning that accounts for the appeal of flesh-and-sweat sports, but the narratives of rivalry, comeback, and so on built into them; video games have the same kinds of narratives, plus more flashing lights. And on Twitch, you actually get to interact with your heroes, a phenomenon that is spawning a new type of media star. "It's this weird mix of Bobby Fischer, Howard Cosell, Kim Kardashian, Jimmy Fallon—media personalities but also players who are performing at a high level," says Frank Lantz, who runs the NYU Game Center. "Some of them are going to become internet famous and be able to have careers. And some are going to blow up and become famous famous."

It is, to be sure, a strange phenomenon, and there is something a little depressing about people being so excited by online interaction, as if real interaction has moved out of reach (especially since this is interaction that's multiply abstracted: mediated through the computer screen and chat room, but also built up in the margins of video games, which are, after all, commercial products, precision-engineered instruments of distraction). But the more I talk to fans of streaming, the more striking I find how they describe it: not just as an alternative to other forms of entertainment but as better, more responsive to the expectations of those who've grown up with the internet as the all-purpose connective tissue of

life. Whatever Twitch's fate as a website or business proposition, it is only making unmistakable something that has already happened: For vast numbers of people, the goalposts of what feels most real have already moved. So much of social life has migrated online already; why wouldn't it be the entertainment that was live and social and digital that feels most vital?

"I don't watch any TV. The level of content seems so dumbed down … There's no realness to it at all," says Darren Geers, a soft-spoken artist from Grand Rapids, Michigan, who broadcasts as Geers_Art. "When you are interacting with someone on Twitch or you are watching a Twitch channel, you are watching someone live. They can't be fake to the extent that a TV program can be."

Cindy "Brownie C" Martinez, born and raised in the Bronx, has the distinction of being the very first fan of one of Twitch's most-written-about channels, MANvsGAME. Jayson Love broadcasts a sort of gamer reality show (he calls it a "gaming-themed talk show") from his Billings, Montana, home and gets a lot of press because he's talkative and makes his living broadcasting (he doesn't talk about money now, but last year in *The Wall Street Journal* he estimated that he might make $100,000 this year from subscriber fees, ads, and the occasional sponsorship).

Martinez found Love's channel back when Twitch was still Justin.tv, three years ago, and describes it as an almost magical experience, the two bonding over a shared love of video-game music. "I found myself addicted to watching this guy," she told me a few months ago—and a few months after the MANvsGAME community crowd-funded her trip to Love's wedding in Billings. "This normal guy who's playing all kinds of games, and seeing him struggle, and struggle, and struggle, like a lot of us have struggled with any game we've played."

Which reminds me of a comment I saw one night slipping by on Fathersongaming, as Bill and Jason played Call of Duty: "This Stream has helped me through some hard times," someone named Jimbojayy wrote, "you 2 just make me want to carry on." Bill and Jason may not be the most extraordinary players, but they are normal in a way that people can relate to—or want desperately to relate to. In a way, the success of Twitch is not really a story about games—people would be playing games anyway. It's about the desire to connect.

I ask Bill what he thinks the audience gets out of watching. “Younger guys who come into the stream, they have broken families or family problems going on. We get a lot of comments like, ‘I just can’t wait until you guys come on, because I forget about all of my stuff going on here’—whatever it might be,” he tells me. “They just like to see a bonding going on. There’s not a lot of that going on out there, I guess.”

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