



Newman, J. (2016) 'Stampylongnose and the rise of the celebrity videogame player.' *Celebrity Studies*, 7 (2): 285-288.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article first published by Taylor & Francis Group in *Celebrity Studies* on 12/04/2016 available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1165020>

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Stampylongnose and the rise of the celebrity videogame player

As Kline *et al.* (2003) note, the videogame industry is fuelled by ‘perpetual innovation’ which ensures that every new product coming to market is accompanied by a flurry of hyperbole proclaiming its groundbreaking graphics and sound, disruptive interface technologies and revolutionary gameplay features. The discursive production of technological progress that underpins platform design, advertising and retail means that each successive title and console immediately renders obsolete that which preceded it in accordance with a carefully calculated programme of supersession and planned obsolescence (Newman 2012). One result of this focus on technological innovation in mainstream videogame marketing has been the production of a curiously anonymous space in which developers, designers and artists – the *people* who create videogames – are comparatively invisible.

Partly filling this void, the rise of competitive videogaming and ‘e-sports’ has provided highly-skilled players with an arena for recognition and potentially lucrative commercial opportunity (Taylor 2012). However, alongside this, the last few years have seen the emergence of a breed of player whose notoriety is not necessarily linked to the extremity of their gaming expertise. Creating distinctive forms of narrated gameplay and harnessing the technosocial affordances of digital production and social media tools, these players have lent a putatively ‘authentic’ and emphatically human face to videogaming. Among this new category of celebrity player is Joseph Garrett. Better-known by the interchangeable soubriquets ‘Stampylongnose’, ‘Stampylonghead’, ‘Mr Stampycat’ or just ‘Stampy’, his YouTube gaming channel is extraordinarily popular. According to the data on its public page, as of February 2016, the channel has more than 7 million subscribers and over 4.7 billion video views. Stampy, has appeared on UK television discussing his gaming videos and production workflow and has extended his transmediality with the publication of *Stampy’s Lovely Book* (Garrett 2015).

This is not simply a matter of reach, however. Characters such as Nintendo’s Super Mario, Sega’s Sonic the Hedgehog and the *Tomb Raider* series’ Lara Croft have long been visible in popular culture (Sheff 1993) and are valuable cultural exports (Livingstone and Hope 2011). However, diverse though a plumber, adventuring Erinaceinae and archaeologist may be, they share in common the fact that they are fictional entities. Initially conjured into existence in pixellated form and later voiced by human actors, they remain clearly identifiable as Mario, Sonic and Lara, albeit drawn with increasing sophistication thanks to the incalculable innovations in graphics and animation the videogames industry so proudly delivers.

Stampy and the host of vloggers like him, are different. They do not voice game characters, *per se*. Rather, they are performers of ‘Let’s Play’ or ‘LP’ videos. It is generally agreed that LPs originated in the mid-2000s on the forums of the ‘Something Awful’ website (though the precise nature of the inception and progenitors is debated, see Klepek 2015) and while there are numerous subgenres, distilled to their simplest, they are video captures of gameplay narrated by the player. Minimally, the player’s presence is felt through their voiceover which is overdubbed onto the game’s existing music and sound effects track but they may also appear onscreen in an overlaid picture-in-picture window so that gameplay, player and the character they are performing with/as are simultaneously visible. Importantly, LPs are not videogame reviews, although their impact on games sales and even game design has been documented (Maiberg 2015; Sinclair 2014; Kohler 2013). Rather, LPs recount the experiences of players immersed in play and, as is the case with Stampy’s work, it is the superimposition of original meta-narratives onto the existing gameworld that is distinctive.

Using the affordances of virtuality, Garrett is constructed as a ‘consumable persona’ (Marwick and boyd 2011). Stampy’s pixellated appearance in *Minecraft* is unambiguously an avatar representing a

living, breathing human player. The presence of Garrett is most directly felt in live action videos documenting personal appearances at games conventions and festivals such as ‘Minecon’ (the annual *Minecraft* convention 2010-present with attendance in excess of 10,000 in 2015). Additionally, tours of the material culture of gameplay (unboxing videos of gaming peripherals, for instance) conspicuously conducted from Garrett’s bedroom serve as further indicators of ‘authenticity’ (Marwick 2013). The performance of intimacy and connection with the audience is particularly evident where LPers appear ‘picture-in-picture’ with their avatars. The similarity of these onscreen representations to Skype or FaceTime calls is impossible to overlook reminding us of the myriad ways digital media are deployed and referenced in the production of these microcelebrity personas (Senft 2008).

Speaking about his work in 2014, Garrett noted that because his videos are, ‘more personal than watching a TV,’ his fans, ‘...feel like they know me more. I’ll get messages from people, not about my videos, just telling me what they did that day... The presenter of CBeebies might not seem like a friend; they seem like a presenter in a studio.’ (Precey 2014). The barely contained excitement in Stampy’s videos eloquently communicates the ‘passionate’ nature of the labour which negotiates financial and personal rewards and professional independence (Postigo 2015: 203). Further adding to this sense of connection with the audience, and simultaneously arising from and masking Garrett’s entrepreneurial labour, is the channel’s publication regime. As Stampy’s YouTube home page notes, ‘I upload a bunch of different games, including a new *Minecraft* video every single day.’ Averaging between 20-30 minutes per episode, Stampy’s *Minecraft* output alone is, as Ashton (2015) notes, an object lesson in ‘relational labour’ and the management of audience (Baym 2015), while the publication/subscription model of YouTube lends a ritualism as each new episode appears in the subscriber’s timeline with diurnal regularity.

It is curious to note that, in the 40 or so years since videogames first blipped onto our screens, there have been few, if any, non-virtual mainstream celebrities. Even the most avid gamers would likely struggle to name more than a handful of developers (perhaps Nintendo’s Shigeru Miyamoto, creator of *Super Mario Bros.*; Hideo Kojima of the *Metal Gear Solid* series; Dan and Sam Houser, co-founders of Rockstar Games famed for the *Grand Theft Auto* games; or Will Wright for *SimCity* and *The Sims*). For those outside gaming’s literati, some of those names will doubtless have been heard for the first time. In fact, I argue that it is not simply that the videogames industry has not given rise to non-virtual celebrities, but rather that it has actively sought to hide the people that make games.

This is not a recent phenomenon. During the 1980s, a group of programmers broke away from the then-dominant Atari to form Activision, the first third party developer/publisher, because they received no formal in-game attribution for their work (Fleming 2007). While Activision’s developers and designers even enjoyed a brief period where their biographies and headshots were printed on cardboard inlays wrapped around the compact cassettes on which their creations were distributed, such material is absent from today’s console game packaging. Interestingly, within the contemporary independent game sector, developers such as Phil Fish, Jonathan Blow and Mike Bithell have attained recognition in part by using the same affordances of social media that Stampy *et al.* harness (see Byron 2014 on Bithell as the first ‘social developer’). By contrast, we should not overlook the uses of such media during the GamerGate controversy which saw developers, writers and critics propelled into the public eye in an often most unsettling manner.

It is particularly notable that something as impactful as the rise of the celebrity LPer was not planned by corporate executives, game designers or technologists at Sony, Microsoft or Nintendo. Indeed, it has even been received with hostility from some in the industry with claims of IP infringement (Gera

2013; MacDonald 2013; cf Tassi 2013). And where development teams of designers, artists, musicians and animators are often scarcely visible in mainstream videogame discourse, Stampy and the legion of other YouTube LPers are manifestly present – performing as and through their virtual personas. And by not only capturing their performances of gameplay, but also by narrating them, and creating original serial narratives, these LPers have transformed these gameworlds into their own arena for cultural work using tools drawn from video gaming alongside social media and digital production. Above all, by imprinting their real selves onto these virtual spaces, I argue that, within the context of mainstream Western gaming culture, LPers like Stampy are among the first generation of videogaming celebrities not to be comprised solely of pixels.

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