Playing the (Streaming) Fame Game: (Re)presentations of success, challenges, and demand in streaming simulation games

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Abstract

This paper explores and analyzes content in streaming simulation games. In these games, players assume the role of a live streamer, largely motivated by a desire for economic success, and faced with situations drawn from the current practice of streaming on platforms such as Twitch and YouTube. How do these games differ (or adhere) relative to the actual experience of streaming with respect to labor and production? How is toxic and problematic streaming content addressed? Applying demand theory as an analytical lens, we explore how these games attempt to simulate the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional demands of successful streamers, or the attempt to become one. By examining in-game characters in various games as they relate to the experiences of actual streamers through mediated gameplay by the player, it is possible to consider how demand is performed, represented, and actualized in a larger context. Additionally, these games are further reflections of the dominant, and toxic, discourse of gamer culture.

Keywords: Streaming, Simulation Games, Demand Theory, Toxicity, Gamer Culture.

1. Introduction

Whether it is the *Twitch* streaming site's own advice entitled '10 tips for Creative Streamers' (n.d.), videos made by successful streamers like Devin Nash (n.d.), or in the wide range of 'how-to' threads such as

those by Newman (2023), streaming games online is largely framed by a desire for 'success' that is ubiquitous across media, platforms, and websites. This is echoed in the advertising blurbs for recent streaming simulation games, which invite the player to become a virtual star on a variety of platforms. Titles such as *Youtuber's Life OMG* (2016) and *Streamer Life Simulator* (2020) boast taglines such as "become the most successful youtuber on the planet" and "Be the most popular streamer in the world," reinforcing the idea that all streamers want to be 'successful' and success most often equates to high viewership. Additionally, with more viewers, and specifically subscribers, comes the potential for financial gain, whether in real life or in-game. And while some games do acknowledge that becoming a popular streamer is hard work, with taglines such as "create your own streamer and see whether you can overcome difficulties of being streamer or not." (Streamer's Life, 2019) or how the challenge of keeping things in balance (Needy Streamer Overload, 2022) can be a real struggle, the aim remains the same across the board—fame and fortune.

So how do these simulation games stack up against the complexity and diversity of real streaming experience(s)? Grounded in the narrative framing of different simulation games, this paper investigates the challenges players-as-fictional streamers face in their quest for mainstream, capitalistic success. To do so we investigate how merit is structured and rewarded; each game's incremental markers and definitions of success; how the labor of streaming is (re)presented at both a narrative and gameplay level across different titles; how life-streaming(work) balance is presented

to the player as a core gameplay mechanic; how the mechanics of the different games re-reinforce difficult or problematic, real world streaming experiences; and finally, how toxicity is presented and addressed across the games selected for analysis. This paper will address these questions through existing literature on streaming, gameplay examples, and applying demand theory, which focuses on the cognitive, physical, emotional, and social demands experienced by both the player and in-game characters in different gameplay scenarios, as an analytic lens. In doing so, our aim is to identify how streaming simulation games represent and obfuscate the varied lived experiences of online streamers and elucidate why representation of the streaming experience is important.

2. Framing the Play

To understand how streaming simulation games are situated within the real-world experience of online streaming, as varied as it is, it is imperative to address a few framing concepts and definitions including defining the genre of simulation games, framing the scope and literature on online streaming, and outlining the framework on demand theory as it speaks directly to videogames.

2.1. Simulators & Simulation Games

In terms of genre, simulators aim to mimic the actions, process, aims and purpose of a particular task (singular or complex). Typically, the aim of a simulator is to be as close to the real-world counterpart as possible. For example, a flying simulation aims to recreate the experience of flying a plane and aims to be as true to the experience and mechanics as possible. Such mimicry of the process is often used for training purposes. Fundamentally, according to Johnston & Whitehead (2009), the difference lies within "intent and closeness to reality" (p. 9).

Within the context of simulation games, more broadly, while there remains an aim to simulate the process and experience of a particular task, oftentimes details are omitted (perhaps minute and mundane steps in a process) to engage the player, their imagination, and to make the game more appealing or time efficient. Narayanasamy et al. (2006) established seven elements that help identify the difference between simulation games and simulators including identifying the extent to which the application involves simulation, imaginative experience, is entertaining, fun, and engaging, develops skills, types of challenges, (p. 5). The key distinguishing elements in simulation games focus primarily on entertainment, fiction, imagination, and random/varied gameplay patterns,

which are typically absent in training simulators. As seen in the case of the four games selected for analysis below, each game fulfills each category in varying degrees, but never crosses over into the training simulator realm. In a sense, these games represent a "flavor" of streaming, privileging a sense of perceived authenticity in an otherwise fabricated system (Posey, 2013).

2.2. Online Streaming

It has been over four decades since we've been sharing ideas and insights over networked connections with other people and two decades of social network sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007). From pre-web text based networked bulletin board systems (BBSs) to globally networked Social Live-Streaming Services (SLSSs), the human need for social connectedness lies at the heart of the technology that supports online social interactions and online communities. However, for many, there is a big difference between being on a perceived closed social network site (SNS) sharing text-based posts and static holiday pictures, where we can select who we share content with and current video streaming services where we can record ourselves or live-stream publicly, limited only by the platform's technical boundaries.

So, what motivates an individual to record themselves and post it on the internet for all to see? This is a question that has been of interest to researchers for the last decade. From wanting to be a part of a community, (Hamilton et al., 2014; Young & Wiedenfeld, 2022) to self-exploration and expression (Chan & Gray, 2020), to a desire for fame and fortune (Törhönen et al., 2020), the individual reasons are as varied as the content creators themselves. Zimmer and Scheibe (2019) unpack four key motivations for streaming online; Social interaction, self-presentation, information, and trolling (p. 2542). While there is overlap between motivations, key reasons center around the need for socializing, needing to belong (and loneliness), self-expression, making money, and being a celebrity. These last two motivations often take up the most media space (marketing, platform media, etc.) and correlate well with the advertised aims of many of the streamer simulation games.

With fame and fortune at the forefront of the reasons for streaming online, there has been an increase in advice on how to become a successful streamer, from those who are successful, (meaning financial gain and popularity). Research has included how to build viewership (Jia et al., 2020), and a review of successful streamers' advice to those hoping to attain the same level of success (Consalvo et al., 2023). Other research has investigated streamers' desires to

find a sense of community (Young & Wiedenfeld, 2022), share information and knowledge (Phelps & Consalvo, 2020; Yang et al., 2020), and self-expression (Kruitbosch & Nack, 2008; Putro STH & Palupi, 2022). Indeed, the data suggests that only 0.6% of streamers are 'getting rich' from streaming and the average views per stream is 27 (https://marketsplash.com/twitch-statistics/), a far cry from the 8.7 — 18.2 million followers of the top 10 Twitch channels of 2022.

2.3. Demand in Video Game Play

The interactivity-as-demand framework (Bowman, 2018; 2021) provides a useful analytic lens for understanding how players attend to and make sense of myriad attentional requirements in video games. Broadly, the model suggests that video games simultaneously-yet-variably engage players on cognitive (e.g., making sense of and solving in-game challenges), emotional (e.g., processing basic and complex emotional states), physical (e.g., engaging in-game controls and devices) and social levels (e.g., understanding and communicating with in-game and out-of-game agents). Throughout gameplay, players encounter these demands *de facto* as they interact with the system, and perceptions of these demands influence gameplay outcomes. For example, Lin et al. (2023) found that increasing the playable field of view in a virtual reality exergame (*Beat Saber*) increased perceptions of that game's cognitive and exertional demand—as more content was present in the gamefield, players had to think harder to solve in-game challenges and they had to move quicker and more purposefully with their bodies. However, while cognitive demands benefitted enjoyment, exertional demands trended towards a negative influence on enjoyment.

In another study in which gameplay was manipulated to facilitate flow states, both cognitive and physical demands were lowest when gameplay was too simple (re: boring), moderate with balanced gameplay, and highest when gameplay was difficult (Bowman et al., 2021). Prior work on simulation gaming using flight simulators likewise found that when cognitive and physical demands were highest, simulators were frustrating for players—and that this effect was even higher for players who were already frustrated prior to gameplay (Bowman & Tamborini, 2013). Less empirical work has been done with other demands, although Daneels, et al. (2023) argued that video games designed to elicit more serious or eudaimonic experiences would likely favor those games that provide content that is emotionally and socially demanding—for example, deep narrative experiences with developed characters with which players must engage (see also Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008).

3. Streaming Simulation Games & Methods of Analysis

To better understand how streaming simulation games compared to the lived experiences of online streamers, this paper draws on data collected from formal gameplay analysis (Lankoski & Björk, 2015) of four different single-player games and is supported by existing research on online streaming. Games selected were released between 2016-2022 and all fall under the genre tag of simulation and simulation RPG games. The four games were chosen for their focus on streaming as a desirable activity to engage in that challenged the player-as-fictional-streamer to gain (financial and social) success alongside other challenges such as toxicity in streaming communities, streaming/well-being balance, as well as managing and maintaining success. The games range from practical simulation (at a mechanic/gameplay level) to experiential simulation (dealing with the rollercoaster of emotions, risks, and impact of failure).

Youtuber's Life OMG (UPLAY Online, 2016) is the most commercial of the four. Gameplay focuses on the wider scope of the streaming lifestyle, including building social capital, upgrading streaming equipment, and balancing life's other needs. There is little focus on actually creating the streams in any simulated, labor-intensive manner even though the player must develop professional skills related to streaming, but the game sells the dream of fame and fortune in a retrospective narrative told by you, the successful Youtuber. *Streamer's Life* (Just Making Games, 2019), is touted as an RPG-simulation, playing as a second-year university student who is bored with schoolwork, decides to make a go at living the dream of playing games and live streaming. The player must balance the demands of streaming (technology upgrades, dealing with viewers and trolls) and their daily needs, including maintaining a good relationship with their parents, who were a key financial support in the early streaming days. *Streamer Daily*'s (Mehan Games, 2020) narrative includes having to make room for your baby brother, with the player-character being relegated to the basement where the player must balance their daily needs (food, work, rest) while creating live streams. Using a simulated interface of OBS video editing software, the game offers the closest thing to a simulation of video/stream creation compared to the other titles selected. And finally, *Needy Streamer Overload* (WSS Playground, 2022), the only game that focuses

purely on social live streaming (no specific skill or hobby is portrayed in the game), is the most serious of the four games in terms of addressing the challenges, demands, and consequences of aiming for fame and recognition. Along with being categorized as a streaming simulation game, it is also listed as a 'denpa-themed' (i.e. addressing issues including stress, anxiety, depression, delusion and/or trauma) adventure visual novel with 1507 endings. As of the time of this research (Summer 2023), all games are rated in the positive range based on user feedback, ranging from 126 overall reviews (*Streamer's Life*) to 13,569 overall reviews (*Youtubers Life*).

Youtuber's Life OMG, Streamer's Life and *Streamer Daily* allow the player to create a male or female avatars. However, gameplay in *Streamer Daily* is played in first person, unlike the other two games. Gender does not affect gameplay progression, as any toxicity scripted into the gameplay affects male or female player-characters equally in terms of stats and response options in three of the four games. *Needy Streamer Overload* has only a female character that the player cannot change or customize. The author played as a female character in all games. Male character choices were viewed in online playthroughs as described briefly below.

Although the aim of the four games is the same—to become a successful streamer (gain viewers, get famous, make money)—they all offer very different versions of the streaming experience in various levels of simulation. While only one addresses any meaningful issues surrounding streaming's difficulties and failures, they all focus on the production of streams, balancing streaming, and other life needs, as well as dealing with toxic and problematic viewers. The game development for each game ranges from polished, big-budget games to independently developed and published games. It could also be argued that games that were created to have the widest audience appear, the less it depicted the difficult or challenging sides of streaming online.

All games were played by one of the four authors on PC through the Steam platform for consistency of gameplay experience. Gameplay videos on Steam and YouTube were also viewed to review game choices not experienced by the playing author (such as playing as a male).

Each game was played until an ending condition was met which ranged from six to ten hours of intermittent gameplay per game. Gameplay notes focusing on the five points of investigation outlined in the introduction were taken during play of all four games. All games were then replayed from the saved game files to review the gameplay notes for a total of approximately twenty hours, for an average total gameplay time of sixty five hours. Gameplay notes were then organized according to the four areas of demand, highlighting moments of gameplay focusing on mechanics and narrative elements that exemplified each demand type as it was represented in the game and experienced by the author.

Four overarching research questions framed the research:

- Q1: In what ways do streaming simulation games differ from the actual experience of streaming online in terms of labor and production?

- Q2: What specific methods and markers of success (and failure) are presented to the player in streaming simulation games?

- Q3: What demands do players encounter during gameplay of streaming simulation games and what demands are re-represented in streaming simulation games (player-character level)?

- Q4: How is toxic and problematic streaming content addressed in streaming simulation games?

With these questions guiding the analysis, we aim to identify connections (and disconnects) between the real, lived experiences of online streamers as described in academic literature and on publicly available streams, and the played experience of vicariously living out the streamer dream.

4. Playing the Streamer: Simulation Games & (Re)Presentations of Reality

When it comes to simulation games, the aim is to provide an experience of the focused task (farming, building cities, flying a plane), without the actual toil and risk that actually engaging in these activities requires. The same can be said for streaming simulation games. With research that focuses on the labor of streaming that addresses both the behind-the-scenes work (Johnson, 2021) and the labor of performance on camera (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019) as well as the creative labor involved (Simpson & Semaan, 2023), it is understandable that someone interested in streaming would turn to a simulation game. Yet, when examining the gameplay itself, which is designed to be an engaging simulation of the actual act of streaming, much of the labor that it takes to stream is hidden, embedded into the game, and couched in different, intertwined tasks.

4.1. Game Playing Motivations

What motivates someone to play a streaming simulation game? While the aim is not to delve deep into player motivations, as these are often as varied as the players themselves (Vorderer & Bryanterer, 2006), a general overview of the reviews posted across all four games on Steam reveals that some players are themselves streamers and wanted to compare the game to their lived experience, while others had no interest in self-streaming and so the games allow them to live vicariously through the gameplay without any real life impact other than the time invested in playing. Interestingly, based on the reviews, many players came to play *Youtuber's Life OMG* after watching actual streamers playing the game online.

Focusing on the games, the motivations for the player-characters to stream fell squarely within the motivations outlined by Zimmer and Scheibe (2019), specifically self-presentation (making money; becoming a celebrity) and social motivation (socializing; needing to belong) (p. 2542). All player-characters are presented as young, perhaps early 20's. In *Youtuber's Life OMG* (2016), *Streamer Daily* (2020), and *Streamer's Life* (2019), they are either living at home or in university with financial dependence on their parents.

The dream? To gain financial freedom to move out and live large. This thread is the most prevalent in *Streamer's Life*, where the player-character must balance their relationship with their parents, attending family events etc., to the detriment of their streaming goals, in order to maintain their financial support in the early parts of the game. While *Needy Streamer Overload* (2022) mentions a desire for fame, financial gain is not a core narrative or gameplay mechanic. Elements of social motivation are also highlighted throughout the games. From making friends and going to parties (*Youtuber's Life OMG*, 2016) to searching for validation and admiration (*Needy Streamer Overload*, 2022), the motivations of the fictional streamers are drawn from actual streamer motivations, making that part of the simulation relatively realistic.

4.2. Markers & Methods of Success

The idea that streaming is a meritocracy is often presented by streaming platforms and upper-tier, successful streamers, taking the form of "Just follow these simple steps, and you too can be a successful streamer!" (also see Consalvo et al., 2023). Yet, success as touted by the successful is much rarer and fleeting when compared to the actual numbers of streamers across the internet. In the current video streaming landscape, on Twitch alone, there are 7.25 million active streamers (Clement, 2023) and this is only one of a plethora of streaming platforms.

At its core, the basic premise of video streaming is to create content, post it to your channel, engage viewership, and increase audience size. Of course, this is an oversimplification of the time, energy, and resources it takes to do so. Many platforms, such as Twitch, offer monetized incentives for creating content and increasing viewership with their Affiliate Program, which enables streamers to monetize their stream. To do so, requirements include having at least "50 Followers, Stream for 8 hours, Stream on 7 different days, and have an average of 3 viewers" (Twitch Customer Support, n.d.), essentially gamifying the process (Scheibe, 2018; Siutila, 2018). With these conditions met, the reward is affiliate status. From here, streamers can work towards "the coveted status of Twitch Partner." This type of wording further encourages this desire and motivation for streamers to gain that status, which can be parlayed into social capital often leading to some form of success (Bründl & Hess, 2016; Consalvo, et al., 2023). Of course, as the details are broken down, it is not quite as simple as it seems. There is no guarantee that meeting these conditions automatically leads to financial success, just its possibility. This is where one of the appeal of streaming simulation games comes in, there is guaranteed success if the game's goals are met.

In considering streaming simulation games, the promise of task-based rewards of financial and social success is not just a promise, but a guarantee (if the player completes the assigned tasks at the required level). Due to the nature of gameplay design, tasks and rewards are typically designed in tandem with an increase in challenge and difficulty, but always leading to the final goal: a true meritocracy (Adams & Dormans, 2012). All four titles simulate the steps of streaming described above in varying capacities, each with their own level of difficulty and reward pacing, guaranteeing success as defined through the gameplay goals of 'becoming rich and famous.' Failure is possible, in that it may take more time to achieve the goals set. However, only *Needy Streamer Overload* has failure as an end state in gameplay and narrative, where the player must restart the game and begin the quest for fame and adoration again.

Mimicking the real-life experience of streaming by focusing on posting content, balancing needs for food, rest, and the demands of family and friends, and dealing with toxic and problematic audience content such as misogynistic comments in *Streamer's Life* (2019) and swatting events (calling emergency law enforcement anonymously on a targeted victim under false pretenses, often as a form of cyber-harassment or prank) in *Streamer Daily* (2020). These are all

demands faced in actual streaming yet are much more accomplishable through gameplay. One of the most common complaints in the reviews across the four games, is the repetitiveness and sense of daily grind of the gameplay. Though a player might consider this grind bad design, it is one of the ways that procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2010) is employed to simulate the experience (and grind) of becoming a successful streamer, perhaps taking some of the allure out of the dream, by showcasing the mundane and thus driving disinterest (Bogost, 2011).

4.3. Player/Character Demands

Engaging in any interactive media activity imposes a range of demands on the user including cognitive, physical, emotional, and social demands (Bowman, 2021). Videogames not only require the range of demands of the player, but they also offer (re)presentations of these demands through be it through the actions of the player-characters or the game's narrative.

4.3.1. Cognitive Demand. Defined as being "associated with understanding in-game challenges" (Bowman, 2019, p. 145) within a gameplay context and as the "mental mode of making sense of things" (Phelps et al., 2021, p. 2864) in a streaming context, the cognitive demand for the player encompasses aspects of streaming and gameplay all in one. While all four games are touted as streaming simulation games, the ways that actual streaming is simulated is different across each game with a range of different technical and content options. It is in this sense that these are games more than they are simulations. As such, the player cannot carry over any previous actual streaming knowledge into their gameplay experience.

In *Youtuber's Life OMG* (2016), through the control of the player-character, the player has to actively select a video game from a shelf, then click on the computer to create the stream. In a completely different process, in *Streamer Daily* (2020) the player must open OBS software to create a video, though it is not a one-to-one simulated mapping of the actual OBS process. In *Streamer's Life* (2019), the player has the option of what type of video they want to create (speedrun, tutorial, etc.) and other related technical options like including music. For the player, the cognitive demand to learn the different versions of simulated content creation processes across games can be relatively high. Yet, in none of the games is the player-character shown to have any cognitive demand related to the streaming process. Even though all start player-characters start out as beginners, at least in terms of fame and fortune, it seems they all already

know how to create, record, edit and post content to their streams. Even when it comes to understanding how to upgrade the streaming technology – webcams, microphones, video cards, hard drives, etc., the onus is on the player to figure out what the best options are in context of their technological needs, financial situation, and status as a streamer while the player-character sits idle on screen until an action is inputted by the player. While categories for these elements exist as shown in Figure 1, the in-game player-character never addresses these challenges in any meaningful way beyond accumulating skill points as they create more content, which the player must then allocate.
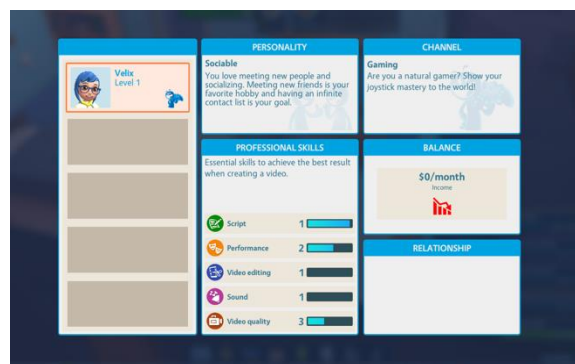
Figure 1. Screenshot of *YouTuber's Life OMG*, depicting simple skill points for complex technical and cognitive demands.

This, of course, is very different from the cognitive demand that actual streamers experience. While many streamers may start their streaming careers using basic technology, if success (financial and popularity) is their aim, they will need to upgrade equipment to more professional quality and learn editing tools that allow for more polished videos and streams. To do so, they must research their options, and make an educated decision. That activity surely has a greater cognitive demand on the streamer as they navigate the volume of information available.

4.3.2. Physical Demand. Physical demands are "associated with fine and gross motor control of the games controls" (Bowman, 2019, p. 145) and "associated with the tactile or haptic inputs required to operate a system" (Phelps et al., 2021, p. 2864). In the context of the streaming simulations played, all games have some marker of physical demand, whether it is the "stress" meter in *Needy Streamer Overload* (2022), or the sleep meter in *Youtuber's Life OMG* (2016). Each game offers a clear and direct reference to the physical demand of streaming. Similarly, the need to eat is highlighted in all but *Needy Streamer Overload* (shown in Figure 1 for the game *Streamer Daily* in the

context of multiple demands). The games all present consequences for not paying attention to the physical demand on the player-character. In *Needy Streamer Overload*, when OMGkawaiiAngel-chan doesn't sleep, her stress levels go up and her streams suffer from incoherence, lack of pacing, and other quality issues. This results in negative reactions from her followers, which in turn causes her stress meter as well as her mental health meter to fill up. Interestingly, there is no reference to physical demands related to, say, sitting in a chair for hours on end, eye strain or hand cramping from extensive gameplay. Yet these are very real physical demands of both video game players and streamers.

Basic Knowledge	Inventory	Skills ( )	Wealth	Quit

Bargain — Allows you to purchase products at 5% cheaper

Gamer — Score from games and the speed of gaining game experience increases by 5%

Streamer — Increses followers chance by 2%

Charisma — Increses subscribers chance by 1%

Advertiser — 5% chance of finding sponsors, YouStop and freelance jobs get 5% more income

Metabolism — Need, energy and happiness becomes 5% less effective

Avarice — Working and donations income increases by 5%

Moderator — Moderators will answer the chat for you. Also increases popularity %5

Figure 2. Screenshot of *Streamer Daily*, noting that metabolism is one of the physical demands.

The representation of the physical demands on streamers in all of the games, even if the consequences vary widely, has some real-world correlation to the physical demands that face streamers trying to succeed. Taking into consideration Twitch's Affiliate program discussed above, the platform requires a baseline number of hours of online time, from how many hours a week to how many days in a row a streamer must create and stream content to become Affiliate, (and this is the lowest tier available). Thus, to become successful (based on viewership numbers and profitability), it would stand to reason that the physical time and toil far exceeds Twitch's minimum requirement.

4.3.3. Social Demand. It could be argued that the very nature of online streaming is social, even for the most micro of streamers, there is always at least a perceived audience they are streaming to, though typically the hope is to gain at least a few viewers over time. From a demands perspective, in the context of streaming, social demands are ones that "engage with other social actors" (Phelps, et al., 2021, p. 2864). This includes social interactions with viewers, as audience engagement creates social capital (Consalvo et al., 2023) which can result in increased subscriptions as well as other forms of monetary support. It also

includes social interactions with other streamers, whether through inviting them to their channel or by commenting/supporting them in their broadcasts. This type of social interaction has the potential to create another level of social capital, which can lead to a sense of legitimacy across the streaming community.

In the context of video game play, social demands are "related to variable social relations with in-game characters and other players" (Bowman, 2019, p. 145). As a simulation, the selected games all focus on growing viewership through various types of social interactions (viewer engagement, contests, etc.) towards the aim of monetizing streams through donations, sponsorships etc. *Streamer Daily* (2020) and *Streamer's Life* (2019), as well as the gamer option in *Youtuber's Life OMG*, frame the player-character as a proficient gamer, which could translate to having gamer capital (Consalvo, 2009) as well as social capital as they begin their streaming careers.

For the player-character in the games, the social demands expand beyond growing their audience as they must also maintain friendships (Youtuber's Life OMG, 2016), family relationships (Streamer's Life, 2019), and romantic relationships (Needy Streamer Overload, 2022). In *Needy Streamer Overload*, the social (and emotional) demand is the most prevalent, if not the primary focus of gameplay. Even if the aim is to become famous, the gameplay focuses on social interactions with in-stream viewers, social media, and 'Jine,' the desktop application that facilitates conversation between the player and the player-character, which is another entire layer of social demand that implicates the player in the narrative of the game and affects her stats (stress, mental health, etc.)

4.3.4. Emotional Demand. Finally, emotional demand spans players, player-characters, and real-life streamers alike. In a streaming context, emotional demand is "[A]ssociated with basic and complex affective reactions to events in a system" (Phelps, et al., 2021, p. 2864) and in the video game play context is related to being "invested into the game's unfolding narrative" (Bowman, 2019, p. 145). From a streamer's perspective, there is inevitably emotional demand as it relates to the feelings that streaming can evoke (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019).

At the player level, there is not much emotional demand as the games selected often take on a humorous or flippant tone, apart from *Needy Streamer Overload* (2022) which has a much more involved narrative that is in line with Denpa-related themes of madness and delusion. The game begins with a caution, stating "do NOT try any of the more extreme and depressing actions" and "some scenes may have

intense flashing, and some can be violent and emotionally painful. Please take a break if it messes with you mentally!". There is a clear awareness of the emotional demand not only on the player-character through narrative choices, but on the player as well. As the player tries to make the right choices in responding to social media or interacting through Jine, there is a level of emotional demand on the player that can impact their experience and require time to process some of the darker themes and endings to the game.

Within the four games, all the player-characters experience varying levels of emotional demand as they deal with the trials and tribulations of streaming success and failures, balancing life's needs, and toxic viewer and social media interactions.

4.4. Simulated Toxicity

Much of the gameplay across the four games addressed the topic and challenges of streaming in a mostly tongue-in-cheek manner with silly puns and juvenile humor (the names of games played in *Streamer's Life*, 2019, were titled Borderhands and Mass Erect 3 for example). While perhaps intended to be harmlessly humorous, it creates a sense of in-group and boundary keeping (Boudreau, 2019). Only those in the know would find the jokes and game references funny. In a more problematic way, however, the representation of toxic and problematic behavior, by both the player-character and the fictional viewers, deviates the most from the actual lived experiences of streamers on the receiving end (Pellicone & Ahn, 2017). Toxicity is largely presented as a gameplay challenge, a mechanic that the player must address efficiently in order to be successful. Yet rather than being emotionally taxing or even frightening or potentially dangerous events, they are presented as one more challenge to overcome. For example, swatting events occur so frequently in *Streamer Daily* (2020) that they quickly become meaningless. Apart from *Needy Streamer Overload* (2022), toxic behaviors have little repercussion or impact on the player-character other than being a determinant of success or failure on the road to fame and fortune.

In *Streamer's Life* (2019), there is some reference to the anger and frustration experienced by players as communicated through a frustration meter in the user interface where the player-character's head increasingly is on fire. When the meter reaches the top, there is a pop up of the comments from viewers criticizing the streamer for losing their cool. The player-character then needs to change strategies to bring viewer ratings back to a positive score so as to continue progressing in the game. The streamer's

frustration, and negative reaction, is glossed over as a mechanic that the player needs to balance. While it could be argued that this is the same in the world of streaming as a streamer must address the toxicity in a manner that does not hinder their viewership (since viewership = status = success), this utilitarian presentation of toxic interactions minimizes the real impact that toxic and problematic behavior towards content creators has on the mental and emotional health of the streamer.

Streamer Daily (2020) offers the player the opportunity to play as a toxic streamer through menu selections that include salacious behaviors such as "show cleavage," and antagonizing discussion topics such as "criticize other streamers" and "make radical discourse" (shown in Figure 3). Each option is coupled with its correlated stats to help the player decide whether it is to their advantage or what consequences such viewer engagement might have on their stream's success. There is no indication of the emotional impact on the player or the viewers they are streaming to, the only aim is to find avenues towards the narrow definition of success—viewership and financial gain.
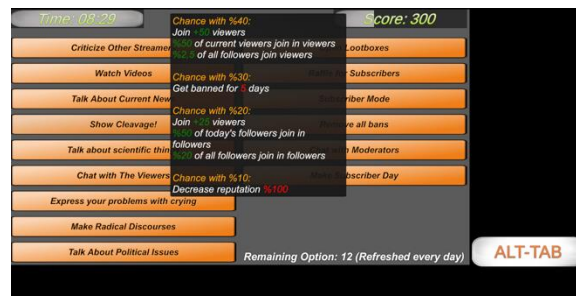
Figure 3. A collection of toxic opportunities for the streamer/player to engage in via *Streamer Daily*, with little to no long-term consequence.

While it is possible to create a male or female player-character, gender does not appear to be scripted into the toxic aspects of the dialog and swatting events – even though women, members of the LGBTQ community and marginalized streamers often see the most toxic behavior directed towards them (Uttarapong et al., 2021). *Needy Streamer Overload* (2022) is the only game among the four that addresses hate and toxicity in a realistic if difficult way. The game focuses on the mental health of the main character, *OMGkawaiiAngel* as they try to stream their way to popularity and fame as the player aims to balance Followers, Stress, Affection, and Mental Health represented to the player as meters. Within the gameplay, *OMGkawaiiAngel* can become manic, consume drugs to handle the pressure and negative feedback, and spin out of control to devastating results in some endings. It is the only game that does not seem

to make toxicity into a trivial challenge like the *Space Invaders*-esque minigame where the player can simply ban, delete or support viewers to regain viewer support (Streamer's Life, 2019).

5. Conclusion

The aim of the streaming simulation games is to entertain, and they all take generous creative license with the elements of streaming they choose to emphasize or ignore. Yet overall, the games have a central focus on the rhetoric of getting "rich and famous" from streaming, with success defined as attracting lots of viewers, becoming famous, and making lots of money. Such games also reinforce the rhetoric of meritocracy in games and streaming- where if one works hard, persists, and does the 'right,' things, success is all but guaranteed. While this is to be expected of entertainment-based games, it means most games within this genre offer a very narrow view of live streaming in general and definitions of success specifically, making it difficult to find titles where financial and social success were not at the forefront of the end conditions.

Additionally, in examining the experiences of in-game characters in various games as they relate to the experiences of actual streamers through mediated gameplay by the player, it is possible to consider how demand is performed, represented and actualized.

Yet the four games' handling of elements such as emotional demand and how to resolve toxic and problematic behaviors that are presented to the player have little connection to the lived experiences of many streamers. Understanding that gameplay is often framed as a form of escapism and need not fully reflect the reality it is re-presenting, these games provide a very specific set of aims and goals in streaming, and do not (re)present the struggles and challenges that are very present for certain bodies in streaming culture, or other motivations to live-stream. They do, however, represent a dominant (and problematic) discourse of gamer culture where toxic behavior is reduced to 'just jokes', which contributes the normalization of growing toxicity, not just in videogame culture, but live-streaming as well.

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