

# GAME CONNOISSEUR

## “Twitch: An Incubator for Online Gamer Culture”

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With the new millennium came a growth in reality television, increased broadband internet access, and more and more tech startups. In 2011, the confluence of these factors resulted in a new platform, Twitch.tv, or “Twitch.” Justin Kan, who was a physics student at Yale seeking start-up success, surely didn’t expect he would create a business that would eventually be purchased by Amazon for \$970 million in August of 2014. Its success can be attributed to the simple fact that a service such as Twitch was, and is, in demand, and likely will be for many years to come.

If we consider the medium of communication that is the Internet for a moment we would all conclude that the sheer volume of information moving instantaneously around the globe is more than a phenomenon, a fad, or a tool. The Internet is a place, it is a frontier. Mediating information in this space has fallen onto the shoulders of mostly young men and women, people like Kan, Zuckerberg, and Aaron Swartz. Facebook and Reddit aside however, Kan with Twitch bring a whole new element to the table. That is the ability to broadcast, or stream, high quality video of whatever one chooses on the Internet.

In the early days of Twitch, it was actually called “Justin.tv,” and was intended by Kan to be used to broadcast one’s daily life, much like reality TV shows at the time. To augment the streaming content, he added a chat function, allowing viewers to discuss the broadcasted events in real time. Further, and most importantly for the future of the company, he added the ability for a user to capture and broadcast his or her computer screen. This feature, combined with affordable internet and the growth of online video games, spawned a subcategory of Justin.tv devoted to users broadcasting themselves playing video games live: Twitch.tv. Now Twitch is more than just a web service, it is a “place,” a part of the internet where culture is

spawned and formed, an online cultural incubator as it were. Thanks to modern bandwidth speeds, broadcasters (or streamers) can live broadcast their screens at 1080p, 60fps resolution. Add that to the Twitch chat feature and a webcam on the gamer, and the possibilities for online streaming culture are virtually limitless.

Perhaps the most noteworthy area of growth in this Twitch-enabled internet culture has been Electronic Sports, or Esports. Since the very beginning of video games, people have competed against each other for glory and cash. Take a look at the documentary “The King of Kong” for examples. As time rolls on and technology continues to evolve, video games have become as complex as any novel or sport. Naturally, as is the case with traditional sports, people want to watch the best compete. Take a game like Counter-Strike, a team-based tactical shooter style of game, where the player sees through the eyes of a gun toting avatar. Imagine, as a viewer, watching through the eyes of the player, literally his first person perspective, as he goes about competing for potentially millions of dollars in prizes. This is akin to viewing through a young Wayne Gretzky’s eyes in real time as he dodges a check, surveys the rink for the perfect pass, and then feathers a pass through two defenders to a waiting Jari Kuri, who, on cue, slams the puck into the back of the net for a goal. Further imagine seeing that, then being able to communicate with hundreds of thousands of other viewers at the same time, all in real time. Interestingly, in a life imitating art imitating life kind of way, camera maker GoPro has teamed up with the NHL to produce a number of on-ice player perspective videos. While it has yet to be used in a live competitive game, that surely is just around the corner. The ability to broadcast competitive sporting events from the players’ perspectives may have started with Esports, but it likely won’t end there.

To give you a sense of the rising scope and influence of Esports, I attended a Twitch discus-

sion panel at Pax East in 2013 in which Kan noted a 300% annual growth in viewership of Esports events on Twitch from 2012 to 2013. And last weekend, March 14-16th 2015, in Katowice, Poland a large Counter-Strike tournament was held. Twitch reported they hit 643,362 concurrent viewers, and had over 23 million video plays. According to Twitch, that is a 169% growth in viewership from last year for that particular event. And there are dozens of these events a year, for all sorts of games, allowing for complementary companies to pop up all over the globe, undertaking the task of bringing this intense level of competition to its viewers, much like ESPN. During a broadcast you’ll see commentary desks, “shoutcasters” doing play-by-play, reporters interviewing the players, highlight reels, and intense player introductions. Even the players themselves look like they could be straight out of NASCAR, attired in uniforms of all sorts, ornate with the logos and monikers of their sponsors.

Alongside the growth of Esports viewership, other sorts of trends are emerging. Since literally anybody with a decent computer and fast internet can broadcast, some have amassed quite the fol-

lowing and can be clearly seen as a new type of entertainer. These folks use aliases much like pop stars to promote their brands. Some entertain by being impressively inhuman at video games, and others by just looking good and communicating well with their viewers. A few of them live by a tight schedule and start their broadcast’s every day at a certain time, where they will find 30,000 people already waiting to watch. Many university communications programs around the country are now formalizing this process, offering shout-casting as an option for their majors.

I’ve been watching the evolution of Twitch since its inception, and I have to say it has been truly amazing to watch it grow as a service, and as a business. Also seeing its culture spread throughout the internet and trickle on down through things like Facebook and even into daily life has been a delight for this nerd with a background in history studies. As of right now Twitch is the 4th most streamed service on the web, with 100 million people tuning in each month to the streams of over 1.5 million people taking their shot at internet stardom. Who knows, will you or someone you know be the next big thing on Twitch?

### Master Thieves

Syracuse-based band, Master Thieves, has evolved into a hard-hitting rock-n-roll six-piece (sometimes seven) that effortlessly blends the improvisational wizardry of the jam band scene with strong vocal harmonies, tight original arrangements and a passion for live performance. This eclectic bunch creates music inspired by a wide variety of influences from Levon Helm, Jimi Hendrix, Galactic, Grateful Dead and Bonnie Raitt.

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### Jess Novak

Jess Novak is a singer/songwriter/multi-instrumentalist who performs solo as well as in duos, trios and several full bands (Jess and The Beards, Master Thieves and The Shining Star Band). Bad Habit, her debut solo album released Dec. 2013, is a collection of songs cultivated over a year and put down organically as they emerged. What began as a four-song EP sprung into a full-length 11-song album as ideas flowed during sessions at Moletrax East in Syracuse with accomplished sound engineer, Jeff Moleski. Fellow Master Thieves, Brian Golden and Eric Tozer, also appear on the album providing guitar and percussion. Recorded between July and October 2013, the album captures a moment in time, focusing on relationships, both good and bad, telling the stories with honesty.

Dates, press and more information is available at:  
<https://www.reverbNation.com/jessnovak>  
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