Twitch for higher education marketing and communications: Creating a presence in the gaming world

Received (in revised form) 24th June, 2020

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Abstract
Social media communicators at the University of Alaska Fairbanks used the video streaming platform Twitch to create a wide variety of content marketing assets as well as develop a new place to build community with current and prospective students. This paper analyses how the team navigated fair use laws and technical challenges and along the way broke through silos in unique and collaborative ways.

Keywords
Twitch, Marketing, Community, Storytelling, Collaboration, Communications, Admissions

LOADING SCREEN
The very foundation of higher education is a group of students facing a teacher in a classroom. In the classroom. Together. Closer than six feet apart and with an unmasked teacher breathing knowledge into their faces. That is one of the reasons Twitch seems to be an alien concept when it comes to higher education. Where before the word ‘virtual’ had been used dismissively when referring to a communications or engagement tool, now, quite unexpectedly, leadership at all levels are looking for ways to build and actively engage with communities online.

In early 2020, the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic forced campuses across the world to shut down. Instruction continued in some form, thanks to the ability to rapidly develop and deploy remote learning and teaching tools by expanding existing online education infrastructure.
The challenge for higher education was not how to continue providing an education for students but how to maintain the bonds of the student community as well as recruit and yield an incoming class without campus visits which, until now, has been an essential part of admissions strategies. Meeting that challenge fell to digital communicators and marketers.

Even before COVID-19, prospective college students knew how to build a community anywhere they have access to 5G or a wifi connection. In many ways COVID-19 forced higher education to finally meet these perspectives in the cyberplaces they live. Attending a class remotely is not a hardship for a student who spends a lot of time online. If anything, it makes more sense. Higher education communications and marketing toolkits need to expand to reach these online citizens where they live. If the tools that have worked until now were still working, colleges and universities would not be facing steady enrolment declines. New channels need to be explored. New ways of sharing content need to be developed. That is where Twitch can play a big part.

This need to expand communications channels in a strategic effort to increase enrolment and retention is what led the social media team at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) to find out exactly how Twitch could be included in their marketing efforts.

FACING THE BOSS
Any higher ed marketer researching where prospective students are spending their time soon runs across the name Twitch. The UAF social admin tasked with keeping up to date on the online behaviour of prospective students did not have a concrete plan for how Twitch could be used as a communications tool, but knew that any platform that has an audience that large is an important place to have a presence. That changed when the admin was served an online ad for a farming simulation game.

During 2017, the UAF was celebrating its centennial. In 1917, the school was founded as an agricultural college with the help of the Morrill Land-Grant Act. Centennial-related content was being shared regularly across all digital platforms. The social admin had a content calendar full of scheduled posts about the origins of the college. Much of that schedule included the same piece of content shared weeks apart on the same platform but with new text. Concerned about declining engagement numbers as the year went on, there was an urgency to find new ways to frame very similar posts. Then came the social media ad marketing a video game product called Farming Simulator 19. This was the catalyst that turned the using of Twitch for communications and marketing from an idea seed into a full-fledged project plant.

This initial idea involved finding an agricultural scientist who was a part of the faculty to play the farming simulator and stream that gameplay on Twitch. The hope was to create some quirky content that would also celebrate a century of agricultural research at the university. Like many projects it seemed simple and straightforward. Like many projects in the world of higher ed, there were several unforeseen obstacles ahead.

Launching a presence on a video streaming platform would be very high profile. This is very different from creating an official account on Pinterest or starting a Tumblr blog. Embracing Twitch as a higher education
communications and marketing tool would mean explaining the validity of the platform to supervisors and leadership in a way that had not been necessary since 2010–2012 when marketers convinced their departments that Facebook was not just a fun thing the ‘kids’ were using, but a powerful tool for brands.

As with those halcyon days convincing nonmarketers that there would be significant return on investment began with outlining the massive number of users that are on the platform. Around 15 million people use Twitch daily. Somewhere around 45 per cent of them are aged 13–17. The Twitch terms of service do not permit account holders under the age of 13. These audience demographics are undeniably attractive to higher education marketers.

With data in hand, the project designers looked to the social component of Twitch to bolster the proposal. Over the past decade, Twitch has expanded to include broadcasts besides games. Twitch regularly streams television programmes like the Bob Ross painting shows, anime series or Doctor Who marathons. During any live broadcast, the Twitch experience includes a chat feature. This is not a back channel of communication, but rather an essential part of the user experience. Multiple users all engage with the same piece of content at the same time and are empowered to share their thoughts and feelings about it. A community. Making use of this community feature would allow direct connection between the faculty member playing the game and the audience of prospective students watching the stream.

Higher education has great stories to tell about research as well as liberal arts. Video games all have a story component. Even if the plotline of the game itself is not compelling, there is a story to be enjoyed about the people playing the game. Competition has a beginning, a middle and an end just like a narrative. Gamers and streaming media consumers are hungry for dynamic storytelling. Expanding marcom storytelling efforts onto Twitch offers the chance to repurpose great material that may not have been appropriate for other channels.

An active community of prospective students who enjoy good stories was exactly the place that marketing and communications had been looking to expand its reach. The social team was almost ready to pitch their idea.

Anticipating the question about measurable goals and long-term strategy, the team looked to Twitch’s Path to Partner for a roadmap. This programme from Twitch lays out the criteria needed to apply to become a Partner. Criteria include streaming a total of 25 hours of streamed content during a 30-day period, streaming on 12 different days and having 75 people watch a live stream at the same time. The first two were very easy for the project managers to achieve. The final part, of having 75 concurrent viewers, firmly establishes a measurable goal and helps create a strategic audience engagement plan.

Becoming a Twitch Partner opens up new levels of personalisation for the branded channel. More than 27,000 brands are Twitch Partners. Partners can create custom emoticons and add a subscribe button to their channel page. The idea of having a consistent and established presence on Twitch meant that the university mascot could be turned into a usable emoticon. This served as a gold star on the proposal to create an official channel with the first streaming event featuring a faculty member playing the farming simulator.
The idea was sound, the research convincing and the pitch well received. Then the communicator who would have to sign off on the project asked if this project was something that was even possible. Not if it was technologically possible but legally permissible. Could a university stream a video game that someone else had made and use it as a marketing and communications tool. The argument that there is a whole culture of people who make money from streaming other people’s video games was not sufficient for the justifiably risk-averse crisis manager who also oversaw the social media team. It was time to examine fair use laws.

There are four questions to answer when adapting media to use without paying a royalty to the creator of the content. Looking at them in no particular order of importance, the first issue to address is how the media is being transformed by the entity seeking fair use protection. If the original media is a song, is the component that is being used for a new purpose somehow different than a song. Are the lyrics of the song being turned into something besides music? Or in the case of a movie or television show, is the content that is being created a still rather than a moving image.

The second question to ask to establish fair use is to consider the nature of the how the content is being used. If the original media is a big-budget blockbuster, fair use would enable schools to share clips to promote on campus showings or in class as study tools. Fair use does not extend to showing a film as a film. The nature of the use must be fundamentally different from the original media.

One of the most important criteria to ensuring adherence to fair use rules is the amount of the original media which is being used. Clipping out 3 seconds of a 30-minute television show to use as an animated GIF is well within fair use. It is transformative, it is a different nature of media and it is a brief part of the whole.

The final fair use question asks if adapting the original media is going to have a financial impact on the original creator of the media. While your animated GIF may help with the marketing of a college or the promotion of an event, it is certainly not an attempt to keep the original creator from earning money from their content.

There was one added layer of protection that UAF communicators added before their first stream: no audio from the game itself would be streamed. The no-audio streaming was a way other gamers had used to navigate fair use rules. Fair use laws are constantly in flux. There are no firmly established precedents. The courts are ruling case by case on fair use challenges. Educational entities such as colleges and universities are given broad protections under fair use rules. Any institution considering using Twitch as a marketing tool should include their legal team in discussions as the plan moves into action. At the UAF, the project was conditionally approved. Then the social media team asked for the final piece for the project: a modest budget. The answer to that request was a resounding and capital ‘N’ No.

RESPAWN

No is an answer that does not deter a passionate creator. The UAF social team knew creating an official presence on Twitch was a good idea. Making beautiful and useful content with no financial support is the normal, day-to-day
existence for higher education social media content producers. This is not to say that a Twitch project has no fiduciary component. It is just that there are ways to work around not having money.

Gathering the components to broadcast a live stream on Twitch can cost as much as the streamer wants to spend. There is a combination of software and hardware that broadcasters need to start streaming. Many of them have no immediate cost associated with them.

The basic thing anyone needs to stream on Twitch is content they are interested in. In the case of this project, it was a game to play. Steam is an online library that includes many games. Some of them can be downloaded and played at no charge; others have a price tag attached. The farming simulator that was originally proposed cost under US$20. With no budget allocated, that meant that the streaming project would have to rely on free games.

The next link needed in the streaming chain is a tool to take multiple input sources and direct them towards a single output, the broadcast stream. Ideally, the director of the stream would be able to control what the audience is seeing and when. Open Broadcaster Software (OBS) is the perfect tool for this purpose. The open-source software is free to download and OBS regularly maintains the product. Broadcast directors can switch between cameras, microphones, desktop displays or the game output itself. OBS is a very powerful no-cost streaming tool.

The essential software that is needed to stream gameplay on the internet is the streaming platform itself. Twitch has the most established online gaming community, and this project was purposely designed to engage the Twitch audience. There is no charge to launch a Twitch account. The platform is supported by advertising, like most other online communications platforms.

The hardware is where any streaming project can start to cost real money. With no budget for the UAF project, it was necessary to repurpose already purchased hardware. There are only a few basic pieces of hardware a broadcaster needs. A computer to play the game, a computer to manage the stream, a camera to show the stream and a microphone to hear the stream.

Private gamers can invest hundreds or even thousands of dollars into their streaming setup. Their studios include lights, a special gaming chair and huge monitors. For a college or university that is committed to an ongoing series of streams, the broadcast setup could cost about US$2,000. The return on investment of creating a streaming studio is the ease with which broadcasts could be scheduled and created. Having a specific gaming station inside a broadcast studio where anyone could come in and stream without having to worry about their level of technical expertise means there are no technical barriers for faculty, staff or leadership. Any participant could sit right down and play.

The UAF team was at a crossroads. They had secured all the software needed. An official Twitch account had been created, the team had downloaded and practiced with OBS, and they had acquired a Steam account to access the library of games. Repurposing computers and webcams that were already in use around the office meant there was no additional charge to secure the technology. There was permission in place to launch the streaming project. They had hardware, they had software, but they did not have wetware. They did not have someone to play a game.
START CAMPAIGN
The team knew the type of person they were looking for and set out to find a match for the profile. They needed a faculty member who already knew and understood the power of digital communications. This was important because it would mean there would be no time wasted in explaining how the internet could be used as a successful marketing tool. The first streamer would have to be a thematic match with whatever game was going to be featured. It would be amusing to have a person who knows nothing about sports play a sports video game and express confusion about what was going on in the game, but entertainment was not the goal for the first stream. And the first streamer would have to be a good guest for a live broadcast. Someone who was clever, good humoured and well spoken.

Now came the chicken or the egg question. Find a game and then find the person, or find a person and then find a game? With the zero-budget constraint in place, it was decided that the game should come first. The team booted up their Steam client and went searching for a free game. There were many free games to choose from but the team needed a game that would fit into the broad institutional communications goals to highlight research programmes. The team found a game that fit the bill. An evolution simulator and resource management game called Cell to Singularity. Free to play and with an appealing user interface. After a few test play sessions, the team felt it was a good match for the software part of the equation.

Finding a great guest to launch the project was essential. These streams would be the examples which would be used to recruit others and ensure a future for the project. The team turned to social listening to find just the right person. Twitter was a good place to start. And, in this case, finish.

Devin Drown is an evolutionary biologist based at the UAF. He has an active and entertaining Twitter presence and is an early adopter of new technology. The perfect fit for a piece of wetware to help launch the project. The offer was made. And, somewhat to the surprise of the UAF social team, accepted.

The team thought they had everything sorted out. A person, a game, a makeshift computer setup to stream with. Then the guest suggested a new streaming studio. The data visualisation centre in the basement of one of the research buildings on campus. This suggestion was the first evidence that the Twitch project was not only going to be an exciting communications project but would also foster a new level of collaboration between a variety of university departments.

Ten screens surround a horseshoe of tables in the data visualisation room. The room is already outfitted with webcams and microphones. It is quiet and has a strong connection to the internet. It was a perfect idea. The team contacted the manager of the Vis Space and described what the project was. The manager agreed quickly, excited to use the space in the new way (see Figure 1).

Setting up the initial stream was relatively easy. The team brought the repurposed laptop into the room, mirrored the display to create a fun background for the stream, welcomed the first guest and started to play Cell to Singularity. Everything went as planned on the day, and the communications assets that came out from the streaming sessions were beyond anything the team had hoped.
The host played the game, asking the guest for input on decisions that should be made. Along the way they talked. These conversations became a beautiful faculty profile. Over four sessions, which ended with ‘winning’ the game, Drown talked about becoming a biologist, collaborating with other faculty members, sharing expertise by speaking at conferences all over the world, choosing to move to Alaska, benefits teaching at the UAF, creating classes for his students, fostering student success, and why prospective students should come to the UAF to study.

This is exactly the kind of content that higher education marketers and admissions teams are hungry for. These conversations told a story of how coming to this specific school could ensure a bright future for a current high school student. As Drown was playing a game and not taking part in some well-lit interview, there was a great sense of authenticity to this conversation.

It is important to note that the conversation grows out of the experiences in the game. The game itself serves as the foundation of the conversation. Drown was able to comment on the science behind the game. The host was able to build off of these comments and analysis during the game play and kept the focus of the conversation on the marketing goals of the stream. The host must keep that branded messaging in mind. While the product is fun and unusual, the work is the same. Every question needs to give the stream’s audience a reason to
choose the school that is broadcasting the stream.

Drown’s streams were the beginning of this phase of the project. The UAF social team hoped to create a weekly schedule for streaming. At the same time each week, 1 pm on Wednesdays, for example, the channel would host a stream. There would be four games in rotation. First week would be game A with guests A, second week game B with guests B, and so on for four weeks. Then game A with guests A would be back on the stream. Setting up a regular schedule would help move along the Path to Partner with the initial goal of getting 75 people watching a live streaming session.

With Cell to Singularity featuring guest Devin Drown in place, the team looked to include a different genre of game in the project. Cell was a single-person simulation game. Next up in the rotation would be the massively multiplayer online roleplaying game World of Warcraft (WoW).

LEVELLING UP

Getting two gamers in the same room playing the same game at the same time was the most complicated part of this project. The social admin and the manager of the space spent three-hour long meetings over a period of six weeks figuring out how to repurpose a room built to display data and host video conferences into a streaming studio. For the Drown streams, the room’s more advanced capabilities were not called upon. It was very different for the WoW stream.

The WoW stream used the cameras and microphones built into the room to show all the people playing as well as each gamers’ stream on a monitor in the room (see Figure 2). These sessions also required that the host be able to switch back and forth between displays to keep the broadcast engaging. Like the director and producer of any broadcast sport. The Open Broadcaster Software allowed that. The stream featured individual gameplay, a side-by-side display of them playing at the same time or a view of the whole room. This created a dynamic experience for viewers of the stream.¹¹

The Drown stream became a faculty profile. The WoW stream likewise gave insight into the faculty members playing that massively multiplayer online role-playing game. Talking with the faculty members about pedagogy that evolved from the gameplay style was fascinating. One of the players always created characters that supported others. A healer. In a Massively Multiplayer Online game like WoW, the team dynamic is what makes the game so fun. This faculty member who played healers described how that was reflected in his teaching. He created frameworks that helped not only his own students, but any student.

The other participant in the WoW stream was the Dean of the School of Management. His joy in the game came from participating in the economy of the online world. Finding resources to sell on the in-game marketplace and getting the best price. Managing his character’s wealth. Another exact match to his interests and personality in real life.

The unexpected outcome from the WoW stream was how much insight it would provide to a prospective student about their own learning style and how that was reflected in their everyday gameplay. If a student is a gamer who likes to rush into the action and lead a group behind them, that student may be interested in joining student government. If the student likes to sit back in
an adventuring party and just participate when they have something valuable to contribute that’s an indication of what they can expect from themselves in the classroom. They will be there and ready to participate and know their input will be valued. If a student is a gamer who ignores the prescribed quests and explores on their own, they may help them be aware that they will need to work a bit harder to stay focused on their assigned lessons.

The streaming project again proved that it could produce very valuable marketing assets. These insights into learning and teaching help demonstrate to prospects that the school is dedicated to helping them succeed even before they have their first class. This is insightful information presented in a context that this particular audience understands and appreciates. Representation matters, not just in ethnicity and accessibility, but also in culture and language. If a school speaks gaming, a gamer will feel like it is a good fit for them.

Where Drown was recruited because of his Twitter presence, the WoW players were recruited based on past personal interactions. The lead member of the social team knew two faculty members who had been serious gamers in the early days of the game. Both agreed to dust off their skills and participate in a streaming session but it was not without risk. After the session, one of the players agreed to stream again, but not WoW. Years had been spent overcoming the almost addictive need to play the game, and streaming it for a marketing project put the recovery in danger.

There are many, many different types of games that will resonate with faculty members, and even graduate students. An English student could play along with a visual novel and discuss storytelling techniques. A group of undergraduate students could stream their playing of
Dungeons and Dragons where each student plays a character that is based on their field of study. The host would talk with them about how their education informed their gameplay.

There is also a potential to host Twitch takeovers using the frameworks in place for student Instagram takeovers. Finding students who already have Twitch followers and giving them the keys to the branded channel would help move along the Path to Partner and the unlocking of all the brand benefits. These streamers would also act as brand influencers and online ambassadors. Provide a sweatshirt to be worn during streaming or a water bottle that can be kept in the frame and those gamers would take that influencing effort into their own streams.

Influencers and takeovers do have a level of risk involved. There would have to be strict guidelines about the games that are played during takeover streams or branded influencing streams. With some work and dedication, this would be a rewarding expansion of the streaming project.

ENDGAME

All of these streaming adventures must serve the ultimate goal of getting students to enrol. Each single stream creates a wide range of content communicators, and marketers can use across a variety of social and digital platforms. Twitch is full of tools to help audience growth and when used strategically, the platform will support all communications efforts. That is done by making the most out of what Twitch calls Highlights, Clips, and Events.

Events are exactly that. Scheduled streaming times that show up on the channel’s front page. These link easily to Facebook and can help raise awareness about the brand’s Twitch channel as well as increase viewership of the streams live. That crucial Path the Partnership criteria of 75 concurrent viewers are easier to achieve using this tool. Having events scheduled on the Twitch channel will also demonstrate that this channel is active, which will help grow people who follow the channel. Links to events also make great content for newsletters and internal communications. Departments, centres, schools and colleges can share when one of their faculty members or students is going to be featured on the stream. The streams themselves provide great video content to post in full on Facebook, YouTube or Vimeo. Fun moments from the stream could be edited down to appear on Instagram or TikTok. Even GIPHY.

Highlights are long, up to a minute or more, segments of a recorded stream, which can be shared via a link Twitch creates. When clicked outside Twitch, the link takes a user directly to a specific moment during the stream. This is very useful when working to highlight faculty or programmatic success. Having those highlights created in advance and documented somewhere means that when a faculty member has a new book published or advancement is working to launch a scholarship campaign for a specific field of study, there is authentic and evergreen content at the ready to support those communications. This makes great posts for LinkedIn, Twitter or even Tumblr.

Clips are short, less than a minute long, and work the same way as the Highlight. Links that are created by Twitch take users directly to that part of the stream. Collect five clips of a faculty member talking about how they ensure student success, compile them into a BuzzFeed and then share that
BuzzFeed during the next yield campaign titled ‘Five Reasons Why This Is the Best School for You’. Post those clip links on the website for admitted students to help them connect with what they are interested in learning about the school. Include those links in e-mail campaigns.

A single hour-long stream is a source for a wide variety of content suited for sharing on many platforms. The key to creating a stream that offers this wealth of shareable material is keeping the end result in mind as the stream begins.

It is very important to reiterate that no matter the game being played, the gameplay is not the purpose of the stream. The purpose is to have the person playing the game generate branded content in an authentic way. That responsibility falls squarely on the host.

The person who interviews the guest must keep turning the conversation back to create sound and audio clips in line with the overarching communications strategy for the institution. The host needs to be someone who understands the brand and the messaging associated with the brand. Without that anchor, the whole thing becomes a strange exercise in streaming for a brand rather than using Twitch as a tool to create interesting and engaging content that will help increase enrolment, retention and brand awareness.

The Twitch project undertaken by the team at the UAF had succeeded in proving that usable, branded content to further institutional communications goals could be created using Twitch. The project ended when the team members spearheading the campaign took jobs in higher education outside Alaska. Severe budget cuts throughout the University of Alaska system soon after that meant a refocusing of all communications efforts.

The Twitch channel fell victim to that change in strategy. Unusual communications methods were dropped in favour of a smaller team relying on commonly-used tools.

Streaming a game with a host interviewing the player to create content marketing assets is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the potential of Twitch as a communications tool. Setting up a webcam in a podcasting studio and streaming the next podcast session would create the same wealth of highlights and clips that can be used to promote the podcast as well as in institutional marketing and communications efforts. Twitch is also a perfect platform for live streaming events, messages from leadership or live interviews about campus issues.

In 2020, it became very clear that higher education needed more online community management tools. Twitch can be that community. Using it as a marcomm tool is only the beginning.

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