

# Laborious Spectatorship of Esports Fans

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## INTRODUCTION

Esports activities are predominantly understood in existing literature through frames of leisure (Lee and Schoenstedt, 2011; Wood et al., 2019). Even in literature regarding professionalisation, the pursuit of esports as a career is often framed as a form of serious leisure (Seo, 2016; Cunningham et al., 2018; Kauwelo, 2019). In this work we propose an alternative perspective of *laborious spectatorship* across three ethnographic studies. The three studies were a part of a broader research course intended to explore what experiences of esports spectatorship looks like in practice and how they differ across sites of spectatorship. In doing so, each of the three studies respectively focused on spectatorship in the home, stadium, and esports bar.

Spectators have been noted as performing labour as audiences of advertising under traditional models of media broadcast and production (Fuchs, 2012). Such tried models have persisted into the contemporary media landscape of esports; a report produced by market research firm Newzoo (2020) found that roughly 58 per cent of the esports industry's market revenue is derived from sponsorship and advertising deals. With this in mind, most esports spectatorship could therefore be construed as laborious. However, in instances of spectatorship which appeared across the three ethnographic studies, the labour performed by spectators was not derived from the situations they were placed in by partaking in spectatorship. Rather, the act of spectatorship itself was laborious. *Laborious spectatorship goes beyond spontaneous leisure, making concerted efforts to achieve a specific spectating experience.* Often, an underlying aspiration motivates laborious spectatorship. We found that spectators sought to advocate for esports through their laborious spectatorship. Spectators felt a sense of loyalty, almost an obligation or a sense of indebtedness to esports for the niche entertainment and happiness it had provided them in the past. Through their laborious spectatorship, spectators felt that they were 'giving back' to esports and played an active role in its promotion and growth.

## THE HOME

For those who spectated esports in their home, the presence of household cohabitants was a common factor with which compromise needed to be sought. While many participants noted that they would stage their spectatorship around their parents,

siblings, and partners, others sought to stage their experiences of esports spectatorship for their household cohabitants. Notably, the laborious spectatorship of these participants sought to legitimise esports for their non-fan cohabitants by portraying esports as legitimate, professional, and therefore authentic. The aspiration of this laborious spectatorship was to not convert non-fan cohabitants into fans, but rather to help improve the perception of esports among those outside of the fandom by portraying esports as a professional and legitimate practice.

### **THE STADIUM**

A desire to engage in active forms of support embodied another instance of laborious spectatorship at the stadium. Driven by a desire for future major sporting events to be held in Australia, spectators sought to portray themselves as an enthusiastic audience worthy of future consideration. Ultimately, this active support coloured the experience of spectatorship in the stadia as one reminiscent of traditional sports. Tying in with the broader sportification of esports (Heere, 2018), the sensual elements of the stadium reflected those of conventional sports. In particular, spectators were able to perform expressions of patriotic support and partisan fandom through their spectatorship, allowing these spectators to partake in a sports-like experience in a context they truly were passionate about. By allowing esports fans to experience these widely celebrated sporting rituals and behaviours, experiences of spectatorship at the stadium were authenticated and legitimised.

### **THE ESPORTS BAR**

The relaxed atmosphere of the esports bar presented the venue as an attractive site to introduce people to esports. Specifically, we observed that enthusiast fans often brought a group of their novice friends to the bar to introduce them to esports. While being constantly exposed to esports in the bar, there was no pressure placed on novices to actively spectate. Rather, enthusiasts worked to ease the novices into esports spectatorship, which can be confusing and hard to appreciate for those unfamiliar (Hilvoorde and Pot, 2016; Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017). In aiding their novices, the enthusiasts worked to stage a spectating experience that would be understandable, educative, and engaging. Notably, the enthusiasts often narrated the match for their novices, providing a commentary track which focused on not only punctuating and contextualising the matches, but also explained much of the sport on a basic, mechanical level. In doing so, enthusiasts worked to bridge the gaming literacy which the novices lacked to fully understand and enjoy esports spectacle. Experiences of esports spectatorship were constructed for the novices based on what the enthusiasts believed spectating esports *ought to be* like, exerting their authority to affirm a convention of esports authenticity (Brunner, 1994). In doing so, the enthusiasts' laborious spectatorship aspired to grow the esports community.

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