Networking roulette, babies, and playing !hitball: An ethnographic study of online games events in 2020

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INTRODUCTION
This paper reflects on an ethnographic study of three Melbourne games events that all took place online in 2020 due to Government restrictions limiting in-person gatherings. The three case study events are Freeplay Independent Games Festival, Penny Arcade Expo Online (PAX Online), and Melbourne International Games Week (MIGW). This paper will discuss my ethnographic experience of observing and participating in each event community, navigating each event space, playing games and hanging out with other attendees, which was supplemented by interviews with event organisers and attendees.

Games events have become an important aspect of Melbourne games community, with MIGW and PAX Australia drawing tens of thousands of attendees per year, and Melbourne branding itself as "the nation's proud digital games capital" (Creative Victoria 2020). This has been reflected in recent years on a regulatory level, with the Australian Federal Government, and the Victorian State Government in particular, demonstrating an increasing interest in videogames as a cultural industry (Australian Government 2016; Darchen & Tremblay 2015). The events also brand themselves as part of Melbourne's cultural identity. For example, Freeplay is self-described on the event website as "iconically-Melbourne" and as having "consistently been part of the city's culture" (Freeplay 2020). All three events maintained a distinct Melbourne vibe, despite taking place online and, especially in the case of PAX Online, being largely placeless.

Gathering together at in-person events is an important part of engaging with games as a player or consumer (Gosling & Kelly 2011), and is also a vital part of networking and connecting with the game-making community in an Australian games industry that is characterised by precarity, a lack of resources, smaller studios and independent game-makers (Keogh 2019). However, in 2020, games events and communities globally have found innovative ways of connecting digitally while it has been unsafe and, in the case of Melbourne for much of the year, illegal to do so in-person.

Though each of the three case study events moved online, they all did so in different formats that were best suited to their particular communities. These formats had varying levels of success. For example, Freeplay took place through a combination of YouTube streams and a virtual hang out space called the Freeplay ZONE. In the ZONE, attendees could select an avatar, move through multiple spaces, and interact with other participants through text chat. A sense of place and community quickly grew as the 'baby' avatar took over the space. It was described by attendees as the "next best thing" to gathering in-person at the Festival.

PAX Online was streamed on Twitch, but the community was directed to the event Discord server, which had channels focused on the streamed panel sessions, gameplay, and server-based bot games such as !hitball and an emoji scavenger hunt that had been created for the event with thousands of people participating. Throughout MIGW, many different platforms were used, with attendees using different spaces for each event that formed part of the week's programme. However, the sense of community prevailed through a sense of familiarity in text-box chats and events such as 'networking roulette' as part of Games Connect Asia Pacific (GCAP).

To examine how each event space was constructed by both the organisers and the attendees populating them, this paper takes Doreen Massey's (2005) conceptualisation of 'space' as a framework to understand the ways they were constructed materially, socially and politically. Massey describes 'space' as the product of interactions, embedded practices and interrelations constructed by the identities of the individuals within them. This framework is useful in interrogating the particular practices and interactions that culminated in each individual case study event space.

Ethnographic research adds "material, visual, aural and kinetic components of human activity" to studies of social interaction (Ardévol 2012, 86-87), with a researcher embedding themselves within a culture-sharing group to observe what is said and done, or the group's beliefs and behaviours. Møller and Robards (2019, 97) suggest that "tracing or following is at the heart of ethnography" which "constructs worlds through movement and tracing within different settings of a complex cultural phenomenon". Furthermore, Kusenbach (2003) argues that an outsider's perspective can be problematic and ill-suited to fully understanding the lived experiences of the group's insiders. To this end, it was important as a researcher for me to embed myself fully in the context of each event and to become part of the communities I was moving through and engaging with. I then conducted semi-structured interviews with event organisers and attendees to understand their experiences of the events.

This paper will take interviews and the ethnographic study at three games events — Freeplay, PAX Online and MIGW — to examine how each event shifted online in 2020, how each space was constructed to suit each event's particular community, and how the communities interacted at each event despite being unable to gather in-person.

BIO
Taylor Hardwick is a PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology. Her doctoral research is concerned with safety, accessibility and inclusion at Melbourne-based games events, both in-person and digital,

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