

# Between places: spectatorship at an Australian esports bar

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the preliminary findings of an ethnography conducted at a Melbourne esports bar: a venue where one can watch live esports in the presence of alcoholic beverages, food and other esports fans. In this sense, esports bars enable a public communal mode of esports spectatorship, which has not yet been comprehensively covered in academic literature. This study sought to capture the experience of, and motivations for watching esports in a place between the stadium and the home. From fieldwork conducted over the span of roughly five months, it is becoming clear that the esports spectating experience at the bar is that of vicariousness, through the imitation and recreation of crowd behaviours, rituals and atmosphere.

## Keywords

Esports, spectatorship, bar, communal

## INTRODUCTION

Nestled in an unassuming basement in Melbourne's CBD lies a peculiar bar. If enticed by the neon blue and red light that pours from its entrance and bathes the street, you will be met with a trendy, lively venue filled with a broad demographic ranging from businesspeople to university students. While some are there based on venue's merits as a bar, many others will tell you that they're there to watch esports. *GGEZ* is an esports bar: a venue intended for watching esports in a bar environment, in the same vein as an American-style sports bar. While esports literature has reported on in-person esports spectatorship at physical stadium events (Taylor, 2012; Szablewicz, 2016; Cumming, 2018) and domestic spectatorship through online streaming platforms like *Twitch* (Burroughs & Rama, 2015; Taylor 2018), the appearance of esports bars like *GGEZ* presents a new, underreported mode of spectatorship. Although esports spectatorship has previously occurred in bar environments at intermittent, organised events like "BarCrafts"

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(Scholz, 2012), esports bars offer a dedicated and accessible space for esports spectatorship beyond stadiums and domestic environments. This method of spectatorship poses a new variable to consider if we are to fully understand esports spectatorship, particularly in Australia. While recent studies have provided statistical representations of how many Australians watch esports (Brand et al., 2017), our understanding of *how* people watch esports is less comprehensive. It is therefore imperative that if we are to fully know the nature of esports spectatorship in Australia, we must cast our gaze towards public communal spectatorship of esports and the venues that enable it.

Although currently sparse in esports literature, the concept of a public communal mode of spectatorship is quite present in sports literature. In the context of soccer, Bale (1998) describes three perspectives a single match can be watched regarding spectating environments. He describes the spectatorship of the “real” game at the stadium where the match is held and the remote spectatorship of the match’s broadcast at home. He also describes a third environment that is “conceptually (and geographically) some way between the stadium and home”. Drawing on the Danish practice of watching soccer on a large screen erected in an open field, Bale recalls how drunken fans engage in a “carnival” of rituals traditionally associated with soccer spectatorship that were no longer allowed to be performed at modern, sanctified stadiums. He goes as far as to claim that this kind of spectatorship is the optimal contemporary sporting experience for this reason. This highlights the crux of Bale’s claim that sports spectators hold a “place-making” quality, being able to transform a place into a sporting place by invoking the cultural and historic essence of the sport through the performance of certain behaviours and rituals. Weed (2006) expands on Bale’s claim, asserting that the main draw of sports spectatorship experience in these contexts is the “collective enjoyment” and “shared communal experience”, created by the gathering of sports spectators. Based on an ethnography of soccer spectatorship in UK pubs, Weed concludes that rather than seeking proximity to the match, sports spectators seek proximity to a desired spectating experience itself.

These notions of the place-making spectator and the draw of the spectating experience manifested clearly during fieldwork at *GGEZ*, as illustrated through a thick description approach. It is described how the “default” state of *GGEZ* as an esports themed bar is transformed into an esports spectating place through the performance of rituals and behaviours the spectators would engage in if they were at the physical event in-person. This point is noteworthy in an Australian context, as most major esports tournaments are held in the northern hemisphere and thus realistically inaccessible for most Australians to attend in-person (Gibbs et al., 2018). Whereas in Bale (1998) and Weed’s (2006) studies, the draw of spectating soccer in a public communal environment was to replicate and enjoy a lost “authentic” spectating experience, the draw at *GGEZ* seemed to be to replicate and enjoy the in-person spectating experience remotely. Even though the chants and cheers would not reach the ears of the teams they were directed to, and nor would the miniature Mexican wave in the bar join up with the massive one sweeping across the crowd at the stadium, the sheer performance of, and exposure to these rituals in the presence of others worked to emulate the in-person spectating experience. Indeed, spectators spoken to often cited spectating at the bar as “the next best thing” to traveling across the globe and being there in person for this reason.

Through studying the experience of spectating esports at Melbourne’s *GGEZ* esports bar, we can observe how Australian esports fans work to circumvent their geographical isolation from the global esports community. By reproducing and engaging in behaviours and rituals observed through the broadcast in the bar, spectators employ their place-making

qualities to bring the in-person spectating experience into a remote location. It seems that while spectators gather at *GGEZ* to watch esports, it is the produced shared communal experience that is desired.

## BIO

David Cumming is a PhD candidate in the Interaction Design Lab at the School of Computing and Information Systems, the University of Melbourne. His PhD research focuses on the spectatorship of esports and the factors influencing esports consumption. He comes from a media studies and journalism background, having previously studied at *Curtin University*.

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Wally Smith has worked in the field for Human-Computer Interaction and Social Computing for several years, holding research positions at University College London, University of Surrey, University of Western Australia, City University London, before joining the University of Melbourne. His research examines real-world experiences of using IT in a variety of domains including public history, education, health and emergency management. He also does more theoretical work on the social and historical origins of information technology. Across his career he has taught various aspects of applied computing, most recently Organisational Processes, Knowledge Management, Research Methods in Information Systems, and Impacts of Digitisation.

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