

# Virtually Safe: An Ethnographic Account of Sydney's Queer Gaming Spaces

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## Keywords

Queer, gaymers, space, ethnography

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

During my fieldwork amongst Sydney's queer<sup>1</sup> gaming communities I noticed participants<sup>2</sup> persistently bringing gaming elements, jargon or symbols into conventionally non-game spaces. Examples include when the Sydney Gaymers turn Sydney's bars into makeshift arcades or when Dungeons and Dragons' families<sup>3</sup> name their houses with fantasy names. The playful nature with which my participants manifested the imagined or the virtual within the real or the actual was usually supported by an agenda of reclamation. There is a sense of resistance against hegemonic or simply unappealing spaces that could be interpreted as a process of reimagining their lifeworlds. Often, participants will speak about the 'queerness' of gaming or it's 'niceness' which points towards a conceptualisation of gaming as a more personal or unique activity in comparison to the kinds of things other adults do.

I'm testing out the theoretical utility of interpreting this practice as gamifying spaces. Gamification is the application of game systems such as goals, rewards and playful elements into traditionally non-game domains such as the workplace. According to Woodcock, Jamie and Johnson (2018), this is understood as a neoliberal productivity strategy that is traditionally applied 'from above' onto workers. They argue that the traditional conception of gamification is limiting and obscures the radical potential of gamification that occurs 'from below' as opposed to 'from above'. My fieldwork revealed a possible avenue for the extension of gamification outside of the realm of workplace governance. I witnessed my participants deploying games as tools for disrupting the everyday structured rhythms of their lives. They gamified their social interactions through role play and re-constructed their worlds as virtual spaces in order to resist the sometimes stifling urban doldrum of Sydney.

Understanding the queer gaming spaces created by my participants requires deconstructing the private/public space dichotomy as well as the idea of a 'queer space' in general. Generic space, a concept developed by Sinnott (2013), is a useful way to interpret the simultaneously queer and not-queer spaces formed by my participants in some of Sydney's straightest areas. An example is the transformation of the sports betting 'Valve bar' into a queer gaming arcade during the gaymers' Pixel Party nights. The establishments that unwittingly uphold or are associated with the masculine, competitive and often toxic side of Australian bar and gambling culture are temporarily transformed into nerdy, queer 'safe spaces'. A safe space is a designated zone that is exempt from transphobia, homophobia, racism and ableism. Of course, the reality doesn't always live up to this ideal but the generative power of mobilising the term does do social work for those who understand and respond to it.

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Using generic space as opposed to simply 'queer space' conveys the space's constant state of flux and its inextricable enmeshment with the generic acts of those that occupy it (Sinnott 2013, p. 334).

The generic spaces Sinnott talks about are of course quite different to a public bar in Sydney but the way the concept problematises the western centric private/public binary brings clarity to the generative acts of the queer gamers. Sinnott (2013) draws on Massey's deconstruction of the private and public 'imagining' (pp. 334, 335). Massey suggests that viewing space as a 'product of social relationships' can allow us to deconstruct common assumptions about visibility and resistance (p.334). Often considered within the 'private' realm, the dormitories in Sinnott's research are generic spaces that defy the classic understanding of a 'closed' or 'domestic' environment (p.335). Considering the global, gendered forces that are evidenced in everyday social acts of the women that occupy these spaces, Sinnott is able to construct a valuable critique of the existence of an entirely private or public space (2013, p.335). The private nature of my participant's gaming behaviours is complicated by the public performance of their nerdiness and queerness on display when they attend events.

Oswin (2008) problematised the notion of 'queer space', arguing that an interpretation of space that is beyond the hetero/homosexual binary is necessary. Oswin advocates less for a redefinition of queer space and more for a queer analysis of space (2008, p. 91). I believe, through the exploration of the generic spaces that my participants created and are created by, we can arrive at a queerer understanding of space. Oswin draws attention to the tendency to homogenise queer space and render invisible race, gender and class in the process (2008, P.94). This is an important critique and one that remained salient in my exploration of the very fluid spaces generated by my participants. These spaces occasionally became more exclusive than intended or put participants in potentially unsafe positions as well.

This emphasis on the generative power of traditionally heteronormative or otherwise problematic spaces helps to elucidate the behaviour of my participants. Their temporary reshaping of traditionally banal or even hostile spaces, reconfigures parts of Sydney into safer spaces. The public and private dichotomy cannot adequately explain the generic space of the transformed bar or the aptly dubbed 'Dungeon' share-house. Even when games are not being explicitly engaged with, their logics are put to work by the gamers I studied to shape their lifeworlds. Even as these spaces are more comfortable than others for my participants, they are not homogeneously 'queer' or even 'safe'.

## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> I understand queer in the broadest sense as any person, identity, practice or phenomenon that is positioned (or positions) itself or them-self against a hegemonic or dominant other

<sup>2</sup> The people who consented to being involved in my fieldwork

<sup>3</sup> Dungeons and Dragons is a tabletop role-playing game that is usually played in groups of about four or more people. My participants called their group a D&D family and for my fieldwork year we met weekly, in a house they named 'Dungeon' to play together.

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