

‘Sculling Shoey’s’ at eSports: Nationalism, Masculinity, and Performative Assemblies

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ABSTRACT

The Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) 2017 event in Sydney flooded the Qudos Bank Arena with 7000 eSport fans on both event days. The championship trophy – an embossed silver plate that was the circumference of a car wheel – stood proudly centre stage. Two rows of five gaming computers were aligned on each side of the trophy to seat the competing eSport teams. The finalists represented the United States (OpTic), China (ViCi), Europe (FaZe), Brazil (SK), two teams from Denmark (Astralis and North), and two teams from Australia (Chiefs and Renegades). These eight teams went head-to-head for a prize pool of \$200,000, playing matches of Valve’s classic ‘hardcore’ videogame, the multiplayer First-Person Shooter (FPS) Counter-Strike Global Offensive (CS:GO).

Groups of urban ‘jackaroos’ (a national image of young men working on a sheep or cattle station in outback Australia) wore matching cork hats and swathed Southern Cross flags as capes. “Aussie Aussie Aussie!” bellowed the host into a microphone. “Oi Oi Oi!” 7000 eSport spectators roared in unison, fists punching the air. Chanting together materialised the looser affiliations of the crowd in proximity into a cohesive body confined to a shared space (cf. King, 1997, p. 857). Throughout the event, the crowd chanted “Aussie! Oi!” in frequent repetition, even when no Australian teams were playing, to the extent that I began to suspect that the audience wasn’t familiar with any other sports chants.

The camera panned over the crowd, zooming in on a young man standing on his seat who slogged back a ‘shoey’. With both hands, he brought a black sneaker up to his mouth, raising elbows above his shoulders as he exaggeratedly leans back to drink from the shoe. The audience hollers, applauds, and cheers him on. A bit of beer trickles down his front, marking his t-shirt with a darkened wet patch below his neckline. This (person I will refer to here as) ‘Shoey Guy’ (one of many shoe drinking attendees across the event) wore official merchandise for the Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) 2017 championship, a t-shirt adorned with iconography of the Sydney Opera House in cobalt blue accents on faded white. As he finished drinking beer out of his shoe, he flexed both biceps and cried out “YEAHHHHH!” triumphantly. The sound of his voice intermingled with the arena’s boisterous cacophony. To the left of Shoey Guy, another mate took a gulp of dark liquid from a clear plastic cup and

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raised it with a nod in a cheers motion toward the camera, left hand pointing at Shoey Guy. To the right, another mate standing on his seat jumped into Shoey Guy's arms to be cradled, right arm around the Shoey Guy's neck with the other hand throwing rock 'n' roll devil horns to the ceiling.



Figure 1: A young fan doing a 'shoey' at IEM 2017 while the crowd cheers on. Image sourced from <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2021/01/iem-melbourne-returns-for-2021-but-itll-be-online-only/>

Within the emerging eSports spectatorship scene, the valorisation and celebration of excessive drinking is therefore part of an embodied masculine 'Gamer' identity (Pearce, 2011; Salter & Blodgett, 2017) that takes noticeable influence from the drunken antics traditionally associated with football fans' "hooliganism" (King, 1997). Like football fans at games, I posit that male fans at eSport tournaments have created imaginary masculine and national boundaries by which they have affirmed their identities (Ibid., p. 576), producing a social understanding of what it means to be recognised in this scene as young Australian 'Gamer' men. Exemplified in the repeated chanting of "Aussie! Oi!" and drinking 'shoey's' – taking up this sporting success cliché (it's the winner who drinks from a shoe) and how it alludes to drunken sports fandom and thus alludes to sports hooliganism – eSport fans construct and embody an imagined category of 'jock' sports culture as 'Gamers'.



Figure 2: Australian team Renegades doing shoeys at ESL One Cologne Grand Finals 2017: "We're going to do a little demonstration now. Boys, you know how it's done. Alright fellas, let's share the shoeey sequence – three, two, one." Screenshot taken at 00:18 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHSLbdckKWJo>

This research is informed by a broader ethnographic study of social events related to videogames, many of which included drinking. It contributes to feminist game studies, media studies, and internet studies on gender and eSports by investigating the embodied alcohol consumption, spectatorship practices, and expressions of masculinity and nationalism that can be present at such events - specifically in this case at the Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) 2017 Sydney tournament. Since alcohol consumption is a heavily gendered and performative social practice (Riches, 2016), studying the drinking culture at eSports arenas offers another way to understand gendered productions and exclusion in these shared spaces. The 'drunk spaces' (Ferrer-Best, 2018) occupied and created relative to gaming, constitute an easily overlooked area of inquiry when game research becomes bounded by the central investigation of play, players, and the creation of play. In order to develop a better understanding of the drinking cultures of gaming culture, this paper argues that game and cultural researchers must historicise and attend the 'peripheral' fields beyond (and related to but not superseded by) videogames themselves.

BIO

Dr Mahli-Ann Butt is a Lecturer in Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne. She is an ethnographer of digital cultures, researching questions of diversity in the cultures and industries of videogames. Mahli-Ann serves on the executive board of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) as the current elected Chapter Officer (2023-) and DiGRA Australia as an Open Seat (2022-), and as the research chair of the Sydney Games and Play Lab (2021-). She has also served as past DiGRA Open Seat (2019-2022), Diversity Officer (2018-2019), and Student Officer (2016-2018), as well as the Editor-in-Chief of the postgraduate game studies research journal *Press Start*. Mahli-Ann is the lead editor on the forthcoming edited book collection "The Post-Gamer Turn", and recently served as an editor for the "Surviving Whiteness in Games" special issue of the *Journal of Games Criticism*. She is also a research collaborator on the "Emerging online safety issues: co-creating social media education with young people" research project funded by the Australian eSafety Commissioner.

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