

# Everything Ethnography All At Once: Reflecting on a Team Ethnography of SXSW Sydney

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## INTRODUCTION

Ethnography is an established methodology in game studies, be it the study of online game worlds and their player cultures (Pearce et al., 2009; Taylor, 2006; Chen, 2009) or offline games events such as LANs (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; McAueley et al., 2020) and esports tournaments (Taylor, 2018; Taylor, 2012, Butt, 2022). These ethnographies almost always draw on the fieldwork observations of a single researcher who is limited both practically (in terms of the number of interviews they can conduct or things that they can see) and by their own positionality (in terms of how they experience, view and themselves impact the research site).

In this presentation, we present our initial reflections and early results from a large team ethnography (O'Reilly, 2009) of South by Southwest (SXSW) Sydney, a major multimedia conference held in October 2023 on the traditional lands of the Gadigal people. The first SXSW to be held outside of Austin, Texas, SXSW Sydney included a unique and prominent games festival encompassing talks, panels, game and XR showcases, industry awards and the Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) esports tournament, which sold out an 8,000-seat stadium. As far as we know, ours is the first team ethnography to be conducted in game studies or at a games-focused event. Here we present our initial findings and reflect upon the strengths of the team ethnography methodology.

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## METHODS AND DATA

As noted by Erikson and Stull (1998), “if ethnography is about discovering – and creating – a story, then the narrative task at the beginning [of a team ethnography] is to come up with a shared story that explains ‘what we are doing here’.” Our team of ten researchers met on a fortnightly basis for three months in the lead-up to the event to discuss methods, review prior literature and develop our research questions. Our team included various seniority levels (A/Prof to postgraduates), genders, research interests and prior ethnographic research experience. We pre-identified three main themes of interest: how events like SXSW Sydney construct and reinforce games culture; the perceived impact of SXSW Sydney on (video)game production in Australia; and interactions between the games festival and the parallel screen, music and tech festivals that co-occur at SXSW.

Across seven days of the festival we discussed the research with 98 SXSW attendees. This included 46 formal recorded interviews and 52 informal conversations relating to the research. During the festival, our team cumulatively recorded more than 1400 photographs and videos; attended 153 sessions, scheduled events or advertising “activations”; and sang 3 karaoke songs at the Games Awards night.

## RESULTS

The most prominent findings from this extensive data collection were the myriad ways SXSW Sydney supported numerous game events which had implicitly contradictory values. Geographically stretched across an atypical axis of Sydney’s city centre, the festival at one end supported and affirmed “hardcore” gamer culture (exemplified by IEM and the *Monster Energy Drink Barbershop*), and at the other end celebrated the best of Australia’s innovative and inclusive independent games scene (exemplified by the *Queer Creators Showcase*, featuring drag and musical performances). The contrast between these spaces revealed the tensions between the markets and communities of game production, with legitimacy and government support at stake.

Marred by miscommunications and lower-than-expected consumer attendance, the games festival was nevertheless described by a game developer as feeling “like a school camp”. Developers who attended to showcase their games expressed disappointment at these organisational mishaps, but ultimately leaned into the opportunity to hang out with their friends and enjoy a holiday to Sydney enhanced by the plethora of activities offered by a SXSW badge. This mirrors how Australian game developers view Melbourne International Games Week, which took place a week before SXSW Sydney (Hardwick 2023). This “school camp” vibe also aligned with our research experience and shaped our ethnography approach. In our presentation, we will further discuss the implications of SXSW Sydney for game studies in Australia.

A secondary aim of this project was to provide an opportunity for junior researchers to practice ethnography, and to develop the research culture of the host research group. We gained many methodological insights about team ethnography, including the effectiveness of a conversational style in semi-structured interviews; the way visual ethnographic techniques changed how the team “saw” the spaces we were attending; and the strengths of different styles of voice memos. The hot Sydney sun and the realisation of how much data the team was capable of collecting led to a methodological shift: discarding scheduled interviews and shared calendars, freeing team members to follow the “vibes” of the conference and seek out new spaces and conversations, which revealed dimensions of the event that had previously gone

unnoticed. Primed to have fun because any friction, conflict or disaster meant great data, perhaps the most surprising finding was the joy we each discovered in socialising the ethnographic process.

## **BIOS**

Dr Fraser Allison is an independent researcher with a PhD from the University of Melbourne. His work explores various intersections of games, death, voice and technology.

Dr Mahli-Ann Butt is a Lecturer in Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne. She broadly researches questions of ‘diversity’ in the cultures and industries of games, situated in ‘the post-gamer turn’.

Dr Marcus Carter is an Associate Professor in Digital Cultures at the University of Sydney and an ARC Future Fellow. His research explores virtual reality, transgressive play and the monetization of children in the digital games industry.

Kate Clark is a PhD candidate at Monash University and a Research Fellow at the University of Sydney. Her work explores immersive technologies and the body.

Finn Dawson is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney. His research focuses on the politics of worlds and world-building in digital games.

(Impending) Dr Taylor Hardwick is a PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology. Her research focuses on safety at games events and in digital spaces.

Dr Mark Johnson is a Senior Lecturer in Digital Cultures at the University of Sydney. His research is focused on Twitch and video game live streaming, as well as esports, and the gaming-gambling intersection.

Dr Brendan Keogh is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Communication, and a Chief Investigator of the Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology. He researches videogame production cultures.

Mads Mackenzie is the current co-director of Freeplay, a Victorian organisation running events and advocating for games as an arts and cultural form; as well as the creative director of Fine Feathered Fiends, a narrative game studio working on its debut title *Drăculești*.

Ryan Stanton is a PhD Candidate at the University of Sydney and a member of the Sydney Games and Play Lab. His research is focused on gaming podcasts and their place in the broader games journalism field.

Frank Meixiao Wang is a postgraduate student at the University of Sydney. His work focuses on modern media, audience engagement and marketing.

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