The Indonesian mobile esports as a confluence of game studies and mobile media studies

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of mobile esports phenomenon in Indonesia, as befits the country's over 300 million registered cellular network users (Kemp, 2024), demonstrates the inseparability between mobile media and digital games. That is, the Indonesian gaming culture's bedrocks are mobile gaming and smartphones as opposed to console and desktop/laptop computer gaming. The phenomenon is an important evolution of the mobile game sub-field of game studies that mostly treat mobile game as casual (Juul, 2010) or experimental mode of gaming which are restricted to small communities or individual uses (Hjorth & Richardson, 2020). Whereas the Indonesian mobile esports is a national phenomenon that combines labor precarity and national institutionalization. Mobile esports' vital role as the foundation of gaming culture in Indonesia necessitates closer observation on mobile media affordances as the playing medium. Specifically on mobile media's portability, economic affordability and opportunity, their convergence with social media, and its centrality to the Indonesian media ecology.

The Indonesian mobile esports' mobile media specifity and its tremendous role in positioning digital game as an important area in the Indonesian mobile media necessitates a new approach of game studies in Indonesia which combine research foci of game studies and mobile media studies. The approach is important because digital gaming in Indonesia is in large part formed by mobile esports of which a confluence between mobile media and digital games occurs. Therefore, discussing digital game in Indonesia needs to include the discussion of mobile media and their practices.

There are five concepts from mobile media studies and digital game studies that I observe to better understand the confluence of mobile media and digital games in mobile esports. From mobile media studies, there are concepts of mobile media affordances that studies new digital media behaviors in the society as a result of subjective uses of technologies (Schrock, 2015), and mobile media convergence that

argues about mobile media's capability in combining features of other media to create a new output and user experience (Jenkins, 2006a; 2006b). From game studies, the concept of games, culture, and society (Mayra, 2008) that explains the cultural resonance of certain games in certain society, the constantly evolving gamification (Idone Cassone, 2016) of which digital games' ludic features always be integrated into new digital media forms and features, and esports studies that explores the competitions, media practices, and organization of esports (Taylor, 2012; 2018; Witkowski, 2023). These concepts are important to understand the growth of mobile esports and its entanglement with mobile media. I combine my understanding of those concepts with concepts the Indonesian mobile media specifity regarding the affordability of smartphones (De Lange, 2015) and mobile media's vital role in helping Indonesians to participate in the global culture (Puspitasari & Ishii, 2016; Onitsuka et al., 2018) including esports (Jiwandono, 2025). The combination is relevant with the confluence of game studies and mobile media studies in the Indonesian mobile esports which occurs in the combination of mobile media technologies with digital gaming, the commodification of that combination, and the integration of esports into the Indonesian sporting framework.

This extended abstract is based on my PhD research upon which I do digital ethnography (Hjorth et al., 2017) research on the Indonesian mobile sports. Based on data from my interviews and participant observation with 18 Indonesian esports practitioners across Indonesian cities and town on Java and Borneo islands, I argue that the confluence occurs primarily in social media uses and education institutions. The confluence takes forms of mobile media affordances, labor precarity, and esports institutionalization. Mobile media affordances refers to the intersection between smartphone technological feature and the Indonesian socioeconomical practices. The labor precarity is the plethora of precarious work that commodifies esports and its popularity. The esports institutionalization is realized through the Indonesian government's programs to formalize esports as a sport. All of these forms are observable from mobile media studies' and digital game studies' concepts that I mentioned earlier, and they indicate the centrality of mobile media in the Indonesian digital gaming.

I close this extended abstract with a suggestion to position mobile media as a centre of game studies research for two reasons. Firstly it is because Indonesia is not the only place where mobile media are very important in digital gaming. Vietnam (McCauley et al., 2020), India (Block & Haack, 2021), and Malaysia (Moore, 2023) are examples of countries where digital gaming largely takes place on mobile media, with Malaysia even having a mobile-first policy of which the government and private sectors invest substantially to mobile media ecosystem that includes digital gaming (Moore, 2023). Secondly, bringing this topic to the DiGRA Australia 2025 conference is important because of Australia's proximity with Indonesia and other countries with mobile media centrality in their digital gaming cultures. Looking at the mobile media centrality in digital games, and their community of practices is an opportunity for the Australian game studies community to diversify its research identity by embracing the Asian-ness of digital gaming.

BIO
Haryo Pambuko Jiwandono is an Indonesian digital game scholar. He is a PhD Candidate at the RMIT University's School of Media and Communication under the supervision of Professor Ingrid Richardson, Distinguished Professor Larissa Hjörth, and Doctor Hugh Davies, and a researcher at the RMIT University's Digital Ethnography Research Centre. His main research focus and the focus of his PhD research project is on mobile esports in Indonesia.

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