

Gendered Arenas: Understanding Esports and Videogame Participation Under Sports Infrastructure

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INTRODUCTION

Esports and gaming events are being hosted in existing sports stadium infrastructure, resulting in inaccessible esports productions and gendered experiences. Sports stadiums and arenas are sterile spaces, that have been cultivated by masculine and high socioeconomic class (Silk, 2004). When a culture and sporting-form such as esports, is activated by existing topophilia, meaning, a strong sense of place that holds a specific cultural identity (Witkowski, 2013). The intersection of games and traditional sports has created environments, that hold sterile and inaccessible attributes to its physical and sociocultural structure, affecting those present in the space (Silk, 2004; Star, 1990; Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2013).

Ethnographic research on esports and sportification of games, has been addressed by experts including TL Taylor and Emma Witkowski addressing sporting culture and masculinities in the space of esports (Taylor, 2012; Witkowski 2013). Despite the significant uptake of esports under sports influence, this paper addresses participants experiences at videogame and esports events, under sports infrastructure. This paper builds upon current ethnographic research, exploring esports events using infrastructure studies, gender theory and sociological concepts.

An ethnographic case study on DREAMHACK Melbourne 2024, was conducted using semi-structured interviews and observations, revealing the connection of esports to sports worlds. Fieldwork conducted across the three-day videogame and esports event, at Rod Laver Arena, included observing and conducting non-invasive documentation of material and presentations at the event e.g. demographics, clothing choices- esports and sports uniforms-, game area activations and activities. This paper overviews a small sample of the ethnographic data collected from this case study. Thematic analysis was used to extrapolate codes and themes from the interviews conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Previous research has noted how the construction of identity production in these spaces formulates experiences, especially through femininity in esports, as participants may feel limited and intimidated by the communities that have been formed by masculinity and male experiences (Witkowski, 2018).

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Gendered experiences in esports are quite common, and further research is in order to understand the historical impact the masculine identity in gaming and esports culture, whilst exploring the implications and relationality regarding women and gender diverse participants in these spaces (Halberstam, 2018; Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2013; Witkowski, 2018). Esports is at a critical moment for women in the gaming community, though we are seeing prosperous data of increased involvement of women around these events.

Videogames and esports success are commended both for its economic and social impact, yet the construction of masculinity and gendered expectations have built and determined existing esports and videogame culture as we know it. An inclusive space was present at the event, that was suitable for those seeking a reprieve from the overstimulation of sound, lights and humans. Immersive esports and gaming spaces were present in the activations sector of the event, which did however cater to specific audiences creating gendered spaces. As the sports infrastructure provides recognition to the activity of esports and validation to the public and mainstream media, accessibility issues for participants remained a topic of discussion.

Videogames have gained popularity as a form of entertainment, engaging with interactive worlds and narratives that traditional media could not offer (Kocurek, 2015). Funding research to promote esports and gaming sustainably, can empower esports to ensure ethical and inclusive practices, are developed long term and can create a positive esports sector in Victoria. Integrating esports into education has become a recent popular incentive for schools and institutions. From this paper, I encouraged further research to be conducted, to explore the affordances and experiences that sports stadiums have on esports and gaming communities, specifically how representation for women and gender diverse people can be encouraged.

In hopes to reclaim queerness as a fundamental part of research in esports, I hope to extrapolate these findings in my PhD research, focussing on women and gender diverse students' participation in videogame and esports programs in high school.

BIO

Chrysanthe Lontis is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of Media and Communications at RMIT University. Their PhD research is focusing on esports and videogame cultures, specifically on women and gender diverse student participation in high school esports programs. Chrysanthe is currently an Esports Production Assistant with the Australian Esports League. Chrysanthe is also a Game Designer, specialised in sound design and production.

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