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Landscapes of tension, tribalism and toxicity: Configuring a spatial politics of esport communities

Authors:

Dr. Emily Jane Hayday[1, *], Dr. Holly Collison[2] and Dr. Geoffery Z. Kohe[3]

[1 & 2] Institute for Sport Business, Loughborough University London, London, England, E20 3BS.

[3] School of Sport & Exercise Sciences, University of Kent, Medway Building, Chatham Maritime, Chatham, Kent, ME4 4AG.

* Corresponding Author: Institute for Sport Business, Loughborough University London, London, England, E20 3BS, Email: E.Hayday@lboro.ac.uk

Author Biographies

Emily Hayday is a Lecturer in Sport Business, at Loughborough University London. Her research specifically focuses on sport mega-events and legacy. During her PhD she investigated the sport participation legacy and policy implementation processes undertaken within National Governing Bodies, undercovering the perceptions and attitudes of senior managers towards sports mega-events. Some of Emily's additional research interests relate to the areas of esport and B2B sponsorship practices. A current study is exploring the possibility of esport to be used as a social development tool, by examining its communities and current practices of corporate social responsibility within the esport industry.

Holly Collison is Lecturer at the Institute for Sport Business at Loughborough University London, UK. She is an anthropologist in the field of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP). Holly has completed extensive fieldwork in West and East Africa and South East Asia examining post-conflict development interventions and the use of sport. Her research explores youth identity, notions of community, international development, peacebuilding, social inclusion, and grassroots perspectives and experiences of SDP. She has recently been invited to participate in expert meetings for the United Nations on the topics of the 'Sustainable Development Goals and the UN System' (New York, 2018), and 'The Use of Sport as an Educational Tool to Tackle Radicalisation and Violent Extremism' (Vienna, 2018, 2019).

Geoffery Z. Kohe is a Lecturer in Sport Management and Policy in the School of Sport & Exercise Sciences, University of Kent. His research focus on socio-cultural, historical and organisational aspects of sport, Olympic education legacies, and sport heritage and museology. His current projects have included sociology and policy-based research related to sport and physical activity participation, physical education and young people, and sport organisation and employee relations. Geoffery is co-author (with Dr Holly Collison) of *Sport, Education and Corporatisation: Spaces of Connection, Contestation and Creativity* (Routledge, 2019), and *High Performance Disability Sport Coaching* (with Professor Derek

Peters), and the author of the centennial history of the New Zealand Olympic movement (NZOC, 2011).

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Abstract:

Proliferation of esport has created a complex landscape of participants, communities, organisations and investors. With alluring lucrative economic, social and political incentives, the crowded esport commons has become a site of rich resource for varied interests, yet also a locale of idea sharing, community production, and collective action. Notwithstanding advantageous outcomes for some stakeholders, esport has also become a space of turbulent tribal relations, exclusion, marginalisation, and inequalities. Such issues precipitate the need for closer examination of esport spaces, relations within these communities, and the underlying ideological and moral conditions thereof. Drawing on spatial theory, and utilising data from 16 semi-structured interviews and 3 focus groups (*n*= 65) with key esport stakeholders, this research explores current experiences of identity and esport community membership. Our investigation focused on esport and explored the ideological grounding, current practices and tensions present within esport communities.

Introduction

The rapid expansion of esport has produced a dynamic landscape comprised of public, private and philanthropic stakeholders, individual participants and communities. Not unlike other sporting domains, esport encompasses attractive characteristics and possibilities for stakeholders (Funk, Pizzo & Baker, 2018; Hallman & Giel, 2018; Xue, Newman & Du, 2019). Such features include esports' global popularity, mass commercial appeal, exposure to new market demographics and technological development. Esport is also a highly charged political space in which diverse social, cultural and economic tensions play out in both explicit and implicit ways (Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Reitman, Anderson-Coto, Wu, Lee & Steinkuehler, 2020; Witkowski, 2012; 2013). While esport has produced opportunities for positive stakeholder interaction and formation of distinct communities (Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Xue et al., 2019), concerns have been expressed with respect to how esport operates, who it operates for, and what consequences accrue to individuals and groups therein.

To note, esport has largely resisted the sorts of bureaucratisation and organisation found in traditional sport (Scholz, 2019; Witowksi, 2012). Such resistance has contributed to a lack of consensus and clarity on industry regulation, and precipitated calls to establish and enhance governance structures (Brickell, 2017; Chao, 2017; Funk et al., 2018). Further critique has also highlighted the prevalence and perpetuation of gender hegemonies (Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Witkowski, 2013), exclusionary tribal and clan mentalities (Xue et al., 2019), limited diversity and retention of competitive players (Steinkuehler, 2020), legal contentions (Holden, Kaburakis & Rodenberg, 2017), and adverse emotional and health effects (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012; Mortenson, 2018). Prevailing concerns notwithstanding, there remains limited

understanding of how these issues manifest within specific esport communities and participants' lives. Continued critical appraisal is therefore warranted on the sector's values and cultures, community development and participants' collective and individual behaviours.

We acknowledge at the outset scholarly contestations over the conceptualisation, definition and potential for esports' 'sport' status (See: Jenny, Manning, Keiper & Olrich, 2016; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Wagner, 2006). This paper, however, has a different purpose to examine spaces and communities that exist within the esport landscape. In the first instance, esports' multi-modalities of representation and production (e.g., different genres, playing modes and formats) (Funk et al., 2017) provides a unique context through which to explore communities' and participants' cultural practices. Sustained examination is also necessary given wider debates in sport (and elsewhere) regarding commercially driven community building, democratic participation, good governance and ethics (Long, Fletcher & Watson, 2017). To note, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) have already recognised the commercial opportunities and popularity of esport, yet conversely identify that esports' structures, culture and imperatives are at odds with the values-based ethos underpinning sport (IOC, 2018). Accordingly, esports' alignment to and enforcement of expected governance practices and ethical redirections may be difficult.

A further distinctive esport characteristic is its largely unregulated nature that affords participants certain degrees of freedom and a sense of protection as they navigate between the lines of imagined/fantasy spaces and reality (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012). This blurred actuality between one's self and their online character (or avatar) fuels autonomy and a potential lack of adherence to established societal practices and norms. For example, gamers may act unethically via avatars and virtually communicate in ways that 'traditionally' may be considered inappropriate (Carter & Gibbs, 2013; Hardenstein, 2017). Notwithstanding limitations of freedom and illusions of protection, there has been little examination into community

formation, production and practices enacted within esport. To this end, this paper provides a spatial analysis of esport community dynamics and how participants' experiences within esport communities are constructed.

We take interest in the tensions, toxicity and tribalism that appear embedded within esport practices, building on the work of authors such as Tracy Taylor (2012), Mortensen (2018) and Xue, Newman and Du (2019) who have examined the male dominated realities, shifting play cultures and community structures within professional gaming. Our intention is to encourage dialogue about producing positive community spaces that may enhance stakeholder relations and improve esport conditions for all participants. As Amit and Rapport (2002) note, conceptualisations of community require sceptical investigation. Accordingly, we apply a Lefebvrian theoretical framework of space focusing on three key dimensions (thought, production and action) to analyse esport communities. Beyond offering new insights, we conclude by considering how esport communities may be reconfigured.

Theorising esport *L'Space*

As identified earlier, scholarship has drawn attention to individual and collective esport experiences. Extant work has interrogated the sector effectively from economic, corporate, management, identity and gender perspectives (e.g., El-Nasr, Drachan & Canossa, 2013; Hallman & Giel, 2018; Holden et al., 2017; Jensen & de Castell, 2018; Mortenson, 2018; Reitman et. al. 2020; Taylor, Jenson & de Castell, 2009; Witowski 2012; 2013). Beyond this, critical conceptual explorations of esport communities are rare. A notable exception is the recent work of Xue, Newman and Du (2019), which examined the way cultural, commercial and identity factors interact in the development and mediation of esport communities. Such politics have been instrumental in consolidating spatial practices and relations that frame what it means to 'be' and exist within esport. Paradoxically, however, these politics are intertwined with problematic discourses of inclusion/exclusion that may inhibit potential capacities of the

esport sector to adopt a more democratic structure. Xue et al.'s (2019) critique provides a strong impetus to unsettle what esport is, does and who it might be for. We continue this advocacy in this paper by providing further theoretical examination of esport communities that reveals spatial tensions, and we consider any need for reconfiguration and further action therein.

Academic considerations of space have identified the need to scrutinise the varied factors that contribute to what spaces 'look' like, how space is comprised, and how interactions take place within. While scholarship varies, degrees of consensus have emerged with respect to the dynamic and fluid nature of space, intersectional forces in spatial framing, and the politicisation of space by individuals and groups. Agreement also exists with respect to conceptualising space beyond physical, temporal, social and political dimensions, and considering the concept in philosophical and holistic ways (Gleseking, Mangold, Katz, Low & Saegert, 2014; Shields, 1999; Studdert & Walkerdine, 2016). Examinations that articulate these nuances illuminate how spaces are crafted and change and, also, how they may potentially be challenged and transformed (Gleseking et al., 2014). Spatial analysis research has been substantially advanced by the work of Henri Lefebvre and colleagues (Lefebvre, 1991a; 1991b; 1996; 2003; Lefebvre & Réguiler, 1986/2004; Sheilds, 1999). The foundation of Lefebvre's interrogation rests on transcending conventional conceptualisations of space (or *L'space*) that are transfixed to physical, tangible and temporal renderings. As Lefebvre noted, this is not to say that these aspects of space were not important. Rather, that space can be understood first and foremost in philosophical terms (Lefebvre, 1991a; 1996; Lefebvre & Réguiler, 1986/2004). In harmony with the earlier theoretical work of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), space, in this sense, does not emerge out of the ether, but takes form from ideas and discourses, intellectual developments, knowledge transfer, and coalescences of imagination and opinion.

While acknowledging the difficulties of defining space, tangible conceptualisations mattered to Lefebvre and he saw value in critical explanations of space that articulated these

complexities. Such spatial analysis still required determining metaphysical constructs (e.g. ideas, beliefs, values, ethics), social and cultural concepts (for example, shared discourses, identity and community formation, interactions), connections and power relations between structures and agency, and, processes of spatial (re)production, consumption and transformation (Lefebvre, 1996; Lefebvre & Réguiler, 1986/2004; Sheilds, 1999). We are drawn to this focus in Lefebvre's work to examine esport communities. The notion of *L'space* enables us to go beyond the basic temporal and spatial dimensions of esport (e.g., fanatical gamers anchored to certain online collective environments) and move toward identifying dimensions of space that influence participants' identities and interactions within esport communities. Conjointly, Lefebvre and Tuan provide an analytical framework of space that has an ideological origin developed via interconnected social, cultural, economic and political processes, which is enacted between individuals (e.g. esport gamers), communities and institutions (e.g., Gaming publishers, corporate sponsors, and media outlets). Ultimately, to follow Lefebvre and Tuan's logic, conception of esport *L'space* requires understanding commonalities of thought, production and action.

Lefebvre offered that thought was an important philosophical precondition of *L'Space*; a metaphysical starting point for understanding spatial construction. Here, we take interest in ideals, beliefs, values and discourses transmitted in and across esport communities. To note, Lefebvre respected that while it was difficult to precisely ascertain discourses within spaces, the notion of collective thought could be evidenced (or 'felt') in the social dissemination of messages (in this case, what esport participants say/do not say, what ideas and beliefs they endorse or dislike), via institutions (e.g., esport organisations, competitions, online network platforms), (re)presentational practices, and *in-situ* inter-personal identity maintenance strategies (e.g., how individuals/groups enact an esport persona). At the most basic level are the prevailing messages about esport identities, community belonging, and capital accrual via

playing prowess. Beyond this, however, are uncomforting ideas related to exclusion, discrimination and tribalism. These ideologies, we contend, are intertwined to contour the social and cultural fabric of esport *L'space*. Moreover, such negative beliefs contribute not only to how knowledge and meaning making occurs, but also acquires legitimacy and is 'policed' and negotiated.

With thought, comes production space; the combination of tangible institutions and structures, and their connections and relationships to individuals/communities, that form around thought commonalities. Esport production space, involves multiple diverse stakeholders, all of whom appear to share (to varying degrees) imperatives, and form production relations, with respect to increasing esports' popular appeal, reach and potential. Beyond production, we take interest in esport as an action space; in which processes of thought and production may affect individual and collective identity and community. Action comprises participants entering esport communities, establishing groups and identities and ensuring community maintenance through participation and self/group promotion, and reaffirming particular ideals, values and behaviours (e.g., by positioning oneself within particular political debates within the community).

Action also was a core component of Lefebvre's notion of 'the third space'; the coalescence of spatial thought and production forces (Lefebvre, 1991a; 1996; 2003). The notion of action assumed new meaning by taking on the imperatives of advocacy and activism. In doing so, the potential of the third space was to be transformational, by challenging power relations, disrupting structural hierarchies and rebuilding democratic conditions for spatial membership. For esport, politically charged action provides encouragement for seeing opportunities where established gaming structures may be challenged and reorganised, institutional powers held to account, and stronger voice given to disenfranchised participants. Essentially, through Lefebvre's thought, production and action schema a critical analysis of

esport can be undertaken that illustrates its dynamism, but also the ways current structures and conditions contribute to community development and collective meaning-making.

Sport and leisure communities were not an initial consideration of Lefebvre's analysis. Nonetheless, the approach is useful for examining the complexities of these spaces. While spatial analysis of sport has varied, a key feature of socio-cultural and political examinations has been the attention on political conditions and the effect of these on interactions/and inactions have on participants' lives and experiences (Bale & Vertinsky, 2004; Davies, 2016; Edwards, 2015; Guschwan, 2017; Kohe & Collison, 2018). Key in this regard has been the interest afforded to notions of community as a central feature of spatial composition. Adopting a Lefebvrian-style analysis has, therefore, utility for our investigation of esport communities in several ways. Foremost of which, the work is useful for constructing a new conceptual framework for articulating the ideological forces (or spatial thought) that contour esport community construction, esport stakeholder relations and identity formations (spatial production), and opportunities for esport community reconfiguring (spatial action). Such an approach enriches esport narratives towards appreciations that acknowledge the messy, fragmented and unstable nature of the sectors' communities.

Methodological approach

This investigation employed a two-phase, exploratory research design (Bryman, 2012; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006), starting with three focus groups, followed by semi-structured interviews. Our approach allowed for investigation of esport community spaces, practices and examination into identity formation. In alignment with Cohen's (2013) exploratory approach to communities, we try to understand 'community' by seeking to capture members' experiences of it. Instead of asking, 'What does it look like to us and what are its theoretical implications? we ask, 'What does it appear to mean to its members?' Rather than describing community

structure from an external vantage point, we attempt to understand and penetrate the structure and space from within, and to look *outwards* from its core (Cohen, 2013).

Data collection was undertaken between April and July 2019 and was split into two phases. Drawing on Scholz' (2019) work on esport industry contributors, we identified primary and secondary stakeholders (although this latter group were not directly influential, they shape the landscape through their involvement and investment). Stakeholder groups included esport national 'governing' bodies, trade unions, game publishers, teams and gamers, tournament organisers, media entities), as well as Sport for Development (SfD) organisations who planned to or were using esport interventions. Stakeholders were invited to participate via email, then snowball sampling was utilised to extend participant networks (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004). Diverse stakeholder representation was achieved (see table 1) with 81 participants across the two research phases (focus groups, n= 28, n= 20, n=17; interviews, n=16) and female participation was reflective of industry norms (Taylor, 2020; Women in Games, 2018).

Table 1- Characteristics of research participants

Data Type	Gender	Sector
Focus Groups		
FG 1 **London** (N= 28)	**M=75%** (n=21) **F=25%** (n=7)	**46%- Esport Industry (n=13)** **29%- Gamers-University Students (n=8)** **25%- SfD (n=7)**
FG 2 **USA** (N= 20)	**M=75%** (n=15) **F=25%** (n=5)	**65%- Esport Industry (n=13)** **15%- Gamers-University Students (n=3)** **20%- SfD (n=4)**
FG 3 **USA**	**M=65%** (n=11)	**88%-Gamers-University Students (n=15)** **12%-SfD (n=2)**

(N=17)	F=35% (n=6)	
Interviews		
(N=16)	M=75% (n=12) F=25% (n=4)	**62%-Esport Industry (n=10)** **13%-Gamers (n=2)** **25%-SfD (n=4)**

Focus groups provided a space for participants to voice insights on esport community formation and participation. This approach suits knowledgeable participants, where the objective is to explore complex issues, by allowing insights into attitudes, beliefs and practices that underlie behaviours to emerge (Carey & Ashbury, 2016; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Silverman, 2004). Focus groups lasted approximately four hours and involved individual and group activities, participant led discussions and case studies to encourage critical and reflective dialogue. One focus group was hosted in the United Kingdom, with a further two focus groups hosted in the United States of America. These two international contexts were selected due to the national proliferation of esport, and each was home to some of the most substantive sector stakeholders. Focus group discussions, worksheets and investigator notes were then used to determine key themes which guided the semi-structured interviews. Interviews enhanced the depth of understanding and focused on participants' experiences surrounding current industry structures and practices, characteristics and features (positive and negative) of esport communities and future opportunities for esport. Interviews lasted approximately 25-60 minutes and were mainly conducted via Skype (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Hanna, 2012).

The multiple data sources were subsequently transcribed verbatim and analysed. The analytical approach was guided by Lefebvre's conceptualisation of space and Kohe and Collison's (2018) related framework for interpreting the thought, production and action aspects

of stakeholder interactions in sport. Inductive analysis using open and axial coding (Bryman, 2012) was employed to produce initial codes that were then discussed and confirmed by each member of the research team. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by giving participants and focus groups pseudonyms. All ethical procedures and university approval were adhered to and participation in the study was voluntary. We present here some of the prevailing themes most pertinent to the research objectives.

Discussion

Across the theoretical thought, production and action dimensions, we examine three inter-related concepts that have emerged from the data analysis: 1) ideological articulations of esport space (thought); 2) construction of community and identity (production); and, 3) tribalism and its consequences, in particular, features of toxicity and exclusion (action).

Esport Thought

Notions of 'community' are bound with and by highly contested and problematic philosophical and symbolic expressions. Akin to 'culture', 'myth', or 'ritual', community is a word regularly used in ordinary, everyday speech. Yet, the concept of community has proven highly resistant to satisfactory definition in social contexts (Cohen, 2013). This complexity manifests throughout esport. As one participant expressed, 'that's the problem with a burgeoning industry [esport]…There isn't much definition anywhere about anything' (Interviewee 2). Participants' thoughts echoed wider principles central to community concerning interconnectivity, shared values, behaviours, rules and ideological affiliations. The idea that social groups are formed and shaped by cognitive and symbolic structures is central to Anderson's (1983) work on imagined communities. Extending the conceptualisation, scholars have challenged the superfluous notion of physical connectedness and recognise that community evokes a thick assortment of meanings and presumptions (Amit & Rapport, 2002). Beyond the common usage

of the term, there exists a growing cohort of esport participants who share interests, passions and a common (self-perceived) community identity. As discussed below, we argue that the bonds and identity formed within esport thought space have strong communal associations. Yet, this symbolic and metaphysical ideal of community is not exercised without complexities.

The Importance of Community thinking – 'Everyone except the haters' (Focus group 3-USA)

Gerd Baumann claims that community is often opportunistically stretched to accommodate a wide variety of categories (1996). As participants in our research explained, 'it's a community culture with unique … fandom surrounding it. Each game/title has a unique community' (Focus group 3- USA). Transcending individual identities and experiences of participation, community thinking here evolved around the idea of esport as a space of cultural assimilation. As identified by Xue et al. (2019), gamers often describe their esport experiences via community reference. As one participant simply explained, 'esport is centred on the community' (Interviewee 1). The nucleus of community thought here is the assumption that gamers are joined by their common interest and desire to connect and belong. 'I think esports are a great way to bring like-minded people together', one gamer explained (Focus group 3- USA).

In pursuance of community formation, the creation of a sense of togetherness has been valued by many participants. 'The community', one participant noted, 'will be made of similar people, the community gets to decide…[and] the community is not going to disagree with themselves, because they've created a community where everyone agrees' (Focus group 2- USA). Participants' experiences here also reiterate wider understandings of community conceptualised as culturally defined social groups (Delanty, 2011). In esport the social construction and strength of connectivity experienced in the thought space is reliant on multiple forms of embodied interest and commonality. As one researcher stated, 'It relies on

connectivity…esports builds a community of people' (Moderator- focus group 2- USA). However, while cohesion and shared experience are fundamental within community formation, there is also a recognition that community provides a means (or natural habitus) through which individuals may negotiate 'safe' social interactions (Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Witkowski, 2013; Xue et al., 2019).

Creating 'safe' social space

Notions of community offer a convenient conceptual haven; a location from which to circumscribe potentially infinite webs of connection (Amit & Rapport, 2002). Evident within esport, is the creation of ideological safe spaces (contoured around 'nerdism[1]') that are protected and valued by participants, some of whom feel unaccepted by broader society. As one participant illustrated, there is a 'lack of understanding of esports by the greater community' (Focus group 1-London); effectively entrenching notions of 'them' and 'us'. Sentiments of vulnerability, misunderstanding and negative stereotyping were evidenced across many of the esport communities we engaged with. 'We are not isolated', one participant exclaimed, 'We are a proper community, regardless of outside perceptions' (Focus group 3- USA).

Esport communities have created a safe space for participants to escape from society and a territory to defend. As many felt there is a 'lack of understanding of the industry, it has a stigma and demonization at many levels, from parents to politicians' (Focus group 1- London). This belief that external stakeholders do not understand or accept these esport communities enhances their strength. As scholars have noted elsewhere in the sport sector, the cultivation of safe space is an integral component of community development (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014).

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[1] Colloquial term often used to describe the practices or behaviours of nerds, often consistent with notions of being a geek or extreme gamer (Urban Dictionary, 2011).

Although valued by esport participants, experiences of safety within communities cannot be guaranteed. Gamers still risk the possibility of internal exploitation, marginalisation and exclusion for not adhering to or aligning with 'accepted' esport identities and community norms.

The familiarity and comfort of Nerd Culture

A community is seen as a place where social relations are marked by mutuality and emotional bonds (Purdue et al., 2000; Taylor, 2003). Within this research, social identity was structured around participants' desire to belong, shared passion for esport, and the anonymity and safety afforded to them within certain gaming spaces. Participants invested in the community's 'nerd' culture, seeing themselves as slightly different and outcast from broader society. As one participant noted, 'it was like a bunch of nerds. And I can use the term nerd endearingly cause I am one...' (Interviewee 1). Here, 'nerdism' provides an anchor around which participants can locate their individual identity and community attachment, irrespective of any feelings of personal connection (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). Relevant work by Lori Kendall (2000, 2011) and Ron Eglash (2002) has exposed the realities of the nerd stereotype, which is characterised predominately by white males and as a term is still used in a judgemental fashion. Kendall (2011) and Eglash (2002) further acknowledge that the dynamics of the nerd culture remain dominated by white (and Asian) males and they suggest that advances by females within the computing space are reversing. Yet, at present, gatekeeping of the nerd stereotype remains prevalent as particular community members act to protect this form of hegemonic masculinity and cultural identity.

In addition to nerd identification, the politics of identity formation for participants became pronounced when communities were faced with wider social critique. As one participant indicated, 'I guess, a nerd culture is gaming but even Jocks would be playing FIFA,

but stereotypically if you're a female that likes games you're just awkward or a nerd…it's kind of the way society looks at it' (Interviewee 10). Notably, collective resistance of social criticism helped the formation and development of participants' identities by creating meaningful spaces in which nerd cultures may germinate and flourish. To rehearse Borgmann's (1992) notion of 'communities of celebration', the nerd ethos provides a means for participants to celebrate themselves and each other.

Esport Production

Common interest and shared engagement in esport construct a community culture deeply embedded within gaming experiences. The ideal of community is not, however, just a rationale for connectivity. As Wenger (1999) suggests, community is an ideal and is also real, it is both experience, interpretation and, in this application, a source of production. In articulating community production, we follow Delanty's philosophical approach whereby 'community is a utopian idea, for it is as much an ideal to be achieved, as a reality that concretely exists' (2011, p10). Within the esport landscape, belief in community via shared interests is a largely unquestioned among participants and wider esport stakeholders. Yet, the industry's unprecedented growth has resulted in community production being in a constant flux as a consequence of changing cultural interests, practices and the perceived 'threat'/challenge of space invaders (aka newcomers).

The concept of 'interest' here is important. Ingham and McDonald (2003) note esport communities are groups of people that have formed a cultural identity based on shared attraction to, and participation in, the gaming industry. However, this collective interest is not exclusively experienced by gamers, but also a plethora of businesses, organisations and entrepreneurs. The growth of interested parties has also contributed to calls for organisational change and community reformation with esport and its communities, with Interviewee 16

noting 'I think if there was a resistance, what might end up happening is people come in, and a lot of people might be losing their job…a lot of change'. The entry of diverse, external stakeholders has also resulted in tension and defensive practices to protect the space, 'We do kind of want to protect what we have… Protecting esports, I think is suddenly important, because we don't know the intentions' (Interviewee 16). Accordingly, the production space is highly pressurised, contested, fractious, and potentially volatile as gamers are afforded choice but are expected to show allegiance to specific esport titles. Participants must navigate, for example, different gaming environments and this carries specific negotiations, and sources of contestation. It is in this production of community cultures, we argue, that norms and boundaries are established, and a form of tribalism is constructed. However, this has not been subtly produced and such networks feed on conflict and competition. As evidenced below, participants understand the tensions and hostile grounding and negotiate their behaviours accordingly.

Identity Production and the Construction of New Communities

In developing esport membership, participants frequently reiterated how valuable having a definitive sense of community was to their identities. One participant articulated, 'there's absolutely a community aspect to esports that's incredibly important too, because if there wasn't a community or a fan-base around esports there wouldn't be audiences… watching those games' (Interviewee 1). The varied characteristics of different titles has precipitated the evolution of discernible groups co-existing within esport. 'Personae from game to games are so different', one participant exclaimed, 'It is hard to define for organisations titles…Fortnight players are mostly on Instagram, Overwatch players are mostly on twitter' (Focus group 1-London). Such fracturing of groups may be a natural consequence of socialisation and reflective of the competitiveness and identity-seeking traits of sport in general. However, this type of community production, in which identities form around specific titles, competitions,

and social media platforms, has also led to clear boundaries and hierarchies between participants. Essentially, participants expressed strong protectionism in the quest to consolidate and galvanise their presence that has reinforced the tribal nature of the industry.

(New) community building and technologies of production.

Alongside niche membership forms, participants also recognised the fundamental roles the built and tangible environment played in community production. As one London-based gamer described, the 'use of technology in competitive play requires bureaucracy, infrastructure, rules, regulation of competitors, participants' (Focus group 1- London). Although similar to other sporting activities, there is a complexity to the infrastructure that is integral to effective esport community building. 'It takes a lot of logistics to operate at a scale like that, and make sure everyone's still having a good experience', Interviewee 1 noted, 'we do a lot of mass communications… automation and scripting and we've built a lot of tools to add to our tool kit to make our big operations experience easier, so that peoples' experience is even easier too'. In articulating how esport structures enhance gaming experiences, there is an underlying sentiment in the participant's position that gamers and key stakeholders have an ability and responsibility to each other to improve community conditions, practices and cultures.

The idea that gamers should enact greater agency and positive change was noted among participants. Greater solidarity and collective spirit within esport communities, some felt could be used to increase equality and diversity of membership and eliminate hostile aspects of esport culture. Yet, as these imperatives may be difficult to achieve given esports' stakeholders varied perspectives, regarding their primary focus 'top priority is staying in business' (Focus group 2- USA), what the communities are, who they represent and how they should be developed, as there is 'sensitivity around authenticity… [and a] lack of industry consensus' (Focus group 1- London). Despite reservations, participants acknowledged producing new, more democratic

and ethical esport communities required commitment and drive from key stakeholders, as 'the community is still anti-diversity because we can hide behind screens. Developers are the centre of control and need to be led on this' (Focus Group 2-USA). Whether developers or gamers lead community production, an emergent congruity among participants was that change could be enacted and mobilised from within. 'Then, and only then', Interviewee 1 suggested, 'will...gaming communities be able to make sure their games…reflect the culture that they want, will, they start being like looking outwards and being willing to partner with other organizations to effect society at large'.

The tension between gaming communities and new networks

In the process of forging clear community spaces for individuals to belong to separatism has also created tribalism and toxicity, as communities (and particular gate-keepers) seek to police boundaries, legitimise and authenticate membership, and ensure longer term sustainability (and in the current climate, commercial success) (Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Xue et al., 2019). Experiences of tensions, and the ability to navigate these within community production were rehearsed by many participants as a key feature of individual and collective gamer identities. Some participants felt, in the first instance, that there was a 'lack of understanding of esport by the greater community (there's already a them and an us)' (Focus Group 1- London). Others felt the greater concern lay in the already entrenched game-specific divisions. 'esport doesn't have geographic ties', as 'allegiances are to titles, not necessarily to players and teams…. I spectate Overwatch and don't play…I play fortnight, but don't spectate. Different game communities live on different social channels' (Moderator, Focus Group 2- USA).

Such differentiation might not matter to external stakeholders, however participants felt strongly about their identity and allegiance to certain esport communities and how their sense of belonging could be fortified by enacting certain practices (i.e. language, behaviour,

protecting online spaces from newcomers). Participants also displayed a strong sense of self-determination and community agency, as much as is possible within the commercial and corporate parameters. As one participant expressed, 'gamers know the community and don't need to be told how to run it' (Focus Group 2-USA). Yet, as the industry evolves, and external stakeholders move to influence or regulate the sector, these tensions need careful consideration to ensure potential action is collaborative and respectful of community distinctions.

Esport Action

The previous two sections have highlighted the complex relationship between the strong community thinking embedded in esport and the production of contested spaces that have splintered cultural cohesion. Although consequences of these processes have varied, the coalescence of thought and production have set the scene for a fractious sector that feeds on the often volatile and toxic nature of esport, and its corporate glorification under the guise of entertainment. As one participant noted 'Sexism [is]… more accepted, sort of - No peer pressure' (Focus Group 3- USA). The action space represents the consequences and realities of radical transformations for communities and individuals, as well as challenging the ideologies that transpire in the thought space. Action here does not occur in the same way it might occur in mainstream sport because of the thought and ideological differences around which activities are orientated and leveraged. Esports' dependence on corporate practices, and commercial infrastructure means that possibilities for meaningful action are curtailed by a reliance on the hegemonic structures that have been (re)produced. The safe-haven for gamers has, for example, shifted to open up access to wider networks and global audiences, encouraging new social groupings. Yet, this shift has also increased toxicity and started to confront the unregulated nature of the industry.

The conditions articulated above have also fostered a strong sense of tribalism within esport subcultures. The notion of tribalism in sport is not new and it has been argued that 'nothing is more tribal than sport, except perhaps warfare' (Smith & Westerbeek, 2004, p.74). Within sport the notion of tribalism is considered a natural evolution of participation, fandom and the collective sense of belonging. In simple terms, the higher the importance and intensity of joint experiences, the more likely a group will 'act as one'. Rehearsing notions of communities and Lefebvre's third space, we consider Cohen's (2013) critique of the symbolic construction of community and the suggestion that individuals may share symbols of community but not the meaning. The tribal behaviours enacted in/between esport communities, serves to express and symbolise boundaries and difference, as opposed to collective hegemony. The pursuit of hegemony is highly fluid and complicated as disconnected and fractious groups (or teams) battle for collective and personal gain, status and opportunity, irrespective of conditions that have incited tribalism, inequality, discrimination, and toxicity.

Tribalism

In considering the negative aspects and consequences of esport communities, there is a need to examine stakeholders' role in the construction of tribal cultures. 'The dark side of community', Berger (1988, p.326) argues,

> is the eternal internal power struggle over resources and over the authority to interpret the ultimately ambiguous, shared culture in a way that ensures optimal conformity and continuity of members…community actually hides the internal conflicts within each of these groups behind an implied rhetoric of shared culture.

In the esport context we examined, corporate ownership has fed political community discourse that has masked the industries disjoined and adversarial nature. We did not witness however esport participants' naivety to such consequences (which will be discussed below). Rather, we

saw a paradox in which community belonging existed in tandem with the recognition of conflicts, tensions and inequalities. Tribalism within esport is not a simple construct based on individual preference or identity, as one participant claimed, 'there's very distinct separate tribes… generally split by game [and] by company too, so there's an Overwatch tribe, there's a World of Warcraft tribe that's very passionate… a League of Legends that's just immense…It pretty complicated right now' (Interviewee 1). In highlighting the tension that exists between the notion of community and performance, one participant explained 'they were a very elitist group of people…that only wanted to have the best Starcraft players…So they were very restrictive in terms of who could join' (Interviewee 1). While participants may accept these juxtaposing cultural conditions, we acknowledge these may be problematic. Foremost, significantly the notion of competing esport tribes undermines the ideological notion and potential for esport communities to be safe and non-toxic spaces.

Toxicity

Esports diverse offerings and playing opportunities create not only tribalism, but active forms of discrimination and toxicity. 'People are not face to face, so they act like the other person does not exist [therefore] sexism, racism [occur] due to stereotype on performance' (Focus Group 3- USA). In part, this was explained by the safety of concealed identity, as 'anonymity and powers, enables and emboldens toxic [behaviour]' (Focus Group 2- USA). Such behaviours manifest in multiple forms, for example online 'trolling is obviously not just happening in gaming, but it is definitely [has] a lot of roots in gaming' (Interviewee 10). Online trolling and players trading insults has like in other sports serious implications. Sexism and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) discrimination for example were regularly a source of discussion within the data collection exercises. With participants agreeing, 'it's not very easy for females to game… it's also not mainstream accepted' (Interviewee 10), others described action beyond exchanges of insults claiming that, 'attacks on twitter and discord with

death threats to poor performance gamers, women gamers and LGBTQ discrimination' (Interviewee 13). We recognise toxicity in esport may be comparable to other highly gendered sporting and recreational activities, in which hegemonic masculinity and discriminatory gender discourses operationalise. Mortensen's (2018) research into GamerGate examined the hypermasculine aggression that was expressed by gamers online, and parallels were drawn between them and hooligans. Moreover, the 'protectiveness of the male space of video gaming' (p.796), resonates with the culture displayed by hooligans.

Such toxicity extends from performance critiques to further discriminatory behaviours, yet responses appear limited. Reluctance to regulate and enforce online safety brings into the question the responsibilities and legitimacy of corporate stakeholders who 'own' the spaces. As one participant claims, 'Digital peer pressure isn't that effective. Developers like supporting that culture…alt-right influence on gamer culture' (Focus Group 3- USA). Arguably, tribalism may feed a toxicity deemed essential for esport's popularity. Yet, we contend this may work against fostering more ethical and safe environments, and as such we believe change is required.

Accountability – The Evolutionary Stopping Point

Regulation and accountability within esport has largely been internally driven by key stakeholders (e.g. game publishers, event organisers, streaming platforms and gamers themselves through self-regulation), as esport currently lacks a clear, overarching governance structure comparable to mainstream sport (Hamari & Sjöblomm, 2017; Holden et al., 2017; Jenny et al., 2017). Rituals of conflict and the performance of toxicity are part of the appeal of esport and are to a degree 'still widely accepted as normal' (Focus Group 3- USA). This has resulted in an internal struggle regarding if, how and by who these behaviours should be managed. Participants raised concerns around how further regulation may damage the

'traditions' of esport communities, as there is 'Not enough community moderation, but moderation [that] doesn't kill the communities' (Focus Group 2- USA). Accountability for these behaviours was met with responsibility aversion:

> I honestly can't think of any companies that have tried to figure out solutions [regarding toxicity]. It's always been dumped on the publishers… I think whoever's platform it is, it's always their problem cause it's their user base, it's their community (Interviewee 9).

Yet, with esport attracting to new audiences and diverse stakeholders, identifying ways to legitimise and moderate the space are needed. Internally, communities themselves have been leading this effort to a degree, exhibiting self-moderation practices as Interviewee 2 notes 'They're the ones who have streamer rules on their channels …to say here are the types of behaviour that…will not be allowed … So, we're seeing that a lot of self-moderating'. Internal policing and community maintenance appear to be more acceptable than institutionalised regulation. With displays of community activism and advocacy working to tackle these behaviours, as 'people may harass you for being female … we see large groups of men and large groups of people coming to the defence of those women' (Interviewee 2).

Within the esport space there are evident complexities and conditions that have led to toxic and tribal practices. Yet, examples of action by the community are starting to challenge traditional power relations and norms within the esport space and reorganise established gaming cultures.

(Re)Loading esport communities

The critique advanced in this paper is grounded in three key points. First, esport communities have been formed around a purist notion of nerdism, providing an environment for identity formation and celebration of each other and their cultural practices. Here, we recall sentiments on positive affectation associated with collective belonging (Baumann, 1996; Delanty, 2011; Kuss & Griffiths, 2012). Yet, while affiliation to nerd culture provide individuals entry points

into esport spaces, participation and inclusion remain predicated upon the established social standards and codes policed by the community.

Second, community formation has been influenced by the evolutionary nature of esports in which an increasing array of stakeholders have been involved in spatial production. The crowded esport commons has naturally brought out tensions and conflicts, as stakeholders vie for resources and negotiate political territory (ironically, the notion of tension is also a shared concept). Intensification of competition has also privileged contest between different esport communities leading to corrosive practices of toxicity, tribalism and exclusion, that work against community harmony. To rehearse similar assertions by Xue et al. (2019), community and identity remain contested, leading to adverse consequences for affecting more positive social relations and experiences among members.

Third, while members have noted esports' adverse effects, holding individuals and groups to account remains difficult in the absence of clear regulatory structures. At present, however, a paradox exists. While governance might be required, there is resistance from some within esport communities who appear to relish the lack of institutionalisation and structural boundaries. Specific attempts to govern through unions, national and international associations, or federations have been limited in scope and political 'teeth', meaning there remain few mechanisms for genuinely challenging negative practices or esport's underlying power structures (though many participants may not necessarily desire this).

Conclusion

Our examination has illustrated spatial formations of esport communities. This said, we appreciate our framework is partial; namely in that we have not been able to capture all the complexities of the sector or specificities of thought, production and action. We have also made decisions with respect to data selection and presentation, and only conducted examination in

two global contexts. As such, further exploration should continue to reflect esports' international reach and growth.

Limitations notwithstanding, we have evidenced that diverse communities are forming, developing and transforming the esport landscape. Ideological foundations of esport are, evidently, crafted around the notion of community, the creation of 'safe' social spaces, as well as recognition and celebration of nerd culture. This has led to the production of diverse communities and subcultures within esport, established around social codes and practices, driven by identity and allegiance to certain titles. Contest and competition between different esport communities and the prospect of newcomers to the space, has led to protectionist and negative practices of tribalism, toxicity and exclusion that hinders the production of positive community spaces.

In the interest of creating more amiable communities, we contend that there remain capacities for the industry to hold stakeholders accountable for their responsibilities toward esport participants' welfare. In this regard, esport constituents may see value in approaches taken the wider sport sector vis-à-vis duties of care, democratic rights, organisational responsibilities and structural change (Henry, 2013). However, we also acknowledge that due to the industry's structure, enhancing advocacy to gamers and communities themselves to self-moderate may be a valuable mechanism to create more positive spaces. Reflecting on the ownership of esport titles and the current lack of a universal regulatory system, game publishers are responsible not only for their own communities (siloed by esport titles), but also for the broader community. Although key stakeholders (such as game publishers) within the industry have the ability, and potential desire, to collectively regulate, at present it is the competition and entrenched rivalry between game titles that in part fuels the tribalism and negative cultures we have identified. One participant proclaimed:

we would be more effective if we band together and try to make the world a better place in unison, but I don't know if there's appetite for that yet, because every company… wants to take advantage of it to capture the credit (Interviewee 1).

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