**Constructing authentic spectatorship at an esports bar**

ABSTRACT

Spectatorship is a core element of esports. Short for “electronic sports,” esports encompasses organised, professional competitive videogaming practices produced and consumed as a spectator sport. Esports’ computerised nature grants it a placeless quality, which creates ambiguities around what authentic esports spectatorship *ought to be*. Notably, some notions theorised prior to the emergence of contemporary esports imply that authenticity and placelessness are incompatible. We address this conundrum by presenting an ethnographic study conducted at an esports bar; a venue designed for the spectatorship of esports alongside other fans and alcohol consumption While embodying seemingly placeless qualities, esports spectatorship nevertheless takes place in situated places. We found spectators at the bar worked to authenticate their spectatorship by drawing on conventions of legitimacy, professionalism and spectacle from elsewhere, particularly spectator sports. Through their spectatorship, those at the bar constructed and affirmed a convention of authenticity for esports.

INTRODUCTION

Situated in an unassuming basement in the central business district of Melbourne, Australia lies a peculiar bar. If enticed inside by the neon red and blue glow that spills from its skylights and bathes the sidewalk, you will be met with a trendy, lively venue filled with a broad demographic ranging from businesspeople to university students. While some are drawn by the venue’s merits as a bar, others will tell you they are there to watch esports. GGEZ is an esports bar; a venue dedicated the to the spectatorship of

esports in the presence of alcoholic beverages, food and other esports fans. Although definitions vary, esports, short for "electronic sports," is a term broadly used to describe the competitive, organised, professional videogaming and its production as a spectator sport (Hamari and Sjöblom 2017). Spectatorship is an essential aspect of contemporary esports, which has seen a dramatic rise in popularity and viewership over the past decade. This rapid rise has coincided with the maturation of livestreaming platforms like Twitch, which act as wide-reaching outlets that serve esports content to global audiences (Taylor 2018b). Contemporary esports' recent success has been driven by the accessibility and ease of spectatorship enabled by livestreaming platforms; previous attempts to professionalise competitive gaming as a spectator sport in the 1990s and 2000s were largely impeded by traditional media gatekeepers (Taylor 2012).

Recent academic literature has noted that esports spectatorship, alongside esports more broadly, has become sportified. In essence, sportification describes the use of sporting conventions and iconography in a non-sports activity to make it appear more attractive to audiences (Heere 2018). Through the process of sportification, aspects of sports that are widely perceived as positive are evoked to promote a familiar sense of popularity, engagement, entertainment, and excitement in the non-sports activity (Lopez-Gonzalez and Griffiths 2018). In the case of esports, major tournaments are now commonly held in prominent stadia filled with spectators, harnessing the sense of grandeur and professionalism the structures embody as the "new cathedrals" of urban landscapes (Trumpbour 2006). Likewise, the emergence of esports bars take inspiration from sports bars, offering esports fans a consistently available public communal site of spectatorship.

The remote spectatorship of esports in communal places like esports bars provide an emerging mode of spectatorship that occurs neither at the site of play or in the home. Although often characterised in mainstream discourses alongside other gaming practices as anti-social and solitary, a night at GGEZ will indicate the opposite. This article presents an ethnographic study that delves into the experiences of esports spectatorship at GGEZ. Existing esports spectatorship research predominantly focuses on fan typologies (Cheung and Huang 2011; Carter et al. 2017) and quantified measurements of spectatorship motivations (Hamari and Sjöblom 2017; Pizzo et al. 2018; Trent and Shafer 2020). While this has generated an understanding of who esports spectators are and why esports is spectated, there is room to further explore what esports spectatorship looks like and the experiences of spectating esports.

More broadly, this research provides insights into how notions of authenticity are navigated and negotiated in an age of increasing digitisation. There is a tendency to think of digitised media and activities, whether they be esports as a form of digital sports or online learning platforms employed by education providers, as simulated obscurations of the 'real' (Syvertsen and Enli 2020); inauthentic replications in the hyperreal sense that are not only insincere in their representation, but also actively prevent us from accessing and experiencing the authentic original. As digitisation and networked technologies increasingly permeate into almost every facet of contemporary life, discourse is often directed towards how we as both individuals and as a society can reclaim authenticity and partake in 'real' experiences that have been replaced by digital approximations (Syvertsen 2017; Syvertsen and Enli 2020). It is evident that people will increasingly find

themselves in situations where their notions of authenticity are challenged by the ways in which digitised activities and media superficially differ to their material counterparts. Esports stands as a fitting frame to explore this conundrum, existing as what many consider to be a digitised sporting activity that while embodying many characteristics of sports, cannot be considered as authentic sports on account of its digitised characteristics (Parry 2019).

One way to look at the tension between authenticity and digitisation in the context of esports is through what Bale (1998) describes as a "sport landscape of sameness." Bale originally conceived this concept in relation to the rise of televised sports, as it "re-places" the spectator from the varied viewpoints unique to each seating position in the stadium to a unified perspective captured and mediated by the television camera. However, it can be said that esports epitomises Bale's sport landscape of sameness Drawing on Virilio's (1991) dystopic predictions of future sports where physical athletes are replaced by televisual images performing in a "video-stadium" directly televised to global audiences (a prediction which parallels with contemporary esports), Bale ponders a path which eventually leads to sports discarding its connection to and reliance on space. Both Virilio and Bale imply that if sport were to be stripped of space in such a manner, it would become somehow debased and no longer authentic.

It can be argued that esports is a greater fit for Bale's landscape of sameness than televised sport. Unlike traditional sports, the competitive spectacle of esports takes place within the digital space of a videogame and must be mediated out of necessity in order to be watched. With esports play occurring within computerised systems, there is no way to

watch esports unmediated. Even in the stadium, matches must be captured, their content mediated by the production crew and projected onto screens around the venue, as well as streamed to remote audiences. In this sense, every esports spectator shares a uniform watching perspective regardless of spectating location. This has led some to understand esports as a collection of seemingly placeless practices (Sturm 2020); a notion that place does not play any notable role in the production and enjoyment of esports. Like how Bale (1998) envisions placeless sports as detracting from sporting authenticity, does the sameness of seemingly placeless practices like esports spectatorship delegate them as activities of solely inauthentic experiences? Such questions are particularly relevant in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has seen forms traditional media spectacle, including spectator sports, move to seemingly "placeless" modes of production (Buehler 2020).

In this paper, we contest this dated understanding of mediated placelessness. We explore how despite embodying or even exceeding the seemingly placeless qualities that Bale and Virilio warned of in the 90s, esports is authenticated by many placeful practices reminiscent of traditional sports spectatorship. Whereas Bale and Virilio were fixated on the loss of highly visible authenticating rituals at the stadium, we have looked beyond the screen to explore how the subtle spectating practices performed by patrons at GGEZ played a similar role. We note that these subtle practices not only authenticated patrons spectatorship, but also worked to negotiate and affirm of a convention of authenticity. While Bale and Virilio presumed that conventions of sporting authenticity would be lost in a condition of placelessness, we have observed that these conventions have been kept

alive by spectators who appropriate and adapt them as a suitable foundation on which to construct and negotiate new conventions of authenticity. Ultimately, we conclude that the notion of placelessness is an outdated way of understanding highly mediated forms of contemporary digital media like esports. Despite not tied to a physically situated pitch or stadium in order to be produced, placeful practices behind the screen play a fundamental role in constructing the authentic identities of these media and their spectators. In this way we observe how the situated practices surrounding digitised media works to negotiate a connection to a suitable and authentic historic past that may have not been initially clear.

Over the course of roughly 5 months in 2018 the primary researcher attended GGEZ three times a week to immerse himself in the practices, behaviours, and experiences of esports spectatorship in the venue. In this article we focus on one night in particular spent at the bar to illustrate our key findings: the overnight screening of The International 8, a major *Dota 2* (Valve Software 2013) esports tournament. We chose to highlight this night as it succinctly encapsulated many of the key findings regarding esports spectatorship at the bar.

## ESPORTS, SPECTATORSHIP, AND AUTHENTICITY

While esports has brought videogame spectatorship to the forefront of the contemporary media landscape, the act of spectatorship has long been a part of videogaming practices, originating from crowds gathered around arcade cabinets (Taylor 2012). Although reliant on computerised systems both in terms of play and spectatorship, many major esports events are held in large venues like stadia or convention centres with physically present

spectators. Much like traditional sports, these events are captured and mediated as a broadcast text to be distributed to remote audiences predominantly through livestreaming platforms. The capture of the physical venue and the crowd it houses becomes an integral aspect of the produced mediated text. In this sense, not only is the match being mediated and presented, but also the entirety of the event itself (Duncan and Brummett 1987). The staging and manipulation of elements inside the venue holds significance over the portrayal of the event for remote audiences. Szablewicz (2016) observes how the careful staging of a Chinese esports event produced a mediated spectacle which represented an idealised image of Chinese nationalism. She highlights how the event had been constructed with the remote spectating experience in mind, rather than the experience in the stadium. The event that took place in the stadium from which the mediated broadcast text was produced had become merely representational while the mediated remote experience had become the one to be "directly lived."

Szablewicz's (2016) work presents the spectator as the subject of meticulously composed experiences; one of two main perspectives present across existing literature concerning the relationship between spectators and experiences of spectatorship. Fairley and Tyler's (2012) work on the spectatorship of Major League Baseball matches in a cinema also reflects this perspective. Fairley and Tyler similarly describe a highly composed and considered environment in the cinema they researched. They describe the spectating experience as "reminiscent of a ballpark outside of a ballpark," with the event organisers endeavouring to replicate environmental qualities indicative of the site of play. Ushers wore team apparel, the smells of "game time" foods being served filled the venue, a

liquor licence was obtained to serve beer, and the cinema's lights stayed on to replicate the sunlight of the daytime game. Spectators also played into the experience, wearing their own team apparel and behaving as if they were at the ballpark, rather than how they would when watching a film. In essence, Szablewicz and Fairley and Tyler each observe ways in which the material and sensory elements surrounding the spectated event were carefully composed by the event organisers to lay out a "space of an ideal vision" to the spectator (Baudry 1974).

It is important to note that Fairley and Tyler's (2012) work also embodies the second perspective: the spectator as a constructor of experiences. In the cinema, spectators also contributed to the construction of an authentic ballpark-like spectating experience. Playing into the theme by wearing team apparel and participating in rituals that would normally be engaged in at the ballpark, the spectators worked alongside the event organisers in constructing this desired experience. This perspective of the spectator as a constructor of authentic experiences is also present in Bale's (1998) and Weed's (2007) work. Bale describes an instance of soccer spectatorship in a "Fælled," a large space of common grazing land that was once the ancestral site of soccer play in Denmark. Bale suggests that the experience of spectating the Denmark-Germany game in the Fælled was perhaps more authentic than that of the stadium. He asserts that spectatorship at the stadium had become "sanctified," having shifted to an all-seated layout with restrictions on alcohol consumption in an effort to reduce disorder. Free of the constraints of the stadium, fans at the Fælled were able to reconstruct a "lost" authentic experience of soccer spectatorship.

Bale's (1998) case demonstrates what he describes as the "place-making" quality of spectators, who are able to transform a place into a sporting place by invoking the cultural and historic essence of the sport through the performance of certain behaviours and rituals. Weed (2007) expands on Bale's claim, asserting that the main draw of sports spectatorship experiences in these contexts is the "collective enjoyment" created by the gathering of sports spectators. Weed's ethnography surrounded the remote spectatorship of the 2002 FIFA World Cup (which was held in stadia across Japan and South Korea) in British pubs. While fans could have alternatively spectated the World Cup remotely from home, they nevertheless endeavoured to attend pubs at 7:00 am, well before any alcohol would be served, to watch the matches. Weed concluded that these football fans attended the pub to spectate the World Cup matches for an authentic "shared communal experience," something that they could not get at home.

While these two perspectives note how spectators are positioned to receive notions of authenticity and how they possess the ability to evoke conventions of authenticity, they do not address ambiguities regarding how such spectatorship conventions are affirmed as authentic. Bruner (1994) notes that authenticity is not wholly contingent on originality or genuineness, but is rather determined by struggles involving various parties' efforts to exert their *authority to authenticate*. For example, the authenticity of artefacts in a museum are not entirely deemed as authentic because they are original, genuine objects, but also because the museum exists as a creditable institution which holds the authority to say what objects are authentic originals and which are fake reproductions. It is unclear who holds the authority to affirm certain conventions of spectatorship as authentic or

inauthentic. Working with Bruner's concept of the *authority to authenticate*, we propose a third perspective in our present study to address this gap: spectators as *negotiators* of authentic experiences. Esports presents an ideal case to explore this third perspective, as it is a young form of media spectacle that currently has no clearly defined convention of authenticity and has recently had conventions of sporting authenticity projected onto it through the process of sportification (Heere, 2018). At GGEZ, we observed patrons work to negotiate a convention of authenticity using the space and resources available to them within the bar. Employing traditional sporting conventions presented to them as a foundation, patrons in the bar partook in series of acts which eventually separated the authentic from the inauthentic. By the end of the night, it was clear which behaviours, rituals, and icons were considered authentic by the demographic of individuals who eventually emerged as the group with the authority to authenticate.

## DOTA 2 AND THE INTERNATIONAL

To understand the ethnographic study presented in this article, it is essential to first have a baseline understanding of *Dota 2* as an esport and The International esports tournament. Developed by Valve Software (2013), *Dota 2* is a multiplayer online battle arena game where two teams of five compete on a symmetrical "map." Each player controls an individual "hero" as their avatar with unique abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. Both teams' objectives are to defend their own base while concurrently attacking their opponent's. Each teams' base contains an "Ancient" which they need to defend from destruction by the opposing team. Once a team's Ancient is destroyed, they lose the round. The map contains various paths and bottlenecks into both teams' bases, placing

much emphasis on territorial control. As of November 2020, players can choose from a pool of 119 heroes. Prior to each round the two teams engage in a hero drafting stage, taking turns to ban their opponents from using specific heroes. This drafting stage creates a level of strategy where each team must tactically adapt to these bans when composing their team structure.

The International is an annual *Dota 2* tournament held by the game's developers. TI has grown exponentially since its inception in 2011 and ranks as one of the largest esports tournaments in terms of both viewership and prize pool. The iteration of TI featured in this study is The International 8 (TI8), which featured a prize pool of over USD $25.5 million and a peak viewership of around 15 million (Mejia 2018). While TI8 had a large physically present audience, most fans spectated remotely via online-streaming platforms.

## THE FIELD OF GGEZ ESPORTS BAR

While GGEZ perpetually streams live and recorded esports on nine wall-mounted TVs throughout the bar, if you were to go there on an average night you would find many patrons not actively watching esports. Although some may make an occasional glance towards a screen, the majority of patrons simply chat with their friends about the latest videogame releases and recent esports results, as well as mundane topics like work, study, and family. While the pervasive presence of streamed esports in the bar often steers the discourse of patrons, it became clear that esports content at the GGEZ on an average night resided in their peripheries. Normally, the live esports at the bar functioned as ambience and atmosphere, alongside other elements of the bar's aesthetic such as its artwork, lighting, music and menu. Although GGEZ is marketed as a specialised venue

for spectating esports, many other activities occur within in the venue that are not necessarily directly related to esports, Rather, the activities and behaviours that patrons engaged in were what truly fulfilled GGEZ's self-identification as an esports bar.

## DATA GENERATION METHODS

The fieldwork component of the ethnography was carried out by the primary researcher at GGEZ esports bar in Melbourne between May and September in 2018. Participant observation constituted the majority of the collected data, alongside informal conversations with patrons. Additionally, a formal semi-structured interview was conducted with the bar's owner. The employed approach to participant observation was not static throughout the fieldwork and changed over the five months. Beginning fieldwork initially as a "wallflower" (Adler and Adler 1987), the primary researcher eventually became recognised by regulars, some becoming aware of his role as a researcher. However, the primary researcher did not engage in the activities that would grant him membership to their community, relying predominately on observations and informal conversations with patrons to gather data. This relatively passive approach gradually shifted into a more involved strategy, where the primary researcher took part in activities surrounding esports spectatorship with the bar's patrons. Although it was intended for the primary researcher to eventually shift into this involved method of observation, flexibility was required to read and adapt to the mood of the bar.

During the night of TI8, the primary researcher's role as an observer sat somewhere between participant-as-observer and a complete participant, with some patrons aware (or had become aware) of his role as a researcher, while others remained unaware (Gold

1957). This had some noticeable effects when interacting with patrons. The primary researcher is an Australian male of mixed Caucasian and Asian descent who was in their early 20s during the fieldwork. Although he holds a keen interest in videogaming and has previously conducted other research regarding esports spectatorship, he approached the research initially as an outsider, holding limited personal interest in consuming esports as a leisurely activity. His personal background was deemed beneficial for this ethnography, providing the gaming literacy required to confidently become familiar with the field, yet lacking recreational esporting experiences that could have formed preconceived notions towards observations and experiences at the bar as a researcher. He was able to engage in naturalistic interactions with patrons and was able to develop a sense of how the bar's patrons engage with each other. Conversely, when interacting with patrons who were aware of the primary researcher's role, he was able to have gain more reflexive insights from patrons. Miller and Glasser (2004) suggest that "social distances" can help participants envision themselves as an expert on their culture. These patrons, keen to passionately talk about their culture and interests, offered insights into nuances that likely would not have been obtained otherwise.

While the existence of other potential fields, such as cinemas screening esports events, offered the possibility for a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), GGEZ was chosen as a single field as it presented a consistently accessible field. The permanence of the bar offered a valuable opportunity to become familiar with the intimacies such venues, something which the sporadically scheduled cinema screening events could not offer. Although special screening sessions for major esports tournaments were held at and

advertised by GGEZ, it was open 6 days a week and constantly screened esports to the numerous TVs mounted throughout the bar during its opening hours. GGEZ acted as a "third place" (Oldenburg 1989), offering a readily accessible venue with a flattened social hierarchy to spectate esports in.

Oldenburg (1989) originally conceived of third places as being geographically and conceptually between home and the workplace, acting as community "anchors." Third places are typically defined by a flat social dynamic, a playful atmosphere, regulars who set the mood of the place and initiate newcomers, and a sense of being a home away from home. From our observations, each of these attributes were clearly present at GGEZ. While we can consider GGEZ as a third place under Oldenburg's description, we believe this interpretation can further be extended further into the context of esports. Beyond occupying a place between the home and the workplace, GGEZ and other places that publicly screen esports can be thought of as a third place of esports spectatorship that exist between the home and the stadium.

## DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

The thematic categorisation of ethnographic data (Angrosino 2007) was driven by a desire to generate a *thick description* account of the experiences of spectatorship within GGEZ. Ryle (1968) first coined the term, establishing a distinction between thin and thick description. Thin description refers to surface-level observations of behaviours, while thick description provides contextual information behind such behaviours. Ryle's thick description acted as a foundational approach for early adherers of the ethnographic tradition, who at the time had begun to explore how supposedly inconspicuous events

could provide nuanced insights and understandings that were not immediately evident at a glance (Yon 2003). Geertz (1973) later popularised and refined Ryle's concept, framing thick description as an analytical approach. Geertz advocated for an analytical approach that would emphasise the nuanced implications beyond surface-level "menial observations," producing findings that accounted for and were intrinsically linked to cultural contexts from which they were derived. Such findings are not simply the product of thick description, but are themselves "thickly described" (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

It was this emphasis on contextual understanding which drove the thick description approach to this study's analysis. With much rich data generated from the highly embedded fieldwork at GGEZ, it was imperative to preserve the contextual information they contained; a central goal of the study was to understand how the context of the bar influenced the experiences of spectatorship within the venue. As the primary researcher carried out this fieldwork alone, the following thick description account will be presented from the primary researcher's perspective in the first-person.

## INITIAL IMPRESSIONS OF GGEZ

Fieldwork began during the first week of May in 2018, which held the Intel Extreme Masters Sydney 2018 (IEM 2018).  This scheduling was not coincidental: IEM 2018 was a landmark Australia esports event, with the Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) series being one first major international esports circuits held in Australia when it was inaugurally hosted in Sydney's Olympic Park during 2017. I anticipated a sizable turnout at GGEZ when considering IEM's fan following and the temporal convenience of the tournament being held in Australia. With most major esports events occurring in the northern

hemisphere, Australians often must stay awake during awkward hours and reschedule their week to watch live. Weed (2007) makes similar observations in relation to geography and temporality in his ethnography, noting how the hosting the 2002 FIFA World Cup in Japan and South Korea lead to the restructuring of many British lives and public services around awkward match times. Temporal factors which esports spectators need to consider are particularly important to note, as they demonstrate an overlooked way in which geographical place can impact supposed placeless experiences of esports spectatorship.

When approaching the bar from the street for the first time, it was evident that the venue would likely only be known to those with prior knowledge. The bar's street-level entrance provided few clues for the uninitiated regarding the venue below them. Overhanging the entrance was a small square canopy with three words printed on its front facing edge: "*BEER ESPORTS BURGERS*" stylised in a red and blue colour scheme, matching the soft neon glow spilling onto the footpath from inside. By the front door were a collection of posters advertising upcoming esports screening events at the bar.

As I made my way downstairs and entered the bar I was met with the drinks menu, which prominently featured themed cocktails inspired by a videogaming or esports related reference. A particularly popular cocktail that I noticed across my visits was their recreation of *Fortnite*'s (Epic Games 2017) "slurp juice" healing item, brought to life as a fluorescent blue cocktail and served faithfully to the source material in a mason jar. Although labelled as an esports bar, GGEZ also appealed to fans of gaming and pop culture more broadly. Furthermore, GGEZ stood as a new trendy venue against other

competitors in the Melbourne bar scene. The bar's patronship often reflected this; while esports spectators could be commonly found in the bar, other patrons included videogame fans enjoying the novelty of the bar's theme and those simply enjoying the venue on its merits as a bar. As I ordered a drink I was enthusiastically asked by the bartender if I was there to watch the matches. It seemed the bar's staff were also expecting spectators to come to the bar with the intention of watching IEM 2018. In the week leading up to IEM 2018 they advertised on their social media platforms a promotion offering a free pint of beer for those who turn up to the bar in their favourite team's jersey. As I later learned from GGEZ's owner, the boost to patronship brought by the screening of major esports events was a fundamental aspect of the bar's business model.

Despite my expectations of a full bar, the only others present in the bar were a group of five men in their early 20s sitting towards the back of the bar sharing a tall pitcher of beer as they watched the IEM 2018 livestream on a large wall mounted TV. The sole group evidently did not need the presence of anyone else but themselves to enjoy the matches, yelling and chanting fanatically in response to the action. But perhaps more interestingly, emotive reactions were also elicited during periods not focused on the matches. In one notable example between matches with the broadcast covering the cheering crowd, the group were quick to join in with the "*Aussie Aussie Aussie, Oi Oi Oi!*" chant reverberating in the stadium. In the moment I found the recital of this iconic Australian sporting chant fairly inconspicuous; the chant has a long history of being bellowed by rowdy Australian fans at international sports events to enact the "Aussie spirit" as an expression of unified nationalism (Law and Mackenzie 2016). While this may have

partially been the case at GGEZ, it became clear during later visits that it was the enactment this chant, rather than the chant itself, that held the most significance for the bar's patrons.

When considering the Australian significance and temporal convenience of IEM 2018, the minimal turn out at the bar raised some questions. In retrospect, the bar's owner speculates that IEM 2018 may have been too local. He suspected that the demographic of spectators that would normally come to the bar to watch esports were also dedicated enough fans to consider a weekend trip to Sydney a reasonable expense to experience IEM 2018 in-person. Although merely speculative, it highlights a notion that became prevalent throughout the fieldwork: a desire for attending a spectating place to partake in an authentic experience of esports spectatorship.

## THE INTERNATIONAL 8 AT GGEZ

At around 1:00 am on Sunday the 26th of August 2018 I drove to GGEZ to watch TI8. Unlike IEM 2018, TI8 took place internationally in Vancouver, hence the early morning start. It was clear that these awkward hours did not deter many fans; entering the bar at around 1:40 am I noticed a few small groups of fans in the bar excitedly discussing the upcoming semi-final matches, among other patrons wrapping up their night of drinking. Many of these fans had prepared themselves for the lengthy overnight viewing session, with one couple snuggled up together with a blanket against a wall and a group of five men in their early 20s sat behind immense stockpiles of snack foods. Despite the matches starting at 3:00 am Melbourne time, the bar had to enforce a mandatory lockout between 2:00 am and 7:00 am as a condition of their licencing contract. Roughly 30 spectators had

gathered in the bar by 2:00 am, patiently awaiting the TVs to be switched over to the TI8 live stream. Much like the soccer fans in Weed's (2007) ethnography, those who had made their way to GGEZ in the early hours of the morning to spectate TI8 were painfully aware of their geographic place on the opposite side of the world to where the tournament was being held.

*Sociality*

As the matches began, the boundary between groups of people became increasingly less defined. Patrons were readily moving around and chatting to strangers about the upcoming matches, often attempting to glean a person's team loyalty and fandom. I was not exempt from this. Having arrived relatively early I was able to secure a well-positioned table by the large TV on the west-facing wall all to myself. Once the bar had quickly filled, I was unsurprisingly approached by a fairly large group of five men and two women, who asked me if they could join me at my table, to which I agreed. While I initially thought that I might simply sit awkwardly at the table with them minding my own business, I was pleasantly surprised when the group started chatting to me about TI8. Eventually, I found myself well incorporated into their discussions. I learned that they had been out on a big night of drinking, which they planned to conclude with a trip to GGEZ to continue drinking and watch as much of TI8 as they could before exhausting themselves, despite a bit of initial confusion among the group.

> *"Are we going to watch it?"*
>
> *"Yes! That's why we're here!"*

It appeared that the group had been led to GGEZ by four of the men who were particularly keen to watch TI8¸with the rest more moderately curious of the event. It would eventually be these enthusiastic four that stayed at the bar for the longest, with the other three leaving roughly 90 minutes later to conclude their big night out. Despite my status as a stranger to them, they actively endeavoured to incorporate me into their group and treated me as one of their own, pulling me into their half-drunk predictions of the upcoming matches. The group even started buying me alcoholic drinks "*courtesy of the boys*," despite my declination of their offers in an effort to stay sober and remember my experiences of the night for the sake of the ethnography. However, once they caught onto my efforts to stay sober, they instead started buying me energy drinks instead. Regardless of the type of drink I was offered, this experience affirmed for me the importance patrons placed on the largely masculine ritual of drinking during spectatorship in the bar.

While Oldenburg (1989) identified third places as embodying a "restrained masculinity" in his initial conceptualisation, he largely characterised this underlying masculinity as unproblematic. Others have since offered alternative readings, noting that while a unifying sense of masculine comradery helps to establish a flattened social hierarchy, it also excludes those who do not strictly fit this masculine ideal (Yuen and Johnson 2016) and further strengthens such norms (Herrman 2017). One way that masculinity can be affirmed is through the (often reckless or excessive) consumption of alcohol, particularly in sporting (Wenner 1998), gaming (Butt and de Wildt 2018) and Australian contexts (Kirkby 2003). With these three contexts converging at the site of GGEZ, it was unsurprising that these men offered me alcoholic beverages as a way to help me fit in

with the predominantly alcohol drinking male patronship spectating in the bar. When that failed, they still believed it was important to have me at least partake in the ritual of drinking, even if what I was sipping out of the can was caffeine instead of alcohol. Had I not maintained the appearance of drinking, I might not have been as openly welcomed into the patronship of the bar, which at that point of the night had been distilled down to mainly men in their 20s and 30s drinking alcohol.

My hesitation to drink was not the only aspect that signalled to these men my outsider status. As the semi-final matches commenced, the group soon realised that I was not a seasoned *Dota 2* spectator or player and made concerted efforts to explain key moments in the matches for my sake of comprehension and enjoyment, something I had previously observed other groups do with their less experienced individuals. GGEZ was often used as a ground of initiation for those new to the esports, whether voluntary or under pressure from their friends already well engaged with esports fandom. The social atmosphere of the bar and the face-to-face nature of attendance made explaining esports to novice spectators an engaging yet casual activity. At this point, I found myself subject to this previously observed dynamic.

Besides me, the group at my table were also chatting and bantering with others around the bar, while others at tables nearby conversed with me regarding the matches. Interactions with others were friendly and enthusiastic, and I was treated almost like a known acquaintance simply because I was at the bar sharing the experience of watching TI8. I was even casually offered amphetamines from a complete stranger who I had only spoken to for roughly a minute, which I declined. While the men at my table had offered

me drinks to help me fit in at the bar, it was the unexpected interaction with this stranger that made it evident that I was largely seen as an insider among GGEZ's flattened social hierarchy; he had assumed that I would be open his proposition as I appeared to be the sort of young male individual who would spectate esports at the bar. Similar interactions have been noted between young male ethnographers and their subjects in other gaming-focused ethnographies. For example, Taylor (2018a) recalls an awkward situation where he was captured in a photograph next to a group of his male ethnographic subjects partaking in sexist behaviour, who assumed Taylor would not object as he blended in with the majority white young male demographic of the gaming event they were attending.

The bar's staff were also engaged in the sociality of the bar, blurring the lines between their work and their own personal enjoyment of the event as esports fans. There were two staff members present at the bar for the entirety of the event: a bartender and GGEZ's owner. I learned from the owner that GGEZ was more than just a simple business venture for him. With previous experience running and promoting bars in Melbourne, he admitted that opening an esports bar was not the most lucrative way to make money. Rather, it was a passion project the emerged from his love for esports. During intense moments in the action, the owner and bartender could be found in the midst of the densely packed crowd of patrons seated in front of the big TV, leaving the bar's counters unattended. But no one seemed to care, as practically everyone there were glued to their seats as they watched what would eventually turn out to be one of the most thrilling finals in *Dota 2* esports history. The owner even went beyond his regular duties to ensure the comfort of his

patrons. With the bar's kitchen closed during the lockout and knowing that patrons would not be able to re-enter the bar if they left to get food, the owner made a quick trip to a nearby fast-food restaurant to feed his hungry patrons. In a similar gesture of solidarity as esports fans, the event's conclusion was celebrated with a round of shots on the house.

*Fandom*

The great sense of communality in the bar was eventually amplified when it became clear that most spectators were supporting OG, a Europe-based team largely considered the underdogs of the competition. OG's team roster for TI8 included *ana*, a player Melbourne. By virtue of ana's presence on OG*'s* roster and his status as the locally-raised star, OG became something close to an Australian team for GGEZ's patrons. These aspects alone were enough to sway the opinion of less knowledgeable spectators at the bar whose loyalty were not strongly cemented with any particular team.

> *"That ana guy, is he Aussie?"*
>
> *"Yeah, he's from Melbourne actually."*
>
> *"Oh sweet, now I know who I'm going for!"*

Likewise, I also found myself being swayed towards supporting OG for these reasons that night, not having any previous team affiliation. But beyond that I had a sense of not wanting to feel like an outsider; it was evident from the cheering and chants throughout the bar that OG were the clear favourites. The few that were not supporting OG, such as a small group of three men seated behind me who supported the Chinese team LGD, often became the subjects of banter among the majority OG fans. However, it was visible that

this was done in a jovial manner, to which the LGD fans responded with their own friendly banter. When speaking to those around me about this back-and-forth banter, I was reassured that there was no animosity. While team loyalties were expressed among spectators, they ultimately were united over their shared love for *Dota 2*.

> *"No matter who wins we're all still friends! We all love Dota!"*

*The next best thing*

As the night continued, it became apparent that the act of watching TI8 in the presence of other *Dota 2* esports fans was an important element of spectatorship within the bar. However, it is important to note that GGEZ was not the only venue in Melbourne where esports fans could experience a live, shared, and public communal experience of spectating TI8. A national cinema chain also offered a live screening of TI8 in their theatres. In many ways, the spectating experience of esports could be arguably better in a cinema, offering large comfortable chairs, a massive screen, and a surround sound system to take in all the action. Yet, I spoke to a late arrival to the bar who had started off spectating at a nearby cinema and ended up relocating to GGEZ for the remainder of the matches. Although he had originally chosen to go to cinema with his group of friends for the "*big screen experience,*" he later regret his decision as he felt the crowd there wasn't getting as "*involved*" as he wanted; most were simply watching in relative silence, glued to their seats and shrouded by the darkness of the theatre. According to him, while spectators at the cinema were watching in unison, there was not a sense of communality and comradery that he thought ought to be in an experience of esports spectatorship. In coming to GGEZ, he sought to satisfy these desires, quickly chatting up other spectators

and participating in the coordinated cheering that persisted throughout the night. When I next spoke to the later-comer during a break in the matches, he happily confirmed that his expectations had been fulfilled.

> *"Yeah nah it's great, it's like I'm really there! It's essentially like the next best thing!"*

This notion of the bar being "the next best thing" to being at TI8 in person was shared among many other patrons. The majority of those I spoke to mentioned that they would have been there in person if it was feasible; a trip to Vancouver proved too much of an investment in terms of money and time. Replicated or simulated experiences are often seen as a form of compromise in that they imperfectly capture the original after which they are modelled (Boorstin 1964). However, attending the bar as "the next best thing" was not merely a compromise for patrons, nor did they consider their experience as lacking or inauthentic.

*Evoking the stadium*

During the high-intensity semi and grand final matches I began to notice some intriguing aspects about how patrons were cheering. While the intensity and frequency of the cheering in the bar would predictably shift with the intensity and momentum of the matches, I eventually noticed that there was more correlation with the TI8 livestream than just this observation. Not only did the timing and intensity of cheering match that captured on the livestream, but also the specific chants and cheers themselves. In particular, the mimicry and synchronisation of rhythmic aspects of the cheering was the most common occurrence of this and was mostly visible during the banning stage before

each match. These periods, predominantly focused on the teams within the stadium as they drafted and banned heroes for the upcoming matches, also inherently featured the visual presence of the physically-present stadium audience, in conjunction with a greater audible presence of their antics. During these relatively uneventful stages of strategic planning it was common for the stadium-situated audience captured in the livestream to engage in rhythmic clapping and chanting of increasing tempo during the anticipation of hero picks and bans. While the mimicry of these specific behaviours by patrons in the bar was not particularly surprising assuming it to be an ingrained spectating ritual, what was intriguing was the mimicry of the tempo and rhythm of these chants and claps.

In another example, the crowd in the bar participated in a Mexican wave initiated by the stadium crowd. Even though their wave would never connect with that in the stadium, nor would the cheers and jeers reach the ears of the teams and players they were directed to, the replication of these rituals and behaviours in evoked qualities of the stadium in the remote place of the bar. Whereas Fairley and Tyler (2012) observed how event organisers worked to bring elements of the ballpark into the cinema with the help of attending spectators, patrons at GGEZ worked to evoke characteristics the stadium largely of their own volition, attributing authentic significance to these stadium-like qualities.

*The climax*

As the semi-finals wrapped up it soon became apparent that the looming grand final match between OG and LGD would be one of the most dramatic moments in contemporary esports. While many in the bar had placed their support behind OG by virtue of ana’s presence on the team’s roster, this was further compounded by OG’s status

as the underdog in the matchup against the favoured-to-win LGD. In essence, OG's arrival in the grand final acted as the culmination of the team's ongoing 'Cinderella story' narrative. Prior to TI8, the once successful OG suffered major setbacks when three key players suddenly departed to join other teams, which some fans interpreted as a betrayal. The loss of these key players meant that OG would no longer be guaranteed an invitation to TI8 and were forced to hastily restructure their roster to earn their way into the tournament by competing in the open qualifiers. As a part of this restructuring ana returned to the team after a yearlong hiatus following the team's elimination in the previous year, alongside the signing of the team's previous coach as a player and a newcomer who had not yet competed at a major event. OG was not expected by most to make it out of the open qualifiers, let alone reach the grand final. Yet, to the delight of those in the bar, their unlikely story of redemption came to fruition.

The last few rounds could be best described as a rollercoaster of emotions. Playing in a first-to-three format, OG's round one win was responded to confidently by LGD's subsequent wins in the second and third rounds. With LGD now at match point, the enthusiasm in the bar was quickly replaced with apprehension. When OG managed to secure the round four win, one could have easily mistaken the calibre of cheering to be in response to an actual championship win. As if the patrons had collectively taken a sigh of relief, a renewed sense of vigour swept over the bar in anticipation of the fifth and final round. Friendly chatter circulated the space, expressing relief and excitement that "we" had managed to beat the odds and make a comeback. This light atmosphere would not last long, as round five quickly commenced. Echoing remarks made by the casters'

commentary from the stream, there was a sense of unease among the patrons as discussion spread regarding OG's choice to draft heroes they were comfortable playing rather than ones that were optimal from a strategic perspective against LGD. At this point, the bar was uncharacteristically quiet. The familiar cheering or jeering was now only reserved for most intense moments at the peak of suspense. With eyes fixated on the screen, the bar stood still. Food and drinks were no longer being served; nobody dared to leave their seats anyway and the bar's staff had suspended their duties to watch.

The moment LGD's Ancient became vulnerable following a series of pivotal plays executed by ana, the patrons knew that OG had essentially won and leapt into a cacophony of celebrations, almost missing the actual end of the match. Social boundaries had completely broken down as complete strangers embraced each other in glee. Even the LGD supporters behind me joined in the celebrations, acknowledging OG's rise from the ashes. Some began to discuss how they would brag to their friends who could not make it to the bar, while other were already on their phones gloating to their absent friends, already working to accrue gaming capital (Consalvo 2007) and assert their authority as dedicated fans to spread this negotiated convention of authenticity to others. After the round of celebratory shots, the whole patronship of GGEZ, many who were complete strangers upon entry, left the bar as a collective and continued their giddy celebrations as they funnelled out to the street on the bright Sunday afternoon. Pedestrians going about their day looked on in bewilderment, unaware of the events that had just transpired.

## DISCUSSION

While Bale (1998) and Virilio's (1991) dystopic predictions of future placeless sports bemoans the loss of an essential sporting authenticity, it was clear that patrons at GGEZ partook in placeful, authentic experiences of esports spectatorship. Drawing on sportified qualities projected onto esports (Heere 2018), those in the bar evoked these traditional sporting conventions to authenticate their spectatorship. On the surface, this created a situation where both traditional sports fans and patrons at GGEZ valued the same qualities and characteristics as authentic. Such similarities between sports and esports spectatorship have been widely reported in existing literature (Lee and Schoenstedt 2011; Pizzo 2018). In particular, Trent and Shafer (2020) directly compare experiences of esports and sports spectatorship and conclude that both are enjoyed for similar reasons. The findings of our ethnographic fieldwork affirm these similarities, further illustrating that esports fans seek placeful, social experiences of spectatorship underscored by elements of masculine comradery and boisterous behaviours. However, what this research considers that others do not are the reasons why these similarities between esports and traditional sports spectatorship exist. As will be made salient in the following paragraphs, these outwardly similar valued qualities shared across esports and traditional sports spectatorship are the result of dissimilar circumstances.

These similarities can be traced to the sportified presentation of the stadium as an authentic site of esports spectatorship. With the stadium presented not as a structure merely showcasing esports spectacle, but rather as an embodiment of the sporting professionalism and legitimacy now manifesting in esports, the mimicry of behaviours observed on TI8s livestream by the bar's patrons worked to authenticate their

spectatorship. In this way we have observed how sportification now influences spectating practices of esports, extending beyond organisational and aesthetic changes (Heere 2018). Looking at spectators at GGEZ, the mimicked ritualistic behaviours acted both as authenticating acts and authoritative performances. As authenticating acts, they functioned as references for attendees to construct authentic personal narratives of their spectatorship in the bar (Cohen 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2000). Despite being dedicated venues of esports spectatorship, esports bars are not currently widely established places of esports spectatorship. Consequently, there exists very few traditions of such spaces for spectators to draw on to constitute an authentic experience. These mimicked behaviours as authenticating acts drew on the established sporting and emergent esporting histories of the stadium (Cardwell and Ali 2014) to transform the bar into a place of esports spectatorship. They also worked as authoritative performances by offering a sense of affiliation and community by making clear the values considered significant by those at GGEZ (Abrahams 1986; Escalas and Bettman 2000). Not only was authenticity affirmed on an individual level, but a consensus of authenticity was adopted across the broad patronship of the bar.

While this has led to a circumstance where both sports and esports fans appear to perceive similar behaviours, rituals, and icons as authentic, it is important to note that the causations for these two comparable perceptions are different. Sports fans see the stadium and its characteristic rituals as authentic as they are anchored in the rich, decades-old sporting histories that have formed a well-established and widely recognised convention of sports professionalism and authenticity (Richards et al. 2020); something which esports lacks to

the same degree. In working to construct for themselves an authentic experience of spectatorship, patrons at GGEZ drew on these widely known and accepted notions of sports authenticity to authenticate their spectatorship in absence of an established canon of authentic esports, thus working to negotiate and establish a notion of what esports *ought to be* (Urry 1990; Wang 1999). While it is tempting to conclude that those at GGEZ believed these sports-like rituals and icons were authentic in an esports context simply because it was presented to them as such, there is further nuance to this observation. Rather than blindly accepting these sporting conventions as authentic, patrons appropriated them as a suitable foundation on which to build their own conventions of authenticity.

Often, notions of authenticity do not arise from the direct historic background of a subject, but rather are attributed to it through a "continuity with a suitable historic past." Peterson (1997) uses the example of American country music to demonstrate this "invention of tradition," describing how many authentic traditions associated with country music in the USA were not historically a part of the genre's heritage, but were actually recent conceptions based on contemporary cultural notions of history and identity that had already received broader acceptance as being authentic. The same can be said of esports spectatorship at GGEZ. While Peterson talks of a prescriptive fabrication of authenticity produced by record labels, we have observed how elements of traditional sports authenticity put forward by the process of sportification were negotiated and affirmed by the patrons at GGEZ as a basis for esports authenticity. In doing so, patrons at GGEZ toyed with the notion of the stadium as a source of authenticity and appropriated it as a "suitable historic past" (Peterson 1997) for esports.

Likewise, patrons did not engage in sports-like behaviours and rituals for the sake of simply recreating them. The mimicked stadium-indicative behaviours and rituals can be considered as being deterritorialised and reterritorialised (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) by patrons at GGEZ. Although patrons evoked a sense of what they thought the authentic experience of spectating TI8 in the stadium would be like through the engagement in these rituals and behaviours, this alone did not entirely constitute the spectating experiences within the bar. Rather, the mimicry was interwoven with other elements within GGEZ, constituting a distinct and unique spectating experience. Although patrons worked to replicate rituals and behaviours accurately to how they were presented in the livestream, they functioned differently in the bar than at the stadium. Cheers and jeers towards players would not reach the ears they were directed to, and the Mexican wave could not sustain itself in the small, rectangular confines of the bar. These behaviours were reterritorialised within the context of the bar, becoming signifiers representative of the stadium spectating experience. With the patronship GGEZ largely viewing the stadium as an authentic site of esports spectatorship, the replication of these rituals and behaviours authenticated their TI8 spectating experience. However, an exact replica of a stadium experience could not be constructed in GGEZ; although behaviours could be mimicked, they could not be replicated to scale within the confines of the bar, and the bar space itself in terms of seating, lighting, services, functionality and location were inherently different from the stadium.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that patrons came to perceive experiences of spectatorship at GGEZ as exchangeable with those in the stadium. Rather than GGEZ acting as substitute for the stadium, the bar acted as an accessible site where stadium-like qualities could be

constructed into experiences of esports spectatorship. While certain elements of the "original" spectating experience at the site of play are often constructed remotely as authenticators, spectators rarely view the remote experience of spectatorship as identical to that of site of play. Rather, these replicated elements act as an anchor which authenticates a novel, unique experience. For example, Fairley and Tyler (2012) note in their study on baseball spectatorship in the cinema that while the reproduced elements of the ballpark worked to authenticate the experience of spectatorship, attendees also valued the climate-controlled venue and high-fidelity audio-visual system that would not be found at the site of play; 70% of Fairley and Tyler's respondents reported that they preferred spectating at the cinema over the nearby ballpark. We too found that the emergent convention of authenticity at GGEZ was not a reflection of the sportified stadium, but rather a *bricolage* of diverse sources brought together; a process of "projection and retrospection, thought and action, abstraction and application" (Johnson, 2012).

It is important to make explicit that the convention of authenticity negotiated and constructed by patrons at GGEZ was not universal across all esports contexts, let alone all remote sites of spectatorship. The variations of between spectatorship sites provides spectators alternative environments, resources, and opportunities to construct a desired experience of spectatorship; those at the national cinema chain and GGEZ held subjectively different ideas of what authentic esports spectatorship *ought to be*. This was most evident in the attendance motivations of the latecomer, who had left the cinema to seek an experience within the bar which aligned more closely with what he envisioned spectating TI8 should be. For him, authentic spectatorship centred around the boisterous communality

which GGEZ facilitated. Such communal experiences set beyond regular time and life are often considered sacred or special by their participants, and thus “the individual enters a transcending community of camaraderie” (Turner 1969; Hopkinson and Pujari 1999). This sense of camaraderie existed as a result of the flattened social hierarchy of the bar, which played a role in establishing who held the authority to authenticate within the venue.

The relative homogeneity of the patrons at GGEZ made it clear which demographic of individuals held the authority to authenticate experiences of spectatorship within the bar. As the matches began and other who were at the bar simply to drink and socialise concluded their night and left, the remaining spectating patrons where predominantly young white men in their 20s and 30s. Such a demographic is a common sight across videogaming-related research, representing the typical gamer and esports fan in western contexts (Taylor 2012; Burroughs and Rama 2015). This highly visible group of young white male individuals are also noted across academic videogame literature as notably vocal and prone to gatekeeping, often obscuring the voices of minority groups (Ruberg and Shaw 2017; Butt and de Wildt, 2018). This privilege played a fundamental role in negotiating what was and was not authentic spectatorship within the bar. As the majority group within the bar and the demographic often considered as representative of videogaming culture, these men assumed the authority to authenticate in GGEZ. As the primary researcher experienced for himself, whether or not one was perceived as an insider to this group determined how they were treated. His decision to not drink was seen as something to rectify, and his lacking *Dota 2* knowledge delegated him as a novice to be educated in an effort to grant him entry to the insider group. Conversely, his outward appearance as a young male made his

presence in the bar unremarkable. As Taylor (2018a) notes, the male body often grants access to gaming events with no contention. Patrons at GGEZ felt comfortable interacting with the primary researcher in ways they may not have chosen when engaging with someone perceived as an outsider, such as the offering recreational drugs. Another way in which this authoritative group demarcated insider from outsider was through team partisanship.

Although many entered and left the bar celebrating *Dota 2* as an esport rather than any particular team, in the heat of the moment a clear line had been drawn between "us" (the OG supporters) and "them" (the LGD supporters). As Snow and Oliver (1995) describe, collective group identities strengthen and define their own boarders by establishing an insider and outsider group. Ana's status as a local and the first Australian to make to the finals of TI were clear achievements to celebrate and earned the loyalty of those who arrived at the bar without any clear allegiance, including the primary researcher. Through ana, OG resembled something close to an Australian national team for those in the bar. Having a personal investment in an event leads to heightened emotional impacts (Escalas and Betmann 2000). Such emotive experiences form the foundations of self-narratives, imbuing them with a sense of authenticity (Escalas and Bettmann 2000). In sharing these retrospective stories, individuals can establish and legitimatise identities within social groups (Fairley and Tyler 2012).

While this sense of partisanship persisted through the night as an affirmed authentic element of the spectating experience, by the end of the tournament this sense of partisanship had faded away and almost everyone in the bar returned to celebrating *Dota*

*2* broadly as an esport; the round of shots at conclusion of the event were downed and celebrated by all in the bar, not just those who were supporting OG. This signals a clear difference between the sportified convention of authenticity proposed to the patrons and the convention of authenticity they negotiated and constructed; based on the findings of Weed's (2007) ethnography it would be unexpected to see zealous soccer fans put aside their differences and celebrate FIFA as an institution immediately after a championship match. For most in the bar, the overwhelming support for OG seemingly did not stem from an existing love of the team, but rather from the combination of OG's underdog narrative and ana's status as a home-town hero who represented a local source of esports pride and celebration. While those in the bar had embraced the sense of partisanship from the sportified convention of authenticity presented to them, they ultimately adapted it to embody what they felt was more important to them; the celebration of *Dota 2* as an esport.

The significance of attending GGEZ to watch TI8 was largely constructed by the patrons themselves. Although GGEZ advertised that they would be adjusting their opening hours to show TI8 live and actively promoted the event, the bar acted as a foundation for patrons to build their desired experiences of spectatorship. Only when fans attended the bar to spectate and engage in spectating rituals and behaviours was GGEZ transformed into a place of esports spectatorship. In doing so, the unique and exclusive experience of spectating within the bar became a collected experience that could later be retold to others. People tend to think of and communicate their ongoing personal history as a collection of narratives, wherein the individual is central (Escalas and Bettman 2000). By locating

themselves within these constructed narratives, individuals construct their identities (Somers 1994). An individual's location within narratives of attendance to events works to constitute their identity as an authentic fan. These narratives do not only signify one's attendance to an event, but also the emotions and meanings associated with it. Strong feelings of emotion imbue self-narratives with a sense of authenticity (Abrahams 1986). In sharing these stories, fans establish the event as authentic among others in the fandom. Patrons at GGEZ not only strived to construct and negotiate a convention of authentic esports spectatorship, but also worked to fashion the identity of an authentic esports spectator after themselves. In doing so, the patrons worked to further cement and communicate their authority to authenticate to other fans.

## CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

While perhaps a fit for Bale's (1998) landscape of sameness, we have identified a dimension of authenticity in esports spectatorship. Specifically, those at GGEZ worked to construct and negotiate a convention of esports authenticity through their placeful spectatorship practices. Despite its typical virtual and placeless characterisations, the spectatorship of esports occurs in situated places. Looking past the screen, we found that esports fans seek out venues that will allow them to engage in what they deem to be authentic spectating experiences. In this way, situated places like esports bars function as essential sites of meaning-making within the esports community and fandom. While spectators of traditional sports work to reclaim authenticity and place through the enactment of spectating rituals lost to the increasing sameness of sporting venues (Bale

1998), this study has identified the creation of authenticity in esports; a practice that theoretically should have none by virtue of its perceived placelessness.

Like their traditional sports counterparts, the findings of this study demonstrate that esports spectators construct a sense of esporting place out of the sites they spectate in. Reflecting the relative youth of esports as form of entertainment and its heritage as a remediation of sports and videogaming practices, a uniform convention of esporting authenticity does not exist and varies across spectators. For those at GGEZ, the bar environment acted as an available site to negotiate and affirm what they believed an experience of esports spectatorship *ought to be*. Specifically, GGEZ's patrons worked to authenticate spectatorship by drawing on and adapting conventions of authenticity from traditional sports spectatorship. Relating back to Bale's notion of the place-making spectator, we have observed that in efforts to establish what esports spectatorship *ought to be*, esports fans have constructed sites like esports bars and stadia as authentic esporting places. In doing so, esports spectators affirm a convention of esports authenticity by appropriating the practices and heritage of traditional sports as a "suitable historic past" (Peterson 1997) to build upon, but not prescriptively adhere to. We conclude by asserting that despite Bale's and Virilio's (1991) bleak writings, even the most highly mediated media spectacles like esports are neither placeless nor inauthentic, but are rather framed, informed, and authenticated by a web of interconnected practices both virtual and situated.

It is worth reflecting on the findings of this study in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Esports has become somewhat emblematic of perseverance during the

pandemic, largely due to its perceived placeless nature. With esports able to be played and produced over the internet without the involved personnel needing to be co-located, many esports leagues and tournaments have continued during the pandemic where their traditional sports counterparts have not. This attribute has been referred to by numerous writers, both in news media (Newman et al. 2020) and academic outlets (Fakazli 2020; Block and Haack 2021), as the main reason why esports continues to stay profitable despite restrictions on public gatherings. However, these accounts often overlook the many other cancelled esports events that were unable to make the transition.

This ethnography documents one of the situated sites of esports spectatorship that disappeared when Melbourne was plunged into lockdown in response to rising COVID-19 infections. Conclusions tied to the monetary success of esports during the pandemic are blind to what is lost when esports fans are unable to congregate at situated communal sites like GGEZ that enable like-minded enthusiasts to negotiate, establish, and enact conventions of authenticity. While it is tempting to think that the supposed placelessness of esports has solved the predicaments that spectator sports and other traditional media face when many physically situated events cannot be held, the suspension of situated spectating practices disrupts meaning-making processes that are fundamental to constructing what esports *is* and *ought to be*. This is an important consideration for other forms of seemingly placeless digital media, as well as traditional media spectacles like spectator sports and concerts which have turned to “placeless” modes of production as a way to persist during the pandemic (Buehler 2020). It is easy to be captivated with the media itself while overlooking the importance of what spectators do behind the screen.

We ultimately join others who have written on competitive videogaming (Law and Jarrett 2019) and beyond (Rogerson et al. 2017) in advocating for an understanding of enthusiast hobbies that does not characterise them as entirely digital or situated, but rather as inseparably extended across various interconnected domains. Particularly, in this study we have observed new ways in which the digital and material are bridged by groups of individuals through their efforts to authenticate. Whereas existing research has noted attempts to bring authenticity into digitised spaces by implementing functionalities that enable users to partake in rituals and behaviours similar to those of previously existing situated activities (Wu and Hsu 2018; McDougall 2015), this study has revealed ways in which a digitised activity has been brought out of a digital space into a material setting to be constructed and negotiated as authentic. In this way digitised activities and media can be shaped into a form that is familiar; one with a clear connection to a suitable historic past that its digital characteristics seemingly obscure. This provides an alternative perspective into how digital media and activities are authenticated and connected to the historic continuities maintained by society.

Such observations demonstrate the importance of group and individual efforts to authenticate in the bridging of the digital and material. Tierney (2014) notes that "meaning making is never precise," involving "approximation or a form of allowable band of interpretations." Such comments are particularly relevant now when authentic continuities are not necessarily clear; much contemporary digitised media exist as products of convergence sitting at the crossroads of various previously existing media (Jenkins 2005). People-driven meaning making processes stand to play important roles

moving into an increasingly digitised future, their imprecision allowing individuals to experiment with and negotiate suitable historic continuities to authenticate digitised media where a clear past may not be evident.

It is pessimistic to suggest that digitisation inherently creates an inauthentic condition. We instead posit that digitised activities and media perceived as inauthentic are those which have yet to be connected to a suitable historic past that is widely recognised and accepted. Such a point is important to consider in the context of this study. While patrons at GGEZ had authenticated their spectatorship of esports by constructing a connection to the historic past of traditional sports, these patrons represent a relatively small group of like-minded individuals. As evident from the ongoing debates in academic and news media discourses surrounding esports' contested status as a sport (Heere 2018; Parry 2019), not all accept the historic past of sport as a suitable and authentic continuity for esports. Nevertheless, such contentious debates are themselves part of the process of negotiating an authentic convention, highlighting the important role that meaning-making individuals and groups play in the authentication of an increasingly digitised life. The authenticity of esports and other products of digitisation will not be determined from their characteristics alone, but by the ways in which people construct and shape them around suitable historic pasts negotiated as authentic.

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