

# Understanding the experience of Australian eSports spectatorship

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the experience of physically attending a live eSports event in Australia. Although Australia has historically been relatively absent from globalised eSports, recent international interest has seen Australia host several major popular eSports events in 2017. To fully understand the appeal of these new prominent additions to the Australian eSports landscape, we must understand what characteristics constitute an Australian eSports event and how attendees experience it within the Australian cultural context. To achieve this, a case study and grounded theory-based approach was employed. 19 semi-structured interviews with attendees at two major Australian eSports events were conducted, observations of the events conducted by the researcher and video recorded of the online event streams. The four characteristics of entertainment, education, socialisation and active support, supported by 10 axial codes were found to constitute the experience of attending a live Australian eSports event in person.

## Keywords

eSports, Australia, spectatorship, support, physical, culture, experience

## INTRODUCTION

The small Polish city Katowice was little-known internationally until it hosted the Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) finals in 2013. Since then, it has continued to host the IEM finals alongside other eSports competitions, becoming known as the “European capital of eSports” (Gaudiosi, 2017). As a result, Katowice now hosts one of the world’s largest eSports event each year, putting Poland at the forefront of European and global eSports. South Korea is the quintessential example of how the embracing of eSports can benefit a country. ESports is now a part of mainstream South Korean culture and is supported directly by their government. With this support, the South Korean eSports market was worth around \$39.5 million in 2005, almost a decade before the current global eSports rise (Samsung Economic Research Institute, 2005; Jin, 2010). In 2016, the Chinese and Korean eSports market was worth \$106 million, 23 percent of the global market (Newzoo, 2016).

In the last decade eSports consumption has grown exponentially. No longer limited to small local tournaments with limited reach, eSports is now a globally spanning industry. The current globalised nature of eSports has led way for numerous international eSports circuits and tournaments (Carter et al., 2017). This has resulted in host cities benefiting from the perks of drawing in hundreds of traveling eSports spectators.

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However, Australia has not experienced these effects of globalised eSports. This is due to certain limitations unique to Australia. Carter et al. (2017) assert that Australia's geographic location has hampered its eSports growth due to poor latency. Furthermore, they state that a lack of eSports services and local tournaments in Australia compounds this issue. However, this situation has started to shift in the past year. Recently, international eSports organisations have started probing Australia as a potential market for eSports (van Boom, 2017; van Daal, 2017; Walker, 2017). In 2017, two large international eSports circuits, the Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) and the Overwatch World Cup (OWC) hosted events in Australia for the first time. Despite this recent interest in Australian eSports, the knowledge required to capitalise and support this movement is lacking.

Although eSports may be considered a globalised practice thanks to internet-connected technologies allowing play over great distances, studies have demonstrated how eSports development has diverged in differing countries (Jin, 2010; Stein & Scholz, 2016; Szablewicz, 2016). When a product enters a new market, it adapts itself to fit the market, rather than the contrary (Cavusgil et al., 1993; Yenyurt & Townsend, 2003). Bagchi et al. (2003) considers the adoption and implementation of information technologies to be strongly influenced by national culture. Therefore, to best support Australian eSports, we must start by understanding what motivates people to attend Australian eSports events and what kind of experience spectators have in the Australian cultural context. While little is known about Australian eSports spectatorship, it is undeniable that the watching and playing of sport is a quintessential and celebrated aspect of the Australian cultural identity (Stoddart, 1986; Cronin & Mayall, 2005; Melnick & Wann, 2011). Understanding the spectatorship of sports in Australia can shed light on the attitudes which Australians may approach eSports spectatorship with. Studies have also shown some similarities between eSports and conventional sports spectatorship motivations (Cheung & Huang, 2011; Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011).

To achieve this, the following research question will be explored:

RQ: What is the experience of a physically attended Australian eSports event?

The definition of a 'physically attended eSports event' was derived from Bale's (1998) work on spectating environments of soccer. The first environment is the physical location where the event is 'live', like stadiums. This environment is the focus of this study. The second environment consists of the private domestic locations, like homes. The third environment consists of public spaces where the event is watched remotely, like bars and sports clubs. Bale claims that these environments offer different spectating experiences, and therefore attracts different kinds of spectators for varying reasons.

## **METHODS AND APPROACH**

By exploring the experience of physically attended eSports events in Australia, the motivations behind attendance and spectatorship at these events were sought to be made salient. Thus, an interpretative stance was taken and a methodology based around case study approaches and grounded theory analysis was employed. To address such a research question revolving around the experience of individuals at an event, an interpretive stance was adopted to "understand the phenomenon within its natural setting and the human insight" (Halaweh, et al., 2008). This approach was informed by Halaweh et al.'s (2008) integration of Straussian grounded theory and case study research as a methodology. By combining a case study approach and grounded theory analysis with an

interpretive stance, a rich understanding of a previously sparsely researched topic was obtained without the manipulation or control of variables (Darke et al., 1998; Halaweh, et al., 2008). Furthermore, the study of multiple cases allowed for the examination of eSports experience at two separate events, allowing for cross case analysis and a greater degree of generalisation. This is was key, as physically attended eSports events are varied in terms of games they feature and organisational structure (Taylor, 2012). A Straussian approach to grounded theory was also appropriate because it employs existing literature to orientate the research process. When considering eSports as a remediation of broadcast sports, television and other predecessors (Bolter and Grusin, 1999; van Ditmarsch, 2013), reviewing literature of these areas helped establish starting points for new concepts to emerge.

Two major Australian eSports events in 2017 were attended by the researcher and served as cases. Data was collected from three sources, primarily through ethnographic data gathering methods: semi-structured interviews with attendees, personal observations of attending the events and video recordings of the event streamed live online. Firstly, the semi-structured interviews (n=19) were conducted to understand the attendees' reasons for attending the event, their expectations of it and their perception of the event. Participants were recruited at the events during breaks between matches when they would leave the stadium seating area and be free to participate in an interview. Interviewing commenced immediately after recruitment and lasted roughly 10-15 minutes, approximately the same duration as the breaks. Secondly, the observations of the event by the researcher were intended to detail how the events were staged and how spectators behaved. Thirdly, the online broadcast of each event was recorded for comparison with the ethnographic observations to identify how elements of the physically attended event were constructed to create a mediated broadcast text.

The Intel Extreme Masters: Sydney (IEM Sydney) and the Overwatch World Cup Sydney Qualifiers (OWC Sydney) were the two case events. IEM Sydney was a *Counter Strike: GO (CS:GO)* tournament organised by the world's largest eSports company, ESL, as a part of their international Intel Extreme Masters series. OWC Sydney was an *Overwatch* tournament hosted by the game's developers, Blizzard Entertainment as a preliminary qualifier for the Overwatch World Cup Finals in California. These events were chosen has they stood as landmark Australian eSports events, marking the first time the IEM and OWC series hosted a stage of their circuits in Australia. Furthermore, these events had among the highest turnout of attendees in Australian eSports history, with IEM Sydney brining in the most in Australian eSports history with 7000 attendees each day of the weekend-long event (ESLgaming, 2017). While official attendance numbers for OWC Sydney were not published, the venue which hosted the event advertises on their website that it is able to accommodate around 800 in the configuration used for the event, which took place over three days (Event Centre, 2017).

The interview consisted of six main questions, along with general demographics questions. These questions were designed to explore the interviewees' motivations for attending the event, their eSports consumption behaviour, their perceived experience of the event, their video game playing behaviour, their relationship with conventional sports and their thoughts on the Australian eSports scene.

Data analysis followed Straussian grounded theory analysis procedures, with data being coded while roughly adhering to three coding stages to help guide the analysis. Firstly, data was subjected to open coding, the "process of breaking down, examining,

comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Words, sentences and observations in the data that held insightful ideas were compared and placed into categories. Secondly, the relationship between categories was explored and connected in the axial coding stage. Thirdly, selective codes were drawn from by relating axial codes to each other. From here, the narrative of the key phenomena was developed and explained.

## FINDINGS

Through inductive data analysis, the experience of an Australian eSports event was characterised by four themes: education, entertainment, socialisation and active support. The following sections presents the characteristics and explores them in detail.

### Entertainment

Entertainment was one core characteristic that emerged through the analysis. “Engaging in fandom”, ‘excitement” and “game passion” were identified as axial codes of this theme. Table 1 outlines the open and axial codes which constitutes “entertainment”.

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
<b>Entertainment</b>	Meta-narratives	League follower Personally invested in players Team fandom Player fandom Contextualisation Dramatic Commentary
	Excitement	Thrilling content Strategic play Being in the crowd
	Game passion	Casual game player Watching high level play

**Table 1:** The construction of “entertainment”

#### *Meta-narratives*

The dramatic storylines that surrounded and emerged from the eSports events held entertainment value for interviewees. It is important to note that these narratives were not those found within the games themselves, but those that surrounded the events, leagues, teams and players. Hence, this axial code has been dubbed ‘meta-narratives’.

Those who were *league followers* closely monitored the previous stages of IEM and OWC, keeping track of the dominant teams, underdogs, rivalries and other conflict, piecing together each event into a timeline and constructing a narrative of the league. For example, Interviewee 4 stated that he particularly enjoyed following the underdog narratives and the drama that ensues when an underdog team beats a theoretically better opponent. For *league followers*, the Sydney IEM and OWC events were the next chapter in their league narratives. For those attending IEM Sydney, which was the grand finals for the circuit, the event acted as a conclusion to their league story. In a similar fashion, interviewees engaging in *team fandom* and *player fandom* constructed similar storylines based on previous performances of their favourite team or player respectively. Others were *personally invested in players*, following not only the narrative of their performance in eSports, but also of their personal lives. The construction of narratives was not solely performed by the interviewees. Constant *contextualisation* was present throughout auxiliary elements of the eSports matches. A prominent example was the introduction of teams with a short profile video outlining their previous performance, the events that shaped their play style, their motivations to win and even if they were considered underdogs. In this sense the profile videos offered pieces of background information for viewers to construct a narrative and create predispositions. Furthermore, narratives were also constructed during matches by the commentators. Commentators would often incorporate suspenseful foreshadowing and speculation and references to previous events to dramatize the matches.

### *Excitement*

The allure of an exciting experience was another attendance motivator among interviewees. The desire to watch *thrilling content* was a commonly reported theme. In this case, interviewees mainly sought to watch matches that were dramatic, emotionally arousing and unpredictable, regardless of the outcome of the match. For example, Interviewee 5 still enjoyed watching a close match that his team eventually lost:

“I mean it wasn’t the best seeing my team get knocked out, but the match was pretty intense, so I’m hoping for a really good grand final.”

Interviewees seemed particularly thrilled by *strategic play*, not only for unconventional techniques used to overcome established strategies, but also for how it changes the game’s “metagame<sup>1</sup>” from that point on. Others found excitement from *being in the crowd*. This was a major factor for those reporting this code that persuaded them to attend the event in person rather than watching remotely. By being in the crowd, interviewees felt they became caught up in the cheering and enthusiasm of those around them. Interviewee 16 remarked when describing the difference between watching eSports in crowd compared to watching from home:

“It’s a way better atmosphere, that’s pretty much I’d say the only difference is the atmosphere but it’s a pretty big difference, having a big atmosphere of people cheering and stuff like that. It’s just more hyped I guess, you get more involved.”

### *Game passion*

Almost all interviewees reported that the events were entertaining due to the passion they held for the games playing played. The majority of interviewees played the game showcased at each respective event non-professionally as *casual game players*. For these interviewees, simply watching a game they played as an eSport proved to be a novel experience and demonstrated a sense of video gaming being taken seriously. Interviewees

also enjoyed *watching the high level of play*, finding awe in the masterful performance of the professional players. Interviewee 12 described being impressed by the professionals executing actions and strategies that he and other non-professional players could not:

“There’s very few mistakes, and if there are mistakes generally they’re calculated. It’s really like watching a masterpiece. Basically, it’s just something that most people can’t do. That’s really why most people watch anything, right?”

## Education

Education was one core characteristic that emerged through the analysis. “Game knowledge” and “understanding the appeal” were the two axial codes of this theme. Table 2 outlines the open and axial codes which constitutes “education”.

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
Education	Building game knowledge	Learning through watching the professionals Strategic play Metric of skill Explanatory commentary
	Understanding the appeal	Gaining a first-hand account of broadcast eSports Being in the crowd

**Table 2:** The construction of “education”

### *Building game knowledge*

Building game knowledge to inform one’s own personal play was widely reported among interviewees attending the eSports events. This was most commonly achieved by watching the matches and *learning through watching the professionals* play. By watching play of a higher level of their own, interviewees sought to incorporate professionals’ techniques and skills into their own play to improve. Some interviewees looked more broadly beyond the professionals’ play, looking at the strategies being employed to understand the current competitive ‘metagame’ and observing how it’s challenged to improve one’s strategic play. Interviewee 7 stated:

“I like watching people find ways to beat their opponents. I love watching how the different metagames evolve in each game. The best thing is when someone figures out how to beat that with unexpected play and it kind of blows your mind. How did they even do that? And it just completely changes the game from that point on.”

Some interviewees also reported that they used the professionals’ technical play as a *metric of skill* to determine their own placement on the skill ladder. In Interviewee 2’s case, it was about seeing how much investment it takes to master the game:

“When you’re playing an eSport you gain an appreciation for how hard it is, and when you watch you get to see how much time you need to put into perfecting it.”

It appeared that the organisers of the events actively sought to teach viewers about the game through the use of *explanatory commentary* during matches to help describe skills and techniques to the viewer. This was most apparent during the Australia vs Sweden match at OWC Sydney. This match was not only streamed online but was also broadcast on an Australian free-to-air television channel. During this match the commentators shifted their focus away from complex aspects of the game, instead breaking down gameplay basics for the less experienced television audience and simplifying their language to rely less on jargon.

### *Understanding the appeal*

Beyond understanding the game, some interviewees attended to satisfy their curiosity of eSports events. Interviewees who had previously watched eSports reported attending to *gain a first-hand account of broadcast eSports* to compare the two viewing experiences and learn if they are distinct or comparable. Interviewees reporting this code mentioned wanting to experience aspects of the event that are only briefly experienced through the online broadcasts. For example, Interviewee 11 wanted to see if the other aspects of eSports events that are only briefly captured through broadcast enhance the experience, despite already having a ‘perfect’ viewing experience from home:

“Obviously you have a perfect view when you’re looking at your own computer at home. So I just wanted to know if it’s better to be there in person with everyone cheering, or is it cool that actually you can see the players or whatever, like that. I wanted to find out.”

For some interviewees, the crowd was their main curiosity. Most expressing this curiosity sought to understand what it was like *being in the crowd*. Interviewees reporting this code described the energy and enthusiasm of those around them in the crowd made them feel more excited and hyped, augmenting the experience. Interviewee 17 compared it to being at a concert:

“When you go to a concert you can feel the noise and feel the applaud and screaming and really, how do you say, you can interact and be affected by the other people.”

Interviewee 19 succinctly explained his desire to be in the crowd:

“When you’re online and you hear them talk about the crowds and how energetic and how like really exciting it is being here and you think ‘oh yeah, but you get the same experience online’ but you really don’t. Being out here is a completely different feeling than being sitting at home behind a computer screen.”

### **Socialisation**

Socialisation was one core characteristic that emerged through the analysis “Substantiating online relationships”, “strengthening bonds” and “making new friends” were identified as axial codes of this theme. Table 3. outlines the open and axial codes which constitutes “socialisation”.

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
<b>Socialisation</b>	Strengthening bonds	Meeting online gaming friends Bonding activity with friend(s) Physically engaging with members of the community
	Making new friends	Meeting like-minded people Finding others to play with Community areas

**Table 3:** The construction of “socialisation”

### *Strengthening bonds*

The eSports events provided the opportunity for interviewees to strengthen existing relationships. Interviewees who attended the event with at least one other person used it as a mutual experience to bond over. For interviewees who reported *bonding activity with friend(s)*, the other party attending with them played a pivotal role in their decision to attend. For some interviewees, the decision to attend was made in tandem with their friend, while others were alerted and brought to the event by their friend. In some cases, interviewees were *meeting online gaming friends* that they had formed relationships previously on video gaming and eSports platforms in person for the first time. Interviewees indicated that meeting their gaming friends in person substantiated their friendship, moving from a perceived lesser online relationship to an ordinary one situated in the physical world. In these cases, the eSports events offered a mutual excuse for online friends to meet up who would otherwise be unable to for logistical reasons. For example, Interviewee 12 reported that attending the OWC justified the cross-country flight from Perth to finally meet his online gaming friend living in Sydney. Others sought to *physically engage with members of the community* rather than specific individuals. Interviewees reporting this code claimed that because eSports is a practice situated predominately online, one often does not interact with other members of the eSports community due to the lack of needing local proximity to facilitate relationships and the varying levels of anonymity online communications affords. Interviewee 8 highlighted this by describing the lack of local eSports scene compared to conventional sports.:

“A lot of times in eSports when you play games you’re playing online and you don’t necessarily meet the other person on the other side. Traditionally you know you might, you know you can go into a local team sports in your area but online it’s different. You can’t really do a local thing here ... it’s very rare to get like a community of gamers and people who just come together. Everyone’s kind of online at home all the time in their own little zone. When they came here it’s surprising. It’s kind of like a fulfilling experience.”

### *Making new friends*

Outside of engaging in existing relationships, the eSports events provided an opportunity for attendees to make new friends. Some interviewees believed that *meeting like-minded people* would be easy at the eSports events, as those who would attend would likely have similar interests in eSports, video gaming and gaming culture. Some participants went beyond this, not only seeking to make new friends with like-minded people, but to also actively seek out new people to play competitive video games with. Interviewee 12 believed that those attending an eSports event would take the game more seriously than the average player, thus making them good gaming partners:

“You know typically the people who show up today play [the game] on like some form of level where they take it like quite seriously... everyone here is just purely here out of interest and nobody is here because they have to be or for any other reason really.”

At both events, but mostly at IEM Sydney, there were community areas which facilitated the gathering and socialisation of attendees. At IEM Sydney there was a designated ‘community area’ in the stadium that hosted activities and a community tournament that attendees could take part in and mingle with others.

### **Active Support**

Active support was one core characteristic that emerged through the analysis. “setting the precedent”, “experiencing sports-like activities and behaviours” and “engaging in fandom” were the three axial codes of this theme. Table 4. outlines the open and axial codes which constitutes “active support”.

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
<b>Active Support</b>	Setting the precedent	Showing evidence of an audience Not being passive Desire for localisation Testing Australian viability
	Experiencing sports-like activities and behaviours	Alternative/parallel to sports Patriotic outlet Understanding sports fandom
	Engaging in fandom	Personally invested in players Team Fandom Player Fandom Audience staging Merchandise

**Table 5:** The construction of “active support”

*Setting the precedent*

The desire to encourage the continuation of major eSports events occurring in Australia was a common attendance motivator for spectators at both events. The idea that these events were designed to *test Australian viability* for eSports resonated among the interviewees. Interviewee 8 stated that his future eSports viewing habits would hinge on:

“whether [the eSports companies] believe Australia was worthwhile coming to and whether that they might have another even on in Australia again or not.”

The main way this was expressed was through *showing evidence of an audience*. For example, Interviewee 18 remarked that his presence, along with all the other attendees, would constitute a large crowd and thus display to event organisers that there is a market for live eSports in Australia, therefore encouraging future events. This was further compounded by *not being passive*. The act of attending the events in person was perceived as a more involved and effective method of showing support for Australian eSports than viewing it remotely.

### *Experiencing sports-like activities and behaviours*

For some interviewees who had no interest in conventional sports, the eSports events provided an outlet to experience and participate in sports spectating practices in a way they were genuinely enthusiastic about. To these individuals, eSports was seen as an *alternative/parallel to sports* in the conventional sense. Rather than considering eSports as a separate phenomenon to conventional sports, eSports was interpreted by the interviewees as retaining most of the practices and norms of conventional sports, except with the competitive spectacle being a video game rather than a physically situated sport. In a similar vein, the eSports events functioned as a *patriotic outlet* for those uninterested in conventional sports. For Interviewee 14, attending the OWC to support Australia helped fulfil that desire that she felt was neglected through her disinterest in conventional sports:

“I know I’m not into conventional sports really and being able to support the country in something that I genuinely enjoy definitely helps.”

Additionally, the engagement in sports spectating practices in an eSports context helped non-fans of sports understand why people enjoy sports. Unlike *alternative/parallel to sports*, *understanding eSports fandom* encapsulated interviewees who were both uninterested in conventional sports and did not understand its entertainment appeal, but were able to gain an empathic understanding by engaging in eSports. Interviewee 7 stated that:

“For the longest time I didn’t get the point of [conventional sports] until I got into eSports. That’s when it clicked for me, when I could empathise with the people following their sports. What they love about sports is what I love about eSports”.

### *Engaging in fandom*

Most interviewees attending the eSports events were there to show support for a particular party. Typically, interviewees were engaged in *team fandom* to support a favourite team, or *player fandom* to support a favourite player. Some interviewees also reported engaging in both. Interviewees engaging in *team fandom* and *player fandom* reported that attending the eSports events to support their favourite team or player helped demonstrate their dedication as a fan, mirroring previous notions regarding physical attendance being perceived as a more substantial way to show support than remote viewing. On a deeper level, some interviewees were not only fans of certain players, but were *personally invested in players*. In this sense, they were attending the eSports events to support their favourite player on a personal level, rather than just based on their skill. Interviewee 4 stated that the stakes the player he followed had to lose and gain amplified his existing *player fandom*. The event organisers appeared to want to portray a sense of fandom among the crowd through *audience staging*. As previously mentioned, audience members were directed by staff to fill the centre of the seating, making the stadiums appear full. This is something observed by some interviewees, with Interviewee 18 suggesting that:

“they want to show you how many people are actually here to support.”

Furthermore, attendees were also given small Australian flags, signs and other props to cheer with by staff. While not given explicit instructions of how or when to use the props, the audience waved their flags and signs while cheering, particularly when the camera was pointed at the crowd. The audience members and their use of props were featured

prominently in the online broadcasts, portraying an enthusiastically fandom engaged audience. In this sense, the audience itself acted as a prop in the portrayal of fandom and spectacle for remote viewers. Additionally, team and league *merchandise* and apparel were available for purchase at both events, which were popular among attendees who sought to show their support for the team they followed. Individuals wearing game and team branded apparel were also prominently featured in the online broadcasts.

## DISCUSSION

### ESports events as a form of entertainment

Entertainment was a key characteristic identified by the findings. There were three primary forms of entertainment experienced by attendees. Firstly, spectators engaged in multiple forms of meta-narratives, ranging from those pieced together on a league level to dramatic narratives constructed by commentary during matches. This style of dramatization has been observed in sports spectatorship research. Byrö (2017) asserts that “the ability to promote the rivalry between the competitors is just as important as fast and accurate commentary.” He found that the vocabulary of experienced commentators was more evaluative and metaphorical than the vocabulary of inexperienced commentators. In the context of basketball, Morris and Nydahl (1985) identify the use historic, objective and interpretive information to accentuate points in the action and craft drama. In this sense, commentary doesn’t act as a filler of time, but rather as way to texture it (Morris & Nydahl, 1985; Rhodes et al., 2010). According to Ryan (1993), sports commentators must choose which potential plot points to highlight, thus shaping the formative narrative.

Excitement was another element that entertained attendees, with the eSports matches themselves providing much of it. Among interviewees there was a desire to watch games that were unpredictable, intense, close and employed the skillful dismantling of the other team’s strategy. Similarly, Cheung and Huang (2011) found that suspense was dominant spectatorship motivation among both eSports and sports spectators. They also found that suspense rose particularly from knowing tactical information the player does not, otherwise known as information asymmetry. In this sense, the foreshadowing of outcomes and the potential fulfilment or failure to fulfil them generates excitement.

Beyond the matches, attendees also found excitement by being in the crowd. Interviewees reported that the atmosphere in the crowd was ‘hype’ and ‘electric’, something that they hadn’t experience by watching eSports events remotely. By being in the crowd, interviewees felt that they too were more enthusiastic and responsive to dramatic elements of the matches. This phenomenon appears to be a case of emotional contagion. According to Barade (2002), emotional contagion can be described as “the transfer of moods among people in a group”. Essentially, it describes the conscious or unconscious synchronisation of one’s emotions to those expressed by individuals around them (Hatfield et al., 1993). Levenson (1996) and Doherty (1998) claim that emotional contagion stems from the innate human tendency of behavioural mimicry of others. Barade further explains that once an individual has mimicked a behaviour, they experience the emotions associated with it based on bodily reactions. Emotional contagion has also been applied in the context of sports, with Wann et al., (2008) suggesting that the communal nature of sporting events is an important attendance motivator as it reinforces group norms.

## **ESports events as an educational resource**

The findings also demonstrate that the eSports events acted as an educational experience for some interviewees. There were two primary subjects that interviewees sought to learn about by attending the eSports events: game knowledge to augment their personal play and understanding the appeal of attending an eSports event in person. In the former category, most of the learning was achieved through the observation professional play to use as a comparison of one's personal play or as a resource to learn techniques and strategies beyond one's skill level. Unsurprisingly, almost all interviewees were active players of the games featured at the eSports events. Comparable findings have been observed in previous eSports studies. For example, Lee and Schoenstedt (2011) found that skill building for actual play was a strong eSports spectatorship motivation when compared to conventional sports spectatorship. Based on their findings, they conclude that eSports spectators have a strong desire to stay competitive and skillful at playing eSports titles. By extension, their conclusion appears to suggest that eSports spectators are commonly also players of eSports titles, something which Rambusch et al. (2017) observes. Similarly, Seo and Jung (2013) assert that those who engage in eSports practices typically take on multiple roles ranging from playing, spectating and governing. While these prior studies do not make distinctions between remote and in-person spectatorship of eSports, the findings of this study appear to confirm their findings in the context of physically attended eSports events.

The explanatory commentary used during matches at the eSports events appears to reflect the events' self-awareness as a learning resource, with the style and complexity of it changing to suit the level of expertise of the audience as demonstrated during the televised Australia VS Sweden match at the OWC. Clearly, the eSports events were intended to have educational value regarding building game knowledge. Georgen, et al. (2015) write about a similar phenomenon during the Dota 2 International 4 where a separate "noob stream" catered for inexperienced spectators, using simplified language and detailed explanation of game basics. In essence, the teaching that occurs in eSports commentary provides a distant cognitive apprenticeship for spectators that can help them to learn expert skills and strategies that require a significant time investment to master alone (Collins et al., 1989; Georgen et al., 2015).

Attendees seemed curious of the auxiliary elements outside of gameplay that were captured on broadcasts but not prominently featured or able to be experienced fully. While watching professional gameplay is indeed a motivator for attendance, it was clearly not the sole reason. At both events, the feed of the matches in the stadiums and on streaming platforms were identical; those watching remotely would technically have the same viewing experience when watching the matches. In the context of conventional sports, researchers have written about the option of having a new viewing perspective by attending the event in person (Esbjörnsson et al., 2006). However, this is inapplicable in the context of eSports, as the "sports" used to facilitate competition are video games situated within computerised systems. In this sense, there is no way to watch the "playing field" of eSports unmediated with the bare eye; it must be captured using in-game interfaces as controlled by an individual to position virtual cameras and shift between players' perspectives. Rather, the results indicate that attendees were curious to discover and seek out the elements of live eSports that would enhance the spectatorship of eSports. Many wanted to know if the crowd, which they could hear and see cheering in eSports events watched online, was as exciting in person as it appeared.

## **ESports events as an opportunity for socialisation**

The eSports events offered an opportunity for socialisation among attendees. There were two primary forms of socialisation at the events: strengthening bonds with existing friends and making new friends. Bond strengthening appeared to be a crucial attendance motivator for some attendees who had attended the event with a friend and would have been reluctant to attend without them. For others, the events acted as a venue to meet people they would normally only interact with online, ranging from online gaming friends to like-minded strangers in the community. The events seemed to encourage these social interactions by providing community areas and competitions separate from the main event for attendees to collectively participate in.

Socialisation has been recorded as an important aspect of other forms of live sports that don't have an improved spectating experience by attending in person. For example, Esbjörnsson et al. (2006) notes that in rally racing, which can't be spectated in its entirety in person due to the size of the racecourse, socialising with like-minded fans sharing similar interests is desired among attendees and offers conversations to be had between action.

The presence of socialisation as a core characteristic of physically attended eSports experience appears to conflict with findings presented in prior work. Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) claim that eSports spectators find social interaction not important to their spectating experience despite the prevalence of social functions embedded in many platforms used to watch eSports. It is important to note that Hamari and Sjöblom's study focused spectating eSports on the internet. Therefore, it appears that physically attended eSports events are a significantly social event, while the remote viewing of eSports events is a solitary activity.

The use of the eSports events as a venue for socialisation may have some positive implications for the develop of eSports culture in Australia. Carter et al. (2017) claim that the stagnant growth of the local Australian eSports culture is partially caused by a lack of established local tournaments, which would bring together and nurture the local community. Indeed, it seems that the two eSports events used as subjects for this study are performing this role outlined by Carter et al. If future Australian eSports events continue to occur frequently and bring together the local eSports community, then the Australian eSports culture and industry could see sustained growth.

## **ESports events as a way to actively show support**

Active support is perhaps the one main characteristic of physically attended eSports experience that distinguishes it from remote eSports experiences. Through this characteristic, attendees sought to show support actively by getting involved by attending the event in person rather than passively watching it remotely. This ranged from encouraging future Australian eSports by demonstrating the existence of an audience for domestic eSports to the support of a favourite team. This was consistent throughout all forms of active support, suggesting that attendees believed that a physical presence shows stronger support than online viewership. It seems that the organisers of the events also hold these ideals, with resources being employed in both events in staging the audience to be closely packed together and supplied with cheering props like flags and signs to create the spectacle of a large and enthusiastic crowd. Similar examples of crowd staging has been observed in prior eSports studies.

Taylor (2012) recalls an emphasis made by the floor management of an eSports competition on shifting audience members to create the illusion of a division between fans and a larger crowd. Later studies like Szablewicz's (2016) work on live eSports spectacles in China show a comparable experience at a Chinese eSports tournament. In this case, Szablewicz argues that crowd manipulation was used to dispel the traditionally negative image of eSports in Chinese culture by portraying eSports as a healthy form of gaming, an "alternative to harmful Internet (wangluo<sup>2</sup>) games." In one experience, Szablewicz describes how the enthusiastic cheering crowd was only present during the opening and closing ceremony for the purpose of portraying a filled stadium of fans to those watching remotely. Through the manipulation of eSports crowds, the traditionally held assumption of video gaming being unhealthy and antisocial is reversed and presented as social and patriotic, thus becoming an ideological image of Chinese values, politics and nationalism. In this sense, Szablewicz claims that the physically attended 'live' event has become an event of representation, while the 'mediated' event that is viewed by those watching remotely has become an experience "directly lived."

Bestowing "liveness" on an event gives it a sense of "reality", which helps to mask its inherent mediation from remote viewers (Morris & Nydahl, 1983). Although based in reality, the director has control of our perspective and is able to use the technology at their disposal to piece together images and sounds of the event to establish new meaning and create a narrative. Bourdon (2000) states that "live really is not only about the technical performance, but also the spectorial belief." In essence, Bourdon argues that an event isn't "live" just because it is broadcast in real-time, but because of the numerous factors that signifies "liveness" to the spectator. These factors can range from paratexts surrounding an event like posters and advertising that orient spectators to be accepting of the event's liveness, to on-screen text stressing the event's live broadcast. Another key factor that helps construct the image of liveness is the candidness of participants on screen, or simply, the promise that they aren't acting. This doesn't just apply to football players on the field or politicians at the podium, but to all individuals captured on camera, including spectators (Bourdon, 2000). Spectators, among other participants, can be used to establish liveness of an event and convey messages. Whether a large crowd is present because of their fandom or because they were paid is irrelevant; the crowd is 'legitimate' to the remote viewer. In the case of the two subject eSports events of this study, the staging of the audience may have helped create active support for the event by portraying a large and enthusiastic crowd.

Experiencing sports-like activities and behaviours at the eSports events was evident in attendees who expressed little interest in conventional sport. This is particularly interesting in the context of Australia. Sports has unusually strong cultural significance in Australia when compared to other countries, stemming from the historic development of the Australian national identity. Mewett (1999) asserts that whereas other nations use sports as a vehicle to celebrate symbols of their nationhood, sports itself is intrinsic of Australian national identity. This was partially due to the eventual succession of Australian sporting teams over British teams in the nineteenth century (White, 1981). Once Australians began consistently winning championships over the motherland, a perception of "Britons" raised in Australia being superior to those raised in Britain propagated in the colonies and began to unite them in a sense of nationalism (Horton, 2000). This was amplified by the emphasis the British placed on encouraging the participation in sports in Australian colonies to further the progression of the British "race", which was seeing physical degradation in Brittan and the USA due to urbanisation (Mewett, 1999). Unlike the USA, Australia had not fought for its independence and

remain strongly tied Britain in terms of association and identity. This excellence in athleticism and sports became one way that Australians were able to separate themselves and have a distinct identity from the British while the country itself remained a thrall of the motherland, thus becoming a key element in the formation of the Australian national identity (Mewett, 1999). In this sense, the eSports events appear to offer an outlet for eSports fans with minimal interest in conventional sports to engage in Australian cultural practices that they normally may feel excluded from.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has shed light onto the experience of physically attending an eSports event in Australia. 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted with attendees at two major Australian eSports events in 2017 about their motivations for attending and their personal experience of the events. Observations of the events were also conducted by the researcher and used along with recordings of the events streamed online to supplement the interviews.

Four characteristics emerged to describe the experience of an Australian physically attended eSports event: entertainment, education, socialisation and active support. Entertainment demonstrated amusement the events provided to attendees through the engagement in meta-narratives, excitement and game passion. Education demonstrated how the events functioned as learning resources for casual players of the eSports titles and as an opportunity to experience the auxiliary aspects of eSports events that can't be felt remotely. Socialisation demonstrated how the events acted as venues which drew together scattered members of the Australian eSports community and provided a mutually interesting activity for existing friends to bond over. Active Support demonstrated that the events offered an opportunity for attendees to support the Australian eSports scene, their favourite team or player and experience sports-like activities and behaviours in a context they are genuinely interested in.

While this paper has explored eSports experience of physically attended Australian eSports events using the perspective and recall of event attendees. The work and motivations behind the organisational structure and planning of physical eSports events remains largely speculative. As such, future research may consider using this paper as a starting point to ask: what kind of experience do eSports event organisers want to create at physical events?

## **ENDNOTES:**

1 The 'metagame' is a term used by players to refer to the dynamic higher strategy that defines competitive gameplay beyond the basic rules of the game (Carter et al., 2012).

2 'Wangluo' is a Mandarin word that literally translates to internet or network. The word is used in the term 'wangluo youxi' to refer to online games, usually with a negative connotation (Szablewicz, 2016).

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