eSports Spectatorship in Australia

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This presentation reports on current and future trends in Australian eSports. The term 'eSports' refers to the treatment of multiplayer videogames as sporting events to be viewed, broadcasted, and engaged with by non-players in much the same way as traditional sporting experiences. Hamari and Sjöblom provide a more theoretically nuanced description: eSports are where "*the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces.*" (2015) Such technical descriptions are highly precise, but do not provide a viewpoint onto the significance of eSports as a cultural practice.

Over the last decade eSports has grown from minor and isolated local gaming tournaments into an international industry. This industry is expected to break the billion-dollar mark in the next 18 months with an estimated current viewership of between approximately 214 million (*Esports: The 2016 Report*, 2016) and 299 million (Warman, 2015) people. eSports obtains significant value from ticket sales, advertising, betting, and merchandise while also having many of the attributes of traditional sporting leagues, such as professional teams with co-branding and promotions of gaming equipment and paraphernalia. There are also significant prizes associated with victories in competitive leagues with, for instance, the prize pool for The International DOTA 2 2016 tournament was US$20 million. This was both the largest prize in eSports (Gies, 2016), and significantly, was funded through crowdsourcing (Green, 2016).

This, however, largely describes situations outside of the Australian context. Australia currently lacks a dedicated eSports service, channel, or broadcaster providing any real sense of the scope of eSports worldwide. The absence also creates problems for research methodologies as the lack of organisational structure for eSports in Australia means that there are few, if any, opportunities to identify Australian eSports athletes or to survey Australian eSports audiences. Limited data obtained from publicly-available tournaments suggests that there are likely to be hundreds of thousands of Australian spectators for international events. Yet these communities are largely invisible and are currently inadequately serviced by Australian commercial services.

The probable reasons behind this gap in Australian eSports gaming are due to a number of nationally-specific limitations. Firstly, the geographic location of Australia relative to the rest of the world has a significant impact on internet connection latency, creating lag for players and viewers during international competitions. This lag becomes increasingly significant during frenetic and high-speed games that are central to the eSports canon and effectively handicaps local players in international games. Secondly, the absence of a dedicated Australian service and the lack of established local tournaments means that there is no local space for the development of an

Australian specific eSports culture and eSports community to provide an adequate training environment for nurturing eSports athletes.

This presentation makes two contributions to emerging scholarship on Australian eSports. Firstly, it provides a series of estimates about the current size of eSports spectatorship in Australia and its growth potential. Secondly, the presentation reports back on a series of semi-structured interviews (n: 18) with eSports spectators from Australia, providing a typology of extant eSports spectatorship by categorising forms of interviewee experience, as 'fans', the 'players', or the 'recruits'. From this, we speculate on probable forms of spectator engagement that might be expected in the coming years.

On the basis of these observations, this presentation suggests that the creation of an Australian eSports environment with attention from both broadcasters and games developers would foster an Australian scene and related audiences for competitive gaming. This would foster the development of competitive eSports athletes who would be able to represent Australia in international eSports events. However, perhaps more importantly, it would provide a local nexus for spectatorship for the Australians who are interested or curious about eSports, yet currently lack a space for proper engagement.

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