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## WHY PLAY WHEN YOU CAN WATCH OR LISTEN? MULTI-MODAL ENGAGEMENTS IN DIGITAL GAMING

Mahli-Ann Butt  
University of Sydney

Dahlia Jovic  
University of Sydney

Ryan Stanton  
University of Sydney

Tom Paul Willma  
University of Sydney

### Panel Abstract

The past decade has seen a significant shift in gaming consumption practices. Although watching or spectating has always been a part of gaming - consider watching over someone's shoulder in an arcade (Kocurek, 2015; Taylor, 2012, pp. 183-184), or spending time at a friend's house as a teenager waiting for your turn on the game console (Thornham, 2011; Taylor, 2012, pp. 184-185) - it is only now that *spectatorship* of gaming, rather than gaming itself, has come to adopt an increasingly central and essential role in game culture and practice (Taylor, 2018; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019).

Watching or even listening to others gaming or discussing games has shifted from something done when one might like to play but presently cannot (as in the examples above) into something which is actively done *for its own sake*. There seems to be something about watching or listening to others playing, but not playing the games themselves, that appeals to many consumers. This however poses fundamental questions about the medium of games and the culture of gaming, especially given existing research's emphases upon the *interactive* nature of games being central to

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their appeal - and in turn, about how games relate to other forms of media, as various scholars such as T.L. Taylor (2012) and Brendan Keogh (2018) have since critiqued.

Taylor, for example, has argued for “a productive flip in games studies” to push back “on an overly simplistic model of engagement with computer games that places the hands-on-the-keyboard actor as the prime object of interest” (2012, p. 183). In making this change and encouraging more diverse and experimental research, we can not only enrich the field of knowledge for games studies, but also create a more welcoming scholarly community (Humpheys, 2019; Phillips, 2020). This stands in contrast to much of the prior work that has occurred in games studies which have often treated videogames as a “new cultural object” (Aarseth, 2001) – a focus which arguably stems from formative discipline ‘anxiety’ and the desire to distinguish games studies as a separate field, as opposed to critically challenging the mediums links to existing fields and disciplines (Phillips, 2020) The unfortunate side effect of this however, is that it works to centralize the texts of games themselves, and relegate other topics of study to the periphery of games and play, something which has been challenged in recent years.

In addition to Taylor’s “productive flip,” Consalvo (2017) writes about the need for research that focuses on centring what have historically been considered paratexts. Indeed, recent years have shown a range of these paratexts taking centre stage, be that through the success of *Twitch* streaming, the rise of *Actual Play*, or cross-media content which stands distinct from the games which spawned them like Riot’s *Arcane*. Following these non-game elements and components of wider gaming culture and practice is thus important, not only for strengthening the ties between games studies and other media disciplines, but also in order to challenge some of the harmful narratives that games culture has propagated. In broadening the research, we can not only challenge the centrality of games as the core of games studies, but also the limited, and often exclusionary boundaries that gaming culture often carries with it as baggage.

To explore these questions this panel presents findings from four ongoing research projects into game spectatorship, via four of the most popular ways consumers interact with games or around games, without the actual play of games themselves. These are watching games content on video sharing websites like *YouTube*, viewing esports (competitive and often professionalised gaming) contests, listening to games podcasts, and enjoying the associated musical texts tied to computer games. It is our hope that in highlighting these aspects of games spectatorship, we can not only provide some insight into the ways these industries reflect broader trends in online industries, but also – in whatever small capacity we can – highlight the ability for games studies to theorise beyond the canon in its research. In turn, these are elements of gaming rarely addressed by scholars of games or internet research, and offer us a number of interesting new directions for understanding what game-players are doing online when not actually *playing* games.

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## **Building the Ultimate Battlestation: The Production and Consumption of Gaming Setup Videos on YouTube**

Dahlia Jovic  
University of Sydney

Multi-modal engagements in digital gaming, including spectatorship, extend beyond gameplay and encompass a broad range of gaming consumption practices. The possibility to share and learn about one's gaming interests and habits (such as 'Let's Play' videos on *YouTube* or streaming on *Twitch*) has been enabled by the proliferation of digital media platforms (Burgess, 2013), as well as the domestication of gaming hardware (Nichols, 2013). One significant but rarely addressed gaming consumption practice is that of creating and watching gaming 'setup' content on the Internet. In gaming setup videos on *YouTube* (Figures 1 & 2), which this paper addresses, players and gaming enthusiasts create and consume content about their hardware, peripherals, and surrounding environment.

From modest desks that contain a single laptop tucked away in a bedroom corner, to dedicated RGB-lit caverns that resemble esports stages, the spectacle of players'

gaming assemblages (Carter, Nansen & Gibbs, 2014; Taylor, 2009) is put on display for everyone to see and appreciate in these viral videos. Players and fans take centre-stage and invite the anonymous public (Ruberg & Lark, 2021) to view their otherwise private 'battlestations' (another term for gaming setup). Producing or consuming such content seems at first glance likely to be a niche activity, yet these undeniably popular media items command millions of fans (Jenkins, 2009), and are entangled with important concepts of gamer self-identity and self-branding (Senft, 2013).



Figure 1. Screenshot from randomfrankp's video 'Room Tour Project 234 - BEST Desk & Gaming Setups!'. Image source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIQSM6G\\_6Vw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIQSM6G_6Vw)

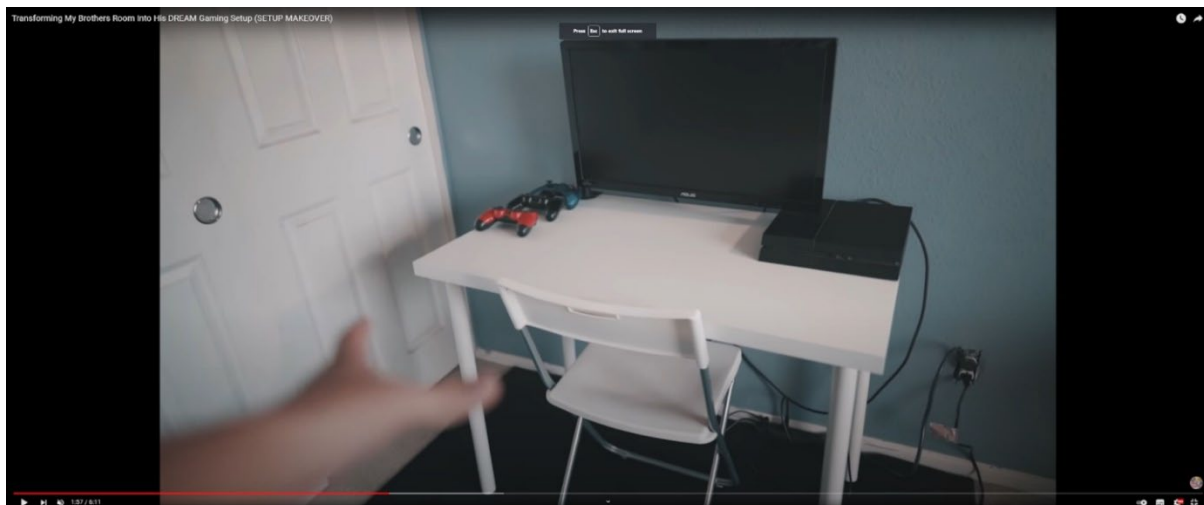


Figure 2. Screenshot from Dairy's video 'Transforming My Brothers Room Into His DREAM Gaming Setup (SETUP MAKEOVER)'. Image source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfdJ-6YAXuc>

This paper will present the findings of a research project undertaken in 2021 that looked at the production, consumption, and circulation of gaming setup videos in the specific context of *YouTube*. The project was guided by two central aims: to explore the performance of gaming social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Consalvo, 2007)

through the online representation of (and discussions about) players' setups, and to investigate player attitudes towards (and tastes in) the functional and aesthetic aspects of gaming hardware and spaces (Figures 3-5).

A content analysis of the top 50 gaming setup videos and the top 10 comments for each video was conducted on *YouTube*. Content creation practices surrounding gaming material culture were apparent on various social and digital media sites (e.g., the *r/battlestations subreddit*, the *killergamingsetups* community on *Instagram*, and the *GamingRoom Setup and Layout* group on *Facebook*), however *YouTube* was selected due to the platform's popularity among gamers (Hjorth & Richardson, 2014, pp. 148-149), its low technical barriers to participation and creative expression (Jenkins, 2009, pp. 12), and its focus on mundane, amateur, and DIY content (Burgess, 2013, pp. 1-2, 5).

The study drew on interdisciplinary research in the areas of platform studies (e.g. Apperley & Parikka 2018), computer culture (e.g. Simon, 2007), domestic media ecologies (e.g. Carter et al., 2014), the player-technology relationship (e.g. Luo & Johnson, 2020), and *YouTube* (e.g. Burgess, 2013) to form a comprehensive picture of how gaming material culture functions in online and social contexts. Pierre Bourdieu's influential theory of capital (1986) was applied as a frame to explore how the three interrelated forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social) occur via the symbolic exchanges of content producers (those who made the videos) and content consumers (those who commented on them).



Figure 3. Screenshot from NoisyButters' video 'GAMING SETUP / OFFICE TOUR 2020 | NoisyButters'. Image source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcC2j2ZsQb0>



Figure 4. Screenshot from DIY Tatay Dan's video 'DIY LOFT BED W/ GAMING AREA'. Image source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzrBs869XBs&t=360s>

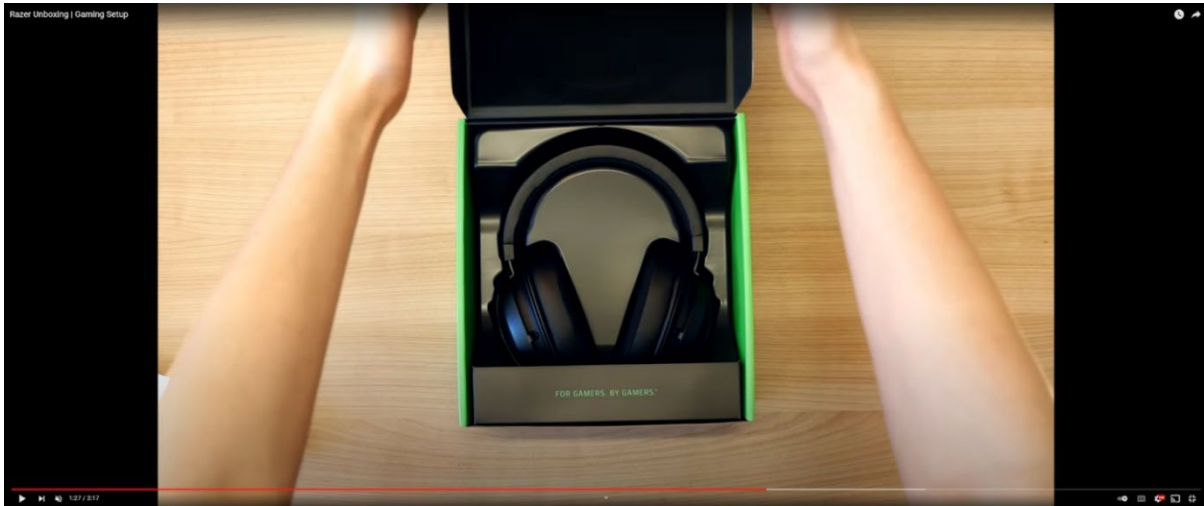


Figure 5. Screenshot from Razer's video 'Razer Unboxing | Gaming Setup'. Image source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6M4BzzKVbE>

Videos and comments showed that players – who were often well-versed in tech-speak (Luo & Johnson, 2020) and who engaged in identity management (Senft, 2013) – made extensive use of *YouTube's* social and technical affordances to share highly specific information about their gaming setups and setup practices. They emphasised both functional (use) and aesthetic (design) aspects (Gibbs, Carter & Nansen, 2017) of their setups. This included product details, specifications, price, worth, comfort, ergonomics, presentation, customisation, colour coordination, and lighting (RGB and LED).

Participants invested significant time, energy, and wealth into their setups; they attained (and in many cases already had pre-existing) cultural, social, and economic capital in doing so (Bourdieu, 1986). Content producers, for example, had to be familiar with the socio-cultural norms and conventions of what being a gamer means in order to make

successful and informative videos (cultural capital). Content creators with higher view and subscriber counts were also far more likely to receive viewer engagements (social capital), as well as monetary opportunities in the form of paid product placements, affiliations, and sponsorships with gaming and hardware brands (economic capital).

Despite the introductory nature of this research, the data captured gives significant and novel insights into the private and intimate, yet undeniably public, displays of these players' domestic gaming spaces. If we are to attain a fuller picture of multi-modal engagements in digital gaming beyond gameplay itself, future research into gaming material culture and the content creation practices that surround it will be needed. What is clear is that the gaming community's dedication to these videos, and the mass spectatorship they encourage, calls for the same level of attention that other, more well-known gaming practices have received.

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### **‘Sculling Shoey’s’ at eSports: Nationalism, Masculinity, and Performative Assemblies**

Mahli-Ann Butt  
University of Sydney

Sociological research on eSports and gender has emerged alongside the rapid growth of the eSports industry in the past decade. Scholars such as T. L. Taylor and Emma Witowski have identified that the social complexities of ‘doing eSports and doing gender’ (Witowski, 2018, p. 186) have informed the precarious positions and doggedly reinforced the exclusion of women in eSports (Taylor, 2012, pp. 121-128). This paper contributes to feminist game studies, media studies, and internet studies on gender and eSports by investigating the embodied alcohol consumption, spectatorship practices, and expressions of masculinity and nationalism that can be present at such events - specifically in this case at the Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) 2017 Sydney tournament. Since alcohol consumption is a heavily gendered and performative social practice (Riches, 2016), studying the drinking culture at eSports arenas offers another way to understand gendered productions and exclusion in these shared spaces. The drunk spaces occupied and created relative to gaming, constitute an easily overlooked area of inquiry when game research becomes bounded by the central investigation of play, players, and the creation of play. In order to develop a better understanding of the drinking cultures of gaming culture, this paper argues that game and cultural researchers must historicise and attend the ‘peripheral’ fields beyond (and related to but not superseded by) videogames themselves.

This research draws from 30 months of digital ethnography, attending over 30 ‘drunk spaces’ and social events related to videogames and gaming through public, social, professional, and industry scenes. It comprises a patchwork of field photography, fieldnotes, unstructured interviews, and informal conversations in situ, supplemented by digital media archival and memory work to help later recall or retrieve additional details, representing gaming as a scenic life. A mobile phone was used for “jotting notes” during observations to later “act as trigger material and assist recalling events that happened” (Riches & Parry, 2020, p. 651). Using the phone’s built-in camera also afforded the



opportunity for events to be recorded “in multiple modalities” (Yin, 2011, p. 161). This paper presents an in-depth site analysis of the drunk space of IEM 2017 global championship of *CounterStrike: Global Offensive* at the Qudos Bank Arena.

The analysis draws from game studies and critical drug studies, combined with a theoretical framework taken from Judith Butler’s understandings of gender and identity as a social construct, social assemblies as performative, and precarity as embodied (2015). At ‘offline’ professionalised videogame public, industry, and academic social events, a dominant drinking culture at the heart of these gaming cultures can pressure attendees to drink alcohol to mark and generate the co-presence of participants. In-groups are affirmed through a performative assembly enacted in the embodied communal consumption of alcohol. In turn, drinking practices work to reaffirm people’s capacities to feel unsafe, precarious, and alienated, or feel belonging, safe, and included. Through the performative assembly of ‘becoming-drunk’ together (Ferrer-Best, 2018), the communal consumption of alcohol continues to drive an embodied wedge between those who are seen to be ‘included’, people (particularly young men) who conform to (implicitly masculine) drinking practices, and those who are ‘not included’ (everyone else).

Within the emerging eSports spectatorship scene, the valorisation and celebration of excessive drinking is part of an embodied masculine ‘Gamer’ identity that takes noticeable influence from the drunken antics traditionally associated with football fans’ “hooliganism” (King, 1997). Like football fans at games, male fans at eSport tournaments have created imaginary masculine and national boundaries by which they have affirmed their identities (Ibid., p. 576), producing a social understanding of what it means to be recognised in this scene as young Australian ‘Gamer’ men. Exemplified in the repeated chanting of “Aussie! Oi!” and drinking ‘shoey’s – taking up this sporting success cliché (it’s the winner who drinks from a shoe) and how it alludes to drunken sports fandom and thus alludes to sports hooliganism – eSport fans construct and embody an imagined category of ‘jock’ sports culture as ‘Gamers’.



Figure 1: A young fan doing a 'shoey' at IEM 2017 while the crowd cheers on. Image sourced from <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2021/01/iem-melbourne-returns-for-2021-but-its-be-online-only/>

The Gamer identity, as a form of what Celia Pearce terms “fictive ethnicity,” is an identity adopted around an imaginary homeland (2008, p. 162). The presence of flags, national colours, and stereotypical nationalist signifiers (such as cork hats) symbolically work to represent eSport fans as a nation. Chanting “Aussie! Oi!” united the polyphony of fans’ ceremonial orations as a church choir vocalising in harmony. The performative act of ‘sculling’ (Australian slang for quickly finishing a beer in a single draught) a shoey manifests an image of youthful Australian masculinity that can be easily recognised and reproduced by other college and university aged men. These symbolic icons and drinking practices provide overtly identifiable scripts that young men can perform to demonstrate their loyalty to the fandom and brotherhood.



Figure 2: Australian team Renegades doing shoey at ESL One Cologne Grand Finals 2017: “We’re going to do a little demonstration now. Boys, you know how it’s done. Alright fellas, let’s share the shoey sequence – three, two, one.” Screenshot taken at 00:18 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHSLbdcKWJo>

Such fans are also specially primed to defend their community (Mortensen, 2018, p. 798) against anticipated claims that eSports are trivial or lesser or ‘not legitimate’ sports. The imagined transgression of the jock/geeks distinction also represents this anxiety about eSports not being seen as a ‘real sport’ that can affirm men’s masculinity as other sports do. Like the internet itself (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 8), excessive drinking practices in eSports arenas provide a shared space for young geeky men to affirm their masculinity and manhood through performative aggression without the need for the physical attributes aligned with images of corporeal male power (Taylor, 2012, p. 116). However, in resisting this jock/geek distinction, the IEM attendees only seemed to work to further reinforce the hegemonic masculine ‘Gamer’ identity when they could have challenged it.

Gaming cultures and drinking cultures are entwined in many people’s everyday social lives (cf. Sotamaa & Stenros, 2016; Ferrer-Best, 2018). Research must pay greater attention to the continuities between games and culture and how overlapping cultural practices such as drinking can shape people’s sense of belonging in gaming and those drinking social scenes. How the sports stadium becomes socio-culturally coded as a ‘jock domain’ is key to building a complex understanding of fans’ drunken behaviours and performative masculine drinking practices at IEM 2017. Consequently, the (e)Sports arena’s drunk space reproduces the imagined tensions between the Gamer as geek/nerd and jock masculinities and demarcating boundaries of belonging and exclusion.

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## **Playing with Podcasts: Gaming Podcasts and New Media Production Processes**

Ryan Stanton  
University of Sydney

This paper will present findings from ongoing interviews and qualitative research investigating gaming podcasts as a new media industry, and one whose content and output game-players are increasingly consuming. Caught at the intersection between the industries of podcasting and gaming content creation, gaming podcasts represent an exciting new field to study which can highlight both the ways online creators are attempting to forge new paradigms of work, and struggle to escape the influence of the corporate or platform powers which are attempting to colonize and formalize these new media industries.

Gaming podcasts are a growing medium, with over 24,000 different shows present in the Games or Video Games categories on Apple Podcasts (Misener, 2021) – this actually represents the largest subcategory in the platform’s leisure section. The gaming podcast industry is also one which has attracted a variety of creators from different media industries, gender and sexual identities and socio-economic backgrounds. This is unsurprising considering both podcasting and gaming content creation have been viewed as like “the wild west” or “the gold rush” respectively (Quirk, 2015, Johnson & Woodcock, 2019).

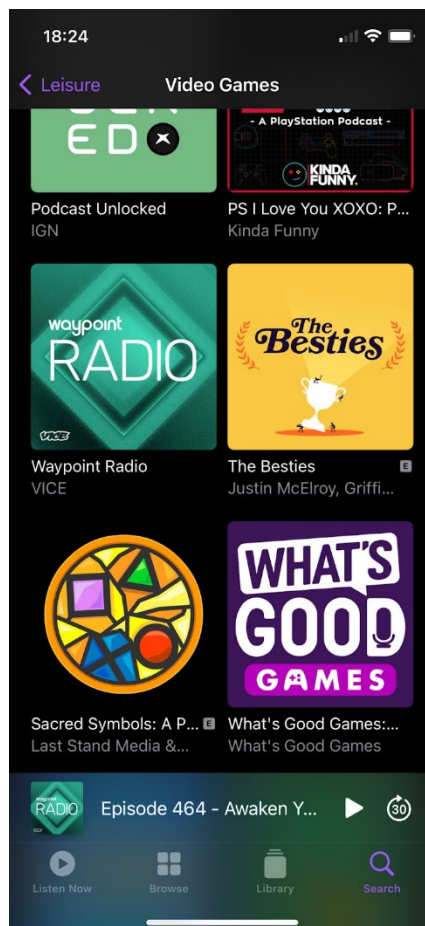


Figure 1: A screenshot of the Video Games category on Apple Podcasts, featuring various shows highlighted by Apple.

The use of colonial metaphors here is particularly interesting considering both the theme of this conference, and the perspective that many creators have about these industries being meritocratic ones where hardworking creators are rewarded in proportion to their labour (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019, pp. 344-345; Sullivan, 2018, pp. 47-48). As a result, gaming podcasts can function as a helpful case study to shed light on the ways new media industries interact with traditional capitalistic structures or neoliberal ideas - structures and ideas which are themselves a product of colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, pp. xii-xiv).

Key to this analysis is an understanding of the relationships between creators and the large platform powers which these industries are often reliant on. Podcasting, for example, has its origins in the technology of RSS feeds - a technology which has been noted to serve as one which resists the closed systems of other technologies (Hansen, 2021). As time has progressed however, platforms such as Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Stitcher have become the most prominent way that listeners find shows, a move which has further consolidated the power of these platforms. Similarly, gaming content creators are reliant on platforms like Twitch or YouTube to reach their audiences (Kopf, 2020).

As a result, we can see tensions emerging between the open and free ideal of these industries and the increasing power of the digital colonialists who are formalizing them. In Quirk's research (2015) it is noted that the "wild west" age of podcasting seems to have passed. Have industries like this been successfully colonized by traditional powers, or are they still a site for new modes of production or thought?

This research uses a mixed methods qualitative approach which consists of three main research methods: interviews with gaming podcast creators, textual analysis of gaming podcast episodes, and surveys of gaming podcast listeners. Creators and podcasts chosen for interviews and analysis were selected after comparing their suitability to a variety of criteria including: show format or style, creator's previous work background, creator demographics, and the success level of the show. Using these criteria as determinants seeks to strike a balance between a wide variety of representative cases have been selected in a way which will allow the findings here to be used to encourage similar research in related new media industries, as well as in more situated and contextual circumstances.

Interviews with creators explore a variety of topics, including their relationships with fans and platforms, their history as a creator, and the production process for their show - including the ways that fans, platforms and individual motivations influence the final result. In discussing and highlighting these aspects, this paper will provide some insights into the ways - both explicit and implicit - that the industries of gaming content creation and podcasting have succeeded or failed in creating an industry distinct from the platform capitalism or digital colonialism that is increasingly pervading the online world, as well as highlighting.

Beyond the digital colonialism, this research also touches on real world inequalities that can be traced back to historical settler colonialism. It is often noted that traditional media has faced difficulties in representing minorities who have historically been discriminated

against as a result of capitalist and colonialist attitudes - which is just one of the many ways that this discrimination is perpetuated in modern society. Indeed, the gaming industry has been viewed as having an outright hostile attitude to anybody who does not fit the perceived norm of the straight white male gamer, as exemplified in the #Gamergate harassment campaign (Dowling, Goetz & Lanthrop, 2020). Similarly, it has been noted that minority voices are often sidelined or marginalized in histories of podcasting, despite their noteworthy contributions (Florini & Barner, 2021). This contrasts with the perceived meritocratic nature of the gaming content creation and podcast industries. Despite the claims that hard work is all that is required for success, these voices have to work harder than others. As a result, this research has explicitly sought out voices from marginalized communities and engaged with them on this matter, the results of which will be included in the paper. This is an important issue to engage with considering that this is just one of the myriad of forms of gaming spectatorship which gaming communities are interacting with.

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## **When Game Music Tops Charts: How K/DA Reframes Game Music and Virtual Musicians**

Tom Paul Willma  
University of Sydney

From the socially charged performances of Damon Albarn's Gorillaz to the cheery imagination of Youtube's Kasune AI, our modern age sees music becoming co-produced (Lin et. al, 2020) and presented (Yamada, 2017) by 'virtual musicians'. These are musicians who either in production or representation are framed through the navigations of autonomous, digital performing agents. Such virtual musical voices are quickly becoming the "who' of our post-theological era" (Dyson, Malina & Cubbit, 2014, p. 69), readily navigating global cultural systems and inviting new perspectives on cultural discourse. One such example is K/DA, a virtual K-pop girl group where musicians pose as characters from the online videogame *League of Legends* (LoL) (Riot Games, 2009). Since their debut in 2018, K/DA's multi-lingual, mixed-reality performances (see Figure 1.) have achieved international acclaim with several tracks reaching the number one spot on the US World Digital Song Sales chart (Benjamin, 2018). However, despite their international reception and critical success, current ludomusical literature has been unable to address these new mixed-reality navigations since they lie beyond the usual paradigm of game music being embedded within gameplay. The following paper therefore aims to address this opening by reframing how player interactivity materialises within the music and performance practices of K/DA. It does so by discussing how K/DA promotes audience interaction with LoL's cultural ecosystem rather than its gameplay, arguing that the virtual band foregrounds cultural discourse through its gendered and techno-sensationalist music and performance practices. Furthermore, in doing so this paper also aims to expand the reach of ludomusicology, demonstrating that virtual musicians may navigate hybrid-cultural understandings through the affordances of game music when viewed through this reframed perspective.





Figure 1: Screenshot of K/DA singer Soyeon (Left) and her virtual double, Akali (Right), performing POP/STARS (2018) through augmented reality on stage at the 2018 League of Legends World Championships. Screenshot captured at 02:09 from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9oDivOV3qs&ab\\_channel=LeagueofLegends](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9oDivOV3qs&ab_channel=LeagueofLegends)

While much research has already been conducted into both the role of music in games and the navigations of virtual musicians, we find that there remain two major openings within the literature. The first is that ludomusicology often fails to acknowledge the role of game relevant music which appears outside of the context of gameplay. Whether the music facilitates interactive gameplay elements (Liebe, 2012) or drives narrative development (Wood, 2009), the role of music in games is often framed by ludomusicologists through these mechanisms of gameplay (Moorman, 2013). By addressing this paradigm through an analysis of K/DA and the music of Riot Games, this paper therefore presents an alternative position, where game music runs parallel to gameplay and interaction results from the audience's immersion in the games' cultural ecosystem, rather than its play experience. By reframing the paradigm as such, the music of Riot Games therefore invites new insight into the considerations of game music and the navigations of virtual musicians. It also encourages us to ask and explore who consumes such content, and why.

The second opening addressed by this paper can be seen through its expansion of contemporary discussions on virtual musicians. Currently, there is a large discrepancy in the literature concerning the cultural navigations of virtual musicians. From Yamada (2017) who conducted a case study into the artist-audience relationships of Supercell - a Vocaloid album featuring the voice of Hatsune Miku - to Lam (2016), Zaborowski (2018) and Matsune (2017), who all similarly discuss the audience-artist negotiations of Hatsune Miku; we readily observe that much of the relevant literature concerning the

cultural navigations of virtual musicians is centered around ideas of Japanese modernity, and more specifically, around the Vocaloid brand. By applying this research base to the mixed nationality navigations of K/DA, this paper also aims to demonstrate how the affordances of game music may further facilitate the practices of virtual musical celebrities. Virtual musicians are already an interesting topic for internet research, but through their intersection with games and gaming culture, they pose questions about music consumption more generally as a gaming-adjacent activity.

To achieve these aims, this paper begins with a literature review focusing on two dimensions: the gendered navigations of virtual musicians and the shared theme of techno-sensationalism between both E-sports and K-pop. Through the former, this paper continues by discussing how the gendered performance practices of K/DA, similar to other contemporary virtual musical celebrities, foreground the cultural discourse surrounding the game and its brand. Particularly, in the instance of this case-study, where K/DA's performative signifiers of sexuality as empowerment are misrepresented due to its context alongside the 2018 Riot Games sexual harassment lawsuit (Liao, 2021). Through the latter, this paper continues by arguing that both E-sports and K-pop share a common core aesthetic, in that stakeholders of both seek to portray themselves as either technological frontrunners or as "cultural icon(s) of novelty and trendiness" (Kim, 2018, p.133). To discuss these cultural negotiations, this paper provides an analysis of K/DA's performance practices and musical signifiers, asserting that by foregrounding these cultural navigations, K/DA reframes the audience's experience of musical interaction, using the medium as a means to navigate hybrid, international cultural understandings. In doing so, this paper demonstrates that beyond gameplay experience, the cultural negotiations of virtual musicians invite a new and innovative modality for player engagement.

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