Esports at the Margins of the Commonwealth Games: Organisational Philosophy, Equity Pipelines, and National Representation

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ABSTRACT

It is August 2022 and the Commonwealth Esports Championship (CEC) Women's Rocket League (RL) bronze match is unfolding between Australia and Canada. Sitting in our respective homes around midnight (AEST), we both find ourselves yelling at our screens. Neither of us play RL, nor knew of these players prior to this week, but shouts of "C'mon Morgie!" and "Jelly-yyyyy!" filled the room. The Twitch livestream of the Global Esports Federation (GEF)–the CEC tournament organiser–, which hosted the finals broadcast, never rose over three-figure viewership, nor was the chat fast and furious, but the community spectacle was flooded with curious comments about esports by newcomers (parents, friends, other esports-code players), insider pep, nationhood reveals, and quickly managed (by community) or moderated (by administrators) prejudiced remarks on women in esports. Esports tournament culture at the CEC produced a different feel to existing elite level esports spaces of similar institutional magnitude. As observers, we watched livestreams of nation-region based qualification rounds and one week of CEC tournament play, followed by player-staff interviews after the event.

This study explores one small slice of participation, production, and organisation of esports under major to mega-sports event frameworks and national to international esports associational stewardship. As a qualitative study observing individual to institutional practices in esports, we follow the rise of the inaugural Commonwealth Games esports event from the standpoint of Oceanic region representatives as they manoeuvre from community to elite level tournaments, through developmental

pipelines, and across various forms of esports governance. While esports is 'at the margins' of the Commonwealth Games as a non-medal[1] event, the emerging processes and dynamics traversing individuals, community-group interactions, and institutions (some established in government, some emerging as non-profit organisations with and without funding) presents a historic look at the state of esports outside of 'traditional' commercial organisation, and alongside or adjacent to traditional sports. This study speaks to the historical present of esports, where contextualised interdependencies matter to the state of CEC play, a marginal(ised) esports event (Denzin 2012). Several themes were produced through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), drawing on our observations, secondary document analysis, and interviews with participants who attended or organised the event throughout 2022. This paper will address two central themes to this inaugural event and 'first-time' production and experience of esports adjacent to the Commonwealth Games: (1) organisational philosophies and how they relate to equity pipelines and (2) national representation.

The various systems of participation players encountered on their journey towards the CEC revealed notable forms of community support, volunteerism, and action ("*more* 'civilized'" esports, but not "civilized *tout court*" - original emphasis, Dunning 1997, 481). There were opportunities for individual growth through intentional coaching, but also disincentivizing experiences which impinged on entry level to elite-level involvement into this debut event space (monetary, misalignment of values, fear of public presence). The distinct institutional philosophies of involved organisations (which ranged from volunteer-based and discursive planning to federally recognised as a national sporting organisation with a public strategic plan) and their public/private interactions and interpretations on the role of esports in society features throughout the study as a mirror on how esports, as nation-wide 'sporting' leisure, is taken seriously, or rather produced with serious intentions and outcomes. This theme discusses issues of recruitment, player retention in minor/finer regions, 'teaching'/coaching, gendered pipelines in esports, and distinctions in participatory values in esports.

The organisation of the CEC event meant that players were recruited to represent their country rather than play for a commercial team, wage, or substantial prize pools. Though, this 'side event' to the Commonwealth Games was distinct from both esports and sports mega events. For example, Turtiainen et al. have noted that "Nationalism is not generally as strongly present in the world of eSports [sic]… It is, however, a common feature in traditional sports" (2020, 364). It should be noted that the World Cyber Games (est. 2000) is a nation-based esports tournament, however national representation does not equal strongly present nationalism in esports. The CEC event, and the players, shifted the narrative from high status monetary prizes and private sponsorship valued in esports worlds towards respectful community connections which occurred alongside of national representation. Flags and uniforms were adorned on the main stage and on the streets of Birmingham as something to bond over, national anthems were sung by teams, and players were recognised and celebrated by sports fans through their country uniform. The materials representing nationality set the foundation for bonding and the expression of having community, an entry point to participate (Billig 1995). Yet, national representation in esports worlds is more complicated than the face-value presentation of uniforms, anthems, and fingernails painted in country colours: This specific and non-continuous team involvement is also complicated by who 'took up the call' to represent their country as tier-2 squads. Even unpractised players dominated the scene. And yet, nationalities that typically stand at the margins of esports were able to take up space, giving teams from New Zealand and Malaysia, for instance, a chance to win medals and benefit from established sporting capital. This theme addresses what national team representation in esports at a mega-event means for participants and associations, experiential information absent from national government body decision making materials on esports support.

Our study contributes to game cultures research with considerations on the impact of the CEC on esports ecosystems, both established and emerging, on the state of participation and equitable involvement in the sport of videogames. The CEC event front-staged (cis and trans) women and a broader scope of esports nationhood across tournament spaces. This process-oriented study offers a vantage point to see the emerging forms of social organisation surrounding esports in society.

Endnotes

1. Gold, silver, and bronze medals were awarded to placing teams, though these did not contribute to their nation's overall Commonwealth Games tally.

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