Exploring constructions of situated esports aesthetics within and outside gameplay in a Nordic context

Matilda Ståhl
Experience Lab, Åbo Akademi University
matilda.stahl@abo.fi

Maria Ruotsalainen
University of Jyväskylä
maria.a.t.ruotsalainen@jyu.fi

Usva Friman
Tampere University
usva.friman@tuni.fi

Fredrik Rusk
Åbo Akademi University
fredrik.rusk@abo.fi

Keywords
esports, competitive gaming, CS:GO, visual ethnography, aesthetics

INTRODUCTION
Video games are "constituted by the images on the screen" (Rose 2016, 88) and game graphics are often discussed by the audience (Johnson 2019). Further, Kirkpatrick (2011, 1) argues that video games are a "historically specific instance of an aesthetic form" and should be viewed through the aesthetic lens to be understood. Despite the relevance to the gameplay experience, there is limited academic discourse on visuality in video games, particularly from a player perspective, as the existing discussions are often from a game design perspective (see e.g. Salen et al 2006). Further, research on visuality from a player perspective is both limited and narrow in scope, primarily focused on player in-game representation and avatars rather than on gameplay experience as a whole. Accordingly, the focus here is on a participant's perspective of the visual norms shaping different esports contexts.

The aim is twofold: to explore how esports aesthetics are constructed within Nordic esports contexts and to see what identities can be (co)constructed within the frames of such situated aesthetics. With aesthetics, we are referring to visual norms within specific platforms and/or contexts and how these shape participation (Goding-Doty 2020). For this purpose, we will combine the results from our previous empirical work with an additional context. The previously analyzed contexts are both located in Finland and are more specifically; 1) visual analysis of esports organizations' webpages and 2) an ethno-case study at an educational esports program focusing on an in-game

player perspective. The empirical data collected as part of this text, offers a third perspective; an esports tournament event. The first two datasets echoed similar findings and functioned as a starting point, however, the third dataset broadens the discussion of how esports aesthetics are constructed.

The first previous publication (Friman, Ruotsalainen & Ståhl in review) focuses on communication on the webpages of esports organizations in Finland. The material includes the public websites of 53 esports organizations; for example, associations, teams and player organizations, competition leagues, educational institutions and esports events. The material (collected in 2021) has previously been analyzed focusing on organizations' communication from the perspective of equity and inclusion, including plans, statements and visual material communicating both inclusion and exclusion, echoing the gender norms within esports discussed by e.g. Witkowski (2018). Primarily relevant for this work was the analysis was the website's levels of visual communication (Barthes 1982). All websites had some visual material, however the formats used and to what extent varies. In general, the visual material included individual portraits of key people within the organization (photos and illustrations) and event photos, promotional videos, illustrations, logotypes and in-game content. Notably, technological devices (such as screens, keyboards and headsets) were commonly present and emphasized in the visual material.

The second previous publication (Ståhl & Rusk 2020) is based on an ethno-case study and was conducted (2017-2018) in collaboration with students at an esports program at a vocational school in Finland. The data consisted of seven matches of *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve Corporation & Hidden Path Entertainment 2012), henceforth CS:GO, and four scheduled interviews per team. The material was analyzed inductively focusing on inclusion, visual agency and identity (co)construction. All weapon skins wielded in the in-game data were either masculine or gender-neutral in terms of color and patterns with mainly technological and military influences, echoing a similar visual norm as the first publication.

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

Informed by previous work on esports events (see e.g. TL Taylor & Witkowski 2010; N Taylor 2018), this visual ethnography (Pink 2020) was conducted during DreamHack Winter 2022 in Jönköping, Sweden, by three of the co-authors during three days of fieldwork. The data consists of photos and video recordings made by the researchers using their mobile phones as well as field notes. In the material, the researchers focused on activities and exhibitions centered around digital games and play. Some additional material has also been supplemented by colleagues of the researchers present at DreamHack aware of the data collection. The researchers primarily focused on the areas and activities accessible to anyone at the event, such as the tournaments and the exhibition area. In particular, the researchers followed two tournaments of CS:GO at DreamHack; the semi-finals and finals of Elitserien, the highest national level of esports as well as the ESL Impact League Winter finals for women and gender minorities professional players. Additionally, the researchers were offered fragmented research access in restricted areas as well, for example access to the otherwise restricted LAN-area as it was being set up.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The preliminary results from the DreamHack material echoed the visual norms seen in our previous work: technology is not only visible but emphasized and the color scheme is dominated by bright colors and neon lights. However, these visual norms were also reflected in and shaped by material objects such as gaming chairs (see Figure 1) and

energy drinks. Sponsorship and other forms of marketing are highly present in the material, suggesting that there is a central commercial aspect to the situated esports aesthetics.

While aesthetics can be understood as personal taste, participation in aesthetic norms can reinforce any embedded charges or biases (Goding-Doty, 2020). When invited behind the scenes for the ESL Impact League, the researchers were told by the producers that the visuals were intentionally non-feminine, but rather should reflect esports productions in general. For example, see the use of green, blue and orange neon lights in Figure 2, echoing the technomasculine (Johnson 2018) visual norms noted in our previous works (Friman, Ruotsalainen & Ståhl in review, Ståhl & Rusk 2020). Accordingly, similar to the previous studies, we see that the visual norms here referred to as esports aesthetics are present both in terms of grassroot level play as well as on a professional level. As a result, the participants aligning with these norms will feel more at home at these venues. However, in combination with as high noise levels and many people in small areas, these visual norms can result in an overwhelming experience, and thereby a sense of othering and potentially exclusion.

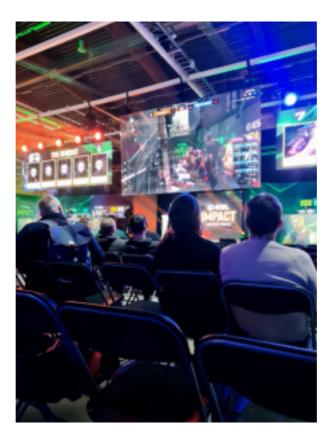**Figure 1:** Photo from the LAN area
of DreamHack 2022.

Figure 2: Photo from ESL Impact League
at DreamHack Winter, 2022.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barthes, R. (1982). Bildens retorik [Rhetoric of the image]. Bokförlaget Faethon.

Goding-Doty, C. 2020. Beyond the Pale Blog: Tumblr Pink and the Aesthetics of White Anxiety. *In A tumblr book. platform and cultures* edited by A. McCracken., A. Cho., L. Stein., and I., Neill Hoch. 344-354. University of Michigan Press

Johnson, R. 2018. Technomasculinity and its influence in video game production. In *Masculinities at play* edited by N. Taylor and G, Voorhees. 249-262. Springer Nature Switzerland.

Kirkpatrick, G. 2011. *Aesthetic theory and the video game*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Pink, S. (2020). *Doing visual ethnography*. Sage.

Rose, G. 2016. *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*. Sage.

Salen, K., Tekinbas, K. S. and Zimmerman, E. 2006. The game design reader: A rules of play anthology. MIT press

Ståhl, M. Rusk, and F. 2020. Player customisation, competence and team discourse: exploring player identity (co)construction in Counter-Strike: Global Offensive. Game Studies, 20(4)

Taylor, N. 2018. I'd rather be a cyborg than a gamerbro: How masculinity mediates research on digital play. *MedieKultur: Journal of media and communication research*, 34(64), 10-33.

Taylor, T. L and Witkowski, E. 2010. *This is how we play it: what a mega-LAN can teach us about games*. In Proceedings of the fifth international conference on the foundations of digital games. 195-202.

Valve Corporation & Hidden Path Entertainment. 2012. *Counter- Strike: Global Offensive*. Online game. Valve Corporation.

Witkowski, E. 2018. Doing/Undoing Gender with the Girl Gamer in High-Performance Play. In *Feminism in Play* edited by K. L. Gray, G. Voorhees and E. Vossen. (Eds.) 185-203. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland.