

Lefebvre at the arcade: Understanding gaming houses as esports' playgrounds

alessandro franzó

University of Milan

Department of Social and Political Sciences

Italy

alessandro.franzo@outlook.com

Keywords

esports, space, gaming house, sociomateriality

INTRODUCTION

Games are everywhere (Zimmerman et al., 2013) and for every play practice comes a specific playground, from arcades (Kocurek, 2015) to urban environments (Lammes et al., 2018). Gaming houses, or “co-operative living arrangement[s] where several players of video games, usually professional esports players, live in the same residence” (2022), might be the elective esports playground for their importance in shaping esports practices (franzò, 2023; franzó et al., 2023). A co-living that brings in the importance of space, especially the shared places that surround (and influence) the competitive practices they entail. In order to disentangle the making of these competitive spaces, this work reconnects with an ongoing project aimed at describing gaming houses' composition and functioning (franzò, 2023; franzó et al., 2023), specifically adopting a Lefebvrian approach to look at their spatial configurations (Lefebvre, 1991). The thought of the French philosopher was chosen because of the importance he gives to the “social” in the production of space, i.e. opening up how the shared and situated conceptions, perceptions, and experiences of space shape our relationship with them (Lefebvre, 1991). In other words, a Lefebvrian approach to gaming houses permits to account for the role that both human and non-human actors have in assembling the spaces inhabited by esports professionals and practices. By analytically separating the space into three layers, the Lefebvrian theory allows to tackle how the preconceptions made around the usage and inhabitants of a place often clash with the ideas and sensations experienced by those effectively housed in those spaces, but also how the unpredictability of co-existence of human beings, materialities, and digital technologies may result in tweakings and modifications that generate new ways of living, interpreting, and making that same places (Beyes et al., 2012; Vásquez et al., 2013). Moreover, this organic view on the production of space reconnects with a rich body of works that stresses the importance of space organising, which has also been critically highlighted for other esports “playgrounds”, like LAN and tournament venues: for example, marginalised groups are physically separated from hardcore players through a set of boundary-setting spatial strategies, like zoning amateurs (and women) in special areas or pushing them toward the borders of gaming

Proceedings of DiGRA 2024

© 2024 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

communities, both spatially and metaphorically (Phillips, 2020; Ruotsalainen et al., 2018; Witkowski, 2013). Thus, the material and spatial organisation of gaming houses might inform us about the functioning of these structures, but also the resistances and modifications that their “users” (i.e., inhabitants) impose on them (Johnson et al., 2021; Hyysalo et al., 2016; Bruns, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

To disentangle the spatial layers in which the assemblage of digital, material, and social actors inhabiting gaming houses moves, playing with the informal and formal boundaries that organise these spaces, the author did some targeted visits to a structure located in Northeastern Italy, called Qlash House. Following a rapid ethnography approach (Vindrola-Padros, 2021; Isaacs, 2013), the dense and deep visits to Qlash House were paralleled by informal interviews and other qualitative material, which helped obtain first-hand information on its material composition and spatial organisation, like the evolution of this structure throughout its history and the daily routine taking place inside it. The author was accepted in the structure during various activities, witnessing 2 teams (the Valorant and League of Legends roasters) bootcamping and training, but also the Qlash crew of professionals preparing an upcoming Comicon and LAN event. As a matter of fact, the three-storey facility of more than 2500m² is one of the biggest gaming houses in Europe, and its owning organisation, Qlash, has been involved in organising and participating in all the most important esports events since its founding in 2017. Although this space functions as the Qlash hub for most of its esports and marketing activities, the moments in which it becomes really crowded are either during bootcamps, when a full roaster permanently occupies the many bedrooms and training areas of the House, or whenever events are prepared and hosted, that is when the whole and extra crew use Qlash headquarters as a physical meeting point and/or a streaming stage. Finally, it must be noticed that though Qlash can count on a Valorant female-only team, the author was told that they bootcamp rarely and, ultimately, was never able to witness the Qlash House hosting these female players.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The work on the social construction of space (Lefebvre, 1991) helps us understand how “physicality” and the “imaginary” aspect of materiality concur in shaping the spaces we inhabit (Lefebvre, 1991), thus creating a reciprocal enfolding with the social relations that create them, but are also reproduced, mediated and transformed by space (Natter et al., 1997). From these processes, derive a three-folded model of space that deploys through the following layers: conceived, perceived and lived space (Lefebvre, 1991; Taylor et al., 2007; Maier, 2013).

Conceived space

The representations of space generated through planning create the “conceived space”, that is the codified embodiments of space conceptualisations drawn and implemented by space planners (e.g., architects and engineers). Strictly relating to power and dominance (Lefebvre, 1991; Taylor et al., 2007), these materialised concepts convey predetermined modalities of using and habiting space (Liao et al., 2021). Plunging the theory into the Qlash House environment, observations highlighted how spatial representations displayed by the structure are aligned with both general discourses around esports and an (achieved) objective by Dragon’s

founders: the goal of being a cutting-edge environment for professionals and a hub for the European competitive ecosystem (AFP, 2019; Hallmann et al., 2018; Scholz, 2020). The House symbolically convey these discursive configurations through the careful craft of its spaces: its aesthetic revolves around the use of chromed and glass surfaces, communicating an idea of high-tech proficiency, material neatness, and unrelenting vanguardism. A minimalistic and modern look that becomes even more noticeable when compared to the surrounding neighbourhood, a semi-forlorn industrial area outside a middle-sized Italian city. The boundary between these clashing workspace aesthetics goes through glassdoors and azure-glowing logos, a “liminal space” (Shortt, 2015) that, when traversed, enters the visitor into an off-world colony of the esports ecosystem (Hölzle et al., 2022). The importance of thresholding in the making of Qlash House is not only aesthetical, as transitional spaces push for a change that pertains to identity and order (Dale et al., 2008; Kingma, 2008): the crossing provokes a mutation, signalling the transformation and entry into a space for competition, skill, and virtuality. Interestingly, the shared rooms clearly limit the privacy of inhabitants and might block some players (e.g., non-binary ones) from feeling at ease during their stay. This element might not be an intentional fallacy of Qlash House, as it might be due to external factors like local regulations, but they significantly speak of designers’ and architects’ preconceptions of the “normal user”.

Perceived space

The “perceived space” is composed of the spatial practices happening inside it, like commuting between and occupying places, which are guided by the designed representations (codes, symbols, etc.) that form(ed) those spaces (Lefebvre, 1991; Zhang, 2006). If the conceived space abstractly “draws the lines”, it is the material configurations of Qlash House that steer its inhabitants’ perceptions and movements around the place. In other words, the perceived layer of space relates to the way its construction (guided by the preconceptions tapped above) influences the life inside it. To put it more straightforwardly, it is how people understand their surroundings: for example, decorating a room with football-themed wallpapers and filling it with sofas and consoles, may steer the use (and perception) of it as a room dedicated to those competing in (or wanting to play at) games like FIFA and eFootball. But the Qlash House goes further in organising the activities around its spaces, as each floor seems to be devoted to different practices (e.g., playful activities are concentrated on the ground floor). The boundary-setting is played by different kinds of liminal spaces: passages, like corridors and stairs, that discipline the currents of people and technologies flowing through the household, directing the traffic between training, working and living areas. Eliciting some behaviours and hindering others (Beyes et al., 2020; Courpasson, 2017) such spaces, again, reflect narratives circulating in the field, like the “off-world-ness” of esports practices (Castronova, 2006; Juul, 2011; Murphy, 2004; Shah, 2018). Interestingly, the Qlash building materially excludes some categories of users, as it presents multiple physical barriers that prevent people with disabilities from fully making use of the facility.

Lived space

The third pole in Lefebvre’s “trialectics”, i.e. lived space (1991; Soja, 1996), pertains to the direct and unfiltered co-living with places and objects, letting in the contradictions between the (dominant) conceptions and the (peripherals) usages of space. As the set of day-to-day negotiations allows for the unpredictability of lived experience to blossom, this experiential dimension restores the dwellers’ agency in

the final re-composition of what is (a) space. In other words, this layer speaks of the “modding” that users apply to the spaces they inhabit, as well as all the stratified modifications that occurred in House to adapt the building to the player’s (and the organisation’s) evolving needs. The everydayness of Qlash House’s living practices relies on inhabitants’ subjective tactics (de Certeau, 1984; Maier, 2013), as they constantly oscillate between compliance and the disruption of formal boundaries organising the structure’s space (Blagoev et al., 2019). When trying to appropriate and domesticate a space built by designers and managers, the occupants give birth to a series of misuses, variations, and radical subversions: a constant “remake” of Qlash House that goes with the people traversing it, as exemplified by the episode that occurred during a Valorant bootcamp: on top of an unexpected event drastically altering the team schedule, a surprising sleeping routine emerged for one of the gamers, as even his teammates were astonished by seeing this player’s habit of resting on the gaming chair for the whole night. His habit, thus, re-negotiated both the meaning associated with the gaming peripherals, now used as “lullaby-machines”, and the training room, which became more of a dorm after the teammates prepared quilts to their sleepy player and the managers changed the night heating to make his sleep more comfortable.

CONCLUSIONS

This last reconversion shows the embedded ambiguity of this space: even though formal subdivisions exist, it is the informal redistribution of practices, objects, and people through the structure that creates the “playground” called Qlash House. An interplay between formal pre-conceived arrangements (e.g., the labelling of rooms, the disposition of the sociotechnical network around the House, the prescribed behaviours interiorised by players through the liminal spaces, etc.) and the informal (but accepted) adaptation of spaces (produced and producing the manifold of uses and needs emerging through the day-to-day living/ed practices), that creates a hybrid and constant making of space (Beyes et al., 2012; Vásquez et al., 2013). A simultaneous co-presence of differences (here intended as both the generative simultaneity of digital, material, and human actors and the multipurpose nature of Qlash House’s spaces) that allows for this playground to function as a hub for the legitimisation and a local grounding of (Qlash) esports practices, ultimately representing a viable point of discussion for the emergence of more sustainable models. Finally, this work adds to other descriptions of the material, local, and spatial substrates that sustain the esports (and gaming) ecosystem, underscoring how crucial those elements may become in shaping the (competitive) gaming practices and how often they are left behind in tackling the players’ routines. The overlapping of physical, digital, and human features displayed by gaming houses accounts for a surge of hybrid spatialities, where the blurred boundary between online and offline resonates with the blurred nature of the activities they entail (franzó et al., 2023; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Ferrer-Conill, 2018).

REFERENCES

- AFP, Inside a Gaming House: How an Elite eSports Team Hones Its Skills under the Same Roof, Scroll.in, July 2, 2019.
- Beyes, T. and Holt, R., The Topographical Imagination: Space and Organization Theory, *Organization Theory*, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 2631787720913880, accessed July 24, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/2631787720913880>, April 1, 2020. DOI: 10.1177/2631787720913880

- Beyes, T. and Steyaert, C., Spacing Organization: Non-Representational Theory and Performing Organizational Space, *Organization*, vol. **19**, no. 1, pp. 45–61, accessed January 27, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508411401946>, January 1, 2012. DOI: 10.1177/1350508411401946
- Blagoev, B., Costas, J. and Kärreman, D., ‘We Are All Herd Animals’: Community and Organizationality in Coworking Spaces, *Organization*, vol. **26**, no. 6, pp. 894–916, accessed July 30, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508418821008>, November 1, 2019. DOI: 10.1177/1350508418821008
- Bruns, A., *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*, New York, NY: Peter Lang, pp. 436, 2008.
- Castronova, E., *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, accessed September 30, 2022, from <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo3620704.html>, pp. 344, 2006.
- Certeau, M. de, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 260, 1984.
- Courpasson, D., The Politics of Everyday, *Organization Studies*, vol. **38**, no. 6, pp. 843–59, accessed July 24, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840617709310>, June 1, 2017. DOI: 10.1177/0170840617709310
- Dale, K. and Burrell, G., *The Spaces of Organisation and the Organisation of Space: Power, Identity and Materiality at Work*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 348, 2008.
- Ferrer-Conill, R., Playbour and the Gamification of Work: Empowerment, Exploitation and Fun as Labour Dynamics, in *Technologies of Labour and the Politics of Contradiction*, P. Bilić J. Primorac and B. Valtýsson, Eds., Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing, accessed May 22, 2023, from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76279-1_11, pp. 193–210, 2018.
- franzò, alessandro, STS Invaders: Gaming as an Emerging Theme for Science and Technology Studies, *Tecnoscienza – Italian Journal of Science & Technology Studies*, vol. **14**, no. 1, pp. 155–70, accessed October 6, 2023, from <https://tecnoscienza.unibo.it/article/view/17612>, September 26, 2023. DOI: 10.6092/issn.2038-3460/17612
- franzó, alessandro and Bruni, A., Gamers’ Eden: The Functioning and Role of Gaming Houses Inside the Esports Ecosystem, in *Computer-Human Interaction Research and Applications*, H. P. Da Silva and P. Ciproso, Eds., Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, accessed January 1, 2024, from https://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-031-49368-3_18, pp. 299–314, 2023.
- Gaming House, in *Wikipedia*, December 15, 2022.
- Hallmann, K. and Giel, T., eSports – Competitive Sports or Recreational Activity?, *Sport Management Review*, vol. **21**, no. 1, pp. 14–20, accessed December 30, 2022, from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1441352317300700>, February 1, 2018. DOI: 10.1016/j.smr.2017.07.011
- Hölzle, K., Kullik, O., Rose, R. and Teichert, M., The Digital Innovation Ecosystem of eSports: A Structural Perspective, in *Handbook on Digital Business Ecosystems*, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, accessed January 27,

- 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839107191.00046>, pp. 582–95, 2022.
- Hyysalo, S., Jensen, T. E., and Oudshoorn, N. Eds., *The New Production of Users: Changing Innovation Collectives and Involvement Strategies*, New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 358, 2016.
- Isaacs, E., *The Value of Rapid Ethnography*, in *Advancing Ethnography in Corporate Environments*, Routledge, 2013.
- Johnson, M. R. and Woodcock, J., Work, Play, and Precariousness: An Overview of the Labour Ecosystem of Esports, *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. **43**, no. 8, pp. 1449–65, accessed October 6, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211011555>, November 1, 2021. DOI: 10.1177/01634437211011555
- Juul, J., *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 245, 2011.
- Kingma, S. F., Dutch Casino Space or the Spatial Organization of Entertainment, *Culture and Organization*, vol. **14**, no. 1, pp. 31–48, accessed July 17, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759550701863324>, March 1, 2008. DOI: 10.1080/14759550701863324
- Kocurek, C. A., *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 208, 2015.
- Lammes, S. and Wilmott, C., The Map as Playground: Location-Based Games as Cartographical Practices, *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, vol. **24**, no. 6, pp. 648–65, accessed March 7, 2023, from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1354856516679596>, December 2018. DOI: 10.1177/1354856516679596
- Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 468, 1991.
- Liao, S. and Huebner, B., Oppressive Things, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. **103**, no. 1, pp. 92–113, accessed July 17, 2023, from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/phpr.12701>, 2021. DOI: 10.1111/phpr.12701
- Maier, H. O., Soja’s Thirdspace, Foucault’s Heterotopia and de Certeau’s Practice: Time-Space and Social Geography in Emergent Christianity, *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. **38**, no. 3 (145), pp. 76–92, accessed July 23, 2023, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23644526>, 2013.
- Murphy, S. C., ‘Live in Your World, Play in Ours’: The Spaces of Video Game Identity, *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. **3**, no. 2, pp. 223–38, accessed July 15, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412904044801>, August 1, 2004. DOI: 10.1177/1470412904044801
- Natter, W. and Jones, J. P., Identity, Space, and Other Uncertainties, in *Space and Social Theory: Interpreting Modernity and Postmodernity*, Oxford, UK; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.
- Phillips, A., *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*, NYU Press, pp. 248, 2020.
- Ruotsalainen, M. and Friman, U., “There Are No Women and They All Play Mercy”: Understanding and Explaining (the Lack of) Women’s Presence in Esports and Competitive Gaming, from http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_Nordic_2018_paper_31.pdf, 2018.
- Scholz, T. M., Deciphering the World of eSports, *International Journal on Media Management*, vol. **22**, no. 1, pp. 1–12, accessed January 29, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.1080/14241277.2020.1757808>, January 2, 2020. DOI: 10.1080/14241277.2020.1757808

- Shah, S., Chinese Esports Team Reveals Jaw-Dropping “SPACESHIP” House Built to Practice Video Gaming, *The Sun*, July 31, 2018.
- Shortt, H., Liminality, Space and the Importance of ‘Transitory Dwelling Places’ at Work, *Human Relations*, vol. **68**, no. 4, pp. 633–58, accessed July 24, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726714536938>, April 1, 2015. DOI: 10.1177/0018726714536938
- Soja, E. W., *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1996.
- Sutton-Smith, B., *The Ambiguity of Play*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 289, 1997.
- Taylor, S. and Spicer, A., Time for Space: A Narrative Review of Research on Organizational Spaces, *International Journal of Management Reviews*, vol. **9**, no. 4, pp. 325–46, accessed July 17, 2023, from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-2370.2007.00214.x>, 2007. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2370.2007.00214.x
- Vásquez, C. and Cooren, F., Spacing Practices: The Communicative Configuration of Organizing Through Space-Times, *Communication Theory*, vol. **23**, no. 1, pp. 25–47, accessed July 24, 2023, from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/comt.12003>, 2013. DOI: 10.1111/comt.12003
- Vindrola-Padros, C., *Rapid Ethnographies: A Practical Guide*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 185, 2021.
- Witkowski, E., Eventful Masculinities: Negotiations of Hegemonic Sporting Masculinities at LANs, in *Sports Videogames*, Routledge, 2013.
- Zhang, Z., What Is Lived Space?, *Ephemeria*, vol. **6**, no. 2, pp. 219–23, 2006.
- Zimmerman, E., and Chaplin, H., Manifesto: The 21st Century Will Be Defined By Games, *Kotaku*, September 9, 2013.