This Is How We Play It: What a Mega-LAN Can Teach Us About Games

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ABSTRACT
Using data gathered through our participant observation and informal interviews at DreamHack Winter 2005 and 2009 we explore a number of themes that not only provide insight into aspects of face-to-face real-time play at LAN parties but also highlight considerations for game studies more generally. In particular, we focus on the heterogeneity of play and experience, the role of spectatorship in computer gaming, the public performance of leisure and gamer identity, and the growing presence of women in game culture. We conclude by suggesting that researchers should begin to consider the much larger trend in which this form of leisure activity is integrating itself into mainstream pop/youth/network culture.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
K.4 COMPUTERS AND SOCIETY *General,* K.4.m Miscellaneous, K.8 PERSONAL COMPUTING *Games*

General Terms
Human Factors, Theory.

Keywords
computer games, LAN, play, spectatorship, gender, e-sports

1. INTRODUCTION
We are at DreamHack Winter 2009 – a massive LAN party – and making our way to our seats for the weekend, lugging our computers with us in a somewhat motley mix of Ikea bags, a suitcase, and assorted backpacks. The panorama in the main hall is extraterrestrial. The view of the room falls into the hands of the light cables, brought and strung up by the players', that if linked together would light up the leaning tower of Pisa. Joyful civil order combined with the heady humming of powerful PC's dominate the human soundscape. A pulsing drumbeat pounds down from the stage. There's not a Mac in sight. As we walk the minutes it takes from entering the main hall to our seats in row D24 the various presentations of experience and expertise unfold – make-dos of vertical shelving for storing hardware above the small 80x60cm allotted play space jut up into the air, alcoves dedicated to particular MMOG realms for raiding are tagged ("For Boulderfist!"), sleeping across keyboards, a monstrous monitor with "advertising space for sale" is displayed on the screen when the particular gamer is AFK. Even at first glance we witness multiple variations of "knowing" and "how-to" and "expertise" and "passing" all put on view.

Within gaming, and computer culture more broadly, LAN (local area network) parties have a long and vibrant history. These real-time face to face events bring together people, and their machines, for several days of intensive interaction and play. LAN parties can involve everything from file sharing and demos to game playing and other activities. They are often a mix of people who already know each other to strangers coming together to meet for the first time. They can range in size from a handful of people dragging their machines over to someone's apartment for an evening to large scale, highly coordinated events with tens of thousands of participants. While LAN parties have a strong local geographical component to them they are also a prime opportunity for people separated by distance to come together. Though the growth of the internet and widespread ease of networked communication and collaboration alters the landscape in which LANs originally arose, the continued existence – indeed even flourishing – of some LAN parties suggests they hold important qualities well worth exploring, even in our increasingly networked age.

This article looks at one particular LAN party, DreamHack, which tags itself the "world's largest computer festival." Though DreamHack (DH) events now take place not only in its home country of Sweden but also via DreamHack Global which provides qualifying rounds for the franchise's e-sports competitions, the Winter installment remains its anchor. Started in 1994 in the small town of Malung, Sweden with only a handful of friends in attendance, DreamHack has grown dramatically over the years. In 1997 it moved to Borlänge, Sweden and with a larger venue attracted 700 people. The 2009 Winter DreamHack (upon which most of the data in this paper is based) had over 14,000 participants with approximately 10,000 bringing their computer with them. This main Winter event is now held every year over three days in Jönköping, Sweden, a small suburban town in the southern part of the country. Organizers stage the LAN party at Elmia (a trade fair event space) and in 2009 four major halls were used: one large main hall with a big stage and approximately 4,500 seats, a second hall with 2,600 seats and a variety of trade-

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show booths, public service stalls, and a lecture area ("DreamExpo"), a third hall dedicated to e-sports and professional computer game play (also with about 1300 seats), and finally a fourth hall for overnight accommodations. Participants to the event can chose from several different types of entry packages. For 720 Swedish kronor (approximately $100.00 U.S.) an individual can purchase a seat at the event which includes a table spot to sit at, electricity, high-speed internet, 24 hour access to the venue, and space in the sleeping hall (bring your own sleeping bag). Those not wanting to bring their computer can purchase a day (100 kronor) or weekend pass (400 kronor) which allows them access to all the halls and events.

Figure 1. The main hall of DreamHack Winter 2009.

In the following we draw on participant observation and informal interviews carried out at two Winter DreamHacks (2005 and 2009). For 2005 one of the authors attended on a weekend pass but did not have a seat nor bring a computer with her for the event. In 2009 both authors attended DH as full participants by purchasing side by side seats in the main hall, taking their computers, and spending the entire weekend fully involved with a range of activities. Though we originally planned to also sleep in the accommodations hall we decided that given the high levels of activity some rest might actually be needed and instead opted for staying in the hotel next door (where it turned out many of the e-sports players and various DH staff also stayed).

DreamHack was incredibly fascinating and we argue in the following that though LAN parties are often simply thought of as fun niche spectacles, there are many lessons we can learn about game culture and computer game play more generally by taking seriously what happens at events like this. The handful of studies on LANs thus far have done a good job in highlighting the social draw they hold for people in terms of opportunities to play together [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. We extend this analysis and highlight the heterogeneity of play and experience, the role of spectatorship in computer gaming, the public performance of leisure and gamer identity, and the growing presence of women in game culture. We conclude by suggesting that we should be cautious about trying to understand game culture and gamer identity as isolated from a much larger context in which this form of leisure activity seems to be integrating itself into mainstream pop/youth/network culture.

2. THE HETEROGENIETY OF PLAY AND EXPERIENCE

Long term Danish college-mates-cum-DreamHacker companions sit under the largest found structure at the event, though these six companions don't go about or do DreamHack the same way. The man with access to the 12-person van and trailer that brings them all here plays EVE Online and downloads movies. A woman in the group with the hand-written title of "PR-manager" stuck to her chair is leveling in World of Warcraft whilst the EVE Online player shouts disses to her about playing a game for kindergarteners. The oldest of the bunch ("30-something," he says) just got a free haircut at the hairdresser school set up in the far corner of the hall while another man sitting in a comfortable looking office chair is busy creating a film for the creative contest. Every once in awhile they all join together to play a retro version of Bomberman on the Nintendo as passers-by stop to watch.

Something that can be quite surprising when attending an event like DreamHack is the diversity of activity taking place. When one hears the term LAN party it is probably typical to think mostly of a group of people sitting around playing games the entire time or perhaps file or demo sharing [4, 5]. Yet at a mega-LAN like DreamHack (whose size certainly amplifies things) there is an amazing heterogeneity of activity and experience taking place [27]. There are two levels this operates at. At a macro level one could find the hobbyist, the everyday gamer, the pro-player, the person with a seat pass for the entire weekend, the day pass person coming in just for Saturday, or the weekend event volunteer. What they are there for, what they are doing, varies. For some DreamHack was an opportunity to set up their machines alongside friends and spend the weekend playing with their tight local group in a larger social setting. For others it is an opportunity to make a low budget film for entry into one of the creative competitions. Day-pass participants could be coming to see one of their favorite pro teams play, meet up with friends (some of whom may have purchased a seat), try out some new games in the demo area, or listen to a Japanese DJ in the evening. For a recurring group of volunteers who, year in and year out administer the event, DreamHack provides the opportunity to revive and build their connections and sense of community with each other through the activity of providing the festival for others.

This heterogeneity doesn't only operate at the macro level but within the individual participant as well. There can be much more to our experience of play-leisure than the actual hands-on-the-keyboard moment. We often cycle through activities. We noticed that DreamHack participants (ourselves included) exhibited this constant movement between a variety of activities over the course of the day: reading the IRC channel or Twitter feed for the event to see what others were up to and talking about and posting back to it, joining in the clapping when the dominant viral song (a catchy net-pop song titled "Get on my horse") is played, searching for that song then downloading it (and a thousand others), finding a new screensaver or desktop image, watching films or favorite TV shows, reading game forums or specialty websites, admiring other peoples hardware and set-ups, wandering over to watch official matches and discuss scores and tactics at the e-sports arena, glancing up at the main stage from your seat to watch a dance or beatbox contest, looking around at your neighbors screens, eating at your computer (sometimes with one hand on the keyboard), wandering through the expo/demonstration area taking

a look at new products on the market or other games, getting information from political or social organizations, sleeping (head on the table, sometimes with a jacket pulled over you), and having conversations – and planning – about next year's event.

Participating in DreamHack tells us something more than just what games people play. We see how game play is integrated into and across everyday life (albeit uniquely constructed in this particular space). It is in the space of the LAN we also see glimpses of how being there, together – playing and participating in one's preferred ways – can feed into a welcoming and almost celebratory atmosphere where there is a general appreciation of gaming no matter the game genre, level of play, or ways (however bizarre) of being a gamer. What the participants of an event like DreamHack do is stamp gaming as a worthwhile leisure lifestyle, whatever your taste may be.

In Jörissen's study of LAN parties, he suggests they are a space for things like *Counter-Strike* clans to come together and publicly demonstrate and renew their values and connections with each other. As he writes, "the social order of a community becomes staged as well as renewed by the participation of the community's members" [4, p. 36]. We would note though that while specific game genres are celebrated at DreamHack, at the macro level the public demonstration of values and connections of any single game (or style of play within game genre) is somewhat diluted at a mega-LAN. There are certainly divisions within game culture (PC versus consoles, genre battles, "hardcore" versus "casual", etc.) [24] and while these stratifications still play a role at LANs (indeed DreamHack is quite strongly identified as a PC-focused event), nonetheless we find the overall heterogeneity remarkable. The space reads more like piles of suggestions on individual gamer identities than the establishment of some overall game genre lifestyle. What gets articulated in the gathering of such a mixed bag of computer game enthusiasts is the frivolity, meaning, and multiple pleasures (not all of them just "fun") available in playing games.

It also shows, however, the ways the specific configurations of that leisure may vary between participants and may itself be integrated into a much larger leisure-identity profile than we typically consider. It is not then that we can identify one archetypical gamer present at the LAN (or indeed in game culture more generally) but that the current construction of game play, experience, and gamer identity is diversely constituted through a matrix of not only varying gameplay preferences, but within a larger mix of leisure activities that are cycled through. Being a gamer regularly involves occupying, in a meaningful way, expertise across several sectors/experience sites outside of any particular game title.

3. SPECTATORSHIP IN COMPUTER GAMING

Four teenage boys sit to our left for the duration of the event. Two of them have brought computers and they create their own little digital cave with them – machines on either side of their allocated space with monitors in the middle next to each other, chairs huddled in, snacks stacked on top of one of the PC towers that divides their space from ours. The other two boys sit behind them, peering over their shoulders as they play. Stretches of time pass where their seats are empty then suddenly all four reappear and resume their positions – two playing, two watching.

Within computer game studies very little is said about the nature of spectatorship when it comes to play. For the most part when it is discussed the frame is more akin to understanding, from a film studies perspective, things like the role of cut-scenes in games. Theoretically the stakes have thus far been in making the case for the way playing computer games prompts a decisively active stance. As Aarseth puts it, "In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" [8, p.1]. When the player is spoken of in computer game studies the image typically evoked is the person sitting at the keyboard or with hands on a console controller, actively looking at the screen and directing (typically with complete rational orientation) the actions of their game character. It is this moment of clear direct action that player agency is often theorized from. But, if we were to stand back and look around that imagined player a bit, what we would often see are people sitting alongside on the sofa or someone with a chair pulled up next to the player, all watching the action on the screen, sometimes (but not always) waiting to take their own turn but just as often playing-over-the-shoulder or giving tips. Indeed, if we were to take another time slice of that actual player's life, we might see them watching their friend play the exact same game or perhaps watching a walk-through video. We want to argue that to understand play in computer games we need to more fully attend to the nature of spectatorship.

We typically cycle through a variety of positions in relation to the actual moment of taking hold of the controls, alternating between spectator and player. A number of authors have sought to nuance the notion of interactivity and games (often via considering the status of the cut-scene) [9, 10, 11, 26]. Newman, for example, suggests that we be attuned to the varying forms of engagement of players as they move through periods of "fully interactive", "partially interactive," and "non-interactive" (with interactivity here being defined in the most narrow instrumental sense). He astutely problematizes overly simplistic notions of agency in computer game play, noting that even within single player games people may be playing together, such as when one person is at work making a map or puzzle solving while another handles the actual controls. As he notes regarding the "backseat" (our word) player, "While these players cannot be seen as having any interactive control because they possess no direct link to the interface of the game and cannot perform or execute commands, they nonetheless demonstrate a level of interest and experiential engagement with the game that, while mediated through the primary player, exceeds that of the bystander or observer" (p. 409).

We would like to extend this intervention on the notion of player engagement even further. We were particularly struck by the complex relationship between actual hands-on-play and spectatorship modes at DreamHack where participants move between varying levels of activity in relation to the events, and gaming, taking place. Spending three solid days straight at this venue provided a powerful lens with which to watch not only the ongoing negotiation of other participants, but our own modulation of time and activity. Over the course of the weekend both of us moved through various activities on a sliding scale of play-action, for example from playing *World of Warcraft* on our own machines to spectating a pro Arena match. Of course, the most

obvious side of the spectatorship-player spectrum is the moment where you are directly sitting at your machine, hands on an input device, playing a favorite game. This is the slice we most often consider when thinking about computer game play and it certainly forms an important part of what happens at an event like DreamHack. All around us people were playing with each other, sometimes downloading new games to explore but also jumping into longtime favorites.

But this is only the most basic component of what a player's mindset is occupied with, especially at this kind of event, and we want to highlight another aspect not often thought about. People make connections with not only friends, but strangers, through forms of spectatorship. Wandering up and down the aisles looking at everyone else's machine and setup is a popular activity here. You can spend hours winding your way through packed aisles filled with people playing and friends hanging out around them. As one moves through the space watching others play games you interpret what you see on the screen. When it is a game you recognize your eye lingers for a bit, situating the image, deciding if you've played that part yet, sometimes inspiring you to want to rush back to your own seat and jump into the game. Often simply watching a familiar game connects you, somehow viscerally, to your own embodied experience of play [12]. You may second-guess an action, remember your own prior experience of playing that scenario, be awed by some new action you are seeing, or be moved to go back and progress further or re-live the gameworld. Games you don't recognize, especially if seen on multiple player's screens, may inspire you to look them up or download a trial to check out. Sometimes you may simply be confused by what you see, perhaps having to ask a friend or fellow watcher what is happening on the screen. Wandering the aisles at DreamHack, while a form of spectatorship, can reactivate one's own sense of, and desire for, play. It can reground your identity as a gamer and even viscerally pull you into that play moment, sometimes even transforming it into a kind of shared experience [12]. Watching others play is a compelling part of a LAN party, with so many people publicly displaying themselves and their games for each other. Even at four in the morning drifting through the aisles simply watching what others are doing provides endless fascination and a sense of activity.

This complex relationship between spectatorship and play comes into sharp relief via e-sports and the competitive scene. DreamHack 2009 hosted three days of tournaments in games like *Counter-Strike* and *World of Warcraft*, having dedicated an entire hall of the event to official tournaments with cash prizes. Swedish television provided comprehensive online coverage of the event, as did a number of other game websites. E-sports, and press coverage like this, is often perplexing to people because it is so deeply enmeshed with spectatorship which can at first glance seem at odds with computer gaming where taking action yourself is key. But within the competitive scene watching others play is a central activity. As Lowood [28] argues in his insightful article on machinima, we can trace back the productive player creations we see in that form to early *Quake* clans and their relationship with high end performance and demonstrating such through various demos (demonstration movies). He writes, "Being in such a clan meant being a community player; it meant visibly performing skills and demonstrating abilities, showing how to do things, spreading information, and building software tools and content to share with other players" [28, p. 171]. He rightly notes that this impulse has long played a role in game culture. It is not simply outside spectators who will follow matches, but professional players themselves who attend competitors matches, download videos for strategic dissection, and watch streaming coverage. For non-competitors spectatorship allows them to see how more skilled players transform a game they likely play themselves at an amateur level. While they may pick up strategies and techniques, as often as not they simply marvel at the moves the competitive players make. Spectatorship in e-sports can also anchor a person's love of gaming by providing them a space to be a fan of a game or a team or a favorite player. It situates them within a subculture where their own play and identity gets supported. Competitive gaming certainly has its roots in the LAN scene and at a place like DreamHack, where participants could wander over to view matches then head back to their own machines, the circuit between spectatorship and play becomes clear.

Three days at DreamHack offers a real sense of the intermingling between play and spectatorship. These active positions seem to lie on the same edge of a möbius strip, where the actions of watching and playing constantly and seamlessly fed into the players' overall gaming practice. When we link an analysis of spectatorship with the role of embodiment in gamer subjectivity, the constitution of the play moment may need to be more broadly construed. As we watch others play we are not only activated as playful subjects cognitively, we embody this subjectivity in often deeply corporeal ways [12, 13, 14, 25]. Given this relationship, understanding more deeply the nature of spectatorship is key to understanding games and play.

4. PUBLIC PERFORMANCES OF LEISURE AND GAMER IDENTITY

Attending DreamHack for the second time this year is a small group of men enjoying their involvement in the amateur Xbox tournament. Atop of their vertical space saving structure are three cases of energy-drink – the prize for coming in third place in a Gears of War 2 competition. While at their table seat they download and surf. A second monitor sits alongside the cases and displays DreamHack's network traffic across the 19" screen, the green line of the graph flits between 50 and 99 percent for all to see.

Taking in the variety of public performances at DreamHack one notices that in this space "geeking out" is a legitimate form of leisure. As the participants shuffle across the BYOC (bring your own computer) areas they can be seen stopping every so often to take in the micro spectacle that catches their eye. These quirky displays like the monitor visualizing the LAN traffic, as well as the more established practice of erecting impressive vertical structures, decorating your seat space, or modding your computer case seem to act as introductions between other players, working as points of interest that encourage people to interact. As Simon usefully suggests, "For the player, it may be more accurate to suggest that the case mod helps constitute a broader experience of the game that is no longer simply confined to the screen" [7, p. 187]. Interaction can take place through conversations but also be activated by seeing how other people do gaming. We even found ourselves talking excitedly about the structure we would build over our table space next time around.

Whether it is aversion or appreciation of what is on display, at DreamHack the perception of what a gamer is or does is stretched through the rich range of activities that are engaged in, be it wearing team jerseys, dressing up in fluffy anime rabbit suits, case-modding, or making fan-films. The range of performances on show pushes the sense that, for these participants, gaming is a meaningful leisure activity and that participation in this activity can be very many different things. From frivolous to serious, this assortment of gamer lifestyles on display at DreamHack works towards a more flexible notion of a "gamer," highlighting in a very public way the heterogeneity we spoke of earlier. It is not, however, that such diversity simply exists (perhaps hidden away for only researchers to note) but part of the pleasure of inhabiting it is through its demonstration and public performance. Showing how you fit into the scene, in part by demonstrating your expertise and skills, become key activities for participants [15].

Figure 2. Customizing your space, for the public.

While not all public performances strive for attention and are intentional in orientation, simply by virtue of being seated players at DreamHack we bring with us a little of the private space from home. Our visible desktop, our typing skills, our preference for one social networking site over another, our choice of game, our hardware setup – our otherwise private leisure identity is now rendered public performance. The small space, between player and computer screen, the space that we most often have to ourselves, abruptly becomes a part of the observable landscape. Unlike other public (amateur) gaming spaces such as net cafes, at DreamHack the micro spectatorship of other players is constructed as a legitimate pursuit for everyone. From checking out your neighbor's (nick)name on the DreamHack website in advance to leaning over a stranger's shoulder and enquiring about a Flash game that they are playing, the personal space bubble is literally burst.

The onscreen action, where we can watch a game performance unfold, is only a fraction of the public display on hand. Back in the halls and aisles a tangible and noteworthy second performance of play manifests in body movements and talk. A too slowly executed mouse move or key stroke, sideline yelling of tactics (taking advantage of the collective view of the monitors), or a neglected buff (a beneficial effect) resulting in the character death of the person seated next to you all become visible and embodied aspects of play. The skills we perform and the mistakes we make are not only observable online or on-screen, they become expertise and inadequacies situated within the body in physical space. We not only watch other people's physical engagement with games, but we also sense the pressure of being watched by others ourselves. Indeed we can also be keen spectators of our own physical performances, carefully managing the front-stage presentation that tacitly communicates on gaming know-how. By bringing private places and performances into a public forum, we reveal to ourselves and to each other those personal blemishes we bear in our leisure, the not-so-polished, and perhaps not even enjoyable, moments that are also a part of a gaming lifestyle.

During a heated e-sports semi-final in a *World of Warcraft* arena match, a particularly public and blotchy moment of what would usually be private play for these practiced e-sports players was put on view. Owing to flawed communication early in the match which led to the quick elimination of a key player, the loss brought about heated whispering which quickly escalated to a highly charged performance of fault finding in otherwise elite play. Finger pointing ("But why did you do that?!") and criticisms were thrown between the three team-mates in a fashion that would usually only be seen and heard by the team themselves in the privacy of a voice or chat back-channel or at a pre-tournament bootcamp. For these amateur competitors, the embodied performance of leisure, what they wanted to put on "show," was something that was difficult to manage. Such embodied moments of gaming push back against claims that computer game play is about losing the body [see also 12, 13, 14, 15, 25]. Whilst e-sports tournaments are built up for spectatorship it does not necessarily mean that the players' are themselves prepared to be spectated in a situation where their micro performances are under the looking glass.

Several of our photos from the event revealed different players sitting in front of the ghost screen in *World of Warcraft*, placing those self-conscious situations where one isn't quite skilled enough on display to the room. These instances of "making mistakes" are all the more striking in-the-flesh (especially when compared to, for example, watching the same e-sports semi-final online without the intense team moment, subsequent regrouping, and win). In this space we get to see how such blunders are made and embodied, and how the players pick themselves up and pull through or try again (especially in the local team situation). As one of the BYOC players recognizes, "the mistakes we make are what connect us as gamers." When thinking of the public performances that demonstrate expertise and experience, we might also want to consider the "mistakes" – the non-gratifying moments – that are an unwavering part of our gaming experiences [16].

Public presentations of experience and expertise unfolded in a rich variety of ways throughout the event. At the macro level, there were too many performers, from fascinating to run of the mill, resourceful or even masterful on display, for us to just speak of one way of "doing." Perhaps the most salient presentation of being a gamer, pro or amateur, was the tenacity demonstrated in picking up the mouse/controller again after those big mistakes, even in public.

5. GROWING PRESENCE OF WOMEN IN GAME CULTURE

Strikingly ordinary is one way to describe women playing in the BYOC area at DreamHack. Across the event women are seated and playing in every aisle, mostly with groups of friends or huddled together in twos, perhaps one another's BFF. They take up their allotted table space in a decidedly common fashion – a hodgepodge of technical apparatus and food stuffs crammed into the small space as is seen across the entire event. It is only in the close-up details that we can catch a sign of something distinct. As one young woman exits her game of Counter-Strike we are suddenly met by the gaze of a dreamy Edward Cullen starring out from the screen.

Figure 3. Edward at DreamHack.

"Playing" DreamHack offered a glimpse of the growing presence of women acting in, and on, computer game culture. Women's attendance as players and spectators impressed not only on the public ("there are so many lady-gamers" was the surprised remark from one event worker), but also worked to modify our understandings of women's presence in public gaming events in a way that might be thought of through their inhabitation of the space. To inhabit, at its simplest, means to occupy, be present or fill up a place. Thinking with the notion of inhabitation reveals some subtle but key shifts in women's presence, orientation, and access in terms of gaming in public. These shifts speak to how women are engaging with and occupying public gaming events like DreamHack and making "a room of one's own" within the culture.

To talk of women's presence at DreamHack we need to turn our attention back to Edward Cullen (one of the main character's in Stephanie Myers hit *Twilight* franchise and played by Robert Pattinson in the films). The longer the image gazed out at us, the more provoking his company seemed. But why was this tiny detail so remarkable in a room full of everything and anything? Because it was not simply yet another pop culture picture but, by being one of a particular young and, to many, desirable male actor, it was a very clear sign of a kind of traditional girl culture being projected "on one's own" into this massive public gaming space and done so in a highly visible and personal way. That such desktop images are reserved for private gaming places makes it even more notable. Though seemingly trivial, this simple desktop image prompts us to consider the space women and girls are starting to take up within game culture.

We might consider the visible ways that women have traditionally been situated in public gaming scenes – often documented as the marginalized girlfriend, or more recently as the hyper-sexualized or side-show professional player/all-female-team [17, 18]. The space of DreamHack is far removed from these shallow opportunities for participation. What women establish at this event is that their presence bears the stamp of familiarity, not only with games and their playing of a rich variety, but also in having a computer of one's own to play on. Walking throughout the halls we experience a growing presence not only in women at the event, but are struck by the roles these women have taken. Not simply "stuck" as girlfriends on the sidelines, women in this space regularly jump in and take on active roles – joining others on stage for the rock-paper-scissors and stare-down competitions, competing in first person shooter matches; downloading new games and trying them out. As we saw over and over again, they are playing a variety of games in every aisle in the BYOC section (we counted about 1 for every 20 seated participants and DreamHack puts the total number of women visitors generally at 10-15%). They play on the two elite *World of Warcraft* raiding guilds performing for their fans. They watch the e-sports finals and play in the pro-am tournaments.

While there are certainly girlfriends attending the event it is not the default stance by any stretch and indeed we could just as easily remark on the boyfriends (or those in search of hook-ups) that are in attendance. Heterosexuality is undoubtedly the most publically identifiable orientation of DreamHack, though here we might note that orientation refers to something more than sexual orientation. Orientation also speaks to how bodies are oriented in space – who or what are we oriented towards and how we have been moved to be able to face these specific directions [19]. What became clear whilst walking through the aisles of players was that the women who occupied a playing seat were not observed as situating themselves in a position of heterosexual desirability for other (male) participants to pick up on (placed for a male gaze). They evaded the double-performance often described in women's engagement in traditionally male pastimes (such as weightlifting at the gym), where a construction of hyper-femininity is "played" into the performance to balance a presentation in what has traditionally been marked as a masculine play space [20]. At the BYOC tables, women were dressed in comfortable hoodies and jeans, topped by disheveled hair, seated on big pillows ready for long stretches of play. In this regard their clothing and everyday presentation of self matched in tone the majority of the BYOC boys and men. The orientation of these players whilst at their seats was towards the main attraction – the goings-on that make up the activity of playing games. By not "doing" hyper-femininity, they presented us with the sight of (many) women playing for the pleasure of the activity itself. Through this non-performance (not doing the juggling act of "gamer"/"woman"), a secondary but significant effect is produced – public gaming is moved further away from the "boy's club" image.

DreamHack offers one more glimpse of a slight but significant alteration that is worth bearing in mind in terms of the role it plays in women's presence in gaming – gatekeepers. The position of gatekeepers to technology and gaming have, in the past, been held by men. For women interested in playing games this would often mean going through male friends, boyfriends, or male family

members to access the technology and games [17, 21]. However the small clusters of women playing in the BYOC section, sitting together in two's and three's suggested something else; that women are taking on the role of gatekeepers for other women, taking on the role of the practiced player(s), and providing an alternative access point to gaming [27]. This example prompts some worthwhile considerations on access to gaming and game spaces where entrée involves a more complex structural arrangement in which networks, meets gaming know-how, meets access to technology/games [22, 23].

If we find ourselves looking at a photograph of a public gaming event that presents us with a panorama of men playing games, we may want to stop up and consider that it is also as much an image of people who have gaming (and/or LAN) know-how or have access to someone that does. Such layered notions on access build on earlier accounts of women's exclusion from public gaming spaces that were based heavily on the gender asymmetry of the space [17]. The women playing at the BYOC tables offer us a fuller look at the growing presence of women in game culture more generally and offers some perspective on the configurations used to "gain entry" to play. The fine adjustments, such as making a space of one's own, having personal gaming knowledge, or entering with an active stance (where gaming is already a part of their leisure lifestyle) certainly are key in terms of women's activity and engagement in the public gaming space. Ultimately, when a girl's girlfriend takes on the role of the practiced player, we start to see how these players offer other women an alternate anchor point in terms of entry into unfamiliar spaces. With this greater diversity in gatekeepers we can only imagine that new doors into gaming and broader interpretations of public gaming are opened.

6. CONCLUSION

As Saturday night wears on we watch the event slowly shift gears. Though the techno music in the main hall continues to pump out (and it seems to have even gotten louder!) sometime around 3a.m. we begin to see dismantling happen. Some of the larger structures in the BYOC area are being taken down and the amount of trash in the aisles seems to suddenly quadruple. The expo and demo hall have been packed away and the pro-arena is now closed. Days of little sleep, energy drinks, and near-constant party-like atmosphere have taken a toll and people seem to cycle between exhaustion and trying to soak up last bits of time with friends. We linger ourselves until, as our British neighbors each in turn put their heads on their desks and try to get some sleep before their long drive back home, we finally pack up our own gear and make our way back to the hotel.

What becomes apparent after attending DreamHack is that some of our ideas about LAN parties, and game culture in general, need updating. The image of a small niche of teenage boys or young men gathering together for a weekend of only intensive play, or file-sharing, doesn't quite match what we observed. Though the perhaps unique context of Sweden (for example, its support of youth clubs, excellent net infrastructure, manageable geographic location within Europe) certainly provide some caution for over-generalizing too much, we nonetheless want to suggest some larger lessons we might take away from the event. The diversity of activities engaged in, the role of spectatorship in gaming, the public performance of gaming, and the growing numbers of women and girls inhabiting spaces like this requires us to think more expansively about the relationship between gaming and the broader cultural moment. DreamHack presented us with a space in which game and geek culture was rendered cool and unabashedly embraced by its participants.

Though you could find the stereotypical activities (like playing games and file sharing), we were struck by the way the event was positioned within a much larger constellation of pop, youth, and network culture. Internet memes and viral artifacts in the form of videos, songs, or jokes sat alongside teen iconography and hipster DJ's. Silly costume contests took place on the stage while down in front flirting teens spent a Saturday night at a computer festival rather than at a club hearing a band. At the same moment participants in their 20's, 30's, even a handful of 40-somethings, joined their friends at the event to spend some face-to-face time playing together, perhaps as a break from their normal work or school routines, all the while checking in with the world outside the LAN via Facebook or Twitter feeds.

Events like DreamHack give us an opportunity to explore the ways games can be both contained within larger cultural activities and yet can also cycle back and shape how people think about their leisure time and identity more generally. On the one hand things like game playing and file sharing become just one more activity on the circuit of experience, one more waypoint in the broader cultural conversation about what we are doing with our free time. And you also can't go to something like DreamHack, sit alongside 10,000+ other people for 72 hours, and not leave feeling that what might have otherwise seemed somewhat marginal when you first arrived – your love of a game, your collection of esoteric anime, your guild camaraderie, your fandom for a famous e-sports player – is actually not so odd after all.

DreamHack gives us a glimpse into the kind of transitional state we are in with regard to both game and geek culture. What we see at the event is actually a growing seamless integration of network/pop/youth/game culture into, simply, a slice of the mainstream [6]. As mainstream culture increasingly becomes network culture, as computer games continue to make their way into everyday life, and as shared cultural experience is at least in part formed through remixes and memes we find online, the border between an otherwise marginal game/geek subculture and mainstream culture is increasingly blurred. DreamHack acts as a kind of harbinger, an edge event, that helps us envision this mix of subcultures into something new.

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