Gamers' Eden: The Functioning and Role of Gaming Houses Inside the Esports Ecosystem

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Abstract. The current paper aims to analyse the complex array of practices entailed by teams and esports professionals by looking at one of the most peculiar phenomena of the esports field: gaming houses, i.e., "co-operative living arrangement[s] where several players of video games, usually professional esports players, live in the same residence" [1]. Representing one of the first attempts to assess the role of gaming houses as emerging esports spaces based on new forms of playbour and production of and by users, the paper comprises an innovative adaptation of PRISMA protocol for literature and scoping reviews to shed light on how the technological, material, and social elements are enacted through gaming houses' activities, which mirror the ones entailed by digital platforms. In fact, through the three moves of encoding, aggregating and computing users' interactions [2], gaming houses (re)produce virtual and analogical goods, translating consumer practices and profoundly influencing the broader esports ecosystem. Finally, by framing themselves as ideal hives for pro players, i.e., a prototypical breeding ground for esports professionals, these structures push for new paradigms of work-life balance and users' production, thus leading to a further reflection on the nature of play and working practices in our contemporary network society [3].

Keywords: Esports · Gaming houses · Platforms · Ecosystems · Socio-materiality

1 Introduction

The rise of esports professionals [4–6] and gaming content producers [7–9] has already drawn the attention of social, media and game scholars, which have focused mainly on the spectatorship dimension [10–12] and the emergent identities and cultures associated with gaming [13–16]. On the other hand, labour researchers highlighted the "prosuming" perspective [17, 18], underlining how the gaming industry transforms gamers' consumption practices into processes of production shared within and without the gaming field. What blossomed in the gaming field eventually spilt over the broader society, as displayed by the spreading of gamification among businesses and institutions [19–22].

In such a scenario, esports teams (i.e., groups of professional players that gather to participate in competitions and operate better in the economic market) emerged as

relevant organisational actors [23, 24]. Evolving from simpler LAN parties' organis-
ers, these groups of gamers undergo a process of institutionalisation and transformation
along trajectories of progressive specialisation [25]. Nowadays, teams usually involve
multifaceted activities to increase revenues, like training together and streaming inde-
pendently; simultaneously, they confront some of the most diffused biases of the field
[26] and propose new solutions to the hurdles they encounter [27].

The current paper tries to catch a glimpse over the complex array of practices entailed
by teams and esports professionals through their daily grind by looking at one of the
most peculiar phenomena of the field: gaming houses, i.e. "co-operative living arrange-
ment[s] where several players of video games, usually professional esports players, live
in the same residence" [1]. Depicted as ultimate professionalising tools by many insiders
[28], these "houses" offer a privileged empirical ground for assessing how the esports
ecosystem adopts new paradigms of work-life balance and users' production [29–31].
Albeit they can respond to different needs [28], these coworking and co-living spaces
are the place of continuous refinement of the narratives and identities associated with the
figure of the pro players [32]. Moreover, they are also framed as ideal hives to nurture
new talents and workspaces for new-fangled professions [33, 34].

Thus, this contribution aims to analyse how gaming houses are composed, adminis-
tered, and lived. In other words, it will examine how the socio-material matrix [35, 36]
embedded in gaming houses influences the houses' (spatial) ecosystem, which allegedly
composes the prototypical breeding ground for an esports professional [37]. Then, the
literature review will focus on the material aspects and the social structures inside the
houses, but also how these are enacted to narrate a professional(ising) trajectory into
which these structures play a crucial role [38, 39]. Finally, the last part will highlight
how a deeper understanding of these structures may contribute to the current litera-
ture on esports as well as offer insights about the embedding of digital technologies in
contemporary societies and (new) working practices.

2   Related Works

While scholars have already tackled either the subjective dimension of esports [40–44] or
the sociotechnical innovations brought in by esports teams and professional players in the
broader gaming scenario [25, 31, 45–47], gaming houses are still an unexplored theme
for academia. However, notable exceptions are constituted by the works of Can [37] and
Thornham [16]: the former represents an in-depth analysis of the current Turkish esports
scene focusing on the role that gaming houses play inside that specific local context,
enriched by a reflection on the persistent gender inequality and segregation that these
structures seem to reinforce [37]; on the other hand, the latter book by Thornham [16]
expands on the issue of gender inside the gaming community by exploring the use of
these technologies inside the domestic environments [48, 49], putting the work on the
page of current media literature on the theme.

Nonetheless, the latter work brings up a "semantic" problem, as Thornham's research
space shares little to no connection to the professional(ised) venture intended by esports
insiders with the term "gaming houses". By means of opening up a scholarly discussion
on these structures, this paper will address this need for clarification by proposing a

first definition of gaming houses, which arises through the lay literature on the theme describing their components and functioning.

3   Methodology

Scholarly approaching gaming houses reveals the scarcity of academic literature regarding these structures. Although many authors have devoted their attention to the competitive scene [25, 30, 50], gaming houses have remained a theme only for insiders and fans. This is why this paper, following some promising results obtained through exploratory inquiries into the Internet, proposes to fill the literature gap by addressing the lay knowledge circulating among gaming communities. However, it was necessary to adapt standard literature review procedures to build a scientific point on such an unstructured body of work. The choice was to use the PRISMA protocol for literature and scoping reviews [51], adapting it to unconventional repositories in order to systematically approach this vast but raw knowledge while maintaining academic reliability.

3.1   Inclusion Criteria

The material included had to talk specifically of gaming houses (i.e., shared households inhabited only by pro players); or other structures devoted to gathering and offering a space to professional gamers; or labelling themselves as "gaming" or "team houses". Consequently, gaming houses were operationally defined as structures, either established by teams or funded by external companies, devoted to hosting pro players temporarily (i.e., bootcamping venues) or permanently (as proper housing solutions) during their playing, training, and living activities. This definition was adopted to distinguish houses from other venues inside the gaming ecosystem (e.g., LAN houses or PC bangs). In addition, the entries chosen for queries reflected the semantic variability found in preliminary searches. Thus, the following keyword combinations were used:

- game house;
- gaming house;
- gaming team house.

3.2   Sources

To fruitfully merge scientific and lay knowledge on gaming houses, the queries were performed on unconventional repositories (accessed through Bing, Google, and YouTube) and then paired with a more common search over the typical academic databases. The scarcity of findings suggested including not only the stricter database Scopus (Elsevier) but also the broader and "messier" Google Scholar, aiming to include even its grey literature and low-tier journals in the review.

   To sum up, the following sources have been examined:

- Microsoft Bing (search engine);
- Google Search (search engine);
- YouTube (media platform);
- Scopus (academic database);
- Google Scholar (academic and grey literature search engine).

3.3 Disclaimer on Sources

Acknowledging that one of the major perils of using Internet sources could be stepping in their built-in biases and, more precisely, the possibility that the searching algorithm might influence the results, some precautions were adopted to limit an excessive manipulation of the data: two parallel searches were conducted, keeping the same web browser (Microsoft Edge) but changing the search engine from Bing to Google. Moreover, the Google search engine was linked to a new account to counter past search history effects. Except for the hardly avoidable information related to the IP address and the geolocation of the machine (Northeastern Italy), the two engines differed in the language adopted: Bing ran in the default English, whereas Google in the suggested Italian (because of the IP address)[1].

Moreover, the choice of adding the media site YouTube, even if related to Google Search, was motivated by the large number of videos that emerged in preliminary searches. Indeed, the recognised link between gaming activities and video-sharing platforms like YouTube and Twitch.tv [8, 9, 50] suggested exploring at least one of them: the more extensive database of YouTube and its characteristic of keeping track of videos and comments, a feature lacking in many Twitch channels [53, 54], pushed for its choice.

All searches were carried out over the last week of November 2022, and every result was double-checked and finally consulted during January 2023.

3.4 Search Strategy

Search engines output massive volumes of results (the highest was "around 4.170.000.000 results in 0,47 s", as reported by Google) that could hardly be filtered. The decision was to limit the search to the first ten pages of results to stem this overwhelming amount while keeping the maximum information possible. This was due to time-constraint reasons and the fact that the records seemed to recur consistently after the first pages, reaching near total repetition (i.e., a full page of already shown records) after the tenth one. The same occurred when searching YouTube, Scopus, and Google Scholar, so the same limit criterion was adopted. However, the single-page output on those sites differed, so the threshold was set to 97 results per source to uniform the searches. Indeed, 97 were the records shown in the first ten pages of (both) search engines.

Moreover, technical issues like broken links, search engines malfunctions, or unretrievable material affected the screening, which in some cases hindered the reach of the expected 97 results for each source. Even though these breakages did not constitute a significant issue, the author added 3 more records from hyperlinks or previously retrieved material.

The total number of reports to be screened was still considerable (n = 1354), and the shambolic nature of search engines' indexing made it hard to find clusters of relevant results. Nonetheless, after carefully analysing the 195 relevant studies obtained through deduplication and selection processes (see Fig. 1), some significant axes emerged from the raw knowledge, which will now be presented.

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[1] The language used for queries has shown to be one of the "local" factors influencing search engines' output [52].
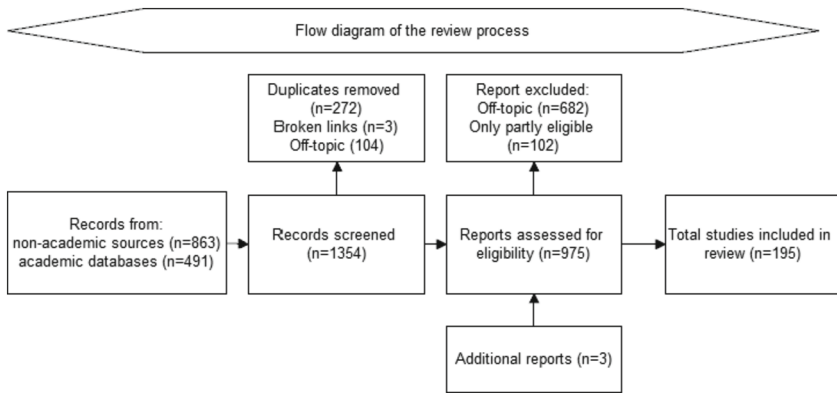
Fig. 1. The diagram summarizes the selection procedure.

4 Findings

A systematic reading of the literature shows how gaming houses represent new opportunities for esports organisations to arrange professional gamers' activities [28] while transforming teams' practices into value-laden products [55, 56]. These organisational configurations sallied from Asian territories [32, 38, 57] and rapidly conquered the rest of the world by narrating themselves as crucial professionalising tools for the field [37, 39, 57]. Gaming houses are displayed as places where professional gamers live and play together [58], as well as modern and innovative economic ventures [59–61].

Drawing from the extensive knowledge gathered by the gaming community, which has been decidedly more productive on the topic, we can recognise several distinctive elements lying behind the houses scattered around the globe, which will help us understand what is intended by the term "gaming house". To navigate the data, the paper will first present a guiding definition of gaming houses, albeit still partial and based on lay knowledge, and then continue their analysis through the proposed theoretical lens of platforms' ecosystemic functioning [2, 62, 63].

4.1 Tracing Gaming Houses' Roots and Defining Them

The Asian background has heavily influenced gaming houses' emergence: mangled in densely inhabited and infrastructured zones, the first goal guiding the creation of these structures was offering an affordable housing solution, which seems to remain a major concern for many teams [64]. Even though the current Korean and Chinese scenes have shifted their focus toward economic sustainability and media production, most Asian organisations still aim to find a balance between endless work and leisure gaming screen hours. Indeed, many insiders claim that life inside these households may become exhausting [65, 66]. On the other hand, a more Western model has diffused lately, more focused on the performance-enhancing opportunities that gathering all players and staff in the same place could give. Following a paradigm that imitates other sports disciplines, many American and European teams' houses emulate sports facilities, starting to criticise

the forced co-living for a more flexible "facility model" where gamers gather only for their working (i.e., training) hours. Alongside these two leading and recognisable ideal types, a full assortment of variations for these structures can be found in the different local gaming ecosystems: ranging from the "coerced" model imposed by Riot to the more content-oriented one spreading in the USA, gaming houses seem to maintain operational flexibility that allows them adapting to the diverse needs that gave rise to them.

However, the cornerstones of what defines a gaming house can be summed up as: being a place where (1) professional gamers live together regularly, even if temporarily (i.e., for bootcamps), and (2) they use such spaces for professional gaming (either matches or training); (3) when in use, gaming houses spaces are not accessible by outsiders, except from invited ones or in certain areas (or events). This definition helps discriminate gaming houses from other types of simpler housing solutions adopted by teams [67] and distinguish them from facility-style configurations [68] or other arrangements renting PC stations and other services to (usually amateur) teams and single players [69].

4.2   Gaming Houses as Platformised Environments

Through the literature emerges how gaming houses slowly constructed a general aura of irreplaceability around themselves [57, 70], framing their existence both as a technical and organisational advancement [68, 71] and as an inescapable consequence of esports professionalisation [28, 64]. This central positioning inside the esports ecosystem is obtained through an assemblage of digital, material, and social components, forming these structures' unique environments [72]. Notably, gaming houses seem to mirror platforms' ecosystemic functioning [2, 62, 63], inasmuch they frame their services as life-improving and producing better versions of their "users" (i.e., team members) through encoding, aggregating, and computing the practices entailed in their spaces.

The following paragraphs will expand on this utterance by tackling gaming houses' complex network of components and functions through the theoretical lens provided by Alaimo and colleagues [2, 62]. Paraphrasing Apperley and Jayemane [73], looking at gaming houses through platform studies offers the opportunity to locate them "as the stable object within a complex, unfolding entanglement" of traceable and examinable relations [73]. Approaching the material substrate behind the esports ecosystem through a similar lens will enhance the understanding of these structures as both "standard objects", routinely dealt with by insiders, and "black boxes", to be spread over by deconstructing them into their components [73–75].

This way, it will become clear how the houses' constitutive elements concur in accompanying amateur gamers towards professionalism through three "moves": encoding, aggregating, and computing.

Encode.   Gaming houses are engaged in a framing effort, as they constantly try to depict pro players' gaming practices as professional [58, 66, 76]. If this can more easily hold for players, houses strive to enlarge their encoding to broader social communities. As they try to loyalise their fanbase with digital goods, like promo codes and sports merchandise [77], houses often employ community-building tactics [61, 78] and even lifestyle models [79, 80] to enrol followers and fans into the crafting of the professional figure of the pro player.

Digital infrastructures emerge as a crucial asset for this move, as most gaming houses nowadays also involve streaming practices carried by their roster members [81, 82], engage in social media to depict their top players as aspirational stars and funnel participation [81, 83], and cooperate with other influential digital firms to broaden their respective communities [55, 56, 61]. These activities are sustained by external infrastructures, like stable and ultra-fast Internet connection [84], and in-house features, like props and architectural renovations [82, 85, 86], that accommodate technologies and furniture like specific lighting [87, 88] and high-end hardware [89].

This way, the new "hardwired" households [90] become not only used but "prodused" by their inhabitants [17, 18] as they transform into fair-like assemblages of amusements and out-screen diversions aimed at the enhancement of their aesthetic qualities [91, 92]. A "streaming turn" also scaffolded by a human capital made of Hollywood creatives, sports psychologists, physiotherapists, marketing consultants, and video makers [59, 77, 79, 80, 92]. These new figures matched the ever-present managers and coaches, more focused on enhancing players' performance [58, 76, 88, 93]. Thus, this whole new social structure helps teams and players craft contemporary gaming celebrities [7], legitimising gaming and streaming endeavours by offering supporting structures and professionals [58, 94–96].

Even though this shift means translating competitive gaming into a tool (or an excuse) to have more content to work with [77, 88, 97], many pro players care about their personal brand as an asset because of the longer, stabler, and higher revenue that streaming practices ensure over esports winnings or salaries, further reinforcing the encoding of their activity as a professional one [9, 37, 38, 57].

Aggregate. The second move that gaming houses enact is displaying themselves as the elective spatial hubs for hosting the network of actors and objects needed for professional gaming. Indeed, this move frames these structures as an environment housing not only the (freshly defined) professional gamers but also the supporting figures and sustaining materialities, like gyms and relaxation areas [67, 82, 83, 98]. This aggregation process again involves cooperating teams and firms, as they often exchange players (and thus, knowledge and resources) and share partnerships with non-endemic companies [55, 60, 78, 83]. The further inclusion of fans and followers as part of each team community through streaming and social media [50, 58, 81] signals a unique tendency to generate a multilayered and digitally dense ecosystem, inside which gaming houses are positioned, made by the network of these different esports actants [45, 62, 63].

Although the rhetoric of gaming houses tries to detach the figure of the professional gamer from casual ones, the socio-material making of these structures seems undecidedly caught between playing as much as working zones. Although this scenario may challenge the familiar categories that divide play and work [99–101], the fundamental support offered by boundary objects [102] helps navigate the assemblage of objects, actors, and spaces devoted to leisure or work efforts, as they are depicted as equally essential in many gaming houses (self-)presentations [94, 96, 103]. Actually, videos and websites cover houses' playful environments and artefacts, like luxurious pools and old cabinet collections [79, 92, 103], as attractive features for aspiring pros and interested partners [59, 104, 105]. The resulting narrative depicts pro players as enjoying a "totalising" environment [106] where embedded digital infrastructures and physical structures

ensnare them between (digital) gaming for professional reasons and playing (analogically and digitally) for leisure. At the same time, this discourse pictures gaming houses as crucial aggregating nodes where all kinds of activities are possible, further framing them as crucial environments for the broader esports ecosystem [28, 39, 64, 65].

Compute. Finally, esports organisations "compute" all the actions occurring among their walls; that is, they extract value from the spatial nodes represented by gaming houses. Pro players, as well as the complex set of practices entailed in these structures, become valuable leverage for connecting with endemic brands and diverse user bases [55, 107, 108]. Moreover, by presenting themselves as broad-ranging digital companies, the organisations behind the gaming houses expand their influence beyond their industrial and economic boundaries, offering interested actors their spatial structures as reliable intermediaries in the exchange of services and products with followers' communities and other gaming firms [78, 109–112].

The appeal of these houses for gaming communities and complementary companies is mainly given by the spatial dimension of their built environment. On the one hand, these structures offer a materiality to collaborating non-endemic firms that position them as unique in a highly dematerialised ecosystem [61, 79, 113], like the one of the gaming industry [45, 114]. On the other hand, the embedding of media and streaming practices, guaranteed by houses' digital infrastructures, material environment and social capital, allows for targeting the respective media audiences [55]. Indeed, the merging of different user communities and their enrolment into the production processes operated through gaming houses both reflect similar tendencies in the media and platform economy [29] and strengthen the reliability of esports organisations, especially the ones backing these structures [60, 78]. In a reinforcing feedback loop, such an intermediary role assumed by gaming houses further establishes a professional "aura" around competitive gamers (i.e., frames them as professionals), who benefit from these processes of industry expansion and stabilisation: not only do they improve esports professionals' economic situation, but they raise significantly the social status associated with the pro player figure [5, 24, 32, 56, 83].

Taking this intermediary role to the extreme, some gaming houses even detached from traditional esports organisations, constituting themselves as rentable hubs for both (amateur-ish) gamers and professional teams. Distantiating from the proper houses outlined in this paper, these hardware-ready facilities offer services like fully-equipped recreative areas, cutting-edge bootcamping venues, and hosting gaming-related events [69, 115–120]. Thus, even though this latter iteration of gaming structures shows a new direction in the meaning associated with these spaces by leveraging the temporary nature of the usage of these places, they display how the know-how behind gaming houses is being morphed to generate novel (economic) actors in the esports ecosystem. As the esports ecosystem evolves through these spaces, the progressive transformation of bigger gaming houses' owners into prominent international media companies [78, 109] gives a sense of how meanings and social relations are endlessly negotiated and adapted to the local (material) features behind their constitutive environments.

5 Discussion

The present study constitutes a first attempt to assess gaming houses' role as platformised spaces [121, 122] that rely on their technological, material, and social elements to embrace gaming's new forms of playbour [100, 123] and production of and by users [29]. Even though it may constitute a limitation for the study, the inclusion of lay sources in the literature review on gaming houses shed light on how the socio-material assemblage composing these structures is enacted through complex organisational processes, which resemble the ones entailed by digital platforms [2, 62, 63]. This body of secondary data showed how through the three moves of encoding, aggregating and computing users' interactions [2], gaming houses not only enrol users as produsers [17] but also (re)produce virtual and analogical goods, translating consumer practices and reshaping the gaming industry [18, 29, 45, 72]. Moreover, it emerged how these structures maintain their role as spatialised nodes in the broader esports ecosystem [45, 124] through a set of boundary-setting tactics [125] that establish gaming houses as core actors in an ever-evolving restructuration of the meanings related to the work-play divide (for further discussion on the innovative, yet ambiguous, power of gaming, see [20, 99, 126, 127]). Nevertheless, it must be noted how these substantial differentiating strategies aimed at separating professional players' activities from amateur(-ish) ones [32, 65, 93, 128] are grounded on the same materialities and digital infrastructures that emancipate gamers from the burden of (traditional) work [64, 129]. Although some insiders and scholars have already warned against the blurring of players' private and public lives [66, 93, 128, 130–132], these shapeshifting qualities allow gaming houses to constantly reposition them and reframe their components along the esports ecosystem and seem to be related to an intrinsic ambiguity belonging to games [133], which is also present in gaming' analogic forerunners (i.e., traditional sports; [6, 58, 134, 135]) and that may represent the focus of further studies.

6 Conclusion

By adapting the rigorous PRISMA protocol to unconventional lay sources, this paper analysed the complex array of practices and actors forming one of esports' most peculiar phenomena, i.e., gaming houses. The fan and insiders' literature showed how these structures frame themselves as ideal hives to nurture cutting-edge workspaces for the new-fangled esports professionals [25, 37, 114]. The paper used the theoretical lens of platforms' ecosystemic functioning [2, 62, 63] to shed light on how the technological, material, and social elements are enacted through gaming houses' activities [72]. As a matter of fact, through the three moves of encoding, aggregating and computing users' interactions, gaming houses embed new forms of playbour [100, 123, 136] and production of and by users [29], as well as constitute themselves as central (material) environments for the esports ecosystem [45, 124, 137]. Finally, the contribution critically engaged with what insiders depict as ultimate professionalising tools to see how their socio-material network led to new paradigms of work-life balance and users' production [20, 29, 31, 129, 137], which may hint at future further reflections on the ambiguous nature of play and working practices in our contemporary network society [3].

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