

Hannah Wang

Lang Prize Reflective Essay

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Beth Callahan gave me permission to submit TWO works for this prize: the original project submitted in my fall quarter class (“Narratives of American Esports”) as well as an updated version (“Kids in the Basement”) for which I have worked with my former instructor on throughout Winter Quarter and received independent study units. “Narratives of American Esports” (old version) is attached to my Lang Prize application, and “Kids in the Basement” (new version) has been emailed to langprize@ucdavis.edu with the subject line “Hannah Wang Lang Prize Submission (Part 2 of 2).” Per Beth’s suggestion, this essay discusses the process of reworking my paper into the current product.

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My research project began in Fall Quarter 2018 as a final project for a first year seminar called CURE: Games of Resistance. As the only Course-based Undergraduate Research Experience (CURE) offered in the humanities, Games of Resistance served as a perfect introduction to humanities research while giving me an opportunity to explore some of my passions-- video games and esports (professional video gaming). For my final project, a research paper entitled “Narratives of American Esports,” I focused on answering the question of why esports, a multimillion dollar industry in America with viewership greater than many sports leagues, lack the mainstream popularity of traditional athletic sports. Because the course focused primarily on Korea as the esports capital of the world, I sought to find underlying social factors contributing to the legitimization of a competition by comparing American esports to both traditional sports and Korean esports.

My research began with my first trip to the library -- I planned on checking out “one or two” books and ended up bringing back seven. Interestingly (and conveniently) enough, the books on video games are directly adjacent to the books on sports. I checked out a variety of books on both subjects and began my reading with Benjamin Rader’s *American Sports* and Donald Macintosh and David Whitson’s *The Game Planners*. Both examined the founding of sports leagues, and the factors leading to the professionalization of play. Specifically, Rader’s discussion of casual play in pre-Civil War baseball fraternities intrigued me as to how casual play impacts the overall impression of the game. Comparing the social baseball fraternity with the oft-referenced stereotype of the gamer as a lonely kid in the basement, I was interested in learning more about the path from social to professional play. In the realm of video games, Thorsten Quandt and Sonja Kroger’s anthology *Multiplayer* contains several essays that are applicable to my project. At this stage, Kowert’s “Party Animal or Dinner for One?” was the most useful selection, as it helped me develop one of my major arguments about the social side of gaming.

I developed this paper around the theme of recognition and legitimization. As an esports fan who has received countless confused looks from people who wonder what is so interesting about watching a bunch of strangers play video games, I was eager to learn about what was

holding my hobby back from public attention. I turned this paper in to my instructor, and asked him if we could continue working together to improve my project for eventual presentation at April's Undergraduate Research Conference. He agreed to begin meeting with me, and the first suggestion that he made was to change the focus of my essay. While "Narratives of American Esports" contained a lot of historical facts about esports and made some strong comparisons between esports and traditional sports, the argument ultimately falls short as I am unable to provide a concrete plan of action for increasing esports exposure aside from the industry needing to somehow educate the public. Noting the sections discussing the Korean PC bang and the American baseball fraternity, my instructor suggested a shift in attention from esports recognition in society to the importance of social space in gamers' identities. While this new project uses much of the same material and makes the same point about the impact of casual gaming norms, the focus on space removes the onus to offer a concrete solution to esports exposure. My new paper, which would eventually be named "Kids in the Basement: Space and Virtuality in American Esports," centers around two major works: Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* and Ray Oldenburg's *The Great Good Place*. These two works both contained theories of social space, and my paper worked to apply Lefebvre and Oldenburg's ideas to esports.

I started with Lefebvre, which, in hindsight, was my biggest mistake in the research process. As a twentieth century French philosopher, Lefebvre's work was incredibly hard to understand and attempting to wade through the textual mire slowed me down considerably. However, the library contained several works that helped me to interpret this complicated theory. The most surprising part of the research process was the number of commentaries that were available in the library to help reading difficult theory become significantly more manageable. Rob Shields's *Lefebvre, Love, and Struggle*, aside from having a title that perfectly described my research process, was an invaluable resource in understanding Lefebvre's concepts of space. I quickly isolated Lefebvre's tripartite dialectic as the piece of his theory that I wanted to analyze most, and Shields's commentary on the structure of that model helped me to break it down and apply the parts effectively. A quick search for Lefebvre on the library website also yielded several other commentaries as well as Dharman Jeyasingham's "The Production of Space in Children's Social Work: Insights from Henri Lefebvre's Spatial Dialectics," a work which, while unrelated to my topic, provided another example of how to make the complex theory relevant to modern topics.

Ray Oldenburg's *The Great Good Place* was also a valuable resource in uniting pieces of my project. I stumbled across the idea of "third places," or designated spaces for socialization, earlier in my research process, and was able to find Oldenburg's critical work describing this concept in Shields Library. This book was far easier to understand than Lefebvre and I was able to use it alongside Jeffrey Wimmer's "There's No Place Like Home" -- which I serendipitously found in the *Multiplayer* anthology I checked out many months previous -- to create another metric for comparing online gaming spaces. Comparing the social spaces inhabited by casual

gamers with third places such as the bar or bistro helped me form a more nuanced conclusion about the differences between American and Korean gaming culture. Finding Wimmer's paper made me realize that although many researchers before me have done research in similar fields, my research still provides a unique perspective. While Wimmer also used Oldenburg's idea of the third place to study game spaces, his overall conclusion that online communities did not have the same benefits as in-person social spaces was only a small piece of my overall conclusion about gamer identities.

Returning to my old paper after working for an entire quarter to create "Kids in the Basement," showed me how I have grown as a researcher. The latest version of my paper reads as more polished and cohesive, and I believe that the stronger writing is a product of choosing a clearer focus. Through focusing on discovering new ideas instead of raising awareness for my beloved pastime and asking "why?" instead of "how?" I was able to create a stronger argument that still aligned with my goals as a researcher. My original paper contained many anecdotes about my favorite esports teams and personalities, but I made the ultimate decision to forego them in favor of more concrete, academic works. Integrating more work from different disciplines -- sociology, philosophy, game studies, and sports studies -- not only changed my perspective on research, but also gave me a new perspective on esports. While theories of social space do not directly relate to esports, pairing theories with many other sources allowed me to form new connections and gain a new perspective. Writing "Kids in the Basement" forced me to challenge ideas that I had as an esports fan and online community administrator instead of just finding books to reinforce my previous perceptions like I did while writing "Narratives of American Esports." A few times I was tempted to write the paper based solely off my own experiences, but after taking time to consult my resources I realized my own potential misconceptions.

I would love to continue developing this project with the ultimate goal of getting published and presenting my findings at other conferences. Library resources have played an essential part in developing my project from the fall quarter "Narratives of American Esports" to the spring quarter "Kids in the Basement" and I know that my time as an esports researcher will not end there. I am currently stepping into a leadership position in the Aggie Gaming, an on-campus student organization which manages several collegiate esports teams. As the incoming Esports Manager, I have already had opportunities to apply my research in discussions at officer meetings and provide insight into the management of our teams. Additionally, enjoying the newly opened PC center Gunrock Gaming at the Memorial Union will give me another opportunity to directly experience and interact with my findings about co-located gaming. This project has given me an amazing opportunity to make my UC Davis education my own, and apply myself towards making new discoveries in an area that is incredibly meaningful to me.