

Esports Event Participation: IEM San Jose whitepaper

Background: Dr. Taylor and three graduate students attended IEM San Jose (Nov 21 & 22, 2015) to undertake research on esports fandom with an eye toward larger questions of diversity and gender. The overall framing for the fieldwork involved:

- Getting basic data on the number of women attending IEM San Jose.
- Explore why people attend esports events and/or the barriers to doing so.
- Understand more about esports fan participation at live events.



Crucial to the method was to examine these issues *across both men & women* so as to avoid simplistic preconceptions by assuming difference. The team slightly oversampled for women given the overall lack of data generally about their place in esports, but in general kept an eye out for both contrast and similarities in the analysis.

Data: Over the course of the two-day event the team gathered approximately 70 hours of observational data and 150 interviews. We also conducted nine head-counts, most broken down by audience seating to assess gender ratios in CSGO versus League of Legends spectating.

Findings:

Similarities across gender

- Though the event is driven by an interest in the games and/or esports, it was consistently framed as primarily a positive social event by both men and women. Attending was spoken of as a fun opportunity to hang out with friends and family. People were excited to be with each other there, sharing the event and their love of the game (or team, etc.).
- Generally attending the event as a group and dealing with any coordination was organized by one person and we found both men and women taking on this role. The five-pack tickets were frequently mentioned as a value to groups wanting to attend. People cited planning the trip in advance and taking time off as a part of what was involved in attending. Several couples spoke about planning on coming together after one partner (typically the man) attended the prior year.
- Fandom – of games, teams, and players – was on display through t-shirts, signs, other gear (such as Teemo hats), and temporary tattoos (offered at the venue). Taking pictures with players or getting their autographs were a huge draw.




- Attendees – both male and female – were not just fans but also players. They regularly reported they’d be home watching online or playing the game themselves if not at the event.
- Despite long days, attendees tended to stay in their seats and focused on the matches, only emptying out of the arena or going down to the Intel gaming stations between games. The research team all noticed how little phone use happened during the games; both men and women spectating were very engrossed and focused on the screens, often cheering or responding to plays.
- The participation ratio in terms of gender breakdown held throughout the event. Women remained a steady presence over the course of the weekend (versus, for example, only showing up for the finals).
- About half of both men and women had played both games.



Gender (and game) differences

- The CSGO audience was on average 8% women while League was 15% women.
- If only one game was played, women were more likely to have played League and men were more likely to have played CSGO.
- Women continue to experience social isolation as gamers (despite the actual increasing numbers of women who game). They often report not knowing many other women who game so attended the event with their male friends. This isolation is most pronounced around CSGO and women attending for that game were typically there with just their male boyfriend or husband. League fan groups were, however, more likely to have women and the handful of women-only dyads attending together we encountered were there for League (or a favorite team or player who was competing in the title).
- Women attending often had significantly more experience with conventions and fan events in general (AnimeCon was mentioned numerous times). The men did not have much experience attending any other events (either sports or gaming focused).
- While women were often interested in displaying their esports fandom, several incidents were remarked on negatively. Most of the merchandise for purchase at the event was t-shirts and none were available in women’s sizes except one, a League “support” shirt. Cosplay was almost exclusively engaged in by women at this event and several who had prepared costumes for it expressed frustration at how the contest, which was cancelled, was handled. Both situations, while perhaps seemingly minor, were remarked on by a number of women as signs of how they are considered outsiders in the space or after-thoughts.

Key take-aways:

- Women’s prior attendance at other fan/gaming conventions prepares them to attend an esports tournament. They have a base level of experience about what to expect and are often excited to attend these kinds of events. Other non esports conventions or outlets are thus prime locations to reach potential fans and participants.
- Women are avid fans and players. They enjoy attending events and, as much as men, like expressing their fandom through merchandise, signs, getting autographs, etc. Given how many of the women we spoke to also attend other gaming or media events/cons they should actually be considered fairly *dedicated* fans – and purchasers – generally. More attention could be paid to offering better opportunities for them to express it.
 
- Despite the growing numbers of women who do game, they continue to feel as if they are isolated (our data is echoed in the recent Pew study about the *perception, not reality*, of who games). Helping women bridge to other women gamers could thus be a powerful intervention in supporting and growing their participation in the scene.
- Friendship groups who play together are often more gender-mixed than typically thought and one way of reaching and supporting women is through these. Group ticket packages, using promotional materials that “hail” this kind of mixed-gender friendship cohort for gaming, etc. could provide powerful messaging to bring more women in.
- Different game titles function quite differently in game culture. While CS has a long history of engagement with women’s teams and tournaments, at this event it was also the domain we saw a lesser number of female fans and those that were in attendance were there in dyads with male boyfriends or husbands. By contrast, League seems to be a game that pulls in women via larger mixed-gender friendship groups (or on occasion women-only dyads). Being aware of the different valence of each is key to understanding how to reach those respective women. It would be a mistake to limit support paths to only CSGO given the potential we saw via League participation. Looking at other titles for comparison is likely also worthwhile.