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Abstract

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# Out of the Cafe and into the Arena

## Esports Spaces and Neoliberalization in Turkey

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## Introduction

In the late 1990s, one of the authors feverishly competed in Turkish gaming tournaments that took place in ill-equipped internet cafes: drab rooms outfitted with twenty PCs atop card tables with plastic chairs where, on match days, voluminous black curtains masked windows to minimize the sun's glare. While organized competitive gaming in the US originated in arcades,[1] Turkey's competitive gaming scene arrived by a different route, starting with amateur LAN (local area network) competitions in makeshift spaces at the end of the twentieth century. Today, Istanbul, the country's economic and cultural capital, has changed how esports are played through dedicated venues decked out with high-end hardware, large screens, colorful neon lights, and rowdy gamers.

Within the city's environs, we examine three specific spaces—an internet cafe (adeks Internet Kafe), a gaming house (Anonymized Gaming House), and a dedicated esports arena (Riot Games Esports Stage). Drawing upon theories of the social production of space,[2] we argue, through an analysis of secondary source materials, that their spatial arrangements and material infrastructure, built to global esports standards, attract and fashion an appropriate type of play and player endorsed by the Turkish authoritarian state. Abiding by esports' global ethos, the government still uniquely upholds a concept of historically founded, conservative, and Islamist youth, shaped to cultivate a "domestic and national" gaming culture as expressed by the Minister of Technology and Industry.[3] Led by the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party, AKP), Turkey's government instituted seemingly antithetical neoliberal economic and social conservative policies.[4] Privatization of public amenities and deregulation of businesses, along with technocratic domination over media, justice, and communal life,[5] revolutionized Turkish society, leading to the erosion of public spaces and the welfare state.

While the questions motivating this research are not primarily historical, this work makes inroads in identifying the significance of geography, material construction, and interplay between local and global governance within the chronicles of competitive play. Throughout our analysis, we recognize that esports' spatial development is historically and geographically situated; in Turkey, competitive gaming arose and still depends on a robust internet cafe culture that provided the first templates for local competitions, teams, and

spectatorship. Their material configurations and infrastructure, which rely on servers either funded by or housed in foreign nations, reflect how the history of esports not only builds upon such local spaces but connects (quite literally) over time to the broader geography of global gaming. In other words, Turkish esports is the consummation of the country's evolution. Our examples underscore the need for historians to consider the role of space and spatial production in global esports, as already propounded by broader game studies research.[6]

Our work also more specifically highlights the long-standing dynamic between local and global factors that drive esports' progress. Turkey's competitive gaming spaces, while suffused with and integrated into global industries, persist within the social and ideological prerogatives of the country's autocratic regime. Simply, the global and local norms of esports exist side-by-side in these spaces. As we suggest throughout the essay, they seamlessly merge to foster a type of play that is simultaneously a clearly recognizable global archetype and culturally distinct phenomenon to Istanbul and the Erdogan government. While our work points to some of the developments that sustain this type of game space, there is certainly opportunity for more historical study on the subject and for scholars to pursue a broader trajectory of global esports' historical growth based on distinct geographies.

Changes in Turkey that underlie the work mirror Peck et al.'s process of neoliberalization, or "a historically specific, unevenly developed, hybrid, patterned tendency of market-disciplinary regulatory restructuring."[7] Key to their definition is the dialectic between global policies regarding deregulation of markets and local governance and culture, where neoliberal agendas are "contextually specific,"[8] based on the idiosyncrasies of the locales and spaces in which they are deployed. Turkey's neoliberalization has been articulated as "neoliberalism embedded in neoauthoritarianism,"[9] precipitated by AKP's last two decades of rule and collaboration with "economic elites and military-bureaucratic establishments."[10] In Turkey's changing cultural, economic, and political orientation, cities and their physical organization are "privileged instruments" that legitimize emerging forms of neoliberal political economy and neoauthoritarian ideological underpinnings.[11] With the influx of international capital, AKP's "gentrification" reinvents "authoritarianism, i.e., [neoauthoritarianism], which usurps cities to glorify their national leaders."[12] As Nagehan Tokdogan puts it, this shows itself in AKP's "mega projects," for example destroying and rebuilding the historical Ataturk Cultural Center in downtown Istanbul, claiming it was outdated and old.[13]

Cities not only allow different cultural and political forces to meet and converge but are molded by the economic directives of hegemonic powers. The Republic of Turkey was initially constructed through modernization projects like railroads, boulevards, and monuments to secure Kemalist ideas of secularism aligned with Western norms. Encouraged by AKP's neoliberal neoauthoritarianism, Istanbul became an entrepreneurial center open to foreign capital.[14] Progovernment construction companies that materially rearranged the cityscape literally and economically cemented the party's populist right-wing rule.[15]

As AKP struggles to strengthen its domination over the bureaucratic, cultural, economic, and physical city sphere, esports spaces emerge as novel sites reimagined by this unique form of governmentality. In terms of spatial, social, and political organization, each esports venue symbolizes a distinct component, spanning over the last decade, in the rise of Turkish esports that prosper with partisan incentives welcomed by world financiers. Their locations and configuration within the city, as well as who gets to play in them, depend on economic, societal, and infrastructural relationships.

Consequently, the interaction of gamers, athletes, fans, site administrators, hardware, network technologies, chairs, stands, screens, and streets not only constitute spaces that foster exclusive modes of communal and competitive gaming, but also facilitate its practices and practitioners in a neoliberal neoauthoritarian Turkey. And although esports' infrastructure allows gamers to transcend geographic boundaries, both the global industry and AKP benefit from the resultant player capital—while AKP manages to implement its populist policies, the embedded esports culture provides streams of revenue for international capital.

## A History and Overview of Turkish Competitive Gaming

Only a few academic works focus on the economic, cultural, and political history of digital gaming in Turkey. One early contribution is Mutlu Binark and Günseli Bayraktutan-Sütçü's 2008 book *Kültür Endüstrisi Ürünü Olarak Dijital Oyun* (Digital Games as Product of Culture Industry), which explores the condition and brief history of Turkish game development, distribution, and marketing systems through in-depth interviews with professionals.[16] The authors find that the Turkish digital game ecosystem is sustained through the ad hoc but ambitious organization of professionals on which Cetin Tuker et al. later build.[17] They describe Turkish video game history as: starting in the 1980s, "The Beginner," 1990s "The Amateur," and the first decade of the 2000s "The Professional." In the beginning of Turkey's video game industry, enthusiasts and professionals claimed various roles ranging from programming, to burning game CDs and even distributing them to shops in their backpacks. By 2013, this makeshift system grew to mostly small and middle-scale development companies with around a thousand industry professionals. A similar narrative could be constructed regarding the relatively shorter history of competitive gaming. What started as community-led competitive gaming tournaments in internet cafes early in the first decade of the 2000s made way, over the next decade, to dedicated esports venues and regulated leagues supported by national and international capital and governmental incentives.

Historicizing competitive gaming in Turkey starts by understanding the particular position the country occupies geographically, culturally, politically, and economically. Located between Europe and Asia, the country's receptiveness to Western influence grew due to the neoliberal policies enacted by the government especially since the 1980s—when the first amateur digital games were also programmed by enthusiasts. Apart from Riot Games, a company we will discuss more throughout this paper, Turkish publisher MadByte

Games (and their game *Zula*) reflects local game production and esports in Turkey. With servers in Iran and Latin America, *Zula* requires the bare minimum hardware and software—which is all that many people in Turkey and other disadvantaged countries own. In other words, game publishers utilize game development know-how and configure it according to the infrastructural conditions of the country. Similar to games produced in the early eras of Turkish game development, *Zula* is filled with nationalist motifs, spaces, and characters.

Eventually, the gaming industry in Turkey, which was initially motivated by local actors, achieved the necessary global gaming capital that international competitive gaming requires while offering opportunities for national companies. At the same time, with the rise and mainstreaming of digital technologies, Turkey is starting to become a regional model as can be seen with the example of *Zula*. Even if game development is not on the same level as Western regions, Turkey is home to about thirty million gamers with market revenues estimated to be between US$400 and US$800 million.[18] Economic growth also exists at the institutional level: currently there are ninety-seven esports clubs, 156 female athletes, 1,651 male athletes, and eight esports centers certified by TESFED (Türkiye E-spor Federasyonu, Esports Federation of Turkey) operating under the Ministry of Youth and Culture.[19]

Competitive digital gaming in the country began in internet cafes. The first was built in 1995 in Istanbul's richest neighborhood, and the number grew from 11,000 in 2004 to about 27,500 by 2012.[20] Despite this, the cafes were maligned as spaces of social degradation. In 2000, a mayor described them as an "enemy of the family" and a "trap" for Turkish youth.[21] There are strict rules and limitations on where they operate (away from mosques and schools) and what is consumed (pornography and separatist content are forbidden).[22] Paradoxically, they are also advertised as important public policy tools and necessary "technosocial spaces" where youth can access learning opportunities outside of the Turkish government's conservative curriculum.[23]

Internet cafes' social nature made them attractive candidates to be the first viable esports venues. Popular online forums are filled with stories of friends skipping classes for impromptu matches at local cafes and establishments staying open after closing hours to keep competitions going till dawn.[24] It is unsurprising that the first esports team in Turkey started in a cafe; Dark Passage Esports Club, founded in 2003 to compete in *Counter-Strike*, is one of the country's largest teams. While there are only six esports sites registered with the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce of Internet Cafe Owners (İstanbul İnternet Kafeciler Esnaf Odası), a cursory search online turns up more than thirty internet cafes that incorporate esports into their business model. These operations tout their professional gamer equipment, fast and stable internet connections, and occasional amateur tournaments.

Esports was mostly sustained through community-led contests until the early 2010s when various midlevel competitions organized by international (e.g., ESL) and national (The Academys, GamingInTurkey) entities became popular. Prize pools for these events ranged from low-end

gaming equipment to US$30,000, with popular games including *CS:GO, League of Legends* (*LoL*), *Age of Empires*, and *Starcraft*.[25]

By 2013, Riot Games, the publisher of *LoL*, started organizing its Championship League (TCL) in Turkey and four years later purchased servers worth US$2.5 million to seal its commitment to the region.[26] The company's investment marked an inflection point for Turkish esports. Public attention and business opportunities grew while Riot's highly structured model of competition professionalized gameplay. After the construction of Esports Stage (ES) in early 2019, the company mandated that teams live in gaming houses (dedicated spaces where teams could train) to participate in its league. Dark Passage Esports Club, which was set up well before ES in 2014, was one of the first teams to comply, showing how international capital could influence local actors over time.[27] Over the next five years, about twenty gaming houses sprang up in Istanbul. Each house formalized its players' activities and training. However, another new space emerged to commercialize esports as spectacle: arenas where professional teams performed in front of live audiences.

Although international corporations (e.g., Razer, Intel) drive industry growth, various national and nonendemic enterprises have begun to sponsor and subsidize esports. Among them are private universities, national retailers, home appliance companies, and multinational companies like Turkish Airlines whose logos emblazon gaming houses and arenas. They also collaborate with internet cafes to organize local LAN tournaments or supply aspiring pros with equipment. Another stakeholder, the Turkish government, established the Digital Games Federation of Turkey (Türkiye Dijital Oyun Federasyonu) in 2011, now the Esports Federation of Turkey (TESFED), to regulate the industry. Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's relatives were instrumental in founding the organization, a striking example of the reach of the current government's autocratic policies and unofficial control mechanisms over sport and entertainment.[28]

In sum, local communities, international conglomerates (Riot), national institutions, and confederations (TESFED) helped mold Turkish esports through the establishment of venues that increasingly regulate and commodify competitive gaming activity. Understood as "constitutive of 21st century global hypercapitalism,"[29] the global scope of (mostly) Western game companies' technical and economic infrastructure extends primarily neoliberal policies while restricting other modes of production and consumption.[30] The amalgamation of this worldwide phenomenon and the dynamics of Turkish internet and game culture has led to esports spaces that lie provocatively between the global gaming ecosystem and the government's grip over the everyday lives of Turkish players and citizens. Gaming's worldwide ideologies acting in synchronicity with local prerogatives to socially produce such spaces mirror broader historical trends worthy of future study.

## The Production of Game Spaces

When it comes to how physical space shapes play, video game researchers have probed the ways game spaces emerged alongside cinema and as gendered spaces within the domestic sphere.[31] Benjamin

Fraser calls attention to the spatial epistemology of video games in which the urban environment informs perceptions of the medium as much as the virtual environment.[32] Emma Fraser similarly adds that how one navigates and experiences urban spaces in terms of "action and ideological resistance to the powers that shape the world" can be fostered by gameplay.[33] Her argument suggests that games *as* spaces also affect players. According to Espen Aarseth, video games blur "representations of" and "representational space" to convey "spatial practice."[34]

Social conduct around and even in digital games nurtures a certain type of player in space, often to the exclusion of others, particularly those who are not heterosexual, white, and male.[35] Mia Consalvo illustrates how "gaming capital" comes from years of experience developing skills and knowledge to operate specialized controllers and navigate popular game genres.[36] Such capital enables entree into physical spaces in which players interact. Emma Vossen develops Consalvo's theories to describe how female gamers "*are treated as non-normative bodies*" meant to "*feel* abnormal" or as invaders of spaces explicitly constructed to inflate masculinized gamer capital (emphasis in original).[37] These normative assumptions extend to competitive gaming: at tournaments, for instance, men and boys often dominate play spaces and women are peripheral, tagging along as spectators or girlfriends.[38] Exclusion based on gender is just one example of how the social production of game spaces ultimately determines who, how, and what expectations of play may be imposed for amateur and professional gamers alike.

This research suggests that buildings, locations, activities, and infrastructures surrounding competitive gaming, as well as player behavior, constitute social spaces infused with ideological content that permeates everyday use.[39] Henri Lefebvre's "spatial triad" distinguishes between the "relatively objective" perceived space (or spatial practice) a person encounters and "mental constructions" or conceived space creators imagine for it. The interplay between these two modes produces the "lived space" that "represents a person's actual experience of space in everyday life."[40]

Thus, Western-style video game arcades facilitate a specific spatial practice of easy migration from game to game to allow for short periods of play. However, users may conceive of these spaces differently, as many did in the 1970s when arcades were critiqued for enticing teenagers.[41] The lived space permits complex layers of interaction that can be reinterpreted over time: what was once a meeting place free from the prying eyes of parents can later prompt nostalgia for spaces of one's youth. In Turkey, esports cafes likewise transformed from novel havens to multipurpose spaces for gaming, meeting, eating, and working for young men from all kinds of socioeconomic backgrounds. In other words, the lived space of these cafes is complex and shifts between their perceived and conceived use. Understanding how spaces like these are socially produced provides a framework to begin to disentangle the dynamic meanings players encounter within each venue.

Lefebvre's theories, however, were political. State resilience is established by authorities who focus on mending "weak points" in the produced social

space.[42] Power can be "contested and reinvented in the cracks and on the margins" because new actors and organizations reconceive its use.[43] Lefebvre's theoretical template for reimagining the scope and politics of spatial organization and activity was expanded upon by David Harvey who created a larger "grid" of spatial practice that explored embedded power relations between objects and space, and the ways they assert control, dominance, and exclusion.[44] As suggested earlier, Turkey's highly segregated gaming environment affirms ingrained gender, racial, and socioeconomic norms and preserves class relations that exclude women and gender-nonconforming gamers by reinforcing sexist and nationalistic images and practices. Spaces can dictate not only how those in power behave but also the labor, political resilience, and so on of those within the space.

Additionally, produced social space is fluid, its perceptions and conceptions constantly mutating. Doreen Massey demonstrated how space is an "ongoing production rather than pre-given." Similar to neoliberalization, space is dialectical, constantly shifting between cycles of "destruction and creation."[45] Thus, while acknowledging the power dynamics in spatial production, Massey also identified competing politics and interests at play, or what she describes as a "heterogeneous multiplicity" of possibilities.[46] How a space is perceived, conceived, and worked within depends on social and material relations and the desires, class, and power of individuals.[47] For example, gaming houses in Turkey are highly gendered, with mostly male players utilizing the space to play for a living. At the same time, such playful activity is foreclosed to women, who usually enter the house in the domestic and drearier role of cooks. Esports spaces like these present "simultaneities of ongoing, unfinished, stories," yo-yoing between competing visions.[48]

Thus, the social production of space is not purely dependent upon locale but rather impacted by the dynamic interaction of many factors, including transnational infrastructures, economics, and governance, which speaks to the salience of Lefebvre's theories on the development of digital technologies.[49] Spatial understanding is further reinforced through and informed by technological and material infrastructural layers, including resources consumed, cloud data centers and services, civil institutions and governance, interfaces, and ultimately users. Benjamin Bratton contends that this "stack" of layers ultimately directs capital, labor, and flows of information through global infrastructures and networks.[50] His work grasps the complexity of operating within contemporary space, as well as the importance of global influence: for instance, his "cloud" layer exists across national boundaries and exerts Western neoliberal economic ideologies on how data is utilized around the world. The consequence is that no matter the specific geographic locale, material, digital, and social assemblages draw on the "cognitive capital" of users,[51] which turns their labor into commodifiable data. Such infrastructures are integral to esports. The interface of *LoL* transcends any given space yet provides a host of commodifiable dividends, avatar skins, and data to reward and engage habitual players for hours and dollars spent in-game. While play spaces are strengthened by prerogatives of capitalist

production and labor outside of the locus of a specific cafe or esports arena, such structures also incorporate inherent cultural power imbalances.

Based on the literature, we imagine the following esports venues as socially produced spaces along a continuum; we will highlight how they are perceived, conceived, and experienced within and across time. As Massey suggests, these dynamics are shifting, heterogeneous, and embodied by a variety of cultural actors who experience esports at different levels of power and access. Thus, our three case studies emphasize the multilayered nature of the production of Turkish esports spaces.

Additionally, we identify how objects, organization, architecture, and informational flow create different levels of dominance and dependence within each space, especially when it comes to labor and capital. These spaces reflect how actors work and play in relation to the state's conceptions of their use. The result is an ongoing dialectical negotiation of power dynamics through potential "weak points" between the interests of an esports space's inhabitants and those who maintain it—including game publishers like Riot and AKP.[52]

Finally, following Bratton's work, we substantiate spaces as simultaneously infrastructural, global, local, and data driven.[53] Each site is connected to contemporary modes of economic and cultural gamer capital and labor that is most apparent in Riot Games' monopolistic Turkish operations.

Esports venues represent uniquely heterogeneous spaces, collectively situated within Istanbul. By analyzing how each venue in our case study is socially produced and developed, our research investigates the dynamics between the lived experiences of players, gaming culture, and the ideological visions of the government—a provocative theoretical underpinning for future historical studies into local (and non-Western) iterations of competitive gaming.

## Methods

In order to discern the development of esports spaces we took a case study approach.[54] Following Kristin Luker,[55] we strategically selected three sites based on the personal knowledge and experience of one of the authors who conducted participant observation of semiprofessional and professional teams in Istanbul.[56] Participant observation occurred between November 2016 and May 2018, but the author's connections to some of the venues (especially to adeks and Esports Stage) occurred naturally during his time as a resident of Istanbul. During the specific dates of the participant observation, the author visited various gaming houses. Anonymized Gaming House was chosen due to the availability of online content shared by the team. In particular, we considered each site's popularity, financial condition, and contextual importance within Turkey. The venues, an internet café (adeks Internet Kafe), a gaming house (Anonymized Gaming House), and an esports arena (Riot Games Esports Stage) represent archetypical Turkish esports spaces of the late 2010s and early 2020s. Given that adeks and Riot Games Esports Stage are prominent in Istanbul's esports landscape, and all material from our research was publicly promoted by either media outlets or on the venues' websites, we chose to not anonymize them. However, the gaming house was

anonymized due to the personal nature of the data gathered (e.g., player YouTube videos). Figure 1 pinpoints adeks internet cafe, Riot Games Esports Stage, and various anonymized gaming houses in the city.

**Figure 1**


Locations of three case study sites showing the central location of adeks situated between (◆) the historical city center known as the Golden Horn and (★) the first bridge between Asia and Europe. A (adeks Internet Kafe), GH (gaming houses), and ES (Riot Games Esports Stage). (Image courtesy of the authors)

Primary design material (e.g., floor plans, architectural proposals, elevations) could not be easily obtained because each establishment was developed by private enterprise. However, as suggested by literature on the social production of space, architecture alone does not delineate the space's social use. Instead, we conducted a textual analysis of secondary source multimedia material (including videos, articles, and photographs) to appraise spatial dynamics and public response to the locations. We collected and analyzed approximately a hundred items that we drew from the venues' official YouTube, Facebook, Twitch.tv, and other social-media accounts to better comprehend how the conceived space is constituted. We supplemented these materials with content from online forums, Instagram, and YouTube where users articulated their experiences in the context of esports.

In accordance with similarly theory-driven analyses of multimedia texts, we "interpretively analyzed" each site based on three vectors: (a) the production of each social space; (b) power dynamics; and (c) the broader infrastructures within which each space operates.[57] Due to language constraints, the first author performed the analysis, while conferring at regular intervals with the second author. In each case there is a description of the space, its activities and place within Istanbul. We also analyze how each is socially produced, including considerations of power, access, and multiple layers of meaning and labor incurred by their material configurations and ties to the city.[58] In our discussion we link these spaces to broader infrastructures of internet technologies and game publishers.[59] In particular, we emphasize how each space caters to different levels of gaming capital and culture, and produces a uniform player/consumer who sustains the global esports ecosystem. Competitive gaming, in turn, supports AKP's aggressive maneuvers to further commodify and privatize media industries and the city space while retaining authoritarian power.

## Analysis

### Case Study 1: Local Cafe for Global Gamers: adeks Internet Kafe

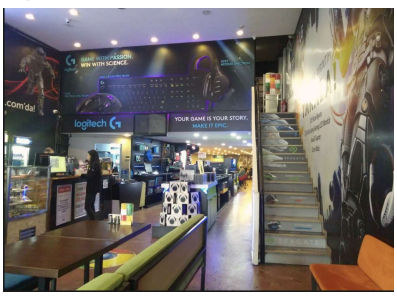
Founded in 1998 by two engineering students, adeks Internet Kafe (adeks) is a forerunner to the surge of internet cafes in the first decades of the 2000s. Opening with only eight computers,[60] adeks grew to contain more than two hundred, along with outdoor and indoor dining and workspaces. Although it sells technological equipment and provides audiovisual services, adeks is primarily a place to game, socialize, eat, and shop. The cafe is situated in one of Istanbul's oldest districts, Beşiktaş, which is historically, socially, and economically distinct from the Ataşehir district where the two other case studies are located. It has a relatively small, diverse population of 180,000 generally affluent residents and well-connected transit. The venue's customers reflect the neighborhood: stereotypical gamers, students, youngsters killing time while waiting for friends, and workers on lunch breaks.

We concentrated on adeks' older (of two) locations due to its long-standing adaptation of competitive gaming earlier than other venues, mainly stemming from its spacious interior that allows for crowds to gather. Additionally, its historical relationship with hosting commercial esports points to the transformation of internet cafe culture at large in the city. At the same time, there are other cafes that are even more invested in commercial esports because they established teams and set up gaming houses. adeks, however, from the outside, still resembles a restaurant. Inside, the foyer is lined with big screens, colorful cables, gaming equipment, and banners for technology companies and video games. Figure 2 shows the entrance of the internet cafe during an esports tournament. In figure 3 customers gather at a front counter where they reserve a computer to use, browse food trays, or order specials of the day.

**Figure 2**


Esports tournament viewing area normally used for dining. (Image from adeks website, https://adeks.net/adeks-galeri/darkorbit-turkiye-sampiyonasi/)

**Figure 3**




Entrance of adeks with the reception desk to the left, gaming technologies for sale in the middle, low-end PCs to the back, and high-end PCs upstairs. (Image from adeks website, https://adeks.net/adeks-galeri/adeks-store)/

The computer menu, however, is much more impressive than the one for food. adeks offers six different gaming options: Silver, Gold, Platinum, Platinum Plus, Elite, and Stream Render, with fees ranging between ₺5.5 and ₺15 (roughly US$0.75 to US$2) per hour as advertised on their website (see fig. 4), though the prices are subject to change as the country's economic stability worsens. The options are considerable compared to other city cafes where rental prices are set around ₺5. adeks' higher prices are justified by computer and internet speed, which they boast reaches 916 Mbps.[61] To provide fast, seamless, and reliable internet to hundreds of devices, the business contracted an independent internet provider, Grid Telekom, which laid fiber-optic cables connecting Istanbul and Ankara directly to databases in Bulgaria and Germany rather than relying on a patchwork network to Europe.[62]

**Figure 4**


Price listing for different systems. (Image from adeks website, https://adeks.net/bilgisayar-alanlarimiz/)

Beyond the register are rooms filled with cheaper computers. The upstairs is crammed with higher-end PCs. Separated from the cafe's common areas, computers dedicated for Elite and Stream Render gaming are relegated to small offices of five stations. These computers are explicitly marketed for practice. For instance, a midtier Turkish team held their boot camp in one room. Both floors are dotted with a constellation of neon lights emanating from gaming hardware, keyboards, mice, screens, and glass computer cases.

Even though large gaming chairs swamp each room and spill out into the hallway, seating is reserved only for gamers. Spectators must huddle over players' shoulders. adeks' staff continuously tends to the space. They deliver snacks and drinks to customers' stations, leaving very few reasons for gamers to quit their play. The PCs are self-monitoring with protective software that prohibits access to pornography and other websites deemed dangerous by the government. Regulations further require internet cafes to record who enters and exits twenty-four hours a day with security cameras, as well as the age of attendees: those younger than twelve are barred access without parents or guardians.

In an era of overt privatization and erosion of public spaces, adeks serves as a safe haven for youth to congregate until 2:00 a.m. under the careful scrutiny of the owners.[63] The cafe welcomes gamers of various classes, skills, and interests to stop by and play and supports a diverse set of participatory activities—shopping, eating, meeting friends, watching matches, and so on.

adeks brings out the potential esports athlete in an everyday gamer. The space courts the aspiring professional with a retinue of gaming equipment on display. All PCs are equipped with mechanical keyboards, noise-cancelling headphones, wide mousepads, gaming mice, and chairs, not to mention the latest titles. Young people can rent a room with their friends to train or try out the latest hardware. They can even enter the next

tournament to win a better version of the mouse they use in the cafe. Thus, the space is suffused with gaming capital—the signs, symbols, and objects that appeal to any hard-core gamer. When it comes time for esports tournaments, usually a section of adeks is cordoned off. Young men crowd the more spacious dining area to either follow the matches on the big projector screen near the register (where awards ceremonies are also held) or await their turn to compete. These dynamics, constituted from the entrenched relationship between Istanbul, the café, and local gamers, point to the need for a more comprehensive historical review of such venues beyond the scope of this paper.

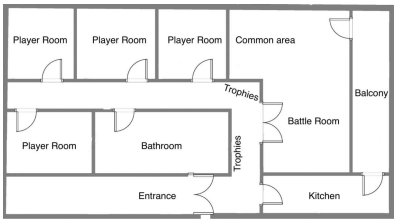
adeks' lived space pits some perceptions against conceptions. Built around internet cafe norms, the space fulfills the needs of both gamers and nongamers. However, its diffuse modes of spatial practice are mitigated by gaming capital, represented in everything from the vendor posters papering the walls to the arrangement of rooms that nurture a certain form of professionalism. In this sense, the space contains "multiple understandings" of its use,[64] simultaneously open to all who can pay, but exclusive to those who are versed in games and gaming. Gamers are first physically divided in the space according to their socioeconomic status determined by their PC reservation. Gaming prowess can turn into social and economic capital,[65] with some players in Turkey achieving high-income celebrity status.[66] The possibility of reaching this level of prestige is reinforced at adeks when the space is reconfigured for ad hoc tournaments. There, gamers solidify their reputations as they compete, shout, watch others, win, and lose. Thus, adeks accommodates the desires, social class, and politics of gamers. It is at once a staging ground and stepping-stone for aspiring professionals, esports enthusiasts, and more casual players who coexist in the cafe. Simply, users can imagine what it is to be and perform like an esports athlete and begin to acquire through the space's material configuration the gaming capital necessary to do so.

Exclusivity and multiple layers of meaning also apply to internet access, which is heavily regulated by the Turkish government. Restrictions are justified as a way to preclude young customers from extremism and raise a conservative generation in line with AKP's political and social ideologies.[67] adeks' direct link to Europe through Grid Telekom yields uncut and fast digital speeds, which, as noted in the introduction, is indicative of a broader history regarding the infrastructural development of esports globally. This suggests a space with unbridled connection to the outside world, but most customers use it solely for gaming. Young gamers get a sense of their future career through the meritocratic principles implanted within the space, tournaments, and software while computer networks infuse transnational capital into the country. In this sense, adeks resembles one of the many "management associations" Lefebvre identifies that fill gaps in the "weak points" of the state's spatial control.[68] While internet cafes may be weak in terms of access to alternative forms of media, and the like, adeks is a place where deviance from authoritarian control only transpires within the purview of gaming's neoliberal logic and cultural norms, which seem to maintain rather than resist state dominance.

### Case Study 2: Sanctioning Play, Rationalizing Labor: Anonymized Gaming House

The dedicated gaming houses in Istanbul are mostly located in urban neighborhoods like Beşiktaş, Kadıköy, and Ataşehir due to the availability of fiber-optic cables. Gaming houses emerged in the mid-2010s sponsored by internet cafes that had the bare minimum infrastructural necessities (such as the computers, monitors, and peripherals). Ataşehir also hosts Riot Games' Esports Stage (ES) which is dedicated to *LoL* esports matches. However, to participate on that stage and in the national league, a team must operate a gaming house, a hallmark in the historical development of Turkey's professional gaming, which stationed esports within this revitalized district. Because of its proximity to ES, we focus on a TCL team's Anonymized Gaming House (GH), which provides a direct pipeline from practice (in house) to performance (on stage) for professional players and, like a factory, is strictly protected, segregated, and designed to churn out product and profit. No one is allowed entry except workers (e.g., players and managers). Social space is ordered not only by the place's physical layout but also the responsibilities and abilities of those within it. In GH, six to seven people live together at all times: players, a coach, and a house manager. The manager is responsible for overseeing chores, attending to the team's needs, and making sure everybody is training. The players are contractually obligated to work a certain number of hours. However, in part to create a cohesive unit, they are also expected to bond. In the entryway, to add a sense of legitimacy, team trophies are on display; next is the biggest room, dubbed the battle arena, where every player has their own station for practice. See figure 5 for our rendering of GH's floor plan.

**Figure 5**




Floor plan of Anonymized GH. (Image courtesy of authors)

The battle room is the GH's liveliest area. Somewhere between an internet cafe, a dormitory, and a teenager's den, there are five tables with PCs for the team and another for the coach to supervise gamers and regulate their play/work time. There is also a large L-shaped couch in front of a big screen on which athletes review tactics and watch demos. The room is disorderly, with stray cables, empty fast-food containers, water bottles, and unused gaming hardware safeguarded by two lackadaisical cats.

At the hall's end the kitchen is bustling: the team's cook, who unsurprisingly is the only woman employed by the team,[69] prepares pots of simmering food. Her healthy meals are consumed in a wide dining room three times a day by the whole team to foster cohesion and communication. Cabinets also overflow with snacks to further boost members' high-quality gameplay. By contrast, the least casual and smallest spaces are the athletes' bedrooms. Vlogs and promotional videos show little in them apart from a bed, dresser, and

personal computer. Devoid of any personalization, they highlight the precarity of professional esports. Altogether, gaming houses blur work and domestic spheres, with managers constantly monitoring player activity and output.

A multiplicity of meanings defines GH space, vacillating not between gamer and nongamer norms, as with adeks, but between work and home. It is perceived as both, enabling players to eat, sleep, and dine within steps of their workstations, a constant reminder that they are obligated to train. At the same time, conceptions and lived experience of the space also embody the insecurity of esports athletes who seesaw between work and play. They intimately work together and are carefully surveilled by their coaches. Workstations are messy while bedrooms are sterile; players are kept at bay from fun for its own sake. Despite its coziness, GH is designed to maximize training and turn play into a productive force; it consolidates mealtimes, gym activities, entertainment, privacy, home, and office in order for team members to perpetually play. Ultimately, GH cultivates what Ergin Bulut calls playful and obedient subjectivities.[70]

This sort of authoritarian control of players works well within the broader urban setting within which GH is situated. The history of Istanbul's geography, and specifically locating gaming houses around a single neoliberal district, seems to directly impact players who rarely have cause to leave the house. With a shopping mall next door, most wants are met, to which house members attest. This restrictive and precarious activity is normalized within not just the bounds of the esports industry but also the neoauthoritarian state. Players provide labor that is easy to manage and promote on the world stage and fills seats at the local Riot Games' arena.

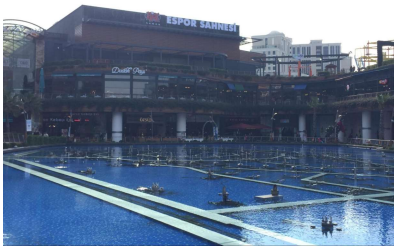
### Case Study 3: Esports in the Mall: Riot Games' Esports Stage

Just a short drive from GH is the Watergarden Mall which houses the Riot Games Esports Stage (ES). ES is dedicated to *LoL*'s Turkish Championship League (TCL) and is one of the biggest esports stadiums in Europe.[71] Its construction was first announced in the popular press in August 2018,[72] and Binali Yıldırım (then speaker of the Grand National Assembly who also acted as the prime minister and in various other roles with AKP) attended its grand opening in January 2019.[73] ES is a natural extension of Riot Games' 2017 investment in server space and underscores the appeal of Turkey (and its peripheries in the Balkans and Middle East) as a potentially lucrative market. Working closely with the government, Riot Games affirmed its importance when the prime minister and minister of education attended two different events in ES and declared the venue as "the next big thing."[74] ES is in one of the richest neighborhoods in Istanbul (see fig. 1). It sits across from the town hall and is surrounded by the headquarters of banks, insurance companies, and state-funded real-estate brokers. The arena is central to a distinct and high-end privatized zone regulated according to the logic of neoliberalism.[75] Part of an urban renewal project, one of the hallmarks of neoliberalization,[76] the construction of the quarter changed the area's rural landscape from shanty houses and personal workshops into gated communities, skyscraper office buildings, and

financial centers funded by and benefiting from national policies and international digital infrastructures.

Privatization is further sustained by Watergarden's security measures. Lower classes are kept out. To get into the mall and ES, bags and bodies are scanned. This ensures a safe environment for families to shop, eat, and have fun. The mall, paradigmatic of the transition of Turkish public space to exclusive use, is already exciting without ES, filled with big screens and even performances over a pool in the galleria.[77] Walking past fountains, high-end shops, and luxurious restaurants, one eventually reaches escalators that go up to ES's entrance, as illustrated in figure 6.

**Figure 6**



Esports Stage in the third floor of Watergarden. (Image courtesy of authors)

High glass walls, both inviting and isolating, encircle the arena. Access is granted with a ticket that costs about US$4. From there is the entrance to the stage, a few food carts, and a shop filled with TCL team merchandise. The stage is a cross between a movie theater and an internet cafe: dark, crowded, and expansive. Screens and speakers blasting the voices of casters or analysts border the interior. Around one thousand seats face the stage where matches are played. In between events, young people either enjoy snacks at ES or wander the mall (especially if the match is unexciting). To that end, Riot's arena connects esports with consumerism via Watergarden and renders it as spectacle through wide screens and speakers broadcasting the game.

Its connection to consumerism typifies ES as a heterogeneous space that exhibits global gaming norms and neoliberal neoauthoritarian ideas. ES is one of the most exclusive venues for competitive play and fandom in Turkey, not only because of the elite matches, but also the high level of private security. Similarly, because Watergarden is a space for consumption, Riot Games promotes esports as a commodity and spectacle just like any other product or service in the mall. Fans can either choose to watch or buy, further privatizing, secluding, and sanctioning esports participation. ES is foremost dependent on the gaming capital of its attendees. As a consequence, it indulges young and affluent men who follow the TCL, root for its teams, and have the leisure to come each weekend. Through ES and its surroundings, the city emerges as a "privileged instrument" of the international esports ecosystem.[78] ES can be thought of as the most recent manifestation of an historical state project that aims to link Istanbul to global social and economic networks. While a more detailed history of these policies is warranted, ES manifests the dynamics of this agenda in present competitive gaming. ES is, on the one hand, buoyed by the big screens and loudspeakers, along with cheering fans, who hail each competition with shouts, claps, and

waving noodles. On the other hand, the arena as a lived space is decidedly sterile, partially because of its location in a high-end mall surrounded by gated communities conceived to only appeal to a certain kind of gamer—one who plays and watches *LoL*.[79] Additionally, they must consume esports like any other fan of the global phenomenon. This consumption, marketed to affluent young men, is sustained by Riot's business strategies to completely control their video games, professional computers, and merchandising. Altogether, the venues we detail acutely illustrate the globalized and commodified qualities of esports that take on different forms within an authoritarian government's neoliberal policies.

## Discussion: Esports Spaces in the Neoliberal City and the Riot Cloud

adeks, GH, and ES signify disparate yet unified articulations of aligned and simultaneous phenomena in Turkish esports' development. Under AKP's right-wing populism, each space reflects the neoliberal neoauthoritarian imaginaries of the government. The spaces collectively constitute an esports industry, and its attendant culture, by catering to ambitious amateurs, esports athletes, and consumers. At the same time, their material configurations, relationship to the city, and the social and economic gaming capital users bring to these sites enable esports in a different mode.

adeks' elite gaming technologies allow aspiring pros to potentially transform their capital into legitimized labor. GH outfits a space to constantly regulate and monitor a team, which maximizes the capabilities of players. Finally, ES affords a sterilized experience for spectatorship, fandom, and spectacle that epitomizes the privatization and commodity form of video game playing. These underlying qualities are not independent, but rather build on each other through the data-driven assemblages of digital connectivity that exist in each space. Essentially, internet technologies ground Turkish esports in global networks of capital, labor, and culture. The spaces' cloud layer, supported by companies like Riot Games, stretches across national boundaries and frames consumption through interfaces like *LoL*'s ranking system, which, by grouping gamers based on skill levels, obscures the social inequalities behind success.[80]

Our three case studies expose this layer to varying degrees within the bounds and prerogatives of AKP's neoliberal policies; each space relies on state-sanctioned infrastructure (e.g., the internet, surveillance, regulation, security) and sponsorship, which paradoxically provides private transnational enterprises a means to further commodify gameplay. Simply, esports represents yet another enterprise in the broader history of Istanbul's neoliberal transformation, in which gaming easily valorized and maintained the conservative authority of the state. As AKP's urban transformation projects attract foreign capital to the city, the material organization of our cases shows that the esports sites are structured for various relationships to the industry: a fan, an aspiring pro, or a professional gamer.

### The Riot Cloud

The Turkish esports spaces we describe are layered with technical infrastructures that we call the Riot Cloud, or the software and hardware that support *LoL* gameplay. It flattens the player/athlete experience, so that anyone who engages with this global phenomenon must operate within (roughly) the same digital interface, store, and skill set to achieve success. The layer thus evenly distributes and bolsters a global gaming culture and depends on the utilization of gaming capital. The representations, practices, and governance of Riot Games through this layer not only make GH and ES possible but also dictate the social life of gaming in adeks by reconfiguring its space to work within the dynamics of the global esports ecosystem. As demonstrated, adeks sponsors tournaments, holds award ceremonies, and offers specialized gaming equipment in sanctioned spaces that encourage competitive gaming.

The infrastructure for the Riot Cloud made its first appearance in Istanbul with the 2017 purchase of servers that created and maintain an online space where Turkish *LoL* gamers could play with minimal pings, or the latency gamers experience during online gameplay caused by the travel time of data from the user to the server. Various top-level Turkish players and teams either complained about the high rate of pings in Turkey or expressed a desire to play in Europe.[81] In response, Riot Games not only presented an opportunity for Turkish gamers to play competitively in their home country, but by mandating gaming houses (e.g., GH) and shows in their arena (ES), extended the reasoning of the Riot Cloud into material space. Expanding their reach to online destinations and wider online audiences, Riot broadcasts these games on Twitch. Similarly, Riot collaborates with internet cafes through exclusive agreements called "*LoL* Cafes" that motivate gamers/users to accumulate game points and have their avatars try on different guises, which are normally unlocked through payments, during gameplay. There are about eighty of these cafes in Istanbul.[82] Thus, arenas, gaming houses, online sites, and internet cafes become spaces where gaming is conducted for and commodified by Riot—building a globalized gaming culture upon which the Riot Cloud dialectically depends for survival. Given its worldwide, yet paradoxically, highly localized influence, a study of the historical development of Riot's material services (along with similar clouds from other publishers) is certainly merited.

adeks, considered a more democratic venue, likewise professionalizes and commodifies video game playing through segregated spaces that range from Silver to Platinum and Elite—echoing the ranking systems of video games like *LoL* to which the cafe, via the cloud, directly connects its patrons. Dedicated gaming rooms for aspiring professionals to practice are backed by a robust internet link to Europe. This internet infrastructure is also a boon to adeks when arranging tournaments in which would-be pros can compete. adeks highlights how infrastructure itself adds layers of meaning to space as a local point of play while entwined globally with Riot games' corporate charter and regulations.[83] The venue's business and operations (and even location in a bustling commercial district and transportation hub) are entangled with the Riot Cloud because aspiring amateurs can elevate their gameplay to the level demanded by the gaming house or arena. Together the spaces nurture a standard Western-like player who satisfies the

economic demands of Riot in terms of gaming capital and culture. The layer enables a homogeneous form of competitive play to persist and subsist within the confines of Istanbul and its idiosyncratic governance and control.

By contrast, players' and fans' relationship to Riot is more directly sustained and cultivated by GH and ES. Their form and location in the newly revitalized Ataşehir district allow for this cloud to condense around a vital economic and infrastructural core where commerce and high-speed connections are readily available. The exclusive spaces only permit inhabitants to think about and interact with *LoL*. ES is built like a theater where esports is primarily a form of spectatorship, while GH veers toward a factory model that manufactures goods for fans who flock to ES. In other words, the athletes at GH labor to satisfy ES consumers all while under the shadow of the Riot Cloud, even though they may engage with it less directly. The ecosystem allowing for this cloud formation is the consequence of neoliberal neoauthoritarian policies that deregulate industries and restructure the city in concert with international capital. Each space champions distinct activities around competitive gaming by crafting the configuration of the venues, the surrounding cityscape, and governance, which highlight key points to consider in future historical research into competitive gaming's worldwide development, as well as studies of the Riot Cloud and similar services. Together the spaces cultivate a user who has a surfeit of opportunities to take part in esports as long as they acquiesce to the financial, social, and spatial conditions set forth by Riot and its affiliated gaming culture.

## The Neoliberal City and Issues of Governance

While adeks, GH, and ES sustain gaming within the Riot Cloud, its seamless integration is sanctioned by a Turkish government that increasingly promotes privatization, surveillance, and the commodification of public space. In fact, different modes of neoliberalization by Turkish officials and the hold of state authority are represented through the production of these social spaces, as witnessed by high-level bureaucrats' repeated praise of investment in esports and disdain for internet cafes. Such places, as stated earlier, are deemed dangerous to youth and are limited in terms of location, operating hours, and access to content.

GH and ES reside in a district where gentrification dramatically transformed a rural landscape into modern blocks of skyscrapers, gated communities, and malls in just a few years.[84] In this way, they parallel the initiatives Peck et al. see as hallmarks of neoliberalization.[85] With vast governmental as well as foreign and national assistance, neoliberal, authoritarian, and conservative policies cast these public spaces around approved classed and gendered dynamics.[86] Unlike adeks, ES is solely accessible by passing through the Watergarden Mall. GH is even more circumscribed, ensconced in a skyscraper where only residents and validated guests can enter. Both sites perfectly comply with the surveilled gated communities around them, creating exclusive gaming and fandom spaces.

The remaking of the Ataşehir district into a commercial and residential sector reinforces the privatization of the esports industry in Turkey. The actual product of esports (i.e., professional gameplay) exists in the team-owned GH. At the same time, consumption of esports as a viable commodity is actualized in ES: fans can easily purchase team merchandise or a ticket to a professional game. Privatization and commodification go hand-in-hand, buoyed by the close proximity of the two venues. The city props up the Riot Cloud while aligning with AKP's policies that increase elitism and decrease the working class's political power.[87]

adeks' place in Istanbul is more nuanced. The cafe is situated organically in its neighborhood and is a more public space. By not identifying with a single esports title and planning tournaments around different games, it breeds a more democratic and participatory esports scene. However, its exorbitant charges to play on select gaming equipment are geared toward would-be pros. In addition, these aspirants have to pay entrance fees to enter competitions. By endorsing gaming and creating additional areas and activities around competitive play, users' experiences can be turned into capital. Located in the city's center where many people gather, it also boosts the professional careers of its clientele.

In adeks's case, the city surrounding the space strengthens its recognized use and value. GH and ES make sense within the context of urban renewal projects, while adeks mirrors its historical heritage and environs; both demonstrate how geography and progress impact the local development of competitive gaming. The spaces are regulated by the city that surrounds them. Although their geography and arrangement within the Ataşehir and Beşiktaş districts cater to different types of players, the venues still commodify and profit from esports activity, with the help of the Riot Cloud layer. In other words, the city itself reinforces the multiplicity of meanings embedded within adeks, GH, and ES. It facilitates their connection to Riot through infrastructure, policy, and, in the case of GH and ES, material construction that reinforces conceptions of these spaces as distinctly globalized and cosmopolitan even while perceptually distinct from other parts of Istanbul.

Ultimately, esports spaces in Turkey are representative of broader trends in society. They comply with the government's agenda to advance freedom of commerce; companies like Riot are encouraged to invest in the country. As a consequence, esports has seen enormous growth and interest since 2017. However, just as AKP generally oversees commercial development, media, and public space, esports is similarly surveilled and controlled. The partnership with Riot is in some ways ideal precisely because their cloud layer allows for further regulation and centralization of gaming practices, technologies, and infrastructures. The result is that gaming cafes, houses, and arenas provide easy points of entry into the world of esports, which are flourishing in ways they previously could not in Turkey. But success is contingent upon the prerogatives of the government (AKP) and game publishers (Riot), who set mutually beneficial restrictions to which players must inevitably adhere. Not only does this reality underscore how the historical development of esports is contingent on both global and local actors, but for those who might not conform to

those normative and social boundaries, the possibilities of new spaces in which to subsist are dwindling.

The outcome is that esports spaces are pivotal in perpetuating the peculiar form of neoauthoritarian neoliberalization epitomized in Turkey. Occasionally, the social production of each space provides weak points through which players can interact with ideologies outside of the tight control of AKP. However, these gaps are filled quickly by norms (and infrastructure) from the broader gaming and esports industry, which itself also tightly constrains player activity while maximizing profit and labor from players. Rather than promoting a wildly different type of space, these shortcomings actually reinforce state conventions under the aegis of (mostly Western) gaming. Of course, the lived space is more complex—young players may not come to gaming venues with the idea of perpetuating neoauthoritarian rule but are instead primarily interested in playing. However, the layers of meaning within each space actually abet economic, political, and social conformity with neoliberal neoauthoritarianism rather than any form of resistance. As management associations, they successfully prop up rather than oppose the government. Their westernized form of gaming produces the profit and space for AKP to hold power.

## Conclusion

This paper used three archetypical esports spaces in Turkey to better interpret how social, cultural, and political conditions impacted its development. We found that each venue works within, rather than around, the neoliberal policies of privatization, government regulation, and commodification effectuated by the ruling AKP regime. As a consequence, these spaces accommodate a homogeneous yet rapidly growing form of primarily westernized competitive gaming without disrupting Istanbul's autocratic sovereignty. In fact, esports support the neoauthoritarian control of the government by fostering restrictive, secure, and neoliberally oriented spaces.

As Jin and Taylor show with South Korean esports, [88] governments frequently influence the development of competitive gaming, in particular infrastructure and spaces for competitive play. Similarly, digital networks filter distinct ideologies and interests through the collaboration of state and private investment. In Turkey, our findings highlight that esports venues facilitate the goals of national power brokers by utilizing gamer capital garnered within the dynamics of a global gaming culture. In other words, we find that competitive gaming serves (neo)authoritarian regimes in unique ways. Although it offers a connection to a global enterprise, the social, material, and even digital strategies of esports publishers reinforce authoritarian norms of restrictive access, privacy, and surveillance within neoliberal deprivatization and the extraction of player and fan capital. Rather than an emancipatory force, esports venues are wielded as instruments of authoritarian compliance and control. Certainly, studies into other neoliberal countries and their investment into esports are warranted. Further, as we highlighted throughout this work, additional investigation into how competitive gaming fits into the historical trajectories of these regimes is deserved. The

interplay between global and local gaming compounded by sociopolitical forces is part of larger projects regarding neoliberalism, entertainment, and spatial renewal. These dynamics, as we show in the case of Turkey, are at once a worldwide phenomenon while geographically distinct based on material and social developments that exert influence on the present. Future historical research will only clarify these influences.

More generally, esports are not only meaningful because of the digital spaces they foster but as another manifestation of the reordering of physical space according to broader ideologies and logics. The Turkish case shows that neoliberalism and authoritarianism do not necessarily conflict. Esports spaces contain multiplicities of meanings, beyond games, based on their spatial production and geography, all of which inform players' daily experience. Competitive gaming as a worldwide phenomenon may produce spaces that look eerily similar, with fans huddled in front of screens cheering on their favorite teams, but the diverse spaces in which players compete contain a myriad of seemingly incompatible political and cultural meanings.

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