

WHAT DOES THE CONCEPT OF ESPORTS MEAN TO YOU?

AN APPLIED ETHNOGRAPHY BY SEB GONZALEZ AND YANCI PENGELLY



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TIP:

Look out for effective mechanics that some teams in the Overwatch League use when facing foes.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It's extremely common to find someone who follows a sports team, especially in the city of Atlanta. A new trend in the world of sports is to follow professional competitive video gaming, commonly referred to as **eSports**.

This report focuses on learning the significance and meaning behind the community and fanbase behind eSports.

The specific eSport we chose to follow was **Overwatch**, an arena-styled team shooter developed and published by Blizzard Entertainment. We had the pleasure of getting to know the **Atlanta Royal Family**, a group of fans of the Overwatch League Team, the **Atlanta Reign**. By using *applied ethnography*, we observed and participated in group events, such as "watch parties", where we observed the fans cheer on their favorite Overwatch League teams at a local venue that would play live streams of the matches.

Through our meetings, we talked to the fans and asked them open ended questions, allowing them to navigate the conversation in a way they wanted to.

Our objective was to find what eSports meant to the members of the Atlanta Royal Family. We wanted to understand what sets eSports apart from traditional sports and what the community around it means to the fans.

CHALLENGES

- The environment was very busy, so it was tricky to focus on certain details.
- New Atlanta Reign players attended the Home-stand Afterparty, making Battle and Brew even more busy and packed with fans.
- We had to be mindful of game times because fans didn't want to be away from the tv too long.



OVERWATCH
LEAGUE

INTRODUCTION

Esports, also known as electronic sports, is a competition held for gamers that usually centers around one game. Individuals and teams go up against each other during these competitions. eSports can be played individually in 1vs1 matches, or as a team. Around the 2010s, esports became noticed more widely, inspiring game developers to create games that catered more to the culture of esports. Some of these games are multiplayer online battle arena, fighting, and first-person shooter games like *Overwatch*. With a such a rich gaming culture that's been around thriving for years, we wanted to delve into the intricacies of esports culture and see what core values makes the community what it is today.

Overwatch was released in May of 2016 by the computer software company *Blizzard Entertainment*. It is a team based shooter game, played from a first person perspective. The player can choose from a roster of 31 (and counting!) characters that fall into the roles of Tank, Damage or Support. A traditional *Overwatch* match is played in a 6 vs 6 player format in a variety of game modes, including securing control points or escorting a payload.

In November of 2016, at Blizzard-Activision's annual expo and convention, *Blizzcon*, it was announced that *Overwatch* would be getting a professional eSports league, sponsored by Blizzard-Activision itself. In its first season in 2018, twelve teams with ties to major cities around the world would compete for a chance to win one million dollars, or for a share of the \$3.5 million prize pool.

The Atlanta Reign did not become an official team in the **Overwatch League** until the 2019 season. The team is owned by the Atlanta Esports Ventures, which is a joint organization, owned by Cox Enterprises and Province.



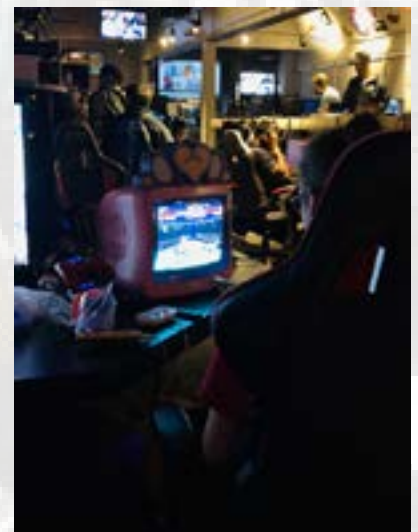
Characters in the "damage" role are responsible for dealing the most amount of damage to the enemy player(s)



Characters in the "tank" role are acting shields for their allies and are responsible for mitigating the enemy team's damage dealt.



Characters in the "support" role have useful abilities, such as healing and stat boosting 'buffs' to give their allies a leading edge against the enemy.

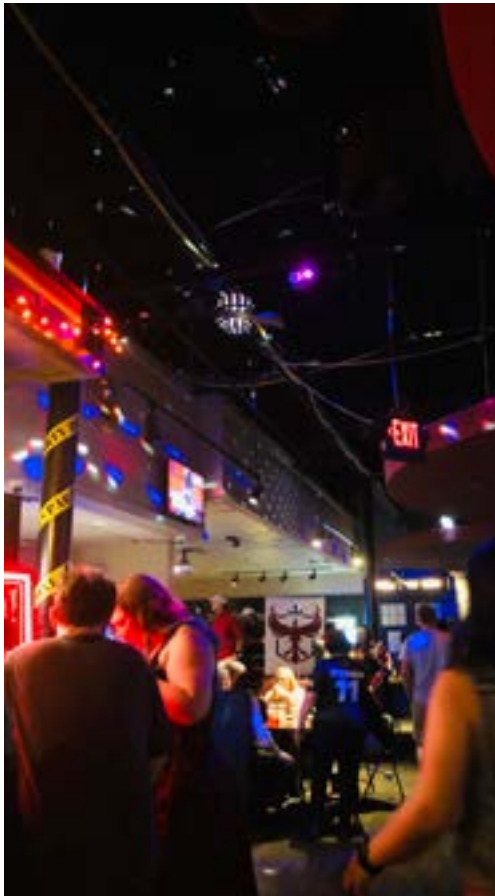


METHODOLOGY

In order to uncover the meaning behind eSports and the community surrounding it, we employed a process called **applied ethnography**. An applied ethnography utilizes practical research methods of anthropology to solve a hypothesis.

We used some targeted questions to get a conversation going with the members of the Atlanta Royal Family. Some of the predetermined questions were:

- What are some formalities used when teams are competing?
- Do you consider eSports a legitimate form of sports?
- Do you follow other professional competitive video games?
- Do you follow traditional sports?
- If you follow both, do you differentiate between them?
- What piqued your interest into following a particular team?



We attended three of **the Royal Family's** Watch Parties at Battle and Brew, a "geek bar" located in Sandy Springs, Georgia. At Battle and Brew, patrons can order geek themed food and drink at the bar or from a wandering server. The walls of the establishment are adorned in murals on the wall of popular characters, such as Bowser from the Super Mario Bros. video games, original pieces of artwork for sale and posters. A small segment of the bar was a restaurant area where guests could be seated and have a traditional dining experience. Just past the restaurant area were doors that led outside to a patio area for guests to smoke or socialize in a less noisy area.

A major part of Battle and Brew's business model (aside from their quirky menu loaded with pop culture references) are their hourly rental services. One could rent a couch to play from a selection of gaming consoles with a large library of games that were available upon request, or it was also possible to rent one of the gaming computers, which was preloaded with a massive library of popular multiplayer titles, including Overwatch.

There was no shortage of televisions around the bar area. And towards the opposite end of the bar was a desk where patrons could rent out TVs with connections to most modern consoles, tabletop games or free-play on the arcade cabinets. Next to the checkout desk was a small café area where espresso drinks were served. Though due to the weather and partylike vibes of the watch parties, the staffing focus was less on the café and more on the bar.

PARTICIPANTS

HERO GALLERY

P1

Megan

A "cosplayer", dressed like one of the iconic characters of the Overwatch franchise named D.Va. She was at the Atlanta Royal Family-Homestand Party at Battle and Brew. She's a fan of the Atlanta Reign team, especially because they're a local team.

P2

Kendra

A cosplayer attendant and a caretaker for the Masquerade which was a cosplay group for Overwatch. She also served as community and social media outreach. If you needed to talk to someone important, she would be the one to talk to. She was eager about the game and although she had never played it before, she was still very active in the local Overwatch community.

P3

Ryan

Ran the platform called The Bird Watchers which is an Overwatch League Podcast. This podcast held weekly overviews of matches that took place with the Overwatch league and contenders. Ryan graduated from Kennesaw State back when it was still called Southern Polytechnic-State University with a degree in game design.

P4

Val

He was good friends with Kendra and also a fan of esports and gaming in general. He followed high-level competitive Overwatch before the Overwatch League started.



NOW LOADING...

OBSERVATIONS

FIRST MEETING: THE ATLANTA HOMESTAND

At the front desk for Battle and Brew, there was a standing white and red banner that read “ATLANTA REIGN WATCH PARTY”, with the team’s logo; a bold red phoenix, rising upwards inside of a dark grey royal border. That made it easy for us to know we were in the right place.



Our first meetup we attended was the Homestand Afterparty, which was a continuation a special event held by the Overwatch League that took place here in Atlanta at the Cobb Energy Center. The event was sold out and aftermarket tickets were starting around \$150, so the more economic option was to hit up the Battle and Brew and meet the Royal Family there.

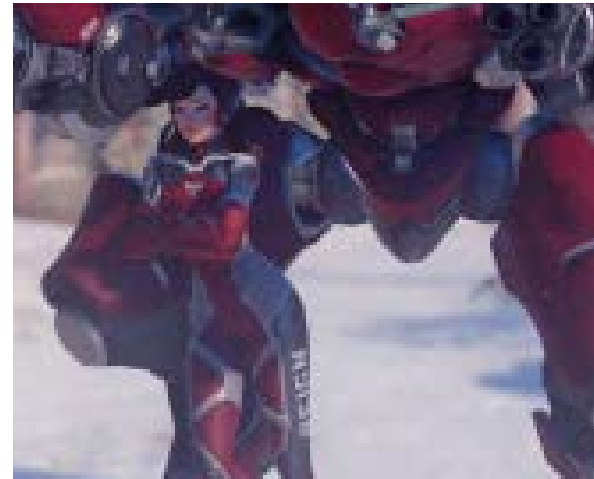
The front desk attendants were two friendly ladies, welcoming us to the establishment and checking IDs to issue wristbands for guests over the age of 21 who wanted to participate in alcohol consumption that night. When we asked where the Royal Family was and where the watch party was, we were directed to a stage-like area with the same banner standing next to the entrance to the seating section. Pitchers of water and soda laid out for the guests. Next to the drinks table was a stage-like area elevated by two small steps and had chairs, bar stools and couches laid out for the fans to relax and socialize from.

There were five displays set up in the seating area. The largest one was a pulled down projector screen and was to the immediate left of the stairs. Rows of chairs were set out for the fans to gather and watch. On the next wall, to the right, were two televisions, one was set on a table and the other was mounted on the wall. Two sets of barstools with a round table were set up. To the right of the mounted television setup, across from the projector screen were two

couches that sat three people each and two tables with a television on each.

Ignoring the banner, several of the attendees of the watch party were dressed in all sorts of jerseys from the Atlanta Reign, customized to have their own names on it or sporting the names of other popular players, and a small population were sporting apparel from other teams, such as the Houston Outlaws, the Philadelphia Fusion, or the Florida Mayhem. There was no live game happening at the time because this event was celebrating the fun matches that happened over the course of the Homestand earlier that day. The televisions were playing highlights and replays from the games played earlier from the Homestand event.

During the Homestand afterparty, we spoke with Megan, who was dressed as the popular Overwatch character D.VA (shown on the right). We took the interview outside to the patio area where it was not as noisy. She was part of the **Atlanta Royal Masquerade**, a group with strong ties to the Atlanta Royal Family that focused on group events and photo-ops of them dressed as Overwatch’s diverse cast of characters. She was used to busy atmospheres because of her role, but was happy to answer questions about her experience as a fan of eSports.



THE ATLANTA HOMESTAND, CONTINUED

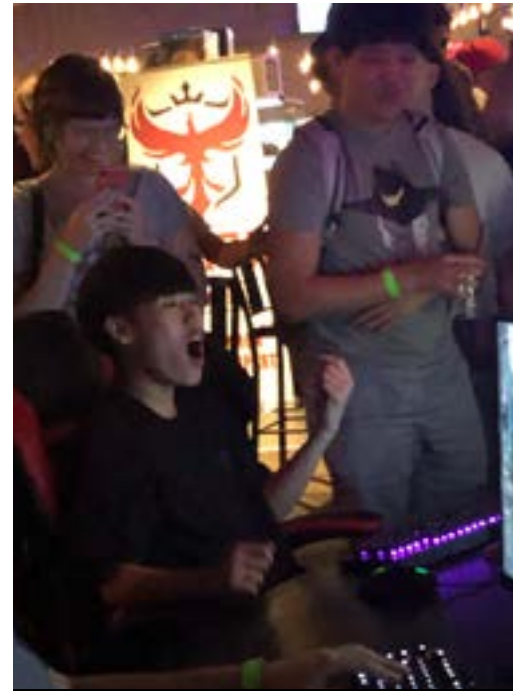


Megan (pictured on the left, crouching) was a graduate from University of Georgia, so she was always a fan of sports, especially college football. She enjoys eSports and traditional sports equally and uses it as a way to bond with her husband. A frequent topic of conversation between them are strategies the pro players use and the interesting lineups in teams. Her friends and family are aware of her interests and don't mind it or shame it. Overwatch was the only eSports she followed and before the Atlanta Reign were introduced, she was a fan of the Philadelphia Fusion and Houston Outlaws. She picked her favorite players based on their personality and play style. She cited Daco, a player for the Reign as one of her current favorites. Although she recognizes eSports and traditional sports as equals, she did note there was a difference between the cultures of Overwatch fans and Atlanta United fans.

The next Royal Family Member we spoke with was Kendra. She was one of the organizers for the Atlanta Royal Masquerade. The Royal Masquerade is an organization affiliated with the Atlanta Royal Family, but their focus was on costumed roleplaying, commonly known as "cosplay". While she did not cosplay as much, she helped organize meetups and events for the Masquerade members to attend and get photos taken at places like fan conventions. She was also a strong point of contact and was eager to help set up conversations with anyone of importance in the Royal Family. She handed out business cards to newcomers with contact info for all of the Royal Family's social media channels.

One of the interesting parts of the interview with her was that she has never played Overwatch before. She just enjoys the character designs and the local community. However, she follows the Atlanta Reign as a loyal fan, all the same. When asked about her relationship with eSports, she mentioned the *culture clash as her parents were immigrants from Hong Kong, so they didn't "get it"*, and as a result, she never mentioned it outside of the Royal Family group. She was excited that night as well because some of the players from the Reign were going to be at Battle and Brew that night!

Before the night concluded, Daco, one of the players (and a favorite of Megan's) was situated at a rental PC station where he was playing a heated game of Overwatch. At least two dozen fans were gathered around him, hushed and watching intently. Although the Atlanta Reign represents the city of Atlanta, we learned that night that the teams aren't actually based in the city that their team is named after. His presence at the Homestand Afterparty was pretty significant.



[MEGAN]: I LIKE DACO BECAUSE HE IS ME BUT I'M ALSO KIND OF LIKE ERSTER BECAUSE HE IS SILENT BUT DEADLY.

TIP:

Overwatch League matches are played in a series of "Stages", that are comprised of 5 games played across 4 weeks.

STAGE 4, WEEK 1

THE ATLANTA REIGN VS THE HUANGZHOU SPARK



Another night at the Battle and Brew, this time we were at an actual watch party! Before the games were scheduled to begin, we got a chance to meet up with Leo (pictured, rear center in the photo), who is the owner and main organizer of the Atlanta Royal Family. We had spoken to him before briefly over direct messages on MeetUp, so it was nice to get a face to the name. We asked if he or anyone he knew would have the time to talk about the culture of eSports and what the community meant to them. He led us outside and introduced us to our next interviewees, Val and Ryan.

Val was dressed in a black and red button up Atlanta Reign jersey and Ryan was sporting a blue graphic t-shirt that said “Dogman” (a player for the Atlanta Reign). With much more time and a not as hectic night, we were ready to have some deeper conversations

with the Atlanta Royal Family members.

Val is actually a friend of Kendra (the organizer for the Royal Masquerade we had met at the Home-stand!). He introduced Overwatch to her and followed professional level Overwatch before the Overwatch League became a thing. He began getting into eSports through the Apex Esports Organization’s tournaments. He accredits the success of eSports through its localization. A key part of picking a favorite team not only is picking out favorite players, but also showing pride for where you live.

When asked about the burnout culture in eSports, Val recognized that it can be a real thing. He couldn’t cite a specific example in Overwatch but mentioned Seagull, a very popular League of Legends player shifting from being signed to a team to becoming a streamer due to the rising demands of maintaining a training schedule and performing to the team’s standards.

Ryan was a Southern Polytechnic University graduate, and was already a big fan of sports, it wasn’t too hard for him to get into eSports as well. Ryan runs The Bird Watchers, a podcast dedicated to the Overwatch League. He saw no separation between the culture of eSports and traditional sports fans and enjoyed being a part of them equally. His first foray into eSports was him playing competitive Halo 2 in the early 2000s. His mom was supportive of his enjoyment of video games and got involved in it. Her chain of logic was that it was like him playing football, but without the risk of getting physically hurt.

He’s optimistic about the future of eSports and shared a story about a game of FIFA being played at a bar and the patrons didn’t realize it wasn’t an actual soccer game being broadcasted. People just enjoy watching games. Even when asked about possible toxic behaviors, such as gambling or fan brawls, he wasn’t able to recite an issue. When he specifically mentioned burnout, he explained that the contracts in eSports and traditional sports are different, and players have much more freedom to stop playing. But one of Ryan’s favorite values that the Atlanta Reign promotes is that they don’t believe in burning their players out by giving them harsh practice routines.

STAGE 4, WEEK 1: CONTINUED

The shared demeanor from both Val and Ryan, however, was they love being a part of the eSports community. Both found a welcoming and accepting community within gaming and even if the Reign does poorly (which they did during the last stage), the hyped environment and community is what matters.

Several members of the Royal noted that it's also easier to get in touch with popular eSport players and interact with them. Getting to swap instant messages with a player from the Atlanta Reign is infinitely more feasible than doing so with a pro player from the NFL or NBA.

That night ended with a resounding win for the Atlanta Reign. They won 3 out of the 4 matches against the Hangzhou Spark, and it was already looking like a real turnaround for the Reign after their less than stellar performance during Stage 3 of the season!



In fact, the Atlanta Reign's verified twitter account follows the twitter account for the Atlanta Royal Family.

TEAM	W	L	MAP +/-	STATUS	RANK	TEAM	W	L	MAP +/-	STATUS	RANK
ICEGLACIOR	5	0	+12	WON	1	ETERNAL	3	4	-1	11	
TANKS	5	1	+14	WON	2	HUNTERS	3	4	-4	12	
PARK	5	1	+14	WON	3	SPITFIRE	3	4	-6	13	
RAIDERS	4	1	+5	WON	4	CHARGE	2	3	-2	14	
HOCK	5	2	-15	WON	5	MAYHEM	1	5	-15	15	
WASTY	5	2	+12	WON	6	UPRISING	1	5	-15	16	
ILLIANT	5	2	+11	WON	7	FUEL	1	5	-15	17	
ITLAWS	5	2	+9	WON	8	REIGN	0	5	-9	18	
VISION	4	2	-1	WON	9	DEFIANT	0	5	-14	19	
AGITATORS	4	3	+5	WON	10	JUSTICE	0	5	-16	20	

-- STAGE PLAYOFFS CUTOFF --

No, really. The Reign did not perform well...at all during stage 3. They didn't win a single match set.

ATLANTA REIGN!

W/ @ THE PHOENIX! #letitreign

HEROES NEVER DIE! slushie! (Hydrate + Heal)

LUCIO'S SPEED BOOST shot (ENERGIZE!)

THE LEO! - the best Maker's Old Fashioned in Atlanta

We LOVE to see your photos! Tag us! 

Instagram

Twitter + Facebook

@battleandbrew

new

#battleandbrew

NOW LOADING...

ANALYSIS

DAMAGE - BURNOUTS IN ESPORTS CULTURE

The major enemy an eSports player must protect themselves from is a burnout. Burnouts can happen at any time to any player and is something that usually causes a player to drop out of the league. This is something we wanted to understand better and how it is related to the Atlanta Reign team. Burnouts occur when a player becomes mentally and physically exhausted with eSports gaming. While the love they have for their league's game can still be there, the

[RYAN]: ATLANTA REIGN KNOWS THEY DON'T BURN THEIR PLAYERS INTO THE GROUND.

initial passion can die out if self-care isn't a main priority. Ryan made it very clear to us that Atlanta Reign always wants to make sure their teams wellness is in a good place so that their players can keep playing the game they love in a healthy way and, of course, with some good old competitive spirit.



Sometimes burnouts lead to players choosing other routes like streaming. That's what the poster child for the Overwatch league, Seagull, did when he decided to step back from eSports. Becoming a live streamer isn't a route every player has to choose, but it's one way to be a less tangible figure in the world of online gaming while still being able to have a notable presence if one chooses. This also leads to a major perk of eSports that makes it differ from sports like football, a player is not obligated to stay if they no longer wish to continue. Often in football a player would have to wait until their contract is up but eSports gives their players a choice to leave whenever they want during a season. The fact that Atlanta Reign left their players with

the freedom to leave whenever they wanted to, shows how much they wanted to keep player burnouts at bay. Players in the league keep up with their physical health which translates to their mental health as well. Megan told us how they stick to certain workout routines that include wrists and arms. Certain food diets are also used to maintain physical health.



SUPPORT - THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY AND DIVERSITY

If you were to find yourself at an Atlanta Reign watch party, you would quickly see just how much of a tight-knit community they have. Victories and losses are both met with an uproar of energy from fans as they crowd around the television screen. Whichever direction you choose to look, you can always spot fans proudly wearing Atlanta Reign jersey and cosplayers representing their favorite heroes. When fans weren't watching the live stream of the game, they were talking about Overwatch with other people or playing the game itself on one of the pc's they had readily available.



[RYAN]: EVEN PEOPLE WHO LIKE THEIR OWN TIME SOMETIMES LIKED TO BE AROUND THAT ENERGY AND THAT ENERGY IS STILL THERE.

The strong presence of the community Atlanta Reign has is undeniably there and awe-invoking. There was nothing but love for Overwatch from all the participants who were interviewed. During one of the interviews, Val said that there really aren't ever any harsh feelings in eSports other than towards controversial players like Dreamkasper. There was only ever playful banter when rivals were met rather than insults. Besides the importance of keeping things friendly, another value that was brought up consistently was diversity.

Every participant who was interviewed mentioned the importance of diversity in eSports. Megan told us about how she would always check out the rosters of eSports teams to look for diversity. Diversity is another reason why a lot of the Atlanta Reign supporters we interviewed were fans of the Houston team as well. Representation mattered just as much in eSports as it does everywhere else.

[VAL]: ATLANTA REIGN IS A CULTURALLY DIVERSE TEAM AND THEY EMBRACE THAT.

[RYAN]: THEY ARE A SMALL ORGANIZATION WHO IS NOT TRYING TO TRADE THEIR PLAYERS IN FOR OTHER ONES ANY TIME SOON, THEY ARE TRYING TO BUILD SOMETHING.



TANK - ORGANIZERS AND LEADERS

On the front lines of the Overwatch community you can find heroes with tanks of their own. Some of these are community organizers like Leo who oversees the Atlanta Royal Family and coordinates the watch parties we attended, caretakers like Kendra who plays a role in the inner workings of the Atlanta Royal Masquerade to make sure their events run smoothly, hosts like Ryan and his "Bird Watchers" podcast, who keeps Atlanta Reign fans up to date with the latest plays, and major fans like Val who passionately represents the Atlanta Reign community he can call family.

While all the glory of gaming takes place within tournaments between teams, these people are on the outskirts with their mighty organizations and businesses to keep the eSports community going and accessible to anyone interested in becoming a part of it.



TIP:

Tank heroes soak up damage, create space for your team, and break apart fortified positions, like closely-grouped enemies and narrow choke points. If you're a tank, you lead the charge.



CONCLUSION

VICTORY ESPORTS
MATCH TIME: 17:48

LEAVING GAME IN: **32**

LEAVE GAME

The Alanta Royal Family showed us that although eSports doesn't quite have the same level of respect and prestige that conventional sports have with the general public, the passion and camaraderie is almost identical. The common denominator we noticed was the comments of inclusivity and how the Royal Family did feel like an actual family.

At the watch parties we attended, there was open body language and people constantly engaged in conversation, and even large cheers and post victory hugs. Even when other attendees were wearing shirts from rival teams, there was never any booing, jeering, or general toxicity that other sports are known to have.

Overall, the community didn't make us feel like we were too invasive, and do live up to the praise that our interview subjects sung. For anyone that's curious about getting into eSports, the Royal Family is a great place to start.

In conclusion, we'd like to say **GGWP*** to the Royal Family for their hospitality and time.

**that's nerd for "Good Game, Well Played".*

[MEGAN]: THERE'S DEFINITELY NOT THIS FEELING OF LIKE 'WE'RE FAMOUS AND YOUR OUR FANS,' IT'S MORE LIKE EVERYONE HANGS OUT AND STUFF.

[VAL]: GAMERS ARE SOME OF THE MOST ACCEPTING PEOPLE YOU WILL MEET IN LIFE.

