

# A Profession of Play

## The Rise of Esports and Its Complications

### Introduction

This essay will look to explore esports as a concept, starting by attempting to define *esports* both by its traditional definitions and through a comparative lens of traditional sports, before acknowledging the flaws in both and attempting to investigate idea of esports as a new form of media entertainment. Having interrogated these concepts, I will attempt to move on and use them as a frame to explore esports as a burgeoning industry, and the complications that are arising for players and organisations from that.

### Defining Esports

#### **Traditional Definitions**

*Esports* has long had a complicated and rapidly changing definition. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate and interrogate some of these definitions and highlight their inherent complications. A dictionary definition of *esports* opines they are ‘A multiplayer video game played competitively for spectators, typically by professional gamers.’<sup>1</sup> Already, three controversial terms are in play: the idea an *esport* must be *multiplayer*, have *spectators*, and be *professional*. The first term, *multiplayer*, is quickly contestable. While a majority of current esports are largely multiplayer, this definition precludes certain modes of competitive play - notably speedrunning. Certainly, speedrunning as a mode of play still involves other players, in that one competes against them in order to achieve the quickest completion time and is therefore (in a sense) multiplayer. However, the games themselves are generally single-player artefacts. Excellent examples of this include speedruns of the *Dark Souls* series, such as Catalyst’s ‘All Bosses’ run that is currently considered the world’s fastest completion.<sup>2 3 4</sup> This definition also precludes elements of arcade culture and video games that are at the core of the formative years of esports.<sup>5</sup> (Taylor 2018, Pg. 145). The iconic ‘high score’ screen and accompanying

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Dictionaries, *Definition of e-sport in English* (2019). [Web]. Available at: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/e-sport> Accessed on 20/04/2019.

<sup>2</sup> Speed Souls, *Leaderboards* (2019). [Web]. Available at: [http://speedsouls.com/darksouls:All\\_Bosses](http://speedsouls.com/darksouls:All_Bosses). Accessed on 20/04/2019.

<sup>3</sup> Catalystz (2018), *Dark Souls All Bosses Speedrun World Record [1:06:53]*. [Video] Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1&v=Zq\\_UGhG0Jho](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=Zq_UGhG0Jho)

<sup>4</sup> FromSoftware, *Dark Souls* (2011), PC.

<sup>5</sup> T. L. Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (2018). Oxford: Princeton University Press. Pg. 145.

limited character signatures of many single-player arcade video games such as *Space Invaders* and *Pac-Man* are arguably some of the original esports titles.<sup>6 7</sup>

The second term, *spectators*, runs into similar inclusivity issues. How central is spectatorship to defining a video game as an esports? Many esports tournaments are and were played with no spectatorship to speak of, particularly in earlier rounds of said tournaments, although it is worth noting that these tournaments are often played with an expectation that progressing to later rounds comes with spectatorship of those rounds. This is largely the case during tournaments where multiple matches are occurring in concert and not all are broadcast due to limited resources, or in amateur tournaments, such as the burgeoning *European Summoner Showdown*, a *League of Legends* competition where limited numbers of the games played were actually streamed by the organisers. [Figure 1].<sup>8 9</sup> It would be disingenuous to assume these competitions gain or lose the tag of 'esport' purely based on whether they have spectators for a given match.

*Professional*, on the other hand, while it still shares the former terms' complications by precluding amateur competitors (which stands against a lot of esports' grass roots heritage), also has more nuanced contextual problematics. (Taylor 2018, Pg. 138). What constitutes 'professional' in an era of self-published live streaming? Does being a professional gamer purely entail participating in tournaments and competitions, or does a streamer who plays and performs via *Twitch* or another platform meet the criteria? They certainly align with the *multiplayer* and *spectatorship* elements of this definition, and this argument is put forward by Kaytoue et al. in *Watch Me Playing, I am a Professional*.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, this definition struggles to deal with the wider auxiliary structures and people that are attributed to esports and esports' productions, such as coaches, camera and broadcast crew, and even specialised roles distinct to esports like the role of in-game observer, all of which can be considered professional roles within esports.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Namco, *Pac-Man* (1980), Arcade.

<sup>7</sup> Taito, *Space Invaders* (1978), Arcade.

<sup>8</sup> Challonge!, *ESS April 19-20 (5v5)* (2019). [Web]. Available at: <https://challonge.com/vue03b4u>. Accessed on 21/04/2019. Available VoDs from the tournament can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyIRd7MNU2Y6RDA39ABxOIQ>

<sup>9</sup> Riot Games, *League of Legends* (2009). PC.

<sup>10</sup> Mehdi Kaytoue, Arlei Silva, Loïc Cerf, Wagner Meira Jr., Chedy Raïssi, 'Watch me Playing, I am a Professional: a First Study on Video Game Live Streaming' from *WWW 2012 Companion: Proceedings of the 21st International Conference on World Wide Web* (2012). Lyon. Pg. 1181-1188.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Stenhouse, *What it Takes to Be a Counter Strike: Global Offensive Observer* (2017). [Web]. Available at: <https://www.pcgamer.com/uk/what-it-takes-to-be-a-counter-strike-global-offensive-observer/>. Accessed on 21/04/2019



Figure 1: Quad Damage's Nymra gets a solo kill 1v2 during amateur tournament, the ESS

### ***The Lens of Traditional Sports***

Another option to try and define *esports* as a term and concept is to do so through the lens of traditional sports. Indeed, the term *esports*' etymology ties it closely to conventional sports, the term in and of itself being a contraction of 'electronic sports'. Many academics have argued, for all intents and purposes, there is no distinction between esports and traditional sports: esports *are* sports. There are numerous examples to draw on, from Ian Bogost's glib comment 'just about anything can be taken seriously as... a sport' to T. L. Taylor's significantly more eloquent commentary in *Raising the Stakes*:<sup>12</sup>

Is it an issue of physicality? Of exertion, skill perfection, or some other alchemy of action and an individual human's striving and drive to excel? Over the years the scope of what constitutes a "real" sport, and indeed meaningful athleticism, has been debated. Well before computer games entered the scene, enthusiasts, regulatory bodies, and athletes debated the merits of counting everything from equestrianism to snowboarding as a sport. Were you to go online now with a few simple search terms, you could find heated debates about whether or not poker, chess, or darts should be considered a sport.<sup>13</sup>

While the calls for esports to be recognised as, or at least be considered in close harmony with, sport are many and vocal, so are the voices that contest and question this. Gary Crawford et al. rightly call out the 'distinctly weak' justifications of Bogost in declaring videogames as sports, and call on Bernard Suits' work on the 'lusory attitude' to point out that seriousness has little to

<sup>12</sup> Ian Bogost, 'What are Sports Videogames?' in ed. Consalvo M., Mitsguch K. and Stein A., *Sports Videogames* (2013). London: Routledge. Pg. 50-66.

<sup>13</sup> T. L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (2012). MIT Press. Pg. 35-36.

do with games (indeed, a core tenant of play is that it is ‘non-serious’).<sup>14 15</sup> One could run a ‘400-m race’, and take it non-seriously thereby not playing but still participating in the sport. Another one of the major contentions regarding classifying esports as sports Taylor noted in *Raising the Stakes* is the issue of physicality: do esports count as a physical activity?

The debate expands beyond purely an academic exercise (as noted by Taylor) and is a hotly topic in the communities of both esports and traditional sports – a good example of which is Joshua ‘Jatt’ Leesman and Choi ‘Locodoco’ Yeon-seop’s ESPN debate from 2016.<sup>16</sup>

It behooves us at this point to step back again and interrogate what defines a ‘sport’, if we are to utilise it as a useful frame of reference to engage with *esports*. Part of the frustration with defining esports as sports – or not – is that the definition of *sports* is similarly ambiguous. Guttmann in 2004 and Suits in 2007 attempted to codify the characteristics of sports, noting they include play (a loaded term in and of itself, but here speaking of ‘voluntary, intrinsically motivated activity’), have events that are organized and governed by rules, include competition, with an outcome, e.g. a winner and a loser, and comprises skill. They also note esports have a large following via online streaming platforms such as *Twitch* and *YouTube*, which mirror the audiences of conventional sport.<sup>17 18 19 20</sup> Even so, others such as Jenny et al. question these criteria, asking for further elaboration on two of Guttmann’s points. The first concerns physical performance, and the extent to which esports players strategically and skilfully use their bodies (as arguably not all of the body is in use when playing a video game); the second concerns ‘institutional stability’, advocating that esports require centralised governing bodies and rules to be recognised as a sport, and not be dismissed as ‘juvenile recreation activit[ies]’.<sup>21</sup> Bányai et al. offer some answers and rebuttals to the concerns raised:

[Regarding the first criterion] there are many sports in which only specific body parts are used when competing (e.g., darts, snooker, shooting) so this criterion on its own would not rule out esports being classed as a true sport... [and regarding the second] The

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<sup>14</sup> Garry Crawford, Daniel Muriel, Steven Conway, ‘A feel for the game: Exploring gaming ‘experience’ through the case of sports-themed video games’ in *Convergence: The Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* XX(X) (2018). DOI: [10.1177/1354856518772027](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856518772027).

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (2005). Ontario: Broadview Press.

<sup>16</sup> Breaking Sports, *Locodoco & Jatt Interview On League of Legends (FULL)* (2016). [Video]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPWTaAlzoLI>

<sup>17</sup> Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (2004). New York: Colombia University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Suits, ‘The Elements of Sport’ in ed. William J. Morgan, *The Ethics of Sport* (2007). Human Kinetics.

<sup>19</sup> Twitch (2011), [Web]. <https://www.twitch.tv/>

<sup>20</sup> YouTube (2005), [Web]. <https://www.youtube.co.uk/>

<sup>21</sup> Seth E. Jenny, R. Douglas Manning, Margaret C. Keiper & Tracy W. Olrich, ‘Virtual(Iy) Athletes: Where eSports Fit Within the Definition of “Sport”’, in *Quest*, 69:1 (2016). Pg. 1-18. DOI: [10.1080/00336297.2016.1144517](https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2016.1144517)

different types of esports games (e.g., first person shooters, MOBA games) with specific rules make it more difficult to achieve institutional stability. However, global esports organizations already exist, like the International e-Sports Federation (IeSF), supporting esports games to be recognized as professional sports, and providing institutional basis for regulation and stabilization.<sup>22</sup>

While these rebuttals offer some valid points, they too are not without flaws. As we have already seen, 'sports' like darts, snooker and shooting are already in dispute as to their nature (Taylor, 2012), and tarring esports in such murky waters is hardly an exoneration. Similarly, their idea of global esports organisations comes with difficult additional caveats: *Fifa* does not own football, they merely regulate it, whereas *Riot Games* does own *League of Legends* and monitors their game and its competitive scene largely in-house.<sup>23</sup> The additional level of dialogue required to have an external regulatory body that has an effective level of autonomy from any given esports title's developer and the legal quagmire that is necessary to have said developer relinquish control to an external body is fairly daunting. As will be investigated later on, developers playing judge, jury and executioner with their titles, and can easily abuse their power, or perhaps more cynically, can be *seen* to be abusing their power (even if they are, in fact, innocent). For all the risks and legal intricacies involved, it is worth acknowledging that a number of national and global esports bodies have developed in recent years. Bányai et al. note the IeSF, and other salient examples include the Korean e-Sports Association (KeSPA), and more intriguingly the 2018 Asian Games. (Bányai et al., 2018).<sup>24 25 26</sup> The last example is of particular interest because it is both international and traditionally a conventional sporting body and event, which fulfills Jenny et al.'s standards. (Jenny et al. 2016). This also has momentous cultural impact for specifically South Korean players, as winning gold during the competition earns you an exemption from the country's mandatory military service, something that had previously only applied to traditional athletes.

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<sup>22</sup> Fanni Bányai, Mark D. Griffiths, Orsolya Király, Zsolt Demetrovics, 'The Psychology of Esports: A Systematic Literature Review' in *Journal of Gambling Studies* (2018). DOI: <https://doi-org.ezproxy.brunel.ac.uk/10.1007/s10899-018-9763-1>

<sup>23</sup> Fédération Internationale de Football Association, world governing body for football. See: <https://www.fifa.com/>

<sup>24</sup> International e-Sports Federation. (2017). *Member Nations*. [Web]. Available at: <http://www.ie-sf.org/about/#member-nations>. Accessed on 21/04/2019

<sup>25</sup> Korean e-Sports Association (2000). [Web]. Available at: <http://www.e-sports.or.kr/?ckattempt=1> (Korean). Accessed on 22/04/2019

<sup>26</sup> Trent Murray, 'Asian Games 2018 Confirms List of Esports, Includes Two Mobile Titles' from *Esports Observer* (2018). [Web]. Available at: <https://esportsobserver.com/asian-games-2018-esports/>. Accessed on 22/04/2019.

## Divorcing Sport and Play: The Dangers of Professionalisation

For all this debate about whether esports are sports, there is another more frank discussion to be had. What is the point at which a game, digital or otherwise, becomes a sport? And does the injection of professionalism into a space created by play (i.e. sports) undermine that space and the nature of what can be called a game, as is suggested by Roger Caillois?

“What used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession. What was an escape becomes an obligation, and what was a pastime is now a passion, compulsion, and course of anxiety. The principle of play has become corrupted. It is now necessary to take precautions against cheats and professional players, a unique product of the contagion of reality.”<sup>27</sup>

This disparaging commentary against first). the dangers of reality intruding into play and second). the professionalisation that arises from this ‘contamination’, is an argument against play as work in general; a corrosive infringement upon the private spaces of the player that diminishes the value and sanctity of play. This is a topic that will be investigated later on in this essay. While Taylor acknowledges Caillois’ concerns, particularly in regards to the blurring of work and private spaces leading to limited agency and the corporate ‘colonisation’ of private play, she also points out some of the empirical evidence and emergent play/work developments that have come into being post *Man, Play, and Games*. (Taylor 2012, Pg.10).<sup>28</sup> Even so, more modern scholars have taken this train of thought up, with academics like Tom Brock calling professionalisation a corruption of pure play: ‘[the] perversion of *agôn* [competition] is a consequence of blurring work with play.’<sup>29</sup> And yet, as Taylor contests ‘I am... accountable to situating player practices within participants’ own descriptions of the pleasure, creativity, social connection, aspirations, and authentic experience that so often accompanies the work of play,’ invoking Weber’s 1949 statement ‘We are *cultural beings*, endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and lend it *significance*.’ (Taylor *Work of Play* 2018, Pg. 81).<sup>30</sup> This method calls on the power of context and the individuality of play and how we experience it, and attempts to curtail the age old conceit that analysts are the only ones capable of identifying the bigger picture... even if it comes with a risk of placing ourselves in ‘cages’ of our own making.

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<sup>27</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, Games* (2001). Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

<sup>28</sup> T. L. Taylor, ‘The Work of Play’ in *The American Journal of Play*, Vol. 11, Issue 1 (2018). The Strong. Pg. 80-81

<sup>29</sup> Tom Brock, ‘Roger Caillois and Esports: On the Problems of Treating Play as Work’ in *Games in Culture*, Vol. 12, Issue 4 (2017). Pg. 322

<sup>30</sup> Max Webber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, Trans. and ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (1949). Pg. 81

## Esports as a New Media Entertainment Genre

While investigating the relationship between traditional sports and esports certainly provides fruitful debate and fruitful context and considerations for defining esports, it has also been revealed as an ideological battleground fraught with ambiguously defined terms and hotly debated conclusions, making it difficult to construct detailed arguments using it as a foundation. Instead, perhaps we must take a different tack in order to encapsulate esports as a concept. Kaytoue et al. argue that esports has 'established [itself] as a new entertainment genre.' (Kaytoue et al., 2012). T. L. Taylor, in a departure from her 2012 work, also sees a shift in the way esports are being defined:

[In talking about the history of competitive gaming]

*Third Wave*: "Media Entertainment" rises as the predominant frame. Serious attention is given to media production, audience, and entertainment. Infrastructures, both organisational and technical, become attuned to as well as [sic] configure themselves around media production and distribution. Tournaments are harnessed as media events with an emphasis on the visual and the narrative.

(Taylor Watch Me Play 2018, Pg. 137).

Key elements here are the focus on a development of esports beyond the game artefact itself into the auxiliary paraphernalia of broadcasting (both in terms of people and equipment), and a new awareness of the audience and the need for events to be entertaining, with tournaments and major events becoming *media events* with story, flair and visual appeal. Taylor goes so far as to say that sports are now attempting to mirror the practices of esports, especially when it comes to an increasing move to an online broadcast market. (Taylor Watch Me Play 2018, Pg. 142). The crux of the argument is that Esports *are different* from traditional sports, but the difference lies in in broadcasting and consumption, and that is largely the result of livestreaming:

If any one thing has happened to assuredly secure the notion of an esports "industry", it is the ability to now easily broadcast events online, globally, and to large audiences... esports no longer *need* television. For many, live streaming has offered a declaration of freedom from traditional broadcast media.

(Taylor Watch Me Play 2018, Pg. 142).

For an extended period, the consensus within the esports industry was that they required TV to legitimise themselves and prove that the industry had 'made it'. This culminated (in the west, at least), in the birth of the *Championship Gaming Series* (CGS) in 2007... and its swift demise the year after in 2008; an excellent (if somewhat sardonic) account of this by Richard Lewis in 2015



offers a good account of this, and also raised concerns around the then forming ESL Pro League for *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* and its potentially predatory business practices.<sup>31 32 33 34</sup> Lewis was wrong in some ways – the ESL Pro League succeeded – but he was right in others. *Twitch* got their broadcasting rights and the league was somewhat set against Valve-sponsored majors, although it hasn't replaced them (which was an initial fear). On a broader scale, the failed attempts to broadcast esports via the TV and traditional networks, and the subsequent embrace of livestreaming by esports and esports professionals, has revealed some interesting truths (or perhaps simply beliefs) about the place of esports on TV:

To be honest with you, I feel like television, broadcast television, will do a disservice to esports. I'm actually pretty against it ever moving to television as a platform. These guys from thirteen to thirty years old, they are consuming their content online. So the people who are into esports, [are] the demographic that esports will always serve, even as it scales... I feel that like the internet is where it really needs to be... where it's in the best interest of esports, because I don't think you can put esports in a broadcast television model and make it work.

(Taylor Watch Me Play, pg. 143).

Taylor's colloquial account is backed up by more substantive data in *Watch Me Playing*, where they also remark on the distinct demographics of esports and herald it as a new community, and as a marker of its distinction from traditional sports:

The main difference with respect to traditional sports lies in the fact the vast majority of the events are only online and an important remark is that members of the community are acquainted with social networks... As a consequence, a new type of social community is emerging

(Kaytoue et al., 2012)

Some of the remarks here can be attributed to the online nature of social networks synergising well with the online communities and communications present within online and multiplayer videogames, and the broadcasting platforms (like *Twitch*, and more recently *YouTube*) having chats integrated into them, encouraging community formation and interaction. All of this is not

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<sup>31</sup> Championship Gaming Series (2007), see: [https://web.archive.org/web/20080731205023/http://www.thecgs.com/Season\\_Closer\\_No\\_Disappointment](https://web.archive.org/web/20080731205023/http://www.thecgs.com/Season_Closer_No_Disappointment) (Web archive, Accessed on 22/04/2019).

<sup>32</sup> Richard Lewis, *Echoes of future past: The ghost of the CGS and what it means for Counter-Strike* (2015). [Web]. Available at: <https://dotesports.com/counter-strike/news/cgs-vulcan-twitch-esl-counter-strike-league-1665>. Accessed on 21/04/2019

<sup>33</sup> Valve Corporation, *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (2012). PC.

<sup>34</sup> ESL Pro League (2015), see: <https://pro.eslgaming.com/csgo/proleague/>



to say TVs *can't* be used as a tool to view esports broadcasts. The introduction of smart TVs with access to casting and integrated streaming apps makes it an increasingly common phenomenon, and HDMI ports allow TVs to be used as essentially larger screens. What it *does* avoid is traditional broadcast networks, in a similar vein to services like *Netflix*.<sup>35</sup> It's with traditional broadcast networks where esports and TV have historically had the most friction. Networked broadcasting is often localised in opposition to esports global market, lacks community interaction and integrated chat, and perhaps most key is very tightly scheduled in a way that esports games inherently aren't – there is very rarely a fixed time limit to an esports game in a way that there is with football or rugby. This means it is extremely difficult to plan schedules around program lengths and keep consistent advertisement breaks. This means either the network has to negotiate new deals with sponsors and accommodate the given esports title, or the game has to be changed to fit the network. Invariably, changing the game to fit the network alienates its player base. They are passionate about the game they play and know, and a game with its rules changed is a different game entirely. What is a game if not a privileged form of play?<sup>36</sup> And play, as Caillois notes, is *ruled*. Changing the rules changes the game. (Caillois 2001, Pg. 8).

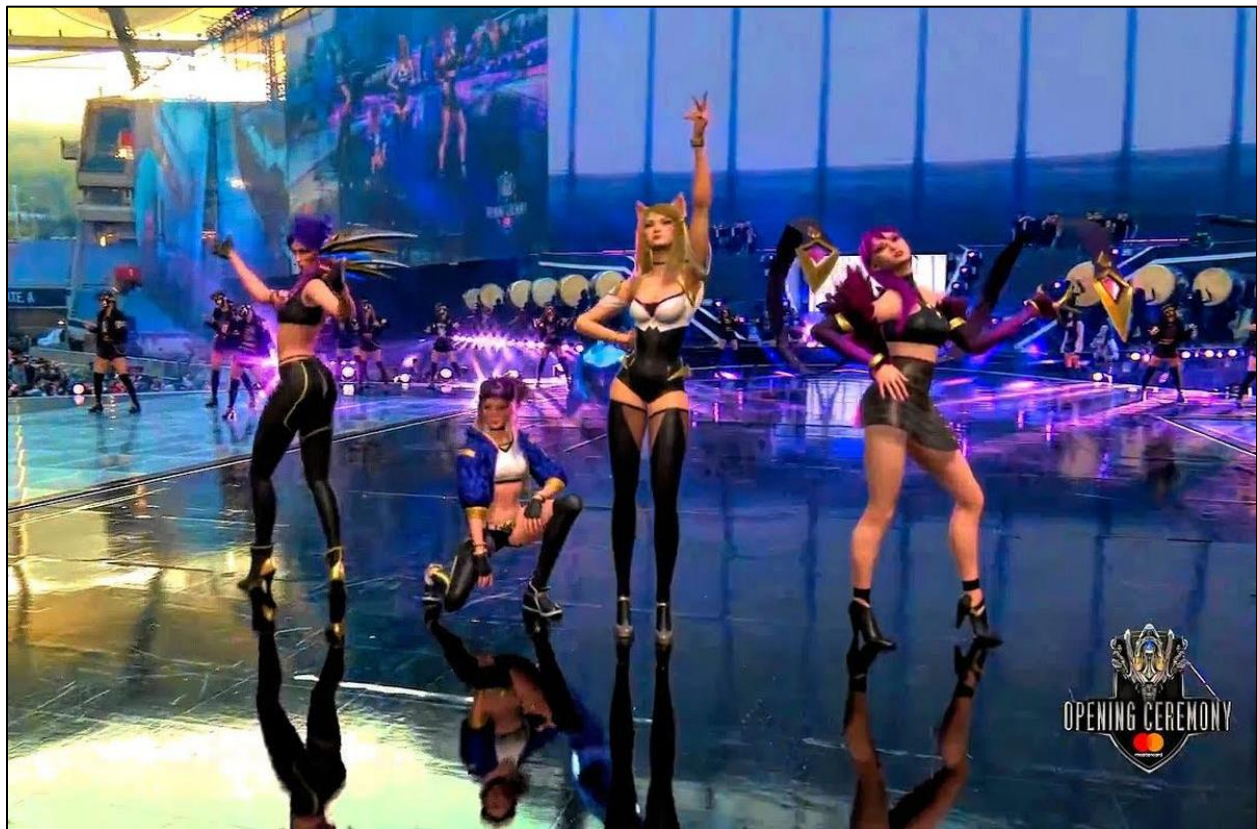


Figure 2: K/DA performing 'live' at the 2018 League of Legends World Championship in South Korea

<sup>35</sup> Netflix (1997), [Web]. See: <https://www.netflix.com/>

<sup>36</sup> Miguel Sicart, 'Architects', in *Play Matters* (2014). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. Pg. 90.

If esports are in part a media product, then they have to be *defined* in part by the media they produce. Esports are not sports in that they are vastly different media products, and while the overlap between the two narrows as mainstream broadcasting continues to move into the digital and online sphere, we can see how they have very different broadcast and demographic needs. In practice, this means esports broadcasts become very distinctive things. The recent finals of the *League of Legends 2018 World Championship* makes for an excellent case study. Held in the Incheon Munhak Stadium in South Korea, with a live attendance of over 23,000 people, it had by some metrics 205,348,063 viewers (though Riot themselves suspect heavy Chinese viewbotting, putting the number at a still enormous 99.6 million unique viewers), with an average viewership of 19.6 million viewers per minute across the entire tournament, and the finals themselves allegedly having greater viewing numbers than the super bowl and making the most watched esports event in history.<sup>37 38 39</sup> It was streamed and broadcast in over nineteen languages on over thirty different platforms and TV channels. Moreover it contained massive levels of stage production and engineering; the stage itself floating over the heads of the crowd, with live performances of the songs *RISE* and *Pop/Stars*, by artists G(i)-dle, Madison Beer, Jaira Burns, The Word Alive and Glitch Mob, accompanied by AR projections of *K/DA*, a K-pop group formed from alternate versions of *LoL* champions designed to be an in-game skin line.<sup>40 41</sup> All this, and none of it is directly tied to live gameplay for *LoL*. We can see how this event both conforms to Taylor and others' ideas of esports as media entertainment, and complicates them. It certainly hits the concepts of spectatorship and of engaging with an online audience, looking to entertain and be 'harnessed as [a] media[ event] with an emphasis on the visual and the narrative.' (*Taylor Watch Me Play 2018*, Pg. 138). It also meshes well with assertions of esports and esports broadcasting being a technical innovator, pushing the limits of what is possible with technology and what can be expected of it, much like with the AR/live artist performance during the opening ceremony. (*Taylor Watch Me Play 2018*, Pg. 146-152). It's also reminiscent of the early days of sports broadcasting, echoing the sentiments of the oft quoted Arledge Playboy Interview, where similar innovations in technology (like 'action replay') were still under development.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, it highlights an effectiveness as a broader media

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<sup>37</sup> Esports Charts, *2018 World Championship* (2018). [Web]. Available at: <https://escharts.com/tournaments/lol/worlds-2018>. Accessed on 21/04/2019

<sup>38</sup> League of Legends.com, *2018 by the Numbers* (2018). [Web]. Available at: <https://nexus.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/2018/12/2018-events-by-the-numbers/>. Accessed on 21/04/2019

<sup>39</sup> Vincent Genova, *LoL World Championship draws more viewers than the Super Bowl* (2018). [Web]. Available at: <https://www.dexerto.com/esports/lol-world-championship-draws-more-viewers-than-the-super-bowl-209502> Accessed on

<sup>40</sup> League of Legends, *RISE - Opening Ceremony Presented by Mastercard | Finals | 2018 World Championship* (2018). [Video]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=177jxGRbPgM>

<sup>41</sup> League of Legends, *POP/STARS - Opening Ceremony Presented by Mastercard | Finals | 2018 World Championship* (2018). [Video]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9oDlvOV3qs>.

<sup>42</sup> 'The Playboy Interview: Roone Arledge' in *Playboy* (October, 1976). Pg. 63-86.

and marketing product: the song Pop/Stars became a hit in numerous countries, and the representation of the K/DA skin-line outside of *LoL* reflected back on to the player base of the game, becoming popular enough that Riot designed 'prestige' versions of the skins.<sup>43</sup> Where this event complicates things is that it shares a lot of elements with traditional sports broadcasting. The bombastic halftime shows of superbowl spring immediately to mind as an apt comparison to the music performance in this particular event. In a similar fashion, the widespread TV coverage of the event paints this as strikingly similar to a conventional (if high profile) sports event, as does its sizeable live audience. To all intents and purposes, is this not merely a sports broadcast? Perhaps not, as it is important to recognise that this event *did not require* TV coverage, it was merely a bonus when recognising the core demographic of viewers. As a further counterpoint, could it not be that rather than esports being an emulation (or just straight) sports broadcast, it is rather that mainstream TV in general is trying to pursue a future in a digital arena that esports was forged in, and it is thereby sports broadcasting that is instead trying to emulate the success of esports and its streaming culture?

As an addendum, Does this apply to every esports event? No, if only because of the sheer scale of the event. Very few will have the resources available to conduct an event of that scale, and this adds another caveat. Largely speaking, for example, events will cater to online and live audiences only, with little consideration for terrestrial TV.

With the birth of livestreaming, a unique media-type has been set up in esports, and drawing on ideas of esports requiring, or at least facilitating spectators, we can see how this converts itself into esports becoming a unique competitive genre. In this sense, whether or not esports are sports is largely immaterial. They are their own archetype; a spectacle to an online audience, witnessing players putting on a 'virtuoso performance.' (*Taylor Work of Play 2018, Pg. 69-70*)

## Esports and the Magic Circle – The Pervasive Nature of Streaming

### Esports' relationship with streaming

Having now investigated the definition of *esports* and its myriad complexities, it is important to interrogate esports in context, both to see where it is succeeding as an industry and where the potential pitfalls and uncertainties lie. One of the more interesting (and certainly popular)

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<sup>43</sup> Brian Crecente, *Fictional Hologram Band Tops Real-World Charts After Stunning 'League of Legend' Show (Watch)* (2018). [Web]. Available at: <https://variety.com/2018/gaming/news/1203022006-1203022006/>. Accessed on 22/04/2019.

developments that ties into the rise of esports, is the simultaneous rise of the live streamer. For the esports professional this poses both an opportunity and a potential pitfall. While somewhat outdated, *Kaytoue et al.*'s study into the effects of livestreaming as it relates to esports players offers interesting insight:

For a professional player, popularity is arguably more important than game performances (although they obviously are correlated). Indeed, most of their stable revenues come from advertisements displayed in streams, sponsoring, special invitations in tournaments etc.

(*Kaytoue et al. 2012, Pg. 1185*).

By this statement, we can see the potential impact that streaming has upon a professional player's life. Perhaps unexpectedly, a player's livelihood is less dependent on professional competitive performance, but rather on their ability to cultivate a viewer base from streaming. It is worth noting some flaws that have arisen with time since the publication of this article. Much of the esports scene has developed since its publication in 2012. For one *StarCraft II*, is no longer a prevailing esports, and so using it as a basis to generalise other esports becomes risky, and secondly a number of professional leagues have developed, offering stability for organisations and players, which in turn allows for consistent player salaries and contracts (see: *LoL's LCS, LEC, LCK and LPL leagues; Overwatch League*).<sup>44 45 46 47</sup> However, in spite of these concerns, there are some key elements that still hold true. Foremost among them is that streaming is a fundamental part of the professional player's life. For better or worse, the player is either being streamed while competing or engaging in it as a self-published undertaking. It is still considered an excellent way to build a personal brand and community, and adds an extra dimension to a player's in-game performance and skills. Beyond this, it can be extremely lucrative. A number of ex-professional players have retired into a life of streaming because it is more profitable than remaining on a team, such as prolific streamers Michael 'Imaqtpie' Santana and Richard 'Ninja' Blevins.<sup>48 49</sup>

If, as we have already observed, esports is partly about the media product created, and that streaming is core to a professional player's life, then it stands to reason that streaming is part of

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<sup>44</sup> Blizzard, *StarCraft II* (2010). PC

<sup>45</sup> Blizzard, *Overwatch* (2016). PC

<sup>46</sup> Overwatch League.com, *What is the Overwatch League?* [Web]. Available at: <https://overwatchleague.com/en-us/about>. Accessed on 23/04/2019

<sup>47</sup> League of Legends Esports.com, *Regional League Sites and Schedules* [Web]. Available at: <https://nexus.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/2019/01/regional-leagues-sites-and-schedules/>. Accessed on 23/04/2019

<sup>48</sup> Imaqtpie. See: <https://www.twitch.tv/imaqtpie>

<sup>49</sup> Ninja. See: <https://www.twitch.tv/ninja>



the job of an esports player. In that eventuality, does this mean the inverse holds true? Does the professional streamer count as an esports player? By the traditional definition, they certainly hit two of the three key areas in *spectatorship* (they put on a show for an online audience) and *professional* (it is their job), and can easily hit the third, *multiplayer* via the choice of game they stream. More esoterically, *multiplayer* could also consider the viewers, via their interaction with each other in chat and the streamer in question, to have entered the contract of the game and stepped inside the magic circle.

### Play and the Magic Circle

It is at this point we must investigate another thorny issue: the nature of *play*. In his influential book, *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga puts forth that 'More striking even than the limitation as to time is the limitation as to space. All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or as a matter of course.'<sup>50</sup> Caillois concurs, and further notes play as 'separate from real life.' (Caillois 2001, Pg. 8). Other elements include a focus on the *ruled* nature of play, and a voluntary submission to those rules, and that *play* doesn't necessarily indicate a *game*.<sup>51</sup> Key to this depiction of play is the ruled, definitive area in which play occurs, differentiating the 'real' world from the world of play. This is most famously described as the *magic circle* by Huizinga, where players subscribing to the rules enter the game's magic circle. However, the magic circle has become contested in recent years with the rise of pervasive games, and it is from this angle that esports and streaming potentially disrupt the circle.<sup>52 53</sup>

Where is the boundary of an esports game? Does it end with the players? The specialised role of the observer, controlling the in-game camera, or the casters and analysts adding commentary and critique for an audience's pleasure? Do the producers, referees, and live ops members count? Alternatively, is it at the boundary of the live event, the spectators within the stadium co-opted into the playground? How about the global audience, watching and interacting with the stream, perhaps even contributing to the tournament prize pool, as with DotA 2's *The International*?<sup>54 55</sup> As is quickly apparent, it becomes very challenging to codify esports' magic circle, if it exists, and indeed it calls into question the nature of *play* within esports too. Part of the difficulty is that modern esports blur the boundary between *game* and

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<sup>50</sup> Johan Huizinga, 'The Nature and Significance of Play as Cultural Phenomenon', in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1949) London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. Pg. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Miguel Sicart, 'Architects', in *Play Matters* (2014). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. Pg. 84.

<sup>52</sup> Markus Montola, 'Exploring the Edge of the Magic Circle: Defining Pervasive Games.' DAC 2005 conference, University of Copenhagen. Retrieved from <http://www.markusmontola.fi/exploringtheedge.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Mia Consalvo, 'To Cheat or not to Cheat: is that even the question?', 'Gaining Advantage: How Videogame Players Define and Negotiate Cheating', in *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games* (2007). Cambridge MA.: MIT Press. Pg. 7.

<sup>54</sup> Valve Corporation, *Defence of the Ancients 2* (2013). PC.

<sup>55</sup> The International, see: <https://www.dota2.com/international/overview/>

event, and as we have already seen games are just a privileged form of play, then *play* too becomes blurred. (Taylor *Watch Me Play* 2018, Pg. 137; Sicart 2014, Pg. 84).

## Play as Practice, Practice as Work

It is this indelible blurring of play with reality that we have already seen so vehemently rallied against by Caillois and Brock. (Caillois 2001; Brock 2017). For the live streamer work *is* play, reality invading on private play space via the public domain of a streaming platform. Granted, there is pleasure to be found there, but it's not without its risks. (Taylor *Work of Play* 2018, Pg. 81). For the average live streamer, this is primarily ensconced in the invasion of the private, and a dubious work/life balance. For an esports player it's a decidedly more complicated matter. If you are playing a given esports title at a competitive level, then it is reasonable to expect a certain level of practice for that game. Playing that game becomes practice, and your practice becomes work. At what point does a player get to stop working? This is compounded by inefficient practice methods.

If a player wishes to practice a given champion matchup in *LoL* or *DotA*, a map in *Overwatch* or an eco-round in *CS:GO*, said player would have to queue up for a ranked match (for appropriate skill level opponents), hope they get the appropriate matchup/map etc. and then wait for a specific timing within the game where the parameters are correct. This is before considering dealing with often exorbitant queue times due to a limited elite player population. This can lead to an hour of unhelpful or irrelevant gameplay for five minutes of salient practice. In traditional sports, you can walk down to the local leisure centre or sports pitch and practice free kicks, passing, shooting or any other number of basic skills, in a way that is significantly more challenging to do within an esports game. Certain titles have attempted to remedy this with the addition of practice tools, as *LoL* has introduced, but even so these are limited in scope. In part, this is because developers fear they may raise the bar of entry to games that already require a fairly high level of initial knowledge and skill, but a number of analysts within the field (notably provocative figure, Duncan 'Thorin' Shields) called out the poor practice options available for players both casual and professional.<sup>56</sup> <sup>57</sup> To further complicate professional player play/practice, their private play is regularly analysed for public professional gain. Player patterns, habits and proficiencies are hunted down for competitive advantages, even going so far as to use machine learning to identify hidden in-game aliases.<sup>58</sup> When such methods are

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<sup>56</sup> Riot Pls (2015). [Web]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5sdTY3pTLE>. Accessed on 23/04/2019

<sup>57</sup> Thoorin, *Thorin's Thoughts - Riot and Sandbox Mode (LoL)* (2015). [Video]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5sdTY3pTLE>

<sup>58</sup> Olivier Cavadenti, Victor Codocedo, Jean-Fran,cois Boulicaut, Mehdi Kaytoue, *Identifying Avatar Aliases in Starcraft 2* (2015). Université de Lyon.

used to drag your private play into the world of your livelihood, finding a comfortable space to play becomes intensely difficult.

Another facet to this is the sheer workload this entails. At particularly intense parts of the competitive season, professional *LoL* players can often end up ‘triple-blocking’ scrim, which equates to roughly 10-14 hours of practice verses other teams, and are then expected to potentially pursue solo-queue in their own time outside of this. Examples like this have lead to serious concerns regarding player health both psychological and physical, as stated by Bányai et al., and they called upon other researchers to help fill the dearth of empirical data. (Bányai et al. 2018).<sup>59</sup> They also note that they believe further research and integration of both sports psychology and gambling psychology into esports teams and organisations could significantly reduce the stigma around professional gamers, and also help identify and deal with issues as they arise.



Figure 3: Cloud 9's Zachary 'Sneaky' Scuderi poses in cosplay for his stream.

## Play as Performance

Another side to this discussion about esports and play, is play's relationship to *performance*. Espen Aarseth's now synonymous concept of games as *ergodic*, requiring non-trivial effort to traverse, and that they are *works-in-motion* provide a useful foothold here.<sup>60</sup> By Aarseth's terminology, games are inherently incomplete; they require the input of one or more players. This also differentiates games from other media artefacts like movies or literature, as they are complete in and of themselves. Moreover, in this regard, the player must be regarded as a performer, acting out roles within the game, allowing them to progress. If the player is a

<sup>59</sup> Dave Lee, *The Real Scars of Korean Gaming* (2015). [Web]. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-32996009>. Accessed on 22/04/2019

<sup>60</sup> Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext – Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997). John Hopkins University Press. Pg. 2-4, 51.



performer, then the game and the screen become a stage, as defined by Brenda Laurel in *Computers as Theatre*.<sup>61</sup>

With the advent of streaming, both as an individual and as part of a larger broadcast, the idea of the screen as a stage becomes much more literal. There is a 'sense that a person's unique engagement with the system – the *particular* circuit between them and the game – is central to broadcasting,' Taylor writes, that there is a performative nature to gameplay; that the game provides a field, or stage, where an individual's play unfolds. (*Taylor Work of Play 2018, Pg. 77; Laurel 1993*).

### **Contested Ownership – the Grey Areas of Copyright**

Where this view of performative play becomes legally contentious is when you begin to argue that a player's performance gives them a product that is distinct from the game itself, and therefore a 'specific entertainment product'; content unique to the streamer. Again, this matches well with Aarseth and Laurel's points about game's requiring input and being seen as a stage. However, this then causes issues with intellectual property rights for the developers, which have yet to be resolved. Aarseth may argue that a game requires additional input, but there is still a structure that the input is interacting with. As a result, a negotiation between both has to be agreed upon, forming a 'hybrid configuration' that enters into potentially messy legal territory with little precedent to follow.<sup>62</sup> Examples abound, but the high profile 'Spectate Faker' case showcases the ambiguity of this situation well. During the incident, Lee 'Faker' Sang-hyeok had his personal games streamed without his permission using *LoL's* in-client spectate feature, but Riot Games' terms and conditions alleged they had complete ownership of all games played, and moreover that they were free to view using the game's client. What evolved was a contentious issue between the player who had been hosting the streams of Faker's games, Faker and his team, and Riot Games themselves, before being finally resolved.<sup>63</sup> This is new or unclear legal territory where current laws don't always translate effectively. What is clear, Burk points out, is that 'However e-sports evolves, it cannot adopt quite the business, social, or legal posture of its physical analogues.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Brenda Laurel, 'The Nature of the Beast' in *Computers as Theatre* (1993). Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley. Pg. 14-19

<sup>62</sup> John Banks and Sal Humphreys, 'The Labour of User Co-Creators' in *Convergence Vol 14, 4* (2008). Pg. 401-18.

<sup>63</sup> See: <https://na.leagueoflegends.com/en/news/riot-games/announcements/spectatefaker-what-we-learned-and-what-we-do>.

<sup>64</sup> Dan L. Burk, 'Owning E-Sports: Proprietary Rights in Professional Computer Gaming' in *University of Pennsylvania Law review*, Vol. 161, No 6. (May 2013). University of Pennsylvania Law review.

## Who Watches the Watchmen?

While this essay has largely focused on esports as a media product, looking in particular at concepts of streaming and broadcasting and how they interact with the professional players and esports talent, it would be remiss not to engage with the other side of the coin – namely the game developers and broadcasting platforms. Esports as an industry has now begun to attract serious investors, with major traditional sports organisations buying into the franchises of *League of Legends* and *Overwatch*, and sponsors like Kia supporting the LEC. It is clear to see that mainstream business is both paying attention to and interested in esports as it continues to develop. It is however, still in a fairly fragile state, if only because of its relative infancy. One major issue that still raises concern is the lack of external accountability developers have regarding their esports titles. They are, as earlier stated, largely judge, jury and executioner, with little viable option for external appeal, which emphasises Jenny et al.'s concerns about the dearth of third-party regulation in esports. (Jenny et al. 2016). Taking Riot Games as an example, they currently run their own player's association, with little in the way of legal protections for players, and deal with nearly all competitive rulings and legal disputes internally, even when it comes to contentious issues like the incidents surrounding Renegades or Tainted Minds.<sup>65 66 67</sup> Whether or not these were the correct decisions, the lack of obvious accountability and transparency will remain an issue in fostering trust both within the community and in esports as a whole.

## Conclusion

With this in mind, for esports to truly cement itself as a lasting industry it needs to find answers to these questions of accountability and transparency, and also pro-actively investigate the dangerously porous divide between work and play for pro-players. If the industry can take strides in these areas and continue to celebrate and build on its successes with tournament events and encouraging player-content creation and community interaction, esports will be here to stay.

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<sup>65</sup> See: <https://dotesports.com/league-of-legends/news/riot-na-lcs-players-association-interview-15244>

<sup>66</sup> MonteCristo speaks out on Renegades ban, calls for more transparency from Riot (2016). [Web]. Available at: <https://www.thescoreesports.com/lol/news/9416-montecristo-speaks-out-on-renegades-ban-calls-for-more-transparency-from-riot>. Accessed on 23/04/2019

<sup>67</sup> Austen Goslin, *Tainted Minds scandal: what we know and what's disputed* (2017). [Web]. Available at: <https://www.riftherald.com/2017/3/30/15042300/tainted-minds-scandal-oce-lol-opl>. Accessed on 23/04/2019

## Images

Figure 1: Screenshot from <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/413857193>

Figure 2: Picture from: <https://www.theverge.com/2018/11/5/18064106/league-of-legends-opening-ceremony-performance-kda-pop-stars-ar-music-video>

Figure 3: Picture from: <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/pMxwfX7TZB4/hqdefault.jpg>

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