Schoolyard Riot: League of Legends and High School Esports

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RIOTING IN TWO CITIES

In 2018, an Australian city-based high school in Victoria (VHS) made it to the championship stage of the inaugural *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009) High School tournament, organised and run by Riot Games Oceania in partnership with two commercial entities – a grassroots start-up and representatives from the Australian Football League (AFL), one of the most profitable media sports leagues in the country. In the run-up to the professionally produced tournament finals, the high school boys from VHS were permitted to substitute their weekly physical education curriculum (scheduled school-wide) for esports practice. This entailed packing up one's backpack, jumping on public transport or walking home, and switching on the home computer to practice online while the rest of VHS practiced sports together on the school field, led by a coach or school staff member.

But as we shift our attention to Hong Kong, where gaming has been reported in public discourses as an addiction rather than a sport (Golub and Lingley 2008), another group of high school students are treading new grounds. Five years ago, four high school students, each also a student leader at their own schools, jointly proposed to their schools to hold Hong Kong's first high school esports competition, but were flatly rejected by their teachers. Undeterred, they reckoned they will not need permission if they set up an external association, and founded the non-profit organization, the Hong Kong Student Esports Association (HKSESA). The last few years, not only had they obtained steady streams of sponsorships from local companies to hold annual competitions, their tireless evangelizing efforts convinced a total of 30 local secondary schools to allow their students to compete at HKSESA. HKSESA was running the only non-profit high school league in Hong Kong – only because of efforts of these students themselves.

These two vignettes raise questions on the state of esports in the high school setting under area specific educational and socio-cultural frameworks. Drawing on our

preliminary studies, we explore Australian and Hong Kong representative high school teams and team practices, vernacular, and organisational structures, looking to unpack the commercial, political, and pedagogical realities when a globally recognised esport enters diverse youth educational systems.

In this twin-set case study, we focus on the positioning and practices surrounding the free-to-play game *League of Legends* (here on in *League*), and how, as an esport, and as a platform, *League* gains formal or informal institutional and holistic support across regionally and area distinct high school settings. Drawing on mixed-qualitative methods (Stake 2006), we ask how esports (*League*) is entering the high school extracurricular system as a recognised organised sporting leisure activity, exploring the practices and relationships involved in maintaining the activity.

Riot's platform expansion is exemplified in the Australian context (Srnicek 2017). Riot Oceania's employment of a pedagogical representative to "legitimize" existing Riot content to educators (through educational summit workshops deploying the positive language of play and sportsmanship), and their provision of tailored educational packaging (addressing the Australian educational framework) is indicative of the investment and techniques on trial as Riot enters the high school setting looking to solidify a grassroots to professional (and fan) pipeline from the High School *League* to the Oceanic Professional League (see Anderson, 2001; Chang, 2018; McIntyre, 2019; Statt, 2016; Taylor, Kauweloa, Partin, & Witkowski, 2018). By providing two core pillars of student support—a professional online resource for "how-to" information and simple team sign-up page, and a produced (and livestreamed) glossy championship LAN event—Riot reveals its intentions. The Oceanic arm of Riot has self-defined their legitimacy as an extrinsically beneficial sports club (despite emerging studies on the systemic, demoralising experiences of organised *League* play - See Busch, Boudreau, & Consalvo, 2016; Cote, 2017; D'Anastasio, 2018; Karhulahti, 2016; Steinberg, 2017), siloing youthful players to their internally assessed esport curriculum, by using techniques of professional staging and reaping the labour of youthful networks and educational professionals.

Within the Hong Kong case, student-led initiatives exemplify an attempt by the youth to cultivate an ongoing practice within their preferred organised leisure activity (Kow, Leino, and Yim 2017), where their organisational actions are met with limited, even hostile, reception from teachers and parents. Students are, in every way, doing high school esports on their own. The original founders and successive HKSESA organisers have been able to engage in ongoing "school outreach," one school at a time, by sitting in meetings with teachers and principals from no less than a hundred schools. Perhaps less than a third of these schools were willing to overlook the social, political, and rhetorical frame of parents saying computer game play is a waste of time – thus giving these students a shot at their own interest. Running two annual competitions – an open league (non-school based) and inter-school competition requiring teacher approval – this grassroots, student-led initiative offers a compelling case to consider the meanings, intentions and strategies propping up high school esports.

Across the two cities, there are diverging stakes, with parents and educators showing considerable unease, particularly voiced in the attitudes and concerns of unpractised and uniformed adults, such as one Australian parent remarked that she had little opportunity to understand it or "stop it". With limited institutional, mature or expert oversight, there are clear challenges on both sides. On the one hand, allowing commercially-driven sports and esports a free reign in looking for youthful players to hook into their sport at an early age (Anderson 2001) raise questions whether Riot could deliver true pedagogy benefits in their designs of these leagues. On the other

hand, adults non-involvement or even plain hostility may set the stage for another kind of "riot" comprising youth resistance and missed opportunity in their learning and development (see Gee 2003; Itō et al. 2018). Thus, these two cases, with themes of youth and parental agency, creativity and resistance by actors with or without direct school involvement (including commercial game/league operators, and state/federal educational sector), and the promotion (commercial and student-led) of self-directed learning, jointly reveal some of the tensions involved as esports manoeuvre into the broader high school activities.

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