The digital imaginary of esports: A League of Legends Worlds case study

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Game studies has long been concerned with the ways economic value circulates both within and around games (Giddings, 2018). In this paper, the relationship games share with global flows of economic capital is viewed critically through the significance of esports mega-events, particularly the *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) 2024 World Championship Final that took place in London. By combining a game studies approach of mapping out new terrains of economic value connected with digital play to a geopolitical perspective common in sports studies (Chadwick et al, 2023), this paper posits the significance of esports to cities and nation states as symbolic of a new digital imaginary.

On November 19th 2023 Riot Games announced that the 2024 *League of Legends* (*LoL*) World Finals would be played in London's O2 Arena, and the decision was met with excitement by UK policy makers. It was the first time the finals were hosted in the UK, prompting London mayor Sadiq Khan to refer to the city as a 'leading destination for esports' and the event as a chance to globally showcase the UK 'capital's cutting-edge gaming industry' (Stubbs, 2023). The final was a huge success, going down as the most watched event in esports history (Šimić, 2024). Tickets to the event sold out in minutes. Regional media coverage was extensive, and the event generated an estimated £12 million for London's wider economy (Nicholson, 2024). What was missing from much of this excitement, however, was a critical discussion surrounding the lasting legacy of this event.

Exactly what the legacy of an esports mega-event can be is a complex question. Witkowski and Harkin (2024) highlight the local and national tensions that exist in global esports mega events that promote inclusion and diversity, for example, in a case study of esports inclusion at the 2022 Commonwealth Games. From a political economic perspective, esports ownership resides in North America and China primarily, which complicates the economic impact the *League of Legends* World Finals had on London in general and the UK games industry in particular. Value is still imagined in a digital context, however, before, during, and after the event. Through a critical analysis of the discourses surrounding the event, this paper argues that world tournaments provide mega-cities an opportunity to reimagine themselves as existing at the centre of a global digital economy. In other words, global esports tournaments of this scale can be understood as symbolic events that negate political economic contradictions existing between cities, creative economies, and digital platforms.

The idea of a globally spanning sporting or cultural event taking on an industrial significance beyond its spectacle has a long history in urban policy in general and London in particular. In 1851 London played host to the 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations': an early example of what came to be known as The World's Fair. According to Gunning (1994: 423), this form of Universal Exposition 'explicitly recalled the image of an imperial city, as neo-classical architectural motifs expressed its universal ambitions in terms of world domination'. Recent research on the international significance of esports industries and events has made reference to similar phenomena. According to Yu (2018) the growth of esports in China is framed as a way to foster both 'national pride and international goodwill', promoting China as the 'epicenter' of the global digital economy. McCauley et al (2019), on the other hand, point to the roles that regional events like DreamHack play in not only fostering local markets, but also integrating local markets into a broader, platform based 'global media landscape'. By bringing this research into conversation with work on creative cities and urban policy (Evans 2009; Zukin 1996), this paper posits the *LoL* World Finals as a continuation of a longstanding industrial practice of using large scale global events to reimagine the city. Put another way, the hosting of globally facing events (like the *LoL* Worlds Finals) brings digital and urban imaginaries together, temporarily centering the city at the forefront of global digital culture and industry.

METHODS

Critical discourse analysis will be used to frame the *LoL* World Finals and identify political economic contradictions existing between cities, creative economies, and digital platforms. Specific focus will be placed on the correlations and contradictions that exist between the event specific discourse present in press releases, media coverage, and promotional material surrounding the *LoL* World Finals, the municipal creative industries discourse (Durieux, 2023) advocated by The Greater London Authority that the event is part of, and the national esports industrial discourse promoted by the Association for UK Interactive Entertainment (UKIE, 2023). In addition, the paper will contextualize these discourses by employing a critical political economic framing to measure the different layers of transnational ownership surrounding the *LoL* Worlds Finals (Kerr, 2017: 28).

CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper will contribute to research on the political economy of digital industries, from an esports perspective. The primary contribution is the theoretical framing of large-scale esports tournaments as symbolic events that negate political economic contradictions existing between cities, creative economies, and digital platforms. And the secondary contribution is the highlighting of uneven geographies and structures of ownership that control esports, both through platform economies such as Twitch (Amazon ownership), Youtube (Google ownership) or Huya (Tencent and JOYY ownership) where the *LoL* World Finals was largely watched and in the ownership of the digital games themselves. The game of *LoL* itself and its respective platform is a crucial consideration because the vast proportion of monetary value derived from esports is controlled by publishers by way of in-game microtransactions. This difference in revenues is considerable, as Ahn et al (2020) estimate leagues and tournaments to contribute 0.6% ($0.14 billion) of esports global market size, in comparison to 63.7% ($15.85 billion) from publishers' games and 9.7% ($2.4 billion) from streaming platforms respectively. As a result, the issue for any country outside of the US and China is capturing the economic value generated by esports mega-events, even if the spectacle is regionally supported by a country like the UK, with all the accompanying discourses of digital possibility, industry and urban imaginary that follow.

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