

# The Domesticating Role of Memes in Esports Cultures

**Josh Jarrett**

University of Staffordshire  
College Rd  
Stoke-on-Trent, ST42DE  
[joshua.jarrett@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:joshua.jarrett@staffs.ac.uk)

**Maria Ruotsalainen**

University of Jyväskylä  
Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies  
Seminaarinkatu 15  
40100 Jyväskylä  
[maria.a.t.ruotsalainen@jyu.fi](mailto:maria.a.t.ruotsalainen@jyu.fi)

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## INTRODUCTION

The circulation of online memes sits at the intersection of politics and play (Mortensen and Neumayer 2023), particularly in online gaming cultures. This paper explores how memes often arise from moments of discontent in esports communities, where creating and referencing memes is a playful and culturally unifying activity. Politically though, playing with memes obscures the original source of discontent and furthers existing power relations. Through framing the obscuring of discontent via memes as part of a 'domestication' of fan resistance (Stanfill 2019; Bollmer and Tillerson 2025), a process that does not challenge the power relations of these long-standing games as a service models, this paper posits that memes serve a governing role in the games industry that upholds the status quo. Utilising examples of discontent turned memes from three prominent esports titles, context is provided for the transitions discontent undergoes as it is played with by a community and the political role these fan expressions play.

## METHODS

As our method of analysis, we are using multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) allows us to examine the way social relations, identities, institutions, ideologies, and power are realized and made visible through communicative modes (Fairclough 2023). Multimodality facilitates extending the analysis to other semiotic resources beyond text and language

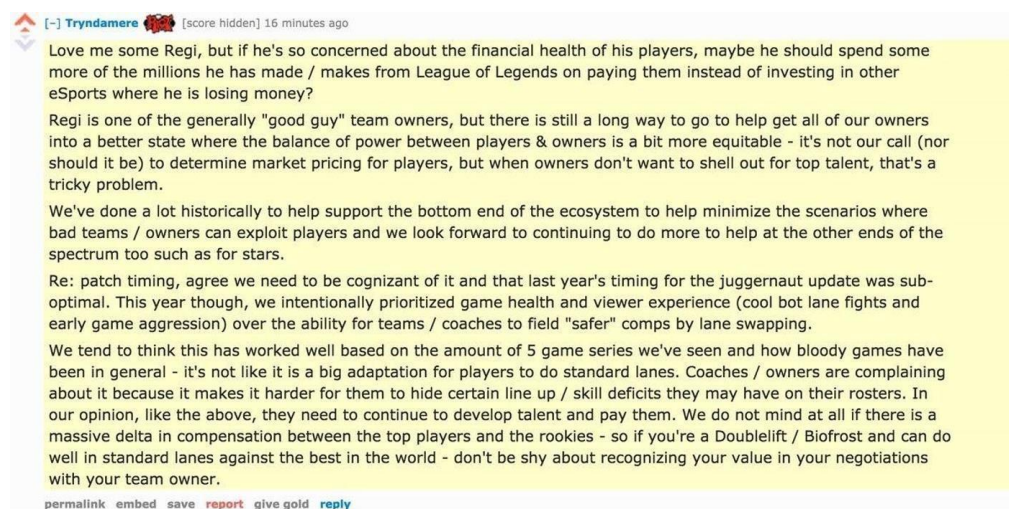
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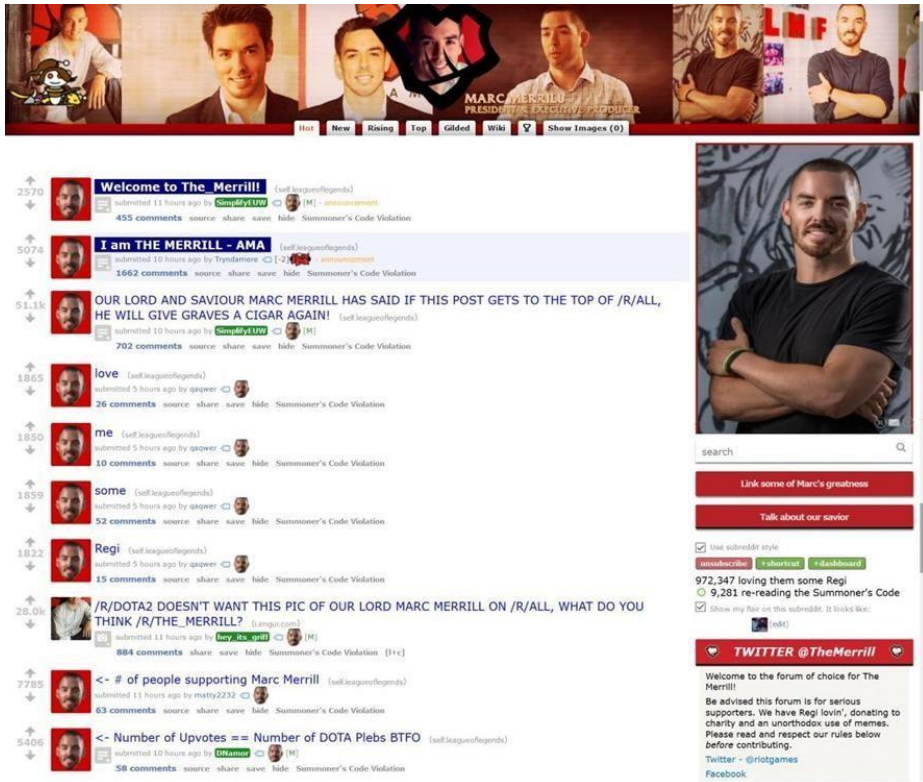
(Machin and Mayr 2012) and recognizing the multiple “semiotic modalities” (Fairclough 2023) discourses are made of, including visual modality which is common in memes. The following MCDA explores three distinctive case studies, from three different esports games and publishers, occurring in 2016 – 17, 2019 and 2025 respectively.

## RIOT GAMES: ‘LOVE ME SOME REGI’

Our first case study is taken from the */r/leagueoflegends* subreddit, where it is common to see Riot Games employees interact with the culture. In 2016, professional players and team owners criticised Riot Games' timing of patches before major tournaments due to their disastrous impact on player expertise and well-being (Švelch 2019), sparking a vibrant discussion surrounding the political economy of esports ownership in *League of Legends*. The co-founder of Riot Games, Marc Merrill, entered the debate to defend Riot Games' position and point out that these players and teams are free to play and invest in other games. The tone of the post was seen as condescending, and comments within the post such as ‘Love me some Regi’ (a team owner who was critical of Riot Games), ‘good guy owner’, ‘sub-optimal’, ‘delta’, along with Marc Merrill himself, would all become humorous memes. The following year on April Fool’s Day, players evoked these now infamous terms and signifiers in the name of *Reddit* threads, forming some of Merrill’s original quotes on the */r/leagueoflegends* homepage. The case study stands as a prominent example of how quickly genuine discontent and critical discourse in an esports community can turn into play, humour and depoliticisation.



**Figure 1:** A screenshot of the unedited original comment made by Marc Merrill, 22nd August 2016.



**Figure 2:** A screenshot of the /r/leagueoflegends frontpage on the following April's Fools Day, taken April 1st 2017.

## BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT: #FREEHONGKONG

In our second case study, we examine how #freehongkong and its variations were used in the Twitch chat of the Overwatch World Cup (OWWC) 2019, taking place in the BlizzCon 2019. #freehongkong was a protest movement against Blizzard Entertainment's decision to ban Heartstone player Blitzchung and take away his tournament winnings after he voiced his support for Hong Kong protests in a postmatch interview. Support towards Blitzchung spread to the Overwatch community, leading to the Chinese Overwatch character Mei being used as the symbol of resistance (Wirman & Rhys 2022). While Blizzard Entertainment reinstated Blitzchung's winnings five days after the event and reduced his ban to six months, the protests against Blizzard Entertainment continued in BlizzCon 2019, which also hosted the yearly OWWC.

During the OWWC matches, viewers were actively typing messages supporting Hong Kong in the chat, including messages like "free Hong Kong" (Siitonen & Ruotsalainen 2025). However, in addition to these serious messages supporting Hong Kong and criticising Blizzard Entertainment's perceived complicity, the chat would have different variations of this message - including "Free King Kong" and "free Willy". These messages demonstrate how the protest turns to a meme and how the political message becomes played with and carnivalised.



**Figure 3:** A screenshot from Twitch chat of the recording of Overwatch World Cup 2019 stream, taking place in BlizzCon, taken November 17 2025.

## VALVE: COUNTER-STRIKE 2 SKIN MARKET CRASH

Our third case study focuses on the *Counter-Strike 2* skin market crash in October 2025. The market crash occurred following a Valve update that allowed players to trade in five lower-tier skins for a chance at gaining a Knife or Gloves, which are much rarer ingame items with considerable monetary worth (ranging from \$150 - \$15000). In the span of one night, the supply of Knives and Gloves dramatically increased, and as a result, \$2 billion was lost from the *Counter-Strike 2* skin market cap (Harbinson, 2025). For players who were treating *Counter-Strike 2* as a financial investment space, a practice common across Steam (Thorhaug 2023: 92), staggering amounts of money were lost. The reasons given for Valve's decision were as a way to diminish the value of items typically traded on sites external to Valve, which they cannot monetise. Regardless, players / potential skin investors' criticism of Valve Corporation's governing role immediately followed, with players upset that there was no wider consultation. Running parallel to these critiques were memes, focusing on Valve Corporation's cofounder Gabe Newell who is the long-standing object of blame and appreciation for any governance decision impacting Valve Corporation (Di Placido, 2025).

## DISCUSSION

In these cases, memes function to both contest and affirm the power relations of publisher-run esports, by voicing expressions of disdain or discontent that ultimately

attach themselves to the kind of structures which neutralise or even benefit from them. These memes guide the collective affect of discontent in a way that enabled continued participation in what is being critiqued. As such, engagement with these games as a service models and their accompanying social media platforms was amplified rather than posing any challenge to publisher power. Representative of what Milner (2016: 9) calls the 'transformative reappropriation' memes undergo as they are shared and remixed by participants, these esports memes exemplify how domesticated discontent can become when publishers know players are likely to return.

## CONCLUSION

Our three case studies demonstrate how memes function as affective outlets in esports cultures. They enable expressions of discontent which, while appearing initially as a form of resistance, tend to slide into playful circulations that maintain the status quo of power and the practices related to it. Thus, while memes have politically subversive potential (Moussa et al, 2020), the case studies presented in this paper suggest that this potential is displaced with playful circulation and humour, possibly due to extensive control esports game developers have over their titles and players' investment to these games.

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