

The endemic intellectual property model of Riot Games

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Keywords

Transmedia, engagement, League of Legends, intellectual property, value, monetisation, worldbuilding

INTRODUCTION

When selling in-game skins, publishers have choices to make surrounding where the inspiration and value of these digital goods are derived. For many esports games, this decision has increasingly turned towards inviting various transmedia influences into their games. Arguably, the most extreme case can be found in *Fortnite* (Epic Games 2017), which has incorporated an extensive and eclectic range of IP collaborators across the domains of anime, superhero comics, pop stars, fashion brands, cinema, and other videogames. In contrast, Riot Games notably stands out against other esports publishers by employing a fundamentally divergent approach in *League of Legends* (2009) that draws only on the endemic intellectual property that they have had a hand in producing. In this research, we investigate Riot Games' endemic approach to IP development in and around *LoL*. We conduct a comparative case study of three transmedia texts created by Riot Games to explore how established publishers look inwards to mobilise aspects of games design and play through transmedia engagement.

ENDEMIC INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

To understand this model of endemic IP, it is first pertinent to understand the broader dynamics of affect and reciprocity which underscores Riot Games' monetisation approach.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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“People who look at the world through a short term, transactional, cynical lens, really struggle to understand Riot [...] These people think we make things like Arcane to sell skins, when in reality we sell skins to make things like Arcane. Riot is a mission driven company where Rioters are constantly striving to make it better to be a player” (Tryndamere 2024).

The above is an excerpt of a post made on the /r/leagueoflegends subreddit by Riot Games co-founder and current president Marc Merrill. The post was a response to reports that the Netflix series *Arcane* (Fortiche 2021), a stand-alone cinematic expansion of the *League of Legends* universe, was a financial failure despite its widespread positive reception (Yin-Poole 2024). Merrill’s quote speaks to the reciprocal model of player engagement which defines the free-to-play monetisation strategy in *LoL*, situated in an affective relationship between Riot Games and the playerbase (Jarrett 2021; Enverga, 2021). *Arcane* is far from the only ‘gift’ Riot Games has offered to their players in ostensible goodwill: the virtual K-Pop group K/DA, international esports series, and a Hall of Legends commemorating star players are each key transmedia texts within this cultivated portfolio of endemic IP.

The importance of transmedia content has been highlighted by audience researchers considering the ways engagement occurs across ‘different technological devices, distribution platforms and forms of content’ (Evans 2019, 9). Particularly in the context of esports titles, the proliferation of “transmedia universes” bring together digetic game lore with non-fictional competitive scenes to engage fans across a diversity of interests (Koskimaa et al. 2021). This represents an extension of Jenkin’s (2006) initial conceptualisation of transmedia storytelling, which focuses on the use of multiple media platforms to tell a lone story world.

While engagement is not a new concept, the way modern audiences freely move between transmedia contexts creates new possibilities to financially leverage engagement (132). Taking K/DA as an example, Ivănescu (2024: 44) points out that ‘the music itself provides a transmedial bridge between the videos and the game through the sound effects of the band-themed skins – an ideal monetisation tool’. In this case, the design of in-game skins mirrors the personas and sounds of the K-pop group, allowing fans of both the music videos and players of the game to further their engagement across these transmedia bridges.

METHOD

This paper utilises a comparative case study analysis (Bartlett and Varvus 2017) of Riot Games’ endemic approach to IP with wider esports publishers, including Blizzard/Activision and Epic Games, who are much looser in allowing IPs outside of their making into their games. Through using a comparative case study analysis and adapting the ideas of macro (outside of the game) and micro (in-game), the paper aims to follow both the transmedia connections made by specific pieces of IP deployed in esports games, as well detailing where their IP derives. The central case studies of this paper are K/DA, *Arcane*, and the Hall of Legends which each present a *LoL* centred case study of in-game monetisation and wider transmedia production.

CONCLUSION

Key to Riot Games’ endemic model of IP is the cultivation and strategic mobilisation of in-game characters and modes of play. As the examples in this paper demonstrate, publishers are experimenting with new transmedia connections to sustain players’ engagement across games-as-a-service models. Riot Games currently stand out

against their competitors both new and old by focusing inwards and developing their own bespoke IP experience for players. This ultimately serves a dual purpose; these new transmedia offerings can be positioned as gifts to the LoL community to strengthen the affective relationship between publisher and player, while also serving as a difficult to quantify but nevertheless significant IP worldbuilding endeavour.

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