

“This Trophy... Is For you”: Participatory Cultures in Esports

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Keywords

esports, platforms, live streaming, parasociality, memes, Twitch

INTRODUCTION

The camera is set at a low angle, looking up towards Lee “Faker” Sanghyeok as he steps forward to dramatic background music.

As Faker speaks – “To those that believed in us, no matter what. The fifth trophy...” – the music reaches a crescendo, cutting to silence with his final words: “...is for you.”

A final cut to the winner’s trophy ends the video before an information slide about the teased event, the League of Legends 2024 World Championship (or “Worlds”) Grand Finals, appears.

This *League of Legends (LoL)* (Riot Games 2009) match between Korean team T1 and Chinese “superteam” Bilibili Gaming (BLG) would come to break esports viewership records, peaking at almost 7 million viewers across a variety of different streaming platforms (including YouTube and Twitch, among others) (Esports Charts 2024). Instrumental to the match’s immense viewership was the aforementioned ‘Faker’, one of the game’s most experienced competitors, and indisputably its most successful. Faker is a five-time Worlds winner and is the first inductee into the game’s recently created ‘Hall of Legends’ despite still being an active player (LoL Esports 2024). Such a decision by Riot Games highlights how invaluable Faker is, not merely to the game’s competitive scene, but also to its casual playerbase and overall cultural impact. Using Faker as a case study, this presentation will examine how the esports industry is developing in the face of increasingly platformised digital cultures. Drawing on its analysis of official Riot Games productions and social media posts, it forwards *memeability*, *personalities as narrative co-authors*, *parasociality* as three main hallmarks of a participatory esports culture that is being mediated by platforms.

These characteristics have significant parallels with the origins of the esports industry, which in its current form can be traced to the 1990s with networked shooter games such as *Doom* (id Software 1993) and *Quake* (id Software 1996), as well as the Real Time Strategy Game *StarCraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 1998) in Korea. This early phase in the esports industry is notable for its grassroots nature and local, amateur tournaments (Taylor 2018);

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2025

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however, it would soon develop into semi-professional and eventually professional leagues, some of which would be supported by game publishers themselves (Wagner 2006). Since then, the industry has continued to grow – competitions have become increasingly organised and structured, with game publishers even directly hosting their own tournaments and the incorporation of collegiate teams and programs for esports (Steinkuehler 2020). When combined with the deliberate use of competitive sports broadcast conventions such as pre-game show analyses and commentators, these processes help to push the concept of an esports industry into legitimacy (Turtiainen et al. 2020). Consequently, esports became entangled with processes of content production, distribution and logistical infrastructures, likening the industry to “media sport” (Turtiainen et al. 2020, 353) or “media/sport” (Taylor 2018, 137). More than merely competition, esports is now product that is consumed and leads to further financial investment, with studies investigating motivations behind engagement (Lee and Schoenstedt 2011; Abbasi et al. 2021; Block et al. 2018). Thus, while platform affordances have enabled the development of participatory cultures, this presentation shows how such practices are still driven by consumption dynamics. Engagement with esports cultures therefore is filtered through multiple layers of corporate-driven mediation, making understanding their relationship with one another essential as the esports industry develops.

This presentation draws on data collected from an ongoing digital ethnography (2024-present). As part of ethnography, the author has followed relevant *LoL* content creators and official accounts, regularly liking posts to influence the author’s algorithm. The findings presented here are therefore preliminary observations, with specific post examples taken from YouTube, Reddit, and Twitter to demonstrate how Faker’s successful career has catalysed continuous engagement with *LoL* esports. The presentation first examines official narratives surrounding Faker through tournament trailer videos released by Riot Games. Communities then transform these narratives, connecting them to other players within the sport through various memes and remixes (see Shifman 2014; Knobel and Lankshear 2008). Some of these transformations occur within the context of specific content creator personalities, revealing how live streamers can function as esports narrative co-creators that mediate how viewers engage with esports. As a result of these dynamics, parasocial connections are formed not just between viewers and players, but also with the personalities that mediate esports consumption. This presentation explores one consequence of this phenomenon, examining how esports teams and personalities across the industry have exploited these emotional connections to encourage increased consumption, resulting in what viewers have called the “kpopification of esports” (fy ★?+°÷♡ 2025; zeek 2025). Thus, while *LoL* esports have used memeability, personality, and parasociality to maintain industry longevity, these characteristics can risk exploitation of the very viewers that sustain it.

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BIO

Geoffrey Lee is a PhD candidate and tutor in the Discipline of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. His thesis will explore how humour is transferred from the livestreaming platform Twitch onto other connected social media platforms and is part of the Sydney Games and Play Lab. He is also interested more broadly in the intersection of livestreaming, humour, and platformisation.