STORYTELLING ON SUMMONER'S RIFT
Philippa Warr

Defining esports is a strange task. At its most basic, 'esports' just means the highest levels of competitive play in videogames. What that actually looks like, and how much of a game's player-base it encompasses, varies wildly from game to game. In some it might mean small community-organized tournaments with little in the way of fanfare and no real chance of converting skilled play into a career. At the other extreme are games with multiple official leagues around the world, player contracts, broadcasting rights and millions of dollars in investment and potential revenue.

League of Legends sits very much in the latter camp. Developed by Riot Games and released in 2009, *League of Legends* currently boasts 100 million monthly players. The game's top talent – a tiny fraction of that astonishing playerbase – can become global superstars, playing matches onstage in front of packed stadia and broadcast live to millions more. The trappings of

esports are a peculiar amalgamation of traditional sports tropes and uniquely videogamey concepts. From traditional sports you might recognize the league structures where teams in a particular division play against one another over the course of a season and are ranked by their result. You might also recognize the broadcast formats where a panel of expert analysts and personalities chew over recent developments and prime the viewer for upcoming matches before throwing proceedings to commentators who narrate and discuss the game live.

On the videogamey side, you'll find a permeable division between the game as the salaried superstars play it, and the game everyone else sees when they log in. There are in-game items that flag you up as a supporter of a particular team, and the capacity to earn digital rewards by correctly predicting match outcomes. Characters in the game get outfits to commemorate winning teams, and the actual parameters of the game might change if a tournament exposes bugs or weaknesses in the current design that the developers need to tweak.

Somewhere inbetween are platforms like Twitch, where players might supplement their income and boost their profile by playing games and streaming the footage to an audience. These won't be the

26, 27 *League of Legends*, gameplay on Summoner's Rift

28 *League of Legends* World Championship, Beijing National Stadium, 2017

tournament games you'd find on Riot Games' own official Twitch or YouTube channels – they're more likely to be high-level kickabouts where the player is more like a theatre act, their draw being a combination of game skill and charisma.

29 *League of Legends* World Championship, analyst desk, 2017

Esports venues are a mishmash of online and physical spaces. Let's take the *League of Legends* World Championship as an example. The World Championship is *League of Legends'* biggest title, awarded annually to the best team in the world. When considering this event, there's the space where the players are actually playing – an auditorium or a sports arena with capacity for a certain number of fans (see pl. 28), a production crew, merchandise stands, security, catering facilities, plus oodles of tech and other provisions for live entertainment; there is also the online space where the vast majority of the audience will reside. That means a variety of streaming options for live viewing, but also vast repositories of video for watching after-the-fact, analysis, highlight reels, gifs, Twitter polls, message board threads…. I'm partial to pictures of viewing parties, where fans post photos of the little dens they've made from which to watch particular big games. You'll see people in pyjamas, piles of snacks, and projectors beaming the game onto someone's classroom wall. But, whether you're there in person or curled up on the sofa at 4am with just a mug of coffee for company, you're always being told stories.

Storytelling is the backbone of esports. It's the tool you use to hook players in week after week and it's the way you translate particular mouse clicks and keyboard taps into iconic rises to power (or tumbles from grace).

For me, as an esports journalist, it's about collecting information and shaping it into a narrative without losing the sense that you're telling a true story. It's about making a hobby that revels in jargon and in-jokes seem approachable. You may or may not know what a laneswap meta is, but when I bill a game as a grudge match, or a David-and-Goliath event, you get a sense of reputations at stake or odds to overcome.

'Without stories, there is little to differentiate one game from another,' says Josh 'Jatt' Leesman.[1] Jatt is a shoutcaster for the North American *League of Legends* Championship Series (LCS), which means he commentates on, and analyses, games as part of an ongoing competitive league. That expertise also sees him pop up at international events, folding those stories from the regular season into the enormous end-of-year and mid-season tournaments.

'Stories bring added meaning and excitement to the game and the sport. For instance, without storytelling fans have little reason to care more about a regular season game than about a championship final.'

Trevor 'Quickshot' Henry is a caster for the European LCS and, like Jatt, is also part of the talent pool for big international events. He expands on that idea of storytelling bringing meaning: 'It's what compels people to keep coming back. You buy into a story of a team or an underdog or a superstar player or favourite team or favourite champion. If you find something interesting that's what you watch.'[2]

While the majority of in-match talk (see pl. 29) assumes a basic familiarity with *League of Legends*, broadcasts tend to assume less knowledge about the teams and the players. After all, there are multiple regional leagues around the world, so a fan who tunes in to watch European teams every week might be entirely in the dark as to what's been happening with Chinese, North American or Korean squads.

A personal favourite moment where a panellist summed up a *League of Legends* match in accessible terms was in 2014 at the World Championship final in Seoul's World Cup Stadium. Professional *League of Legends* player Yiliang 'Doublelift' Peng summed up a lopsidedness of skill in the matchup by comparing the favoured side, Samsung White, to the Power Rangers and their opponents, Star Horn Royal Club, to hotdogs.

Whether or not you were able to follow the intricacies of the action onscreen, Doublelift's summary cuts through the confusion and instantly gives you a story to latch on to: Samsung White are powerful, dynamic, heroic; Star Horn Royal Club are a wobbly tendril of meat, bereft of basic defences, outclassed and waiting for consumption.

In terms of actually picking out the stories to focus on, casters draw on many different types of information. There's their own analysis of games and trends, there's whatever the community is talking about, there are the narratives teams and players put out themselves through their own videos, blogs and social media and which might need to be countered or, at least, assessed.

30 *League of Legends* World Championship, audience, 2017
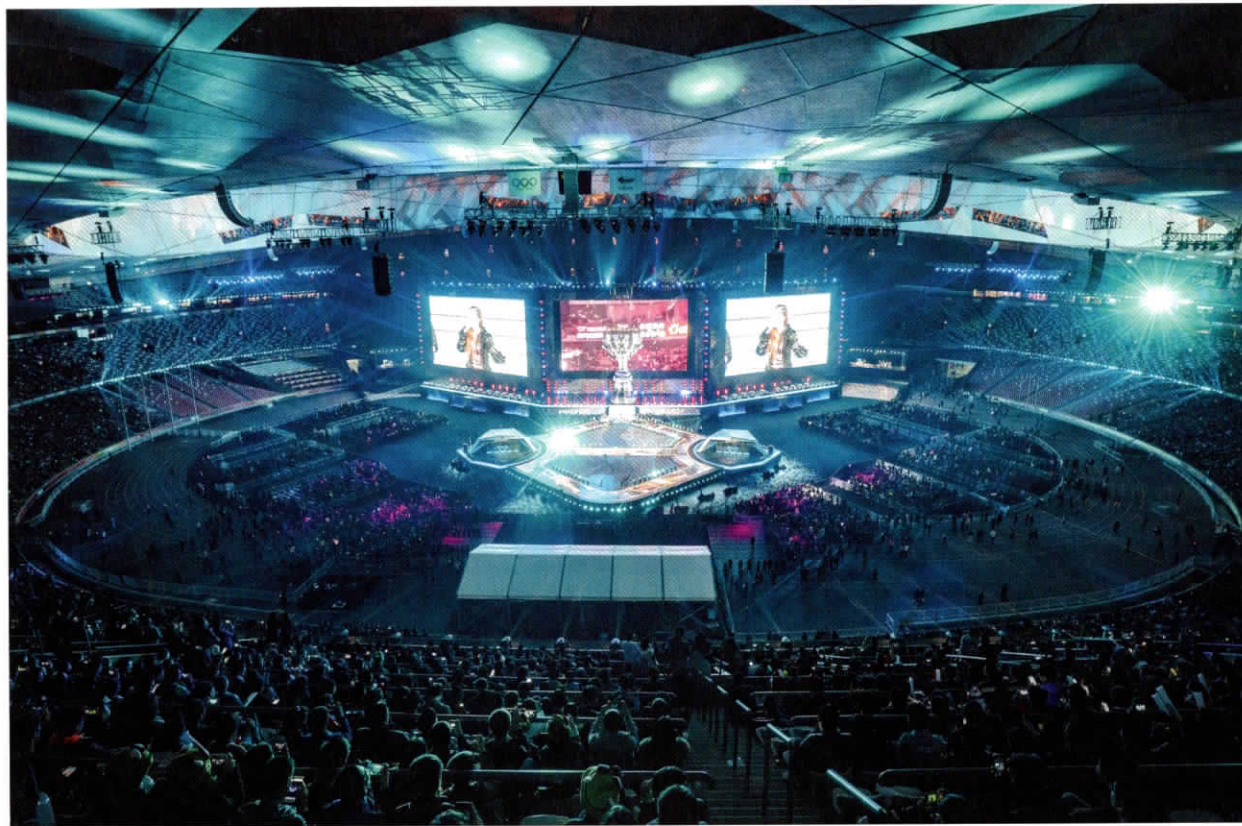
31 *League of Legends* World Championship, closing ceremony, 2017
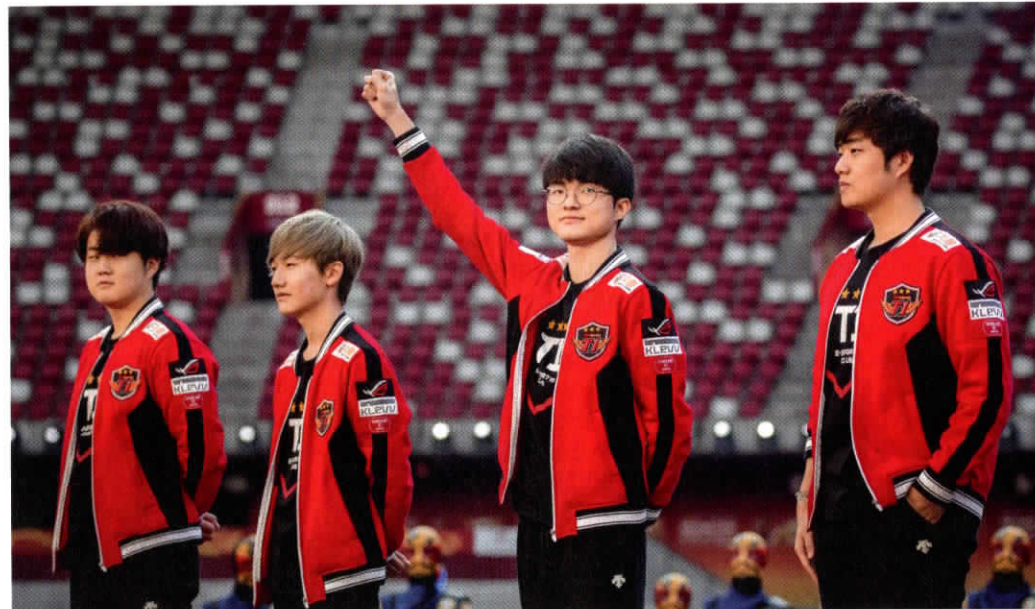
32 *League of Legends* World Championship, SK Telecom T1 team, 2017

'It's a caster's job to identify [storylines] and figure out which story fits the scenario the best,' says Jatt. 'Whether it is a community argument, talk between players, or a trend identified by a caster, a story needs to be analysed for how well it fits. The most important thing in all of this is what feels genuine and right.'

Quickshot points out another factor – the context of the tournament. 'What's important in week three of the spring split of the EU LCS versus what is important on day two of the World Championship is completely different.'

With an event like the World Championship I'd expect more 'drive-by' interest than with the regular season of competition. The World Championship is big. It's bombastic, it attracts attention, it piques people's interest in the way that the football World Cup entices people who don't usually watch sports to take in a game or two.

In that scenario, a storyteller's audience is straddling many different levels of expertise and so they must pitch their narrative accordingly, figuring out how basic and how advanced it's feasible to go. Jatt takes his inspiration from traditional sports broadcasting: 'Take basketball as an example. The objective of the game is to put the basketball in the hoop more often than the other team – but the casters aren't going to spend time explaining that incase a newcomer is watching. There is a certain level of assumed knowledge.'

But even if you take the absolute basics out of the equation there is still a balancing act to perform, catering to casual fans as well as those with an encyclopaedic knowledge of *League of Legends*. 'That comes with a bit more finesse,' admits Jatt. 'It's important to not alienate the average viewer for the benefit of the hardcore fan; however, the opposite is also true.'

That means finding succinct ways to include both groups as you make your points. Say the rivalry between two teams goes back six years, Jatt would tie it to the current match, pointing out how that rivalry might impact play. If he mentions specific events in past tournaments he'll give enough description to either prompt a memory of the moment in question if you know it, or to give an understanding of what happened if you don't.

Rivalries, unbroken winning streaks, former teammates now on opposing sides…. Those are all obvious starting points for storytelling, but when a narrative is less forthcoming casters still need to find a hook for the audience to grab on to.

Quickshot gives me an example in the form of a matchup between two European teams – Team Vitality and ROCCAT: 'I'm going to be quite blunt and say that's traditionally not going to be an extremely

exciting matchup. You've got two teams that have been middle to lower half of the table of the EU LCS for a long period of time and you've got, generally speaking, not a lot on the line for the teams.'

The challenge there is to take that comparatively lacklustre match and tease out a reason for people to watch. 'We go a couple different ways,' says Quickshot. 'The easy way out is to make it very personal and very team-specific. This match itself may not have a lot of weight to carry, however for a team like Vitality who are still constantly trying to prove themselves and make it into playoffs again it means they have to beat ROCCAT.'

ROCCAT, on the other hand, had a phenomenal end to the spring portion of the 2017 season then lost Nubar 'Maxlore' Sarafian, the person on the team who specialized in making team decisions and co-ordinating the action. Their story might be that the match helps us figure out what the team is like without Maxlore. These two hooks can then intertwine or just run in parallel as the match plays out.

Quickshot adds that in a game like *League of Legends* you can also step outside the teams or players for stories and look at the other changeable elements of the game. Matches involve the players picking characters and buying items to augment those characters' skills. That opens up stories about which characters are popular and why, or which items you might want to build, or how particular changes to abilities open up or close off types of play.

The challenge may actually end up being how to edit a wealth of potential tales down instead of scratching around for one. As Jatt puts it: 'When a caster does their research properly, it's not so much a struggle to find stories, but a struggle to tell the best ones.'

Something which has been an interesting challenge for my own esports storytelling skills is the dominance of a South Korean team called SK Telecom T1 (habitually shortened to SKT). At the time of writing, SKT (pl. 32) have three of the six World Championship titles to their name and field a man called Lee 'Faker' Sang-hyeok in the middle lane of the map. Faker is widely considered to be the best player in the world and has earned understated nicknames like 'The Unkillable Demon King' and 'God'.

The challenge here is to explain why a tournament or a match featuring SKT isn't a foregone conclusion. Their reputation precedes them and gets simplified in a way that can make storytelling difficult, as you need to fight that narrative in order to expose nuance and foible.

'Stories can absolutely get in the way of what's going on in the matches if they are told too strongly,'

says Jatt. He points out that, looking at SKT, as we headed into the 2017 World Championship, two roles on the team – the player who occupies the top lane of the game's map and the player who roams the jungle – had actually changed in the last year. The team composition was thus not the same. 'They also don't come into Worlds as the reigning champions of Korea.[3] The story then becomes much more nuanced. Can SKT reach that point again where they are undisputedly the best team in the world?'

There's also the fact that broad-strokes storytelling will only carry you so far. It might be fine to make pronouncements about SKT being unbeatable while pontificating to friends over a drink, but, as Jatt points out, if you're commentating a live match and the audience are watching SKT fall behind the story of the 'unbeatable' team ceases to perform a useful function. 'A caster always needs to be reactive to the current state of things when relaying stories to viewers,' he notes.

Some teams and some players seem more prone to featuring in narratives so I'm curious to know whether it's a difficult thing to balance those high-profile star stories with interesting things that low-key players might be up to. As Jatt explains:

In all honesty, the players who are featured in more narratives are often the most interesting players. It's our duty as a broadcast team and as casters to tell the stories of interesting players. Let's be clear, none of these storylines are manufactured or made up. We're simply translating what we see and finding a way to tell the story to a viewer. Therefore, if a story is interesting from a low-key player, it's our job to tell it in whatever way we can.

A handful of players have become incredibly well-known. These are the high-profile stars I was referencing above. There are pantomime villains who the audience loves to hate, there are people who are beloved by the fan community, and people who seem to radiate some kind of supernatural ability when it comes to the game. Their star power and their appearance in narratives seem related but not necessarily in a direct way.

'I look at shoutcasting and broadcasting as a bit of an amplification system when it comes to star power,' explains Jatt. 'When stories are there, or when a player or team has great qualities like a villain or a hero, the broadcast does its best to make sure that story is told. However, it's impossible for the broadcast to make those stories up, or to make those traits appear out of nowhere.'

Something Quickshot explains is how a broadcast tries to take into account players' own strengths and weaknesses. Andrei 'Xerxe' Dragomir is one such player. He has an interesting style of play but isn't particularly confident in interviews. 'We, as a broadcast, made a conscious decision to try and feature his gameplay highlights … and try to tell Xerxe's story through gameplay.' Those gameplay snippets are augmented with music and short sequences which provide context to what you're seeing, thus putting Xerxe's achievements in front of the audience but in a way that plays to his strengths not his weaknesses.

The broadcast uses players prone to visible displays of emotion like Marcin 'Jankos' Jankowski very differently. Clips of him yelling and screaming are useful pre-game and afterwards. They act as shorthand for people's investment in *League of Legends* and offer visible demonstrations of the highs and lows that matches can bring.

In fact, the closing moments of the 2017 World Championship became as much about the images of Faker visibly distraught (pl. 33) after losing to Samsung Galaxy as they were about Samsung's win (pl. 34). Actually, I'd predict the footage from the SKT booth, teammates milling around and Faker with his head on the desk, is the image people will associate with that grand final for years to come.

Jatt is keen to stress that these stories, though entertaining, are all anchored to real events. There are real unbroken winning-streaks, real triumphs over adversity, real thrilling races to the finish line. But reality doesn't always play well with narrative. Sometimes a plucky underdog won't get their fairy-tale ending. I ask Jatt how he deals with real life not necessarily having the satisfying pay-off that fiction might offer:

Honesty is the best practice. It's not wrong to get excited with the fans, to talk about what an improbable run a team is having, or to express the disbelief in how they've done it. It's also not wrong to predict the downfall of the team. The thing with underdog stories, is they wouldn't really exist if everyone started to say they were expected to win. Being honest allows the stories to play out properly, and have the most honest and genuine payoff.

Quickshot points out that there are also ripple effects beyond the two teams currently onscreen. The result of the match might be the thing that knocks a third party out of the competition.

A potential problem is that when viewers are invested in one storyline, if that fizzles out there's a chance they'll stop watching. Broadcasters can try to
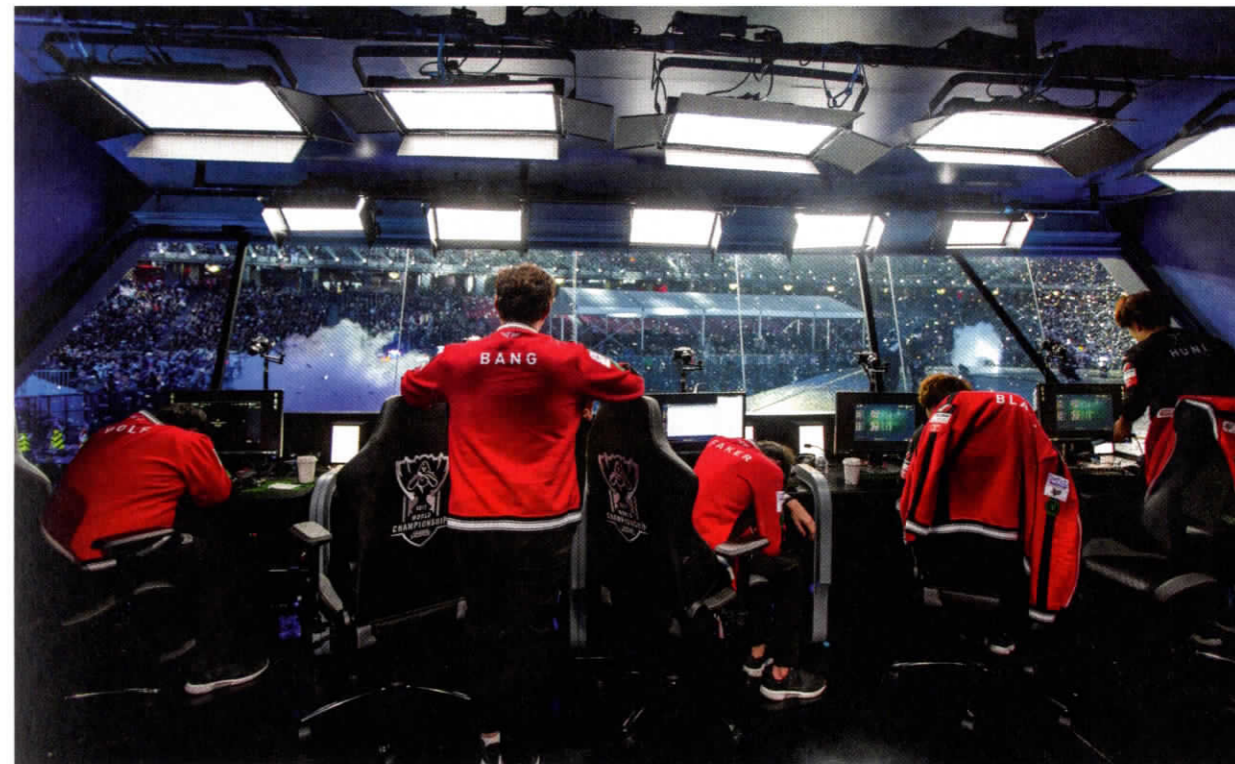
33   *League of Legends* World Championship, SK Telecom T1's defeat, 2017

34   *League of Legends* World Championship winners, Samsung Galaxy White, 2017

35 *League of Legends* World Championship, Jarvan IV cosplay, 2017

mitigate that by making sure other narratives exist and are put forward – extra hooks for those fans to latch onto. But it's also possible that people will dip out for the remainder of the tournament and come back next year. Quickshot likens the process of following a favourite team in a competition to reading a book – if this one didn't work out you wait for the next title and hope for a better ending.

My own favourite stories from *League of Legends* esports events tend to exist where the matches and the sense of community intertwine. During the 2017 World Championship I was furiously trading text messages with a friend all the way through a game between European side Misfits and SKT. It actually looked like SKT might get knocked out of the whole competition by this rookie squad and neither of us could tear ourselves away for long enough to get lunch – I didn't even want to risk going to the bathroom – in case Misfits made *League of Legends* history.

The year before, I was in Los Angeles, perched high up in the crowd on the very edge of my seat as Samsung Galaxy pushed SKT to an absolutely unexpected full best-of-five in the 2016 World Championship finals. In between the fourth and fifth games in a full series it's now traditional for Riot to play Silver Scrapes. An outsider might describe Silver Scrapes as slightly plodding incidental music but if you're part of the *League of Legends* esports community, those thumping chords signify the concluding part of a massive fight. In LA I shared that Silver Scrapes moment – goosebumps on skin and heart in mouth – with an entire stadium of people and it was electric.

Other favourite stories involve time spent photographing the audience at esports events. Those pictures are a riotous mess of merchandise, home-brew signs, flashing lights, inflatable thundersticks and the spectacular homemade costumes of skilled fans who dress as characters from the game (cosplay, see pl. 35). They help me tell the story of what it's like to actually attend those events, and feel the raw energy of a crowd.

I asked Quickshot and Jatt for their own favourite stories. 'I would have to say Faker's narrative,' says Jatt:

Not only is Faker the best player in *League of Legends* and a three-time World champion, he's done it in a sport where many people didn't think that type of success was possible. Back in the early days of *League* esports, many people thought pro players wouldn't last more than a few years. For many, that was completely true. Yet somehow, through all the changes to the game in the past five years, Faker has remained at the top throughout.

Quickshot offered a few moments similar to my own in that they were personal and tied into the emotional side of esports. One involved flying to North America because Riot needed an extra caster and, within 12 hours of landing, covering a Team Solo-Mid game where one of their most famous players pulled off a rare and spectacular five-kill streak. Another was a moment where a fellow caster was so excited by the conclusion of a game that he jumped on, and broke, his chair.

The latter isn't representative of all professional *League of Legends* matches, but in trying to communicate why I, and millions of others, watch esports, that broken chair might be the best short story.

1
Interview with Josh 'Jatt' Leesman (North American League Championship Series Shoutcaster at Riot Games), 30 September 2017.

2
Interview with Trevor 'Quickshot' Henry (European League Championship Series Shoutcaster at Riot Games), 17 November 2017.

3
'Worlds' is the way most people who follow professional *League of Legends* refer to the World Championship series of events.