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Between the Digital and Physical: Legitimization and Virtuality in E-Sports Opening Ceremonies

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BETWEEN THE DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL:
LEGITIMIZATION AND VIRTUALITY IN E-SPORTS OPENING CEREMONIES

By

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ACRONYMS

Ace: When all members of a team are slain

Burned: Used

E-sports: Professionalized video gaming

Flash: An ability within the game, used to teleport short distances

HP: Health Points

Kite/Kiting: Attacking an enemy while maintaining distance

LAN: Local Area Network

LCS: League of Legends Championship Series

Level Up: After enough experience points are earned, a character will “level up” and grow stronger

LoL: League of Legends

Riot Games: The developers of League of Legends

Shoutcaster: A commentator for a game or match

Ult/Ultimate: A character’s “ultimate ability,” generally on a longer cooldown than its other spells and with more powerful effects

ABSTRACT

E-sports is one of the fastest growing entertainment genres in the world, with millions of viewers and ever-increasing revenue streams flowing into bigger and more impressive tournament displays. One of the ways that this revenue is utilized by e-sports producers and event managers is to engage audiences with musical events prior to large finals tournaments, events which are emblematic of the games being played and the competitive nature of the participating professional gamers. Within this thesis, I aim to deconstruct these events in their context, understanding the ways that these events provide a microcosm of the e-sports genre and move forward a legitimization of e-sports as a whole. I look closely at the 2019 League of Legends World Championship Finals Opening Ceremony (and other similar League of Legends opening ceremonies as necessary) as a particular example of this phenomenon, focusing on emergent themes such as virtuality, intersectionality in terms of race, class, and gender, and economic influences on e-sports. I draw on Bruno Latour's actor-network theory as well as theories of music mediation developed by scholars such as Georgina Born to inform my analysis, and to determine how assemblages of physical and digital mediators influence and interact with one another in the opening ceremonies I analyze. These events are more than simply a precursor to the main event; they are themselves signifiers of the widely interconnected nature of e-sports which has only continued to expand into new markets, new audiences, and new platforms. By closely analyzing the themes introduced by these ceremonies and the ways that technologies are utilized by the individuals associated with these events, we can move closer to understanding why e-sports has undergone such a massive explosion of

growth in such a brief span of time; further, this can also inform the ways that entertainment will continue to expand and evolve in an increasingly virtual landscape.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The music fades before a low rumbling appears in the background; Ahri turns to face the back of the stage where a shimmering circle of light has appeared, hovering in mid-air, showing scenes of rocks, ruins – and the trophy. She walks slowly, measured steps taking her towards the portal as the low growl in the background grows stronger as she steps through – the camera cuts, color bars flashing quickly across the screen – and Ahri turns, looking back towards the audience. The portal’s outline shifts from gold to blue as the ‘real’ world disappears, going to black until light from the portal blurs everything to white.

In the 2018 League of Legends World Finals Opening Ceremony, a brief technical glitch with one of the production’s main cameras occurred during a climactic moment following K/DA’s performance of “POP/STARS,” in which Ahri, one of the singers from the fictionalized k-pop group, steps through a portal from the physical world into the world of League of Legends. Color bars showed on the screen, visible for only moments, but still enough that the immersion was broken for viewers. Even a tiny technical error can spell massive problems when so many different systems are interacting to produce an event as large as a League of Legends World Finals Opening Ceremony; while this error did not bring the show to a halt, or the world to come crashing down, it did break the illusion which was being carefully crafted throughout the show. This illusion, meant to capture the imaginations of the audience and the viewers online and let them move alongside Ahri into the virtual world being crafted onscreen, instead left them wondering about the interruption of the camera and reminded them that this was a

fictional production – the complete opposite result than that which the event’s producers intended.

The 2019 World Finals Opening Ceremony, then, was produced with this exact scenario in mind. Every aspect of the performance had to be perfect; from the holographic projections of champions performing together with their human counterparts to the opening of the trophy case at the climax of the show, the event had to flow seamlessly throughout to keep the audience entrapped in the world that they were building around them. It is this performance that I am interested in and focus on throughout this thesis. The unique applications of holographic technology and the imaginative blending of digital and physical spaces which occur in this opening ceremony exemplify a spectacle which is exceptionally immersive and interesting to a viewer. The 2019 Opening Ceremony, the point where League of Legends, music, sponsorships, virtual reality, augmented reality, representation, and competition meet and intermingle, is an excellent example of a modern e-sports event which moves competitive gaming from a sideline oddity into the center stage. In this thesis, I will discuss the ways this opening ceremony has been crafted as a form of legitimization for e-sports, as an entertainment genre and cultural movement at a point in time where engagement with digital and virtual technologies has become an implicit factor in the way we spend our leisure time.

Background:

I began playing League of Legends in high school, less than a year after the game first entered the public market in 2009. At that time the player-base was relatively small, and the developers who produced the game, Riot Games, were a somewhat unknown quantity among other major game producers like Blizzard Entertainment, Electronic Arts, and Nintendo, but I quickly grew enamored with the game and played frequently, even drawing in my friends to join me. I have been an active user for roughly ten years, and have watched the game grow and evolve throughout its development. Several years ago I began, at the urging of one of my close friends, to start watching professional games. He was (and still is) a devoted fan of the organization Cloud9, a prominent team in the League of Legends professional scene, and I watched to help cheer them on with him. Watching League Championship Series (LCS) matches was beneficial to me beyond just spending time hanging out with my friend; it was a way to model my own play on how the pros performed, and to learn strategies and tricks that would help me out in the game.

As I watched I was interested in the gameplay: who won, how they won, and how could I apply the things that they did to my own play. Over time, however, as the broadcasts which produced these games became more and more elaborate, I began to realize that the production of these events hold just as much significance as the games themselves. When the world championships roll around each year, even though I'm tuned in to watch and cheer for the teams and players that I like, what I look forward to most is always the opening ceremony performances which herald the final games. All of the anticipation that the moment holds, all of the tension waiting to see who is going to come out on top, culminates in one last explosion of

color, light, and music before the teams take the stage – until one side is victorious, and the season comes to a brilliant close.

Purpose and Significance:

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the ways that opening ceremonies like the 2019 World Finals Opening Ceremony contribute to and exemplify the ongoing effort to recognize e-sports as a legitimate and valid form of entertainment alongside similar entertainment media such as more conventional sports like soccer or baseball. In other sports, events like the Superbowl Halftime Show and the Olympics opening ceremonies are massive events showcasing the power and resources available to the organizations and political powers which put on those events. These events legitimize the proceedings, showing the audiences that these are competitions that have substance and should be respected because of the enormous displays being put on, displays which bring in cultural icons, famous musical guests, and which create a visible performance of opulence. Like other sports, then, e-sports has turned to these opulent displays of wealth and power as a way to legitimize the sporting events that these games host, and embolden audiences and participants in the e-sports subculture to embrace a form of entertainment which was often considered to be an undesirable or shameful part of one's identity. I've grown up in and around the gaming subculture, and I consider myself a gamer as one of the core facets of my identity; however, even though it's something I am strongly passionate about, I am frequently hesitant to discuss gaming and e-sports with others

because of the negative connotations associated with gaming and geek culture.¹ These negative connotations (such as conceptions of laziness, immaturity, or unhealthy obsessions) have been changing in recent years as geek and nerd culture has moved into mainstream cultural parlance, and e-sports has followed that trajectory as evidenced by increasing popularity and corporate sponsorships. This thesis tracks that trajectory, not only for the e-sports scene and geek culture, but for myself as well.

This thesis is also significant in that very little research has thus far been conducted on the music of e-sports and competitive gaming. While various studies have been conducted on e-sports, the literature available has generally focused on sociology rather than musicology. Authors such as T.L. Taylor,² Nick Taylor,³ and Emma Witkowski⁴ have begun work on the study of the social and cultural impacts of e-sports and professional gaming, including some works which I pull from throughout the course of this thesis, but none address music's impacts throughout e-sports culture. There is a more fully developed body of literature relating to the study of more traditional sports, but there remains a dearth of analysis regarding the

¹ Conceptions of gamers as immature and childish are only enflamed by recent events which characterize gamers as intolerant, misogynistic, and homophobic such as "GamerGate"; see works such as Sarab Beth Evans and Elyse Janish's "#NeedDiverseGames: How the Queer Backlash to GamerGate Enables Nonbinary Coalition" for a description of "GamerGate."

² T. L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, MIT Press, 2012.
_____, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*, Princeton University Press, 2018.

³ Nick Taylor, Jen Jenson and Suzanne de Castell, "Cheerleaders, booth babes, Halo hoes: pro-gaming, gender and jobs for the boys," *Digital Creativity* 20(4) (2009), 239-252.

Nick Taylor, "Play globally, act locally: The standardization of pro Halo 3 gaming," *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology*, 3(1) (2011), 228-242.

_____, "Now you're playing with audience power: The work of watching games." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33(4) (2016), 293-307.

⁴ Emma Witkowski, "On the Digital Playing Field: How we "Do Sport" With Networked Computer Games," *Games and Culture* 7(5) (2012), 349-374.

Emma Witkowski and J. Manning, "Player Power: Networked careers in esports and high performance game livestreaming practices," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 25(5-6) (2019), 953-969.

intersections of music and sports. A few authors such as Ken McLeod,⁵ whose work I consider later in this text, have written about this intersection with regards to cultural significance and social impacts, but the majority of the available scholarship considers the physiological effects of music for athletes, such as the way music impacts bodily performance during sport and exercise (see work by authors like Karageorghis⁶ and Bellon⁷). Research like this is useful, and it holds repercussions for what types of music are played at sporting events and why that might impact athletes in play, but it does not consider issues such as how the music is interpreted in context or what the music symbolizes in conjunction with sporting events. Historical connections between music and sport are not taken into account within research that focuses on the physicality of music, and the cultural impact that music has held on sports, including the intertwined relationship that sports and music have come to hold in events like halftime shows or opening ceremonies, has only just begun to be theorized upon. Music and sports tend to be taken as oppositional within many studies; seen as two sides of an educational coin, where students who study music gain certain intellectual or physical benefits and those who study sports acquire certain other intellectual or physical benefits.⁸ Therefore, most of the studies that we have to pick and choose from to supplement studies of intersecting sports and music are based on the educational or physiological intersections of the two.⁹

⁵ Ken McLeod, *We Are the Champions: The Politics of Sports and Popular Music*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2011.

⁶ Costas Karageorghis, *Applying Music in Exercise and Sport*.

⁷ Dominique Bellon, *Application of Sport Psychology to Music Performance: A Study Based on a Review of Sport Psychology Literature and Selected Interviews With Professional Musicians*.

⁸ Charlotte Cabane, Adrian Hill, and Michael Lechner. "Mozart or Pelé? The Effects of Teenager's Participation in Music and Sports."

⁹ It is important to note here that I am speaking about music *and* sport rather than music *as* sport. There have been a number of publications written on the topic of musical competitions in various cultural contexts which I do not include in this thesis. While it falls along similar lines, I have focused on sporting events which utilize music in some way, shape or form that is not judged based on musical parameters.

Useful, to be sure, but lacking for a musicological study. This thesis aims to fill that dearth in scholarship for a topic severely under-theorized at this point in time.

Literature Review:

Musicology is at this point in time only just beginning to come to terms with the study of music within video games, and the impact that that music has on the way people play, understand, and enjoy games. With regards to e-sports, then, there has been little to no formal research conducted on how music functions within competitive video game events, much less on League of Legends specifically. Due to this dearth of formal research on my specific topic of music and e-sports, I have taken cues instead from work by authors who investigate music and sports such as Ken McLeod, as well as literature which has begun the monumental task of tackling the music of video games, something which has been started by authors like Kiri Miller, William Cheng, and William Gibbons. Beyond work from those avenues of inquiry, I also utilize the works of various sociologists and anthropologists who have been among the first to discuss the social and cultural impacts of e-sports, including authors like T. L. Taylor, Nick Taylor, and Emma Witkowski.

As the function of music within e-sports and e-sports contexts is as yet not fully realized in academic scholarship, my research has needed to borrow from a large variety of disciplines to better analyze the way this opening ceremony produces meaning for viewers and promotes a legitimization of e-sports and gaming culture. The interdisciplinary nature of this thesis borrows from musicology, sociology, gender studies, posthuman theory, and many others to

formulate a cogent argument, and I have endeavored to combine these disparate threads together for an analysis of an event that sits at the intersection of any number of disciplines.

One author who has delved into this gap in scholarship is Ken McLeod, whose work *We are the Champions: The Politics of Sports and Popular Music* (2011) invokes and attempts to alleviate this dearth of written scholarship combining music and sport. In this text he briefly outlines the history of music's involvement with sports and competitive events, spanning the breadth of Western history, from Olympic competitions (which encouraged both musical and athletic competition) to American baseball tunes like "Take Me Out to the Ballgame". Additionally, he discusses the ways music has been utilized with the framework of organized sporting events to construct national and transnational identities for audiences and participants, such as the use of sport chants and anthems that connect fans and players. One of the primary discussions that McLeod dives into in this book is that of music's involvement with gender politics in sports, and masculine and feminine identities within sporting events. For example, in chapter 5 of his book he considers the ways music and sport intersect in the construction of the stereotyped hypermasculine African American man, a construction informed by performance and aesthetic practice. McLeod argues that the performative emphasis on competition within African American rap and hip hop is mirrored by the presence of Black men in sports like basketball, and a hypermasculine competitive stereotype of the idealized Black male is formed at the nexus of these aesthetic practices. Beyond simply being one of the few texts that has delved into sociocultural intersections of music and sport, his emphasis on the gendered implications of this work is useful to me when considering the ways gender politics can be applied to an analysis and discussion of e-sports and musical events.

Another article which dives into the connections of sports and music is “Sound, Music and Magic in Football Stadiums”, authored by Pedro Marra and Felipe Trotta. In their article, they argue that music is used as a tool by audiences and fans to attempt to create a mystical impact on the game being played, and that music can be considered a magical tool linking the physical realm to the intangible. This work is important because it identifies specific points where music and sports can be intrinsically tied together to investigate cultural associations with music, and on how groups of people view and understand their own agency within an event that ostensibly is unimpacted by what they might do. These behaviors are identifiable within e-sports as well, including audience chants when impactful moments occur in-game as a way to get excited and raise the energy of the theatre or arena, or to try to cheer on the players during a difficult moment.

Moving on to writing that has been done with regards to video game music, we have begun to see quite a bit of work moving in this direction as the economic and aesthetic opportunities of video game music grows. Some of these authors include William Cheng, Kiri Miller, William Gibbons,¹⁰ and Tim Summers,¹¹ among others.¹² In his 2012 article “Role Playing Toward a Virtual Music Democracy in the Lord of the Rings Online”, William Cheng discusses the ways music is utilized within an MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) as a community building and identity forming activity that involves individuals coming together within a virtual space to make and perform music that is shared with other virtual audiences and spectators. This article discusses early methods of virtual ethnography, such as searching

¹⁰ William Gibbons, *Unlimited Replays: Classical Music and Video Games*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

¹¹ Tim Summers, *Understanding Video Game Music*, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

¹² See works by authors such as Joanna Demers (2006) and Karen Collins (2008).

through forums and interacting digitally with interlocutors within an invented online space rather than working physically with collaborators in a real-life interview situation. Similarly, Kiri Miller's 2017 book *Playable Bodies: Dance Games and Intimate Media* is a useful tool for a study of virtual ethnography methodologies, and represents one of the most complete and intimate ethnographies of video game music to date. Miller's reflexive approach to the writing of the text allows for an in-depth consideration of the player's interactions with music and dance while engaging with dance video game media. Additionally, significant sections of this book have to do with the ways physical bodies engage and interact with virtual dancing bodies, and how those virtual figures impact the movement and behavior of physical human actors; this is very similar to the way physical and digital actors interact and connect within the 2019 Opening Ceremony.

Works like William Gibbons 2018 text *Unlimited Replays: Classical Music and Video Games* and Tim Summers' 2016 book *Understanding Video Game Music* have begun to focus academic attention on the processes and usages of musical scoring in video games,¹³ and especially on the way music encodes and underscores meaning for visual media in the interactive space of video game playing. This parallels the function of music in other visual media, namely film and video. As Summers argues in Chapter 6, "Hollywood Film Music and Game Music," video games have long been borrowing tropes and thematic elements from the music of films as a way to capitalize on the affective memory of their audience, who has long been conditioned by viewing television and movies to hear certain sounds, musical elements, or

¹³ Additional works in this same vein include Dana Planck's 2019 article "From the Concert Hall to the Console: Three 8-Bit Translations of the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor" and Roger Moseley's 2016 text *Keys to Play: Music as a Ludic Medium from Apollo to Nintendo*.

themes as producing particular emotional responses and expectations. The production of meaning in an event like the 2019 opening ceremony also relies on the conjunction of music and visual media to encode meaning in its performance, and so we can utilize works that focus on this very intersection to further our understanding of its composition. Authors such as Katheryn Kalinak in her 2010 book *Film Music: A Very Short Introduction* and Miguel Mera and Anna Morcom in their 2009 article “Introduction: Screened Music, Trans-contextualization and Ethnomusicological Approaches” for *Ethnomusicology Forum* have tackled the question of music’s affective power in film and screened media, and texts such as *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies* (2013) edited by David Neumeyer collect numerous perspectives surrounding the study of music’s power to influence meaning in filmed media.

Studies of film music have had academic interest for over thirty years¹⁴ but only recently are academics beginning to look at the music of television in a similar way. James Deaville, in his 2019 article “Studying the Study of Television Music and Sound” for *American Music*, looks at the ways television and television music has evolved over its lifespan, and argues that while film studies have made major headways in musicological study as evidenced by the publication of works like *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies* (2013) and *The Routledge Film Music Sourcebook* (2012), this success is not yet shared by studies of television music. Video game music and the music of video game related media (advertising or promotional videos, for example) share this same sub-categorization; we can look towards film music as an inspiration, but the (sometimes minute) differences should still be carefully taken

¹⁴ See Siu-Lan Tan’s 2015 Music and the Moving Image Keynote Address “The Psychology of Film Music: Framing Intuition” for a brief history of some early film music studies.

into account when undertaking a study of the musical production of meaning and affective power in our distinct screened media.

Moving on to studies of competitive video gaming, a number of authors have written scholarship considering social implications of e-sports; one of the most prominent of those authors is a sociologist by the name of T. L. Taylor. Taylor's work has focused on the development of competitive video games over the past two decades, starting from early LAN tournaments and moving up to contemporaneous discussions of Twitch streaming. Her book *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* is a discourse on the history of e-sports, from early competitive matches between rival programming teams from universities involved in the development of some of the first computer games through to large conventions which hosted competitive gaming tournaments for thousands of players. Moreover, it also serves as a survey for broader issues and their intersection with e-sports; these include gender dynamics within competitive spaces, the mediation between players and their game, the economic influences necessary for a competitive video game profession, and numerous other discussions.

Another author who has contributed to this field of study is Nick Taylor, who has published a number of articles related to e-sports and gender, professionalization of e-sports, and an early study of virtual ethnography similar to that of William Cheng's previously discussed. Alongside Taylor's work is that of Emma Witkowski, whose work with gender politics in e-sports compliments that of the other scholars I've discussed. I will be utilizing the work of both of these scholars in order to consider issues of gender diversity within e-sports, and the disconnect that seems to appear between who is playing on stage during a match and who is

performing on stage before those games. In the article “Cheerleader/booth babes/*Halo* hoes: pro-gaming, gender and jobs for the boys” Taylor, alongside co-authors Jen Jenson and Suzanne de Castell, describes the roles that are typically ‘for’ women in e-sports events; that of cheerleading moms, or side-line reporting post-match. These are roles that are still seen over a decade past that article’s publication, and drawing parallels to the gendered positions of players and performers is important to determine how audiences view female artists on stage at an e-sports event.

The representation of the groups onstage is important to consider throughout this paper, and as the ceremony makes significant use of female artists and Black artists, the way they are represented in conjunction with an event focused primarily around white and Asian male competitors is important. I utilize works by authors like Baruti Kopano¹⁵ and Marvin Gladney¹⁶ in my study of the representation of hip hop and Black aesthetic practices in the 2019 Opening Ceremony, as well as works by authors who have looked at the way women are represented in conjunction with masculine (and masculinity reinforcing) sporting events. These include works such as J.C. Bennett’s 1990 article “The Secondary School Cheerleader and Ritualized Sexual Exploitation” and the aforementioned article by Taylor, Jenson, and de Castell. Video gaming, and certainly professionalized video gaming, has in the United States often centered around an image of the white male gamer, and to that audience marketing and promotion has focused its attention. The presence of a highly diverse cast of performers on-stage performing music typically associated with Black audiences creates a sense of cognitive

¹⁵ Baruti N. Kopano, “Soul Thieves: White America and the Appropriation of Hip Hop and Black Culture”, *Soul Thieves: The Appropriation and Misrepresentation of African American Popular Culture*, 1-14.

¹⁶ Marvin J. Gladney, “The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop,” *African American Review*, 29(2) (1995), 291-301.

dissonance for a market who would presumably be expecting musical entertainment catered towards that primarily white male audience. With this in mind, it must be examined whether the use of hip hop aesthetics and female representation within the opening ceremony is accurately reflecting how those groups are reflected within the gaming community and the professional player-base.

Another important aspect to be kept in mind while studying this opening ceremony is the networked associations of the performers, the music, and the audience. I utilize a discussion of actor-network theory¹⁷ (ANT) and mediation theory to analyze these associations, as well as what impact they have on the perception and production of the ceremony as a whole. I utilize arguments by authors such as Bruno Latour¹⁸ and Georgina Born¹⁹ for my analysis, as well as looking at similar studies which utilize ANT for their own analysis. These include authors such as Nick Prior,²⁰ Jonathan Murdoch,²¹ and Eliot Bates,²² each of whom utilize ANT in distinct ways to determine the function of networked associations between both human and non-human actors and agents. By incorporating the work done by authors who have used ANT as a framework for their own work, I hope to better inform my own analysis as

¹⁷ Actor-network theory is a methodological framework popularized by sociologist Bruno Latour in which the world is categorized by networks of social relationships between both humans and non-humans. This theory considers that social interactions are influenced and rely on the input of non-human entities, such as instruments or tools, and thus places human and non-human actors in relation to one another without privileging the agency of either.

¹⁸ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory*, 2005.

¹⁹ Georgina Born, "On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity," *Twentieth-Century Music* 2(1) (2005), 7-36, and Georgina Born and Andrew Barry, "Music, Mediation Theories and Actor-Network Theory," *Contemporary Music Review*, 37(5-6) (2018), 443-487.

²⁰ Nick Prior, "On Vocal Assemblages: From Edison to Miku," *Contemporary Music Review* 37(5-6) (2018), 488-506.

²¹ Jonathan Murdoch, "Ecologising Sociology: Actor-Network Theory, Co-construction and the Problem of Human Exemptionalism," *Sociology* 35(1) (2001), 111-133.

²² Eliot Bates, "The Social Lives of Musical Instruments," *Ethnomusicology* 56(3) (2012), 363-395.

well as determine how these authors understand and respond to critique of ANT as a theoretical framework.

Non-human performers factor significantly in the production of this opening ceremony, and in this thesis I argue that these non-human performers can be conceptually realized as fully invested (if artificial) actors within the show, influencing and being influenced by the other actors around them. I utilize scholarship from posthumanistic theory to consider the ways these digital/physical hybrids influence perceptions of the opening ceremony, and how we can use an analysis of this performance to look forward at new forms of technologically hybrid entertainments and cultural processes as they will emerge in the future. I incorporate works from authors such as Paul Rekret,²³ Donna Haraway,²⁴ and Christin Ellis²⁵ in my analysis to define and examine the posthuman in the virtual space of the opening ceremony.

The intersectionality of this event has necessitated a borrowing from numerous different sources, each of which plays a role in the analysis of music's role in e-sports events. Throughout this thesis, I work to bring these disparate sources into conversation with one another so as to better elucidate how this event can be conceptualized from numerous angles; looking at the event from a purely musicological consideration would forgo much of what makes the event unique, and incorporating as many perspectives as possible is necessary to produce a complete and informative work.

²³ Paul Rekret, "Seeing Like a Cyborg? The Innocence of Posthuman Knowledge," *Digital Objects, Digital Subjects: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Capitalism, Labour and Politics in the Age of Big Data*, University of Westminster Press, 2019.

²⁴ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Manifestly Haraway*, 2016.

²⁵ Christin Ellis, "Posthumanism and the Problem of Social Justice: Race and materiality in the Twenty-First Century," *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Fordham University Press, 2018.

Chapter Overview:

In the first chapter, I provide a brief description of League of Legends and the LCS broadcast as viewed by an American audience, as well as defining e-sports and the figures that might be expected to play a role in professionalized video gaming. I discuss the history of e-sports and competitive gaming, considering the movements from early computer labs to large LAN based tournaments, all the way to contemporary competitions which are highly organized, produced, and sponsored to cater to audiences of hundreds of thousands of viewers.

The second chapter will delve into the question of legitimization, considering the ways that e-sports opening ceremonies are similar to or differ from the musical events of other more traditional sports, such as the Super Bowl halftime show or the Olympics opening ceremonies. I will also discuss why this legitimization is necessary, and for whom these events are important; as the categorization of “gamer” grows to include more groups than just adolescent white males, the responsibility of game companies and media to evolve with that categorization grows apace. This chapter will argue that a legitimization of e-sports in fact enables the legitimization of gaming as a lifestyle and pastime of choice for an ever-expanding body of players and viewers.

My third chapter will focus on the question of virtuality in the 2019 Opening Ceremony, and the role that virtuality plays in conceptions of e-sports. Digital engagement is a central issue for e-sports productions and for video gaming as a practice, and I analyze the thematic elements of blended physical and digital performance in this opening ceremony to highlight how this contributes to the spectacle of the event, and what meaning viewers take from the hybrid performance. I begin the chapter with a brief description of the three distinct

performances followed by a thematic analysis of the intersections between physical and digital agents within the show.

Chapter four delves into the way music constructs meaning alongside a visual medium. Drawing on the work of film music theorists and examining how music functions in the opening ceremony and Riot Games' in-game and out of game music, I argue that the opening ceremony works to influence viewers based on their affective memory of musical tropes and styles, bringing them more deeply into the performance and the virtual space of the show.

My fifth chapter considers issues of representation within the opening ceremony event, discussing the ways that race and gender impact our reading of the event in light of the lack of representation for those groups among the professional player-base. With just one Black professional player and no female pros in the League of Legends e-sports circuit, this chapter problematizes the way Black and female performers are used within this opening ceremony.

In my conclusion, I synthesize the numerous strands woven throughout this thesis, bringing together the way each plays into the legitimization of e-sport as a modern virtual form of entertainment. I argue that this precludes a further movement of entertainment and cultural practice into an ever-expanding virtual world; as digital technology become ever more intertwined with our daily practices, differentiating between the physical and the digital will become more and more difficult (as well as more and more unnecessary!). This thesis works to benchmark the process of virtualization that our world is undergoing, and posits this opening ceremony as one of the nodes to consider when looking back at how this process was undertaken.

E-sports Background and Game Description:

League of Legends is a competitive online multiplayer game in the MOBA (multiplayer online battle arena) genre of video games. Two teams of five players each compete on a large map, with the end goal of reaching the enemy's base and destroying it. Each player chooses and controls an in-game avatar, known as a champion, each of which being a unique character with their own skills, personality, and playstyle. These champions grow and level up throughout the course of the 20-40 minute game, gaining new abilities and earning gold (the in-game currency) to purchase items to power up.²⁶ Every new game allows the player the opportunity to choose a new champion and to level up again from scratch, deciding based on the state of the match and the opponent's gameplay what items and decisions would be best. These matches are, in essence, a very elaborate game of chess, in which every choice that is made builds upon one another throughout the game leading to the end result – victory or defeat.

League of Legends was released in 2009, and originally consisted of a roster of seventeen champions. As new champions have been released over the last eleven years, that number has grown to 153 different playable characters available to the player. As the League of Legends champion pool has grown, so has the number of players piloting those champions. In 2011, the first year that Riot Games (the developer of League of Legends) released an official statement regarding a player count, it was announced that League of Legends boasted 11.5 million active players; itself a remarkable number. By 2014 that number had risen to 65 million, and while Riot has not released an official player count for the 2020 year it is estimated at

²⁶ "Leveling up" refers to the process by which a character becomes stronger through acquiring experience; at certain set milestones of experience (gained by defeating enemies), the player may increase the power of one of the champion's abilities as well as improving the base statistics of their champion.

roughly 115 million unique players.²⁷ For comparison, the closest competitor to League of Legends in the MOBA genre, Dota 2 developed by Valve, has an average player count of 11 million users per month, just under one-tenth the estimated player base of League of Legends. This explosion of growth has lent itself not only to massive profits for the company, but also to an exponential increase in interest for the highest levels of competitive play. While the first few League of Legends championships were played in small spaces and viewed by only a relatively small audience, that viewership has risen by leaps and bounds. In 2013 over 32 million unique viewers watched the League of Legends championship finals, and that number quickly grew to 57 million in 2017, and finally to 100 million unique viewers by 2019²⁸ - even outweighing the viewer count for that year's Super Bowl.²⁹ We can clearly see the exceptional interest in this newly emerging entertainment genre of e-sports due to the spike of viewers, but what exactly is it that they are watching?

E-sports can be loosely defined as professionalized competitive video gaming. Most individuals who play video games play for leisure; a few hours here or there to wind down from the stresses of daily life. Some are more active, their gameplay constituting a hobby that consumes time and money to pursue - others have made gaming into a career. This can include game testers, who playtest games to look for errors and bugs prior to the game release, or gaming content creators who produce videos and livestream their play to others, and it can also

²⁷ Spezzy, "How many people play League of Legends? – Updated 2021," Leaguefeed, January 12, 2021, <https://leaguefeed.net/did-you-know-total-league-of-legends-player-count-updated>.

²⁸ Christina Gough, "League of Legends championship finals viewers number 2013-2019, Statista, November 18, 2020, <https://www-statista-com.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/statistics/518126/league-of-legends-championship-viewers/>.

²⁹ Annie Pei, "This esports giant draws in more viewers than the Super Bowl, and its expected to get even bigger," CNBC, April 14, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/14/league-of-legends-gets-more-viewers-than-super-bowlwhats-coming-next.html>.

include professional e-athletes, playing for prestige and cash prizes in competitive environments. Professional e-sports competitors are those who have taken the game to the next level, making the study of the game and the precise control of their mouse and keyboard or gaming controller a matter of the utmost importance. Whether it be in a first-person shooter like Call of Duty or in a top-down Real Time Strategy game, these players perform at the highest level to be recognized by fans, tournament organizers, and sponsors. League of Legends is no exception, rising well above other e-sports scenes vying for viewership on streaming platforms. In 2019 League of Legends was the most watched game on the streaming platforms Twitch and Mixer,³⁰ racking up a total of 348.8 million hours watched by fans. Counter-Strike: Global Offensive took the number two spot at 215 million hours, and Dota 2 followed closely at 198.9 million hours.³¹

In the League of Legends e-sports broadcasts there are multiple aspects to the show that are important beyond the raw gameplay footage. Much like ESPN and other sports channels on television, casting hosts are present as an intermediary for viewers, both during the game as shoutcasters³² (calling out the game in real time and providing entertainment and analysis during moments of slower action) as well as in between and after games on the analyst's desk, providing a breakdown of the matches and discussing aspects of the player's

³⁰ Mixer was discontinued in July of 2020. Currently Twitch is the most popular game streaming platform, alongside YouTube.

³¹ J. Clement, "Leading eSports games on streaming platforms in 2019, by hours watched," Statista, January 29, 2021, <https://www-statista-com.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/statistics/1125460/leading-esports-games-hours-watched/>.

³² "The term "Shoutcaster" derives from early days of the internet when "radio" casting was done via the SHOUTcast application. Through SHOUTcast, various internet "radio stations" cropped up as it allowed people to publish broadcasts online. In esports, the terminology has evolved to encompass a sports-style commentary of a game or match." <https://oce.learnwithleague.com/shoutcasting-101/>.

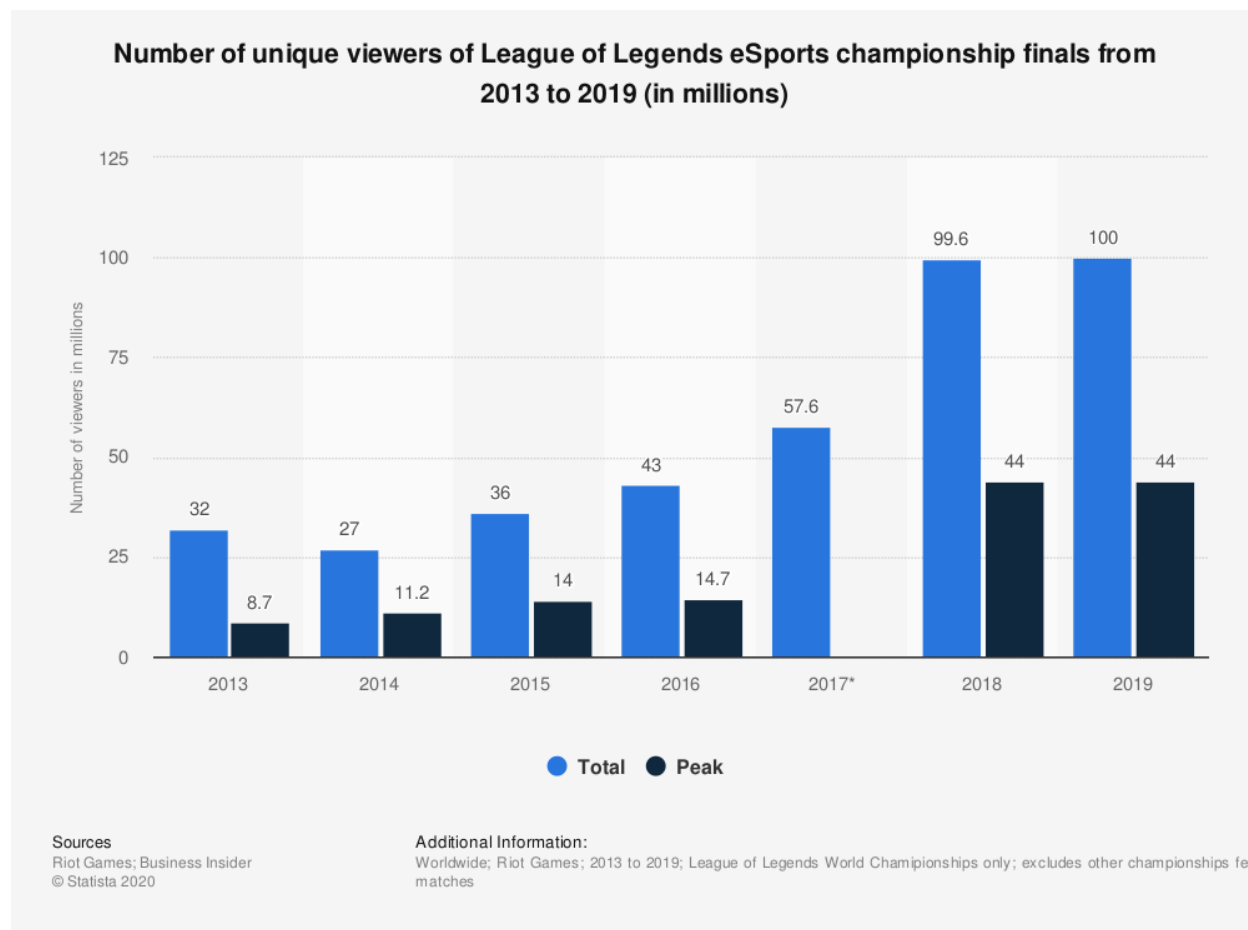


Figure 1.1 - "Number of unique viewers of League of Legends eSports championship finals from 2013 to 2019 (in millions).

performances. There are also breaks during which advertisements and brief musical interludes play; the music that is utilized in these breaks serves to pump up the crowd as it moves to the next segment of the broadcast, especially when played between matches. One of the most iconic pieces that fans recognize during these breaks is the dubstep³³ song "Silver Scrapes" by Danny McCarthy. In the 2012 World Championship event during technical difficulties, this song was played on repeat for hours at a time while technicians attempted to fix issues with the

³³ Dubstep is an electronic dance music characterized by syncopated rhythmic patterns and heavy basslines.

stage equipment, and became “engrained in people’s heads”³⁴ as a result. The song is now played exclusively as the ‘game five’ music, played in between games four and five of a match should both teams win two of the five game set, and fans recognize that if the song is playing that means the match has been competitive with both teams taking points off of their opponents.³⁵

E-sports did not suddenly make it to the polished broadcast that League of Legends presents overnight; it progressed steadily, from small locally sponsored competitions to modest regional tournaments, and from there to national and international spectacles. One of the first documented ‘e-sports’ events was the “*Spacewar Olympics*” which Stewart Brand³⁶ describes in his 1972 article for *Rolling Stone*.³⁷ This event brought together a number of computer scientists to Stanford’s Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, where they battled for four hours of frenzied engagement behind a PDP-10 computer screen for prizes and beer sponsored by *Rolling Stone*. Brand provides a play-by-play for this event in the introduction of his article, and the action occurring in the article sounds almost exactly like what one might hear or read about a college football match, complete with onomatopoeic indicators and rushing active voice:

As kills are made the scores start to change +1 for a successful kill, -1 for being killed, +1 for being lone survivor of a battle. Personalities begin to establish themselves in the maneuvering spaceships: The pilot of the ship called *Pointy Fins* is a dead shot but panics easily in cross fire. *Roundback* tries to avoid early dueling and routinely fires two torpedoes "around the universe" (off the screen, so they reappear lethally unexpected from the opposite side). *Birdie*

³⁴ Lol Esports, “Spotlight: A Look Inside Silver Scrapes,” Youtube, April 8, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AiGnL3XKctA>.

³⁵ A further discussion of this song and other thematic musical materials is contained in Chapter Four.

³⁶ Stewart Brand is an American writer and former sportswriter for *Rolling Stone*, as well as a contributor to the creation of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and the *CoEvolution Quarterly*. He is currently the co-chair and President of the Board of Directors of the Long Now Foundation.

³⁷ Stewart Brand. “*Spacewar Olympics*.” 1972

drives for the sun and a fast orbit, has excellent agility in sensing and facing toward hazard. *Funny Fins* shouts a lot, singling out individual opponents. *Flatback* is silent and maintains an uncanny field-sense of the whole battlesky, impervious to surprise attack.³⁸

Commentators for contemporary League of Legends matches often sound surprisingly similar to Brand in this article; we can easily conceive of Brand as being one of the earliest e-sports shoutcasters within his descriptions throughout this text. Compare this to a cast by Clayton “Captainflowers” Raines of the 2020 World Champion play-in stage match between PSG Talon and Rainbow Seven:

He's stuck in the hextech ultimatum, he's burning away, he's got 50 hp left. Over the wall goes Kongyue, beautiful three-man facebreaker into a four-man haymaker, as Aloned is trying to get himself away, it's a sleepy Sett but he flashes over the wall, take a nap and enjoy your rest. Everybody from the side of Rainbow Seven's gonna be run down; Hanabi's kiting himself away, he takes the mace to the face but it's still gonna be the ace. PSG Talon will rend them asunder!³⁹

The forward momentum of Captainflowers’ casting resembles that of Brand, though with more animation and rhythmic timing (possibly attributable to the fact that we are able to hear the cadence of Captainflowers’ cast while Brand’s is text-only.) Stewart Brand, at the time a sports reporter for *Rolling Stone*, was likely familiar with the similar sportscasting of baseball or football over the radio and at games, and mimicked that same style for his own reporting and

³⁸ Stewart Brand. “*Spacewar* Olympics.” 1972

³⁹ Riot Games, clipped by Noman_Sami. “Flowers spittin bars,” Twitch, <https://www.twitch.tv/riotgames/clip/DistinctAntediluvianKuduPipeHype>.

“casting” of the Spacewar Olympics. Casters continue to use this style, despite the dramatic changes that e-sports has gone through over the past few decades.

Competitive gaming migrated from computer labs in research institutions out towards the arcade, and from the arcade into in-home playing devices like the NES (Nintendo Entertainment System) and the Atari 2600; these evolved alongside competitive computer gaming, where network capability for multiplayer engagement encouraged growth in first-person shooter (FPS) games like *Doom* and *Quake*.⁴⁰ This networking capability allowed numerous consoles the ability to connect and play together as opposed to several individuals playing on a single console, and enabled large-scale competitive events to flourish in the late '90s and early 2000's. T. L. Taylor describes some of these early tournaments in her 2012 text *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, such as the 2003 World Cyber Games in Aarhus, Denmark, marketed at the time as “the Olympics of computer gaming.”⁴¹ She describes the excitement of being a participant in a live audience watching the action occurring on the screen in front of them, becoming energized alongside the crowd despite being unfamiliar with the particulars of the game being played. The setting of the tournament was, as she described, half LAN (local area network) party⁴² and half tournament, with technical preparations for the event ongoing throughout even the first day of competition. She describes the casual nature of the tournament, where players mingled freely with

⁴⁰ T. L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, 2012.

⁴¹ T. L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, 2012, 11.

⁴² A LAN party was an event in which a number of people would get together to play games over the local area network connection with their devices, rather than using internet connection. This was either because the infrastructure for internet play was not yet in place, or because low internet speeds caused too much lag to be feasible.

spectators who were able to watch the game from behind the player's own chair. During the final match of the *WarCraft III* competition portion of the tournament, Taylor describes the breakdown of the broadcast server which was showing the action for the audience. Rather than pause the match to repair the broadcast, the crowd simply moved into the backroom where the players were competing and crowded around the chairs of the players, watching the action directly. This would be highly unlikely to occur in contemporary events – as the profile of the players heightens then so does the security surrounding them. During League of Legends matches played in-house, the players are separated from the crowd, playing on-stage or in a separate room, and only come into contact with fans either immediately following the match or for meet and greet sessions.

Despite the evolutions that e-sports has undergone, the role of sound and music within the video games that are played has stayed fairly constant. Music is used as a reinforcement of the action occurring on the screen; when something important occurs, a sonic cue will likely occur to inform the player that they should be paying attention to that occurrence. Whether that is a subtle shift in the musical accompaniment from a major to a minor key, the introduction of a new instrumentation to represent a change in the game, or the recognizable “ping” sound which a League of Legends player uses to alert their teammates, sound is important for professionals playing at the highest level. During the 2020 semi-finals match between SN Gaming and TopSports in the World Championships, there was a clear moment in the broadcast which highlighted the importance of sonic cues in the game. While the game was going on, the visual element of the broadcast froze while the sound of the game was continuing to occur; instead of giving up and waiting for the video to continue, the shoutcasters

commentating on the game (David “Phreak” Turley and Sam “Kobe” Hartman-Kenzler) utilized the sounds coming through to keep the energy of the cast going throughout the active teamfight that started just after the visual cut:⁴³

“I hear it, we can maybe do it from audio?”

“Flashes burned on one side or the other- “

“Ornn! Ornn ult!”

While they aren’t able to cast as efficiently as if they had full visual of the action occurring onscreen, they are able to pick up the various abilities being used by the players and translate that to viewers who may not be as familiar with those same actions. Judging by the particular sound designs of each of the champions in the game, they are able to determine who was involved in the fight, the characters that had been taken out and the ones who were still fighting. The sound design of these games is crucial not only for passive enjoyment of the game, but for highly important competitive information as well, relying on sensory information from all available sources to make the most informed decisions. Professional players therefore utilize a multimodal form of perception, such as that described by Casey O’Callaghan in her 2015 article “The Multisensory Character of Perception,” in which she argues that “the same conscious episode or experience may be both visual and auditory, or both gustatory and tactual, and so on.”⁴⁴ A player will see the action of Ornn raising his horn and hear the blare of the Ornn ult (a ringing war-horn), and recognize that it is an important occurrence during the

⁴³ Riot Games, clipped by snabic. “Riot Official Stream Freezes Right Before Big Fight,” Twitch, November 2020, <https://clips.twitch.tv/BumblinRamshackleStinkbugTheTarFu>.

⁴⁴ Casey O’Callaghan, “The Multisensory Character of Perception,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 112(10) (2015), 551-569.

fight; for the casters, the sound itself was indicative of its occurrence, but they were unable to locate where it was originating, or whom it would be effecting. A multisensory approach to playing and watching is therefore highly valuable for the League of Legends community.

One of the most notable usages of music within the League of Legends e-sports scene are the opening ceremonies for the final tournament of the year, the World Championship. Each opening ceremony has built on one another from year to year, incorporating elements of the game into the performances to create an immersive musical experience for fans. These events are a sonic marker to followers of the League of Legends e-sports scene – the finals are here. This is it. For an occasion like that, the production teams for these events are constantly stepping up to improve on the ceremony, and make it as impressive and awe-inspiring as possible. One particular event was a watershed moment for League of Legends production crews: the 2017 World Championships Finals Opening Ceremony,⁴⁵ in which Against the Current's Chrissy Constanza sang "Legends Never Die." During this performance, an augmented reality Elder Dragon (a monster from the game) "crashed the stage", briefly upending the song and roaring at the audience before flying back up to the roof of the arena. The dragon, which flew around the arena in a real-time event broadcast to millions of viewers, was an entirely unexpected and completely new development in these ceremonies, marking a significant movement towards the inclusion of virtual and holographic elements within these performances. In an interview from The Verge with Adam Mackasek, Events Producer at Riot Games, Mackasek stated that he was asked only minutes following that performance "How are

⁴⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fn5kSCj-VNM>.

you going to do that bigger next year?" He goes on to explain that now after the wild success of the 2017 show, audiences have come to expect incredible augmented reality performances from Riot Games at these ceremonies.⁴⁶

I am most interested in this thesis with the 2019 opening ceremony,⁴⁷ which features Valerie Broussard singing "Awaken," True/Damage performing "Giants," and Chrissy Constanza and Cailin Russo singing "Phoenix." While each of these artists and groups are performing, unique holographic imagery accompanies their sets that the artists interact with through their choreography. The holograms that are involved in this performance are produced by a technology named Holonet, provided by the company Kaleida. The holograms which appear onstage are directly influenced by the music, and appear both as digital representations of the performers and the characters those performers are emulating as well as various stylized visual effects. For example, during True/Damage's performance, the artists (Keke Palmer, Becky G, Soyeun, Thutmose, and Duckwrth) are acting as avatars for the champions who make up the fictionalized group (Senna, Qiyana, Akali, Ekko, and Yasuo), who are projected onstage and appear to interact with the music and the musicians as the event unfolds, often taking center stage as the performers of the music themselves. In another portion of the ceremony, as the third song begins shards of ice crack into the physical space of the stage, disintegrating into a whirling storm of snow as Cailin Russo enters the space to begin her performance alongside Chrissy Constanza.

⁴⁶ Webster, Andrew. "Designing League of Legends' Stunning Holographic Worlds Opening Ceremony."

⁴⁷ This ceremony can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QDWbKnwRcc>.

The interactive holographic imagery that is utilized within this opening ceremony creates a unique blend of digital and physical space, in which performers can be viewed either as human or non-human – or as something in between. This virtual space is what creates the sense of spectacle for viewers; the time and effort put in by performers, producers, musicians, and technicians (among others) alongside the expenditure necessary to put on a show like this impresses upon the viewer that this is not a simple pre-game show. The spectacle of the event, combined with the blended physical/digital thematic elements that are emphasized throughout the performance, result in a staging that reminds viewers of the grandiose performances of large-scale traditional sporting events while also creating a space that is uniquely suited for the technologically entwined e-sports scene. As we move further into an age where the digital is so closely mirroring the physical, spaces like this which combine the two become more and more important, as well as more and more frequent. We can use performances like the 2019 opening ceremony as hallmarks to consider what our entertainment and culture is going to look like five years from now, ten years from now, and further. Science fiction has long had a fascination with holograms and holographic technology, but now we are finally in a place where that fiction is starting to give way to real-life implementation. How long will it be before that technology is able to function without the limitations of a screen or a stage, and what will the world look like when we make it there?

CHAPTER TWO

SPECTACLE AND LEGITIMIZATION

Traditional sports and e-sports share many similarities, but very different cultural contexts. The youth of e-sports as an entertainment genre means that it is not yet recognized as being of the same value as traditional sports like soccer or baseball, but the growing number of viewers and expanding subset of gaming fans is beginning to change that conception. One of the factors which impacts the mainstream conception of e-sports as holding cultural value is the display of power, prestige, and wealth that are displayed in high profile opening ceremony events like the 2019 Opening Ceremony. In this chapter I consider the ways that spectacle is displayed in ceremonial contexts both in e-sports and in the realms of more traditional sports, and how the use of spectacle is related to the legitimization of e-sports as an entertainment genre.

League of Legends opening ceremonies don't simply exist in a vacuum; they have corollaries in traditional sporting events. The Super Bowl halftime show, or the Olympics opening ceremonies – these are moments that provide a sense of legitimacy and engagement for the following sporting events. Ken McLeod, in his 2012 book *We are the Champions: The Politics of Sports and Popular Music* describes the way these events utilize spectacle to reinforce audience perceptions of the grandeur and legitimacy of the happenings. “The musical and military pageantry associated with many major sporting events is a symbolic projection of the resources and leisure capacity of the sponsoring state regardless of the overt intentions of

the organizers.”⁴⁸ McLeod takes as an example American football culture, in which great effort is made to display scenes of opulence to promote the sport and, by extension, American nationalism. Despite being an internationally watched and appreciated entertainment, nationalist imagery and thematic elements are implicit in the construction of the Super Bowl as a whole as well as the critical halftime performances. This has the effect of creating a parallel for viewers; if the halftime show is a grand, awe-inspiring affair, then the United States (being the host and promoting state) reflects that grandiosity. Should the event be lacking or poorly constructed, that is also reflected upon the state as a whole.

The Olympics are another key example of the use of spectacle to reflect status within ceremonial and performative events. The 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony,⁴⁹ viewed by over 91,000 live spectators and many times that number worldwide, is estimated to have cost between 100 and 300 million dollars to produce.⁵⁰ This ceremony cost a not-so-small fortune to produce, and created a remarkable spectacle for the promotion of Chinese national pride. “Beyond the numbers and size of this media event and its alleged purpose as a theatrically staged welcoming gesture, the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics also raised questions about China’s role in the twenty-first century while figuratively proclaiming its position as both an ancient center of geopolitical dominance and a modern superpower.”⁵¹ The use of spectacle was, in this case, not only to simply impress and entertain the viewers of the

⁴⁸ Ken McLeod, *We are the Champions: The Politics of Sports and Popular Music*, 2012, 160.

⁴⁹ The 2017 League of Legends World Finals were played in the same stadium as the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, and the stadium provided the backdrop for the showcasing of the augmented reality Elder Dragon discussed in Chapter One.

⁵⁰ Francesca Lawson, “Music in Ritual and Ritual in Music: A Virtual Viewer’s Perceptions about Liminality, Functionality, and Mediatization in the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games,” 2011, 3.

⁵¹ Lawson, 4.

opening ceremony, and to prepare them for the sporting event to follow - it was meant to convey the power of the Chinese state and to force a shift in the international perception of China as a superpower.

Spectacle is, according to the online Merriam-Webster dictionary, “something exhibited to view as unusual, notable, or entertaining.”⁵² More than this, though, the spectacle is something that inspires awe, fascination, and a single-minded attention; the spectacular is what captures our imagination, and what captivates our senses. What is occurring during these events that can be considered spectacular? How do we decide if something is, in fact, spectacular? I have decided to consider the expenditure of resources when determining that an event or function is entering into the domain of spectacle as one part of that equation; the bigger the expenditure, be it money to purchase pyrotechnics and sound systems or personnel to perform and set up the event, the larger the spectacle. That can’t be the only consideration for determining spectacle, however – just because a planning committee manages to spend a million dollars doesn’t mean that the event will be spectacular. The energy that is brought into the space where that spectacle is being produced is also important. The reactions of the audience, and the way the audience views that event is also a paramount consideration. Guy Debord, in his 1967 text *The Society of the Spectacle*, wrote that “The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.”⁵³ While the effort that goes into the production of the spectacle is obviously vital for the construction of the event, the spectacular reaction has to, in the end, come from the reactions of viewers

⁵² Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v., “spectacle” accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/spectacle>.

⁵³ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, 2.

and their own interaction with the event. In the case of the Super Bowl halftime shows then, spectacle is produced by the people watching, both in the stadium and from their homes; the combination of sensory overload from fireworks, pyrotechnics, sound and music, as well as the informed understanding of the massive cost of a ceremony that involves all of that material expenditure culminates in the resulting spectacle which effectively reinforces American nationalism and power.

In his 2009 article “The Art of Noise: Hearing, Feeling and Experiencing the Sound of Democracy,” Justin Patch effectively describes the intensity associated with the spectatorship involved with viewing and engaging in spectacle in his description of the crowd at the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver: “The stadium literally shook with applause, cheering, and the pounding of feet. In that moment, the atmosphere suddenly changed, it was absolutely electric and full. It pressed against me as I could feel my body shake and my ears ring. It had been transformed from a space of anticipation to one of arrival and release.”⁵⁴ Spectacle can cause a visceral reaction for viewers, a full-bodied entry into the world of the spectacular alongside one’s fellow participants; this visceral reaction can also be the act of contributing to the spectacle itself. Patch describes the way clapping and audience interactivity directly engage the start of the spectacle, swelling and consuming the event to create the resulting emotional connection of the spectators to the action and to each other. “In this realm, the sound of thousands of participants putting their hands together and applauding wildly erases the differentiation of the crowd. From afar we are a mass of supporters; from within we

⁵⁴ Justin Patch, “The Art of Noise: Hearing, Feeling and Experiencing the Sound of Democracy,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 92(3/4) (2009), 316.

are an unstoppable movement, an irresistible force.”⁵⁵ The spectacle that Patch is describing doesn’t come from the use of pyrotechnics, lights, or even music; it is a direct result of a massive crowd of individuals connecting in one single moment of collective engagement. The spectacle is what an observer makes of it – without an observer participating in the event, all of the lights, fireworks, and music in the world would fail to be spectacular.

The function of utilizing spectacle for a legitimization of statehood and reputation has occurred throughout history. Ken McLeod argues that these spectacles are similar to those of various historical figures, themselves attempting to legitimate the prestige of their state: “The gladiatorial spectacles of ancient Rome are analogous to the musico-theatrical spectacles of the court of Louis XIV at Versailles. Both represented a literal spending of wealth that served to underscore the power of the dominant order by intimidating any would-be threat and to provide a communal diversion from potential social concerns.”⁵⁶ While opening ceremony events like the ones produced by Riot Games are not necessarily meant to intimidate their opposition (though they certainly might), they do have a certain analogue to these other examples; they provide a fabulous show of wealth and prosperity for the game, which is at this time flourishing and bringing in a very high profit. Drawing from these examples as well as the opening events for the Olympics and the Super Bowl Halftime Show, we can see that an opening ceremony serves a number of functions for an event: it can act as a signifier for national or cultural identity, be a showcase of prestige and economic power for a hosting group, and create a sense of legitimacy for the proceeding event. The opening ceremonies

⁵⁵ Patch, 313.

⁵⁶ McLeod, 128.

produced by Riot Games for each year's World Finals fits neatly into this niche of the spectacular, providing viewers a taste of the economic power that Riot is able to muster along with the cultural capital that they bring to bear in the performance itself. So then if these events are so similar, what is it exactly that Riot Games is trying to legitimize by putting on these massive shows?

E-sports is a new phenomenon in the world of global entertainment and leisure activities, and League of Legends is even younger yet. One of the struggles that a new e-sport has to go through to enter into the spotlight is reputability and recognition; if a viewer has no idea what is happening on the screen, they aren't likely to be as engaged (much less see the nuance between professional play and average players). Many casual (American) viewers of a baseball game for example wouldn't be able to tell you the specific details of the game, but most likely they would be able to recognize a home run if it happens – the concept of baseball as a sport has been ingrained in American popular culture for so many years that it's odd if someone doesn't know at least the basics of the game. For a game like League of Legends which has had only just over ten years to build their brand and name recognition, the action occurring onscreen is foreign and difficult to follow for a new viewer. The complexity of the game also plays a similar role. The 'rules' of League of Legends change constantly as new champions are added to the game. Items that can be acquired in the game change frequently as developers work to balance the game, and changes are frequently made to the map and the champions themselves as the game evolves. A side-by-side image of the same champion⁵⁷ in the same place on the map from 10 years ago and from today shows significant difference in

⁵⁷ See figure 2.1.



Figure 2.1 "Side-by-side of Kayle from League of Legends." On the left is a recent screenshot of Kayle, taken in February of 2021. On the right is a picture of Kayle as her champion was designed originally by Riot Games. Left: Screenshot by author. Right: aAa-Nymphae, DeviantART.

design and aesthetics (with certain key elements maintained to preserve the identity of the character); compare this to the standard baseball diamond, whose shape has remained unchanged for over a century.

Just as the written rules of the game change, so too do the unwritten rules. A viewer without a background in gaming probably wouldn't understand the specifics of how the players move around the map, or why a player is purchasing a specific item for a certain game. The "meta"⁵⁸ is constantly shifting as changes are made to the game, and the things that make a player strong or weak is often dependent on what is strong or weak in the metagame. It

⁵⁸ The metagame is the understanding of what is the most effective way to play the game at any given time; this includes what items are most effective, what champions are strong or weak, and what roles different teammates might play at certain points.

requires a viewer to be actively engaged in their own play to recognize what is exceptional about the play of the professionals, which often subverts or reassembles the rules of how the game is 'usually' played so as to throw off their opponents and claim victory. Casual entry into this viewership is difficult if a viewer is hoping to get more than the basic information available. Inversely, however, the main plot points of the game are very easily understood; if a champion is slain, that information is clearly shown onscreen (and you can bet that the casters will be shouting about it). If a turret is destroyed, or a major objective taken by one of the teams, bold letters will show and sound effects will be played – and if the nexus is destroyed, the audience will be cheering and the casters will be praising the winners. If a new viewer is in the audience, it's likely that they will be caught up in the moment even if the particulars of an event will be lost on them.

While the youth of e-sports plays a significant role in the need to legitimize the professional gaming scene, it is not the only piece of the puzzle. The gaming sub-culture from which e-sports arose has been stigmatized since its inception, existing as a form of leisure activity and lifestyle that was seen as something to be kept to oneself or to one's close friends who also shared in the sub-culture. Gaming culture is associated with youth, and adults who game often have to contend with labels of immaturity or laziness; these often mirror schoolyard insults like geek and nerd that many struggled with as children and young adults, words that are now being appropriated as positives for "nerd culture." As the first generations to have grown up around video games matured and entered 'adult' spaces like the workplace, however, many remain engaged in the culture of video games, either playing or now watching. For example, in 2020 an average of 38% of video game players in the United States were

between the ages of 18 to 34 years old, almost double the number of gamers under the age of 18 (21%).⁵⁹ Relying on legitimizing rituals such as the lavish opening ceremony performances reinforces to those adults that this is no longer a sub-culture that one would be shunned for mentioning or listing as a hobby; we can look at the similarities between e-sports spectatorship and live sports spectatorship as an indicator that rather than “popular culture” and “sub-culture,” they are instead combining into one single leisure culture (or at least two parallel cultures with similar respectabilities). This is an ongoing process, but the ever-growing percentage of the population that plays video games regularly or watches e-sports showcases the expansion of video gaming as a popular leisure activity. In 2020 roughly 175 million Americans played some form of internet-connected game, whether it be desktop, mobile, or console based, and that number is expected to continue rising.⁶⁰

Alongside this increased population of gamers comes the natural influx of economic opportunities; companies who see the growing success of gaming culture are able to see massive returns on investment for catering to that population, and e-sports is no exception. Sponsorship deals have existed within the e-sports scene for decades, but in recent years this has ramped up exponentially within the League of Legends scene. In 2018 the North American LCS finalized its plans to franchise the league, making the LCS teams permanent partners of Riot Games rather than being subject to promotion or elimination based on results.⁶¹ This had a

⁵⁹ J. Clement, “Age breakdown of video game players in the United States in 2020,” Statista, January 29, 2021, <https://www-statista-com.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/statistics/189582/age-of-us-video-game-players-since-2010/>.

⁶⁰ Statista, “Number of Digital Gamers in the United States from 2019 to 2024 (in millions),” September 2020.

⁶¹ Pete Volk, “NA LCS is franchising. Here’s what that means.” Rift Herald, Polygon, June 1, 2017. <https://www.riftherald.com/2017/6/1/15720812/na-lcs-franchising-explanation-summary-lol-revenue-sharing>.

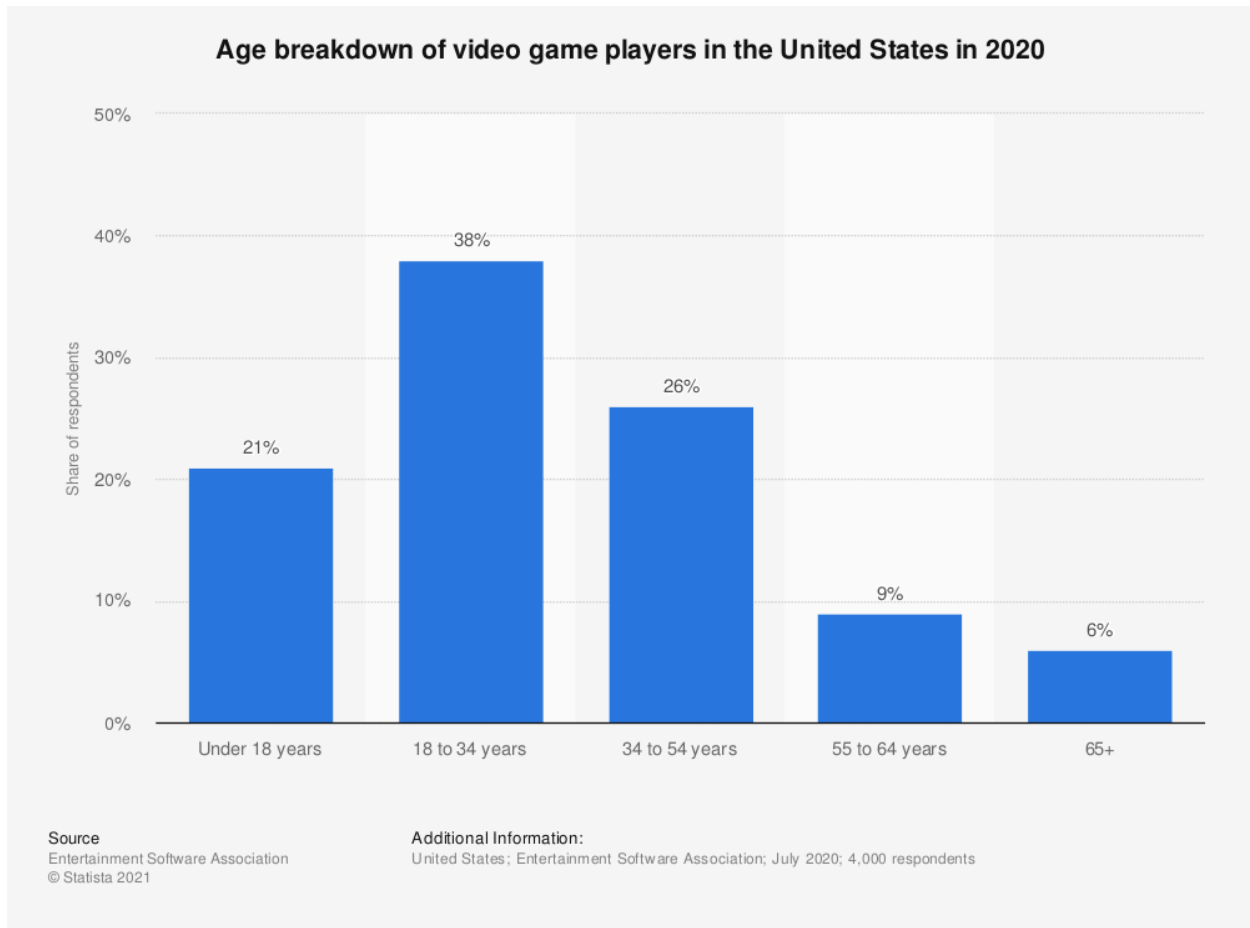


Figure 2.2 "Age breakdown of video game players in the United States in 2020."

number of impacts on the league as a whole, but one of the most important effects was that since teams were no longer in a state of flux and uncertainty, investors were made to feel more comfortable with long-term contracts and financial support for specific teams, opening up avenues for economic involvement beyond league-wide contracts. Riot's "2019 LCS Year in Review"⁶² noted that with 11 new partners joining the LCS including names like Honda, Rocket Mortgage, and Mastercard, 91% of the current sponsors had agreed to returning or multiyear deals. For an expanding entertainment genre, funding is a critical aspect to growth and entering

⁶² Lol Esports Staff, "2019 LCS Year in Review: Looking back at the 2019 LCS Season," Riot Games, accessed February 13, 2021. <https://nexus.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/2019/12/2019-lcs-year-in-review/>.

new markets, so the existence of substantial sponsorship infrastructure to the league is a sign of mainstream support for e-sports communities.

The 2019 World Finals Opening Ceremony was also funded by an outside sponsor, one that many e-sports fans were surprised to see enter the competitive gaming scene – French fashion house Louis Vuitton. In September 2019 Louis Vuitton and Riot Games announced the partnership, collaborating to create a trophy case for the tournament as well as in-game cosmetic skins,⁶³ and a capsule collection available from Louis Vuitton. As Naz Aletaha, head of global e-sports partnerships at Riot Games stated, “This is a historic partnership that speaks to the impact Riot Games and League of Legends has had on the industry over the past nine esports seasons.”⁶⁴ This was not the first time that Louis Vuitton had designed a trophy case for a sporting event, having also produced cases for the America’s Cup and the FIFA World Cup;⁶⁵ however, this was the fashion house’s first move into the e-sports scene, a world that has long been considered entirely separate from that of high fashion. This sponsorship move made many within the e-sports scene and beyond question that separation, as well as the separation from other similar industries. If Louis Vuitton had sponsored the opening ceremony and recognized League of Legends as being worth investing time and money in, then others may reconsider their own positions with regards to investing in e-sports productions as well.

⁶³ Skins allow the user to change the default look and style of the champion that they are playing. These and other cosmetic items are available for purchase via microtransactions within the League of Legends online store.

⁶⁴ Sam Carp, “Louis Vuitton makes esports move with League of Legends World Championship,” Sports Pro Media, September 23, 2019, <https://www.sportspromedia.com/news/league-of-legends-world-championship-louis-vuitton-riot-games-sponsorship>.

⁶⁵ Kati Chitrakorn, “The risks and rewards of LVMH’s renewed interest in sports,” Vogue Business, January 24, 2020, <https://www.voguebusiness.com/companies/lvmh-interest-in-sports-stars-risks-and-rewards>.

Sponsorship and, by extension, profitability and stability for the League of Legends e-sports scene is one of the key points which moves the scene from a hobbyist project, something for a teen to spend a few years playing then leave to look for a “real job,” to a tangible career path. Many former players remain deeply involved in the League of Legends scene, taking positions as coaching staff, analysts, or even as team owners or stakeholders following their departure from professional play. This is because the economic opportunity available from the scene allows for a significant support structure surrounding the players. Coaches for the LEC, (the European branch of the League of Legends circuit), make an average of €100,000 per year, and in the North American LCS coaches often have salaries up to \$500,000 annually.⁶⁶ Those numbers continue to rise as new sponsors and investment opportunities enter the market, as do the salaries of the players themselves. Allowing for a support system that is actively working to provide livable, generous salaries to the people working alongside the players benefits not only the league, but also the audience; professional play can be expected to improve as the surroundings of the players improve.

Sponsorship is highly beneficial to fostering the growth of new entertainment genres in the modern economic climate, but it also brings its share of risks. Reputations meet and collide when sponsorships are introduced, and if those reputations are in conflict then the net benefit may at times be outweighed by the negative. In July 2020, the LEC announced a partnership with NEOM, a project city being constructed by Saudi Arabia, in an effort to place NEOM as a hub for e-sports markets. This was immediately met with intense criticism; within an hour of

⁶⁶ Daniel Rigon, “H2K Gaming founder: LEC players make around 250,000 euros per year,” ESPN Brazil, September 21, 2019, https://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/id/27668371/h2k-gaming-founder-lec-players-make-250000-euros-per-year.

the partnership being announced, dozens of prominent members of the League of Legends scene had spoken out against the deal, including Eefje “sjokz” Depoortere, the host of the LEC’s casting desk, James “Dash” Patterson, the host for the LCS casting desk, and a number of other analysts and casters for both the American and European leagues. Concerns were levied over human rights violations by Saudi Arabia and its treatment of LGBTQ+ citizens, as well as the fact that NEOM is being built on the back of forced migration of the Huwaitat ethnic group.⁶⁷

“I am terribly disappointed.” – Eefje “sjokz” Depoortere⁶⁸

“My disappointment is immeasurable. I adamantly do NOT support this partnership.” -James “Dash” Patterson⁶⁹

“Tried to find nice words to express my feelings of today’s news. Couldn’t. This sucks
It sucks for the #LEC
It sucks for my friends who are casters
It sucks for those who are LGBT
It sucks for esports as a whole
Thought we were better than this” – Ovilee May⁷⁰

Within 90 minutes of the partnership being announced, international reactions to the deal caused Riot Games administration to cancel the sponsorship. Alberto Guerrero, Riot’s Director of Esports for Europe, the Middle East and Africa published a response, stating “After further reflection, while we remain steadfastly committed to all of our players and fans worldwide including those living in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, the LEC has ended its partnership with NEOM, effective immediately. In an effort to expand our esports ecosystem, we moved too quickly to cement this partnership and caused rifts in the very community we

⁶⁷ Ruth Michaelson, “‘It’s being built on our blood’: the true cost of Saudi Arabia’s \$500bn megacity,” The Guardian, May 4, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/04/its-being-built-on-our-blood-the-true-cost-of-saudi-arabia-5bn-mega-city-neom>.

⁶⁸ Eefje Depoortere, Twitter, July 29, 2020, <https://twitter.com/sjokz/status/1288439553104261120>

⁶⁹ James Patterson, Twitter, July 29, 2020, <https://twitter.com/JamesDash/status/1288561810488979457>

⁷⁰ Ovilee May, Twitter, July 29, 2020, <https://twitter.com/OvileeMay/status/1288581217697148928>

seek to grow.”⁷¹ Overreach and haste in looking for financial partnerships caused them to overlook or underestimate the reactions of the individuals working “on the ground” so to speak for the LEC, ultimately setting back the goal of expanding to new markets.

The opening ceremony performance and other spectacular events staged by Riot Games share a position with sponsorship deals, in that they are both a reaction to and a cause of the legitimization of League of Legends; they are themselves promoting e-sports as a legitimate form of entertainment while also being a product of that legitimization, building upon the work of past spectacles. This sedimentation of spectacle has produced an environment in which e-sports fans not only want to see opening ceremonies that live up to the previous; they need to see them continue to be better, bigger, and more spectacular as the market and opportunities available to e-sports expands over time. As this expansion takes place we are given the tools necessary to reexamine our conceptions of acceptable leisure activities – if watching football on the television is an acceptable (or even encouraged) way to take time for ourselves and rest, then surely watching e-sports should similarly be encouraged? The legitimization of e-sports also allows us to consider other burgeoning entertainment genres which should be encouraged in a similar way. The rise of online streaming services like Twitch show that there is a market for casual viewership of games and other activities, and as new opportunities for digitally influenced media enter the market they also need to be encouraged and utilized. This Opening Ceremony provides a new opportunity for a 21st century population of consumers to determine

⁷¹ Alberto Guerrero, “LEC Ends NEOM Partnership: A statement from Alberto Guerrero, Director of Esports, EMEA,” Riot Games, July 29, 2020. <https://lolesports.com/article/lec-ends-neom-partnership/bltadb06bbe0a40c6c6>.

what is worth watching, and to encourage the creativity and enthusiasm of those who will be working to create the next development in entertainment activities.

CHAPTER THREE

VIRTUALITY

The holographic projections displayed onstage during the 2019 Opening Ceremony serve numerous purposes throughout the production, such as distorting the audience's perceptions of reality and to create a sense of wonder and spectacle. In this chapter I will consider how the blended digital and physical aspects of this opening ceremony are perceived by the audience and the performers acting out the show onstage, utilizing the conceptualization of virtuality and virtual space to develop my analysis. I also introduce the use of actor-Network Theory, which is useful for this analysis due to the intertwined relationship of human and non-human actors within this space. I will begin with a short description of the event, to illustrate some of the interactions between the music and the actors performing onstage.

The opening ceremony features three performances, each of which blend into each other through connecting fragments of sound and holographic visualizations.⁷² The first and briefest of the three, "Awaken" featuring Valerie Broussard, begins with swirling glitter and gold flowing across the holographic screens, highlighting the trophy set at center stage. The teams competing in the finals are briefly shown on large screens above the stage before the camera zooms in on the door where Broussard enters, flanked by shadowed male figures dressed in dark clothing, carrying glowing white staves amidst a sea of fog. Broussard strides onto the stage and begins to sing, haunting voice accompanied by pounding drums and nimble

⁷² A recording of this performance can be found on the official League of Legends Youtube channel, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QDWbKnwRcc>.

violins. Dancers begin moving across the stage, surrounding the trophy as Broussard makes her way towards the dancing group, the pitch of her singing rising with every step until she reaches the center of the stage and is struck by a holographic projectile, erupting behind her and creating a shockwave which removes her and the backup dancers from the scene. Ekko, a champion from League of Legends and a member of True/Damage appears on-stage, flitting from one side to another, and the audience roars; astute fans recognize that the explosion on stage is a representation of one of Ekko's in-game abilities. The shockwave disappears and darkness onstage is replaced by static – scenes of a futuristic city blurring briefly past as “Giants” begins to play.

Ekko once again reappears onstage, accompanied by back-beat snare and distinct digital bass. He is joined by his physical representation, rapper Thutmose. Images of Thutmose and Ekko switch places, flickering around the stage and up and down imaginatively invented staircases while the rapper starts his intro, rhyming smoothly on top of the driving music. As his solo ends the camera moves to center on Becky G, representing the champion Qiyana, sitting on a stylized replica of her in-game weapon, an ohmlatl (a large circular blade similar to a chakram); the drums and bass drop out briefly as her voice fills in the space left by Thutmose. A snare fill leads in Keke Palmer as the character Senna. Palmer enters powerfully with the first iteration of the chorus, backed up by rapid hi-hat and bass, with the voices of the other group members behind her. As the word “giants” is repeated in the chorus, a holographic Senna appears behind Palmer, standing over double her height. The camera's focus then returns to Becky G, framed by a massive image of the weapon on which she was previously seated, and in which the holographic representation of Qiyana dances along with her. The beat slows as Becky

G raps over digitally produced bass until there is a pause – and Soyeun,⁷³ representing Akali enters the stage alongside a number of dancers lit by alternating red and blue lights. The holographic Akali appears in a flash of smoke and light, performing alongside her physical counterpart during her solo. The sound drops once more, returning to the chorus for the second time as Soyeun is joined on-stage by Becky G and Palmer without any holographic projections.

The dancers corner the stage, and as the beat picks up again flashing white lights emit from the ceiling, giving a shimmery holographic effect to the plaid-jacketed dancers. In the background, an image of Duckworth as Yasuo (the DJ for the group True/Damage) appears onscreen, flanked by the representations of each of the other four champions. The stage cuts to black as Yasuo appears on stage, unleashing a tornado which engulfs the dancers, appearing to fling them off the stage; the crowd goes wild. Thutmose once again appears alone on-stage, flickering between the darkness to appear randomly at different points on the platform as his second solo begins, much slower this time with an accompanying soundtrack which draws aural cues from the game alongside synthesized bass tones and steady hi-hat. Ekko appears, sitting on the trophy case which is illuminated throughout the solo despite the dark backdrop, before disappearing once again as the holographic screens surrounding Thutmose react in real time to his rapping, words and sonic cues being represented larger than life above and around the performer. He ends his solo pointing to the sky as the rest of the musicians enter the stage for

⁷³ Soyeun, a member of the South Korean girl group (G)I-dle, also performed at the opening ceremony the prior year as a member of K/DA, a k-pop group composed similarly of League of Legends champions. Soyeun reprised her role as Akali for True/Damage in the 2019 performance.

one final repetition of the chorus, holographic representations of each standing behind them in massive scale.

The stage goes dark once again as the camera pans to the audience, cheering and waving, now painted blue by the overhead lighting. Images of ice crack onto the stage, emerging from under and above as Cailin Russo descends a staircase surrounded by flurries of snow to begin “Phoenix.” A rapid staccato tapping is replaced by a deep bass drum heartbeat as her vocals enter the mix, a low melody rising and falling as she makes her way to the center stage, crescendoing to a held high note upon which an icy claw (reminiscent of another champion from the game, Lissandra)⁷⁴ extends from her position to the opposite side of the stage, revealing a holographic projection of Russo who completes the rest of the phrase. The stage bursts into drifting particles of light as Chrissy Constanza appears in front of the trophy case, beneath a series of images of the various teams and competitors who were involved in the tournament. The music raises in fervor as the two artists begin the chorus, separating to both sides of the stage while dancers enter the scene. Darkness falls over the performance apart from three spotlights, one on each of the singers and the other on a single dancer center stage, who engages physically with holographic blades swirling around him.⁷⁵ The other dancers join him while the music recapitulates the introduction, Russo and Costanza singing a soft harmony while the audience’s attention is drawn to the dancers at the center manipulating the blades.

⁷⁴ One of Lissandra’s most iconic abilities allows her to teleport from her position to that of the claw, a slow-moving projectile. Russo’s movement from one side of the stage to the other via a hologram is a nod to that teleportation mechanic.

⁷⁵ These blades are the same as those that the champion Irelia utilizes, her in-game movements and use of the weapons being mimicked on-stage by the dancers.

The music builds as the dancers rush to Russo's side of the stage, gathering behind a beam of light projecting from her to the opposite musician, and as it reaches a breaking point the stage erupts into an explosion of light to accompany the second chorus, images of the two teams competing passing on the massive screens above. The music drops once again, strings filling in the space while the camera pans around the trophy case, itself now alight with imagery of the past championship winners while in the background the logos of each of the former triumphant teams are arranged in an arc. After a few moments the case unfolds like a flower blooming, revealing the Summoner's Cup, the ceremonial trophy, as the crowd roars in the background. The music swells and the singers enter once again as the stage lights up to show the two teams standing on either side before they file onto the center stage to wait on either side of the trophy. One final burst of light accompanies the final notes, and as the sound fades from the stage the audience's cheers and applause fill the arena, completing the performances.⁷⁶

Throughout this performance, we see various implementations of digital technologies which interact with and stand alongside the physical human performers; whether that is the ice surrounding Cailin Russo as she enters the stage, the holographic blades being "controlled" by the dancers during "Phoenix", or the holographic champions dancing and accompanying the artists during "Giants," these digital representations are every bit as important to the effect and spectacle of the event as the human actors. Not only that, the thematic emphasis on digital performance is important in reflecting the virtual nature of e-sports, which is only possible

⁷⁶ This description of the event is based on the official League of Legends video, found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QDWbKnrRcc>.

through the deeply intertwined connection between physical human actors and digital playing spaces. An e-sports spectacle reinforces that connection, relaying to the audience the aspects of the performance that are unique to competitive gaming as an entertainment genre. We can analyze this performance both musically and thematically to determine how this virtuality is achieved, and how it underpins and reinforces the spectacle of an e-sports event.

In this thesis, I utilize the term virtuality to describe the space that is created by a blending of digital and physical actors, in which both take on aspects of the other with the effect of creating a liminal space between reality and cyberspace. In her 2011 article “¡Un Forastero! Issues of Virtuality and Diegesis in Videogame Music,” Isabella van Elferen defines virtuality as “a nonmanifest dimension of reality that escapes, precedes, or exceeds actualization – that which is virtual is separated by its not-yet-being-actualized.” She continues on to state that “Virtual reality, then, is quite literally a form of reality that is virtual (i.e., nonmanifest); it can be created by computer games and other digital media (*cyberspace*) but also by other media such as film and TV, theater, text and poetry, . . . and by music.”⁷⁷ Virtuality can be evoked by a number of factors, but here I argue that this liminal space is created by the holographic immersion taking place on-stage, combining the holograms, the physical human actors, and the musical accompaniment to create a virtual environment into which the audience is placed – an environment in which the constraints of reality are bent and reshaped. Creating a space in which the impossible can be made real allows the audience to witness

⁷⁷ Isabella van Elferen, “¡Un Forastero! Issues of Virtuality and Diegesis in Videogame Music,” *Music and the Moving Image* Vol. 4, Issue 2. 30.

events that can't possibly be occurring, and allows the performance to evoke the wonder and amazement that a proper spectacle should be striving to achieve.

The 2019 World Finals opening ceremony was produced in combination with a technology called the Holonet, provided by the company Kaleida. The Holonet is a transparent gauze material, able to be strung across large areas. In the proper lighting, it can be nearly invisible to the naked eye, so without forewarning audiences would not even notice that it is present. As Kaleida states on their webpage, "In a controlled light setting Holonet will become completely transparent with your audience unaware of its existence. This gives the impression of solid objects and real people existing in 3D."⁷⁸ While the flashing lights of the performance do eventually give away the presence of the Holonet, when light conditions are stable it is very difficult to notice that the Holonet is present on-stage. This is important so as to help preserve the "magic" of the event; even if audience members notice and are aware of the Holonet, its presence is so ephemeral that it isn't difficult to suspend belief regardless. Light is projected onto this screen in pre-generated patterns which interact with the holographic gauze to create three-dimensional figures and images, which form the characters with which the actors on-stage interact. These images can be freely manipulated, and in the case of the opening ceremony are made to appear as if they are singing, dancing, and performing alongside their physical counterparts. The audience, drawn into the virtual space of the event, is made to believe that the holograms are performers in their own right; transient, but every bit as real in that moment as the human next to them on-stage.

⁷⁸ <https://www.wearekaleida.com/holonet>

One way that we can consider the interactions between the human and non-human performers on-stage is to think of them as social connections. One pitfall that needs to be overcome when we make a map of the social interactions of a space, culture, or in this case, a performance, is that those connections are not limited to interactions between humans and other humans. In his 2005 text *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory*, Bruno Latour considers the way actor-network theory can be deployed to reassess how we examine social interactions, by laying out the connections between different actors in a system regardless whether that connection is between a human and a human, a human and a non-human, or between a non-human and another non-human. As Latour states in his introduction, “we should not limit in advance the sort of beings populating the social world.”⁷⁹ An actor, from the perspective of the actor-network theory, then is any agent within a given network that effects or is effected by other agents; for example, within the opening ceremony a small section of the overall network can be the connection between the dancers and the holographic blades during the performance of “Phoenix.” This network can be said to consist of the dancers, the holographic projected images, and the music, as a basic set of actors (these could then be expanded upon and, in turn, deconstructed if necessary). The dancers are listening to the music to follow their choreography, and watching the holographic blades to take care that their motions are in time. The blades, pre-programmed to appear on the Holonet, are timed in accordance with the music and with the choreography of the dancers. The music is the same, being timed precisely so as to match up with the other essential segments of the performance. Each one is dependent upon the others to create a fully

⁷⁹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory*, 2005, 16.

functioning network of associations – despite the fact that of the three, only one is a human actor.

ANT has been used by a wide variety of scholars for a wide variety of disciplinary studies. Eliot Bates, in his 2012 article for *Ethnomusicology* titled “The Social Life of Musical Instruments,” utilized ANT as a method for a reconceptualization of the role musical instruments play in the formation and performance of social connections. Bates argues that “Musical instruments constitute a fruitful site for ANT-style approaches, as they are intertwined in myriad forms of social relations, and instrumentalists and audiences often have distinctively intimate affective relations with them.”⁸⁰ In his article he examines the role of the saz, “often called the ‘national’ instrument of Turkey,”⁸¹ in social networks composed of instruments, performers, artisans, and audiences; this examination allowed him to consider the ways the saz impacted and effected the human actors who were engaged with it alongside the ways those human actors perceived and effected the saz (by playing it, making it, etc.) One particularly interesting point that Bates brings up in this article is the saz’s impact on identity formation. Bates argues that while a non-Turkish individual playing the saz might become “more Turkish,” it would not (according to his interlocutors) make the saz “less Turkish.” “Note that the potential of causation went one way. If I played a saz I wouldn’t run the risk of rendering it less Turkish; the saz itself contained an exclusive potentiality to impact change.”⁸² In this instance it is purely the non-human actor’s ability to enact change that creates a shift in the social network that it is involved in; because we are involving the non-human actor in mapping the network we

⁸⁰ Eliot Bates, “The Social Lives of Instruments,” *Ethnomusicology* 56(3) (2012), 374.

⁸¹ Bates, 374.

⁸² Bates, 386.

are able to easily determine who or what is causing a social change. It is Bates' argument that ethnomusicologists should more actively utilize systems of analysis that can figure in non-human actors such as instruments that can clearly have significant impacts on the social relations between humans, other humans, and non-humans.

Another useful example of scholarship conducted on ANT methodologies is that of Jonathan Murdoch's 2001 article "Ecologising Sociology: Actor-Network Theory, Co-construction and the Problem of Human Exemptionalism." In this article, Murdoch makes a case for examining the actions of humans within their ecosystems on a playing field even with the actions of other organisms that do not have human intentionality, drawing in critics of environmental sociology who have argued that despite ostensibly focusing on the interwoven connection of humans to their environments, it has inevitably become too entrenched in the *social* to the detriment of the *natural*. He cites two particular critics of ANT, David Bloor and Ian Hacking, who both argue that the usage of ANT does little to solve the problem of human exemptionalism within ecological sociology, which is that "humans must still be seen as having distinctive characteristics (linked primarily to their use of language) that mark them out from the non-human world."⁸³ Instead, Murdoch proposes that a variety of methodologies may be necessary to further the conversation about an ecological sociology, including paying particular attention to what actors are involved in the specific studies being conducted and working from a decidedly interdisciplinary lens. "It might therefore be appropriate to place our study of particular 'ecologies' on a continuum, extending from those situations where 'social' (or

⁸³ Jonathan Murdoch, "Ecologising Sociology: Actor-Network Theory, Co-construction and the Problem of Human Exemptionalism," *Sociology* 35(1) (2001), 121.

‘interactive’) factors are paramount to those where ‘natural’ (or ‘indifferent’) factors are decisive.”⁸⁴ Flexibility in our use of theoretical principles is necessary for a balanced study of topics such as these, and just as ANT allows for a restructured view of the social relationships between different actors, we need to consider the benefits and drawbacks that come apace with the use of any particular theoretical frameworks.

ANT has been very often criticized for making the social playing field “too flat,” so to speak, and has been said to incorrectly ascribe intentionality to non-human beings when in fact these figures are unable to consciously hold any form of agency. One outspoken critic of ANT within the field of musicology, Richard Taruskin, argues that ANT is “regressive” in its flattening of social networks, and that there must be distinctions between actors and the tools those actors wield: “If guns are actors then it is they who kill people and we can empty our jails. If cantatas or chanson are actors then we can say, with Mark Evan Bonds, that they ‘emerged’ at such as such a time in such and such a place, and pay no attention to singers or composers or printers or booksellers.”⁸⁵ While it’s true that (for the moment, at least) non-human actors cannot self-determinatively influence changing social relations, they do effect those social relations in interesting and varied ways, and their study can influence how we understand the way we as humans interact with each other and our surroundings. William Cheng, in response to Taruskin’s critique, states that “Rethinking human agency can do a lot of good. It can impugn social hierarchies, promote animal rights, and rectify the disempowering and dehumanizing representations of people who identify as disabled or queer.”⁸⁶ As Bates argues, “One ... long-

⁸⁴ Murdoch, 129.

⁸⁵ Richard Taruskin, “Agents and Causes and Ends, Oh My,” *The Journal of Musicology* 31(2) (2014), 292.

⁸⁶ William Cheng, *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016.

standing critique of ANT and related approaches is that it ascribes intentionality to inert matter, but this is a misreading of the theory of agency as it conflates *intention* with *effect*.”⁸⁷ Despite the fact that a gun cannot intentionally shoot another social actor as Taruskin argues, it is engaged in an interactive action with the person pulling the trigger and the person (or non-person) being shot. By pointing to more specific interactions between humans and non-humans we are able to closely analyze those relationships and re-examine how we enact change in the world. In the case of the 2019 Opening Ceremony, I am looking at the social relationships that exist between the human actors performing on-stage and the variety of non-human actors influencing and being influenced around them, including the holographic champions present in the performance of “Giants.”

These holograms, themselves composed of a varied network of associations, interact with the motions and timing of the human performers with the aid of choreographed movements as a polished act. The humans are dependent upon the music and the holograms to orchestrate a successful performance, and the music and the holograms are themselves incomplete without the humans performing. The overall spectacle is achieved by the effective network of connections and interactions between the human actors, the programmed holograms, and the timekeeping music, each of which is intertwined with the others to culminate in the final show. This brings us to the agency of these disparate actors; despite being interconnected, each has to have its own particular path throughout the performance. In that case, does it matter whether that pathway is pre-programmed or if it is being navigated in the moment? Issues of power and agency are important when we consider what those agents are

⁸⁷ Bates, 373.

accomplishing (or attempting to accomplish) within the confines of their context; not only that, but when we think about how those agents are perceived by an audience it should be discussed *what* they are conveying to that audience. The agency of the holographic structures within this performance, and to a lesser extent, that of the physical human performers, is constructed as an entirely artificial one. There is a particular script being played out on-stage; holograms must be pre-programmed to move in particular ways, staying exactly true through repeated rehearsals. In order to mask that repetitive construction, humans have to themselves imitate and remain true to that script to “keep the magic alive” so to speak, to make an audience believe that the holograms are living, breathing parts of the performance. As Sherry Ortner describes in her conclusion to chapter 6 of *Anthropology and Social Theory*, “Power and Projects: Reflections on Agency”,

“Whatever ‘agency’ they seem to ‘have’ as individuals is in reality something that is always in fact interactively negotiated. In this sense they are never free agents, not only in the sense that they do not have the freedom to formulate and realize their own goals in a social vacuum, but also in the sense that they do not have the ability to fully control those relations toward their own ends.”⁸⁸

Agency is difficult to pin down, and in this case it is the perception of agency and intentionality that makes the audience view these constructed holograms as agents and performers possessing the same agency as the human actors on-stage; in a way, they do.

An interesting parallel between the perception of these holograms and the virtual worlds of video games is the presence of figures known as “NPCs,” or “non-player characters.” Non-player characters in video games are constructed characters meant to act in such a way as to influence the story or gameplay in some way, such as either a story character who gives the

⁸⁸ Sherry Ortner. *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. 2006.

player a task or an enemy for the player to triumph over; the NPC is a crucial part of nearly any story-based video game, as otherwise the player would be alone in the game world. League of Legends, for example, includes a number of NPCs despite its primary focus as a player-versus-player game: these include the merchants which players purchase items from and the various jungle monsters which players slay to gain experience and gold. In other video games such as RPGs (Role-Playing Games) these characters are generally pivotal for the progression of a game's story. On a conscious level players know that these NPCs are constructed actors, generated by the game and coded by the developer, but as these figures are implicitly involved in the construction of the game world and the story, they are often individuals that players can feel deep emotional connections to. To many players, these NPCs are very real parts of their experience, despite the fact that they are fictional, constructed figures acting in pre-programmed ways. In the same way, then, the holographic champions on-stage are acting as three-dimensional NPCs; figures who are pre-programmed to move and interact in certain ways with the performers on-stage, but who are ultimately vital in the construction and performance of the show. For the audience, these holographic figures are just as important as the humans on-stage, if not even more so due to the emotional connection that League of Legends players have with them through their in-game play. These figures are a crucial part of the network of associations that exist within the show, between the performers as well as the audience.

Not only are these networks important for the 2019 opening ceremony performance, but they are also present when we discuss e-sports players themselves, who are connected within an expansive web of actors. In his 2009 dissertation, Nicholas Taylor utilizes ANT to analyze professional Halo 3 play, to map the "LANscapes" of the tournament event. Taylor

discusses the way players are connected, both to other players and to their devices, including the cabling to connect the consoles, the controllers that they are using, where the players are sitting, how they interact with one another, and much more. One example that Taylor introduces is the fact that wireless controllers are not allowed, due to the signal distortion that they can introduce into the LAN. Therefore, all controllers are required to be wired only, which introduces complications for spacing and motion within the event. “In turn, the rule mandating users to physically connect their controllers to their console producing a further constraint upon players’ embodied actions, limiting how far away from the console they can sit (and as a result, how close to one and other they must sit).⁸⁹ Even a simple rule like “wired controllers are a requirement” introduces a significant number of complications for a network that is so tightly formulated, and effects the placement of actors within the network. This is the same for professional League of Legends players; the basic necessities of interacting with their computers in certain pre-described ways impacts the ways that they are able to interact with the game, their teammates, and the audience.

Another fascinating point that Taylor brings up is the soundscape of the Halo 3 event. He specifically focuses on the way teammates used call-outs⁹⁰ to interact with each other during a game, noting that despite the game being played by non-English speaking teams as well as English speaking teams, both sets of players utilized English descriptors for the map in their call-outs: “the content, as well as cadence and occurrence of call-outs, remained largely

⁸⁹ Nicholas Taylor, *Power Play: Digital Gaming Goes Pro*, York University, Toronto, Ontario, 2009, 210.

⁹⁰ Call-outs are short phrases used by players to signal to their teammates important information occurring on the map; this allows for brief bursts of communication that quickly brings other players up to speed on what they are seeing or doing.

consistent despite linguistic differences between teams.”⁹¹ He argues that the players are being impacted by the game while they are playing, cyclically effecting and being effected throughout the course of their competitive careers. “similar patterns in how and when map call-outs are employed might be expected in so far as players from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds are similarly familiar with particular maps, constituting another way that players are, in the sense ANT talks about, ‘acted upon’ by the game. In other words, similarities in what, when and how players utter map call-outs arise from sets of game specifications and maps that are consistent across different LAN tournaments.”⁹² These call-outs form the sonic network of each team’s communication, and produce a soundscape that is determined not by the players but by the language common for the game. Since that language is primarily English, players have learned to adjust the ways that they convey information about the game in the most efficient way possible.

In the case of the opening ceremony, it is often confusing who is singing; the music is digitally produced and broadcast throughout the venue, and the holographic entertainers often take turns at the microphone (though with less frequency than the physical ones). I have argued that because they are placed on a (relatively) even playing field within the virtual space of the stage, they are independent actors within this network, and thus their voices should be seen (heard?) to be just as real as the voices of the human actors on-stage. This allows us to reconceptualize who or what is making music now that it is a tangible reality that non-humans might make music independently of human action or intent. It is even entirely possible that the

⁹¹ Taylor, 2009, 205.

⁹² Taylor, 2009, 205.

audience for this non-human music may truly be other non-humans. As Brian Cooney writes in the introduction to his 2004 text *Posthumanity: Thinking Philosophically About the Future*, “We’re in a *philosophically* turbulent era, because the products of our latest technology will include a new kind of *reality* (virtual), new kinds of *minds*, and new sorts of *bodies* for those minds.”⁹³ A view of the human as composed of two arms, two legs, a torso, a head, and a conscious mind (along with various other organic bits and bobs) is slowly coming unraveled as those pieces begin adding up to something that doesn’t fit our conceived notions of humanity. Paul Rekret argues that “As division between the natural and the cultural, the mind and the body, and the human and the technological all grow increasingly difficult to maintain, so too, it follows, do the anthropocentric terms by which social theory tends to operate.”⁹⁴ Binary oppositions of human and non-human are quickly becoming outdated as the world of the digital intersects more and more deeply with that of the physical, and we should be prepared to consider this intersection as it is occurring, not only after it has happened.

In her landmark 1985 essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway considered the ways that “cyborg” theory could influence our conceptions of humanity and society; she argues that “late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines.”⁹⁵ More than simply breaking down these binaries, however, Haraway focuses on the figures who splice aspects from both sides of

⁹³ Brian Cooney, *Posthumanity: Thinking Philosophically About the Future*, 2004, xi.

⁹⁴ Paul Rekret, “Seeing Like a Cyborg? The Innocence of Posthuman Knowledge,” *Digital Objects, Digital Subjects: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Capitalism, Labour and Politics in the Age of Big Data*, University of Westminster Press, 2019, 82.

⁹⁵ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Manifestly Haraway*, 2016, 11.

particular binaries to create a new, lived reality. “From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.”⁹⁶ Finding a place for figures that are newly imagined, technologically created, or a patchwork canvas of natural and artificial is one way that we can move forward a theoretical perspective on the things that might come about when we stop limiting “humanness” as a concept. Another author that utilizes the posthuman to consider the conceptualization of humanity is Christin Ellis in her 2018 text *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Twenty-First Century*. Ellis invokes the work of Jacques Derrida in her arguments, stating that “In highlighting the myriad relations of similarity and inequality that cut across species lines, Derrida’s essay [*The Animal That Therefore I Am*] therefore reminds us that the human/nonhuman binary is not, in fact, a speciological distinction but rather an ideological one.”⁹⁷ She utilizes this conceptualization of humanity as a way to focus on the marginality of racism discussions within posthuman theory, a perspective which as she argues “ignore[s] the long and ongoing history of racism that has systematically demoted targeted populations of *Homo sapiens* to the status of ‘nonhuman.’”⁹⁸ It’s important to remember as we move forward into this consideration of the posthuman that we fully recognize the implicit roots of prejudice that accompany it. How and what humanity and human consciousness will look like in an

⁹⁶ Haraway, 15.

⁹⁷ Christin Ellis, “Posthumanism and the Problem of Social Justice: Race and Materiality in the Twenty-First Century,” *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Twenty-First Century*, 2018, 144.

⁹⁸ Ellis, 137.

entirely digitally immersed world is as yet unknown, but events such as this are certainly pushing our boundaries forward towards that virtual world.

CHAPTER FOUR

MUSIC AND MEANING IN VISUAL MEDIA

Through this thesis I have discussed how these networks of associations are formed and what is forming them, so what role does music have in these networks? Is music simply one of the dependent factors for the performers and holograms, a glorified metronome for the actors to base their choreography off of? From a certain perspective that's true. Music is the glue that holds the 2019 Opening Ceremony performance together, which connects all of the other actors within the network; timings and performed activities are gauged according to the music, which provides the template for the rest of the performance. Just as importantly, however, is that the music is the mediating factor which draws the audience into this network, enabling them to enter the virtual space. As the rest of the performance plays out in time to the music, so too does the audience begin to follow the beat, anticipate the rhythm, and expect the next performed action as the music swells and ebbs. The immersive musical environment into which the audience is thrust within this opening ceremony reinforces the virtuality of the performance; distant digital echoes and the blurring of natural sounds with technologically inspired audio brings the listener into the world where performers like Becky G and Thutmose are juxtaposed with fictional heroes like Qiyana and Ekko. Music mediates between these spaces, and influences the perceptions of the audience as a way to further distort the confused reality of the opening ceremony, reinforcing the sensation of infinite possibility in a turbulent space.

One particular section of the performance which reflects this distortion is Thutmose's second solo from "Giants." At this point in the song the lights have been entirely cut besides the

holographic imagery occurring alongside the rapper, and the musical accompaniment to his lyrics is significantly subdued; brief drum fills echo through the arena atop digitally mixed bass beats which direct the audience's attention to the singer, and within this suddenly open sonic space the aural reference of the "ping" sound is front and center rather than hidden by a dense musical texture. The darkness of the room combined with this open sonic space effectively disembodies the viewer, who is following the impossible movements of the singer in front of the larger than life imagery passing behind him. The textural quality of the music is what immerses the audience in the virtual space, and draws them into the network; by correctly fitting the conditions on-stage to the sonic environment, even the unlikely action of Thutmose teleporting from one side of the stage to another can become a possibility in the virtual reality being constructed in front of them.

Another moment highlighting the blending of digital and physical in a unique way in this performance occurs during the second iteration of the chorus, when dancers on-stage are bathed in a strobing white light. This has the fascinating effect of creating the imagery of a holographic projection in a reversal of the way holograms have been introduced throughout the performance; rather than a non-human attempting to masquerade as human, in this case they are humans attempting to pass as non-human. This strobing effect has been a way for artists and film producers to simulate holograms in visual media, such as the hologram of Princess Leia from *Star Wars* or Cortana from the *Halo* series – in this case, that trope of visual distortion is utilized in a "real life" scenario to add more textural variety to the holographic imagery being portrayed on-stage. Once again viewers are forced to reconsider who and what on-stage is or is not "real" when watching, as immediately following this section those same

dancers are holographically “blown away” by a tornado, further cementing their constructed reality as virtual in nature.

In their 2018 article “Music, Mediation Theories and Actor-Network Theory,” Georgina Born and Andrew Barry consider how music can be viewed as a mediative tool, and how this mediation can be analyzed through a social or cultural lens. They argue that “Mediation theories, then, can be and have been taken to highlight music’s entanglement with technologies, things, material cultures ... and infrastructures.”⁹⁹ The music in this opening ceremony influences all of the other actions occurring, and draws the audience into the network of associations; when the lights flicker to virtualize the dancers on-stage, they flicker alongside the beat of the music. As Thutmose is moving across the stage and massive imagery flashes behind him, they are all entangled in the rhythm of his voice and the flow of his rhymes. The audience, too, is entangled; heads nod and feet tap, and the roar of the crowd becomes a part of the music just the same. When we identify the ways that music is mediating between the performers, the holograms, and the audiences in this performance, we can more effectively analyze the event rather than simply taking each of the actors as disparate pieces. As Born and Barry state, “identifying music’s constitutive mediations yields a more complex and distributed object (an assemblage) on the basis of which to trace the conditions, trajectories and forces that converge on a musical object or event, engendering subtle forms of explanation.” The technological hybridity that emerges within this event, being implicit within the holographic

⁹⁹ Georgina Born and Andrew Barry, “Music, Mediation Theories and Actor-Network Theory,” *Contemporary Music Review*, 448.

engagement as well as the digitally produced and enhanced musical experience is just one of a multitude of mediations occurring within this event to produce meaning for a viewer.

In his article “On Vocal Assemblages: From Edison to Miku”, Nick Prior discusses an assemblage that bears a striking resemblance to the production occurring on our stage: the Vocaloid Hatsune Miku. Miku is a character constructed for the Vocaloid software, “an all-in-one software package that allows amateur and professional musicians to write songs without the need for a ‘real’ singer.”¹⁰⁰ Users manipulate pre-recorded phonemes to construct songs that Miku is “singing” and then release those songs to the public, constructing a massive body of works attributed to Hatsune Miku. The fervor surrounding Miku reached a global audience, and “By 2009, Miku had gone ‘live’ as an all-singing, all-dancing digital projection, fronting a series of concerts to sellout crowds in Asia and beyond.”¹⁰¹ Prior focuses on the voice of Miku in this article, arguing that Miku’s voice is an assemblage composed of various human and non-human artifacts. Rather than considering this to be a contamination of a so-called “pure” or “human” voice, he argues that conceptions about the voice need to be revised as technologies and digitization change the way we sing or make music. “This moves us away from the idea of technology as a contaminating obstruction to the ‘real’ and towards the voice as a multiply constituted object that emerges and re-emerges through the modulating forces of the socio-technical and material.”¹⁰² As we blur the lines between digital and physical in opening ceremonies, we also blur the lines about conceptions of what makes music real, authentic, or live. Music-making has changed with the advent of new technologies, and it will continue to

¹⁰⁰ Nick Prior, “On Vocal Assemblages: From Edison to Miku,” *Contemporary Music Review*, 37:5-6, 500.

¹⁰¹ Prior, 500.

¹⁰² Prior, 503.

change – just as the invention of the piano, the vibraphone or the steel drum changed the way music was made, so too will digital technologies change and adapt our musical sensibilities, just as they already have.

The way music is structured and utilized within this event is similar to the way music is used in television and movies (as well as video games!) as a way to tie the visual elements occurring on the stage or screen to meaning or understanding for an audience. In his 2019 article “Studying the Study of Television Music and Sound,” James Deaville argues that the musical composition of television programs serves a crucial role in the formation of meaning for a viewer just the same as it does in film media. He states that “Music still ‘anchors the image to a particular meaning,’ as Kathryn Kalinak observed of film music, and in doing so perseveres as a key element in televisual storytelling.”¹⁰³ I would contend that the music in this opening ceremony is serving that same purpose; it is underscoring the visual composition of the event to facilitate the understanding of the audience, and reinforcing the structure of the Opening Ceremony to enable viewers to fully immerse themselves in the virtual space. However, music is not only serving a subsidiary role in this event; it is also fully active in producing meaning and affective response for the audience. Kathryn Kalinak, in her 2010 text *Film Music: A Very Short Introduction* (to which James Deaville references in the above quote) argues that while music can serve to support meaning that is already being fully realized in the visual media it is accompanying, it also acts on its own to influence audiences and viewers. As she states, “positing that music either parallels or counterpoints what is already ‘there’ assumes that the

¹⁰³ James Deaville, “Studying the Study of Television Music and Sound,” *American Music* 37(4), 401.

image is autonomous and encodes meaning unproblematically.”¹⁰⁴ She continues, arguing that “When we hear tremolo strings, it is not a simple case of music reinforcing the suspense that is already ‘there’ in the image. Instead, tremolo strings are a component of the process by which suspense is generated.”¹⁰⁵ Music in this case is an interwoven strand by which suspense (or other meaning for an audience) is created, equally as important as the visual component of a particular medium.

E-sports fans, and fans of League of Legends, are predisposed to understand certain musical implements as having particular affective value; beyond the ingrained thematic tropes that North American audiences hold as a result of growing up surrounded by television and film media, musical connections are distinctly maintained by Riot Games as a matter of course for their promotional materials and advertisements. For example, every new champion that is released has its own particular theme associated with it that is utilized in promoting its announcement and release. Many players therefore are able to make an immediate association on hearing particular musical tropes or references when that music is played to bring them into conversation with the champion. In-game sound design for the champions also plays a part; the sounds and aural cues that accompany playing a particular character need to be unique and fit with the champion. In a Devblog post by Jason “Protoshredanoid” Willey, a composer for League of Legends and a member of the Riot Games based metal band “Pentakill,” Willey describes the process for composing a thematic music for a particular champion, in this case a theme for the “Eclipse Leona” skin. “The key of B major along with the open B string pedal on

¹⁰⁴ Kathryn Kalinak, *Film Music: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 17.

¹⁰⁵ Kalinak, 18.

guitar have a bright quality, which feels like Leona. B major is generally considered a very sharp and bright key, and to me it sounds like a super saturated hue of yellow ('pitch to color' could be an entire post by itself!).¹⁰⁶ As Leona is a champion who represents the sun, bright sounding textures and aesthetically "yellow sounding" music fit her thematic markers for character design.

The promotional materials that Riot Games and other game designers utilize to engage audiences with their products often rely heavily on music for its narrative storytelling properties. Animated music videos and storytelling content are constantly being produced which influence fans, such as "The Curse of the Sad Mummy"¹⁰⁷ or "Annie: Origins."¹⁰⁸ For League of Legends particularly, very little in-game "lore" (the 'story' of the game and the world it is set in) is to be found just by playing; snippets are contained in the dialogue of the characters and their interactions with others, but as it is a fast-paced player-versus-player game, there is less of a place for the story to be told. Instead players are given the story in the form of promotional videos, graphic novels, and short stories; dedicated fans therefore deeply ingrain the sounds and music of these promotional materials as they read up on and become familiar with the story of the game. In his article "The Non-Diegetic Fallacy: Film, Music, and Narrative Space," Ben Winters discusses the particular narrative universes which spectators enter into when watching films. He utilizes the concept of diegesis introduced by Étienne Souriau to discuss the unique narrative spaces within films, and argues that music is an inherent

¹⁰⁶ Jason Willey, "Dev: Rocking on the Rift," *Nexus*, <https://nexus.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/2018/12/dev-rocking-on-the-rift/>.

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AvWV6Mk374>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUTU-GnxVuM>

part of those unique universes, or the diegesis of the film. As he states, “the presence of music in the space of the filmic universe might be considered an aspect specific to a particular film, whether realist or fantastic in its aesthetics.”¹⁰⁹ In much the same way, the diegesis of the video game incorporates the unique characters, settings, and (importantly) sounds of the game world in a way that players recognize in the various media released in conjunction with the game.

I have discussed how music serves to pull the audience into the network of associations occurring in the opening ceremony event; the affective memory that is produced by the audience’s identification with the sound and video of the event is what is able to accomplish this effect. As Kathryn Kalinak states, “By resonating emotion between the audience and the screen, film music engages audiences in processes of identification, which bind them into the film.”¹¹⁰ The deeply emotive properties of musical engagement serve to more effectively subsume a viewer into the (in our case) virtual space of the opening ceremony, enabling the digital/physical divide to grow more and more indistinguishable. “Film music makes us more likely to brush away doubts about what the film might be promoting, to suspend our disbelief in the two dimensional, larger-than-life images posing as reality, and ultimately to accept, uncritically, a series of images and the cultural values they encode.”¹¹¹ The music of the opening ceremony takes this one step further; the images that are posing as reality in our case are fully formed three-dimensional figures, stepping out of the ‘screen’ of the game and into the ‘reality’ of the show. Audience members are able to relate their own memories of

¹⁰⁹ Ben Winters, “The Non-Diegetic Fallacy: Film, Music, and Narrative Space,” *Music & Letters* 91(2) (2010), 224-244.

¹¹⁰ Kalinak, 20.

¹¹¹ Kalinak, 27.

witnessing these champions in the game and in the media released by Riot Games to the familiar sounds of the show, and are subsequently drawn into the virtually manifested diegesis of League of Legends.

Affective memory also serves to incite emotion or anticipation around certain key songs, sounds, and aural cues; take for example “Silver Scrapes,” which I briefly discussed in my introduction as the theme for the ‘game five’ match in a five game series. Audiences have an emotional attachment to that song as a result of its historical emplacement within the League of Legends broadcast – viewers hearing that song recognize its meaning and anticipate the conclusion of a closely contested series. This is similar to songs such as “Take Me Out to the Ballgame,” which has become known for being performed between the halves of the seventh inning. As McLeod describes in *We Are the Champions*, “it was the legendary Chicago broadcaster Harry Caray who instigated the song’s association with the “seventh inning stretch. ... In what has become one of baseball’s most hallowed and beloved traditions, a variety of celebrity guest vocalists – including Bill Murray, Jeff Gordon, Muhammad Ali, Ozzy Osbourne, and Eddie Vedder – continue to lead the fans at Wrigley in singing the anthem.”¹¹² It is a specifically baseball-oriented song, which audiences have come to expect at certain times in a game; when fans hear the song being played, they are able to negotiate their space within the baseball game via their understanding of that song’s significance.

Within the opening ceremony, then, there are a number of aural cues that specifically represent in-game references which audiences recognize and can associate particular emotions and anticipated responses to. The sound of the “ping” going off during Thutmose’s solo in

¹¹² McLeod, 30.

“Giants” is a particular sound that players of League of Legends would be alert to; a “ping” represents another player pointing out specific information on the map for others to be cognizant of. Knowing the difference between an “alert” ping and an “enemy missing” ping is vital when a player is in the middle of a tense moment and can’t look at their map – knowing whether an enemy is going to be unexpectedly joining the fray or whether you’re free to play without fearing enemy reinforcements can make the difference between success or failure, and recognizing that aural cue is vital. The presence of the “ping” sound in the song, then, is a clear reference that players will understand and associate themselves with; they are understood to be the audience that this performance is made for, and in turn more fully commit themselves to the show.

In his 2001 article “Emotional Dimensions of Ritual Music among the Kotas, a South Indian Tribe,” Richard Wolf considers the ways participants in ritual events such as divinity ceremonies or funerals experience, create, and participate in emotional responses to the event. He argues that music is a constitutive part of the creation of emotional response within ceremonial contexts: “music does not merely cause people to experience emotions, nor does it merely fit into a simple ritual scheme of definitions, but rather that it helps to dynamically constitute the overall emotional texture of a ceremony.”¹¹³ As he argues, specific musicalities and musical tendencies denote different emotional responses for various groups; he mentions often throughout his article that the Kota specifically “feel” the ways that divinity music is different from funeral music, and how the emotive properties of each differ. This is similar then

¹¹³ Richard K. Wolf, “Emotional Dimensions of Ritual Music and the Kotas, a South Indian Tribe,” *Ethnomusicology* 45(3) (2001), 396.

to our consideration of the emotional affect of the opening ceremony – the emotional attachment of a viewer who is deeply involved in the game and culture will have a deeper connection with the music and activity occurring on-stage, and more strongly feel the pull to enter the virtual space of the performance. In his 2019 article “Analyzing Gospel,” Braxton Shelley examines a similar phenomenon occurring within the performance of gospel choirs and congregations, arguing that the emotional connection of the congregation to the music being performed (involving both the singers and the audience’s clapping, cheering, and bodily engagement with the music) causes the audience to be more deeply engaged with both the music and the transcendental feeling of connecting with their religion. He argues that “situated sound can transport entire audiences, performatively constituting imagined spaces that are inextricably linked to embodied memories.”¹¹⁴ He follows this up by claiming that “this collective engagement with music grants these believers transcendent access to times, places, and subjects outside their material world.”¹¹⁵ While the opening ceremony exists in a much different context, at its root the two experiences share significant similarities; both are collective engagements of a large number of people in a musically engaged space which is drawing them into an space which is not-yet-actualized.

Music functions in these spaces as a vehicle and constructive tool for meaning and emotional connection. Whether the space is a gospel congregation, a Kota funeral ceremony, a ‘90s rom-com, or the opening ceremony for the 2019 World Finals of League of Legends, music still operates to immerse the viewer or participant in the affective power of the event, and

¹¹⁴ Braxton Shelley, “Analyzing Gospel,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72(1) (2019), 183.

¹¹⁵ Shelley, 185.

draws them into the world of the music. The emotional connection of the audience to the recognizable sights, sounds, and feelings of the event creates a bridge that connects two markedly different spaces – that of the physical, and that of the unreal, leading a participant into the world of the virtual; a world in which the impossible is possible and the most unimaginable things can seem commonplace. Music is the way that these connections come to pass, and the method by which individuals and collectives shift from the physical into something more.

Creating a space in which a global audience of e-sports fans can come together to recognize and enjoy a shared connection to the game and to one another empowers this opening ceremony and the viewers who watch it. In developing an event that can make that happen, and to showcase the attachment that the members of the League of Legends community have to the game and to the gaming culture is just one aspect of the growing consciousness of e-sports and video gaming as an acceptable and encouraged pastime and choice of leisure activity. However, this community importantly needs to be examined in consideration of whether certain groups are privileged over others within the e-sports scene, and how this opening ceremony plays into that consideration. In the following chapter I discuss the various groups and cultural art forms being represented in this opening ceremony, and how audiences might perceive them in the context of an e-sports event hosted by Riot Games.

CHAPTER FIVE

POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Various groups are represented within the 2019 Opening Ceremony, both in terms of gender and ethnicity. Of the seven main (human) performers, five are women and two are men. Three of the female performers (Cailin Russo, Chrissy Costanza, and Valerie Broussard) are Caucasian/white, one (Soyeon) is Korean, one (Becky G) is Latina, and one is African American (Keke Palmer). Of the two men, Thutmose is Nigerian-American, and Duckwrth is African American. Interestingly, there are no Caucasian men included within the main cast of performers (though there are white male backup dancers and supporting cast). The ethnic make-up of the cast on-stage would ordinarily be a nonissue; after all, we have previously discussed in this thesis that Riot Games is attempting to make in-roads with markets that are not generally associated with League of Legends or e-sports. The hip-hop aesthetic of “Giants” alongside the performing cast of BIPOC musicians certainly enters an unexplored avenue for the League of Legends scene, but problems begin to arise when one looks at fundamental issues of why hip-hop has not been typically intersectional with the game. Of the entire North American LCS, there is only one Black professional player currently on a team and playing in the League (Zachary “Aphromoo” Black); no other professional teams in any of the other main regions (Europe, China, Korea) are fielding a Black player at this time. Does the inclusion of “Giants” in this opening ceremony promote a false representation for BIPOC players and community members, or should this be seen as an extended hand towards a group without significant representation in the professional player-base?

The professional gaming community is often not welcoming to Black and minority players. Blatant racism and hate speech are frequent on comment sections and chat boards discussing games; add into that the fact that League of Legends has a remarkably toxic¹¹⁶ player-base¹¹⁷ and one can easily assume that many talented young Black players would want to avoid the professional scene which comes with an excess of heckling and degrading commentary. As Nick Ray, a writer for Hotspawn notes in his June 18 article “Black Lives Matter, the LCS, and What’s Next,” “Between countless racist IGNS¹¹⁸ flooding the servers, a bad reputation of toxicity, rampant sexism, and a drastic lack of representation in game, on stage,¹¹⁹ and on-air, LoL doesn’t seem inherently welcoming to BIPOC from a multitude of perspectives.”¹²⁰ He goes on to state, “Those who have been following the LCS since its formation in 2013 have watched varying rotations of the same white men soaking up most of the screen time on the broadcast.” Without possible role models for Black youths in the League of Legends professional community, there is a significant barrier to be broken before we see Black players thriving in the scene. Some of these role models are available as cast and crew; figures like Barento “Razlepasm” Mohammed, a caster and coach, Nicole LaPointe Jameson, the CEO of Evil Geniuses (a team in the North American LCS), and Derrick “PRIMAL” Asiedu, a new analyst for the 2021 season. However, until that representation spreads to the main subject of

¹¹⁶ Toxicity in this instance refers to disruptive or offensive player behavior such as rude actions, racism, hate speech (among others).

¹¹⁷ Andreas Stravropoloulos, “League’s toxicity falls on Riot and the community, and Hai believes the ‘problem needs to be fixed from both ends,’” Dot Esports, June 18, 2020, <https://dotesports.com/league-of-legends/news/leagues-toxicity-falls-on-riot-and-the-community-and-hai-believes-the-problem-needs-to-be-fixed-from-both-ends>.

¹¹⁸ IGN refers to a player’s in-game name, or the name that other players can recognize them as.

¹¹⁹ Note that on stage in this case refers to players on stage, not performers at Opening Ceremony events.

¹²⁰ Nick Ray, “Black Lives Matter, the LCS, and What’s Next,” Hot Spawn, June 18, 2020. <https://www.hotspawn.com/league-of-legends/news/black-lives-matter-the-lcs-and-whats-next>.

the broadcast – the players themselves – it remains difficult for viewers to accept League of Legends as a truly diverse and inclusive environment.

Latoya Peterson, writing in March of 2018 for *The Undeclared*, has another explanation for the lack of Black professional gamers in games like League of Legends or Dota 2. In her article “Why Aren’t More Black Kids Going Pro in Esports?”, Peterson argues that the work of scholars like Betsy DiSalvo has shown that African-American men have a tendency towards playing games on consoles,¹²¹ rather than PCs.¹²² This can be attributed to class divisions in many cases; gamers with more expendable income are able to purchase and maintain high performance gaming computers, while those with a limited economic capacity for gaming play on what they are able to afford. The racial divide between gamers typically on the PC side (white and Asian gamers) and those on the console side (Black and Latino gamers) brings into question who is able to afford PCs to even begin the process of going pro. Peterson showcases this in her article, considering the prize pools for various tournaments: “But there’s also the financial aspect to the PC/console divide that contributes to a growing disparity in esports: the sheer dollar amounts involved. For PC-dominant games such as Dota and League of Legends, the prize pools involved reach into the millions. Part of the money is normally fronted by the publisher to seed initial interest. But much of the pool can also come from competitor or fan contributions. And while there is a major pot for PC-based prize pools, in the console-based world the top prize pools barely reach the hundreds of thousands.”¹²³

¹²¹ Consoles include systems such as the Xbox, Playstation, and Nintendo lines of gaming systems. These are pre-built and generally much cheaper than a fully featured computer.

¹²² Latoya Peterson, “Why aren’t more black kids going pro in esports?” *The Undeclared*, March 27, 2018, <https://theundefeated.com/features/why-arent-more-black-kids-going-pro-in-esports/>.

¹²³ Peterson, “Why aren’t more black kids going pro in esports?”

Fan contributions make up a considerable portion of the prize pool for winners of a tournament, so compensation relies directly on the ability of fans and sponsors to donate to the winnings. Console based tournaments often have prize pools far smaller than those of PC based games like League of Legends, where gamers with more disposable income are able to contribute more significantly. Many young gamers who would have the talent and ability to play professionally are gated from the beginning due to material conditions that make gaming an unreachable career path.

Despite the barriers that many Black gamers face when looking towards professional League of Legends, there have been moves made by Riot Games to encourage a diverse platform; this includes a June 5th announcement by Riot Games President Dylan Jadeja, in which \$1,000,000 was pledged to The Innocence Project¹²⁴ and the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), alongside a donation matching program for employee donations to similar organizations.¹²⁵ Jadeja also announced a program to invest a further \$10 million “towards investments and startup programs focused on founders underrepresented in the games community,”¹²⁶ partnering with Florida A&M University and providing a \$50,000 scholarship via the Thurgood Marshall Scholarship Fund “to support black students with an interest in game development.” This came in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, whose death sparked countless protests across the nation, and in the address Jadeja argued that it was Riot Games’ place as a mature and prominent company to add its voice to the national conversation. On-air,

¹²⁴ <https://innocenceproject.org/>

¹²⁵ Dylan Jadeja, “Our Commitment to Drive Change: A Letter from President Dylan Jadeja,” Riot Games, June 5, 2020, <https://www.riotgames.com/en/news/our-commitment-to-drive-change>.

¹²⁶ Jadeja, “Our Commitment to Drive Change: A Letter from President Dylan Jadeja.”

the LCS broadcast observed an eight minute and 46 second moment of silence in support of the Black Lives Matter movement before an announcement from Gabriella “LeTigress” Devia-Allen that Riot Games was matching an additional \$100,000 in donations from individuals and organizations involved with the league.¹²⁷ The support from Riot Games at this time is heartening, but it undeniably only comes on the heels of a nation-wide moment of racial awareness; if this type of change and support only occurs because it is an obligation, will that support continue into future endeavors?

Tamara Lizette Brown in the preface to her edited volume *Soul Thieves: The Appropriation and Misrepresentation of African American Popular Culture* discusses the ways that white America has appropriated Black culture for financial and hegemonic gain, starting from the beginning of the slave trade through contemporary history. She argues that this appropriation stems from a necessity to create a national identity where none was yet extant, and in taking this identity from African Americans, diluted and repackaged it for the purposes of hegemonic superiority. As she states, “the appropriation of the culture in question as a reinterpreted facet of their own helps to solidify their hierarchical standing while diluting the meaning and initiatives of the original.”¹²⁸ Co-opting Black cultural art forms into a hierarchy of musical and artistic colonialism ultimately, in the eyes of Brown, waters down the meaning that those art forms were created to represent. In a similar way, then, the presence of the song “Giants” in an opening ceremony meant to valorize non-Black professional players is a co-option of Black cultural artistry into a white hegemonic structure. In defining appropriation and

¹²⁷ Ray, “Black Lives Matter, the LCS, and What’s Next.”

¹²⁸ Tamara Lizette Brown and Baruti N. Kopano, ed., *Soul Thieves: The Appropriation and Misrepresentation of African American Popular Culture*, viii.

misrepresentation, Brown argues that “appropriation denotes taking possession of something that one has no right to, and misrepresentation refers to the deliberate, typically negative, depiction of a false ideal. Both can relate to commodification or turning something of inherent value into an instrument for monetary gain.”¹²⁹ Riot Games, in this opening ceremony, is misrepresenting what a professional League of Legends player can (at this moment in time) look like; by attempting to turn their sights to new markets, they exposed a fatal flaw in the diversity of the young adults who are actually playing the game, and the lack of initiative towards making strides to rectify that mistake.

An even more stark contrast between the representation shown on-stage during the opening ceremony event and the professional player-base is that of the five women headlining the performance. While the cast and crew of the major leagues often have female casters, hosts, or analysts working on the broadcast,¹³⁰ there are no female professional league of legends players on any team in any of the four major regions. The pressure and harassment from an often toxic fanbase is a significant deterrent to many women who are interested in competing at the highest level; examples of women who have entered the scene only to be endlessly disparaged by online trolls are numerous. One particular example is that of Maria “Remilia” Creveling, the first female and transgender individual to enter the LCS. After her entry into the league in 2016 alongside the team Renegades she left the league only a month later, “citing pressure and harassment she received related to her appearance.”¹³¹ Creveling stated

¹²⁹ Brown and Kopano, ed., viii.

¹³⁰ Figures like Eefje “sjokz” Depoortere, the host of the LEC Analyst’s Desk, Gabrielle “LeTigress” Devia-Allen, a host and interviewer for the LCS, and Emily Rand, a former ESPN staff writer are just a few of the prominent female broadcast employees.

¹³¹ Jacob Wolf, “Remilia, first woman to compete in LCS, dies at 24,” ESPN, December 28, 2019, https://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/id/28383021/remilia-first-woman-compete-lcs-dies-24.

following her departure, “The past few weeks have been really tough for me as I’ve continued to struggle with a lot of personal issues, most notably anxiety and self-esteem issues. These were amplified by playing on stage and the rigorous day-to-day of being a pro player, compounded with a lot of the stress.”¹³² Mental health concerns and self-esteem issues plague professional gamers, but those issues are only compounded when the gaze of an enormous body of fans and followers seems to be fixated solely on you.

Female professionals are also often turned off from the League of Legends circuit due to the history of sexual harassment and gender discrimination scandals emerging from Riot Games. A 2018 article by Cecilia D’Anastasio for *Kotaku* titled “Inside the Culture of Sexism at Riot Games” sparked a heated discussion over the male-centric workplace of the company; in the article, the author frequently refers to the “bro culture” of Riot Games, stating that numerous sources had referenced that term in relation to Riot’s workplace environment.¹³³ This “bro culture” often included workplace harassment, belittlement, crude behaviors and actions, and hiring discrimination against female prospective employees.

“Hiring a woman into a leadership position proved impossible for Lacy, she said, and she left the company in part because of the sexism she’d personally experienced. She said her direct manager would ask her if it was hard working at Riot being so cute. Sometimes, she said, he’d imply that her position was a direct result of her appearance. Every few months, she said, a male boss of hers would comment in public meetings about how her kids and husband must really miss her while she was at work.”¹³⁴

¹³² Leslie Callum, “The first female LCS player has stepped down,” Dot Esports, February 5, 2016, <https://dotesports.com/league-of-legends/news/remi-leaves-renegades-2959>.

¹³³ Cecilia D’Anastasio, “Inside the Culture of Sexism at Riot Games,” *Kotaku*, August 7, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/inside-the-culture-of-sexism-at-riot-games-1828165483>.

¹³⁴ D’Anastasio, “Inside the Culture of Sexism at Riot Games.”

The culture of sexism at Riot Games has been and continues to be a problem, despite significant external and internal pressure to reform the company; in 2019, Riot Games settled a class action lawsuit from two former female employees over “violations of the California Equal pay act, alleging that they were routinely subjected to sexual harassment and gender discrimination.”¹³⁵ This settlement included at least \$10 million to female employees who had worked at the company within the previous five years, and Riot Games released a statement following the settlement stating, “The settlement is another important step forward, and demonstrates our commitment to living up to our values and to making Riot an inclusive environment for the industry’s best talent.”¹³⁶ When the parent company of a game has and continues to have¹³⁷ sexual harassment scandals emerging, is it any wonder that female gamers are in no rush to enter the professional scene?

The history of women sitting on the sidelines of sporting events while men “sport” on the field (or on the stage) extends to e-sports as well. In their article “Cheerleaders/booth babes/Halo hoes: Pro-gaming, Gender, and Jobs for the Boys,” Nicholas Taylor, Jen Jenson, and Suzanne de Castell examine the placement of women within professionalized *Halo 3* tournaments.¹³⁸ In their study, nearly all of the women discussed are relegated to a sidelined position, acting as cheerleaders or promotional models for sponsorship booths. Mothers of the professional players act as de-facto managers, supporting their sons as they compete: “female

¹³⁵ Sam Dean, “Riot Games will pay \$10 million to settle gender discrimination suit,” Los Angeles Times, December 2, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2019-12-02/riot-games-gender-discrimination-settlement>.

¹³⁶ Dean, “Riot Games will pay \$10 million to settle gender discrimination suit.”

¹³⁷ Steven Musil, “Riot Games investigating its CEO over sexual harassment lawsuit,” CNet, February 9, 2021, <https://www.cnet.com/news/riot-games-investigating-its-ceo-over-sexual-harassment-lawsuit/>.

¹³⁸ Nicholas Taylor, Jen Jenson, and Suzanne de Castell, “Cheerleaders/booth babes/Halo hoes: Pro-gaming, Gender, and Jobs for the Boys,” 2009.

players risk being labelled as *'Halo hoes'*, mothers at events describe themselves as 'cheerleaders', and promotional models become 'booth babes' – all supportive, subordinate roles."¹³⁹ This is similar to the way women are represented within the League of Legends broadcasts: extant only as hosts, analysts, and interviewers on the show, but never as a player themselves. The women performing on-stage during the opening ceremony also inevitably fall into the role of subordinate cheerleading; if we read that they are performing for the sake of the players on-stage, we run the risk of reducing their contribution to the cultural event of the opening ceremony to mere ornamentation. An optimistic viewer may interpret that the showcasing of female talent on the stage is a nod to the female player-base, and a show of support for female gamers looking to enter the world of competitive League of Legends - but in light of Riot's reputation there is room for skepticism.

We've talked about how the gender and ethnicity of the performers on-stage formulates a representation that is not available among the professional players, but in turn there are aspects of the performance and of the music that do resonate with the LCS broadcast despite the lack of Black and female players. One particular example is the connection that can be seen between hip-hop rap aesthetics and the "play-by-play" casting style of various LCS shoutcasters. This style focuses on quick, entertaining play-by-play speech, often moving quickly between the names of players, abilities, teams, and other aspects of the game as they are occurring, meant to keep the action and pace of the game alive for the viewers and to enhance the viewing experience. A proper play-by-play caster is meant to speak quickly throughout the entirety of an action-packed fight or event, often with a very high number of

¹³⁹ Taylor, Jenson, and de Castell, 243.

words-per-minute. Rap focuses on a similar aesthetic of quick rhythmic speech and improvisatory phrasing during performance, though shoutcasting and rap (generally) have significantly different contexts. One shoutcaster who exemplifies this connection between rapping and shoutcasting is Clayton “Captainflowers” Raines, a caster who often is given the moniker “Rap God” for his exceptionally quick and rhyme-heavy casting. In an interview with GINX, Raines discussed this moniker and where it originated:

So, the “Rap God” thing itself just comes from the fact you can tune into any Twitch chat anywhere for any sort of professional gaming thing--or even if it’s not a pro gaming thing, but it is super common for any sort of big time competition if a commentator is speaking very quickly in order to keep up with the action, the chat will always spam “Rap God”, because of the track from Eminem of the same name where he speaks incredibly quickly for about twenty seconds just non stop, that’s what Twitch chat resonates with; they’re like, “Oh my God, this guy’s speaking so fast over and over again, just like that one famous part in that one Eminem song; this is awesome.”¹⁴⁰

The connection between rap and casting is fairly cyclical in this instance; fans recognize the similarities of a certain caster’s cadence and style to that of rapping, and show their support and admiration. In turn, the caster recognizes that the fans are excited about that style and resonate with the musicality of their casting, and they work to enhance that style and further cement that connection.

Captainflowers has fully embraced the connection between shoutcasting and rap, including a rap battle video¹⁴¹ done in collaboration with an LEC shoutcasting counterpart,

¹⁴⁰ Neuro, “CaptainFlowers – “If you think you are even in the ballpark ... you still have a chance to be that top team.” GINX Esports TV, January 22, 2020. <https://www.ginx.tv/en/league-of-legends/captainflowers-interview-ballpark-top-team>.

¹⁴¹ LEC, “Rap Rivals – EU vs. NA (Rift Rivals 2019), June 25, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yfuv4z1mVHg&feature=emb_logo.

Daniel “Drakos” Drakos and a video posted to twitter¹⁴² in which Captainflowers raps a short segment of “Rap God” by Eminem. In the collaboration with Drakos, the two are seen alongside other casters from the LEC and the LCS dressed in typical ‘90s attire including adidas trackpants and flashy open jackets, gold chains and tinted shades. Boomboxes are showcased as the two casters trade insults in good fun about the players and teams of each region, dropping references to League of Legends professional culture in time to the beat. Allusions are made to other rap songs and the hip hop culture this video is made in reference to, including low resolution camera work and police sirens, and police car imagery on-screen while the European caster raps:

The trophy? In 80 minutes or less
That’s the EU finesse, best respect it or flee
Or you’ll live up to your namesake, land of the free¹⁴³

Drawing upon traditions from artists like The Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur, both in terms of musical and visual stylistic choices as well as in references to contemporary social issues surrounding Black youth, this video serves as a direct link between broadcast shoutcasters and the “Rap God” aesthetic that many fans have come to expect and desire from the casting desk.

In turn, the rap segments showcased within the 2019 Opening Ceremony exemplify this same stylistic quality. Of the five members of True/Damage, three have significant rapped verses during “Giants,” including Thutmose’s two solos and verses by Becky G and Soyeun.

¹⁴² Clayton Raines, Twitter, October 4, 2020.

<https://twitter.com/captainflowers/status/1312790647858888704?lang=en>.

¹⁴³ This is a play on words on several levels; on the one hand it refers to America as the land of the free, setting up the nationalist tone of the lyrics. Additionally, however, the word “free” is often used in League of Legends parlance as a derogatory term for when one team is winning without significant opposition, hence the game was “free” rather than costing any effort. In this case the European casters are insulting the North American casters by stating that the upcoming tournament will be won easily, without any undue effort on the part of the European teams.

Lyrics contain references not only to League of Legends and the e-sports scene, but also to typical rap aesthetics such as references to crews (“My crew make the beat drop”) as well as gold imagery and wealth (“I’m a Benz and you’re more like a Volvo”, “Spinning this thing, gold on my ring, Royalty up in my veins”). Overt references to social and political issues aren’t included within the lyrical content of the song, however; as a song and event made representing League of Legends and Riot Games, the content within the song is not made for specific advocacy against or for any social activism agendas unlike the work of various rap artists who utilized the genre for voicing discontent or drawing attention to disadvantaged communities.¹⁴⁴ Instead, symbolic reference is placed on the group and, by extension, the League of Legends community as growing, expanding, and staying strong. Lines like “We’re running this world, we keeping it turning,” and “No one can stop us, they’ll try but they won’t” emphasize the focus on the connection of the members of the group rather than on the individual. The lyrics which tend towards the communal aspect of the song are more often placed on the beat or in cadential patterns, such as Soyeun’s “My crew make the beat drop” being sung on top of a staccato phrase ending in time with the beat as opposed to lines like “I’m a God, better ask if you don’t know” in Thutmose’s introduction which is displaced from the beat.

When this Opening Ceremony is taken by itself, it is a hopeful sight; a diverse cast of seven amazing musicians, performing three unique pieces of music that explore different ways of connecting performers to its audience, emphasizing the community of gamers that are watching and cheering as the music plays. Unfortunately, we cannot take the event out of its

¹⁴⁴ Marvin J. Gladney, “The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop,” *African American Review* 29(2) (1995), 291.

context – we have to remember that despite the show of diversity and representation occurring on-stage, that representation has failed to materialize within the professional player organizations that make up the League of Legends scene. Riot Games has not yet made the strides necessary to open its professional play for people of all genders and ethnicities to feel comfortable, safe, and supported within the developing scene, and until those efforts have been made shows like this one ring hollow despite the extravagant settings and music. As e-sports grows and matures as an entertainment genre the responsibility of the parent company to accurately represent all of its demographics grows as well. We can only hope that as time goes on that representation will find its way into the professional scene, so that more young gamers are able to look at the people playing the game onstage and see themselves in the reflection.

To Conclude:

Throughout this thesis, I have looked at the ways the 2019 opening ceremony has contributed to and exemplified the legitimization of e-sports and League of Legends in a growing digital age. The use of spectacle and economic influence supplement the virtual nature of the opening ceremony, producing an event which reinforces the legitimacy of e-sports as an entertainment genre and professional gaming culture as a whole. E-sports has followed a similar trajectory as that of live, physical sports; professionalization follows casual play, and with professionalization comes reputation and economic responsibility. Sponsorships and investment opportunities carry forward the conception of the sporting event as a legitimate form of entertainment for viewers, both casual and dedicated; this economic and cultural

capital is showcased as extravagant spectacles to impress and awe viewers, further compounding a form of 'legitimacy currency' collected by the game which is accumulated as time goes on. Legitimizing e-sports as a socially acceptable and encouraged form of viewable entertainment is an important step as the world is beginning to accept digital entanglements in all aspects of our lives, not just entertainment. As new generations are growing up, these digital entanglements shape the way they view the world, the actions that they take, and what they achieve. Rather than being ashamed of the things that they grow to love and enjoy, they should be encouraged to do the things that make them happy. As League of Legends and the professional gaming scene have grown over the last ten years, events like the 2019 opening ceremony show that we are slowly making it to that point for the e-sports culture.

I have discussed the role that this opening ceremony plays in bridging the divide between physical and digital spaces, bringing itself and the audience into a virtual space through holographic engagement and interconnected networks of actors. The music of this opening ceremony is how that network is interwoven throughout the space, and impacts the development of every concept, action, and reaction that is produced on the stage. The connection between the opening ceremony and the audience is made through music; the sound of the synthesized bass filling their lungs and the sharp sizzle of the snare buzzing through their heads, while haunting melodies and light lyrical play raise the goosebumps on their arms. Music is why this opening ceremony is so effectively able to break down the boundaries between reality and the digital, transporting the audience from where they are sitting – on the couch, in their chair, or in a seat in the stadium, to the virtual world of the performance where the most improbable action is somehow possible. The spectacle of this

event is in the way that a vast network of humans, holograms, and music come together to create something truly unique for the world of e-sports.

Despite the massive strides that e-sports has made over the last few decades, it is not a simple process – there are difficulties that come with growing, both economically and morally. When a group, company, or organization expands and is broadcasting its message to a viewership as large as the 2019 Opening Ceremony reached, it needs to understand the way that message will be received and interpreted. The message that was intended with this ceremony was one of diversity and inclusion; the presence of a diverse group of musicians on-stage indicates Riot’s goal of a hopeful path forward for League of Legends and e-sports as a whole. However, the reputation Riot Games has built as a company and the predominately monolithic racial/gender make-up of the professional player-base belies that message, promoting a false representation of inclusion that undeniably does not match reality. While this may change moving forward, and though we have seen steps in a more promising direction, the musicians that perform on-stage as a show of diversity for an organization needing to continue expanding into new markets are ultimately tokenized by this false representation, serving as subordinate figures for the players on-stage who do not share that representation. The path forward for Riot Games must be to continue supporting a diverse population of potential young professionals, regardless whether that support is necessitated by heightened global racial and gender awareness; it should be done because it is right, not because a show needs to be made of it.

The movement of entertainment into digitally influenced aspects of our lives is ever increasing; be it forms of entertainment like live-streamed games¹⁴⁵ or the shift from television to streaming media, we are becoming ever more reliant on spending our lives connected via the internet to billions of other lives. E-sports is just one of these forms of entertainment that bridges the gap between the physical and the digital, creating a pathway for others to follow into our virtual future. In our virtual future, where the lines between the physical and digital, the commonplace and the fantastical, and the imaginary and the real collide, the ways we spend our leisure time is going to change dramatically. Understanding this event can allow us a small glimpse at that possible future, and what we will be moving towards in the years to come.

¹⁴⁵ T. L. Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*, Princeton University Press, 2018.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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