

# Esports and the spectacularisation of events. The case of League of Legends

## *Esports y espectacularización de eventos. El caso League of legends*



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### Abstract:

Esports are a prominent cybercultural agent of postmodernity. What seemed to be an insignificant phenomenon may change the status quo of entertainment as new generations disengage from non-native digital broadcasting. This article focuses on the videogame League of Legends, analysing its spectacularisation through the opening

### Resumen:

*Los esports son un agente cibercultural destacado de la postmodernidad. Lo que parecía un fenómeno intrascendente puede cambiar el status quo del entretenimiento pues las nuevas generaciones se desvinculan de la difusión no nativa digital. El artículo toma como objeto el videojuego League of Legends, analizando su espectacularización a través de*

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ceremonies of its world championships. Iconographic and semiotic patterns that characterise this industry and its appeal among young people are identified. Barthes and the 2.0 culture are used to carry out a discourse analysis supported by a focus group and a Likert questionnaire. The results show a discursive and meaning hybridisation between symbols and icons typical of videogame and young peoples' narratives, propagability, a scenography in line with big shows and festivals, and a rewriting of mass sports. The findings show an evolution towards controlled environments with cutting-edge immersive techniques. Transmediality increases in these performances. Elements such as music, and links to contents such as books and animation series become relevant, which implies a growth of the narrative universe. Loyalty was detected from leading brands, demonstrating the persuasive capacities of this type of event.

**Keywords:**

Esport; spectacularisation; semiotic analysis; influencer; new generations; sponsorship.

*las ceremonias de apertura de sus campeonatos mundiales. Se identifican patrones iconográficos y semióticos que caracterizan esta industria y los atractivos entre los jóvenes. Se recurre a Barthes y a la cultura 2.0 para realizar un análisis del discurso apoyado en un focus group y un cuestionario Likert. Como resultados se observa una hibridación discursiva y de significado entre símbolos e iconos propios del videojuego y narrativas juveniles, la propagabilidad, una escenografía en línea con los grandes espectáculos y festivales, y una reescritura del deporte de masas. Las conclusiones aprecian una evolución hacia entornos controlados con técnicas inmersivas de vanguardia. La transmedialidad se incrementa en estas actuaciones. Cobran relevancia elementos como la música, los nexos con contenidos tales como libros y series de animación, lo que implica un crecimiento del universo narrativo. Se detectó fidelidad por parte de marcas de primera línea, evidenciando las capacidades persuasivas de estos eventos.*

**Palabras clave:**

*Deporte electrónico; espectacularización; análisis semiótico; influencer; nuevas generaciones; patrocinio.*

## 1. Introduction

Video games have gained a widespread following that transcends the boundaries of age, gender, or social class. The rise in subscription-based gaming has boosted this popularity, the emergence of freemium video games such as *Fortnite* and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ke and Wagner, 2020), among others. They have evolved significantly, with the digital 2.0 era taking precedence over offline experiences (extradiegetic). It is a widespread and consolidated discourse that eclipses cinema and television in many aspects. Understanding contemporary society and specific social interactions would be impossible without considering video games, especially among young people. Video games have become a focal point for prominent influencers such as Ibai Llanos, who co-owns the esports team club KOI. Spectacularisation is reshaping sports as established as football, as shown by the King's League promoted by Gerard Piqué (Tomás, 2023). The gaming industry is leading the way in entertainment and has a powerful cultural and narrative influence (Martín-Núñez and Navarro-Remesal, 2021). They serve as a catalyst for innovation and are a source of inspiration across various cultural industries (Martín-Ramallal and Micaletto-Belda, 2021) and even foster learning (Rodríguez-González and Del-Moral-Pérez, 2018).

Since the first consoles in homes, video games have become an essential entertainment hub and a gateway to consuming content on the Internet. The internet is a definitive wake-up call as it is the channel through which "new forms of interactive digital communication is disseminated, from videogames to communication on mobile devices" Scolari (2014: 74). The smartphone is a portal to any type of content and offers games as popular as *Fortnite*, allowing users to play anytime and anywhere they please.

Esports (electronic sports) are becoming a defining characteristic among new generations. Their distinctiveness and influence are capturing the interest of the media and traditional sports industry. Esports have managed to engage young people, who have become increasingly challenging to reach. In connection to this, the president of Real Madrid asked “Why is it that 40% of young people between 16 and 24 do not have any interest in football?” (Martín-Ramallal and Merchán-Murillo, 2021). Given the circumstances, there is a push to implement gamification techniques to reach these audiences (González-Díez, Labarga-Adán and Pérez-Cuadrado, 2019). Therefore, responding to their unique characteristics is essential as they cross the barrier from the virtual to the physical realm, establishing themselves as a prominent cybersocial actor.

## 2. From the classic videogame to the origin of esports

Video games are cultural products materialised in multimedia and interactive rule-dominated software that are supported by one or more hardware platforms with different narrative levels, created mainly to entertain and generate personal or multiplayer offline or online and/or 2.0 experiences. These experiences (Murial, 2018) are hyper-diegetic narratives (Murial, 2018) that can have applications such as edutainment, medical therapies, marketing, or *serious games*, although in these cases some do not consider them as such because their mission is not to entertain (Calvo-Ferrer, 2018).

In 1958 the first sports simulator emerged, *Tennis for Two*, a ping pong game for visitors to Brookhaven National Laboratory (Eguía-Gómez, Contreras-Espinosa and Solano-Albajés, 2012). Two players playing against each other would be a distant precursor to esports, although it lacked many characteristics, including a commercial premise or media distribution (Mandiberg, 2021). The sector took a significant leap forward with “*Pong Madness*” (Atari), which echoed *Tennis for Two* (Wolf, 2012; Egenfeldt, Smith, and Tosca, 2013), generating interest in esports. During the 1990s, video games experienced a golden age with the emergence of the “16-bit generation”, with examples such as *Mega-Drive* and *Super-Famicom* (Wolf, 2012). During this period, PCs played a significant role. Their capabilities gave rise to a variety of themes. The compact disc revolutionised the way content was understood (Pérez-Arranz, 2004) due to its capacity, cost, and ability to be copied. Paradoxically, piracy contributed to video games becoming mass culture (Garfias-Frías, 2010). Classic first-person shooters (FPS), considered by some to be the origins of esports, emerged, evolving from 2D to 3D. *Wolfenstein3D*, *DOOM*, and *Quake* gained significant recognition (Sanglard, 2019; Martín-Muñoz and Pedrero-Esteban, 2019).

### 2.1. Present-day status of esports and their spectacularisation

Nowadays, online multiplayer video games form the core of esports when they come together as a mass spectacle (Martín-Muñoz and Pedrero-Esteban, 2021). They recreate environments and situations where players can control objects and/or one or more characters through an avatar or first-person perspective to achieve a specific objective(s) within predetermined rules (Martín-Ramallal and Merchán-Murillo, 2019). Semantically, they carry the prefix *e*, which stands for electronic. They are also known as professional games (pro-gaming) (Establés-Heras, Guerrero-Pico, and Contreras-Espinosa, 2019). It could be considered an umbrella term, which includes shows such as drone races. In this regard, Kin and Kin (2018:710) state that they, “have been recognised as a new type of esports since they involve digital communication technology”. There is a mixed consensus as to what they are, some do not even consider them to be sports (Wahyuni, 2020). But, what is sport? For Tiedemann

(2004), it is “an area of sporting activities where people develop and train mental or physical skills” to which Wagner (2006) adds that esports combine. “... the use of information and communication technologies”, thus incorporating a wide range of themes. They are usually understood as multiplayer networked video game competitions broadcast on streaming platforms that may have a live audience. Hamari and Sjöblom (2017: 211) bring the concept up to date with ICT:

Sport is where electronic systems facilitate the fundamental aspects of sport itself. The interaction between players and teams, as well as the output of the esports system, is mediated by computer interfaces. In practical terms, esports refers to video game competitions broadcast over the Internet.

For Establés-Heras *et al.* (2019: 218), “They were born out of modernity. In other words they are the product of globalisation, neoliberalism, affective social changes, and the ubiquitous proliferation of ICTs”. Their origins date back to the reinvention of arcades, the emergence of the Internet, and the expansion of LAN parties and Internet cafes. The inclusion of online video games demonstrates the elements that pave the way for esports. *Quake* (1996) is the first game that centres on competition with these characteristics (Chanson, 2017: 18). Nevertheless, its particularities have undergone changes and developments over time. The first one is the competitive nature between humans and a tangible prize for the winner(s). Fairness is paramount, skills matter more than accumulated resources and bonuses (such as weapons, boosters, shields, etc). Clear rules outline penalties for unsportsmanlike behaviour such as cheating (Holden, Rodenberg, and Kaburakis, 2017; Irwin and Naweed, 2020) and need to be streamed via platforms such as Twitch, or Facebook Games. Broadcasting takes on 2.0 traits, such as commenting, rating, or liking something. For Antón (2018: 459), “ they have become a new form of entertainment that offers an alternative form of video game consumption”.

Carillo-Vera (2016), understands that the broadcasting of visual content influences how information about a sporting event is presented. In this context, various elements outside the sport are incorporated to enhance the entertainment value for the audience. For instance, these include pre-game discussions, context-providing reports, and post-event analyses, among other resources related to the sporting event. These strategies are adapted for esports, which are tailored to the type of video game and digital platform. To this extent, esports events often experience a spectacularisation effect, which this study understands as a tendency to present or represent something exaggeratedly and oversized to capture the audience’s attention and generate interest, for which it uses media and techniques from various disciplines. This effect tends to distort reality through fantasy to evoke emotional responses from viewers.

Esports come in various types and scopes, ranging from amateur leagues at national and international levels. Esports teams are usually comprised of players hired by companies (Establés-Heras *et al.*, 2019), who occasionally vie for million-dollar prizes in world championships. Competitions are typically organised into annual leagues. The Intel-sponsored ESL (Electronic Sports League) is the most popular, which promotes games like *Call of Duty*, *LoL*, *Starcraft II*, *Counter-Strike*, and *FIFA*. Another alternative is the cups, which usually last for one day. It should be noted that the *Intel Extreme Masters* (IEM) is an ESL competition in its own right.

It is common for top video games to be PC and/or game console-compatible. It is usual for the top games to be compatible with both PCs and game consoles, as they are online-oriented, increasing their potential fan base. *Clash Royale* deviates from this norm, since it is designed specifically for mobile devices (Martín-Muñoz and Pedrero-Esteban, 2019: 89). When a person buys

the game and subscribes to its platform it can be likened to joining a federation, which involves different levels of engagement that can sometimes lead to professional status (Taylor, 2012b; Establés-Heras et al., 2019). France, through Decree N°2017-872, which concerns professional esports players, and Decree N° 2017-871 2017, already cover this situation.

It is worth noting who the publishers or publishing houses are (Peng *et al.*, 2020). They are part of the developers' network and their position often leads to accusations of monopolistic behaviour and abuse of power (Miroff, 2018; Arin, 2020). Prominent among them are Sony Entertainment, Electronic Arts, and Ubisoft. It is also worth mentioning The League of Professional Videogames (LPV), which is dedicated to organising and promoting competitions, such as *LoL* tournaments, promoted by Riot Games. Likewise, platforms such as Epic Games, Uplay, Microsoft Xbox, Nintendo, and Sony Playstation promote activities to gain subscribers and widen their fanbase.

## 2.2. *LoL, a brief description of the phenomenon.*

Set in the magical world of Runaterra, *League of Legends* (hereafter, *LoL*) is a videogame released by Riot Games (2009), and is the leading MOBA today (multiplayer online battle arena) (Mora-Cantalops and Sicilia, 2016; Taylor, 2012b; Establés-Heras *et al.*, 2019). It is initially inspired by the *Warcraft III* map, *Defense of the Ancients: Allstars*. The game consists of a battle with complex mechanics and rules, lasting between 15-50 minutes. The teams (usually composed of five players) must destroy an opponent's structure known as the Nexus. This generally involves taking out the opponents' turrets and inhibitors in a lane. The players' avatars, known as champions, have unique traits that they can enhance throughout the game using gold earned in various ways, such as by defeating opponents. The participants are divided into seven ranks (ladders), from the lowest, iron, to the highest, master +.

Every day, millions of users worldwide enjoy the video game, and its world championships reach over 200 million viewers, establishing *LoL* as a cultural phenomenon. From an isometric perspective, games can be viewed on streaming platforms, fundamental for the success and conception of esports. The world championships, known as Worlds, are held annually in different countries, featuring an opening ceremony that lasts an average of 15 minutes. The tipping point that enhanced the reputation and fame of video gaming took place in October 2018 in South Korea, one of esports' hotspots (Pyun et al., 2023). The event was an explosion given its significance and reach. The Seoul stadium hosted 40,000 fans in a groundbreaking event watched by 90 million viewers, with up to 200 million simultaneous followers during the final.

*LoL* has emerged as one of the most influential video games in history and its significance can be attributed to several aspects. First, it revolutionises the way digital entertainment is consumed, combining strategic skills and mechanics in a competitive virtual environment. At its peak, the game boasted over 100 million monthly players (Collis, 2021), and it has become a cultural phenomenon that transcends spatial and generational boundaries. What's more, its size has played a crucial role in its expansion.

The game has established an international competitive ecosystem, with numerous tournaments and professional leagues that attract players and spectators alike. The League of Legends (LCS) in North America, The European League of Legends (LEC) in Europe, and various regional leagues across Asia, Latin America, and other regions have boosted competition to unprecedented levels. These streamed events have converted players into electronic athletes with professional careers and

high financial returns in a seemingly unexpected environment, some of whom have gained star status. Streaming has had such a profound impact on sports that it has influenced popular culture and society as a whole. Traditional sports, such as football, are beginning to imitate esports' techniques in response to this threat. *LoL*'s iconic characters, generationally rich narrative, and distinctive visual art have inspired fan art, cosplay, literature, and music, converting it into a source of global creative inspiration. The phenomenon's international community has fostered social connections, encouraging fandom and communication through online forums, social networks, and live events. This sense of belonging and camaraderie has solidified *LoL* as an unparalleled cultural entity with unique implications derived from its transmedia universe (Bárceñas-Curtis, Lemus-Pool and Governatore-Moreno, 2019).

Figure 1. LoL opening ceremony Worlds 2018



Source: LoL official channel (2018)

### 3. Methodology

The main aim of this article is to emphasise the iconographically and semiotically distinct characteristics of esports, which combine cyberculture and sports. This objective is achieved through an in-depth examination of the discourse, focusing on a representative example of how video games have become emblematic spectacles. Consequently, the main objective of this article is to highlight the unique iconographic and semiotic characteristics of esports as cybercultural and sporting events. It seeks to achieve this through a discourse analysis focusing on an emblematic case of spectacular videogame spectacularisation.

To achieve this purpose, the following specific objectives have been set out:

- To understand esports appeal to young people. This will be done through an iconographic and semiotic analysis of the opening ceremonies of the *League of Legends* (*LoL*) world championships. The aim is to identify the particularities that explain the success of the spectacularisation phenomenon, which goes beyond the sporting or competitive component.
- To define the characteristics that define esports as spectacles, so that these qualities can be replicated in their specific and other contexts. It is acknowledged that these events have a significant rhetorical-persuasive component that makes them

attractive, especially for a young audience. It is important to note that while this article focuses on the spectacular aspects, it consciously references the sports sphere framed within esports, thus offering a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon.

### 3.1. Methodological approach

Video games, esports, and academia have long been interconnected, forming close connections as a field of study of growing relevance. *LoL* is a recurring material object when addressing esports (Martín-Muñoz and Pedrero-Esteban, 2019; Rodríguez-González and Del-Moral-Pérez, 2018), as well as its relationship with spectators (Zyza, 2022). This article is framed within game studies (Stenros and Kultima, 2018), adopting a qualitative and quantitative nature (Hernández-Sampieri, 2018), but without statistical intent, using a descriptive explanatory focus (Yin, 2017). It brings the study of iconographic and spectacularising elements as a novelty to the study, aspects of the cybercultural entity,

The study uses an inductive approach as general contributions are extracted from an object considered referential and paradigmatic. Connotative aspects are studied within an iconic approach, using content and discourse analysis based on Barthes' ideas, which are universally applicable and valid in the digital world. The items analysed are image, pose, synthesis, trickery, and iconicity. The study provides a perspective on composition connotation, allowing us to observe technical parameters that convey meaning, which converge with proxemics, kinesics, and scenography. In addition, technical parameters are observed that contribute to a holistic understanding of esports' event spectacularisation. By hybridising these approaches, a study is carried out on scenography and audience, players-champions and teams, sound and music, production and special effects (VFX), brand identity, the 2021 Worldcup, and the gala presenter.

The official videos of the *LoL* world championship and its transmedia universe (Alberich-Pascual and Gómez-Pérez, 2017) were used as a basis for this study. The World Cup opening ceremonies from 2018 to 2022 were interpreted. Moreover, two tables describing parameters are included to optimise decoding and the understanding of the study. The final phase is contrasted by convening a focus group (FG), which involves a carefully planned and designed dialogue to inform and understand a pre-constituted area of interest in a permissive, non-directive environment (Krueger, 1991; Silverman, 2015). In this way, the frictions of the case study are eliminated (Beiske, 2007). The authors collaborated with seven players and *LoL* fans and moderated discussions with them. Their insight allows us to elicit common and individual issues, knowledge, habits, and emotions evoked by esports. The discussion provided unforeseen data by not following a closed structure, thus enriching the experience shown in the results phase. A questionnaire based on the Likert scale was used to support the qualitative instrument. In this context, it made it possible to quantify the participants' responses, thus adding a numerical dimension to the study.

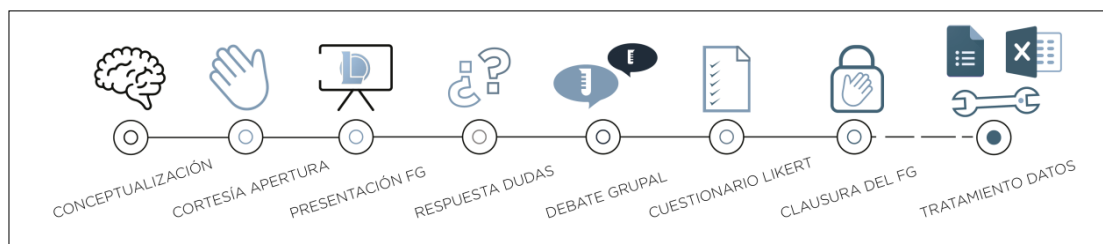
This has allowed for the identification of trends and patterns in the responses, which in turn validates and supports the conclusions drawn from the hermeneutic process. The scale was designed according to five levels, thus striking a balance between sensitivity and simplicity, making it an effective tool for gathering relevant and easy to analyse information. The form (see Table 2) served as a semi-structured script for the group interview, as it was answered using Google Forms once the discussion was over. The data were processed with Microsoft Excel software according to the variables and formulas of the Likert system (Leung, 2011). This approach is justified given the limitations associated with the use of a focus group including



possible biases due to group dynamics, the difficulty of obtaining deeply individualised opinions, and the need to carefully manage interactions between participants. Quantification and the contrasting criteria of the authors' hermeneutics minimise this casuistry.

The FG consists of 5 men and 2 women whose ages range from 20 to 23, who are *LoL* players and are familiar with the world championship opening ceremonies. Participants fit the parameters that define Generation Z (Martín-Ramallal and Micaletto-Belda, 2021) but take on the role of experts, so the authors took their predisposition toward the subject into account. They are undergraduates and graduates in Communication and Digital Communication, so they have mastered the related concepts. The test took place in December 2022, lasted 150 minutes, and was accompanied by a research presentation and videos of the opening ceremonies (*LoL*, 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022) and its highlights. A presentation is followed by the completion of a form, which serves as the semi-structured script of 25 questions that have been validated by communication professionals and academics (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Stages of the focus group**



**Source: created by the authors (2023)**

To process the five-level Likert data (Leung, 2011) means were calculated by assigning numerical values to the responses from 1 to 5, 1 corresponding to “Strongly disagree” and 5 to “Strongly agree”. Then the average of these responses was determined to obtain the overall mean. An answer lower than 3.5 was considered deficient as this model requires correction since there tends to be an upward trend, especially when the participants have favourable ties to the subject matter, as in this case. Since the averages provide an overview of the responses, context, and qualitative interpretations were considered through content analysis and pre-constituted discourse analysis.

### 3.2. Esports, an object of visual and iconographic analysis

Esports and their scenography are referents for the codes of digital society, mixing classic and postmodern narratives. The player is a redefinition of the hero, and team iconography is reshaped, resulting in a reworking of mass sport with elements from cyberculture, video game items, and socialisation 2.0. They can also be viewed through iconographic patterns adapted to the current connected world. In this part of the methodology, the elements of the iconographic approach are briefly outlined.

Firstly, the primary persuasive channel is through the static or dynamic image. It serves as a metaphor for reality and the ideas and concepts conveyed. It is a reliable reflection of a given moment, typically perceived unequivocally. Barthes (1986: 13-14)



goes further and states that it is “language without code”. Understanding the image-connotation relationship (Galindo et al., 2014), frames are chosen to capture a time-lapse, selecting a shot and a composition (Castillo, 2012). The personal touch is inalienable, just as much as the presence of a certain objectivity. The last stage is postproduction, where a more significant iconic symbolism can be incorporated (Aparici, 2009). Synthesis encompasses two aspects, on the one hand, it relates to the place that something occupies within the space. On the other hand, Barthes’ idea (1986), where the actual image is a unit or element of a sequence. Another syntactic foundation is the image-text relationship. When acting on its own, an image has a more unambiguous meaning, but when placed in relation to others, it changes the message (Costa, 2003). This symbiosis reinforces what is intended to be conveyed. We apply this logic to the visual identity and branding of esports.

Faces have several areas, each conveying unitary messages on its own, although we will decipher them collectively. Esports players embody archetypes and, understanding their intentions allows them to adapt to the environment. The pose includes complicated strategies such as non-verbal communication, which in the case of esports can be gallantry, strength, bravery, surprise, and emotion. For Barthes (1986: 18) “there is a reservoir of stereotypical attitudes that constitute established elements of meaning”. Non-verbal communication incorporates resources that help to convey messages with a given purpose. Gestures, environment, and clothing define them and can have a given explicit symbology, as in the case of esports. Influenced by culture and experiences, the audience interprets the message beyond its obvious meaning.

In esports, the stadium and scenography convey an idea. Marketing capitalises on this using clichés, common places, lifestyles, and prescribers, imbuing events with values that resonate with the target audience. That’s why esports is becoming more sophisticated.

Finally, there is trickery, production, post-production, and intentional manipulation to alter meaning. All promotional images are manipulated with specific intentions (Ramos-Hilaguera and Martínez-Guirao, 2016: 73-74). They enhance traits without appearing unreal, assigning them rhetorical power by using presumed denotation to convey subtle messages. CGIs (computer-generated imagery) and holography create impossible or unreal elements.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Audience and Scenography Study

From the perspective of esports scenography, a key feature stands out: the staging is designed to be visually engaging from multiple angles, avoiding a central focus. This approach is reinforced by large screens that provide a comprehensive view of the event from any location. In the 2022 edition, a notable innovation was a wide curvature, creating a circular structure that intensified the audience’s immersion. Furthermore, this setup also functions as a multimedia backdrop, featuring players and kicking off the show. In recent editions, the floor has gained prominence by being highly reflective and acting as an extension of the screen, enhancing the sense of immersion and the perception of the esports stage.

The displays combine real images with cinematic scenes taken from the video game, from the transmedia universe, or created specifically for the event, enhancing the storyline immersion and sensory experience. The championships typically begin with a countdown. In the 2018 edition, CGIs of female singers from the saga were showcased, highlighting the growing importance

of women in the video game world. Screens play a crucial role in presenting the champions, featuring background montages of the participants in a style reminiscent of the battle royal in *Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012). Fire, posing, staring into infinity, slow motion, and other iconographic effects are inspired by these narratives intrinsic to youth. Rhetorical devices of this nature are relevant since they comprise elements of the new generation's imaginary. It is noteworthy that at Worlds 2022, the beginning was longer but austere, a dynamic that would be repeated in different aspects of the gala.

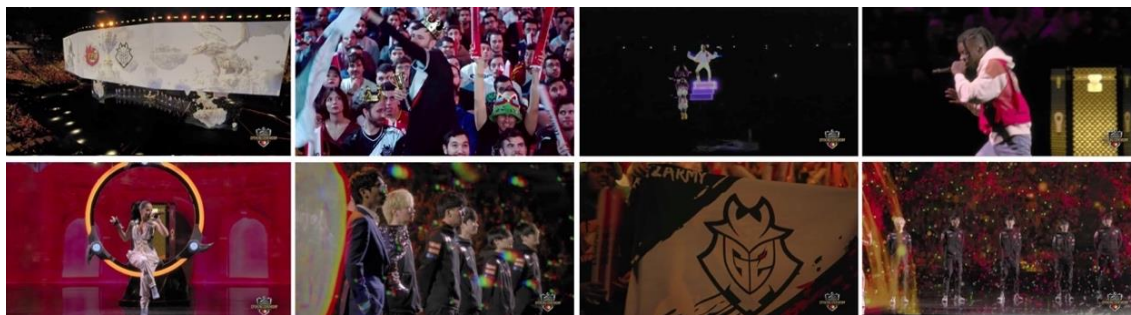
Elements from the videogame and the synthesis of *LoL* inspire the actual environments. The ceremonies are held in large, modern auditoriums featuring props based on the world of Runeterra. Moving parts can partition areas to divide performance areas, such as for bands or teams. Internal and external movement serves as a persuasive audiovisual tool, constantly capturing the audience's attention through *LoL* set designs. The spatial iconography, or commonplace, is a mixture of fantasy, dystopian future, Victorian era, modern underground urban, Far Eastern, and science fiction motifs to name a few. Other resources such as smoke (including virtual smoke), fireworks, synchronised lighting, or lasers are commonly used. The audience actively participates and is given luminescent merchandise and materials to enhance their engagement in the show and choreographies.

The scenography and audiovisual editing blend the Super Bowl final (U.S.A) style, hybridising them with other iconographies such as oriental themes and the videogame itself, as shown by using traditional Japanese taiko drums. During these events, images from previous galas, games, the winners, and the audience are commonly displayed, accompanied by epic music reminiscent of festivals like Tomorrowland.

The trophy is an important icon. Its presentation is always grandiose, often accompanied by spectacular effects such as CGIs or urns that open to reveal the coveted prize. It is common for it to be placed in the middle of the music group while they dance and sing around it. An illustration of the impact of esports is the 2019 trophy, which was presented in a Louis Vuitton suitcase. The luxury brand continued collaborating in subsequent editions and brought out a separate collection, designed by Nicolas Ghesquière, rejuvenating the prestigious brand.

The audience plays a vital role. For them to participate actively, they are provided with elements like glow-in-the-dark bracelets and cylindrical balloons screen-printed with *LoL* iconography. The audience interacts with the artists and players like in musical events, enhancing the audiovisual appeal. The dimmed lights and active engagement result in a captivating ambience. This sense of connection extends to those attending the events and the streaming audience, who yearns to participate in person despite the comfort of watching from home (Kim and Kim, 2018). Starting the show at sunset generates a psychological connection, transitioning viewers from the real to the fictional world, especially for those in the broadcast's time zone.

Figure 3. Worlds 2019



Source: official LoL channel (2019)

#### 4.2. Player-champions and teams

The players are mainly young men with diverse ethnic backgrounds due to the international nature and the audiovisual global reach of *LoL*, making the event a phenomenon with global broadcasting potential. Players wear customised sportswear provided by brands, similar to professional sports players from which it borrows many audiovisual production elements. Both the production team and the esports players are aware of the impact of this visual expression.

Each participant has an alias that becomes their identification in the real and virtual worlds. Even coaches are introduced—highlighting the overall professionalisation and relevance of the event. They wear team-branded tracksuits featuring sponsor logos, which are visible in the shots. Their hair is usually neatly combed and groomed and reflects youthful styles, carrying explicit symbolism. The logos are characteristic of esports, reinterpreting traditional coat of arms from the perspective of globalised modernity and videogames, conveying players' origins or the message they are attempting to transmit.

As such, gamers are a fundamental pillar. In the case of *LoL*, the gamers embody an ethnographic profile specific to each region. The fact that they are in the finals is an opportunity to showcase that they are in tune with new fashion trends or hairstyles. While they are selected for their skills and not their physical appearance, it enhances the connotative effectiveness of the ceremonies. Their physical appearance reflects that of ordinary young people, sharing the new generations' concerns and distinctive traits. This relatable appearance allows them to connect with fans more intimately, authentically, and seriously, strengthening their bonds with followers, which has not been seen in other sports, such as professional football. Moreover, they often discuss issues typical of Generation Z on their social media platforms (Madden, 2017).

The uniforms are provided by major sponsors such as Nike, Red Bull, Panda TV, and OPPO. Chinese brands Panda TV and OPPO highlight esports' potential to reach Asian targets. The sponsors are usually technology brands, that align with esports, reinforcing their message.

Teams tend to remain the same in each edition due to their professional skills, which helps to increase their fan base. Featuring these players in repeated events and promotions, who have similar profiles to their targets, transforms them into a concept

akin to a “group of friends” boosting engagement. They share common interests and hobbies with the public. They are different from athletes in other sports, such as football, since their physiques are conventional, and they demonstrate their skills in cyberspace. This relatability for young people, combined with the captivating nature of this recreational activity, keeps the event engaging for viewers.

The players’ credibility and strong ties with their followers make them effective mediators. They take on the role of heroes (Jung, 2002) adapting it to postmodernity and cyberculture. Following Jungian thought, players in *LoL* embody courageous figures fighting against their inner demons. These heroic characters unintentionally set out to confront an overwhelming threat with bravery.

The notion of carefree, adventurous, brave, and somewhat unconventional behaviour is as common in *LoL* games as it is in influencers, exemplified in Spain by El Rubius or Ibai Llanos among others, who also broadcast their match. Subconscious patterns and symbols (Rodríguez-Zamora, 2009) are instilled in target audiences so that they take it in as their own, making them active players in their minds. This connection can be intensified in esports broadcasts.

From the perspective of proxemics, their position, and social distance imply that they are a cohesive unit. However, they maintain a significant distance from the opposing team and the audience, which exalts them. Their kinesics, especially facial expressions, and their upright, energetic posture resemble video game characters. They only deviate from the script when mentioned by the speaker in the opening ceremony. Some may smile and wave to the audience, although it is obvious that they are not following instructions since some even turn sideways and unconsciously bite their lip to hide their expression.

The deliberate gestures and the absence of wild gesticulations create the impression of adventurers about to embark on a journey. In this context, Barthes’ theories make sense. At first, their poses evoke boldness, daring, and superiority, akin to video game characters. However, there is a radical shift when the competition begins as they are visibly excited and focused. As they are immersed in the game, they compensate for this with dramatic facial tension in their mouth. They also move quickly and nervously, heightening the narrative intensity.

Figure 4. Worlds 2020



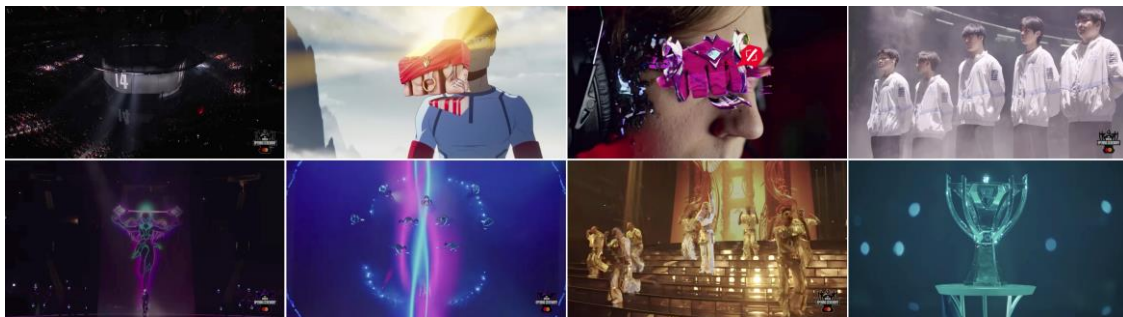
Source: official LoL channel (2020)

### 4.3. Sound and music

One of esports' main elements is music, collaborations with increasingly relevant groups, like in the 2020 edition where the music was done by *Take Henry Lau*, *Max Schneider*, and the lead singer of *A Day to Remember*, Jeremy McKinnon. Some songs form part of the mainstream charts, such as *Enemy* by *Imagine Dragons*, one of the world's biggest hits in recent years. Music is fundamental in the promotion of esports with concerts during ceremonies being a critical stage, as well as in the entire transmedia universe. An example is *LoL*'s partnership with Spotify to have its own channel. The lyrics of the song are not a mere sound ornament. They support the idea of combat, action, team, and other elements of the MOBA ideology, and can even influence the psyche (Campo-Falla et al., 2023; Berga et al., 2023). They can include excerpts in several languages, such as Spanish, catering to a global audience, as manifested in the ethnic variety of the videogame and its members and singers of the event.

Together with the music, the events are full of sound effects, such as explosions, and ambient effects such as the rustling of the wind, which contributes to intensifying the spectacularity of the event. The visual rhythm goes hand in hand with the diegetic and extra-diegetic sound (effects-music), in consonance and harmony with the tempo of the shots (Jódar-Marín, 2017). The choreographies are always carefully crafted to the extreme. The dancer's aesthetic is a mix of sports and video game clothing matching their age, coinciding with the average *LoL* spectator. Some are even virtual and/or holographic entities from the video game.

Figure 5. Worlds 2022



Source: LoL's official channel (2022)

### 4.4. Production and special effects (VFX)

The advertising items in esports use a wide variety of framing and angles, ranging from close-ups to long shots, which are fast and abundant, creating a rhythmic and dynamic visual experience. These shots are inspired by video games, sports, concerts, and social networks and many shots of the ceremonies focus on the teams in formation. The sequence begins with a long shot and then transitions to a medium shot, as the camera sweeps across each individual, which gives a sense of unity, introducing

the players and giving them a collective entity. The use of panoramic shots, travelling, cranes, steady cams, and remote-controlled zenithal add constant dynamism to the visuals.

The editing, both in the live broadcast and on the stadium screens, incorporates elements from video clips. The images and videos employ various tricks and effects and make no attempt to disguise them. The players and audience are introduced to the 3D environment of the game through the use of visual effects (VFX) (Jódar-Marín, 2017) pronounced by striking animations that enhance the immersive experience. There is also artistry in the finishing of the images, an example is when they are treated as if they belong within the world of LoL itself. This technique is consistently employed, creating a synthetic and cohesive whole.

In 2018, the main attraction was the virtual K-Pop group K/DA featuring its virtual singers Soyeon and Miyeon from (G) I-dle, Madison Beer, and Jaira Burn, a performance that profoundly impacted social media. In the same year, there was a dramatic sequence that borders on pseudo-augmented reality (although not all elements were included), where one of the performers opened a portal to the videogame, which combined animation with real-time footage of the stadium, leaving the audience in awe.

All the ceremonies have an ICT punch that seeks to propagate 2.0 (Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2015). The 2019 edition claims holography, where the human singer performs together with the videogame character. It is common practice for the stadium lights to be turned off at specific moments to make way for digital videos, which immerse the audience in the virtual narrative. This technique also highlights digital productions, such as the holographic choreographies showcased at the Paris event (2019). It is also common to implement graffiti overlays with a tag aesthetic, an urban element that young people can identify with (Figueroa-Saavedra, 2007).

#### 4.5. *Brand identity*

A crucial aspect in esports in general, including *LoL*, is the management of brand visual identities. World Cups serve as a platform for sponsors to showcase their brands. The ceremonies open with the parent company's logo, Riot Games, a choreographed symbol of a fist. Such *Hunger Games*-style gestures are recurrent. Team logos vary but align with youth-oriented values and themes. They draw inspiration from oriental motifs or incorporate features of American NFL teams where mascots are important. Once again, the *Hunger Games*, as is the FPX logo, are referenced, with a pheonix similar to the Mockingjay, a bird from the dystopian saga.

Flags also play a significant role. Each team has its logo symbol and, as in heraldry, they are used as battle signs, and each team's symbols of power and personality. During ceremonies, these flags are placed behind or beside the players, moved by dozens of flag bearers in a display resembling martial arts acts and even military formations on a battlefield. This approach adds a playful element that serves to animate the live audience and the streaming public.

In every opening ceremony broadcast, the fly logo of the championship sponsored by Mastercard is superimposed on screens, showcasing a liquid and collaborative identity. Notably, a financial company, somewhat distant from the younger demographic, often sponsors esports events to reach this social stratum, proof of its successful integration into this social sector.



#### 4.6. 2021 Worldcup. The Covid-19 edition

The 2021 edition deserves a special mention. In the 2020 tournament in Shanghai, China, due to the onset of COVID-19, some teams were unable to participate despite the implementation of an “isolation bubble”. From 5 October to 6 November 2021, the eleventh edition was held in Reykjavik, Iceland, featuring 22 teams from five regions. Due to the threat of the virus, the event was conducted without a live audience, leading to meticulous staging. A spectacular video mix combining digital rotoscoping was created based on *Arcane* (2021), the *LoL* series produced by Netflix. The video featured Vi and Jinx sisters, portrayed by Hailee Steinfeld and Ella Purnell. Around minute four, the video transitions seamlessly to live action, where the viewer sees a steampunk-inspired city before returning to animation around 5:30 minutes. The singer Bea Miller strolls through the Zaun district and performs a song with an awe-inspiring display of production on par with an AAA video game.

The real-virtual, plot-video clip jumps (Imagine Dragons, JID, Denzel Curry, Bea Miller and PVRI) are repeated in the footage, integrating the viewer into the narrative, as discursive bridges to fiction are blurred. The plot is enhanced with visual and sound effects, such as explosions, in time with the music. Light painting style overlays are superimposed on buildings and people, depicting Jinx’s madness. In fact, mental health among young people is a growing social concern. Eventually, luminous glyphs from a fantasy language appear, and a subjective aerial view of Piltover (Zaun), the city-state at the forefront of technology where the plot unfolds, emphasising the vastness of the *LoL* universe. The journey concludes in a palace-fortress, featuring a musical click in the real image where some young people with the player’s profile dance an energetic choreography that resembles martial arts combat or shooting.

The 2021 winner’s ring is shown during the closing ceremony, reminiscent of major American football leagues. Holographic fades transition to the competing teams (DWG KIA and EDward Gaming), portraying them as impassive figures, symbolising the event’s significance and that they are on another level of thought. Their poses and gestures emphasise their importance, subtly detaching them from their humanity. This ceremony is a display of spectacularisation of *LoL*’s cross-media and transmedia universe (Martín-Ramallal and Micaletto-Belda, 2021), comprised of the videogame, music, series, comics, books, merchandising, and others, making it clear that is the biggest esports in the world (*LoL*, 2022).

Figure 6. Worlds 2021



Source: official *LoL* channel (2021)



#### 4.7. The presenter

A particularity of esports that differentiates them from traditional sports events is the inclusion of presenters. They are responsible for introducing teams and players while animating the audience. Their role can vary, either they play a significant role or remain in the background as a voiceover.

### 5. Focus group

The iconographic and semiotic analysis results of *LoL* are shown in the table below. This table, derived from a discursive analysis, is a tool to generate statements from the Focus Group (FG). A five-level Likert questionnaire is developed to test the validity of the hermeneutic process carried out by the authors (Table 2). It should be noted that the focus group results are interpreted in conjunction with the discourse analysis and *LoL* content analysis.

**Table 1. Presence of iconographic items**

ITEMS	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>Place</b>	Seoul	París	Shanghái	Reykjavik	Mexico- USA
<b>Duration</b>	15'01''	14'00''	14'46''	13'59''	12'42''
<b>Participants</b>					
<b>Gender</b>	Males				
<b>Attire</b>	Tracksuit, trainers and sports shirts				
<b>Spatial interaction</b>	Haughty, defiant, cheerful				
<b>Hairstyle</b>	Well-groomed, deliberately dishevelled, dyed.				
<b>Image</b>					
<b>Shot</b>	Long shot: stadium, stage, audience, Big Close-Up: cup, champion's ring, Close up: player				
<b>Angles</b>	Front, back, front view				
<b>Lighting</b>	Natural-Artificial	Artificial	Natural-Artificial	Artificial	Artificial
<b>Postproduction</b>	CGI	CGI Holography	CGI Holography	CGI Rotoscopy	CGI

<b>Scenography</b>					
<b>Scenario</b>	Real- Immersive	Real-Immersive	Real- Immersive	Virtual-Streaming	Real- Immersive
<b>Effects</b>	Smoke, fire, FX	Holograms, laser	Smoke	Real+Animation	Smoke, hologram, laser
<b>Choreography</b>	Choral. Individual / Virtual Choir	Choral. Individual/ Choral- Individual Holographic	Choral. Individual / Choral- Individual Holographic Martial arts	Choral	Choral. Individual
<b>Decoration-Props</b>	<i>LoL</i> - Oriental - Fantasy	Virtual: <i>LoL</i> Underground	<i>LoL</i>	CGI-Real. VFX	VFX
<b>Proxemics</b>					
<b>Spatial location</b>	High Stage	Central stage	Central stage	Stage	Central stage
<b>Relevant attitude</b>	Hieratic	Hieratic	Hieratic	Hieratic	Hieratic
<b>Kinesia</b>					
<b>Posture</b>	Standing. Team Formation	Standing. Team Formation	Standing. Team Formation	Standing. Team Formation	Standing. Team Formation
<b>Gestures</b>	Impassive-Smiling	Impassive-Smiling	Impassive-Smiling	Impassive	Impassive
<b>Facial expressions</b>	Defiant - Distant				
<b>Sound</b>					
<b>Music (genres)</b>	Indie K-Pop	Indie HipHop	Indie K-Pop	Indie HipHop	Indie
<b>Sound effects</b>	Diegetic-Extradiegetic				

Source: created by the authors

**Table 2. Presence of iconographic items**

Statements	<Low			High>		Average
	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	
St1. Esports have characteristics that differentiate them from other shows				5	2	4.28
St2 Esports appeal to young people.			1	1	5	4.57
St3 Young people prefer esports to			3	4		3.57
St4. Esports will overtake conventional sports			6	1		3.14
St5. Sports should use esports' promotion models				2	5	4.71
St6. Player charisma is important in esports			5	2		3.28
St7. I would watch esports if they were broadcast on television	2	3	1	1		2.14
St8. Music is fundamental in esports				5	2	4.28
St9. Special effects and set design is a basic requirement				5	2	4.28
St10. The annual technological surprise is important in the ceremonies				6	1	4.14
St11. I hope to see something innovative in esports events				5	2	4.28
St12. The presenter is important when following esports	2	3	2			2
St13. I like LoL because of the transmedia discourse			1	5	1	4
St14. I would play and watch LoL without the existence of this universe	2	1	2	2		2.57
St15. LoL and videogames are culture				5	2	4.28
St16. I listen to LoL or esports music regularly			1	3	3	4,28
St17. I can relate to a LoL character			1	3	3	4.28
St18. Effects such as holograms and augmented reality are important			3	3	1	3.71
St19. Broadcasting at sunset or night adds to the drama			4	2	1	3.57
St20. I would pay to attend esports events as much as other sports				5	2	4.28

St.21. Ceremonies are reminiscent of music festivals.		1	4	2		3.14
St.22. I find elements of esports attractive for other things (e.g. advertising)				3	4	4.57
St. 23. I pay attention to the sponsoring brands.			3	4		3.57
St. 24. If mainstream sports were to do these shows I would follow them more.		1	2	3	1	3.57
St. 25. Women should play a more significant role.			1	2	4	4.42

**Source: created by the authors**

The focus group findings indicate that esports are perceived as unique and highly appealing to young people. In terms of their preferences compared to conventional sports, esports are favoured except for football, although this dominance could change with the arrival of the touch generation in the future. This idea is especially strong among younger participants and the women in the focus group. As to whether they will prevail compared to conventional sports, this is the case except for football. They believe esports will coexist with traditional sports, especially if it incorporates esports elements. The discussion determined that individual charisma did not play a significant role in competition as it is a team activity, although participants from Spain and nearby regions were valued more. They highlight that they physically resemble an ordinary young person, which makes them more relatable, more than in sports requiring fit bodies.

Conventional television was not persuasive for enjoying esports ceremonies since it lacked the flexibility of other devices or the ability to provide real-time commentary. Some claim to have watched the ceremonies on TV or YouTube, finding it more spectacular. Based on their consumption habits, it would serve as a support screen due to its larger size complemented by another device such as a smartphone (Ramos-Méndez and Ortega-Mohedano, 2016).

Music is fundamental. Everyone listens to it daily and values it, indicating that it is easy to hear it on mainstream radio or online platform playlists. This did not particularly relate to music festivals, except for some scenographic elements. The intent behind music festivals differed significantly, although participants were open to their resources being adopted. Ceremonial effects and technological surprises such as holograms and augmented reality were perceived as attractive and fitting, as they were eager to see how they would be surprised.; they were a major draw. Participants perceived each edition as evolving towards immersion. Regarding the presenter, if there is one, they are considered secondary, although it is acknowledged that they are a good source of energy.

The transmedia universe is important. They state that *Arcane* (2021) or other narratives are a hook without which they would not be so connected to *LoL*, and that possibly some would not play so much. Participants especially liked the series and that it starred “two tough girls”, finding them relatable. Almost all of them could relate to some character. The rebroadcast time generated some disagreement. It was acknowledged that the fact that it was at sunset could influence the broadcast as it was a delocalised event, this was of secondary importance, as it was usual for it not to coincide with the viewer’s time. Participants expressed willingness to pay for events like these, as much or more than football, as the spectacle is considered far superior

to that of conventional sports except for the big games. They believed that producing events with these characteristics could enhance their success and popularity among young people.

Regarding advertising in esports, they believe that if they were more inspired by esports they would resonate more among young people. Several members of the FG argue that many advertisements are already drawing inspiration from esports narratives. They did not look closely at sponsors, except for a few caveats. Everyone remembered Mastercard, Intel, or Redbull. A plausible explanation was that they were not products that they could identify with.

Lastly, it should be noted that although the audience increasingly enjoys women's presence, women's representation was lacking among participants. The discrepancy was not gender-biased as open competitions allow anyone to participate. Given that most *LoL* players are men, future suggestions included customising avatars with players' uniforms and introducing a "god mode" in esports broadcasts.

## 6. Discussion

This study allows us to bring into the discussion the approaches of Establés-Heras et al. (2019), whose contributions are acknowledged. However, a possible divergence arises related to the claim that esports are equivalent to traditional sports, given their cybermediated nature. This analysis clearly shows that esports spectacles have a unique discourse formed through the fusion and appropriation of various conventional and cybercultural elements. These events bridge the gap between video games and sports and tend to incorporate transmedia techniques. The creation of complex universes, exemplified in cases such as *LoL*, converge music, video clips, innovative scenographic techniques, social networks, television series, comics, and literature, which not only generate profits but also engender a magnetic appeal and spectacularisation of the videogame, resulting in active audiences hungry for related events.

Music plays a central role in this process, not only as a thread running through the plot but also to enhance interactions with the audience. Although adapted to generational preferences, epicness prevails as a constant concept in esports shows, as its absence is perceptible in the experience. While sporting events such as the NFL share similarities, they differ considerably in terms of live streaming 2.0 experience and reliance on connected devices. The need to integrate advanced technological components like laser lighting and holograms, is highlighted due to esports' close relationship with technology. Combining these resources with iconic youth elements, such as graffiti, sportswear, steampunk, or underground aesthetics, emerges as an ideal perspective.

## 7. Conclusions

In light of the results, esports emerge as leaders in spectacularisation, embodying the paradigm of ludic entertainment 2.0 in hypermodernity, especially among new generations. In contrast to conventional sports, the amalgamation of technical, technological, narrative, and rhetorical resources challenges the foundations of the current state of sports. The transmedia universes surrounding this amalgam of entertainment signify a shift in young people's entertainment preferences. In all

its dimensions, the intersection between culture and ICT serves as a magnetic formula that attracts them, inviting them to participate in events merging physical presence with the intrinsic dislocation of live streaming and social networks.

For future research, exploring esports' inherent discourse is proposed, considering its growing social relevance and ability to generate new narratives through hybridisation. Fields such as marketing and sports journalism have shown academic interest in this phenomenon. Investigating visual brand identities in esports also shows promise, merging concepts and iconographies to reinterpret them as inspiration in hypermodern contexts related to young people. In addition, it raises discussion on the gender issue, acknowledging the increase of female participants in video games, though not proportionally represented in mass events. Adopting iconic elements from traditional sports, such as trophies and champion rings, and fusing the real and the virtual, through holograms, screens, and videos, are valuable suggestions to further enrich esports shows.

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## 9. Specific contributions of each author

	Name and Surname
Conception and design of the work	Pablo Martín Ramallal & Juan Ángel Jódar Marín
Methodology	Pablo Martín Ramallal & Juan Ángel Jódar Marín
Data collection and analysis	Pablo Martín Ramallal & Juan Ángel Jódar Marín
Discussion and conclusions	Pablo Martín Ramallal & Juan Ángel Jódar Marín
Drafting, formatting, version review and approval	Pablo Martín Ramallal & Juan Ángel Jódar Marín

## 10. Conflict of interests

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest contained in this article.

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