Japan's League Lag:

Understanding the Shortcomings of *League of Legends*' Professional eSports in Japan and Recommendations for the Future

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Introduction

The 2022 *League of Legends* (also known as League, LoL, and LOL) Worlds Championship was one for the history books. DragonX, commonly known as DRX, was the first team in League eSports history to participate in Play-Ins, make it through the Groups Stage, win their Semifinals games, and then go on to win it all. In their regional games, DRX consistently underperformed against other South Korean teams and just barely qualified for a Worlds placement. Despite this, DRX shocked the world when they beat the most successful *League of Legends*' team ever, T1.

Although Worlds 2022 marked history with an underdog team proving that they are capable of being the best, in many ways, the competition was more of the same. For the past decade, either a South Korean or Chinese team has taken home the Summoners Cup. The last non-LCK (South Korean) or LPL (Chinese) affiliated team to win Worlds was a Taiwanese team, Taipei Assassins in 2012. Before that was LEC (European)-affiliated Fnatic in 2011, the first year Worlds took place. When it comes to professional *League of Legends*, South Korea and China dominate the scene with no sign of change coming—especially when a low-performing LCK team can still beat the top performers of every other region.

This paper considers the paradox of Japan's League of Legends eSports environment. While LoL esports have flourished in South Korea and China, Japan has yet to achieve local popularity and global competitive success. In fact, Japan has never won an international title, or even come close. A nation that has led the way for gaming in many regards through Nintendo and Sony, lags other East Asian nations in a rapidly growing eSports ecosystem, both in revenue and in event attendance.

The first two chapters of this paper provide foundational knowledge critical to understanding the larger context of *League of Legends* in Japan. Chapter 1 reviews existing literature on eSports as well as

proposed definitions for the term "eSports" that spans time and disciplines. Building upon these definitions, I provide my own that serves as a basis when discussing eSports throughout the remainder of the text. Within Chapter 2 I explain the basics of the game *League of Legends* and important terminology. In this same chapter I discuss the casual play environment in contrast to the professional competitive scene.

To analyze Japan's lag in the adoption of *League of Legends'* casually and professionally, I utilize Everett Roger's diffusion of innovations framework which describes how an innovation is communicated through various channels over time to members of a social system.[1] In Chapter 3 I compare the adoption of LoL eSports within South Korea, China, and Japan. Through a comparative analysis I draw attention to communication channels employed within South Korea and China that were imperative to the growth of eSports in those countries during early stages of diffusion that were not employed in Japan. In Chapter 4 I take a closer look at Japan's cultural and social context to understand how *League of Legends*' attributes as an innovation did not meet the needs of players. Lastly, in Chapter 5 I provide recommendations for LoL's adoption in Japan along with suggestions for Riot Games to increase influence in the country's gaming market.

I argue that while South Korea and China employed various channels of communication to promote and legitimize eSports, Japan's public and private institutions did not. Furthermore, at the time of *League of Legends*' release, the game's attributes were not suitable to Japan's gaming environment which hindered casual player acquisition and LoL's professional eSport's development. For these reasons, Japan experienced a "League lag" compared to other East Asian countries. Japan's League lag highlights

[1] Everett M. Rogers, Arvind Singhal, and Margaret M. Quinlan, "Diffusion of Innovations," in *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research, Third Edition*, 2019, 35, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203710753-35.

the issues of game exportation to Japan and provides clarification for the paradox of Japan's weak eSports scene.

Chapter 1: Defining eSports

Michael Wagner traces the first reliable usage of the term "eSports" or "electronic sports" back to the late nineties in an Online Gamers Association (OGA) press release comparing eSports to traditional sports.[2] Yet, a clear definition of what is "eSports" was not provided in the release itself. Even today many gamers, viewers, and players lack a cohesive understanding of what exactly qualifies as eSports. Nearly three decades later, participants of the eSports ecosystem default to a "you know it when you see it" understanding which has led to ongoing debates concerning the validity of eSports and if players can even be considered "athletes."

Despite the obscurity of eSports within the multiplayer gaming community, multiple scholars have made attempts to rectify the incongruities of the many interpretations of "what is esports?" Wagner is one of the earliest scholars to not only create a definition of eSports but also make a case for the validity of the field entirely as one of scholarly interest. Wagner's definition relies upon sport scientist Clause Tiedemann's definition of sport, which is:

> "Sport" is a cultural field of activity in which human beings voluntarily go into a relation to other people with the conscious intention to develop their abilities and accomplishments – particularly in the area of skilled motion – and to compare themselves with these other people according to rules put self or adopted without damaging them or themselves deliberately.[3]

While Wagner states that this definition is already broad enough for the inclusion of eSports, they argue there is a necessity for further refining to particular sports disciplines that are culturally important. Specifically, they point to the fact that traditional sports emphasize physical ability and skilled motion.

[2] Michael G. Wagner, "On the Scientific Relevance of ESports" (Las Vegas, Nevada, 2006), 1, https://doi.org/10.1086/290752.
[3] Wagner, 2.

Interestingly, Wagner argues that the emergence of eSports is due (at least in part) to the emergence of a society that has transitioned from industrial to information- and communication-based.[4] As such, our definition of eSports must reflect and emphasize this transition. Which brings us to Wagner's definition of eSports:

> eSports is an area of sports activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies.[5]

While Wagner's definition is unique in its consideration of information and communication technologies as a foundational characteristic of eSports, it remains broad and unclear. Relying on this definition, there is opportunity for video games regardless of competitive nature to be considered eSports. Yet, this is not the case. Instead, I argue that a critical component of eSports is its sense of competition—essentially, there must be a contest that results in a winner and a loser.

An additional critique than can be made of Wagner's definition is the usage of "or" regarding training. Since the release of Wagner's article *On the Scientific Relevance of eSports* in 2006 medical interest in the health effects of extended time spent gaming has increased dramatically. By extension, so has interest in the health conditions of professional eSports athletes. A 2021 report by Kurstein Sant and Kirill Micallef Stafrace states that eSports players carry out over 400 fine motor movements per minute and practice for an average of 10 to 15 hours a day.[6] They found that 42% of professional players report

[4] Wagner, 3.
[5] Wagner, 3.
[6] Kurstein Sant and Kirill Micallef Stafrace, "Upper Limb Injuries Secondary to Overuse in the Esports Community. Is This a Rising Epidemic?," *International Journal of Esports* 1, no. 1 (2021): 1, https://www.ijesports.org/article/39/html.

neck and back pain and that musculoskeletal injuries are common. Additionally, they claim that eSports professionals are at high risk for overuse injuries such as Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, tendinopathies, and lateral epicondylitis.[7]

Further studies have been conducted on the overall health and wellness of professional eSports players. Kari, Siutila, and Karhulahti carried out a quantitative survey with a sample size of 115 and qualitative interviews (n=7) exploring the training routines of professional players with a focus on their physical exercise. Researchers found that of those sampled, 55.6% reported that integrating physical exercise into their training regimen has a positive impact on their gaming performance.[8] The *Gamer's Health Guide: Optimizing Performance, Recognizing Hazards, and Promoting Wellness in Esports* (2020) goes even further, pointing out the metabolic derangements for which players are at risk as a result of their extended hours spent in sedentary conditions and overall poor nutrition.[9]

I bring in these works to critique Wagner's definition (and broader criticisms of eSports) that de-emphasizes the need for physical training of professional players. Rather, players must develop and train their mental and physical abilities in order to maximize the lifetime of their careers and perform to their highest potential. While eSports professionals do not need to physically train in the same ways that traditional sports professionals do (e.g., daily cardio routines, practicing on the field, and so on), attention to posture, wrist and neck exercise, nutrition, and physical activity is critical to player's well-being, their performance, and career longevity.

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[7] Sant and Stafrace, 2.
[8] Tuomas Kari, Miia Siutila, and Veli-Matti Karhulahti, "An Extended Study on Training and Physical Exercise in Esports," in *Exploring the Cognitive, Social, Cultural, and Psychological Aspects of Gaming and Simulations* (Canada: McMaster University, 2018), 270, https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-7461-3.ch010.
[9] Ahmed K. Emara et al., "Gamer's Health Guide: Optimizing Performance, Recognizing Hazards, and Promoting Wellness in Esports," *Current Sports Medicine Reports* 19, no. 12 (2020): 538, https://doi.org/10.1249/JSR.0000000000000787.

Emma Witkowski highlights the inclusion of physical performance when defining eSports in her work with professional *Counter-Strike* players.[10] The author describes "the balanced body" as a key concept in eSports physicality which encompasses composure, breathing, and steadiness. She goes on to describe the "haptic engagement" of players, meaning the interaction between the physical and sensory self and the feedback received by the technologies that serve as a mode for gaming.[11] While Witkowski does not offer us a clear definition of eSports in her work, she argues for a "redescription of bodies" that recognizes the physical performances of players and their intimate interactions with technology.[12] Witkowski's acknowledgement of player physicality builds upon Wagner's definition which recognized the need for including technological interaction and communication as a core aspect of eSports.

When defining eSports, Witkowski's provides the inclusion of physicality but it lacks a consideration for the various modes of interaction players will encounter in today's eSports environment.[13] Historically but even more so today, professional gaming is mediated through a variety of modes ranging from desktop computers to mobile phones. *Super Smash Bros*, published by Nintendo and played via the Nintendo 64 (a gaming console) along with controllers and a TV, had its first professional competition in 2002. While desktop computers are without a doubt the most widespread modality for professional competitive play, they are not the only one (e.g., console, mobile).

More recent attempts at defining eSports comes from Hamara and Sjöblom (2017) who describe eSports as:

[10] *Counter-Strike*, formally known as *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, (CSGO) is a first-person shooter game which is played via a desktop computer.
[11] Emma Witkowski, "On the Digital Playing Field: How We 'Do Sport' with Networked Computer Games," *Games and Culture* 7, no. 5 (2012): 369, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412012454222.
[12] Witkowski, 369.
[13] Because Witkowski's research focus was on *Counter-Strike*—a game played on a desktop computer—it is likely that other modes of competitive play were out of the scope of her work and thus irrelevant.

> a form of sports where the primary aspect of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of the players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces.[14]

Zhikun Yin and Kazuhiro Asakawa critique both Wagner's definition as well as Hamara and Sjöblom for their reliance on traditional understandings of sports to define eSports, arguing that eSports should instead by considered an area of study separate from traditional sports.[15] Despite this, Yin and Asakawa do not provide a clear and defined usage of 'eSports' in their work, leaving significant ambiguity.

"Chapter one: What is Esports?" of *Understanding Esports: An Introduction to the Global Phenomenon* provides a comprehensive review of other proposed scholarly definitions of eSports. As with traditional sports (e.g., soccer, baseball, swimming), within the eSports community (among players, spectators, organizations, etc.) unique jargon, behaviors, and shared passions are expressed.[16] What distinguishes eSports culture from that of traditional sports is the integration of technology. Unlike traditional sports, within eSports high ranking yet casual players often have opportunities to compete with or against professional athletes. For example, the highest ranked players of *League of Legends* often play in the same games as professional players that share their servers. This is a unique characteristics of eSports culture that would not be possible if not for the access to pro players that technology (generally, a gaming device and internet connect) provides casual players. Additionally, many professional players stream their gameplay regularly on platforms such as Twitch.tv or Youtube. During these streams fans can

[14] Juho Hamari and Max Sjöblom, "What Is ESports and Why Do People Watch It?," *Internet Research* 27, no. 2 (2017): 2, https://doi.org/10.1108/IntR-04-2016-0085.
[15] Zhikun Yin and Kazuhiro Asakawa, "An Analysis on Japan Esports Industry: Key Factors That Influence the Diffusion and Adoption of Japan Esports" (Keio University, 2019), 7–8, https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=KO40003001-0000201%0A9-3537%0D.
[16] Ryan Rogers, *Understanding Esports: An Introduction to the Global Phenomenon*, ed. Ryan Rogers, *Lexington Books*, First (New York: Lexington Books, 2019), 16.

directly interact with the streamer via the viewer chat function. It is these interactions facilitated through technology that makes eSport's culture unique.

Thus far, I have indicated five key characteristics of eSports:

1. eSports is competitive, meaning that players individually or as team compete against each other for the ultimate goal of winning a game/match/title/league/etc.
2. Referring to Tiedemann's definition of sports, it is a cultural field of activity in which players, spectators, and organizers share jargon, behaviors, passions, and gameplay.
3. eSports requires mental and physical exertion and training by players.
4. eSports is multimodal, meaning that gameplay can take place via various modes of technology such as on a smart phone, desktop computer, laptop, and console.
5. Using Wagner's definition, players train and develop their skills in the use of technology and communication.

What is missing from this list is the organizational component of eSports, which Adams and others describe in detail:

> The "organized" component refers to the way in which industry enthusiasts of varying levels of professionalism and prowess construct tournaments and/or leagues for players to engage in such competitive practices.[17]

The organizational component is critical in developing a definition of eSports as it emphasizes the various levels at which eSports gameplay takes place. Across the United States eSports programs have been established at the high school and university level with some schools even offering scholarships to students with proven success at their respective game. Thus, recognition of the legitimacy of these semi-

[17] Rogers, 19.

professional players as eSports athletes is important just as collegiate players of traditional sports are respected in similar ways.

For the purposes of this paper, as it focuses on Japan's League of Legend's eSports ecosystem, I would be remiss to not include understandings of eSports from Japanese sources as well. Japan eSports Union (日本 e スポーツ連合) defines eSports as, "'eSports' is an abbreviation of 'electronic sports,' and in a broad sense, it refers to entertainment, competitions, and sports in general that use electronic devices as a sporting event."[18] This same definition was used by Sato and Ohmine in their work *Examination of Factors Affecting Impressions of eSports* (2022).[19] In a 2020 publication titled, *Huge Potential of eSports* (e スポーツという大いなる可能性), authors define eSports as competition using games that digitize the actions of players according to strict rules, are competitive with others, and entertaining to watch.[20] As I will demonstrate later in the paper, Japan's eSports scene has developed at a slower pace than that of other nations such as the United States, China, and South Korea. As such, scholarly works on eSports in Japanese are scarce and definitions remain vague. What can be concluded is that definitions do not vary dramatically and despite ambiguity of what eSports is, variation is minimal enough that international play/collaboration has been and remains possible.

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[18] "Esports E スポーツとは," Japan eSports Union, 2018, https://jesu.or.jp/contents/about_esports/.
「e スポーツ(esports)」とは、「エレクトロニック・スポーツ」の略で、広義には、電子機器を用いて行う娯楽、競技、スポーツ全般を指す言葉であり、コンピューターゲーム、ビデオゲームを使った対戦をスポーツ競技として捉え際の名称。」

[19] 佐藤広英 and 大嶺一真, "E スポーツの印象に影響を及ぼす要因の検討," *第 64 回総会発表論文集*, 2022, 1, https://doi.org/https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.20587/pamjaep.64.0_274.

[20] 加藤貴昭, 古谷知之, and 南政樹, "E スポーツという大いなる可能性," *Keio SFC Journal* 20, no. 1 (2020): 189.
「e スポーツは、競技者の行動をデジタル化したゲームを用いた競技を指す。 したがって、単純なコンピュータゲームやビデオゲームを e スポーツとは呼 ばず、厳格なルールに則って行われ、他者との競争性や観覧する娯楽性を持 ったゲームのプレイスタイルを e スポーツと呼ぶ。」

Having reviewed existing conceptions of eSports, an attempt can be made to expand upon and improve our definition of such. As described previously, there are six key characteristics of eSports to consider when attempting to define it. Utilizing these characteristics, I define eSports as:

> eSports (Esports/e-sports/esports) is an organized cultural field of activity in which players develop their mental and physical abilities as a team or individually to compete in tournaments, matches, leagues, and other activities hosted via multimodal technologies and communications.[21]

[21] In Japanese, the writing of "esports" is consistent utilizing the romaji 'e' and katakana スポーツ (supōtsu), resulting in the word 'e スポーツ' (e- supōtsu). On occasion a capital 'E' will be used instead of the lowercase 'e.' On the other hand, variation is wide in English but typically consists of esports, eSports, Esports, and e-sports. In 2017 the Associated Press article, *Understanding Esports: An Introduction to the Global Phenomenon* declared "esports" as the official spelling of the word, yet a variety of spellings still appear both in casual chat forums and professional organizations. As of now, spelling is primarily dependent on either preference or exposure. For this paper, I will utilize the spelling of "eSports" (out of preference).

Chapter 2: Understanding *League of Legends* Casually and Professionally

In PC gaming, Riot Games' *League of Legends* (League/LoL/LOL) is one of the most popular computer games worldwide. Released on October 27th, 2009, *League of Legends* has grown from a niche player base to a worldwide phenomenon with over 180 million active players in September, 2022.[22] For years, Riot Games, Inc. was considered a one-trick-wonder of the gaming world with the company's only product being *League of Legends*. Now, the company has grown significantly with offices across the globe, multiple game titles, music albums, and an award-winning Netflix series, *Arcane*. Yet, despite these accomplishments, arguably Riot Games' most significant success has been the growth of the LoL eSports scene.

League of Legends is a multiplayer online battle arena, also called a MOBA. There are multiple game modes but the primary mode (and the mode played at the professional level) is called 'Summoner's Rift.' The Summoner's Rift map is structured in a baseball diamond shape consisting of two bases on opposite ends of the map with three lanes connecting the bases and a 'jungle' separating the lanes from each other (see Figure 1). The goal of the game is to destroy the enemy team's nexus which is in the heart of each base. The first team to destroy the enemy nexus wins the game. Within the lanes separating the bases, though, are turrets that deal increasing damage to players the more that they are hit. Therefor players must destroy turrets to create a safe path to the enemy base.

[22] Spezzy, "How Many People Play *League of Legends*? – *League of Legends* Player Count in 2022 (April)," *League Feed*, November 24, 2022, https://leaguefeed.net/did-you-know-total-league-of-legends-player-count-updated/.

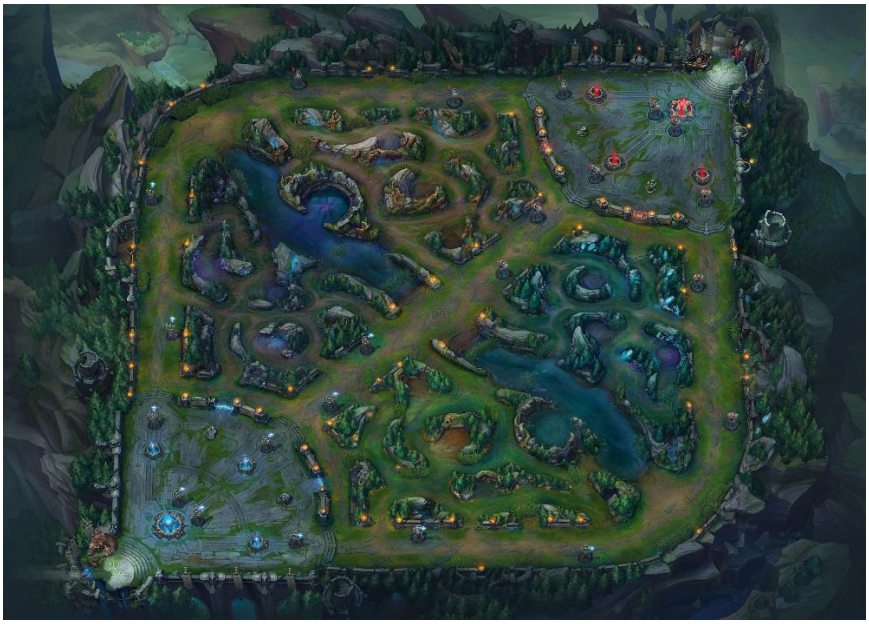

Figure 1. Map of Summoner's Rift.[23]

Within each team there are five designated roles (listed in respect to their position on the map from top to bottom): top laner, jungler, middle laner, attack-damage-carry, and support. These roles are typically shortened to the terms: top, jungle, mid, adc, and sup. Top, mid, adc, and sup are each designated to their respective lanes for what is considered the 'laning phase' of the game. Meanwhile the jungler will primarily stay within the jungle (as the name implies) gathering experience and money by killing small neutral monsters known as 'camps,' large neutral monsters that give stat bonuses to the team, and 'ganking' lanes to help the laning roles get ahead.[24]

During laning phase, the top, mid, and adc players will attack enemy team's 'minions' which spawn from the enemy base every 30 seconds in what is referred to as 'waves.' Killing minions will provide

[23] Anonymous 61e1aa72028575.45802871, *Updated Summoner's Rift Map (Pre-elements Update), League of Legends* Wiki, https://leagueoflegends.fandom.com/wiki/Map_(League_of_Legends)?file=Summoner%2527s_Rift_Update_Map.png.

[24] 'Ganking' is a term used to describe when the jungler comes into a lane with the purpose of killing the enemy player in that lane.

players with gold and experience but management of the minion waves is an integral part of gaining control over the map and a lead over the enemy laner. Meanwhile, the support player will acquire passive gold and experience while in lane through unique support items. For this reason, the support is there not to 'farm' (kill minions or monsters in the jungle) but provide a supportive role to their teammates. Throughout the game, laners and junglers will make decisions to try and put the other team behind, such as attacking enemy players, taking monsters from the enemy team's jungle, stealing large monsters, and destroying enemy turrets to get closer to the base.

Currently, there are more than 140 playable characters (called 'champions,' shortened to 'champs') in the game. Each champion has a unique set of three basic abilities and one ultimate ability. Additionally, there are three types of damage in the game: magic, attack, and neutral. Champions are typically designed around these damage types either dealing one type or a mix of them. During the game, players will spend their accumulated gold to purchase items that either enhance damage, reduce received damage, or provide utility (e.g., speed boosts, healing, shields). Items must be purchased with consideration for the player's champion's abilities, stats, and enemy team composition.

Due to the highly complex nature of the game, *League of Legends* is widely considered to have a 'high skill floor.' In other words, it is not friendly to new players. The game's ranked system has nine tiers which are: iron, bronze, silver, gold, platinum, diamond, master, grandmaster, and challenger. As of November 2022, according to the website League of Graphs, of all soloqueue players in North America, 88.4% of players fall within the first four ranks.[25] Only 0.0063% of players have reached the highest rank of the game in soloqueue.[26] These statistics indicate not just the difficulty of League but the unique and

[25] Soloqueue is a format within the *League of Legends*' ranked system in which players join a game either individually or with a partner. For this reason, soloqueue is considered a more difficult ranked format to go up the ranks ('climb') in as teammates have little to no prior exposure to each other and often only communicate via the in-game text chat and ping system.

[26] "Rank Distribution," League of Graphs, 2022, https://www.leagueofgraphs.com/rankings/rank-distribution.

incredible skill of players at the highest ranks of the game, which brings us to *League of Legends*' professional eSports scene.

The first *League of Legends* championship took place in 2011 with what can now be considered a humble prize pool of $50,000.[27] Since then, League's professional scene has grown considerably. For context, the prize pool for this past year's highlight international competition, *League of Legends* World Championship (often called 'Worlds'), was $2,225,000.[28] Yet, League's eSports growth is not indicative of Riot Game, Inc.'s own profit. In-fact, in an interview with The Washington Post, Riot's head of eSports, John Needham stated that Riot's eSports ecosystem does not turn a profit for the company. Rather, Riot Games' views their eSports scene as a marketing endeavor with profits going to the teams, players, and sponsors.[29]

In professional *League of Legends*, there are 12 regions represented.[30] Of these regions, the most dominant in the scene are LPL (China), LCK (South Korea), LCS (North America) and LEC (Europe). Over the course of a year there are two major international competitions. Marking the end of each *League of Legends*' season and most anticipated is Worlds. Of the top four regions, four teams are invited to play

[27] "FnaticMSI.LoL Are DHS Champions! Winning $50,000," *FNATIC*, June 20, 2011, https://web.archive.org/web/20110701112001/http://fnatic.com/news/8905/FnaticMSI-LoL-are-DHS-Champions-Winning-50-000.html.

[28] "Prize Pool for *League of Legends* Worlds : Check How Much Money Will Be Distributed This Year," *The Economic Times*, November 2, 2022, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/us/prize-pool-for-league-of-legends-worlds-check-how-much-money-will-be-distributed-this-year/articleshow/94541119.cms?from=mdr.

[29] Teddy Amenabar, "*League of Legends* Esports Still Hasn't Turned a Profit. That's Okay, Says Riot.," *The Washington Post*, November 2, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/esports/2021/11/01/league-worlds-2021-profit-lol/.

[30] These regions are: *League of Legends* Pro League (LPL) which consists only of China, *League of Legends* EMEA Championship (LEC) consisting of European countries, League Championship Series (LCS) represented by North America, *League of Legends* Champions Korea (LCK) made up only by South Korea, Campeonato Brasileiro de *League of Legends* (CBLOL) represented by Brazil, *League of Legends* Japan League (LJL) consisting only of Japan, Liga Latinoamérica (LLA) represented by Latin America, Vietnam Championship Series (VCS) represented solely by Vietnam, Pacific Championship Series (PCS) consisting of Asian-Pacific teams, *League of Legends* Circuit Oceania (LCO) consisting of Oceania, *League of Legends* Continental League (LCL) represented by Russia, and lastly, .

Turkish Championship League (TCL) consisting only of Turkey.

from each; one region has two teams invited and the remaining regions are represented by only one team. There are four stages to the competition which are: Play-Ins, Groups, Semifinals, and Finals. Stages are elimination-style format with games taking place at multiple locations over the course of approximately a month. Each year a different country is chosen to host Worlds, though notably for Worlds 2022 games took place in Mexico and the United States

The second most important competition is the Mid-Season Invitational (MSI) which was first held in 2015. Like Worlds, MSI is an international competition with representatives from multiple regions. Typically, 12 regions each represented by one team are invited to participate in an elimination-style competition consisting of three stages: Group Stage, Rumble Stage, and Knockout Stage.

Throughout the year, regional specific competitions will take place culminating in the top performing team(s) competing at either MSI and/or Worlds. Competition formats vary between regions though each one is overseen by Riot Games which provides a degree of consistency and predictability. In addition to oversight, the game itself does not change between regions and as updates are made (known as patches), they are applied to all servers ensuring players are practicing on the same patch.

Over time, it is expected that Riot Games will enact significant changes to regional formats via mergers and/or disbanding. Following the completion of Worlds 2022, Riot announced plans to merge Europe, Turkey, as well as Middle East and Africa (MENA) in 2023, replacing the existing LEC to become EMEA.[31] While rumors to do the same to other small regions such as the LJL, VCS, LCO and others have come up, nothing has been confirmed.

As the future of smaller regions remains uncertain, there is cause for concern when it comes to representation at events such as MSI and Worlds. With the current invitational format, small regions (such

[31] Jay Hunter, "Riot Games Announces LoL Esports EMEA Region For 2023," *GINX Esports TV*, November 18, 2022, https://www.ginx.tv/en/league-of-legends/emea-esports-ecosystem-2023.

as the LJL) are guaranteed a chance to compete on the international stage. Yet, if regions are to merge, the existing format—which provides direct bids to regions—lower-performing teams access to international competitions will become much more difficult. The 2023 MSI format has yet to be announced, but if the invitational system remains the same, it is unlikely we will see a team from Turkey, the Middle East, or Africa outperform a European team and make it to the Group Stage.

Chapter 3: Comparing Japan's League Adoption

Since MSI's debut, only one team not from the LPL (China) or LCK (South Korea) has won the competition (the LEC's G2 Esports). On top of that, for the past decade either an LCK or LPL team has won the Worlds Championship. Without a doubt, China and South Korea dominate the *League of Legends*' eSports scene. This domination extends beyond their success at international tournaments; they also outperform other regions in their ability to attract international viewership for regional competitions. According to Esports Charts, the LCK has a record-breaking peak viewership of 1,374,155 people at one time.[32] The LPL's record viewership numbers according to the same source is 349,681.[33] On the other hand, the LJL has a record viewership of only 76,430.[34] Additionally, Japan has never won an international competition and it was not until 2021 that a Japanese team even made it to a group stage.[35]

For many, it is shocking to see Japan lag so far behind other East Asian countries in any gaming sphere. As a nation well known for its video game developments and success in exporting domestically developed consoles such as the Sony PlayStation and Nintendo Switch, Japan's underperformance in the *League of Legends*' eSports scene creates a paradox. Why is it that Japan has and continues to underperform both in international competitions and in garnering an international audience for their regional games? To answer this question, I draw upon Everett Rogers' concept of diffusion of innovations.

Rogers defines diffusion as "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system." He goes on to describe innovation as "an idea, practice, or object perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption."[36] Within his

[32] "Series / LCK," Esports Charts, 2022, https://escharts.com/events/lck.
[33] "Series / LPL," Esports Charts, 2022, https://escharts.com/events/lpl.
[34] "Series / LoL Japan League," Esports Charts, 2022, https://www.dexerto.com/esports/tsm-ftx-japan-global-expansion-plans-interview-1671022/.
[35] In 2021, DetonatioN FocusMe (DFM) made it to the Mid-Season Invitational, Groups Stage.
[36] Rogers, Singhal, and Quinlan, "Diffusion of Innovations," 417.

framework, diffusion of innovation is fundamentally a process of communication through mass media, interpersonal communication channels, and information technologies.[37] In this case study, the innovation is *League of Legends*' professional eSports system (regions with teams that play locally and go on to compete internationally) while diffusion is the system's introduction to and adoption by Japanese gamers—casual and professional. Riot Games, Inc. serves as the primary (but not limited to) change agent.

In their paper, *An Analysis on Japan esports industry: key factors that influence the diffusion and adoption of Japan esports*, Yin and Asakawa analyze the diffusion and adoption of eSports in Japan through three main elements: government, media, and game industry.[38] I build upon their work by looking specifically at the *League of Legends*' eSports ecosystem in Japan. Through this case study, a concrete example of eSports expansion into Japan can be illustrated and provide additional insight otherwise unachievable when speaking in general terms. Furthermore, in the following chapter, I look to the attributes of the innovation (professional *League of Legends*) to understand its adoption in Japan.

In 2000, the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA) was established as a member of the Korea Olympic Committee and the International e-Sports Federation. It manages 24 eSports in the country including *League of Legends*' activities, regulates tournaments, distributes broadcasting licenses, and has introduced welfare policies for players.[39] It is believed that KeSPA is one of the first organizations in the world dedicated to overseeing and regulating eSports.[40] In December 2011, Riot Games released the official South Korean league server and in 2012, as a cooperation between KeSPA and Riot Games, the *League of Legends* Champions Korea (LCK) was established. Under the LCK there are ten teams which

[37] Rogers, Singhal, and Quinlan, 418.
[38] Yin and Asakawa, "An Analysis on Japan Esports Industry: Key Factors That Influence the Diffusion and Adoption of Japan Esports."
[39] Yin and Asakawa, 12.
[40] "ゲームを最初に「e スポーツ」と呼んだのは？韓国説が有力," *News ポストセブン*, September 22, 2020, https://www.news-postseven.com/archives/20200922_1596823.html?DETAIL.

compete at the LoL Park in Seoul—an arena developed and opened by Riot Games in 2018 that can seat 400-450 fans.[41]

Adoption of eSports in South Korea was uniquely swift in comparison to countries. Wagner describes the development of eSports in the East and West as "two different gaming cultures."[42] While first-person shooter games such as *Doom* and *Counter-Strike* took hold of the professional gaming scene in the U.S., multi-user real time strategy games such as *Starcraft* dominated South Korean eSports. As with *League of Legends*, *Starcraft* has a top-down format in which players must be constantly aware of macro strategy to gain control of a map and overrun their opponent through micro decision making. Thus, it is no surprise that League rose in popularity so quickly within South Korea among PC gamers.

In addition to formal government support of eSports and League's cultural adaptability to South Korea, mass media played a pivotal role in LoL's diffusion. According to Wagner, in the mid-nineties South Korea experienced a deregulation of advanced telecom applications, this lead to an unprecedented growth of broadband infrastructure in the country. Television stations looking for content landed in part on broadcasts of online gaming as a solution.[43] Many telecommunications groups created their own League teams (e.g., SK Telecom).[44]

While the emergence of professional *League of Legends* in China came later than in South Korea, its diffusion was no less effective. With the assistance of Chinese multinational entertainment conglomerate and holdings company, Tencent Holdings, Ltd., China's official League servers released in 2011. That same year, Tencent paid $400 million to purchase 93% of Riot Games shares, making Riot

[41] Callum Leslie, "Riot Plans to Take over LCK Production in 2019 , Open LoL Park Studio," *Dot Esports*, November 13, 2017, https://dotesports.com/league-of-legends/news/riot-lck-production-18664.
[42] Wagner, "On the Scientific Relevance of ESports," 1.
[43] Wagner, 2.
[44] Yin and Asakawa, "An Analysis on Japan Esports Industry: Key Factors That Influence the Diffusion and Adoption of Japan Esports," 12.

Games a subsidiary of Tencent Holdings.[45] In 2013, Tencent established the *League of Legends* Pro League (LPL). The league's structure is based off its LCK counterpart but consists of 17 teams. Talks between Riot Games and Tencent started in 2015 to jointly operate the LPL and concluded in 2019 when the two companies agreed to a joint venture called TJ Sports.[46] That same year, China's Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (CMHRSS) officially recognized "eSports professional" and "eSports operator" as two new professions. Additionally, under the Sports Information Center of General Administration of Sport of China, eSports was deemed an official sport.[47] Despite the delay in official government support, Chinese companies had no hesitation in heavily investing in the eSports market. This investment legitimized eSports and gave enough authority to prompt adoption by government officials.

As the case of South Korea demonstrates, support of eSports by mass media can provide the avenues necessary for widespread exposure and subsequent adoption. Online broadcasting platforms quickly took on eSports for content and match broadcasting rights are auctioned off to competing online television and livestreaming platforms.[48] In 2014, Riot Games formally established an English language stream of regional LPL games to increase accessibility and viewership internationally. Additionally, as with South Korea, Chinese broadcasting companies own and sponsor *League of Legends* teams (e.g., Bilibili.tv).[49]

While in recent years mobile gaming has seen significant growth in China, PC gaming continues to reign supreme. In May 2022, games market intelligence organization Niko Partners reported that China's

[45] Nicholas James, "Who Owns *League of Legends* and Riot Games? We Break It Down," *Win.Gg*, January 19, 2022, https://win.gg/news/who-owns-league-of-legends-and-riot-games-we-break-it-down/.
[46] Hongyu Chen, "Tencent and Riot Games Create Joint Chinese Esports Venture : TJ Sports," *The Esports Observer*, January 11, 2019, https://archive.esportsobserver.com/tencent-riot-games-tj-sports/.
[47] Yin and Asakawa, "An Analysis on Japan Esports Industry: Key Factors That Influence the Diffusion and Adoption of Japan Esports," 18.
[48] Yin and Asakawa, 20.
[49] Yin and Asakawa, 20.

PC gaming marke remains the largest in the world with a PC game revenue of $13.6 billion.[50] Furthermore, they state the China's eSports market is the most developed with 434 million fans.[51]

Japan's adoption of eSports and *League of Legends* has been very different from South Korea and China. It was not until 2016 that Riot Games officially released a Japanese server for *League of Legends*. Prior to that point, Japanese players primarily played on the South Korean or Chinese server where communication took place in their respective languages. The delayed release of the league server proved to be highly problematic for League's adoption in Japan. By the time the Japan server was created, casual South Korean and Chinese players were well established and skilled at the game. Upon the release of the Japan server, casual Chinese and South Korean players moved to the server with the intent of 'trolling' new players.[52] Essentially, overseas players made the game a horrendous experience for Japanese players.

Diffusion of innovations is fundamentally a communications process.[53] Critical to the adoption of the innovation are interpersonal communication networks which rely on early adopters discussing the innovation with their peers.[54] In the case of *League of Legends*, Japanese players evaluation of the game was overall negative. Riot Games continues to struggle with issues of toxicity within the League community over a decade after the game's release.[55] These experiences negatively impacted players decision to adopt the game and likely influenced the tone of discussion with their peers which caused others to forgo as well.

[50] Niko, "China Pc Games," 2022, 2, https://nikopartners.com/china-pc-online-games/.
[51] Niko, 3.
[52] 'Trolling' is a term used by *League of Legends* to describe players who join a game with no intention of winning, either through purposefully negative behavior such killing one's own character for the enemy team or passive means such as sitting in their own base.
[53] Rogers, Singhal, and Quinlan, "Diffusion of Innovations," 419.
[54] Rogers, Singhal, and Quinlan, 419.
[55] 'Toxicity' is a term used to describe players who 'troll' games, verbally abuse other players, and lower the play experience.

The *League of Legends* Japan League (LJL) was established in 2014, two years before Japan received its own server to play on. Unfortunately, information on how LJL came to be is scarce, even among Japanese language sources. What can be determined is that the LJL is produced by Riot Games, Inc. and owned by Riot Games Japan. Within the LJL there are eight teams but only DetonatioN FocusMe (DFM) has made it to an international competition. The only broadcasting partner of the LJL is Twitch.tv and still there are no official English language broadcasting options. Notably, the LJL Officially Unofficial founded by Alex Swan, Alex Hapgood, and Sam Hapgood provides English language casting of LJL games.[56] English-speaking fans have had to create solutions in the absence of formal systems.

Communication channels and their interaction with the innovation's attributes serve as the means of speeding up or slowing down an innovation's rate of adoption.[57] In the case of South Korea and China, communication of the innovation via mass media was not just prolific but was legitimized through broadcasting organizations teams' sponsorships. However, in Japan communication of LoL eSports via mass media has yet to come to fruition. With the main function of mass media being to create awareness of the innovation, many players lacked exposure to LoL eSports at a critical time in Japan's eSports' scene development.[58] Even today, the LJL's limited broadcasting space cannot garner significant enough awareness among players in Japan to encourage individual adoption of the game or participate in the eSports ecosystem. A lack in mass media and interpersonal communications has hindered professional League eSports development.

Unlike South Korea and China, Japan's government has not provided any formal support for Japanese eSports. The most prominent eSports organization in Japan is the Japan eSports Union (日本 e

[56] LJL Officially Unofficial also provides podcasts and newsletters in English about Japan's professional *League of Legends* eSports scene.
[57] Everett M. Rogers, "Attributes of Innovations and Their Rate of Adoption," in *Diffusion of Innovations*, Fourth (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 207.
[58] Rogers, Singhal, and Quinlan, "Diffus. Innov.," 419.

スポーツ連合) but it has yet to oversee or regulate *League of Legends*. Ultimately, Japan's eSports ecosystem has had zero government support and relies on the efforts of Riot Games to increase its reach. Rogers writes that, "the greatest response to change agent effort occurs when opinion leaders adopt."[59] In the case of eSports adoption, government organizations serve as opinion leaders who can increase innovation adoptability through legitimization via legislation and formal institutions. While individual-optional adoption is slower than organizational adoption, the rate of adoption can be sped up by reducing the number of individuals involved via altering the unit of decision.[60] Within South Korea and China, government adoption altered the unit of decision by legitimizing eSports in a top-down, centralized method rather than relying on the adoption by individuals and organizations over a long period of time. On the other hand, Japan lacks legitimization of eSports via government regulation and/or sponsorship and must rely on individual-optional adoption to reach self-sustainment.[61]

When LoL came to Japan, very few marketing efforts were made. It was not until 2018 that Riot created an advertisement for the game that would target a Japanese audience. The ad was done in what can be described as quintessential "weird Japan" fashion. Featuring a giant cabbage roll named Roru-kun (ロルくん)—a play on words using the Japanese pronunciation of "LoL" and "roll." In the ad, Roru-kun approaches a salaryman on a crowded train. He goes on to give his League pitch describing exciting action that is free-to-play and can be shared with friends.

While rate of adoption is not directly linear to the change agent's promotion efforts, their potential benefit should not be disregarded.[62] Furthermore, while something is usually better than nothing, timing is key. Roger writes, "Greater payoff from a given amount of change agent activity occurs

[59] Rogers, "Attributes of Innovations and Their Rate of Adoption," 208.
[60] Rogers, 206–7.
[61] Rogers, Singhal, and Quinlan, "Diffus. Innov.," 427.
[62] Rogers, Singhal, and Quinlan, 208.

at certain stages in an innovation's diffusion."[63] In the case of League eSports, Riot Games' advertisement targeting a Japanese audience may very well be a case of "too little, too late." By 2018, a large chunk of their potential player base had already experienced the chaos of the initial server release and been turned away. Additionally, while this requires further exploration, the Nintendo Switch's 2017 release potentially interfered League's adoption. Given Japan's preference for mobile, handheld gaming devices, Riot may have lost potential players to the new console release before they even attempted to capture them.

Janelle Wavell-Jimenez, a former Riot Games employee who helped create the commercial, describes the difficulties of PC gaming in Japan in her Twitter thread announcing the ad's release. She says:

> Real talk though, this is a great commercial that highlights one of the struggles we (and other Western PC games) have in Japan: there just isn't as big of a pc gaming culture in comparison to say, Korea. When I talk to my friends and ex-coworkers in Japan about what I do, I spend half the time explaining I don't work for a porn game company [] Whereas in the US I have to explain microtransactions, in Japan I was about [sic] to buy stuff on my phone since the 90s so THAT part is normal[64]

Janelle's commentary brings me to my next point about Japan's gaming culture and PC gaming's cultural adaptability. In her post, she explains that Japan does not have a large PC gaming culture, posing significant trouble for *League of Legends*' ability to enter the market. Japan diverges from other nations

[63] Rogers, "Attributes of Innovations and Their Rate of Adoption," 208.
[64] Janelle Wavell-Jimenez, Twitter post, September 18th, 2018. https://twitter.com/thejanellemj/status/1042146987284549638.

in game development in that the Japanese gaming industry has primarily focused on the development of handheld, mobile devices. Nintendo released their first handheld device, called the Game and Watch, in 1980. After that came the Gameboy series, DS series, 3DS, and now the Nintendo Switch. In 2005, Sony released its own handheld device, the Sony PlayStation Portable (PSP). Today, phone games have become the foundation of Japan's gaming industry and in 2019, revenue from mobile games surpassed those of console and PC games.[65] After mobile gaming, the next most popular mode of play is consoles with PC gaming taking third place. Ultimately, *League of Legends* lacked a compatibility with the needs of Japanese gamers. Rather than the change agent determining the needs of the client, the agent instead pushed an innovation to a client who lacked any need in the first place.[66]

[65] Yin and Asakawa, "An Analysis on Japan Esports Industry: Key Factors That Influence the Diffusion and Adoption of Japan Esports," 22.
[66] Rogers, Singhal, and Quinlan, "Diffus. Innov.," 228.

Chapter 4: League's eSports' Attributes

The success of League's eSports is not just achieved through the organizations that operate within it or the professional players, but also by spectators and fans. Therefore, when considering the diffusion of innovations, there needs to be a consideration of non-professional units who also exist within the gaming sphere. Thus, while the focus of this paper is on League professional play, the diffusion of the game itself through consideration of its attributes is also critical to the understanding Japan's League lag.

In *Attributes of Innovations and Rate of Adoption*, Rogers describes five attributes of innovation: 1) relative advantage, 2) compatibility, 3) complexity, 4) trialability, and 5) observability.[67] Within diffusion of innovations, relative advantage is considered "the degree to which an innovation is perceived to be better than the idea is supersedes."[68] As I described previously, League's introduction to Japan was largely negative. The server was delayed, it lacked stability, and—most detrimental to gameplay—it was riddled with overseas casual players purposefully harming the play experience. The game offered little advantage to Japanese players and no incentive. By the time Riot had formally introduced League to Japan via the creation of its own unique server, Japanese gamers had well established gaming habits and culture which relied on mobile and console gaming. As a PC game, *League of Legends* needed exceptional relative advantage to convince players to leave behind their mobile and console devices. Without the perception that League offered more to players than its competitors, players had few reasons to switch platforms.

Due to League's poor release and ultimately poor performance within Japan, the player base is now exceptionally small compared to South Korea and China. According to a 2022 report by The Global Gaming, the number of accounts created in 2021 on the Japanese server was 1,736,489 while the number

[67] Rogers, "Attributes of Innovations and Their Rate of Adoption," 208.
[68] Rogers, 212.

of accounts created on the South Korean server was 19,822,124.[69] While account creation is not indicative of the number of players as players can make multiple accounts on one server, it does provide some insight into server activity within regions. While the drastic difference in account creation can partially be explained by lacking popularity of the game in Japan, another cause of the discrepancy is that many high ranked Japanese players do not use accounts on the Japanese server. DFM (the highest performing Japanese pro team) is known to practice on the South Korean server. The reason being that there are so few active players that often the highest ranked players are put into games with individuals more than three ranked divisions below them.[70] As a result, the competitive nature and difficulty of the Japan server is many degrees below that of the South Korean server. For prospective professional Japanese players, the relative advantage of pursuing *League of Legends* is low. Their own server is not conducive to cultivating high performers and players that do want to compete with their Chinese or South Korean counterparts must play on a server with higher ping and in a different language.[71]

The next attribute of innovation through which this case study can be analyzed is compatibility. Compatibility is "the degree to which an innovation is perceived as consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters."[72] The innovation can be compatible with sociocultural beliefs, a previously introduced idea, or a recipients need for innovation.[73] In many ways, compatibility overlaps with cultural adaptability. They differ in that cultural adaptability implies in its name the ability to "adapt" or change to fit the needs of the client. On the other hand, compatibility helps the client recognize and give meaning to the innovation so that it regarded as familiar.[74] While further research is

[69] The Global Gaming, "Player Count by Region | LOL," theglobalgaming.com, September 1, 2022, https://theglobalgaming.com/lol/player-count-region.
[70] For example, a Grandmaster player may be placed into a lobby with a high-Diamond player.
[71] Ping communicates to players how fast their computer is communicating with the server that hosts their game. A high ping can lead to slow communication and a negative play experience. In competitive play, ping is important in ensuring that no player has an advantage over another due to their connection speeds.
[72] Rogers, "Attributes of Innovations and Their Rate of Adoption," 224.
[73] Rogers, 224.
[74] Rogers, 224.

required to make conclusions about League's compatibility with Japanese culture and beliefs generally, the concept of previously introduced ideas can be addressed.

Japan's gaming industry has nurtured mobility and prioritized personalization in gaming that takes place online and offline.[75] On the other hand, while League can be played on a laptop which provides some mobility, a single match is a minimum of 15 minutes and can go beyond an hour. Additionally, to compete at a professional level, the player is expected to have a high-performance desktop computer. Desktops and their peripherals (e.g., mouse, keyboard, monitor) take up a lot of space and are understandably unappealing to Japanese players with limited living space. In a gaming culture that values mobility, short game time or games that can be paused and resumed easily, and compact devices, *League of Legends* is incompatible. Previously introduced ideas of what gaming is and should look like in Japan do not resonate with what *League of Legends* has to offer players. For this reason, League and its professional play have lacked the necessary compatibility to be widely adopted.

As discussed in Chapter 2, *League of Legends* is a deceptively simple game. For many, LoL is their first MOBA style game, a game format already considered difficult to learn due to its combination of macro considerations and micro play. Within the world of MOBAs, League is a game with a notoriously steep learning curve. Not only do players need to learn the basic format of the game, they also must learn over 150 items, six rune trees, summoner spells, over 140 champions (each with four abilities and unique passive abilities), seven dragon buffs, multiple damage/defense types, and more. It is a difficult game to learn and even harder to master, making it unfriendly to new players. While complexity alone is not enough to stop the adoption of an innovation in its tracks, it can serve as a significant hurdle when the innovations other attributes do not align with the client's needs. In the case of Japan, with *League of*

[75] Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson, "Games of Being Mobile: The Unruly Rise of Mobile Gaming in Japan," in *Mobile Gaming in Asia. Mobile Communication in Asia: Local Insights, Global Implications.* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017), 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-0826-3_2.

Legends' lacking compatibility and missing relative advantage, its complexity was not a hurdle that could easily be overcome.

I will address the fourth and fifth attribute, trialability and observability, in this final section. Trialability is "the degree to which an innovation can be experimented with on a limited basis" while observability is "the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to other."[76] *League of Legends*' is a free to play game and any purchasable items are visual adjustments to one's character. For this reason, so long as a player has a functional computer, mouse, and keyboard they can play League. Yet, as I have already explained, many Japanese gamers do not. Additionally, while some players could access the game, arguably due to the state of the server their ability to try the game as intended is hindered. Thus, League's trialability in Japan is negative compared to other games more suited for console or mobile gaming.

Observability and communication go together. *League of Legends*' existence as an available game in Japan is not enough to consider it as "observable" in the sense of diffusion. Rather, the game requires a rate of adoption that is high enough to consider it popular. It is this popularity that is expressed through communication, either by individuals discussing the game with their friends or media reports (just to name two examples), that establishes the game as observable. Yet, as I have demonstrated, League lacked the necessary communication channels to lead to its widespread adoption. By extension, it could not reach a degree of popularity that would contribute to its observability.

An innovation does not require success in all five attributes to reach a rate of adoption that leads to self-sustainment. Yet, as the case of *League of Legends*' diffusion in Japan exemplifies, the success of at least some are necessary. In each attribute, League as an innovation failed in Japan and if the casual player would not adopt the game, opportunities for professional eSports' success were even slimer. An eSports success relies heavily on its popularity among the casual players. It is those players who will

[76] Rogers, "Attributes of Innovations and Their Rate of Adoption," 243–44.

become spectators and fans. Rarely does a player in the realm of video games engage in the professional scene of a game they do not play themselves. League's inability to gain traction among the causal player in Japan spelled doom for the growth of its professional scene.

Chapter 5: Avenues for Adoption

Throughout this paper I have analyzed the attributes of *League of Legends* and its eSports scene in addition to the various channels of communication and their effectiveness in bringing awareness to the game. Using diffusion of innovations, we can pinpoint moments in League's export to Japan and understand where adjustments were needed to improve its rate of adoption. While the South Korean and Chinese governments adopted League eSports through formal support measures, Japan lacked adoption by opinion leaders necessary to achieving widespread popularity. Furthermore, Japan did not have the necessary channels of communication—interpersonal and mass media—to cultivate awareness and improve adoption rates. Lastly, the change agent (Riot Games, Inc.) delayed their promotion efforts which hindered *League of Legends*' popularity and the growth of its eSports scene. Furthermore, Japan's pre-existing gaming culture and League's initial server roll-out impeded its ability to gain traction among casual gamers. Without the adoption of the game among this player-base, potential for the growth of the game's professional scene was unlikely. With a low rate of adoption, *League of Legends*' eSports in Japan has yet to become a self-sustaining innovation in the way that it has in South Korea and China.

What we can learn in the case of *League of Legends*' professional growth in South Korea and China is that a viable eSports environment demands a multi-faceted approach with encouragement for growth at multiple steps in the diffusion process. Yin and Asakawa write:

> Within China and South Korea eSports industry, government media and game industry are equally important. All of them are indispensable parts of eSports, and they all made significant contributions to the development of eSports.[77]

[77] Yin and Asakawa, "An Analysis on Japan Esports Industry: Key Factors That Influence the Diffusion and Adoption of Japan Esports," 14.

The success of eSports in Japan cannot be shouldered only by the eSports industry (professional players, game companies, and organizers). High rates of adoption demand efforts by a country's government, its media infrastructure (i.e., broadcasting platforms), the change agent's efforts, attributes aligning with the needs of the clients, and players communicating the game with others through interpersonal channels. In this chapter, I will explore opportunities for growth in Japan's eSports scene for Riot Games, Inc. regarding *League of Legends* and its 2020 released game, *Wild Rift.*

In February 2022, Riot Games announced the expansion of its publishing business into the Asia Pacific region (APAC). With an emphasis on prioritizing the wants and needs of players, Riot stated it will focus on its hyper-localization efforts while extending its reach to Japan and India.[78] A few years prior, in 2019, Japan-based organizations PlayBrain Inc. and Yoshimoto Creative Agency partnered with Riot Games to operate the League of Legends Japan League. This partnership came with a new sponsorship from well-known PC and laptop gaming company, Alienware along with a broadcasting partnership with streaming platform, Twitch.Tv.[79] That same year, PlayBrain raised $1.9 million in seed funding to support LJL (League of Legends Japan League) eSports events in Japan, which included the Japan league's events.[80] In 2021, official *League of Legends* merchandise could be purchased in Japan for the first time via PlayBrain due to the organization's collaboration with Riot Games.[81] In November 2021, to celebrate the release of Riot Games' Netflix-series, *Arcane*, PlayBrain organized an "ARCANE DAY" in Akihabara with a screening

[78] Riot Games, "Riot Games Expands Publishing Business Into Asia Pacific," February 24, 2022, https://www.riotgames.com/en/news/riot-games-expands-publishing-business-into-asia-pacific.
[79] PlayBrain, "PlayBrain , Riot Games and Yoshimoto Partner for League of Legends Pro League in Japan," January 18, 2019, https://playbrain.com/en/news/ljl-partnership.
[80] Dean Takahashi, "PlayBrain Raises $ 1 . 9 Million for League of Legends Esports Events in Japan," February 27, 2019, https://venturebeat.com/business/playbrain-raises-1-9-million-for-league-of-legends-esports-events-in-japan/.
[81] PlayBrain, "PlayBrain Launches Official Goods Store for Riot Games in Japan!" (Tokyo, Japan, 2021), https://playbrain.com/en/news/riot-games-store.

of the show and special exhibition booth.[82] This event correlates with Riot Games' publishing announcement that specifically cites the release of the highly anticipated show.[83]

Starting in 2019, Riot Games' has made never before seen efforts in the promotion of League in Japan. Their partnership with PlayBrain has provided an avenue into the market through the Japanese organization's understanding of Japan's existing game industry and ability to engage in on-the-ground promotion efforts. It is evident that Riot's *Arcane* has been recognized as a source of excitement and interest to spur Japanese gamers to download League. While statistics regarding the Japan server activity after *Arcane*'s release are not available, within the U.S. some player behaviors seem to have been affected by the show's popularity. Prior to November 6th, 2021, the champion Vi—who is a predominant character in the show—had a modest play rate of 5.74%. After the show's debut, that rate rose to 15.4%.[84] Due to limited data on Japan's reception to *Arcane* it is difficult to determine Japanese viewers' and gamers' opinions of the show. What can be concluded is that *Arcane* has inspired new marketing efforts in Japan by Riot Games. New League-centric media such as TV shows, movies, and comics may provide opportunities for Riot to expand its reach in Japan and improve awareness. Particularly, I recommend further investment and utilization of media that would speak to a Japanese audience such as Riot's Star Guardian story line which draws inspiration from the Japanese magical girl (魔法少女/*mahō shōjo*) subgenre. Utilizing themes and concepts already familiar to a Japanese audience will improve the likelihood of the innovation's attributes aligning with the familiarity and needs of players.

2020-21 may prove to be a transformational moment in the growth of eSports in Japan and League's growth in the region. In 2020, the Japan Times reported that the Japanese government had

[82] PlayBrain.
[83] Riot Games, "Riot Games Expands Publishing Business Into Asia Pacific."
[84] Andre Amos, "How Arcane Has Totally Changed League of Legends Meta in Season 12 Preseason," *Dextero*, November 19, 2021, https://www.dexerto.com/league-of-legends/arcane-changed-league-of-legends-meta-season-12-1702049/.

plans to launch an economic package with the goals of expanding the eSports economy and generating 285 billion yen.[85] In addition to economic support, the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry will work with companies and legal experts to create guidelines for the promotion of eSports in Japan. These efforts are expected to increase Japan's eSports market from a revenue of just 6.1 billion yen in 2019 to 15.3 billion yen in 2023.[86] Thus far, government support has been a missing component of Japan's eSports industry. The critical nature of adoption by opinion leaders has been demonstrated in South Korea and China, countries that can contribute success of their League eSports' teams to early government intervention and support. The Japanese government's financial investment and policy support will legitimize the eSports industry and professions within it. Legitimization will encourage the adoption of eSports content by mass media communications such as broadcasting networks who will seek to garner attention and capitalize on the industry's increased revenue. I recommend Riot Games swiftly interject themselves into this newfound government interest to advocate for the interests of the LJL (League of Legends Japan League) and influence government support to favor PC gaming. Or, instead of Riot Games directly engaging with the Japanese government, they can do so through the proxy of the LJL like the LCK's (League of Legends Champions Korea) collaboration with the KeSPA (Korea e-Spors Association).

My final recommendation breaks away from professional *League of Legends* and instead explores opportunities for Riot Games' 2020 release, *League of Legends: Wild Rift* (often shortened to *Wild Rift*). *Wild Rift* is based on *League of Legends'* with changes to game mechanics and user interface to fit a mobile format. *Wild Rifts*' mobility is ideal for Japan's gaming market which relies heavily on mobile gaming. Additionally, *Wild Rift* utilizes gacha mechanics to unlock various aesthetic changes to a player's

[85] Kevin Hitt, "Japanese Government Looks to Esports for Economic Boost Through 2025," The Esports Observer, April 1, 2020, https://archive.esportsobserver.com/japan-esports-plan-2025/.
[86] Hitt.

characters.[87] While this loot-acquisition format has been sharply criticized in the United States, Japanese players are more welcoming of games' inclusion of gacha. Japanese game companies have been including gacha mechanics since the early days of mobile game development and Japanese players are familiar with its real-world equivalent (capsule machines). *Wild Rifts'* mobile format and inclusion of mechanics familiar to Japanese players from its release improves its likelihood of adoption in comparison to its PC counterpart, *League of Legends*.

Wild Rift's first professional tournament took place in 2022 and was organized by Riot Games itself. In March of 2022, Riot Games announced it would once again host the tournament in 2023.[88] Riot Games' hands-on approach to *Wild Rifts'* professional scene breakaways from *League of Legends'* professional development in Japan decades prior. Riot Games direct involvement is important as it allows the company to guide *Wild Rifts*' professional development and increase its investment in Japan's eSports scene. *League of Legends* release in Japan and professional league creation lacked direction and promotion by Riot Games. This absence hindered the improvement of LoL's game experience for Japanese players in a timely manner. Additionally, Riots' absence coincided with the absence of promotion efforts that hindered the game's ability to grow through communication channels. In contrast, *Wild Rift*'s diffusion into Japan is directly supported by Riot Games and comes at a critical time as the Japanese government turns towards eSports investment.

Through *League of Legends: Wild Rift*, Riot Games is in a remarkable position to break into the Japanese gaming market and reach sustainable adoption of one of their titles. *Wild Rift'*s mobility and familiar game mechanics provide it with attributes that could successfully appeal to the casual Japanese gamer. Additionally, *Wild Rifts*' release came at a time in which multiple factors conducive to the game's

[87] Gacha—shorthand for the Japanese capsule toy vending machines called gachapon (ガチャポン)—is a method of unlocking in-game items via purchasing capsules/boxes/chests and opening them for loot.
[88] "Riot Games Officially Announces Wild Rift Japan Cup 2022," *Esports Grizzly*, March 9, 2022, https://www.esportsgrizzly.com/league-of-legends/riot-games-officially-announces-wild-rift-japan-cup-2022/.

popularity occurred—the release of *Arcane*, partnerships with Japan-based marketing organizations, and the Japanese government's proposed investment into eSports. It is critical that *Riot Games* continues to oversee professional *Wild Rift* competitions in Japan while increasing promotion efforts both internally and through partnerships (e.g., PlayBrain).

While *League of Legends* experienced multiple shortcomings in its diffusion to Japan, this is not a complete failure for Riots Games. Rather, as the company has grown, Riot Games has diversified its products and localization efforts that now make the company a strong potential competitor in the Japanese market. In addition to *Wild Rift*, Riot Games' is developing an arcade-style fighting game that already seems to have many appealing attributes for Japanese gamers. Utilizing *League of Legends* as a case study in understanding diffusion and adoption of foreign games in Japan, companies such as Riot Games can take the necessary steps to achieve success in the country. Furthermore, gaming companies in collaboration with eSports organizations and national/local governments can collaborate to improve the state of eSports in Japan and the experience of athletes and fans. Instead of viewing LoL eSports in Japan as a case of failure, we can recognize opportunities for growth that are beneficial to not just Japan's gaming community, but the health of the international eSports industry.

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