



Global Game, Global Life: Impressions from the League of Legends World Championship

Features

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by [Eron Rauch](#)

There's nothing quite like watching two top-tier teams go head-to-head in the heart of Los Angeles.



“Frescas! Mangos! Watermelon!” An elderly woman yells from behind a cart heaped with cut fruit in plastic bags. All around her, people with wings, swords, claws, armor, and tights slip past each other twenty-deep, spilling off the sidewalk into the stopped traffic. They knock against a folding sign with giant red letters proclaiming self-parking costs \$40, valet \$60. Deliberately chewing a long, dripping orange spear dusted with salt and dried chile, the vendor hollers again to the thronging crowd.

I never expected to be fighting crowds to find my friends at the the biggest esports event of 2016. But a couple nights ago I was up late zombie-ing through a few games of Overwatch after a double shift. A friend I haven't seen in months, despite the fact we live a few miles apart (a typical Los Angeles problem), joined me for a few games. While I'm cursing the enemy Genji -- he's either really good or I'm a little drunk -- my friend asks if I know anyone that wants to go see the *League of Legends* World Finals. Before my own reflected bullet can kill me, I surprise myself by saying yes -- me!

So even though I technically quit *League* (again) six months ago, here I am trying to find the right entrance for the biggest esports event of the year. Fumbling to type a question on my phone, I get bounced south by superheros rushing to some comic convention, and back north by fans in video game costumes and team jerseys surging the way I think I need to go. Soon enough, I can see a block-long line of blue plastic Porta-Johns forming a finger pointing directly at the slanting dome of the Staples Center.



The Staples Center, located in the heart of Los Angeles.

Above the swirl of fans on the street, there is a hundred foot banner flapping against the side of the stadium. On it is a CG rendering of the winner's trophy, the Summoner's Cup. Amidst the

steel skeletons of high rises, a broken radio rattles out half Spanish and half static as the overcast day inches imperceptibly to dusk. Hundreds of fans huddle in front of the stadium to shoot selfies that prove that this City of Angels battle royal is real.

Once I get to the packed main plaza, I find a Chinese television crew filming two young women in bright red fur bikinis and war paint at the foot of a bronze statue of Wayne Gretzky. His hockey stick and gloved hand held high matches their lofted prop weapons.

Across from a bronze statue of Magic Johnson, ticket scalpers sit next to me with practiced nonchalance, hats drawn low. One tries to eke out a pity sale from me with quickly mutating stories of children who were sick, or aren't sick and couldn't make the event, or maybe never liked this game anyway. "Just got one extra, cheap... maybe two if you got the cash?"

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On the public part of the sidewalk beyond the stadium, a half-dozen scraggly disciples of some hatred-filled church that fixates on hell and being homophobic are lifting their signs toward clouds that keep promising to rain but teasing with sun. They try to hold their ground amongst the 20,000-strong swell of fans from all over the world. Downtrodden and homeless panhandlers weave back and forth amongst them to the out-of-tune soundtrack of a busker's saxophones and the clatter of change. One *League* fan with a *Naruto* headband walks right past the protesters' spiteful megaphones, pauses ten feet later as though he just noticed them, fights back upstream and says to the preacher in a soft voice, "Man, I just don't think you got the right audience here," before letting the crowd gently sweep him downstream toward the stadium doors.





Cosplayers mill around outside the Staples Center ahead of the match.

Outside, the crowd presses against rusting crowd barriers. An almost exclusively Latino and African American security team reminds the fans to stop leaning on the barriers and keep moving. The fans dutifully oblige, washing away from the gates in spiraling eddies to go take pictures of costumes, compliment shirts for teams that were knocked out of the playoffs a month ago, and meet people they have only known online with hugs and sloppy grins. Cries of, "It's Project Ashe Noob!" and, "I just want anything but a 3-0!" mix with the rattle of trains, the shouts of the church, and the swell of epic video game music piped over a stack of giant speakers across the fence.

My friends show up just as game time draws nigh and drag me along to the entrance at the same time that the crowd swells and all at once tries to shove through the black-tinted two story doorway. We all squeeze to a stop in front of three layers of security. First a rummage through our bags. Beeping metal detectors come next. Last, a pat-down for any smuggled contraband.

Once clear, the stadium staff finally scans the our tickets and IDs, and reads directions from their screens to send us to our seats. Up the glass-clad escalators we ascend, a trio of police with tactical bullet proof vests and riot shotguns quietly laughing a private joke as they fade into the shadows below.

When my friend asked me to come, I assumed "free tickets" would mean sitting somewhere beside a cleaning closet near the rafters. But we're shocked that our tickets turn out to be door keys to a tastefully-appointed box for a major luxury European liquor conglomerate. The interior has been done up to match their most lux products, bottles of which linger, conspicuously empty, on every wall.

Looking out past the box, we momentarily are blinded. As our eyes adjust to behold beams of light that lance from the walls to illuminate a massive, single-family-home-sized four-panel screen hanging in center court. The ever-smiling heads of three announcers bark out predictions for the game. Their voices clatter and swirling in the vast shadows of the air-conditioned cavern. One announcer moves their headset back slightly and the crowd giggles at the slick dent in their otherwise perfectly groomed hair. Someone from the next box hollers, "At least their suits fit this year!" and we all laugh, since only a handful of years ago this whole operation was rag-tag.

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The live orchestra is just finishing packing up from the pre-show, lovingly placing instruments in battered flight cases, when the house lights drop and incredibly saturated red and blue lights straddle the arena cutting the audience into sections. These colors are typically represent the two sides in the game, which would be about as exciting as cheering for black or white in chess. But for people who follow the professional *League of Legends* scene, they take on special meaning, since they also blaze out as the respective team colors for the bout between Korean telecomm versus Korean tech industry. Tonight, two of the most dominant teams in the world, SK Telecom Team 1 aka SKT, red, and Samsung Galaxy, blue, battle.





Team SSG takes the stage.

SKT walks out across the awkwardly rumpled vinyl floor covering, showing off their matching letterman jackets and pristine New Balance high-tops -- A perfect replica of the uniform that cool preppy kids from a high school drama might wear. Ascending two small steps they enter an oddly seashell-curved booth where they will play. But the crowd doesn't give a damn about architecture or the shoes, and is roaring "S! K! T! S! K! T!" over and over in support of the defending champions. Everyone is spamming selfies with the stadium on Instagram and Facebook in not-so-secret hopes of eliciting jealousy from their friends and followers. A friend Facebook messages us back the request to yell the star player's name for them. So of course we all bellow "Faker!" with our hands cupped to our mouths as the he adjusts his soundproof headset and chair height in front of 15,000 fans.

Amidst a sea of glowing advertisements that crawl along the inside of the arena -- Toyota, McDonalds, Staples and Riot Games mixed with suggested hashtags for the audience to use -- the timer on the hovering screen counts down the final seconds. The crowd chants along, lagging by a beat. Sharp white strobes flicker at 0:00, and on the ground a few hints of smoke rise. Technicians run to the floor, scrambling to pull and push at cables while shouting into their headsets. We assume there was supposed to be pyrotechnics, but we never find out since the games immediately get underway.

The challengers enter, striding across a faint projection of their logo on the court where the Lakers and Kings have both won championships. After the long walk, they meld into their computer chairs on the opposite side of the arena. The audience chants a scattered slur of, "Sammmsuunnnggg," or triplets of, "SSG", but no one shouts the Galaxy part of their name, perhaps chagrined about the recent recall of said-named explosive devices that can no longer be brought on airplanes. Or perhaps the five syllables are just awkward on the inebriated tongues of this new breed of virtual sports fans. They are too far away to see if they also have sponsored footwear.



 ZOOM

There is smoke, but (fortunately) no fire.

Joining the shadowy red and blue crowd, we cheer, pound our feet, clap, and yell, all the while ogling the hanging screen along the way. Every so often we glance down at the people hunched over tiny computer monitors on the stadium floor. We cheer and jeer both teams, switching sides repeatedly. Together, it seems like we-the-audience are cheering mostly for the continued existence of this game, this match, this moment that is proof of the realness of video games amidst a frantically changing world.

I'm confused as everyone in the box forgets the action for a long moment to run into the hallway behind and swarm the two grinning men in uniforms pushing a cart along the institutional gray carpet. I have no idea what they are doing, so I get up as well and go outside while the players frantically click away. On closer inspection the wheeled burden these two men push is loaded with desserts. Apparently Staples Center knows what its most high-powered guests want: plates with oversized M&M's ice cream cones, Snicker's cheesecake, and Bailey's brownie sundaes.

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After each match ends there is another gout of pyrotechnics arcing from the floor, where they hang impossibly, wavering and jittering brightly, before falling and fading to nothing behind the exhausted players. Their formerly rigid frames are now slouched in their booths after 70 frantic minutes in front of a computer. Suited coaches clasp their sagging shoulders and eventually the teams leave the arena in a winding line to scheme and regroup for each next game.

On the omnipresent screen a timer meticulously counts down to wait before the next game. It is punctuated only by advertisements for the new *XXX* movie featuring the series' original star. "I miss Vin Diesel," someone sighs, forgetting about the game for a moment. "He was too busy playing Dungeons & Dragons to make movies," one heckles. Another yells back, "I'd play D&D with him any day!" and the shadows in the seats all the unseen hecklers laugh in agreement.

Out past the hallways where the dessert carts roam, I join the snaking line for the bathrooms. The tiled alcove is packed. Almost everyone has a phone in hand. From behind stalls, off of mirrors, and over urinal flushes, a chorus of the game's Twitch and Youtube streams blast the start of the next game over dozens of these tiny speakers at once. Fans pause in the hallway to stand around a phone to watch the game before continuing to their seats.



After three matches, SKT leads SSG 2-1.

The treadmill of games continues, closer than anyone expected. I haughtily predicted a 3-0 sweep for SK, but that was four games and over five hours ago. As game five starts up we are all starting to smell a bit musty and sweaty from our marathon of cheering, flailing, and drinking. The first few minutes are a blur but the announcer's voice booms with renewed vigor, "A huge influx of gold!" We perk up in anticipation. "Look how much they punish mistakes!" a neighbor waves and shouts over the plexiglass divider. He points toward the empty center of the stadium as though to show us the imaginary landscape where their judo-like reversal propelled SKT ahead of SSG once and for all.

The red SKT drive their digital warriors to shatter the opposing blue crystal nexus to end the series.

The crowd finds a third or fourth wind and suddenly everyone is screaming and standing in anticipation as the red SKT drive their digital warriors to shatter the opposing blue crystal nexus to end the series. Off in the distance, banks of spotlights turn on and we can see the casters' booths. Now, dozens of countries, each with their own duo or trio sectioned off, are each

frothing into their cameras for the home audiences linked across satellites and cables under the sea.

The final victory screen flashes. After a heartbeat, the stadium lighting erupts as though someone had bumped the button for demo mode. Scintillating swirls of every color and shape form a vortex. Hundred-foot long words on the floor celebrate the winning team. A small fountain of dazzling sparks sizzle above the audience from one corner of the screen. Nothing happens at the other corners and there are more men yelling through headsets on the sidelines to other men pulling at various boxes and plugs. Heedless of the malfunction, SKT tries on their World Champion jackets in a new golf-inspired ritual vestment before lining up to start the victor's ceremony.



SKT moves to center stage to accept their trophy.

We're uncertain how we feel about how half of the championships in *League of Legends* have gone to this single team, but we cheer an expected amount and sip on one last concoction hacked together from the remnants at the bottoms of the bottles. One of the SSG players, face shoved in his hands, knees pulled up close on his sleek futuristic chair, continues to sit in his booth long after his team has drifted away.

We decide to leave early to avoid the crush of the crowd, so we salute our neighbors and strategically wander towards the halls. On the way out of the building we catch fleeting glimpses of the victory ceremony through the open balconies and doorways. Passing a picture of Ricky Martin screwed tight to the beige wall, we look down the next open door to glimpse the only woman to get any main event screen- or stage-time doing a quick interview with Faker through his translator. I can't help but wonder what message that sends to the very young woman whose family shared our box, and who was touted by the other guests as the best *LoL* player amongst their veteran gamer friends.

We laugh and claim to have forgotten it was Halloween Saturday, even though every one of us deliberately skipped those parties to go see the crowning of the new World Champion.

The security staff is exhausted after the double-shift epic competition, one exit guard sleeping on the floor while the other keeps her orange baton flashing toward the street. Before we can get to the doors, we crash into random friends who had the same idea for a quick escape. Our expanded posse is slower now, and fails to scurry far enough ahead of the tremendous press, sliding down the momentarily empty stairs, only to be wrapped in bodies and shouts from the stadium's roiling celebration, echoing, echoing.

Our group bobs in the euphoric crowd, getting washed out through the pale green mercury-lit downtown sidewalks at midnight, past the Danger Dog sellers, past men rolling empty 55 gallon drums, past the tents of a homeless, past the fashion district's iron-barred warehouses filled with textiles from the world over. Luminescent half-built towers and their dance-partner cranes loom overhead. We are rushed past bar after bar filled with filled partiers in sexy costumes of famous people and made-up characters. They gulp drinks and sway below plastic Jack-O-Lanterns and flame-retardant spider webs. We laugh and claim to have forgotten it was Halloween Saturday, even though every one of us deliberately skipped those parties to go see the crowning of the new World Champion.



 ZOOM

Official photo of SKT as they don their champion jackets.

Further into the shadows the parking lot fees count down as we turn further south. \$60, \$40, \$20, \$5, \$3, then there is a long trail of glittering glass from a car windows on the ground in the two parking spots in front of my car. But my dented Honda is intact, nothing of value to steal I suppose. Recounting the games to each other, laughing about our screams to Faker, reminiscing how many years we've played *League* and the ever-growing number of times we've quit, we drive off into the freeway's float and whine. All around the smoke from the crack and fizzle of illegal Halloween fireworks settles in a fine pale ash across the city.

All photographs provided by Eron Rauch, with the exception of the SKT team close-up. That one comes from Riot's [official Flickr](#).

Disclosure: League of Legends developer Riot and Zam share a corporate parent. Riot has no control over our editorial and was not involved in any way with the direction of this article.

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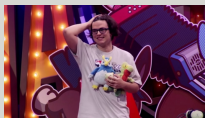
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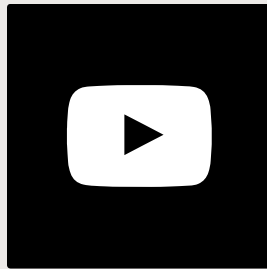
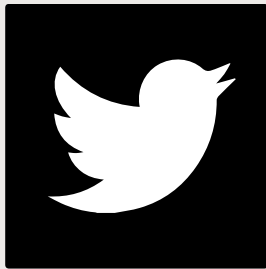
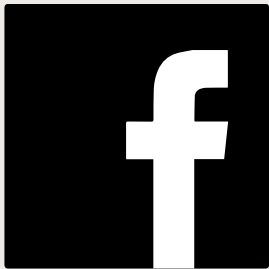
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