Riot Games' Content Marketing Approach for VALORANT Champions 2022

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Abstract

VALORANT is a competitive first-person shooter (FPS) game developed and released by Riot Games in 2020. The game has celebrated high player involvement in the competitive gaming scene wherein, only two years after the game's release, the grand finals of the culminating event of 2022, VALORANT Champions 2022, peaked at 1.5 million viewers (Esports Charts, 2022a). Building on firsthand observation of following VALORANT Champions 2022 as it took place, this paper explores Riot Games' content marketing approach for VALORANT Champions 2022, its impact on player engagement, and compares it with other esports marketing strategies. I analyze the main mediums of content distribution for the VALORANT Champions 2022 event (social media, website, and in-game content) and compare them against the content marketing sector using the latest developments in esports, with reference to competing game developers and esports organizations. I argue that Riot Games focuses on inclusivity of the global market, involving diverse types of players and regions, and their design/marketing choices create immersive experiences that incentivize players to be a part of the event in one form or another. The results suggest that other games with an esports scene could implement and expand content marketing, creating more themed experiences, similar to how Riot Games does with anthems, in-game content, and more, to grow and maintain interest in their competitive events.

Keywords

VALORANT; VALORANT Champions 2022; content marketing; marketing; esports.

Introduction

In recent years, content marketing has become central to digital marketing strategies. Content marketing is a marketing approach that focuses on providing consumers with information that is interesting, useful, problem-solving, entertaining, or in some way beneficial to the consumer from a trustworthy source, without overtly selling a product (Forrest, 2019). As mentioned by Content Marketing Institute (2014), content marketing focuses on creating and distributing personalized, valuable content to an interactive, engaged, and targeted audience. The content is anything created and uploaded to a website by the company or its community, including blog posts, videos, podcasts, and reports (Chapman, 2012). The content forms a connection between the brand and the customer (Nufer, 2015), which ties in with event marketing and results in a positive customer experience and brand value.

Jefferson and Tanton (2013) argue for a shift from a selling to a helping perspective in marketing—making it easier for businesses to reach their audience and provide quality experiences. At the same time, consumers can collectively determine their attitude toward a brand by leaving feedback and reviews (Alsulami et al., 2021). This view aligns with Sripathi and Kunchaparthi's (2020) observation of the increasing importance of consumer engagement in digital marketing.

This shift is particularly relevant in the esports industry, where the audience interacts with brands and seeks experiences mainly through online content. As an industry, esports is not only about playing computer games competitively but also involves watching, learning, and immersing in esports through the aesthetic experiences offered by event creators or being part of esports communities (Seo, 2013). Game developers, event organizers, esports teams, brands, and creators invested in the esports industry create most of these experiences with informational and entertaining online content. This content can range from tournaments to match analysis, video compilations, and more. Yin et al. (2023) highlight that content's entertainment, reliability, and diversity significantly influence viewers' experiences during esports content viewing and are areas marketers and game developers should enhance. In other words, investing in content marketing is vital for esports and esports event marketing.

With that in mind, this paper analyzes *VALORANT*'s marketing strategy. *VALORANT* was published in 2020 by Riot Games, which is owned by Tencent Holdings and accounted for 11.04% of the global esports market in 2021 (Gough, 2022). Riot Games is known for two major esports titles: *League of Legends* (*LoL* hereafter; Riot Games, 2009) and *VALORANT* (Riot Games, 2020). While *LoL* is a well-established esports title, *VALORANT* has only been around for a few years, and VALORANT Champions 2022 was the second-ever event of such scale, following VALORANT Champions 2021. Despite being new, *VALORANT*'s esports scene grew rapidly. VALORANT Champions 2022, the culminating

VALORANT esports event of 2022, peaked at 1.5 million viewers during the grand finals (Esports Charts, 2022a), which is considerably high when compared to well-established rival game's *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (*CS:GO* hereafter; Valve, 2012) event of the same year, which peaked at 2.1 million viewers (Esports Charts, 2022b).

In an interview with One Esports, Riot Games executive producer of *VALORANT* esports events Jean-Baptiste Blot said that the *VALORANT* development team had received help from experienced *LoL* esports departments when working on the game, but that he had a "specific vision for what VCT [VALORANT Champions Tour] [should] loo[k] and fee[l] like," including colours and reflection of the in-game lore (Tan, 2023, p. 11). Blot added that *VALORANT* had to be inclusive and had to be about self-expression (Tan, 2023, p. 15). This is reflected in the in-game lore of *VALORANT*. *VALORANT*'s playable characters (also known as "agents") find their origins in real cultures, and maps are based on real locations. For example, the agent Fade is of Turkish origin and was designed to be a character Turkish players could potentially relate to, from her clothes to her in-game abilities (Haas, 2022). Such inclusivity and representation make *VALORANT* more progressive than the parent esports title *LoL* and open more opportunities for marketing and community interactions.

Methodology

Drawing on Egol et al.'s (2014) work on digital marketing models, this paper examines how content marketing fits within Riot Games' marketing approach using the developer's more established esports title, *LoL*. Using qualitative (e.g., website heatmaps, content themes) and quantitative approaches (e.g., social media metrics, search engine optimization [SEO] analysis), I evaluated three core mediums of content distribution for VALORANT Champions 2022: social media, website (valorantesports.com), and in-game content. The goal is to understand the reasoning behind *VALORANT*'s explosive growth and high community interest.

I evaluated *VALORANT*'s social media presence and identified its brand positionality by using an interview with Riot Games' global social media lead Amber Jackson conducted by Game Developer (Francis, 2022). I analyzed multiple social media accounts and their content, primarily focusing on the official VALORANT Esports Twitter (also known as X) profiles, since Twitter is the main informational hub for news and interaction with brands (Zote, 2022). Moreover, out of all social media platforms for VALORANT Esports, Twitter has the most frequent cadence of posting and the most variety of content. The analysis considered top-performing posts using key content metrics identified by Rancati and Gordini (2014) for a quantitative overview.

I analyzed the official VALORANT Esports website considering fundamental usability factors, effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction

(Rusu et al., 2015). This was done through visual and heatmap analysis to evaluate the content and how it factors into the overall quality of information on the website (Alsulami et al., 2021). The quantitative analysis of the website included looking at it from the SEO point of view, using tools seobility.net and Ahrefs, to understand the website's role in the content marketing strategy. Seobility.net was chosen for its comprehensive, user-friendly analysis tools, providing a general overview of on-page SEO elements, while Ahrefs is an industry-standard SEO tool (Hande, 2022) that offers in-depth backlink analysis and domain authority insights, which are crucial for understanding the site's competitive standing. Lastly, I qualitatively describe the in-game content using Smith and Sun's (2016) in-game advertising theory. I discuss core pieces of in-game content, like cosmetic items and visual overhaul, and how they affected the gaming experience of a *VALORANT* player.

In the last section, I give an outlook on the content marketing sector within esports, starting with the development of *VALORANT* as a game, namely its new Premier game mode, and how it fits into Riot Games' vision. Here, I discuss active esports teams' involvement in community engagement through their own platforms, drawing on González-Moreno et al. (2022, p. 58). I analyze company-wide activations, content, and Web3-based platforms. Finally, I briefly compare Riot Games' content marketing efforts to other competitive game developers like Blizzard Entertainment and Valve, discussing how a lack of content marketing strategies aimed at involving multiple audience segments, especially casual players, can negatively affect the game's esports scene.

Author Positionality

I approached this subject from the perspective of a game industry professional. I studied esports at the university level, with a focus on marketing and social media, and have several years of experience as a journalist and SEO writer in the game industry, covering video games such as *VALORANT*, *LoL*, *CS:GO*, and *Overwatch.* I am also invested in some of these games as a player, following their competitive scenes and experiences created by developers. This positionality allows me to have an insight into *VALORANT*, its audience, and its community. While this positionality may introduce bias in the form of favouritism, it also brings a hands-on perspective on the subject. At the same time, I drew comparisons to other games using tangible evidence and different sources, including viewership numbers and content examples to mitigate bias as much as possible.

Riot Games and Esports Content Marketing

Riot Games' content marketing operates internally; Riot organizes, hosts, and markets its major esports events without third-party involvement, giving the company more freedom in creating esports experiences. To put this into perspective, a game like *CS:GO* partners with external organizations like Electronic Sports League (ESL),

Professional Gamers League (PGL), and BLAST Pro Series to organize and support its esports events. These organizations have been Valve's partners for over a decade and have delivered multiple large-scale events. Despite that, the product delivered by third-party organizers, including digital content, can differ and may not fully convey the message intended by the game developer. In August 2023, Valve announced new requirements for running large-scale competitive events to eliminate unique business relationships or other conflicts of interest between third-party tournament organizers like ESL and participating teams (Valve, 2023). While this is not a marketing example, it is safe to assume that the degree of limitations can extend to marketing as well and affect the content put out by the event organizer.

Riot Games' content marketing for the annual League of Legends Worlds events follows a Customer Experience Designer model, as described by Egol et al.'s (2014) digital marketing model overview. In this model, the company provides a superior customer experience through interacting with customers at multiple touchpoints (Egol et al., 2014). The company also prioritizes segmentation, needs assessment, and omnichannel presence, followed by innovative and optimized content (Egol et al., 2014). In the case of League of Legends Worlds 2022, Riot firstly reached customers who might be unfamiliar with the game and its esports scene by introducing the music artist Lil Nas X as the face of *LoL* (Šimić, 2022a) to create the event's anthem, thus increasing the reach of the event massively and targeting a wider audience with the celebrity endorsement effect (Basiouny, 2023). The opening ceremony of League of Legends Worlds 2022 also featured songs that were familiar to the dedicated *LoL* player base. Secondly, to attract casual *LoL* players who might not have been interested in the event, Riot Games used in-game content. During League of Legends Worlds 2022, Riot Games added an in-game event for the occasion featuring missions, in-game shop items, rewards, and a pick'em challenge where players could predict match outcomes of the tournament to earn rewards (Amos, 2022). With that content available to everyone who was playing *LoL*, players who did not follow the game's competitive scene were still aware of the event.

Content Marketing for VALORANT Champions 2022

The content marketing for *VALORANT* and VALORANT Champions 2022 inherited the approach taken for *LoL* and was applied to multiple mediums of content distribution. First, regarding social media, instead of one-way marketing, brands on social media platforms build connection and trust with the consumer by providing valuable content (Forrest, 2019), which is also the case for *VALORANT* and its esports events. Second, the VALORANT Esports website offers the most detailed information about ongoing events in *VALORANT* esports, including VALORANT Champions 2022, becoming the go-to destination for any major piece of content and invested fans who want to learn more about the events featured in that content. Lastly, Riot Games extends its marketing for events through content within the game itself. While in-

game content is not directly a part of content marketing theory, it offers extended exposure to the whole player base of the game, including players who may not be familiar with or interested in the event.

Social Media
Social media has become a key part of digital marketing as businesses can address a range of stakeholders, including current and potential customers, employees, journalists, bloggers, and the general public (Sheela, 2018). Since esports is a digital experience, social media is a logical centerpiece of esports content marketing. By analyzing VALORANT Champions Tour's (VCT) social media, with a focus on Twitter, I argue that the primary message Riot Games communicates through *VALORANT* is the inclusion of a diverse player base.

In an interview, Amanda Jackson, who worked on creating a social media presence for two Riot Games projects, reveals that one of the key elements to consider when approaching social media is "the main thing you want to communicate with your fans" (Francis, 2022, para. 6). I focused on Twitter out of all social media platforms listed on the VALORANT Esports website (Riot Games, 2022a) because it is the main informational hub when interacting with brands (Zote, 2022) and allows for sharing different types of content, from plain text to videos and embeds.

Method and data collection
I analyzed the content posted on Twitter by the official VALORANT Esports account (@VALORANTEsports) from August 18th to September 19th, which is the period from the first tweet about VALORANT Champions 2022 until the day after the grand finals of the event. The goal was to identify five to six top-performing posts by the number of likes, shares, and retweets, which are the baseline metrics of content engagement (Rancati & Gordini, 2014).

Findings: Peak of user interactions
Two of the six most popular Tweets by likes and retweets posted throughout this timeframe (see Table 1) are highlights of spectacular moments during matches, with engagement being around 50–60,000 likes and 10,000 retweets per post. The announcement tweets for major content pieces by Riot Games, including merchandise and in-game rewards, gathered on average 10,000 likes, except for the anthem reveal. However, the anthem reveal post had wider exposure since it was posted on the main *VALORANT* account rather than on the VALORANT Esports account only.

Tweet	Likes	Retweets	Quote Retweets	URL
Gameplay highlight	98K	18.4K	4,826	https://twitter.com/VALORANTEsports/status/1565395973420986368
Winner announce-ment	77K	14K	1,983	https://twitter.com/VALORANTEsports/status/1571571219081707529
Anthem reveal (posted on the @playVALORANT account)	57.2K	12.3K	3,358	https://twitter.com/PlayVALORANT/status/1561700060642257305 7
Gameplay highlight	44.4K	7,762	1,656	https://twitter.com/VALORANTEsports/status/1568299580634316800
Technical issue update from Riot Games	41.8K	2,834	3,013	https://twitter.com/VALORANTEsports/status/1569818049867354112
Winner victory photo	20.2K	1,266	89	https://twitter.com/VALORANTEsports/status/1571850627499573249

Table 1. The most popular VALORANT Champions 2022 tweets by the official VALORANT Esports Twitter account.

The rest of the content, including match results, less spectacular highlights, tournament standings, and one-line tweets had significantly lower engagement, which is unsurprising because it had a narrower target audience. For example, not everyone might be interested in the match results of two specific teams, but most fans would be interested in seeing a spectacular moment from that match. Moreover, Twitter has historically been a platform with a lower engagement rate than others (Kim, 2019), making it more difficult to understand the performance of content with a lower number of likes and shares. Although Twitter introduced a feature to display the number of views of each tweet that could assist in showcasing the engagement rate, that feature does not apply to older posts, including those in this analysis.

While the general format of the content is similar to that of other events, like Intel Extreme Master (IEM) Rio Major 2022 for *CS:GO* (IEM, 2022), the content for VALORANT Champions 2022 differentiates itself by the presence of a non-game piece of content, namely the event's anthem. This anthem gave the event a level of significance and tied in further with in-game content.

Findings: Regional accounts

VALORANT also has a set of regional subsidiary accounts for esports (see Table 2) that post regional esports content and general *VALORANT* content (see Table 3).

Account name[1]	Twitter handle
VALORANT Champions Tour EMEA	@valesports_emea
VALORANT Champions Tour JAPAN	@valesports_jp
VALORANT Champions Tour NA	@valesports_na
VALORANT Champions Tour KR	@valesports_kr
VALORANT Champions Tour Brazil	@valesports_br
VALORANT Esports LATAM	@valesports_la

Table 2. All of VALORANT Esports' Twitter social media accounts.

Account name	Twitter handle
VALORANT France	@VALORANTfr
VALORANT Spain	@VALORANTes
VALORANT – Italia	@itVALORANT

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[1] Country was added manually when it was not already mentioned.

VALORANT // Polska	@VALORANTPL
VALORANT LATAM	@VALORANTLATAM
VALORANT // BRASIL	@VALORANTBrasil
VALORANT // JAPAN	@VALORANTjp
VALORANT // Россия и СНГ	@valorantru
VALORANT // TÜRKİYE	@VALORANTtr
VALORANT // Arabia	@VALORANTar
VALORANT // PORTUGAL	@VALORANT_PT
VALORANT // UK, IE & Nordics	@VALORANTukn
VALORANT // India & South Asia	@playVALORANTsa
VALORANT Germany	@VALORANTde

Table 3. All of *VALORANT*'s Twitter social media accounts.

While those accounts are not dedicated to posting content for VALORANT Champions, they have major implications for community engagement and their involvement in *VALORANT* esports outside of the VALORANT Champions 2022 context. Each regional esports account posts updates on events and leagues featuring teams from that specific region, complemented by documentaries and interviews. On the other hand, regional *VALORANT* game accounts use a considerable amount of user-generated content (UGC). UGC is a major factor in *VALORANT*'s content marketing (Kristian & Katie, 2022), which is why social media accounts share an abundance of UGC, including community cosplay, gameplay videos, and text tweets.

Several posts suggest that Riot Games also pays attention to the content posting time depending on the region. For example, in the case of the Ion 2.0 skin line announcement trailer (VALORANT, 2022), every regional account posted the tweet around 4:00 PM BST except for the Japanese account, which posted it at 10:00 PM BST. This could be because 4:00 PM BST is 00:00 in JST. 10:00 PM BST is 6:00 AM in JST.

Alternative platforms
Although I primarily analyzed Twitter, similar care for content and its distribution can be observed on other platforms and the choice of platforms themselves. For example, there are only four *VALORANT* regional TikTok accounts: Brazil, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.[2] Those are the countries with the biggest TikTok userbase

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[2] Since the original research, the list of VALROANT TikTok accounts has expanded to include Poland, Germany, Turkey, and other countries.

according to Lin (2022) out of all the countries Riot Games targets with *VALORANT* content. On the other hand, there are no *VALORANT* Twitter accounts for Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines because Twitter is not widely used in those countries compared to Facebook, according to user statistics (Degenhard, 2022). Such focus on individual markets can be seen across other Riot Games' esports titles like *LoL*. With *LoL*, Riot expressed its commitment to supporting its competitive scene and ensuring stability to its pro-players in countries like South Korea (Davidovici-Nora, 2017) and having dedicated country managers to nurture communities in their target markets like Turkey (Riot Games, 2022b).

Considering all these findings, the main element that Riot Games communicates in the case of *VALORANT* is the inclusivity and the importance of every region within the community. This incentivizes players to be more invested in *VALORANT* while positively representing the game in front of other esports titles and non-gaming audiences.

Website

The website is a platform where transactions or conversions may take place, and monitoring website metrics can help work towards making sales (Rancati & Gordini, 2014). However, in the case of VALORANT Champions 2022 and *VALORANT* esports in general, the website and pages related to the event do not involve purchases. Instead, they focus on providing relevant information regarding ongoing *VALORANT* esports events.

I started the website's analysis by exploring the main sections the consumer may use, following the fundamental usability factors: effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction. Those factors define the attributes of the software product by evaluating the ability of the user to achieve their goals (Rusu et al., 2015).

Method and data collection

I used the Wayback Machine (Internet Archive, 2022) online tool to revisit the VALORANT Esports website from August 28, 2022, a few days before the event's start. This allowed me to see how the website was gearing up for the event launch. The website was then put through the Attention Insight AI tool to simulate an attention heatmap (see Figure 1) and understand the core usability goals of the website. According to its website, this tool has been trained on 70,000 participants' data sets from eye-tracking studies and has passed the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's tests with 92.5% accuracy, making it an appropriate tool for the base analysis of the VALORANT Champions 2022 website (Attention Insight, 2024). The VALORANT Esports website heatmap is split into three sections: the navigation bar at the top (0.5% attention percentage), the match schedule (19.3% attention percentage), and the latest/featured post (74.6% attention percentage).

Figure 1. VALORANT Esports website heatmap. Created using Attention Insight and Wayback Machine to review the website on August 28, 2022. Screenshot by the author.

The latest post on the page includes everything a user needs to know about the event; notably, the match format, game times, and team brackets. The user can quickly see the list of upcoming matches in the match schedule section, allowing them to view the schedule in their time zone. For more detailed information, the user can use the navigation bar containing intuitive icons, directing them to the home pages of the Riot Games website and VALORANT Esports website, followed by the written menus "schedule," "watch," "standings," and "news." The "schedule," "watch," and "standings" pages are all made similarly to allow the user to easily watch previous and ongoing games and to view the results of previous games. The user can also use filters to find the events they are most interested in while automatically selecting the biggest events taking place at the moment. The "news" menu contains all the news posts and features about *VALORANT* esports. There are articles explaining the VALORANT Champions 2022 tournament format, how to watch or physically attend the event, merchandise reveals, in-game content, features on participating teams, and a tournament recap. Some of those articles are featured on the main page, as mentioned before.

SEO is another vital part of content marketing (Baltes, 2015). To inspect the SEO state of the VALORANT Esports website, I used the free SEO checker Seobility (see Figure 2) and the paid tool Ahrefs (see Figure 3). The analysis primarily looked at the overall SEO scores, domain rating (DR), and backlink number.
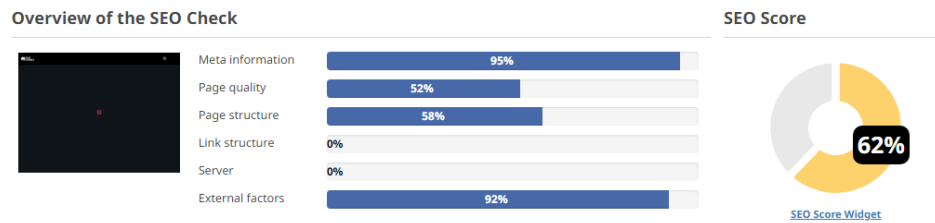
Figure 2. VALORANTesports.com website SEO score on seobility.net. Screenshot by the author.
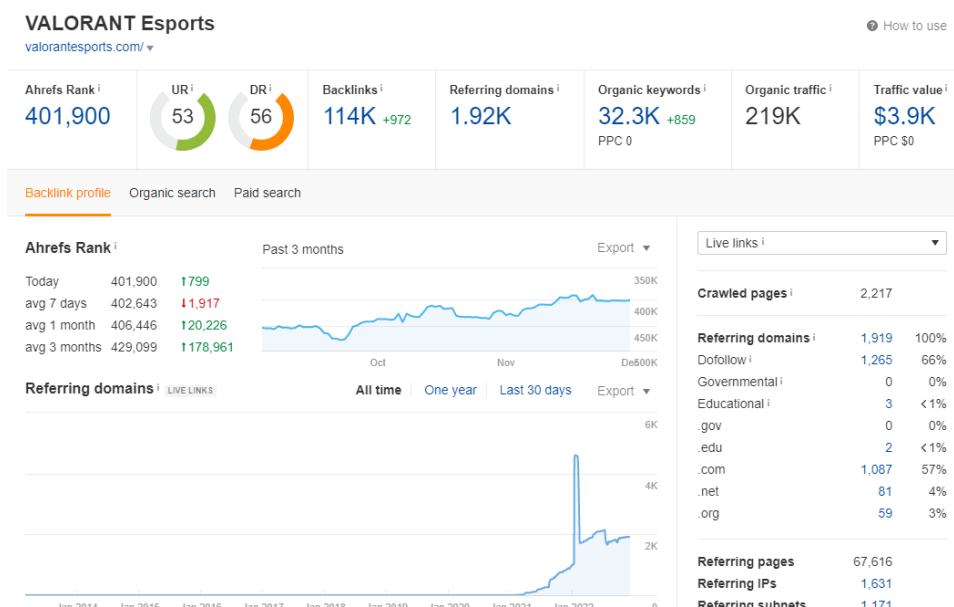

Figure 3. VALORANTesports.com site overview in Ahrefs. Screenshot by the author.

Findings: Content purpose

The heatmap and visual analysis of the VALORANT Esports website confirm that the website's goal is to deliver up-to-date information on the tournament's progress and ongoing matches. To that end, the website only has two main sections on the home page: the latest post and the upcoming match schedule. Users can find any additional information using the navigation bar at the top of the page. SEO results suggest weak link structures, indicating the website functioned more as a content repository than a promotional tool.

Findings: Regional distribution

During VALORANT Champions 2022, the website looked very similar across all regional versions. However, after the event had concluded, the website had a few differences. The North American and Latin American websites (see Figure 4) have featured articles section on the home pages, enhancing visual appeal and contributing to information quality presented on the website (Alsulami et al., 2021) as opposed to the European version of the website (see Figure 5). In addition, the Latin American website featured much more regional content, including

interviews with players and their stories, giving them additional spotlight, which ties into the inclusivity and involvement elements of *VALORANT* discussed in the social media section.
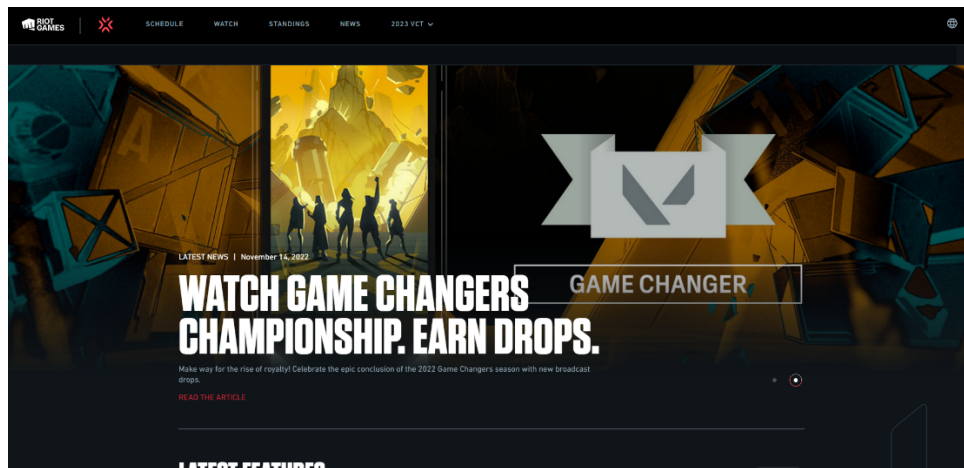

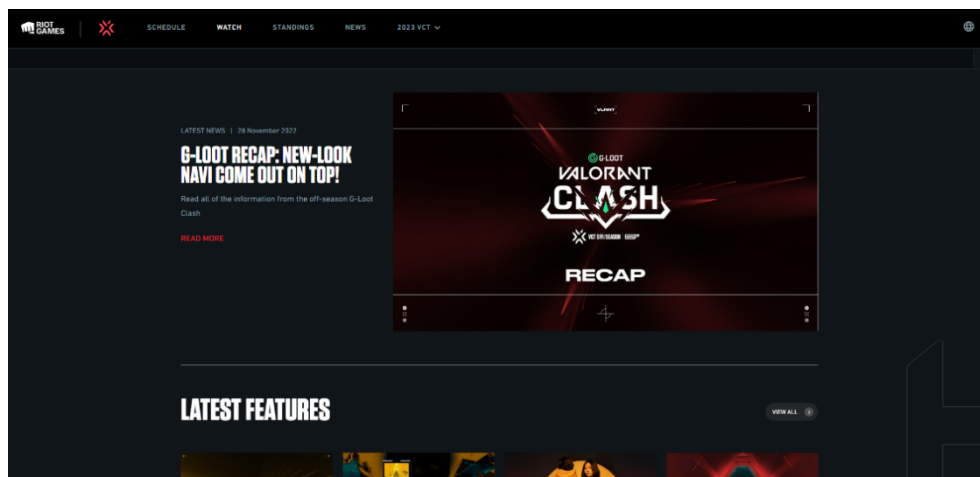Figure 4. The Latin American version of the VALORANT Esports website. Screenshot by the author.

Figure 5. The European version of the VALORANT Esports website. Screenshot by the author.

Findings: Relationship between web traffic spike and events' dates
Despite VALORANT Champions 2022 being the biggest *VALORANT* event of the year, the content did not bring new traffic to the website (see Figure 6). The only visible spikes in traffic happened from the 9th to the 14th of July 2022 and the 7th to the 15th of November 2022. Those dates respectively correspond with the game days of the VALORANT Champions Tour Stage 2: Masters Copenhagen and those of the VALORANT Game Changers 2022 Championship.
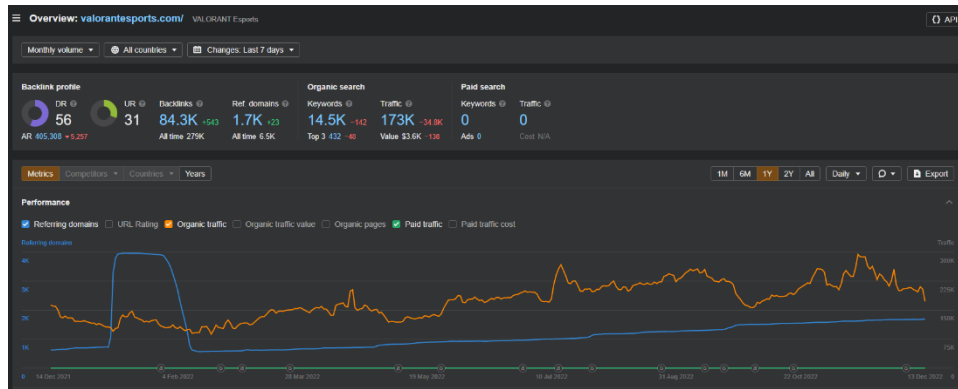
Figure 6. VALORANT Esports website traffic overview. Screenshot by the author.

When comparing the VALORANT Esports website to that of other esports titles with similar functionality and content, namely Overwatch League (see Figure 7) and IEM (see Figure 8), the VALORANT Esports website has a higher degree of traffic. While it is difficult to identify why, it could be inferred that, thanks to other means of content marketing such as in-game content and the inclusivity of social media, the game's community is much more involved in *VALORANT's* esports overall.
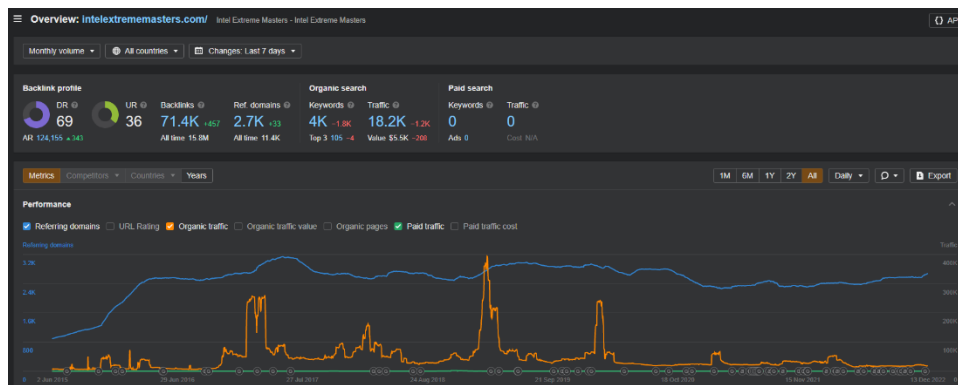

Figure 7. Overwatch League website traffic overview. Screenshot by the author.
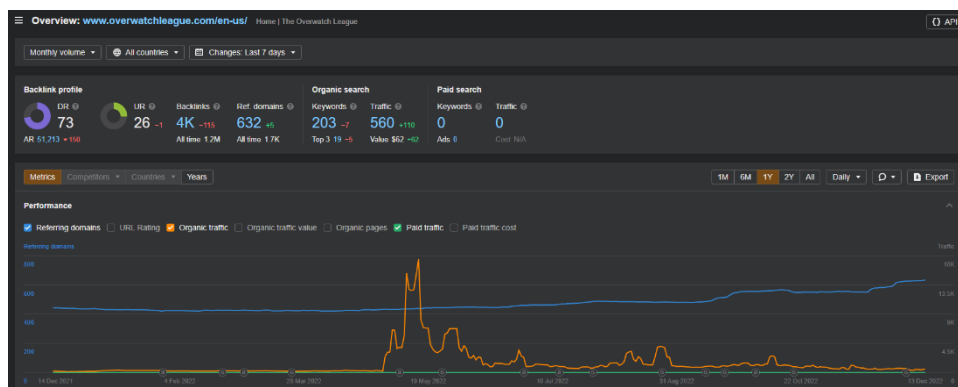

Figure 8. IEM website traffic overview. Screenshot by the author.

In-Game Content

Marketing a product inside a game is described as in-game advertising (Smith & Sun, 2016), and this analysis considers in-game content as such an advertising method. Riot Games uses in-game content in *LoL* to market esports events to the casual player base, strengthening the link between fans and professional players (Davidovici-Nora, 2017). A similar method was observed for *VALORANT* during VALORANT Champions 2022.

Visual changes in *VALORANT*

During VALORANT Champions 2022, the game visually changed. Upon launching the game, players were greeted with an announcement featuring information about the new esports content (see Figure 9). The announcement was designed using a colour palette specifically created for the event, which is vital to maintaining brand consistency and creating visual recognition of the event (Karjalainen & Snelders, 2009). The same design choices applied for all other pieces of content related to VALORANT Champions 2022. After closing the announcement, the player could see the new main menu screen that featured a motion graphic of VALORANT Champions 2022 accompanied by the altered version of the event's anthem (Mattic, 2022). The revamped game contributed to creating an immersive experience via usability and appeal (Leroy, 2021)*.* It created a competitive aesthetic that connected the wider player base to the major event without any need to physically attend or watch it online. As will be further discussed, such immersion and aesthetics are not something competitive games prioritize as much, and this is why *VALORANT* stands out from the marketing and player investment standpoint.
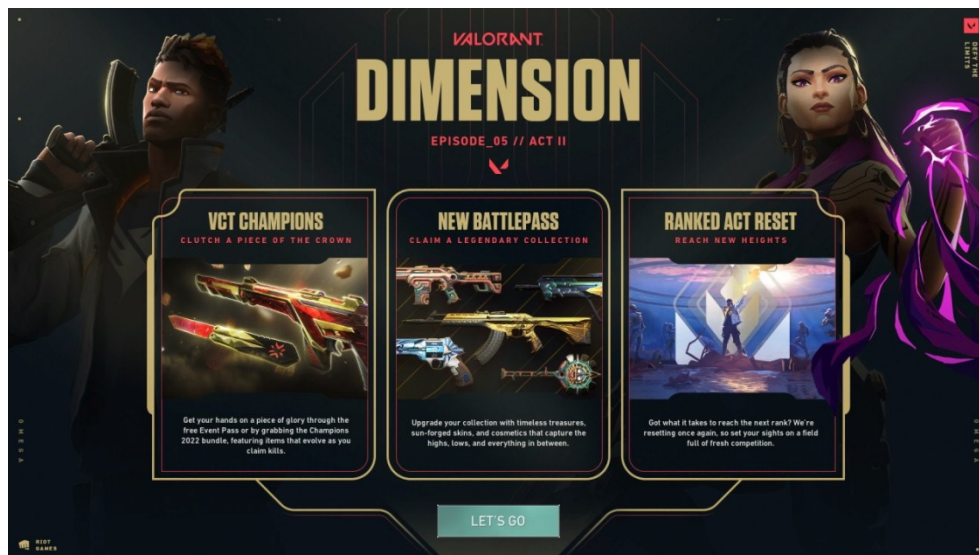

Figure 9. In-game content update announcement. Image via Riot Games.

Activities in *VALORANT*

The actual in-game content revolves around limited-time cosmetics and can be split into three sections: paid rewards, playtime rewards, and watch time rewards. Paid rewards are mainly the VALORANT Champions 2022 skin bundle, which contains multiple cosmetic items made in the matching style and colour palette of the event. The entire bundle cost around US$65 and was only available during the event, unlike the majority of skin bundles in *VALORANT*. Playtime rewards are a series of free esports-themed cosmetics that players can earn by playing the game during the event. The watch time rewards are several minor cosmetic rewards that players can get for watching the event on Twitch.tv, also known as Twitch Drops. Twitch Drops are designed to increase viewership throughout different events by limiting the periods during which a fan can obtain a certain reward, with the best saved for the grand finals.

Findings: Fear of missing out

While some of the rewards, mainly free ones, were relatively small (like an in-game spray that is infrequently used by players), the fact that they were only obtainable during the event created a fear of missing out (FOMO). FOMO generates anxiety (Good & Hyman, 2020) for the players who might regret not engaging with the game during the event, buying the paid bundle, or earning the free rewards. Such scarcity appeal enhances the product's value in consumers' eyes and increases purchase intention (Eisend, 2008), as demonstrated by sales figures for the paid skin bundle. Throughout the event, Riot Games raised US$32 million from bundle sales (Das, 2022). Valve implemented a similar approach for its *Dota 2* (Valve, 2013) and *CS:GO* events. For example, *Dota 2*'s The International, one of the biggest annual *Dota 2* tournaments organized by Valve, crowdfunds the prize pool through battle pass microtransactions. The revenue from the battle pass in 2022 was US$70 million, considering the prize pool of US$19 million (25% of the total battle pass income and US$1.6 million base prize pool; Valve, 2022).

For context, The International 2022 had significantly lower sales compared to 2021. The International 2021's prize pool was US$154 million (US$40 million prize pool). However, there were a number of factors contributing to lower sales. In 2022, Valve reworked the crowdfunding system, launching The Compendium, which proved to be underwhelming. It offered less incentive for players to support the event, resulting in lower sales (Stubbs, 2023). During the same year, *CS:GO* events also allowed teams to raise money from in-game sticker capsules. According to Valve, US$70 million was raised by the community for *CS:GO* teams and players over the 12-month period (Walker, 2022). Despite this, when comparing the revenue of VALORANT Champions 2022 to *Dota 2* and *CS:GO*, the results are still quite impressive, considering that *VALORANT* was two years old at the time and offered fewer opportunities to crowdfund the event.

With content provided during the event, Riot Games created a themed experience and aesthetic that reached any player who launched *VALORANT* during the event. The visual changes clearly signalled the event, while the limited-time rewards attracted players who do not usually follow *VALORANT* esports.

Outlook on Content Marketing Within Esports

Content marketing is primarily community-centric, and the community's involvement with brands is what will develop it further. My analysis highlights that Riot Games has the ability to tailor content to various segments of its audience by creating and supporting localized esports content on its website and social media, as well as engaging the player base that is less interested in esports. One of the most recent developments in *VALORANT* that targets a wider player base is the announcement and release of a Premier game mode. Premier is a tournament game mode in *VALORANT* with features seen in professional *VALORANT* esports events like the map pick-and-ban system. This mode is available to all players and allows them to better connect with VCT and the esports scene (Walker, 2022).

With Riot Games proving to be successful in marketing toward multiple player segments, some event organizers and developers may want to start implementing similar approaches. Based on firsthand observation at the time of writing, not many event organizers and game developers are investing in content marketing for their esports events. Developers and marketers should provide diverse and informative content, especially to less-involved players, as those are important potential viewers (Yin et al, 2023).

One example of an undermarketed esports event is the Overwatch League 2022 Playoffs organized by Blizzard Entertainment. A casual player could encounter a minor notification in the menu of the game (see Figure 10) inviting them to watch the event, and a notification from Overwatch League social media if the player were following the account. The Overwatch League 2022 Playoffs also used Twitch Drops for the first time to increase viewership (Esports Charts Team, 2022). At the same time, this event became the second most-watched event in the game's history (Šimić, 2022). This is likely due to the release of *Overwatch 2* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2022) in October 2022, which boosted its popularity on Twitch (Streams charts, 2022) alongside Twitch Drops. Lack of marketing for this event seems like a missed opportunity, especially due to declining interest in *Overwatch* events overall. Looking at Overwatch League events in 2022, there was a high risk of a rapid decline in viewership due to a lack of interest (Carriço, 2022). At the

same time, there were almost no improvements to the marketing approach.[3]

Figure 10. Overwatch League Playoffs announcement in *Overwatch*'s main menu screen. Screenshot by the author.

Organizing the event, including the content strategy, is also often done by a third-party organization, which limits the ability to expand marketing reach, like the IEM Rio Major 2022 organized by ESL. Despite the limitations identified in the third-party involvement, *CS:GO* keeps a level of exposure to the casual player base as well, though to a lesser extent than *VALORANT*. Previously, *CS:GO* allowed players to see the ongoing esports matches in-game and gave them a chance to earn Souvenir Packages. Players could also immediately see the latest event sticker capsules on the home page of the game in case they were interested in buying them to support the event. With esports further developing, we should see an increase in the game developers' involvement in content marketing and community-centric marketing or involvement of third-party organizations within the community and casual player base.

Apart from Riot Games, many esports teams and organizations are putting additional efforts into content and community involvement. González-Moreno et al. (2022) highlight that organizations like Evil Geniuses (EG) endorse women, members of the LGBTQ community, and people with disabilities in gaming. EG also features a non-profit foundation to support hospitalized children, all of which provide a significant amount of moral value to the esports community. Esports team Fnatic, on the other hand, is using a lot of user-generated content through their Fnatic Network, which is a grassroots talent initiative that

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[3] In 2023, the Overwatch League circuit was shut down to be replaced with a "revitalized" esports program (Parrish, 2023), now known as the Overwatch Champions Series (OWCS), demonstrating the necessity of expanding the circuit's reach.

seeks out and improves content creators, influencers, and esports athletes.

With the community being at the core of the content, it is possible to expect more fan engagement and involvement within the esports industry. Such attempts were already made in 2021, notably by Team Liquid, an esports organization that launched a fan engagement application called Liquid+, which would award points and allow fans to win prizes by interacting with the content and social media channels of the organization (Baker, 2021). Quests included objectives like liking posts, commenting, and watching streams. At the same time, Espo.io launched a fan engagement website in collaboration with esports organizations like Built By Gamers, Team BDS, BOOM Esports, F2K, GODSENT, and Team Queso. The platform aimed at a similar concept of missions and rewards, offering fans a chance to interact with their favourite team.

Neither of those platforms got much traction; however, in November 2022, an esports organization called LOUD, which won VALORANT Champions 2022, announced the launch of the Web3 fan engagement platform LOUD Club (Frascarelli, 2022). The platform focuses on engaging with the audience rather than monetizing it and offers unique interactions with the organization. With LOUD being one of the most popular esports organizations in 2022 (Šimić, 2022b), this could bring back the tendency to engage with the community through custom platforms.

However, when it comes to Web3 specifically, esports and gaming fans have proved to be skeptical of the concept during the popularity of Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) that operate using blockchain. Even though major game publishers—such as Ubisoft—attempted to enter the NFT space, they quickly received backlash from the audience (Knapp, 2022). While NFTs are a small fraction of Web3 as a concept and blockchain as a technology, the backlash emphasizes the current customer stance on both.

Competitive games could consider implementing more ways to tie their player base with their esports scene to drive engagement, whether it is through in-game rewards, items, or dedicated game modes. Moreover, more community engagement and involvement could come from the esports teams themselves. As we have already seen with *VALORANT*'s in-game content, there is an opportunity to reach more casual players at multiple touchpoints, allowing for quicker growth of the esports scene.

Conclusion

Overall, the results of this paper point to two main conclusions. Firstly, Riot Games is dedicated to making *VALORANT* a more inclusive and diverse esports title in a variety of ways. The design of *VALORANT* is meant to be inclusive by using different maps and agents, and this

transfers into *VALORANT*'s social media strategy, which includes platforms tailored to the region and accounts with UGC and regional content attracting players from different backgrounds. The inclusivity also extends to the website content, which includes interviews with players and their stories.

Secondly, much like in *LoL*, in *VALORANT*, Riot Games uses in-game content to consistently target a more casual player base by redesigning the look of the game to match the aesthetic of VALORANT Champions 2022 and adding multiple limited-time cosmetic items, both paid and free, that generate FOMO for players and push them to be more invested in the game during that period. Outside of the VALORANT Champions 2022 context, there is also the Premiere mode made to bring esports and casual players closer. These efforts have positioned VALORANT's community as deeply engaged, comparable to that of more established titles like *Overwatch* or *CS:GO*, judging by the website traffic, event viewership peaks, and in-game microtransaction revenue.

Other event organizers and game developers who are not putting as much effort into content marketing could replicate this approach to attract a wider audience, involve them in esports, and drive engagement through inclusive content marketing strategies.

Limitations and Future Study

The main technical limitation of this study was the limited ability to analyze the engagement of the social media accounts and posts due to needing access to content management tools. Future studies may consider using more advanced and paid social media data tools to offer a more detailed quantitative analysis.

When it comes to social media, it is important to remember that the role of Twitter in the companies' online presence might change due to the current state of the platform and Elon Musk taking over as the head of Twitter (Duffy et al., 2022), rebranding it to X. There were several issues during the transition, one of the most notable ones was changing the Blue Check to a paid feature rather than granting it by verifying accounts' authenticity, which resulted in users sometimes not being able to distinguish real from fake accounts (Chen & Mac, 2023). However, shortly after Twitter began its rebranding into X, the new brand name experienced multiple trademarking issues, including not being able to trademark the name in the European Union (Hancock, 2023). While these events have not directly affected Riot Games and most of the gaming industry continues to use Twitter as its main communication platform, there is a chance that another platform, for example, Threads by Meta, which became available to European Union users in December 2023 (Hays, 2023) and is used by Riot Games on a smaller scale, will eventually replace Twitter. Future studies may reevaluate developers' social media presence and highlight any significant changes or improvements in the strategy.

The limitations of the research's scope lie in the fact that it focuses solely on the importance of content marketing for player investment in the game's esports. It is important to remember that content marketing itself is not a solution for player investment and is only a fraction of the esports ecosystem. For example, esports as an industry has several sustainability issues (Nyström et al., 2022), and some of them appear in the latest esports news, like the previously mentioned shutdown of Overwatch League, the main esports circuit of *Overwatch.*

However, there were further issues, including stories of harassment and abuse at Blizzard, the *Overwatch* server shutdown in China, and teams struggling to pay franchising fees, which led to the mentioned circuit's shutdown (Parrish, 2023). A similar case happened in *VALORANT* as well, when professional players claimed that team franchising in VCT heavily affected the tier two scene[4] (Ganguly, 2023). Moreover, the state of the game and its development play a vital role in the players' interest in the game and can therefore affect their interest in its esports scene. Further studies may consider the wider context of game development and esports to identify how impactful content marketing is in the larger scheme of things.

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[4] Tier one scene consists of the best teams in the world who participate in events like VALORANT Champions 2022. Tier two teams compete for an opportunity to move to the tier one scene and has lesser-known teams.

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