


Chapter 1

Is Predicting a Win in Esports Possible?

Marketing Opportunities of the Overwatch League Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to identify the variables that can predict a win in an esports game, using the Overwatch League as an exploratory example for international market entry. The goal of using predictive analytics is to pinpoint where marketing efforts should be concentrated to maximize impact. The Overwatch League was the first franchised esports with 20 city-based teams competing in 6v6 games and serves as the basis for this analysis. Utilizing logistic regressions with a binary win/loss variable for three years of Overwatch League games, the data revealed that previous overall wins did not predict future wins. However, certain tactics and hero selections were significant predictors of success. This study highlights future areas for predictive analytics research across various esports, aiming to uncover market opportunities on a global scale. As esports leagues accumulate longer-term data, season-to-season analytics should be evaluated to discern patterns for effective market entry and growth strategies.

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INTRODUCTION: SPECULATE WHICH SPORT IS DESCRIBED BELOW

- ✓ City-based teams compete for a chance at more than \$5 million in prize money as well as championship titles.
- ✓ League finals have tens of millions of viewers which are broadcast on major networks like ABC, ESPN, as well as online via Disney+.
- ✓ Players receive a minimum salary of \$50,000 USD, healthcare, housing, and retirement and can earn sponsorships with major brands.
- ✓ Awards are given to regular season MVP, rookie of the year, and coach of the year.
- ✓ 40 million amateurs play the sport on a regular basis.
- ✓ Celebrity sightings at league finals are part of the routine.

If you guessed this sport to be Major League Baseball or the English Premier League, you would be far from correct. The above information is about the Overwatch League (OWL), the first online video game league with franchised city-based teams from around the world. The Overwatch game was released by Blizzard Entertainment in 2016, and the company held its first league game two years later. The first season in 2018 had enormous popularity with thousands of fans tuning in to watch games. OWL was popular in 2020 when it changed streaming platforms from Amazon's Twitch to YouTube; this move coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic diminishing then canceling all in-person events and tournaments caused multiple challenges. Eventually Chinese regulations banned the Overwatch 2 release, and these compounding pressures resulted in the league closing in 2023. Lee noted in 2024, "The death of the Overwatch League did not mean the end of Overwatch. Hundreds of thousands of players still log in to play the game every day." This chapter is an opportunity to examine the winningness of OWL teams in its early years (2018-2020) to determine how it made a successful international market entry and how to use predictive analytics to uncover market opportunities on a global scale.

At its height of popularity, the league was comprised of elite gamers who participated in a regular season and playoffs format, with the roster of Overwatch League players being assured a minimum annual salary, benefits, and a portion of winnings and revenue-sharing based on team performance. During the league's inaugural season in 2018, more than \$3.5 million in prize money was awarded, and it increased to \$5 million during the 2019 season (Overwatch, 2020; Webb, 2018).

Only a select number of players participated in the league each year, but millions of amateur players still participate in Overwatch games on daily basis from the comfort of their homes, and millions more are fans of the esports worldwide (Chen, 2024). The game itself is team-based and competitive, played with two teams of six

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