

Rewarding Labor and Valuable Investments inside of Video Games

A League of Legends Study

Emina Bajtarević



Thesis submitted for the degree of Master in
Social Anthropology
60 credits

Department of Social Anthropology
Faculty of Social Sciences

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

Spring 2023

Abstract

Anthropological studies done on the subject of virtual worlds have covered immersive virtual spaces which tend to simulate traditional social networks. These spaces offer alternative ways of identity building and self-expression, sometimes to be acquired in exchange for real money. Young people increasingly tend to spend time online, and there is an emergence of video games that require both monetary and temporal investments from their players. One of these games is League of Legends, a free-to-play video game which collects its revenue from the sale of cosmetics, a customization option that enhances the user's visual appearance. What makes League of Legends different from a traditional role-playing game is that its forty-minute-per-match format makes each encounter with the ally and the opposing team a new experience.

The research presented in this thesis is a result of a six months long participant-observation fieldwork, conducted both online and in person. The main focus of the research was a group consisting of six players, five of whom were entirely new to League of Legends. During fieldwork, they learned the rules of the game, encountered many other players, and created their own networks. Through the analysis of interviews conducted with them during this period, as well as conversations with more experienced and active members of the game's community, the results of this research allow for comparisons between traditional anthropological findings and those of this video game's: identity, markets, transactions, anxiety, anger, and kinship are some themes discussed.

The thesis also considers the economic differences between Norwegian and Bosnian-Herzegovinian youth, and how they may affect the relationship a player has with the game when it comes to investing in it. This project aims to contribute to future anthropological research on the topic of the digital, as it provides a new angle on social relations and virtual worlds.

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Terminology Overview	4
1. Introduction.....	6
2. Conceptual Framework	16
3. The Rules of the Game.....	24
4. Welcome to Summoner’s Rift – The Hardships of Learning the Game.....	30
5. League of Markets	46
6. Anxious Without the Game, Anxious Due to the Game.....	66
7. “Rage-Quitting” – Anger and Revenge.....	73
8. Conclusion	84
References	89

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I wish to thank my supervisor, Elisabeth Schober. Not only have you helped me out with your knowledge and experience, but you have also shown me support and understanding through different stages of this thesis. It has been a privilege to receive your guidance.

I am incredibly grateful for all of the people who have been a part of this research. Some I have met a long time ago, and some I have gotten to know through these several months in the virtual world. Thank you for your patience and trust, and all the games we have won and lost together.

To my parents, my friends, to Kemo and Nerma and Tobias: your love is immense, and so is your sense of humor. Hope I can reciprocate at least one of those.

I also wish to thank my professors from University of Zenica, as they have greatly inspired me to move abroad and push my education further.

Terminology Overview

Ability	A power that a character has; champions have four. Players cast abilities using their keyboards, and move their characters with the mouse.
AFK – Away from keyboard	Refers to a player who is not currently playing the game.
Blue Essence	A currency players earn by playing the game, that they can spend on buying champions and some other benefits.
Camp	An objective on the game's map that is primarily meant for the Jungle player to take.
Champion	A player-controlled character.
Client	The software which launches, manages and runs the game.
Cosmetics	Elements in the game which do not affect gameplay, but the visual appearance.
Gank	A surprise attack, usually done by the Jungler.
Item	A helpful, permanent power-up to the character's stats that a player buys in the shop.
Lane	A designated path that minions and champions take; there are 3 on Summoner's Rift.
Lobby	Usually referring to the pre-game chat where players can choose their roles and champions, and discuss strategies.
Marksman	A champion type that is played on Bot lane, referred to as the game's ADC (Attack Damage Carry). These characters carry guns or other ranged weapons.
Match	A singular 5v5 game within the League of Legends game as a whole.
Minions	Characters that are not controlled by the players, which exist for both teams and follow the lanes. They attack structures and enemy champions and minions, and can be killed for gold and experience.
Melee	Refers to the range of fighting between characters; melee fighters must come right next to the enemy in order to attack it.
Nexus	The main structure on the map. There exists one for each team, and the goal of the game is to destroy the enemy's Nexus.

Ranged	Refers to the range of fighting between characters; ranged fighters can attack enemies from a distance.
Riot Points	A currency that players can only obtain through spending money in the game, used for buying champions, cosmetics, and so on.
Skin	A cosmetic that affects the visual experience of champions and wards.
Tower	A defensive structure which attacks enemies under certain conditions; destroying them in at least one lane is necessary in order to reach the enemy Nexus.
To carry	Refers to the strongest player on the team which carries the rest of the team to victory with his strength and skills.
Vision	By having vision, players refer to being able to see the enemy on the usually dark elements of the map.
Ward	An item that, once placed, grants vision of an area. They can reveal enemies and help controlling the map.

1. Introduction

“Welcome to Summoner’s Rift,” a formal-sounding female voice announces the entry to a new match. A player is standing amidst four other people, represented by an avatar character of a previous choice. If they are well introduced to the game’s diverse cast of characters by the start of this match, the players already know what they should do in the next fifteen to fifty minutes. They aim to perform better than the other five players beginning their match on the far opposite of the Summoner’s Rift map. They cannot prove their resolve simply by typing “I want to win” in the team chat. Their match history, their established rank, their nickname in the game, their attitude in the character selection lobby, the language they speak, the things their character is wearing (that are purchasable), their choice of character for the role they are about to embody: they all encapsulate their devotion to success.

As the first minute rolls out, there is no time for pleasantries: the battle has begun, and their previous match is something the players immediately forget. This new, unique experience occurs every time the female voice welcomes a player to the Rift. They are likely to return even if they have lost their previous games; the sensation of a clean slate lingers, and players wish to experience it again. So it may be this time, this match! Before they know it, they have over two thousand matches behind them: two thousand new beginnings, two thousand unique encounters with nine thousand people, two thousand outcomes, and two thousand “Welcome to Summoner’s Rift” lines.

In short, this is the experience of playing League of Legends, a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game, which, at the moment of writing this thesis, has a total of 150 million registered players, with over 117 million monthly active players. The premise is repetitive at a glance, yet its variety hooks players to the screen. Summoner’s Rift is a resetting arena¹, a social setting that combines the competitiveness and teamwork of sports and strategies and tactics of card games, chess, and logical puzzles. It is also a mechanically complex game, making it an immersive experience that demands full attention. League of Legends, once learned, is a game that can feel immensely satisfying upon scoring victories. However, its

¹ Once a match is over, the next one starts anew

difficulty and the mixed attitudes of fellow strangers playing together make it a rough game to get invested in. Nevertheless, how did it lure in and keep tens of millions?

Why League of Legends?

I will have been a League of Legends player for precisely eight years by completing this paper. My familiarity with the game was the most appealing aspect of it as a field. I know its gradual differences over the years. I have met plenty of people – some turned into friends – I understand the rules, and I like to think that I understand the mentality of other players I encounter. Despite its specifics, Summoner's Rift as a map in which the main game modes occur is not the only field. The League of Legends experience begins once users launch the Riot Games (the game's developer company name) client². For some, this experience begins when they decide when they will be playing next; back in 2016 and 2017, my friends and I would meet in person only to talk about our match history, other players we have encountered, and our future games. Theorizing about the game's pros and cons and how it affects people is a common topic among players, and often the conclusion is that it is not the game that is bad; the players themselves are. However, despite often feeling dissatisfied at the lack of victories in this team-based game (that teams up random players together, somewhat based on their skill level), players keep coming back – and spending their money on it.

This research explores what motivates players to stay and play, spending their time and money on a virtual hobby. Considering that games often require their players to, instead of spending real money, grind³ for resources within the game, which may take hours or days to achieve, I have included the word “labor” in my research title. After all, the slang for this action in games is “farming,” and once it is complete and a particular object or character or skill can be upgraded, it does become “rewarding” (at least because no money had to be spent on it?).

In order to get the answers, I initially imagined working with two focus groups, one from Norway and one from Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the Norwegian group was the first to take shape, and it made me rethink my fieldwork's aims. Comparative analysis was not something I had in mind, and yet, by having two separate groups, that is what it would beg for at the end of the fieldwork period. Since the main focus of my research project is the addictive cycle of earning and spending, and the goals are observing participants' motivation in learning

² In this case, a game launcher that allows access to League of Legends (the game itself) and social options (chatting, adding, and removing friends) is named, by its creators, a client.

³ Grind is a term used in video games for working on repetitive, often daily or weekly tasks within the game whose completion grants certain benefits to players.

a new game, potentially turning it into a hobby of theirs, having one group would allow us to immerse into this experience as one team completely. Additionally, the rules of League of Legends are so complex that the learning period usually takes months. A couple of weeks are enough for the basics to stick, but understanding the game takes perhaps as long as the fieldwork period. Therefore, having two separate groups in which all but one player are new to the game would have turned this research into a tutoring process, and I was afraid that my data would be nothing but the groups' learning success.

Moreover, League of Legends is a massive set of strategies and tactics. It sounds simple enough: five players play against five players on a map that looks the same every match, and their task is to defeat the enemy by destroying towers on the enemy's map side and taking down their champions (played by the players). However, there are over 160 champions to choose from, and each belongs to a certain role on the map, with at least four unique abilities. What separates an experienced player from a new one is, first of all, knowing what all these champions do in order to perform well intentionally. Unfortunately, the game itself does not provide a tutorial other than the mandatory, basic one for a new account, and its descriptions of champions and their abilities are simplified and are difficult for a new player to understand either way. Therefore, my knowledge of the game came in handy when introducing the focus group to the game.

Methods

In order to get my answers, I initially imagined working with two focus groups, one from Norway and one from Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the Norwegian group was the first to take shape, and it had me rethink the aims of my fieldwork. Comparative analysis was not something I had in mind, and yet, by having two separate groups, that is what it would beg for at the end of the fieldwork period. Since the main focus of my research project is the addictive cycle of earning and spending, and the goals are observing participants' motivation in learning a new game, potentially turning it into a hobby of theirs, having one group would allow us to immerse into this experience as one team completely. Additionally, the rules of League of Legends are so complex that the learning period usually takes months. A couple of weeks are enough for the basics to stick, but truly understanding the game takes perhaps as long as the fieldwork period. Therefore, having two separate groups in which all but one player are new to the game would have turned this research into a tutoring process, and I was afraid that my data would be nothing but the groups' learning success.

And League of Legends is truly a massive set of strategies and tactics. It sounds simple enough: five players play against five players on a map that looks the same every match, and their task is to defeat the enemy by destroying towers on the enemy's map side and taking down their champions (which are played by the players). However, there are over 160 champions to choose from, and each belongs to a certain role on the map and has at least four abilities unique to them. What separates an experienced player from a new one is, first of all, knowing what all these champions do in order to perform well intentionally. The game itself does not provide a tutorial other than the mandatory, basic one for a new account, and its descriptions of champions and their abilities are simplified and are difficult for a new player to understand either way. Therefore, my knowledge of the game came in handy when introducing the focus group to the game.

Up until deciding League of Legends was a field I wanted to analyze anthropologically, I have been a member of its player base. I observed it through the lens of both a competitive player and a regular customer, taking part in its economy and social events. However, not many people consider League of Legends a social game at first. In fact, it is notoriously known as an anti-social environment, as its game format allows a lack of team play, which is otherwise expected. This leads to a lot of in-game arguments among teams, but despite the common unsportsmanlike behavior, League of Legend's player base and income numbers are rising. What is it that makes players invest their time and money into a game like this? Only a small percent of the highest-ranked players make it to the big, international e-sports championships, so it may not be the expectation of great success, either. For myself, the main motivation has been the large social circle the game became a medium for: from how I got into playing this game, to traveling in order to meet other players, to writing this thesis itself, League of Legends has been, at the very least, a very rewarding hobby of mine. As someone who has spent so many years in this virtual world, I find it easy to list arguments of my interest in it. It is not difficult to list the game's flaws in parallel, but they can be overlooked after all the previous investments I have made in it. The question I could ask myself is, then: If I had begun playing League of Legends now on my own, would I want to stay?

In order to answer this, I had to approach League of Legends as a social space that combines the "inside and outside" of this virtual world. I have decided to work with a focus group over the six months course of my research. I wanted to research their social roles on the "outside," in combination with the roles they would fit into once they were on the "inside."

This comes with an assumption that their behavior and motivations could be symmetrical, asymmetrical, or differing in both.

I had managed to form a focus group consisting of six players. Five of them were completely new to the game, and decided not to explore much about it until our research began. Our introduction period was a conversational one, where the participants introduced me to their previous video game experiences, expectations and outcomes of this research, their familiarity with micro-transactions in video games, and general information about their hobbies. These were impersonal, as I wanted the group to get to know each other first before sharing information about their lives apart from the screen.

My role in the group was that of a researcher and a moderator, developing discussion and interview questions; identifying daily, weekly, and monthly tasks and goals; managing schedules of all participants and locations where our meetings will take place (virtual or otherwise), noting my observations down and sharing those which could lead to further discussions during or at the end of our meeting sessions (Morgan, 1997, p. 12).

Teaching a full group the game's rules was not going to be an easy task. Apart from my researcher position, I have also been a tutor. Participants played when it aligned with their free time, and sometimes not all could make it at the same time, and this allowed us to have various sessions with different participants interacting with one another. After the initial period of learning, one I considered the most difficult one to overcome, I did not have to be in the matches myself. As time went on, the players' League profiles shaped up. Some were improving at the game with every session, and some lagged behind, some loved joining, and some were not so eager. But apart from their opinions on the game, they became more open to conversations about personal connections to the virtual, and suddenly I was listening even more than observing, and League of Legends became our meeting place.

As for our interviews, I have followed the guidelines and advice from literature. With my group being a small-scale one, giving me the opportunity to learn more about the participants before the research started, I was able to create a narrowly focused set of questions. The planned questions were always about the topic of the meeting, but the topics between the meetings were rarely the same. Following the groups' learning and involvement progress, I would focus the research on specific areas. The main points of interest were the teamwork aspect, social norms and reactions that are implied within the game community, identity-

building in the virtual world, and money spending. The multiple-angle approach helped the research flow more naturally, as the group took part in all these elements themselves.

When taking notes, I have considered the suggestion in Krueger's "Moderating Focus Groups" (p. 76, 1997): splitting a page in two, with quotes on one and keynotes on the other side. Apart from recording some of our sessions in which I have played myself, I have found hand-written notes the most natural method of documenting field notes. Using my own set of symbols, I could use these notes to look back on some previous discussions and see how the arguments may differ now, and mark what I have written as a personal memo for reference or an insight worth considering in the paper writing process. Being a fast writer, my being with pen and paper did not affect the flow of our interviews.

As complex as League of Legends is, it was not my only field. I conducted plenty of interviews with my group across the months, some online and some in person. The variety of our meetings allowed a perspective into how these players act within and outside of the game.

This research required constant internet connection and the usage of 3rd party software with which I could record audio and video during our play sessions and audio of the interviews. I have returned to League of Legends in a way I have never before imagined returning to, with an academic, thorough, methodological, fresh perspective, which gave my relationship with it a new dimension.

My own relation to the field

The first time I have ever heard of this game was soon after its global release in 2010. My classmates would ask each other if they wanted to play "LoL," which I thought stood for 'Laugh out Loud' in that context as well. It took me several years to connect the dots; in 2013, I downloaded the game for the first time, deeply disappointed by the way my misunderstandings of its terminology were treated in the game lobbies. For example, at the time, there existed a fresh insult that my peers used to mock one another: "bot," as in a robot, but in its most offensive intention. In the game lobby, once I had already picked a champion – I chose an ice archer lady called Ashe, which I liked for her looks – my teammates would write "Ashe bot," signaling that I should go bot lane, as my character is a Marksman. I mistook that for offense and, to my memory, had no idea where to go or what to do anyway.

I did not seriously start committing my time to League of Legends until the year 2016 when I met a group of new friends from another town who were all playing regularly and had

found excitement in teaching me how to. It was a months-long period of learning; for at least the first four weeks, I played only one support champion (Janna) and listened to everything the other players would tell me to do during our matches. The aspects of jungle play or any other lanes, including the *minion hitting*, were lost on me. The support should not generally be the one killing minions, as they passively gain gold through other items that are available in the shop. My job was to keep the others safe during the battles primarily, and I thoroughly enjoyed that role with my new friends. Soon enough, our group started meeting up in person, too, and we formed some meaningful connections which are relevant to this day.

In the coming years (2017-2019), I have added hundreds of people to my friends' list, chatted with dozens, created online servers for group communications, visited League friends and had them visit me, written songs inspired by the game's champions and met even more people through the medium of art. One of such meetings was when I was left stranded in Vienna due to a major delay of a flight that was supposed to take me home

In the period of 2020-2022, I have played significantly less; although I have been a part of the University of Oslo e-sports team, transferring to EUW (Europe West) from EUNE (Europe Nordic & East) erased my past ranked history, which demotivated me to invest more time in the game. Opting for League as my field of research was something that came naturally to me amidst some political uncertainty in my home country, where I intended to conduct a physical participant-observation on a different matter. For that reason, I remained on the EUW server until the beginning of the year 2023, and returning to EUNE felt like "coming home" – as players cannot team up and play together across servers, this was a welcome reunion.

At the moment of writing this paper, I am the owner of the account I created back in 2015; I am level 422, with around 3500 euros of Riot Points bought through the client and invested into skins. These two – RP and skins – are my topic of discussion in this chapter. Fields of economic anthropology, and theories of identity and self, have helped me form some conclusions on the game's micro-transaction policy.

Limitations

Planning out the sessions had proven more difficult than I thought. Coordinating six people, each with their own responsibilities and schedules, had to be of a flexible nature. Some weeks we played more often than others; some, we were unable to find a time that fitted anyone; sometimes, it would just be two or three of us, and sometimes a whole group. Planning in advance was difficult, so our meetings were irregular, but we communicated through Discord,

which was our main line of communication while playing and formed ad hoc sessions at times when there was suddenly an opening to join. Playing as less than five, though, meant the game would match us with strangers. This randomness was an aspect I did not think through much until I realized how often it would occur, but it added an interesting perspective on competitiveness and tolerance. Some more experienced players were nice to the group's beginners, and some were not. The morale of the group would lower if matched with players that wrote hateful messages and intentionally played badly to mock the group, so we would have to take a break after such encounters.

Furthermore, even though I figured opting for one focus group was a better idea, I feared that six participants were not a sufficient sample size. However, the participants took the matter seriously and helped me avoid unnecessary generalizations. I am hopeful that the level of detail that this focus group allowed me to explore makes up for the small number. On the topic of motivation, I had hoped that my invitation to join this research would not remain the only reason why the participants played for half a year. Fortunately, that was not the case, and I was able to discern different reasons for their time spent with the game.

Apart from gathering data from informants, I followed League of Legends' social media, which is their main advertisement point. These were necessary in order to explain the justification of in-game prices, and yet, there was a lot of data to unpack here. I have decided to keep this marketing analysis out of the paper due to its lack of overall connection with the in-game experience (since my informants did not really follow the game's social media themselves and were not influenced by the advertising).

Lastly, despite my efforts to include young women in this research, none wished to participate in the focus group experience. The main reason was their overall disinterest in League of Legends on what they had heard about it before. One of the women I spoke to explained that she heavily disliked the behavior her male friends that played League of Legends expressed when talking about the game. While I have encountered a few female players that were happy to contribute to the matches and discussions, I remain the only woman that actively participated in the research process.

Ethical Considerations

Before embarking on online fieldwork, I had received written consent from the participants in accordance with NSD's rules and procedures required for this research to be approved. I was careful to remind the participants that they have the option to refuse to answer

anything that might make them uncomfortable or to change their minds about something they had previously said. The participants themselves were aware of the level of information they could share in order not to be able to identify their workplaces, employers, studies, families, and so on. If anything was shared in confidentiality, it remained as such and will not be a subject of analysis in this paper.

The participants have chosen their own nicknames for me to use in this paper, and these differ from their real, legal names, and in-game names. As for those who have participated in this research and are not a part of the focus group, I have informed them of the goals of my research and obtained consent to use information that was openly available online (such as their in-game ranks, levels, and possessions).

When including the participation of third parties in our matches, I have obscured the entirety of their in-game names while keeping the gist of it if it was relevant to the situation noted. Chat messages that I quote were mostly un-edited unless a word had to be censored for its vulgarity. When taking part in the matches, I would notify the strangers in the lobby that the goal of our playtime was teaching my teammates the game for a thesis.

I had to be careful when choosing whose statements online I could include in this research; as stated by the NESH⁴ guidelines, a person online may pretend to be somebody else while also not having the “sufficient capacity to consent,” as it is likely to be a child behind the screen as anyone else. Therefore, I ensured that all the people I interviewed for the purpose of this research were eligible to give consent and understand the topic and the purpose of their participation. When noting examples that occurred before this research and that are from my own experience, but including real people, I have also ensured prior that the persons mentioned are alright with sharing this information in the paper.

The structure of this paper

This paper begins with a chapter on the conceptual framework which guided my research and helped me narrow the research questions. While I focused on the sociological and anthropological development of the term “identity” in social spaces, contemporary literature on researching virtual worlds has given me insight into approaching these worlds ethnographically. It gave me the confidence to fully immerse myself into the field of League of Legends as a member of a vast, existing social setting.

⁴ The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities

The second chapter is dedicated to the complex rules of the game, as these are necessary to go through in order to understand the social norms and expectations that exist among players in each match played. My ethnography included playing hundreds of these matches that obeyed the general rules explained.

The third chapter, “Welcome to Summoner’s Rift,” introduces my focus group and our beginnings in the game. The learning period helped create bonds between the group members and set the ground for our future encounters in different modes of the game and with many different people.

In the chapter that follows that, “Money, Money, Money,” I shift my focus onto the economic aspects of the game. Here, I explain the monetary system in the game and the values assigned to the accounts of its users. This is a game that is free to download and play, and yet it earns significant amounts of money through in-game sales. These purchases do not affect the users’ performance in the game, and therefore I wanted to learn more about the users’ motivations when investing money. In this chapter, I also explore the act of gifting in League of Legends, which bears some resemblances with other anthropologists’ findings in the past on this form of exchange of goods.

The fifth chapter describes the reasons behind playing the game, despite its faults. In a sub-chapter, I present an analysis of a set of interviews in which the participants share their experiences with social anxiety and how video games helped them connect with other people.

The final chapter explores the most common social interaction we encountered in League of Legends: that of displaying anger. Experienced players learn to manage the display of their anger in a way that makes them ineligible for system punishment, while some use these cracks to lead their team toward defeat intentionally. A wide range of satisfactory motivators is at play: power, control, social hierarchy, or the joy of plain, anonymous trolling.

All of these topics and the findings about them during my fieldwork period have led to a conclusion that aims to answer if League of Legends is an optimal social game and if it, as such, motivates its players to invest their time and money.

2. Conceptual Framework

Identity theory

Identity is a topic that dates from the beginnings of philosophy to religion, history, and science. Knowing oneself is popularized in today's influential self-help media genre. Wearing brands and logos that reflect one's interests is well-marketed. The need for individualism is recognized within virtual worlds: League of Legends, as of January 2023, offers 1481 skins, divided over 163 characters.

In this sub-chapter, I will offer an overview of the theoretical discussion on identity. The literature I use is within the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. Despite the different historical contexts during which the authors have written their texts, some observations overlap and complement each other. The general idea stays the same: identity is never a state; it is a process. Numerous factors affect it; some remain immutable, and yet, scientists still argue that individuals will keep trying to nurture and present a particular self despite limitations.

In his highly influential work, "Mind, Self, and Society" (1934), George Mead thoroughly explores the building of self within a society, emphasizing the importance of language and communication – social interactions – in order for the self to develop. He divides the self into individual and social; into "I," which constitutes within a social process and is a responsive result of it through observation, reaction, and internalization of others' attitudes, and "me," a reflective, self-aware collection of attitudes taken from the social interactions. The importance of "me" is in its ability to successfully reflect the attitude of the community (p. 187), appealing to it.

Applying Mead's theory to League of Legends' peculiar sale style, it is possible to discuss why it is so profitable for its creators. While each individual "I" may have a different sense of enjoyment in purchasing, obtaining, and 'wearing' a skin, the attitude of the community as a whole is that owning skins reflects either skill in the game (assuming one would not spend money on a skin for a champion they are not good at), dedication to the game, or a sort of financial stability and prestige. "I" may like the skin for its resemblance to the selves' style; "me" may appreciate that the skin is considered prestigious to own and that I enjoy the reaction of the community to its appearance in the match.

Mead's theory points out the importance of mind and body together in a social context, constantly developing and learning symbolic communication with others, which helps internalize others' perspectives of self that construct a sense of it. The concept of "role-taking," which Mead introduced, can be well translated into the virtual, as long as the "body" is no longer the physical carrier of "I" but its avatar in the virtual. It is clear that League of Legends is a game that assumes roles from the beginning of a match; a player is expected to act as the role describes. The social situation in which an individual finds themselves is different in each match. The research described in this thesis, for one, will showcase the different approaches players had towards each other depending on the game roles they were given, the skins they were wearing, the countries they were from, the lines they were writing in the group chat, and so on. Pre-determined social structures within a social situation construct a framework for identity-building (Stryker, 1980). This framework provides individuals with sets of expectations for the role they partake in.

Similar to Mead, Goffman (1959) describes the active, continuous process of individuals adopting roles in order to mimic the impression others have of them or to present an image of self. However, Goffman further stresses the limitations of the social context in which role-taking occurs: individuals will often find obstacles in their ability to present a certain image of self, constrained by factors such as social status, gender, and race. On the other hand, social status can be viewed as the beginning of the identification procedure. Through social interactions, a person's identity becomes the link between the person and the group to which they belong. Identity, being both a sense of belonging and a building of behaviour, gives motivation to the otherwise sterile concept of role. Behavior which an individual adopts is a result of these factors; Burke and Freese (2018) introduce the term of "double duty", a process in which individuals not only act via their personality traits, but also the values of the group that they are a part of. Geertz (1973) refers to the analysis of these traits as not an experimental science, but "an interpretive one in search of meaning" (p. 5), and the cultural traits a web of significance that a man creates himself. The development of identity was also described as an internal mechanism that responds to psychosocial crises, and the success of the responses depends on individual and sociocultural context (Erikson, 1950).

Sometimes, the limitations on identity-building and individual expression, caused by the group's values, can inhabit a different extreme: a sense of superiority towards individuals within other groups. Tajfel and Turner (1986) introduce comparison in their discussion of self-perception. Their social identity theory emphasizes individuals' tendency to classify

themselves and others into homogeneous social categories by attributing common characteristics to members of a certain category. These lead to socially problematic biases, prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination: in-group favouritism and the perception of out-group homogeneity. In League of Legends, rank is the most influential distinction between players, followed by the question of which server the rank was achieved on, which role the player is mostly playing, and which champion.

Rogers Brubaker (2016) offered alternative terms which can bypass the concept of identity: identification, categorization, social location, membership. The outcome of identification is internal sameness, separateness, or group association. A person can identify themselves in different situations and contexts: in relation to others, in relation to a narrative, in a placement within a category (belonging to a group that shares categorical attributes, such as race or language), in a kinship network, and so on. Self-identification does not have to coincide with the categorization performed by others, but Brubaker considers it inferior to categorizations developed by any authoritative institution or group. Therefore, self-conception as situational subjectivity, lacks the full connotations of identity and is limited by its self-referentiality and inability to grasp the concepts and categorizations of others. Pierre Bourdieu (1994) defines self-identification as a rather practical sense, “the sense of the game”, which is developed by experiences and social interactions and is embodied by habits which are acquired through these experiences. Quite like a cycle of learning and applying, the practical sense is a framework of unconscious navigation through the social. On the other hand, membership in a community is an emotionally charged sense of belonging and solidarity, through sharing one or multiple common attributes (Brubaker, 2016). Again, this can lead to an extreme sense of difference from those which are not part of the community/group. Until several years ago, League of Legends offered the possibility of creating groups, called clubs, and its members could wear a special tag next to their in-game name, visible in matches. After this option was shut down, many players adopted the club tag into their own in-game name. It had always been popular to include an e-sports team tag in one’s name as well, showing affiliation towards the team.

I want to argue that belonging to a group does not have to be exclusive; with the rise of globalization and means of communication across borders of any sorts, there can be multiple affiliations towards groups or individuals. In his works, Charles Tilly (1978; 1984; 1993) describes social networks as ties between individuals, which hold significant powers to assemble social movements and change socio-economic and socio-political outcomes. He

suggests that these ties have the ability to connect multiple groups together. In “Identity and Control: A Structural Theory of Social Action” (1992), Harrison White builds on Tilly’s argument through a framework that explains the influence of social networks on shaping social structures. Groupness is a product of networking, but some groups can achieve greater stability than others. Some individuals may find more success in networking, too; based on their “status characteristics” (race, gender, occupation, education, etc.), individuals can be perceived differently within and without a group.

In “Networks of Outrage and Hope” (2012), Manuel Castells relates social networks to digital networks, explaining that the digital networking system, as a communication technology, is a tool for disseminating a collective identity and purpose. In “The Rise of Network Society” (2009), Castells defines identity as “the process of construction of meaning that provides a sense of unity and purpose to an individual or collective actor, by integrating its distinctive experiences, interests, and values into a unique and coherent whole, making possible collective action and a sense of continuity in time and space.” It is a process which gives certain sets of attributes priority in relation to other sources of meanings, allowing a possibility of multiplicity of identities. Furthermore, in his three-volume work “The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture” (1996-1998), Castells gives digital networks an advantage in identity forming, over the traditional forms such as family and nation-state. Social identity is suddenly not limited to its cultural and social context of (physical) time and space. Digital networks offer an additional glimpse into the rest of the world. They are an interactive medium of information gathering and distribution, allowing globalization to take root fully. Yet another extreme, which Castells point out, is but an extension of the one noticed previously (Brubaker, 2016); fundamentalists fear globalization for its power to transcend categorical groupings, they want their members to feel superior towards different groups and their members, and they want to limit the categories of their identity to as little as possible, and to as role-fitting as possible.

While it is true that digital networks, especially with the rise of online social networks, offer the possibility of a multitude of identity factors, the “double duty” also becomes a multiple one. Each virtual space is essentially a new room to introduce oneself to; each virtual world is a world of its own, and as worlds are – social, cultural, political, economic communities – they will each have their set of rules, norms, and expectations. Even the assumption of no expectations carries with itself an expectation of randomness which cannot always be fulfilled.

In an anthropological sense, the Internet has evolved to be more than a globalized market and a sphere for individual engagement. It has become a space that directly mimics globalization: online discussions and communities have the ability to influence and shape local contexts (Postill, 2011). While online video games provide entertainment, I will discuss this influence and the intersection of digital with personal in the following sub-chapter.

Identity in a virtual world

A virtual world allows its users to immerse and interact with the world itself and its other users through new webs of social norms and practices. The appeal of the games that are large in their imaginative scope is exactly that: they are a refreshing, new start in which a player can be somebody else. These worlds can be as restrictive or as free-form as their creators allow, but both sides of the spectrum invite players to explore their possibilities and interact within. If a game is a single-player experience, it invites freedom of personal preference in the choices. If a game is also in the simulation genre, that freedom is enhanced.

Apart from campaign modes with clear financial goals, popular simulations of city-building and resort-managing (Sim City, Planet Zoo, Roller Coaster Tycoon) come with a sandbox mode. This mode does not have any restrictions in terms of unlockable items and amounts of money the player can spend at once. It encourages creativity, and some very complex and beautiful builds from these games can be found on YouTube in the forms of “speed-build” videos. Another game that has plenty of fan-made content online is The Sims, a single-player simulation game whose goal is, simplified, managing a family.

As of September 2021, The Sims, a single-player simulation game, has reportedly sold over 200 million copies worldwide since its initial release in 2000. It is a game that allows players to imitate real life while controlling their Sims characters, navigating their relationships, education, employment, money saving and spending, and so on. The player is entirely responsible for the narrative in the domestic sphere, as the game challenges strict gender norms and traditional family values (Consalvo, 2002, p. 9). The Sims thus provides an interesting site for examining domesticity in a virtual context, as well as a safe space to explore gender identity and sexuality (Tosca, 2005). With an included, heavily detailed build-mode for building interiors and exteriors of residential and community buildings, The Sims offers a high level of control in their players’ virtual neighbourhood and family management. This virtual accessibility, in both The Sims and SimCity, can be used as a potential for urban planning

practice and urban development, as the complex and intuitive building tools in these games make urban visualising easy and realistic enough (Lapenta, 2016).

Another simulation game with a massive collection of options in virtual life-managing is *Second Life*, released in 2003. Users create their own avatar⁵, after which they begin their navigation through a 3D world that is customized by its community. The depth of the game's simulation is up to its players: they can hang around the environment and meet new people, they can create, share and sell virtual spaces through a built-in tool, they can shop and sell different customization options and goods, and even attend virtual conferences and classes held by other players. The game allows voice chat, as well as physical touch through haptic devices.

In his book “Coming of Age in *Second Life*: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human” (2008), Tom Boellstorff, an American anthropologist, writes about a ethnographic research he conducted in *Second Life* over the span of three years. His focus was on the social norms and identity building within the game, arguing that *Second Life* offers opportunities for self-expression and meaningful social connections. Through embodying one's avatar, players can experiment with their personal identity (customization options) and how they wish to be seen by others. “On the one hand, we may experience our virtual bodies as more directly under our control, because they do not need to contend with the physical limitations that shape our physical bodies. On the other hand, the lack of physical sensation means that we may not always have the same immediate awareness of our virtual bodies that we have of our physical ones.” (Boellstorff, p. 25)

Another key conclusion in Boellstorff's book is that *Second Life*, being a representative of virtual worlds, is not an escape from the “real” world and an experience entirely separated from it. They are not just fantasies, despite their freedom of choice and behaviour. On the contrary, these freedoms allow creation of complex social spaces which reproduce social structures that exist in the “real”. Since *Second Life* is not in the genre of fantasy, one can argue that these reflected social structures exist because of the game's similarity to real life.

World of Warcraft is a good example of a large, complex, role-playing multi-player game that does not include thorough “real” life simulation as *The Sims* and *Second Life* do, and yet, as anthropologists have researched, still encourage players to create communities and engage in social activities as they progress in the game. Tom Malaby (2009) wrote about both

⁵ A digital representation of themselves

Second Life and World of Warcraft, comparing the creation, development, management and functioning of the two virtual worlds.

“World of Warcraft might be considered a deeply controlled game. It has a vast number of rules, in the form of game mechanics, that must be learned and followed. It is also heavily policed by both the game’s administrators and the players themselves, through the use of in-game reporting and disciplinary systems. Yet, despite these controls, World of Warcraft is also a deeply social game, with a complex set of social norms and practices that emerge from player interactions. These norms and practices are not entirely determined by the game’s design, but rather are negotiated and developed by the players themselves in the course of their interactions with each other.” (Malaby, 2009, p.107)

Malaby’s analysis of WoW touches on issues of power in the digital, too. The fact that this game has classes, roles and predetermined relationships between them does affect the role-playing experience, but it is the design and management of its world that impact how players interact with each other. WoW has built-in options to communicate and chat with other players, to exchange goods, to form groups and guilds, to participate in larger player versus player encounters, and even express romantic feelings through animations of blowing a kiss and flirting.

World of Warcraft is also described as a point of convergence between the technology, creativity, private life and public realm (Nardi, 2010, p. 4). In “My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft”, Nardi writes: “The activities in World of Warcraft are deeply cultural in the sense that they are imbued with meaning, values, and beliefs that are shared among the players” (p. 152). Having conducted extensive ethnographical research in the game, Nardi recognized a remarkable level of collaboration between players that helps them achieve goals only possible as a result of teamwork (p. 77). World of Warcraft and League of Legends have the team-building in common; one of WoW’s activities, *a raid*, is a large-scale event that involves 10 to 30 players who have previously strategically and mechanically prepared themselves for close cooperation in order to defeat challenging bosses and objectives. Considering that raids consume a lot of time, both in preparing and playing one, and that their completion rewards players with valuable equipment and recognition within the community, it is expected that everyone on the team plays their best. Nardi devotes an entire chapter (Chapter 6: Raiding and the Guild) to exploring the dynamics of raids and the coordination among players which is required for their successful completion. Raids both

strengthen friendships and connections, and confirm behaviour protocols that are set by power dynamics within the roles distributed among the groups' members.

3. The Rules of the Game

League of Legends is an online multiplayer game, which players can download and play for free. It falls within the MOBA genre, which stands for Multiplayer Online Battle Arena. Unlike some of the other multiplayer genres, which focus on a single-player experience that is occasionally enhanced by teaming up with other people, the goal of League of Legends is to play with and for four other people on one's team – and against five others.

This clash between two teams happens within a “match” which, if it is a regular 5v5 game, may last anywhere from 15 minutes – the earliest the game allows players to surrender – up to an hour, and its action-packed gameplay within forces players to stick through the match without ever actually being able to leave the computer, if they aim to win. The game offers over 140 different characters for players to choose from, which are called “champions”, although not all are unlockable for free for a fresh, new account.

General rules of the game



Figure 1 - A map of Summoner's Rift, taken from source (1)

The aim of the game is for either of the teams to win, which puts teamwork above self-success within a match, although general self-improvement and experience of players increases the chances of a team to be victorious. Regardless of the level and rank of a player outside the match, each player starts as level 1 in Summoners' Rift (the name of the 5v5 map for each mode but ARAM), with 500 gold (enough to buy mandatory starting items) and 0 XP, which are earned by performing well. Both mouse and keyboard are required to play the game; mouse clicks are used for movement and choosing a target to attack, while the skills and abilities are bound to the keyboard.

As seen on the figure 1 above, the map is mirrored across the middle with minor changes to the sides, and the areas marked are:

1. Top Lane
2. Mid Lane
3. Bot Lane
4. Jungle

The mirrored sides are referred to as “blue side” and “red side”, and the players' individual health bars and lane towers take the colour of their team's side. The goal of the game is to defeat the enemies' Nexus (5), which is impossible to get to unless at least one of the lane's inhibitors (6) are defeated, which is also difficult without previously taking down the lane towers (7). Both teams' Nexus deploys lane minions which help the champions defend these towers. Killing the enemy minions rewards XP and gold, as well as access to the tower. Towers also help defending; if there are no enemy minions underneath, they will automatically target the enemy champions instead (if they are in its targeting radius), and if there are minions, but the enemy champion deals any damage to the allied champion, the tower will also prioritise enemy players. The key to a successful lane is managing the waves of minions, while dealing damage to one's opponents' champion, with the aim to bring the enemy to 0 health. Once the enemy is “slain”, they return to base called “the Fountain” (8), and are unable to play for a few seconds. The longer the game lasts, the longer are slain players out of it (*). With an enemy defending the tower out of the way, damaging and eventually destroying the tower becomes a lot easier – plus, killing or assisting to a kill on an enemy champion rewards larger amounts of gold.

Each lane inhabits its own specific playstyle, and a roster of champions which are fit for the role within the lane (by their base stats and play-kits). Top Lane is also known as the Solo Lane, for its notorious 1v1 playstyle. Although the Jungle player may come and assist, mid and bot lanes are generally livelier. Usual champions for Top lane are melee type, meaning they attack from a close distance, and they are either fighters (able to deal damage, tank some, and heal some back, and such) or tanks (not as strong as fighters in terms of damage, but can absorb a lot of it and their kits hold powerful Crowd Control abilities: stuns and roots, for one). Ranged top-laners are scarcer, but not less powerful; in good hands, they can make the lane very difficult for a melee champion, disabling their minion kills and even approaching the enemy tower.

Midlane player is expected to play either an ability power champion (AP) or attack damage champion (AD). Generally, these two are the main damage types champions deal, and abovementioned tanks, for example, can build resistance against one or the other, depending on the enemy teams' strongest players. The decision between playing AP or AD is one that a player makes themselves, but it is implied that a team should have at least one AP or AD champion (otherwise, the enemy has it easier to build resistance against one damage type, making every other minute of the game more difficult). Mid-lane champions which deal heavy AP damage are mostly ranged, and they are classified as mages. Mid-lane champions which deal heavy AD damage are mostly melee, and they are classified as assassins (due to their quick hit-and-run playstyle). For example, if the enemy has no tank champions, opting for a strong AD assassin on Mid-lane may be the key to winning the game.

Bot-lane is the only lane where two players play together, one inhabiting the role of ADC (Attack Damage Carry), represented by a ranged Marksman, and the other the role of Support (usually a healer/enchanter which power-ups their ADC in lane, and later the entire team, or a tank which deals little damage but has a stronger Crowd control kit than a regular top-lane tank). Sometimes, a support player will choose to pick a ranged mage, which can go well for the team if AP damage is lacking, and the player will not leave their ADC behind. Marksmen are very powerful, but also very easy to kill by the enemy – a good team can keep their marksman behind their front lines and make sure they output as much damage as possible in a team fight.

Jungle is a versatile role, often referred to as the most important and with the most impact on the game. A jungler will choose between a roster of specialized champions (which

can be anything from AP mage, AP or AD tank, AD fighter, and so on), and instead of being in one lane consistently, they will farm the jungle “camps”, attempting to help their lanes when a fight between champions is starting. Junglers are also equipped with an ability to “smite” large jungle monsters, which give powerful and unique stats to the team that secures them.

As the match progresses, players will be able to leave their lanes in order to fight with their Jungler for jungle monsters, or to help push towers of other lanes, or to join large fights between all 10 players. With good communication, lane rotations can be done smoothly, and everyone can benefit from them. In a way, League of Legends is a game of strategy, not just one of mechanical skill of aiming with a mouse, and keyboard button-pressing at the right time.

There are several types of matches that can be chosen from the League of Legends client launcher; some arrive on a monthly rotation basis, while some are standardized and exist at any point within the client. The latter are:

1. Player vs AI (difficulty: Intro, Beginner or Intermediate) – instead of fighting against real people, players can choose to practice through AI matches, better known as “bots” or “bot matches”. Although practicing against AI is recommended, it is not forced via the client.
2. Normal Blind Pick – players will queue for the game without choosing the role they want to play; once a match is found, they have to type in chat with other players on their team in order to assign roles. Enemies’ picks are not visible, nor can players ban champions.
3. Normal Draft Pick – players can assign two roles they would like to get to themselves, and once a match is found, they will know which role they were given by the matchmaking system. Enemies’ picks are visible, and each player can ban a champion.
4. Ranked Flex – same rules apply as in the Normal Draft Pick mode, except for the introduction of the ranked system which ranks players according to their wins/losses respectively. Players of all ranks can team up to play together.
5. Ranked Solo/Duo – as its name states, players can look for a match as a single player, or with one friend. Ranked system in Solo/Duo mode is considered a rather serious one, as it’s the one considered relevant when attempting to be successful within the game, or join pro-play. Players of same or similar ranks can queue up together.
6. ARAM – “All mid, all random” – this game mode’s map is consisted of one singular “lane” which all five players of both teams occupy and fight to defeat the enemies’ Nexus. The “all

random” in its name stands for randomized champion picks in the game’s pre-match preparation.

Rules that apply to levelling within the match are standardized, but some are not; everything that can be a player’s choice, including simply walking under the enemy tower and repetitively dying, is left for them to decide to do or not. Therefore, playing the game with strangers is based on mutual trust that all five on the same team will play to win. There exists a report system for players who abuse this freedom and play against their own team by intentionally dying and giving gold to the enemy, giving up jungle objectives or revealing their allies’ location to the enemy, but it is still a flawed one, and a loss will be considered a loss for everyone on the team (even if the player is punished for this behaviour after the game).

Progressing in and out of the game – levels and ranks

Making a new account on League of Legends website is mandatory for downloading the game itself. A player chooses which server they will be on, depending on the region they reside in (for example, NA – North America, or EUNE – Europe Nordic & East). Choosing the optimal server ensures that the connection during the matches should be more stable, but also that it is possible to encounter many players who reside in the same country, or close by, as the player.

Upon installing the game, players will be taken to a mandatory tutorial, which is quite short and simple; while introducing a few characters in the game that the player can switch between during listening to simple tower and minion mechanics explained, the tutorial barely scrapes the surface of what the game is actually like: interactive, and dependent on real-time teamwork. This games’ complexity and depth may be what compels players to learn and improve continuously, but this aspect of it is to be learned through other mediums.

Once the tutorial is complete, players are introduced to the game’s client. The client is technically serving as a launcher: players can choose a game mode to play through it, matchmake and plan out the match. However, this client has many other purposes: the main page showcases news about the game, with the access to the shop, player’s collection of owned items, information about champions, and a friends list that is always displayed on the far right of the client. With every match played, players gain experience points within the client. These points are part of a levelling system whose purpose is to sign how much a player has actually played; for instance, a level 500 player is speculated to have invested around 2 thousand hours into the game.

Ranked modes are not available for a new account until it reaches level 30, which takes around 200 games played (without purchasable XP boosts). That may be enough to understand the gist of the rules, but not enough to learn the mechanics of every champion available, let alone how to properly play against all of them, as any of them. Thus, the ranked system can feel unfair to both new and experienced players, as the matchmaking is based on current rank, not time spend into the game.

League's lowest rank is iron, followed by bronze, silver, gold, platinum, diamond, master, grandmaster, and challenger. Ranked Solo/Duo and Ranked Flex, as two different ranked modes, have separate rankings which are not dependent on each other. A player can be impressively high ranked in Flex, playing with their friends who work well together, but struggle to reach higher than bronze rank in Solo/Duo.

4. Welcome to Summoner's Rift – The Hardships of Learning the Game

Finding players to play League of Legends with is a task simplified by community owned Discord servers. Anyone can join these and look through text channels designed for seeking ranked partners or casual players. However, these are going to be players who already know the game, or have at least played it for a while. I had to find my group of beginners elsewhere.

I have briefly known Tereels through University of Oslo Gaming club, as I was a member of the UiO e-sports team, and he was a casual League player and a member of the UiO Gaming Discord server. During one of the club's board game nights, I have asked around for League of Legends players who are not on the team, and Tereels showed immediate interest in my project. He said he knew a guy who used to play video games with him when they were younger, and who definitely has not touched League of Legends yet. That is where we started from; I have tried to recruit some girls from the club, and even some that I was acquaintances with, but none were interested in spending six months with League of Legends.

The rest of the group members joined one by one, by having friends of a friend ask them about participating in this research. At some point, there was around a dozen interested people, and I initially wanted to have a group of five, as that is the number of players on a team. However, I chose six, as not only would there be times when not all of them can play, but also because these young men seemed different enough from each other, and the most experienced in other virtual worlds. The reason I prioritized existing gamers is in the difficulty of learning League of Legends, assuming that it would take a long time to engage non-gamers into such a complicated world of rules. Would six months be enough, however, to will even the most experienced of gamers to become an active part of the League's social and competitive community? I was eager to find out.

Our first meeting

When I first saw them together, it was the beginning of May (and perhaps, fair to say, the beginning of Spring in Norway). We have decided to meet at McDonald's, in order to discuss the process of the research and organize our pre-existing thoughts on the game they are about to learn—the familiar smell of behind-the-counter burgers and fries mixed with that of

cleaning detergent. I approached the group of boys with my notebook in my left hand, ready to greet them all with a handshake.

There was Jimmy, with his copper red hair and bright blue eyes, hidden behind sunglasses. He wears them pretty much all the time, he said, sometimes even behind the computer screen. The Sun damages his eyes and gives him a headache. The rest asked if he would avoid this if he actually adjusted his vision and wore the glasses gradually less, to which he casually shrugged, with a smile.

Tereels was sitting on a chair far too small for him; both him and Saxman were very tall and slim built, with legs that reached beyond the McDonald's tables. Tereels had already played League of Legends before, and hoped to be of help teaching the rest how to play. Despite being a player for a year, he still considered himself a beginner, but knew enough about the general rules to be able to tutor someone else. Saxman was not too keen on video games at first, it seemed. He explained that he was a very busy individual, with University obligations getting in the way of his passion for music. Video games were a means to stay in touch with his friends.

B.B. introduced himself as a student. His shoulder-long blonde hair, entirely in curls, was neatly tucked behind his ears. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt, jeans, and enormous, black military boots. I asked him about those – it was a warm day of May, after all. He had been in the military around three years ago, and he kept those because he liked them. In fact, he liked them so much that he ended up wearing them anywhere, all the time, no matter the season. The rest agreed that they were cool. “A fashion statement”, added Tereels.

OverChad was the chattiest of the bunch, while Zeri was the quietest. One had very short, spiky hair, while the other had very long, straight hair. They both liked video games, although very different genres that we agreed to talk about next time we met. Despite the shyness, Zeri was more excited about League of Legends than OverChad. Having played similar games, OverChad thought that there would be nothing special about League to keep him hooked.

So far, they had three things in common: they were all in their early twenties, they all had some variation of blue in their eyes, and they all loved video games.

Our first actual interview on the topic of video games was an online one, and it was still before their first game in Summoner's Rift. I wanted to learn which games they liked, and what made them spend money on them (if any money was spent). In a way, it was a profiling process

of potential future Riot Games customers. The store in the game's client is filled with purchasable content: champions, champion skins, icons, ward skins, emotes, Hextech crafting chests, Hextech crafting keys, orbs, capsules, monthly passes, skin bundles with skin borders and icons, chroma skins and bundles...it was a weekly refreshed store, making window-shopping a colourful and exciting experience. This is certainly what Walter Benjamin would have considered "aestheticized commodities" in "the ever-changing landscape" (1982), with art shifting into industry through advertising, marketing and reinventing displays for commercial use (Buck-Morss, 1983). What else fits into the term mass culture better than products which are purchasable through a click of a mouse, and are available in infinite numbers to an unlimited number of customers, and each piece is always identical, no matter if ten or ten million own it?

Saxman was the first to share what games he plays and spends money on: Overwatch, Call of Duty, and Team Fortress 2. Their stores offer similar products as that in League of Legends: mostly cosmetic stuff, an online, in-game only boutique. "...for Team Fortress 2...I spent a lot of money on cosmetics because I thought they looked cool. And you know, it is like a status symbol to have cool sh*t. That was my main reason to do that". He further explained that Team Fortress 2 is a first-person game, meaning that the player does not see himself, but is playing through the eyes of their character. They can see hands and weapons, but not the actual skins. "This means that it only changes how other players treat you, in a sense. These purchases aren't about progress, but it sort of motivated me to play more." About competitive gameplay, he said that having skins sometimes feels like something he needs to justify owning, and therefore perform better in the game.

B.B. also plays Overwatch, and Teamfight Tactics. Teamfight Tactics is actually a game within the League of Legends client, very different from the actual LoL experience. It is a game based off DOTA⁶ auto-chess, and only played with a mouse. Each player competes against seven others, by buying characters, merging and combining them, and placing them on their boards to prepare them for an automatic duel which will play out according to the placements of their teams. The only actual connection between TFT and LoL, apart from being available through the same client and developed by the same company, is that TFT characters represent playable champions in League, hence being attractive to long-time LoL players as a breath of fresh air. B.B. had never bought anything for TFT at that point, but was aware that

⁶ A different MOBA game, League of Legends' predecessor

there were “loot boxes”, a term commonly used in other games, which are cheaper than buying an actual skin, but give out an item of random rarity.

Loot boxes are a thing in Overwatch, he continued, and you obtain one per level. “There is a percentage chance of getting one type of skin in a loot box. Except if you buy like a special loot box, sometimes you can just get legendaries⁷, and then you buy them, and open them, and get a skin.” However, Overwatch is not a free2play title. Apart from purchasing the game, B.B. hasn’t spent any money on it. Instead, he said he “earned” all his cosmetics and in-game currency: “like instead of buying it...it’s like, ‘oh! You got a cool skin because you just bought it instead of playing a lot’”, and that it makes him feel “kind of proud, I guess”.

OverChad was slightly late to our online meeting, ready to chat the moment he arrived. His favourite and most played game is Overwatch, but he also plays Lego: Star Wars, Skyrim, and Destiny. He likes skins, he purchases them “of course, to look different, have a unique identity to myself – like, I chose the skin that appeals more to me than just a general skin in Destiny, for example. I haven’t purchased any DLC characters for Lego: Star Wars because there I see it as unnecessary, because I don’t get anything from it...”,...”and for Overwatch, of course, I don’t purchase skins. Because you can get them so easily.”

Destiny offers a purchasable boost within the game, which gives a clear advantage over other new players who will spend actual time to achieve the same thing. OverChad had never bought those, considering them bad for the overall experience in the game: “There’s no real meaning to it after I purchase it, because I’ve already gotten it. So I’m like – okay, now what do I do? I already have it.” As for cosmetics and motivation, the skins themselves are not what motivates him to play more. Instead, he is motivated to play to acquire the skins, and while playing, to “look better”.

Tereels listed plenty of games that he had played: League of Legends, TFT, Team Fortress 2, Overwatch, Dead by Daylight, and a multitude of single-player titles. The game he has played the most is TF2, with over 3500 hours invested in it; around 1000 hours with Overwatch, and until then, a couple of hundreds with League of Legends. “I have spent money on TF2, both on cosmetic stuff, and also you have this like trading system, you can trade items within the game. So you can, if you spend some money to get some items in the game, trade those with players to make value.” Value is assigned to these items by their rarity and

⁷ A term for legendary items or skins

popularity. It is displayed in actual currencies (dollars or euros), and the money earned by trades can be either spent further within the game's store on other trades, or cashed out to use in other applications (Tereels used it for purchasing games via Steam). None of the tradeable things boost one's progress in the game, or give any advantage: they are all cosmetic, and as previously mentioned, not even seen by the player themselves, as it is a first-person game. While liking having skins in the game, Tereels said he mostly enjoyed the trading process, "trying to get something more valuable" every time.

Jimmy mostly plays Football Manager. He additionally bought a DLC that adds an editing option to the game, which allows players to alter stat values of their teams. For instance, he could assign billion dollars to his team if he wanted to. He did not want to call it a "cheat", but rather "defining the level of progression that your teams will already have". However, Jimmy himself does not enjoy playing with the editor, as it makes the progress feel less like a success, and more of a shallow action. Football Manager is mostly a single player game, but there exists a large community of FM players on a Reddit forum, where they can share their personal achievements with others. He enjoys playing the game for himself, seeing how far he can take each football team, and how good they can get.

Zeri does not play video games as often as the others seem to, he said, as there is not a multiplayer game that he returns to on a regular basis. He enjoys indie titles⁸; he purchases them, as well as their DLCs, but they do not have microtransactions. "It feels worth it when I already like the game", he said, and that supporting indie developers "is like justifying paying the money".

Before our first League of Legends game, I asked the group what their thoughts on their future with it are. B.B. was the first to answer excitedly: "yeah, I will be motivated!". Zeri said that, if he likes the game, he might spend money on it to unlock the characters, but is not particularly interested in the skin aspect of it.

"Knowing myself, I will probably spend money on it", said Saxman, to which Jimmy responded: "Knowing myself, I think I will be very reluctant to do that. Because, yeah, for me, I would rather use money on food and survival."

"I think I could be willing to purchase skins", OverChad said. Tereels has already made purchases in the game, mostly to either purchase a skin for his girlfriend, or a skin that makes

⁸ Games developed by independent studios, usually of a smaller scale than AAA titles (in terms of graphics and technical achievements)

him match her when they play together. He could see himself being more interested in skins, now that he will have an entire group to play with.

We concluded our meeting with another brief reminder that League of Legends is going to be an overwhelming learning process, and that the groups' experience with Overwatch, which is an extremely fast-paced game, might help with learning the ropes. "One thing is getting into the mechanics. But the other thing to get into is the f-in player base", Tereels said. "In your first games, you will match with everything from people who are brand new, to veteran players who made a new account, which makes it really, really inconsistent."

Needless to say that the motivation aspect plummeted afterwards.

Rough starts

"Ignore the parts of the map which are dark".

This was my first instruction given to the group as I opened the game's practice mode and shared the screen over Discord. Practice mode is a custom mode which does not count towards progress of either one's rank or level; it is a good way to try out any champion, as it allows players to choose the amount of gold and XP their characters will have at any moment. It also allows generating AI enemies, minions and target dummies. Generally, practice mode is considered good for working on particular combos of abilities on champions which are based on hitting all the things correctly. "High risk, high reward" is how they are usually described. However, this particular practice mode entry served its purpose of having me walk around the Summoner's Rift map and explaining what each lane is.

The darkness of the map exists for both teams, as they can't see the other team's side on the mini-map. This darkness is called 'the fog of war'. It also covers the jungle area for all players, allowing early action. For example, the enemy Jungler, sometimes joined by the rest of their team, may choose to 'invade' the friendly jungle. This is not the norm, as the map rules imply that each team has their own starting side which they aim to defend, including the jungle camps. It is not quite the norm to gather as five in one of the bushes on the map during the first minute, and wait for a potential enemy to walk in, but it sometimes happens, and is fun (if it works).

As I will often mention in this paper, trust and agreement between players plays a big role in all the choices. These two are not necessarily communicated about, as playing to win, especially in a ranked game, is an expectation players create for everyone. Within each match,

though, a different hierarchy is set depending on the outcome of each action that results in an objective scored, a tower pushed, or a champion being slain (enemy or ally). To quote Malaby (2009), “the negotiation of social interaction is a key aspect of virtual worlds, where players are continually developing and refining their own social norms and practices”, and these worlds offer a “unique opportunity to study the negotiation of social norms and practices in real time, as they are being developed and refined by the users themselves (p. 138).

A ward is an item all players have in the game, I explained further, but there are also wards that can be bought. The free wards refresh every few minutes, and a player can hold up to two at once. Placing wards disperses the darkness, I explained further. Areas also light up once friendly characters are in them. You always see the lanes to the point where your minions are, as they are friendly characters, too. If you destroy enemy towers, your minions can go farther without obstruction. If you defeat an enemy champion, you can push them even further, thus allowing more vision. Some areas in lanes, though, are always dark unless a ward is placed, and those are bushes, which exist in the jungle area, too. If an enemy runs into a bush which is not warded during a fight, they can’t be targeted by ally minions nor champions, as they are out of vision. There are certain champions whose abilities apply vision on enemy targets for a brief period of time, regardless of the area the targets are in. There are certain champions who can become *camouflaged* and can only be spotted by purchasable wards.

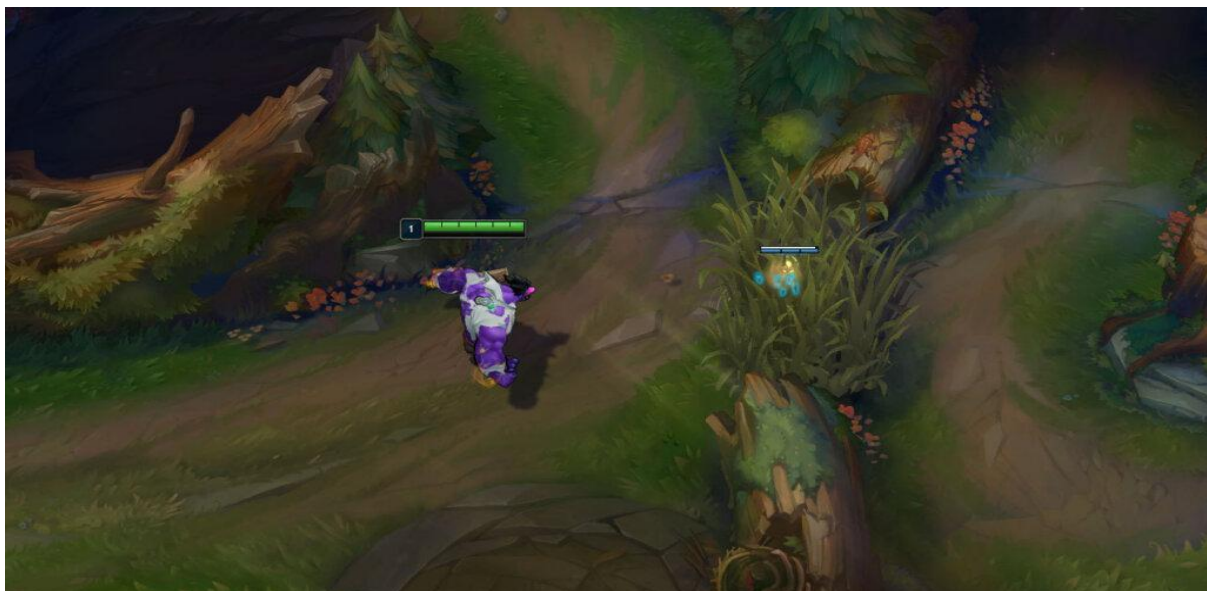


Figure 2 - Ally Mundo placing a strong early ward in the jungle bush, image taken from source (2)

“Must I think of all that?”, Jimmy asked. From the very beginning, he had showed the least enthusiasm about League of Legends. Even hearing that it is an overwhelming game

overwhelmed him. However, in bot games (Player vs AI), no one has to think of vision. The AI bots do not possess the level of understanding that goes beyond the rules that are already set by the game itself. They understand lanes and the rules of playing within one. They understand the rules of minions and the rules of towers, meaning that they play to defend their tower while attacking the enemy. Explained this way, the game becomes very easy, and put this way, made the group a bit more at ease. The guys liked not having to think about what other people are doing at the same time during the games. They liked that they were playing together, but for the most part, it didn't feel as though they were playing together. Every lane was for themselves. At certain instances, our call would become so quiet that I wondered if this was going to be more difficult than I hoped it would be.

For players who are used to games which are not competitive between other players, such as Zeri, the experience of playing bot games was as if he was playing just another game that has a map, and has enemies. It was hard to feel the randomness of the game, and its uniqueness in these first games that we have played together. What makes this game so fun while also holding the ability to make it frustrating, is the synergy between the teammates. In bot games there was no synergy, though these were the games that were supposed to teach them the rules. The difficulty stems from the fact that the game itself does not teach the player of any rules other than the ones that the bots in the bot games know: the rules of vision, the rules of listening and communicating, the rules of observing the map, and leaving your lane when necessary. These are the things that players learn intuitively, from game to game, from experience to experience, and mostly by losing.

On the other hand, losing to bots is really hard. Eight years ago, when I first started playing League of Legends, there was no such thing as practice tool. Learning new champions was something I did in the bot games, and it made every champion feel easier than they actually were. If we ignore the fact that the bots do not perform much further from trying to keep a fair distance between themselves, the enemy, and the towers, the simplicity of bot games is in the AI enemies' disability to properly group up and shut down a friendly player who is doing well. However, to a beginner, the bot games are still a challenge, and I gave up playing them with the group early on. I would end up beating the poor AI champion in the first few minutes, making the lane almost entirely open for me and my waves of minions. I could keep pushing all the way into the Nexus, all by myself, because the rest of the enemy AI would still keep going to their respectful lanes, completely ignoring my advances. But, if this is not how the

game is supposed to go, how should it, then? After all, this is how the game developers themselves have programmed the bots to behave like, mimicking a real game.

The general consensus among the group was that these games were boring, and they could not see the appeal. There seemed to be nothing to strategize about. Then we started our conversation about wards and the fog of war.

In regular team sports, the position of the enemy is hardly obscured. You are supposed to see where the enemy is doing in order to strategize against them. League of Legends makes that quite difficult to understand for beginners.

Saxman: "...so I am just supposed to know what to do."

Emina: "Well, that is, kind of, a given."

B.B.: "It is crazy to me that you are supposed to see your enemy, if they are plotting something against you, and you have these wards – but the bots, they don't plot anything. So how do I learn? I mean, it gets pretty boring."

Tereels: "Enjoy the times in which the game is boring, those times are very rare. These might be some of the most peaceful times you will experience in the next six months together (laughing)".

During one very long bot game, one in which I decided to lay a bit low and not end the game early, we almost lost. Jimmy was struggling to play Miss Fortune on top lane, together with Saxman who chose a mage called Lux. B.B. was attempting to play jungle, while OverChad chose Garen on midlane. They had died enough times to the enemy AI to give them a significant advance in gold and items they could purchase with it, so that even I struggled to fight against them, as they would deal too much damage to my character at once. Tereels watched the game, commenting why it would be embarrassing to lose it.

Tereels: "You just don't lose bot games in League of Legends. If anything, the AI game is the one time when you are actually going to win, without a doubt. No other outcome."

To the rest of the group, though, it did not matter.

The years spent playing this game may convince the player into the idea that only by winning do they achieve good with the time they have spent into the game. The time in question is not just the length of a match they won or lost, it is all the time previously invested, too. The frustration of strangers that played with us in the early Players vs Players games will add

strength to this claim. It made me miss the times when League of Legends, for me included, was about learning and having fun, not primarily about caring whether the game ends with a victory or a defeat sign on the screen.

Becoming the champion

Tereels told us that the reason he ever even started playing League of Legends was because of his girlfriend. It was a game she was very passionate about, and she wanted him to join her. As someone who had already played competitive games, Tereels considered himself up to the challenge. With a lot of laughter, he recalls the first games he had played with her. She was very patient, he explained, as long as he was listening soundly and playing pretty much what she told him to, which was a support champion called Soraka. Soraka is considered a simple and easy champion, as her abilities are straight forward, and do not require extreme precision.

Abilities of champions are, by default, binded to the Q, W, E and R keys on the keyboard. The Q ability is usually a character's most basic, signature ability. On Soraka, her Q is a circle which briefly slows enemies, deals a small amount of damage, and heals her continuously for a short time. In order to heal an ally, all a Soraka player must do is click on them with their W. However, if the W heal is casted after a successful Q, the ally will also have the effect of continuous healing. Soraka's E is another circle, easier to cast than the first one, and it silences⁹ enemies, rooting¹⁰ those that stay in it before it disperses. The ability assigned to the R key is always a champion's *ultimate* ability, their strongest one, and with the longest cooldown¹¹. Soraka's R is an instant heal to all allies, no matter where they are on the map. A good Soraka player will observe the action on the map at all times, and react to fights in which her ultimate could change the tides of a different lane.

⁹ A silenced enemy can move, but cannot cast abilities or Summoner's spells

¹⁰ A rooted enemy cannot move, but can cast abilities and Summoner's spells

¹¹ The remaining time until an ability can be used again



Figure 3 - Soraka casting Q on an enemy Annie, image taken from source (3)

Tereels: I was Soraka all the games – too many games. I started identifying League of Legends with Soraka. I really didn't want to be Soraka in all games, and when I picked something else, I would, of course, be bad at it, but then it would be a problem for everyone else that I was bad, and in order to not feel bad, I would pick Soraka the next game again. It was in bot games that I could play whatever I want"...the other day, I had a lot of kills with Kayn, and she approached me and asked 'is this bots?', and I said, yeah, because it was, and she started laughing – she asked it as a joke, implying that Player vs AI is the only place I can score good with Kayn. And the irony of it all, yeah, it was.

Jimmy: It is just easier to play as one character. I don't have to think too much about what it does if I know what it does.

Zeri: But you had to play MF¹² for the first time, too, in order to know what she does.

Jimmy: I had her in the tutorial, that doesn't count.

¹² Miss Fortune

Tereels: So all you are is MF.



Figure 4 - Miss Fortune official splash art

Despite knowing each other's real names and in-game nicknames, the players referred to each other as the character they were playing. This started occurring about two months into the game, when the basics of the gameplay became a common knowledge, and we could shift our focus onto playing with some strategies involved.

We referred to the enemies as the character they were playing, too. The nicknames that players choose are not always the most memorable ones, despite their visibility on the screen when they are near, and the special tab menu of overall stats of both teams. Since the game allows player to choose any nickname, as long as it does not contain offensive language, we cannot be expected to even try mouthing the name "xyxyxyxy111" when trying to warn our allies of their absence¹³. Furthermore, as we were playing against 5 different people every game, it could be confusing to refer to their nicknames. Instead, for example, if both the enemy ADC and support are missing from the bot lane, we could write or say: "bot missing" or "bot ss". If only one of them was missing, it was more common to say the champion's name: "Tristana's missing" or "Thresh is missing".

¹³ As before-mentioned, League of Legends is much about strategizing and knowing when to leave a lane and move to aid allies. The goal is to move around areas which the enemy does not have warded. It is expected from players to ping or write about the enemy's absence from their lane, so that the others can play around expecting their ambush.

When being written to by the enemy or ally strangers, they would also refer to us by our champions in play. When Jimmy was getting bullied for his poor performance in previous Miss Fortune games, he would receive messages that stated: “MF, you are trash”, not “Jimmy, you are...”. And if the bully had a champion chosen by that time, we would refer back to them as their champion: “Don’t be so rude, Nocturne”.

This might appear as role-playing, but the game itself is not focused on social role-play. It is very rare to encounter players who embody the personality of their chosen champion and actually pretend to be them. Even if their nicknames were referring to the champion (“best Zed EUNE”, “Yasuo the samurai”, “Luminescent Princess¹⁴”), they weren’t actually pretending to be that champion. The messages they would send are not in the personality of the character, especially not if what they are saying is offensive. When we did encounter a few of those who pretended to be the character they were playing in their messages during the game, they were met with comments that criticized and mocked their behaviour. The word “cringe” was used the most.

Contrary to Releets, Zeri did not mind being Soraka. He considered that playing and being a healer champion was a good reflection of his character. As he generally avoided games that were violent in nature, Zeri preferred gentler characters. Those were mostly female champions with protective abilities. OverChad considered these boring, since “you can’t carry with them and get kills.”

Emina: “So it is only fun if you get to kill other players?”

OverChad: “Feels more like action.”

Player VS Player

In the League community, it is common to check another player’s profile before, during and after the match. It is often done in order to scan their previous games, their most played champions, and scores they had with them. Over third-party software and websites, most popular being opgg, players can also check winrate percentages of others. These allow filtering between Solo-Duo ranked games, Flex games and non-ranked modes as well. Sometimes, these performance statistics are used against players. Jimmy had a pretty bad streak of games as Miss Fortune on bot lane, and people who noticed that would make sure he knows they noticed. They would write messages to him and others that implied that he would perform just as bad

¹⁴ The champion Lux

in the new match; in bot games, this would not be the case. In bot games, there is no such desire to check other teammates, as it is a given that the game will end in a victory. Furthermore, the bot game ending with a victory screen does not mean much: it rewards the player with some XP (experience points) within the client, but does not feel much like a win once the player is used to playing against others.

Saxman: “I am really excited to play against real people. You promised us less boredom.”

Zeri: “I like the boredom (chuckling).”

Jimmy: “Me, too.”

B.B.: “Me too, but, I want to know what the game is all about. Because it can’t only be about shooting creeps and towers.”

Tereels: “You’ll see – (interrupted)”

B.B.: “Now he will tell us how the game is about the players again.”

Emina: “It is!”

Tereels: “But it is! (laughing)”

To make the transition to playing against real people a more relaxing experience, I asked for aid of some of my other, more experienced League of Legends friends to play with the members of the group. One of them is JazzNass, a former *Rank 1* player of champion Riven on the EUNE server, and a former Challenger player. Games played with him usually result in a win, especially if they are against people who will match the rank and level of the beginners he is playing with. JazzNass was very patient with everyone, scarcely giving any advice. He explained that noting every single mistake of a new player can have an opposite effect from wanting to learn and improve: “Unless I am coaching someone who specifically wants me to watch them play and tutor as they go, I do not like to tell others what to do. It can be overbearing and annoying, we call this performance anxiety in the game.” On the other hand, JazzNass would often comment against enemies, and teammates that were outside of the group. In moments where one of the other would make a mistake, he would be vocal about it and address them as though they were with us on the call. Once he played against another Riven player who was not performing well, and instead of typing in *All chat*, which is a chat function that allows

players to write a message that both the ally and the enemy team can see, he kept saying things like: “Riven, you are so bad”, “Riven, what are you doing”, and so on.

JazzNass lives in Egypt, only around ten minutes away from the pyramids. When we have first met, I asked him to take some pictures of them for my grandmother. We were both high school students, addicted to the game. Today, JazzNass is a successful University student and a part-time League of Legends streamer on Twitch, an online streaming platform. He listens to rock and roll music from all decades, has a dog that always barks in the evenings, and admits that League of Legends sometimes clashes with his religious and academic obligations. However, JazzNass has embraced this game as his major hobby. When I introduced him to the focus group, he was incredibly humble about his rank and status in the game’s community. He dismissed it when I suggested that this was a rare achievement. Instead, he joked how his results are a sign of embarrassment: they mirror all the time he has spent in the game, telling the rest of the world that he “has no life outside of the game”.

Owning a successful League account came with a lot of respect in Champion selection lobby, and such was transferred to the members of the group as well. Jimmy did not receive a single negative message when playing with JazzNass, and neither did the rest of us. JazzNass would let the strangers know that these are his friends, and that they are beginners, and the responses were positive each time: “Don’t worry, bro”, “All good”, “You will carry anyways”.

When I would play with the group, and explain that I was teaching them for the sake of a Master project, responses were varying. There was no way of telling if players would react positively or negatively to this. For the sake of playing with Norwegian players, I transferred my account from EUNE to EUW server, which erased all my previous achievements in ranked games. For anyone who would look my account up on OPGG, I was a low Silver rank (which I accomplished by finishing ten rank placement games, that had me start from Iron, the lowest rank), and I was not trusted to be an objectively good player. Instead, when I would announce that my teammates were beginners, we would be met with more doubt in our success than when I would not write anything. When letting the enemies know that they are beginners, asking politely to go easy on them – these were blind pick Normal games after all, the PvP ones with the least impact – the reactions were also negative, ranging from “I don’t care” to intentionally having the enemy jungler target the weakest of our group. Not only was this not helping anyone learn, but it was also exhausting and dissatisfactory.

Further, my being a young woman did not always help our case, either. I have the title “Queen” in my nickname, but if that is not a hint enough, I also often play stereotypically “female” champions (Miss Fortune would be one, but Jimmy kept taking that away from me). When introducing myself as a Master student, I would often get a “go to the kitchen” back. If I were the one carrying the team of my beginners (some games we managed to win, despite everyone’s confusion), I would receive more kitchen comments, together with other hateful language. From my perspective, there was no need to feel so insecure at the sight of a woman taking a video game seriously, but these experiences also impacted the group’s opinion on the game.

OverChad: “I would say I don’t understand why anyone would play a game like this, but then again, I am playing Overwatch, so who am I to talk.”

B.B.: “I find it okay. I just don’t read what others are saying.”

Zeri: “Me neither. I know I am bad, with or without their input.”

Emina: “And do you think you will get better?”

B.B.: “Not like this, for sure!”

Jimmy: “I am just pressing buttons, to be honest.”

Saxman: “I think I will. It just doesn’t feel like I am getting better by each game, you know? I feel like I am bad in every. So when does it happen that you are suddenly, just, good?”

Teerels: “You should all play Soraka.”

Emina: “Guess no one is buying skins just yet.”

5. League of Markets

The Skin Shop

“We all have this hole inside us, and consumerism is the answer”

Ragnarok, a EUW player, when asked about the expensive skins he has in every game

There are two currencies a user can obtain in League of Legends and spend in the shop: Blue Essence, and Riot Points (RP). Blue Essence is gained passively by playing the game, and users are rewarded with slightly more if they win. The only way of obtaining RP is by spending real money on it. The price for the bundles offered in the shop vary from region to region, depending on real-life currency statuses¹⁵.

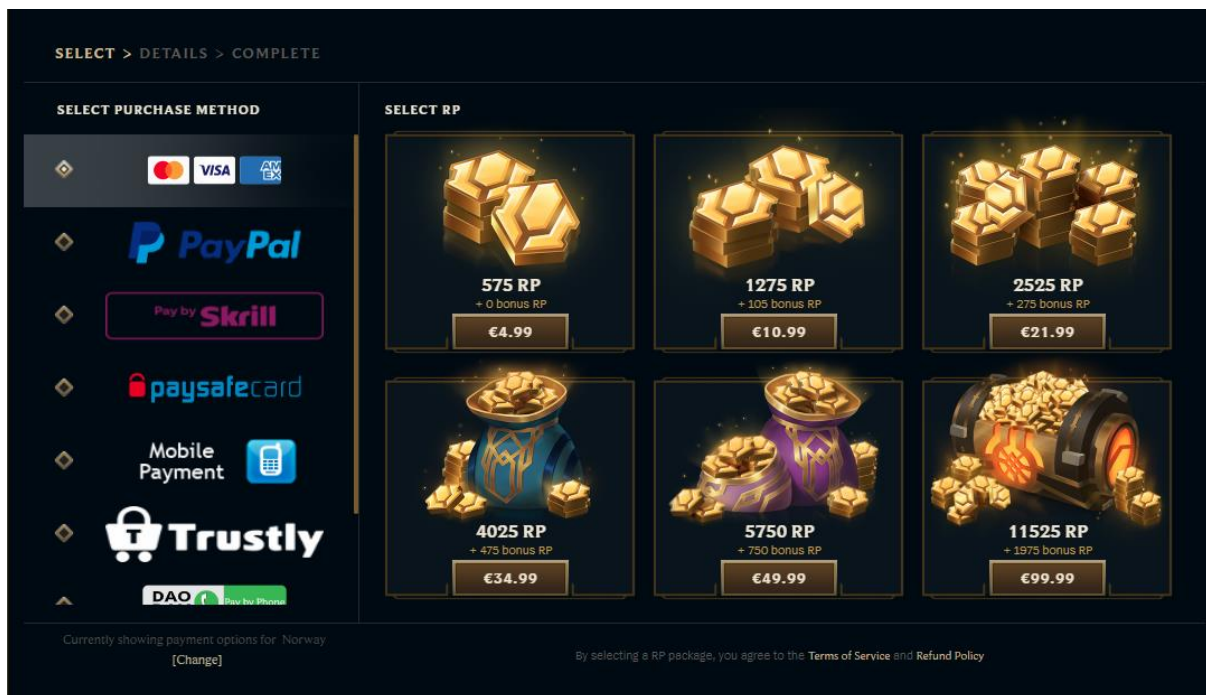


Figure 5 - League of Legends RP store, image taken from the game's client

Users can use Blue Essence for purchasing champions, rune pages¹⁶ and nickname change. Champions BE prices range from 450 to 6300, and even 7500 for a champion that has just been released (this price lasts for a week). Rune pages cost 6300 BE each, and the name change 13200 BE. Every 6 months, Riot Games would launch a special event shop within the client, Essence Emporium, where all skin chromas that were released at least one year prior to

¹⁵ For example, the prices in euros have gone up after the Russia-Ukraine war began

¹⁶ Specific champion builds that are chosen in the champion lobby, explained further on the page

the Emporium could be purchasable for 2000 BE each. There would also be a roster of new icons that are purchasable with BE, as well as some other “goodies”, the most popular being the Urwick skin for champion Warwick, which costs 150 000 BE. However, in early 2022, Riot Games announced that they would stop the Essence Emporium, vaguely promising a different event instead.



Figure 6 - Urwick, the 150 000 BE Warwick skin official splash art

League of Legends client is heavily focused on making its users spend money on the cosmetics in the game, and its progression over the years shifted from only having champions and their skins as a way of making money, to selling skin variations, ward skins, emotes, champion achievement markers, skin borders, loot boxes, and so on. I will describe each of these, and their prices in game:

1. Champions: The only item on the list that is not RP exclusive, and can be unlocked through the resource given to players as they level up and play.

2. Skins: Alternative looks for champions, which can come in several tiers (other than the regular skin which only changes the appearance of a champion, there are Epic skins, which alter the ability effects and recall animations, Legendary skins, which additionally alter walking and attack animations and add new voice lines to the character, Mythic skins, which are only purchasable through a special shop and special currencies, and Ultimate skins, which are similar to Legendary, but add several variations to the skin which makes it feel like the player

has multiple skins in one game). The prices are mostly fixed by the tier (1350 RP for Epic, 1820 RP for Legendary, 3200 for Ultimate), although there are weekly rotating skin sales that lower the prices up to 60%.

3. Skin Chromas: Alternative looks for existing champion skins, usually offering a different colour palette to the main skin release, together with slight details on design and patterns.



Figure 7 - Heartseeker Yuumi skin and its chromas, image taken from source (4)

4. Loot Boxes: An addition to the game's shop that arrived in 2016, loot boxes come in two variations: Hextech and Masterwork chests. The first can be obtained and unlocked by performing well in the game, and it can reward the player with a champion, skin, emote, or ward skin shard, and the latter only by RP, and does not reward champion shards. Shards are one step away from owning the reward in the chest; the user must use Orange Essence to unlock a skin from a shard fully, and Orange Essence is exclusively gained by discarding other skin shards in the Loot inventory. Champion shards are unlockable with Blue Essence, although with a significantly lower price from their shop BE cost.

5. Skin Borders and Bundles: Bundles are a way to purchase multiple things at once, and if a bundle offers multiple skins in a new line, it is not much less expensive than buying each skin individually. There are limited bundles that offer icons and skin borders for a specific skin, which are custom-made borders over a champion's skin art in the game's loading screen. These can also only be purchased with RP.

6. Event Passes: A common, popular way to get players to spend money are monthly or weekly passes which cost 15 euro value of RP, and encourage players to complete missions in their games to win points (*tokens*) which can be exchanged for rewards. For example, by collecting 2200 tokens during one pass (which would require many hours of gaming), user can exchange them for 125 *mythic essence*, which is a currency for unlocking limited edition skins that can not be purchased by RP.

7. Icons: Only visible through League of Legends client and in the loading screen, these cost 250 RP each.

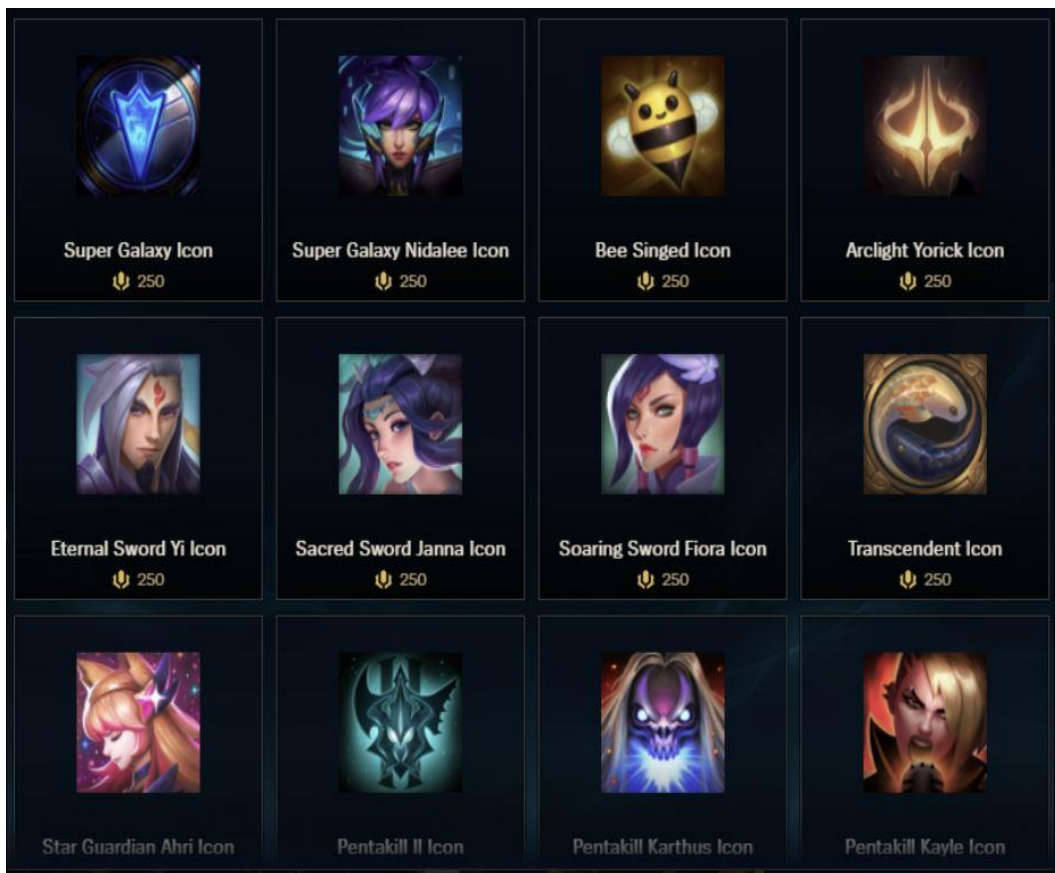


Figure 8 - Icons from the Icon store in the game's client, taken from the game's client

8. Eternals: This change was marked as a *cash grab* by players when it was released; for 600 RP each (to put into perspective, it is half a cost of an Epic skin), players could unlock a tracker for three specific abilities its champion has. This tracker would display their collected achievements during the loading screen, and sometimes during the game, if a checkpoint is reached. For example, one of Soraka's trackers counts how many times she hit an enemy with her Q ability (*Starfall*). Realizing the dissatisfaction of their players, Riot Games offered Eternals as a free gift that can be dropped by loot boxes, albeit for a random character.

9. Emotes: Cute, funny, or relatable cartoon images of League of Legends characters that players can display to each other in a match. They convey emotions such as joy, confusion, sadness, anger, and so on – 350 RP each. However, they are a common free gift in loot boxes and Event passes.

10. Server transfers: As previously explained, server transfers are RP exclusive ways to move an account from one server to another, and they cost around 20 euro in value.

What is specific about the League of Legends market, as a representative of a singular game's real-money market, is that it has a large number of heterogeneous buyers, but only one seller. With no competition, prices of commodities are dictated by the seller's judgement of their value. If there were competition, the seller would "have an incentive to keep their prices low and to improve their products" (Stiglitz, 2019, p. 55). Appadurai's „The Social life of things“ (1986) highlights the complex interplay between globalization and markets, both of which he directly connects to culture and considers impactful in cultural interactions. Appadurai describes the emergence of transnational markets as transformative, as they have the power to homogenize markets, which would, in turn, homogenize cultures and bring them closer together. The League's market offers products which are uniform for the entire playerbase, regardless of the users' location. Commodities sold there are also uniform across servers, and do not have any limitation as to who can buy them (e.g., hyper-feminine skins are not only acceptable on users who act feminine).

Another factor is that League of Legends does not offer trading between players, which makes the skins' value in price remain the same in the store. Some skins, which are considered *Legacy content*, are called that way because they disappeared from the store and will never return again. In those instances, accounts which own such skins can be priced high on the online account market. The only currently unobtainable skin that I own at the moment is Unchained Alistar. I have received this skin as a gift from Riot Games User Support in 2017, when I inquired about a song I have written and uploaded on YouTube, "Be at Peace", inspired by and dedicated to the Star Guardian Soraka skin. As a sign of appreciation, a member of the User Support added the skin to my account.

Considering that skins have the accepted price which ranges between five and fifteen euros in the store, the 600 RP price of individual Eternals was a surprise to the community. Eternals do not unlock anything new; the main argument that my interlocutors expressed was that it felt unfair to pay for something they would do themselves, which the game's client would

only keep track of. It does not add much to the customization of users' profiles, other than that it can display their Eternals achievements.

On the other hand, there exists an independent market outside of the League of Legends' client, consisting of many different websites with different offers and price ranges. This market offers accounts of a certain rank, under a certain price. Accounts with good win rate, good rank and all champions unlocked are those which are most expensive on the account market. I communicated with an online account market administrator through Discord, who chose to remain completely anonymous. He explained that, despite the fact that I have invested over two thousand euro into my account, I could not manage to sell it for even half of that. Since I transferred to EUW, all my ranks have been erased, and therefore I cannot offer any value in that compartment. I do not own all the champions, either (a thing of principle, as I buy what I play), nor any old, *legacy* skins. Most of what I have can be bought in the store, and while it is true that buying it all for a thousand instead of two thousand euros sounds like a good deal, no one would be interested in that. Instead, people would spend one thousand euros on buying skins that they actually want.

"Time is worth more than money in League of Legends", the administrator stated. The higher the rank of an account, the more time was spent into achieving it. The more champions there are on the account, the less time the buyer will have to spend on unlocking them with Blue Essence. The better the win-rate of an account, the less time the buyer will have to spend continuing the climb in the ranked system, as he will naturally earn more ranked points by winning. "When players get into a slump and lose many, many games, they say that their account is doomed. Then they go and play on another one, with fresh MMR¹⁷."

This online market is impersonal, aimed at players who do not get attached to their accounts and do not invest money into a singular one. There is no social networking that determines the demand and supply, no trust and personal preference. Instead, the value is determined by saving time: you can either spend a few months, playing 5 to 10 games every day, learning and improving and hopefully climbing the ladder to reach a Diamond rank, or spend around 50 to 100 euros on buying Diamond as your starting rank. Players who play below their rank level, though, struggle to keep this rank, while also making the game more difficult for the team of real Diamond players that they are matched with.

¹⁷ Matchmaking rating, which is a system that Riot uses to match players of similar skill level, sometimes even regardless of their current rank

Gifts in League of Legends

The next time the entire group met in person was in the last week of June, by the Oslo City shopping mall. I was alone on my train, but Tereels, Zeri and Jimmy figured out that they live near one another, and they arrived with the same one. B.B. lived in an area that was, distance wise, close to the city centre, but difficult to travel to and from in practice. His public transport arrival was, what he called, “an adventure”. Despite the difficult journey of transferring three different buses and trains, in an unusually hot day for Norway, he was still wearing his black military boots over a pair of jeans, his long, curly hair all over his face. “How are you not cooking in that?”, was the general question, and B.B.’s general response: a shrug.

OverChad and Saxman arrived from the mall itself. OverChad boasted about his newly bought pair of sunglasses, and a shirt that represented an Overwatch character. He would not normally wear that, he explained, but he felt like he could between us. Saxman explained that the two of them ended up playing Overwatch together in their free time, often joined by Jimmy. It was still early to plan much, but they expressed a joint wish to visit Japan.

Jimmy was still behind sunglasses, this time with a cap over his copper hair, too, as if the Sun was a paparazzi photographer and he had to be away all the time. He did not give up on his summer disguise even when indoors, until we got our laptops out in a coffee shop and started logging into our Riot accounts.

To celebrate our month of playing together, we have decided to gift each other something on League of Legends. B.B. was clear that he wants a Mordekaiser skin, as he was the champion he played the most, and was starting to get good at. Zeri wanted icons and emotes, Jimmy wanted “to end his misery” (his failure to understand anything in the game was still a laughing matter), Tereels wanted a Lee Sin skin, “the only good one”, Saxman wanted a Teemo skin and OverChad wanted a mystery skin box (“I am fine with whatever”). I agreed to a mystery skin as well, as I already owned over 400 skins and would not want anyone in the group to invest even more money into my account.



Figure 9 - Dark Star Mordekaiser and Infernal Mordekaiser, two Epic skins. Images taken from source (5) on the left and (6) on the right

Tereels shared that he viewed League of Legends gifting as a genuine sign of affection, friendship, or gratitude. Between him and his girlfriend, sending a skin over League client was an acceptable, and sometimes a desirable gift to mark their significant day in a month, or as a part of a birthday or Christmas gift. However, he would never mark a yearly anniversary with just a League skin. Furthermore, they often surprise each other with a skin that just came out, which is for their favourite and most-played champions. If one does it first, the other often feels obliged to gift back. It makes it more special than if they just bought what they wanted themselves, without this gifting consultation. This way, they are sending a silent message: “I know what you want, and you know what I want.” It is definitely a sign of affection. For that reason, his girlfriend always notifies him if someone else sends her a gift on League.

Tereels: “It may seem like a small thing, but it still someone putting their credit card info into a software and deciding to spend money on someone. I am not jealous like that, no, she tells me so we can both rejoice at a free skin. If someone is a creep, she blocks them. If someone is nice, then it’s already her friend, but then there is the same feeling of obligation, like you have to send something back. So, I think she sends back an icon or a mystery skin. It is cheaper than what she got, so this way she does not send a gift back, which may seem rude. But she sends a thank you, like, I am willing to spend some money on you, too.”

The patterns that Tereels noticed in his girlfriends’s reactions and expectations of gifting are akin to what Mauss (1925) describes as reciprocity practices. Giving gifts that are followed with an immediate return is an exchange which Mauss comparatively describes

among the findings of anthropologists who have studied the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest and the Trobriand Islanders of Melanesia. The cycle of giving and receiving is both a way of reinforcing values and engaging in a non-verbal competition of outdoing one another in the quality of gifts given. If Tereels receives an Epic skin from his girlfriend, he will either gift her a different Epic skin back, or go a tier above and find a Legendary skin for her. Apart from this quantitative measure, they also take into consideration the quality of the skin they are sending. Not only must it be in a tier that is considered above average, but the skin should also belong to a character that they are usually playing or starting to play, and be in the style that they enjoy. Money is inevitable in this exchange of goods, as a means to unlock any gift for a League of Legends friend, but the value put into the price increases with the expectations the received gift meets.

In his essay, Mauss refers to the exchange of gifts with the term *potlach*, which he relates back to Native Americans and their way of expressing *total services* – i.e. institutions which dealt with marriage, inheritance, and other social exchanges (1925, p. 7). In Bosnian language, the adjective *potlačen*¹⁸ means to be under the negative effects of someone else, oppressed, under their total control. In this linguistic case, *potlač* means being of total service to somebody else. Without getting into the etymology of how this term evolved on two different continents throughout history, I noticed the similarity between Mauss' and Slavic *potlach* in Tereels' and his partner's gifting practices. Their skin reciprocities are indeed affectionate, but also competitive in nature. The two want to impress each other by gifting faster, and if not being fast enough, by gifting better than the other one. As Tereels explained, he considers it a sign of defeat in a race against time if his girlfriend gifts him a newly released skin before he gets to do it first. Even though she has never displayed dissatisfaction in such situations, there was an instance in which it was clear that he made a mistake in judgement.

Tereels: "There was an exclusive skin coming up, one that would expire in a while from the store. She said she was so excited about it, and that she liked it so much she would get it herself. But the number of times she mentioned that should have been a hint for me, apparently, that this is finally something that she really wants, and her actually ending up buying it herself was a mistake on my part."

Based on this example of skin obtaining, Tereels' girlfriend expected of him to be the one to grant her this happiness. As he describes it, she was genuinely upset that she had to buy

¹⁸ This word or its very similar variations can be found in many other Slavic languages.

it herself. What made it worse was that she did not buy it the same day it was released, and she found it “heart-breaking” that he did not notice it. She gave him a window of time to complete his “obligation”, and when he failed to do so, she ultimately bought the skin herself and told him about all of these aspects of the situation that made her feel disappointed. In contrast to her, Tereels finds many joys and disappointments in playing together with her. Sometimes, she would rather play with her other friends, but if he launches the game next to her, this is also meant a silent remark to her that he would prefer to play it together instead. Additionally, if either of the sides has gifted a skin to the other, it is expected that the receiving party will proceed to play that skin in their next game, or during several of them. If they do not do that, it sends a message to the sender that the gift was not that important to them.

Another gifting story of his involved an old League friend of his girlfriend’s, a player from Greece. The three of them played together occasionally, and when he decided to enrol in a military education, he knew he would have to say good-bye to gaming for at least six months. As a sign of friendship, he gifted each of them an Epic skin for the last champion they played in a game with him. It was also a sign of keeping a bond strong despite the distance, a promise of alliance continued once he has returned. In this case, the reciprocity expected was not another skin, but to not forget him and play with him again in the future.

During her ethnographic research in the Trobriand Islands, Annette Weiner recognized “inalienable possessions” as parts of exchange among the Islanders (Weiner, 1992). These were objects that, even after gifted, would remain to carry and enhance the givers identity. The power of the giver was found in the gift per se, as the receiver is obligated to reciprocate. Such were many of League of Legends gift exchanges I took part in, and was told about. Tereels’ girlfriend holds the power to get an even better gift than the one she sends her significant other. Their military friend holds the power to expect them to stay in contact.

The acquaintances I have befriended in the game hold the power of expecting I will play with them after they had sent me a gift: once I was called ungrateful for refusing to participate in an inappropriate, sexual conversation after receiving a skin from this person. While there is a general notion that gifting in League of Legends reinforces existing social relations among the two players, its inability to be refused and returned makes it obligatory to, at the very least, accept the gift. If immediate returns were possible, some unpleasant situations could be avoided.

The Stereotypes and the Vippsings of Skins

OverChad followed Tereels' story up by saying how happy he is his girlfriend is not a gamer.

OverChad: ...”her love language is gifting, I swear...it would be difficult, especially in League, there are so many things that make you go – ooh, shiny! And they obviously make skins targeted for girls – I mean you can’t deny that!”

B.B. and Jimmy agreed, putting their champions to a comparison: Mordekaiser, with his large hands and feet, holding a mace, hidden under an ominous mask, always appearing menacing in any skin variation he has got. Miss Fortune, on the other hand, with unrealistic body proportion in her skin art, lush red hair, and a mysterious smirk. Shyly, Zeri added how he thinks Miss Fortune is still made for men: “it’s in the way they dress her up, and the poses, and the angles...a sexualized character, a little too much.”

When we asked League players about this debate in All chat, during our matches, we were mostly answered that MF is “hot”, fitting into the male gaze ideal. As for actual champions and skins that could be enjoyed by girls, the stereotype was that they only ever play support champions, and specifically healers and enchanters: like Soraka is, for one. Tereels hoped we could now understand why it was so embarrassing that someone with a non-girly nickname on League had to play Soraka for many, many matches.

The Star Guardian is another stereotypically female-oriented skin line, which Riot Games has tried to deny over the past few years by adding male champions to the skin roster. These skins are inspired by Sailor Moon, a famous 90’s Japanese anime and manga, as the characters wear dresses and costumes that resemble the Japanese characters. The first Legendary skin in this line was for an ADC named Jinx, and the designers even gave her the iconic main character’s pig tails.



Figure 10 (left) - Star Guardian Jinx in-game, taken from source (7)



Figure 11 (right) - Sailor Moon, taken from source (8)

Saxman: “You will find the same stereotypes in other games we play, too. Like if there is voice chat in a game that is ‘supposed’ to be played by boys, mostly. Me and OverChad tried Valorant, it is similar to Overwatch...if a girl speaks, it is so hostile.”

Tereels: “You can’t voice chat with strangers on League unless you are in the same party before the match starts. Imagine how it would be if you could.”

Emina: “Told ya, ain’t easy being a ‘Queen’ on the Rift.”



Figure 12 - Secret Agent MF, official splash art

Jimmy still wanted a MF skin that is considered the most attractive one – Secret Agent MF, as its femme fatale attributes (Hollywood waves, long purple dress with a slit) resemble

Jessica Rabbit. It made the guys laugh, a lot. Them agreeing to gift him this, though, had a special significance to Jimmy. He explained that, in the Norwegian culture he was brought up in, asking for something as a gift was a thing between family members. The group agreed: their birthdays and Christmas holidays were the two times of the year where they could ask for something specific, as it is a goal of the gift to be something that is necessary and needed by the receiver. It is also common, in Norwegian gift-giving, to leave receipts with the gifts, in case the receiver would like to swap it for something else. In my experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina, leaving a receipt would be a signifier of two things: deeming the gift as insignificant enough to forget to remove the proof of purchase, or wanting the receiver to know how much the gift cost. Either way, the action of doing so is considered rude.

In League of Legends, the cost of everything is transparent. However, when a gift is received, the recipient sees what it is, who it is from and a short text that the sender had written. The design of it makes the intent more important than the transaction itself. Additionally, gifts cannot be refunded from the either party. Contents of gifts are added to the recipients' inventory immediately, even before clicking on the notification which opens the gift message window. During our groups' gifting session, B.B.'s client had a strange bug¹⁹: he was not getting notifications about receiving any gifts from anyone, but his client displayed that a new skin was in his inventory. He did not know which one of us sent it to him, and it was only weeks later that the gift message window unexpectedly appeared upon him launching the client.

Despite it being possible to gift Riot Points currency to other players directly, that is a form of gifting that I have never participated in, nor did the members of the group and the players around us during our research period. RP is money in League of Legends, it is a converted currency as any other, and it is not common to directly gift money to others. League of Legends gift cards that used to be available in physical stores were a way of getting around this. They would contain RP that the buyer paid for and which reads on the card, but that physical piece of plastic and paper would be the necessary extra step that divides the act of giving money and receiving Riot Points. When wanting to give recipients a choice, the group would rather ask each other what it was that they wanted, instead of gifting them an amount of RP.

A common practice among young people in Norway is to use a mobile application called Vipps for quick transactions among each other. It is common enough that it has its own

¹⁹ A mistake in the program which makes it behave unexpectedly.

verb in the language: if one person would cover the entire bill for the times we spent outdoors, the rest would offer “to Vipps” them what the cost of their order was. As it is rare for them to use cash, the young men instructed me to connect my bank account to Vipps as well. It was an almost casual way to deal with money, one that was very unusual to me. In my old High School days of earning money from my schoolmates, the act of receiving coins from them was one both parties found so embarrassing that we would go through it without looking at the money itself while transferring it from one hand to another. Furthermore, if a person offered to pay the bill, it would be considered rude to return the amount your order cost. Instead, the person that was treated is expected to reciprocate in the same manner next time they meet. If there had been Vipps in my time of saving up for League skins, I assume I would have made more money than I have: somehow, it felt lesser when I could see a number on the screen of my phone.

“We do it that way because we do not want to be in debt to anybody”, OverChad explained *the Norwegian way* to me. He recalls even Vippsing someone the cost of the gift he received, because he felt that it was too much from the other person to spend on him. However, he did not feel that sentiment a single time in video games, including League of Legends. In his perspective, putting money into a game is saying good-bye to it: it is still there, in the form of a different currency, but it is not *really* there anymore, because it cannot be converted back. At the back of his head, that money is already spent and given up, and it ceases to exist as a monetary obligation. As with Tereels, he is only left with the feeling of giving back the equivalent of the gift he was given within the game. He would not proceed and Vipps the gift-giver in any context of that exchange. Since Vipps is a Norwegian mobile payment app, it limits its users to Norwegian people only, and video games are something OverChad and the rest play with people from all over the world. They would not go as far as to request someone’s PayPal or other payment option information in order to gift or return money to them. Therefore, video game currency remains in the video game realm, but is still treated as money within: the users understand that a gift had its cost, and find ways to reciprocate that would not make the other person uncomfortable, or the transaction too formal. In fact, the ease with which gifts can be sent in League of Legends are analogous to that of Vipps: a few taps on the screen, the symbolism of it “not being a big deal”, as Saxman and Jimmy put it. It creates an illusion that the transaction of money happened somewhere behind the scenes, where the users did not have to participate in the act. It does not diminish the action of gifting itself, but it can, over time, lose some of its weight. With Tereels and his girlfriend, gifting in League of Legends has become a back-and-forth.

In our further discussions about skins in League of Legends, we have once more touched on the topic of those bearing resemblance to other fictional characters, but never officially acknowledging a connection or company's collaboration. The context of the conversation was gifting skins that thematically fit the receiving persons' interests: for example, I would always prefer a Star Guardian skin, for its Sailor Moon resemblance, over a High Noon skin which is inspired by the Wild West aesthetics.

OverChad: "It is interesting to me how they make skins that look like characters from pop culture, but they don't actually collaborate with anyone. Kind of sneaky."

Tereels: "Yeah, they are 'inspired', but sometimes it really feels like they steal designs. For example, in some Mecha skins, there is a chroma in purple and green, which makes them look like main characters' robots from Neon Genesis Evangelion. Like, why not acknowledge it? But yes, then you got to pay for the license and all."

Emina: "They *are* a rich company, though. My thoughts is that they want to keep their identity, want everything original. Because there are plenty of games that collaborate: in Fortnite, you can play as almost anything these days."

Saxman: "Yeah, the Witcher, Spiderman, Ariana Grande, Keanu Reeves..."

Tereels; "There is another game, Arena of Valor, and they collaborated with DC comics...you can literally play as Batman and Joker...and this is a game that works like League, so imagine, it is so silly!"

This led the conversation into arguing over Marvel being better than DC or vice versa, and the young men realizing they had even more in common than they have learned so far, eager to organize a cinema visit together for the next superhero movie that comes out. Jimmy loves being the one with the digital tickets on him, so he offered to deal with the booking. Naturally, we would all Vipps him for the tickets.

Skin to Win

"I just can't play without a skin!", Snoopy did his best impression of a man enraged, with heavy, native German accent, blasting through my headphones. "Must! Buy! Skin!"

And he did.

Snoopy played on an account that is lower in rank and level than his main one, so my group and I would not be getting difficult enemies because of his "immense skill", as he called

it. He was mainly a jungle player, which got him to high Diamond this ranked season. His main champion was Zac, a large character that plays around building items that give him a lot of health-based stats, as his abilities are unique, and cost him health. When casting any of them, Zac leaves behind a piece of him: a slimy bit of his slimy body. The first time he dies in a cooldown span of five minutes, Zac divides himself into four slime blobs that enemies need to destroy before they reach each other and revive Zac. Zac also grows the more health he has, and shrinks the less he has. For some reason, the goofy nature of this character seemed to perfectly fit the goofy nature of his player. Snoopy was one of those players who would refer to themselves in third person when playing on voice chat: “here comes Glib Glob²⁰”, “Glib Glob is coming”, “best jungle in the universe coming”, all to let us now he is coming for a *gank*²¹.

But, before he played all these games with us which were supposed to be informative for the group, Snoopy *had to* buy a Zac skin, otherwise he would not play well. It was the similar feeling I have had in my first months of League, which only sparked once I purchased my first skin myself. It was a marker of my achievement with the support characters Janna and Thresh, something I thought I deserved after playing well with my friend group at the time, having been successfully coached and taught to support.



Figure 13 - Zac in-game, taken from source (9)

It got severe enough that I refused to play new champions that were on free weekly rotations, which is something I was previously doing every day before school (in my last year of high school, classes started at 13:30 for seniors). I even kept track of which champions I liked and wanted to practice more, until I started keeping track of which skins I had. Back in 2016/17, there were not that many Epic and Legendary skins as there are now, and they were not as smooth in their animation design, or flashy in terms of effects. In overall, the game was

²⁰ A nickname he has given to his Zac

²¹ A League term invented and used by players, to universally refer to a jungler coming into their lane, be it enemy or ally

less graphically impressive, and yet, it was the same amount of joy buying a cheap, 720 RP skin, or the first ultimate skin I purchased with my own money: a 40-euro Lux skin. Having money for a video game, as a highschooler, was no easy feat: I was doing other people's homework, essays and literature reviews for extra cash.

To understand why this was so unusual on my part: Bosnia and Herzegovina, where I am from and was living in at the time, does not have any laws against piracy over the Internet. Video games were something we, as children, always had for free. It was the fresh, empty CDs and DVDs we had to pay for, so we could burn a game image into them and share them among each other. The older children, ones who learned how to pirate via Torrent websites first, had a monopoly on some games, selling their CDs for 1 to 5 KM each (50 euro cents to 2.5 euro). Some actual CD shops caught on, selling pirated games for the similar price per Disc, and we considered these as owning the original. Once websites as ThePirateBay became widely popular, and the children of my generation got older, we did not need CD shops or neighbourhood kids to scam us anymore: we could do our own piracy, yet again, without questioning how much games actually cost. Even a game as popular as World of Warcraft had its free server version (still does, to this day), and despite it not getting any updates after its release in 2008, it remained a crowded place²².

But with League of Legends, there was no way to pirate one's way to RP. There exists a modification to the game's files which allows players to play as any skin they want, but only that player sees the skin in game. Some players have reported getting their accounts permanently banned when using this mod, as it is recognized as a third-party cheat software. Therefore, if I wanted a particular skin, I had to buy it.

One of my friends, who likes to use the nickname Gorgon, had only played League of Legends for a short period in early 2017. He wanted to play it strictly because he liked a character called Cassiopeia, a woman's torso on a snake's body, for she had a Mythic Cassiopeia skin that indirectly referenced a Greek myth of Perseus and Medusa. Basically, he wanted to be a Gorgon, playing a Gorgon, and no matter how little he knew about the game, he started being interested in other skins for characters that shared similar traits: mysterious, vile, hyperfeminine, witchy. These characters were Morgana, Evelynn and Zyra, and when a dragon-themed, Epic skin for Zyra was released, Gorgon implored that I *must* buy it, since I play Zyra, and so we can look *hot* next to each other. Although he does not play the game

²² I played on this server from 2010-2012, and again from 2018-2020.

anymore, he would still log on occasionally to boast about the Coven skin line, which had everything he previously liked about the old skins. For him, League of Legends was a purely aesthetic experience.

“When I get bored, I buy myself a new wardrobe, or a League of Legends skin”, was an iconic line of his which I noted in a mobile notes app, during an after-school dinner with my ex-boyfriend (another avid League player), and my best friend Nina. Nina never wanted to play League, and was annoyed that all our group conversations would *always* end on the game, and she would have nothing to say other than to remind us that she is there, too.

Nina tolerated my obsession with League because she knew how much it meant to me, and such was realized through my struggles to earn money for it. This was the time I started doing live music for cash, too, and most of it ended up stashed on a credit card, and converted into RP. Gifting skins was another passion of mine. Whenever I would have over several thousands RP, it would seem unfair not to share, and this notion remained.

Snoopy, the Zac player, did the same for us. During one of the official, professional e-sports League of Legends matches, he joined a stream and was drafted to win 100 000 RP. To celebrate, he gifted each of us a skin. Then, he proceeded to gift his alternative, low level account a few more skins, too, so he would not always only play Zac with us.

“I can’t play without a skin, either”, I shared with everyone, but in 2023, the situation with skins is much different. Not only have I already invested into buying at least one skin for each champion I play regularly, I also have Epic (or higher) skins for champions I do not play, as these are given to users through Loot boxes or Mystery skin gift boxes. Today, I buy skins without the obligation to do so in order to play, but with actual interest in the skin itself. For instance, I purchased a new, legendary skin for Irelia (a champion whose design I like so much, I have her as my laptop wallpaper), even though I rarely even play top lane, which is her main lane. I wanted to have it.

Gabriel Tarde, an early French sociologist, whose methods of tying human interactions with social patterns resemble those of anthropology, wrote about the concept of “passionate interests” as a driving force that decides human actions, including the dynamics of economy. Despite this being an anti-Marxist line of thought, I argue that Tarde’s statement that passion, rather than rational self-interest, has the power to impact individuals is a concept that explains virtual shopping sprees:

“It is not necessity, it is not even interest properly understood, that gives birth to most human actions. It is a sort of charm or fascination, often unconscious, which the things of the world exercise over our minds, and which leads us to throw ourselves into some pursuit with all the strength of our being, and sometimes with all the resources of our fortune.” (Tarde, 1903, p. 67)

As for the young men from the group, all but Tereels were still far from wanting to spend money on skins over wanting to spend time grasping the game’s appeal. B.B. had played a lot of Riot’s Teamfight Tactics game, which is a standalone game at this point, and purchased a few cosmetics for it. He explained that he did not want to spend money on something he does not understand yet, and the rest of the guys agreed.

OverChad: “For me, I need to be invested into something first, and then aim into buying something that makes it better, than the other way around. I am not motivated to play more if I spend money, it needs to be a product of having fun.”

Jimmy: “I earn my money hard, I work in a grocery store chain, micro-management”... “I am saving for a new apartment, and prices are raising like...phew (gestures up)...so I am careful what I spend my money on.”

Zeri: “All the Marvel movies.”

Jimmy: “But that is something I am really passionate about, so I do not feel like I am spending.”

Saxman: “I am a collector; I like to have everything from and about everything I really like. That is why it kind of feels good that I do not like League of Legends so much at the moment. There is a lot of money to spend on that one, I can tell.”

Emina: “But what about time? I can see all of you playing League in your free time, too.”

Jimmy: “I always play video games in my free time.”

B.B.: “I like Mordekaiser.”

Saxman: “I like playing by myself because then I can go toplane²³ and practice Garen and Teemo.”

²³ Since Mordekaiser is a top lane champion, Saxman would not be able to play the lane B.B. chose

Zeri: "I am okay with it. I want to do it so I can have more to say about it."

Saxman: "I also want to be better, to be honest."

Emina: "So you do not feel like you are wasting time?"

Tereels: "That is something we can talk about."

6. Anxious Without the Game, Anxious Due to the Game

If it's so bad, why do we play it?

Both JazzNass and Snoopy expressed their frustration due to the game's ranking system. The time one loses, if their games are not victorious, is what leads to most dissatisfaction, as it is the one currency, apart from money, that they cannot get back.

Climbing the ranked ladder in League of Legends is a long journey. Aside from there being nine rank tiers²⁴, each has five divisions (from 5 to 1). In order to climb divisions, a player needs to have earned 100 LP (League Points), which are rewarded by winning and deducted by losing. On average, a player will have to win 5 consecutive games to get into the next division. When climbing from a lower to a higher rank (from, for example, Silver 1 to Gold 1), a player must first win three out five *promotion* games. While a match itself may last anywhere from 15 to 50 minutes, there is also the time a player spends queuing and waiting for the match to be found, as well as the champion selection lobby where players are picking their characters, picking the runes and builds for their characters, banning what they do not want the enemy to play, and discussing potential tactics. To conclude, there is a lot of time to invest into *climbing*, especially considering that a good win rate is over 50% and a great one is over 60%. Losing is inevitable. Why is losing so agitating, then?

“The most annoying thing (about losing) is when I know it was my fault,” a player Midnight wrote to us over Discord chat when I asked to introduce the ranked mode to the group. “I usually stop for the day when it's not going good.”

“You will face bad players with ego-typing in the chat. I don't care about losing, but at least don't be a d**k”, wrote Melissa. “But I keep on playing, even though I am not motivated to. A friend who made me play League died like 5-6 years ago, so I feel like she is still with me when I am playing League. When I play ranked, it's for her.”

“The most annoying thing about losing a ranked game of League is when you know you've done well, but you get a bad coinflip²⁵ in terms of getting players who are not interested in winning the game, so you just end up being the only one doing your best to destroy the enemy Nexus. I think it's cool when you lose on good terms, for example, if the enemy was

²⁴ Iron, Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Master, Grandmaster, Challenger

²⁵ A term used to express the 50-50 chance of getting a bad team

playing better, even though everyone was doing their best. I think those defeats are a good lesson”, wrote Boxxi.

Boxxi, Midnight and Melissa are members of the League of Legends EUNE Discord server, which has over 10 000 members, and usually around 2 000 of them online at a time. While I am briefly acquainted with the latter two, Boxxi, and I have been friends since 2019 when he commented on my LoL YouTube music video²⁶ after seeing me perform on Croatia’s Supertalent, a country he is from. He signed his comment as Gnar, which is a champion he plays the most on League. When we met in person during the Advent period in Zagreb, Croatia, I gifted him a little drawing of Gnar for his birthday. However, we spend more time texting and voice chatting than playing the same game that introduced us to one another. Boxxi claims he loves the stories behind the champions and the amount of talent that is displayed through the artistic aspect of the game, but otherwise, he considers League to not be in a good state right now. If not for Gnar, he would not be playing at all. He is a high-ranked player, and yet, sticking to one singular champion through all of it. His opinion is that a player will perform his best if he plays one to three champions regularly.

The members of the group agreed from a beginner’s perspective. They could see themselves becoming better as the summer months rolled by, but once they would pick a completely new champion in a Player versus Player game, it would be back to day one. Everyone had generally improved – everyone, but Jimmy. While still being interested in the game and playing with us, Jimmy would much prefer when we would do a different online activity together. Him and the guys would play Uno online, the new Overwatch game, Team Fortress 2, and a set of interactive quasi-board games called Jackbox.

During one of our outings, Saxman recalled a significant trip to Denmark in 2018. He participated in a Team Fortress 2 e-sports tournament, which was so unpopular that the contestants had to finance their own trip entirely. They did it out of passion and wanting to meet each other, not for rewards, which were minor and not financial. He compared this venture to League of Legend’s successful professional scene, and gigantic prize pools for annual Worlds Championship winners (\$2 225 000 in 2022 season). It is understandable that more people would invest their time into becoming professional League players, even if it means

²⁶ Similar to the Star Guardian Soraka song, I have written and uploaded several more inspired by the game’s characters

losing over and over again. Even during Worlds Championship, each team but the 1st placed one has a statistical chance of losing at least one game.

OverChad: “For some of these players we face, it seems like winning becomes their whole personality. Like, they will be really mad at you if you are on the same team as them, and they are losing. They will be mad at everyone, enemies, too.”

Zeri: “League of Legends is their whole personality.”

B.B.: “But they keep on playing the game because they like being good at something. That is what they say. To be honest, I am playing it right now because I like that I am becoming good, but it is not the only thing I am good at or that I will play. But some players...”

Despite League of Legends being a virtual arena, I have found a comparison to a physical one. In the introduction to Clifford Geertz’s classic essay on Balinese cockfighting, Geertz discusses the emotional investment and the high stakes that are involved in the games which are, in their essence, out of the men’s hands once the roosters have begun fighting. This fight is described as a “Balinese cultural text” which expresses aspects of social relations and what these men “feel about themselves and their fellows, what they believe to be the hidden, and often malevolent, forces that underlie human existence, and what they think is the proper way to comport oneself in such a world. It is a story they tell themselves about themselves, and it expresses their deepest feelings about their condition of life.” (Geertz, 1973, p. 412) Patterns of such dissatisfaction and malicious behaviour could be seen in the games me and the group have played together, from the messages we were sent during the games, to the actual, intentional effort of players to lose the game.

Some players take anything which is against their better judgement as a sign of hostility towards themselves, as offense and a reason for which their teammate “does not deserve to win”. The desire for this teammate to lose becomes much higher than the desire to achieve victory, and when others comment that they will be reported for their intentional bad playing, the responses are often on the topic of buying a new account. Again, time is the most valuable currency in League: this player, or any other, can indeed buy a new account, but they will waste the other players’ time, while also adding to their ranked LP loss by the end of it. The report system is more focused on punishing bad, hateful messages than bad and hateful gameplay, as someone’s score may also be from their unfortunate performance, rather than malice. This topic will be further discussed in the “Rage-Quitting” chapter.

Another annoying aspect of the game, which is available due to the accounts markets, is getting *smurfing* players on the enemy team. A smurf is a person who is a higher-skilled player, playing on a low-rank account in order to achieve easy wins. Smurfs either play on other people's accounts to boost them to a higher rank, or do it for fun. There is no fun for the enemy if they cannot match this player's advantage, though.

With all the negatives that a lot of players list about the game, it is still the most popular MOBA on the market, and its company has the highest net worth in the world. Even when losing progress in their ranked climb, my high-ranked colleagues still return to the game on a daily basis, as if it was a chore they need to do. None described it as an addiction, although B.B. jokingly said that it so far seems like a trauma-bonding relationship between the young men: "we play so we can all complain about the same thing". The more they learned about the game, the more they wanted to play it together, and our weekly hours increased as months went by. They felt more comfortable with meeting new people over voice chat, and created their own Discord server through which they communicated times they can meet up to play League or something else.

Gaming as an anxiety remedy

Not long before my fieldwork was about to come to an end, Jimmy asked me if we could talk about something important, related to the research. His tone of voice was serious, almost worried. Then I began to worry – what if all these months of laughing about his misfortunes with Miss Fortune were our way of engaging in the practice of League of Legends bullying? What if he was about to finally share how he felt about this experience, and it turns out he does not find it pleasant to be a part of it anymore? What if League of Legends has been such a negative experience for him that it might overturn all the fun that we were seemingly having all these weeks? I did not want to share my worries if anyone, not even him. If bad news were on the way, I wanted to hear them unaffected by my predictions.

However, the negative aspects of the game were just a matter of humorous remarks for Jimmy. He wanted to tell me something that, as he put it, "might help me" in the paper. "It can add to everything we were talking about", he explained. He wanted to add something significant to the whole experience, something that he found beneficial to understanding his viewpoints about this and other games.

"It is something I do not talk about other than to my close friends' circle, as they have known me my whole life. But you can write about it here, it is alright, and it is important", it

was almost unusual to hear Jimmy talk about himself without the usual self-deprecating humour about his ginger hair, bright skin and sun, pollen and cat allergies. “I suffer from immense social anxiety, and I go to therapy and take medication for it. Every social interaction in person is difficult for me. I charge my battery for it, prepare for days, and drain it so quickly once I am with people, even with my friends.”

I quickly followed up and asked if our League sessions were draining for him. It made me severely worried about his health: the last thing I would want is for this research to have caused him any kind of discomfort. He reassured me that he would have shared this with me at an earlier point if he thought it would be a problem. The video games, he said, did not reinforce his social anxiety – they eased it. The meetings we had in person were not a bother either, although he enjoyed that they were not “super formal” and did not require severe mental preparations on his part. They were still draining in their own right, but not nearly as much as he experiences every day at work.

“And you work a lot!”, I exclaimed. Jimmy takes his job very seriously. Apart from the financial motivation of saving for an apartment, Jimmy shows a passion for performing well at work. During our six months of playing together, for instance, he got sent to a different, bigger store, and got a better position and a better pay. He is a few steps away from being eligible to manage an entire store himself. Even B.B. tried to get a job in the new store that Jimmy got a position in, thinking it would be a good opportunity for a part-time job on the side while he is finishing his Master’s degree. And he got it! This made the two very excited for the shifts they get to work together.

“I experience anxiety due to both wanting to perform well, and interacting with people and customers. It is not difficult to speak to my colleagues as it is to deal with customers...I need to be someone else. That is why I feel pain in my whole body once I am home”, Jimmy shared. He also takes sleeping pills regularly, as he considers sleep to be the only reliable source of energy. Drinking energy drinks is something he also does, and he usually eats only once a day. Even making food becomes a difficult task for him after a draining day. The only thing he feels like doing is video games.

Family meetings are something he had always dreaded as well. He was not close with the members of his family, apart from his parents, but even this closeness is relative compared to the way Bosnian and Balkan family relations are. In my experience, it is common for young people to live with their parents all the way until their marriage, unless some other factors lead

them to move out. Students in Bosnia and Herzegovina are legally forbidden to have a job during their studies, and scholarships are not enough to cover the living expenses of a single person. At best, they can cover monthly bus tickets for travels between towns. I still cannot imagine being able to save for buying an apartment myself in my early twenties, and yet this possibility is a reality for Norwegian youth who are able to work full-time. Being financially independent, Jimmy sought to live alone once his job became his aspiration. As he explained, dealing with his family on the side would make it all more difficult for him. He needed peace and quiet after work, and yet, he spent his time in the evenings playing video games with his friends on Discord voice chat.

“That is socializing for me”, he said. It checks the mark of daily social interactions which are not formal and obligatory. In all the positive ways, he considers it socializing. However, when it comes to his anxiety, this online time is not a cause for it. In fact, it makes him feel more at ease, and less alone with his thoughts.

“Was this experience good for you?”, I asked him. We all knew that he did not improve much in the game, but he stayed with us, nonetheless. He reassuringly replied that it was really fun and reflective. He had never before considered his gaming as something more than a hobby, although he was aware that it was more pleasant than any other form of social interacting. But now he was able to experience what it was like to bond with others through both a game and the discussions it inspired between the participants. He could not care less about League of Legends, respectfully, he said with a slight chuckle. He probably will not play it after the research is complete, despite the others showing interest for it. But he discovered other similar interests through which he could connect with his new friends. B.B. even works in his store. OverChad is a massive fan of Marvel movies so that they can watch them together. Tereels, Zeri and Saxman love playing virtual boardgames such as Jackbox and Uno. Seeing them in person felt as natural as it was online.

“I have spent my entire life with my computer. That was normal for me”. On this topic, the rest of the group had previously also shared that their childhoods were mostly lived through their computer screens. They found it hard to socialize with other people, as everyone seemed to either be a part of an existing friend group, or liked being by themselves. “If I think of meaningful social interactions and friendships, I think of the times when I would play video games with my cousins or friends, in person or later, when it became possible, online. So I understand why League of Legends means so much to those that started playing it years ago,

if they started playing it young. You meet so many new people every day, and some stick around.”

Jimmy told me that he does not think that gaming increased his being prone to social anxiety. He knows this, because he started working right after high school and he had more than enough hours socializing with people in person to do then. Gaming was a remedy for the anxiety he would experience as a part of his daily life.

“Anxiety, lack of sleep, ADHD, backpain...all that I am dealing with...”, Jimmy did not conceal the heaviness of the impact these have on his life. He had the tendency to dismiss things the moment he shares them, with a shrug or a big, wide smile. “I am grateful for all the friends I have made online, and the friends I get to keep because online games exist. I would be very lonely otherwise.”

In “Small Places, Large Issues” (2015), Thomas Hylland Eriksen discusses kinship in various domains. One of those was the bureaucratic organization type which is more present in modern societies and the capitalist labor market. Rather than kinship commitment and family values, the capitalist bonds are based on “individual achievement” and loyalty to “law and contractual obligations” (p. 149). For Jimmy, the online sphere provided opportunities against traditional kinship networks. While he deeply respects and values his capitalist obligation in real life, he managed to form stronger bonds online than with his own blood-related kin and those in close proximity to him. I would like to argue that Jimmy’s story portrays a generation that grew up alongside the rapidly evolving technology, and took the opportunity to figure their own social way out alongside it.

7. “Rage-Quitting” – Anger and Revenge

Despite everything that makes League of Legends a colourful, interesting video game that can be played with old friends or used to make new, it inspires a lot of anger in its players. This anger can be developed early in the match, often during the champion selection itself, if the expectations of the affected player/s are not met. The practice of looking other players up can result in the players’ feeling of unfairness that the game itself treats them with, as they have a sense of deserving better in their games. However, there is nothing any of the users can do about the matchmaking system, and this fact leads to additional resistance. Anger is channelled towards the developers, “expressing dissent and challenging power relations” (Jansen, 2015, p.21), and displayed in the form of hateful messages that refer to Riot Games.

While the term “troll” is the common one in the online community, standing for people who behave with an intent to upset and offend others, League of Legends community uses the term “*griefing*”, for the act of purposeful trolling, and “*griefer*” for the agent. The official report system includes griefing as one of the points a player can select when issuing a report.

In the most recent Solo/Duo ranked season, Riot has decided to obscure nicknames of players who have not queued into the match together, meaning that a player can only see the name of their Duo partner, if they have one. This practice was installed to discourage players from engaging in negative thinking before the match has even begun, as the research of teammates’ previous matches can lead to assumptions about their performance in the current one. Instead, the names and current ranks are revealed during the loading screen, after both teams have had their chance to select champions, summoner spells and runes. Third-party software (Blitz, Mobalytics) can quickly detect all players’ stats, including their win rate on their current champion and even some specific quirks of their playstyle (for example, being prone to dying early in the lane phase). This replaces manual research with its speed and amount of data calculated at once, but it does not have the same effect it used to while it was available during champion selection. Players cannot suggest each other what to or not to pick based on their previous games, and most importantly, they cannot instantly decide to be angry about who they got matched with. Instead, the anger arises during the loading screen, as the teammates are revealed.

A common expression of anger during champion selection, which is preferable over hateful speech, is dodging. Dodging is quitting the game’s client during champion selection,

instantly resetting the queue process for everyone. Dodging results in a 5-minute penalty from the next queue (15 minutes for the second dodge, if it comes right after) for the dodger, as it is not a recommended practice. In ranked modes, dodging costs 3 LP. Champion selection lobby begins with each player banning a champion they do not wish anyone to play in the game, although its mainly aimed at the enemy picks. A player can wish to dodge after the champion they have announced to play is banned by another player on the same team. This ban can be unintentional, as some players have champions that they always ban²⁷, and do so reflexively and without observing their teammates choices. Some players decide to “grief the game”, and announce picks that are an obvious negative response to the ban. For example, the healer support Soraka could not be played well in Jungle. This move calls for other players on the team to dodge instead, as the trolling player suddenly feels in the position of power, with the chance of destroying four other people’s experience in the said match, including their win rates, LP gain/loss, promotional game for the next ranked division, and so on. Once locking in a bad pick, the trolling players additionally announce that they have no intention of trying to play to win in the next match. Regardless of who dodges, the ranked experience acquires a sour taste.

“Anger can be a response to feelings of powerlessness and frustration in the face of injustice and inequality” (Kleinman et al., 2011, p. 105).

The need to intentionally ruin other people’s games is an attempt to shift powerlessness into a position of power. With some, it is a constant battle between the ally team as well, demanding respect through actions which, for one, would never be seen on the professional League of Legends scene. By making other people dodge, angry players get a sense of this being done not only because of them but also for them, as they will not lose any LP due to the dodge or be on a queue timer. They can queue up for the next match with no repercussions, and their misbehavior will not be recorded, reportable, or eligible for a ban, as reports can be only issued after the match has concluded.

Another method of griefing is a player picking another player’s announced champion, intentionally stealing the pick if they got to choose first. There are some champions that can be played across multiple roles, and while this action may not result in a ruined match *per se*, it can discourage the other player from playing at all, especially if the picked champion is their main one or the only one they are good at against the current enemy pick. If the second player decides to “troll-pick” as a response, and the game does start, they will be the ones that the

²⁷ In the game’s slang, this is called “perma-banning”

report system will recognize as eligible for a penalty. While this is correct, the initial player who started the chain of grief will not be reportable, enforcing the sense of power.

“Anger can serve as a signal of injustice or unfairness, and its management can reflect social norms and expectations” (Fernandez, 1986, p. 76).

In League of Legends, individual expectations can exceed rational thinking and team-based strategizing, and anger becomes a normalized emotion. Anger is so widespread that it is commonly joked about over the Internet in the form of memes. It is also a popularized way of attracting an audience on Twitch²⁸, the streamer Tyler1 being a good example: despite his child-like, loud raging, and sometimes intentional losing of games, he currently counts over five million followers on his Twitch channel.



Figure 14 - Image taken from source (10)

Figure 15 - Image taken from source (11)

Instead of focusing on bettering their own anger management, players are learning how to manage angry players that end up on their team. For example, in the champion selection, one more unpleasant scenario can happen: a player can threaten to intentionally lose or *go afk*²⁹ if another player picks a certain champion. ADC players may not want their bot lane support partner not to play a tank champion, but the support really wants to play Soraka, and the threats begin. Sometimes the players stay true to their threats, and sometimes they say them only to gain what they want in a way that, to them, may end up in success, in opposition to asking politely in the chat. More often, though, my group and I were threatened with the afk status in

²⁸ The most popular streaming website for gamers

²⁹ Going afk (away from keyboard): recalling one's champion to the base fountain and not playing anymore during the match.

case we did not swap the lanes we were given (“if you don’t give me mid, I go afk”). OverChad refused to give mid to a stranger, who proceeded to lock a mid-lane champion anyway. They ended up playing a duo mid, which is against the general rules of the game, and yet, not punishable, as the game allows freedom of gameplay choice. We played a game without a jungler, with two people sharing gold and XP on mid, neither getting enough resources to catch up with the enemy team’s advantage, and we lost.

Players showcase anger in the match itself through malicious messages triggered for various reasons. While I would mostly face gender-based comments, the guys in the group noticed the tendency of players to call each other “dogs” and “apes” as mild flaming and to wish other people death and cancer in the more extreme variations of flaming. In “Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human,” Boellstorff (2008) discusses flaming as a social tool of punishment towards users who behave abnormally, as it can discourage them from continuing the behavior which the community may seem as disruptive. In League, players justify flaming on the same account; JazzNass called it “preventive; they will start playing better if I flame them,” Snoopy called it “necessary,” and Boxxi stated that it was “the only way, sometimes.” However, Boellstorff notes that flaming may escalate into toxicity, as the anonymity inspires people to “say things they would not say in person” (Ibid., p. 141).

The ease with which death is discussed in League of Legend’s chat is another normalized occurrence which, while reportable, and also scannable in real time (the user who writes a slur or “kys”³⁰ gets automatically system muted for the rest of the match, and cannot participate in the chat), is something the rest of the players who do not wish to participate in a such language just have to bear with. Suppose anyone writes offensive content back, even if in apparent response to what was said, they still stand to be as reportable as the other person and face the potential danger of their account getting permanently banned. Rules apply to everyone, but in practice, during the match, it still maintains the bully’s power, as they can write whatever they want without getting properly told back. If someone mentions that their account may be perma-banned after the match, they respond with the good, old “I will get another one.” The enjoyment of the temporary discourse control that a toxic player gets is higher placed than their future in the game; most likely, they will write the same things to other players on another account once they get angry enough to put their new account at risk. Some players, who already

³⁰ Short for “kill yourself”, a three-letter abbreviation which, if sent in the chat, can lead to an account getting permanently banned

have bad win rates, bad account honor ratings, and several chat content warnings, will add one more nail to the coffin by entering matches and intentionally losing them. This is what they call “testing Riot”: testing the limits of the game’s report system and pushing their luck until the “doomed” account is finally permanently banned.

Getting any ban for bad scores, on the other hand, is significantly harder than getting an entire perma-ban for one word. Angry players use this fact to their own advantage, replacing writing toxic things with doing them. Experienced toxic players are able to evade any penalty by keeping their misbehavior at a minor level while still provoking anger in their teammates. One common way to do so is to play against the team’s jungler.

As roughly explained in the League of Legends rules chapter, the role of a jungler is to keep track of what is happening on the map, preparing their team for contesting significant objectives (the dragons, which spawn every five minutes, or Baron Nashor, which spawns after the 20-minute mark), protecting their team from the enemy roams and ganks, notifying them of their own movement and ganking plans, all while sticking to the initially dark areas on the map, which are all commonly known as the jungle. For high-ranked players who decide to main the jungle role, jungling becomes a rather monotonous set of optimal paths they need to take in the first ten to twenty minutes of the game. When teaching us some intricacies only serious jungle players know, Snoopy explained that he takes lessons from Challenger rank players who specify in coaching, as that is the only way to improve. At a certain point, a regular jungle player will stall in their overall progress, and their playstyle would consist of moving around the map and making decisions without actual knowledge of why. A bronze player from Bosnia and Herzegovina, who joined the group on some occasions, said he always thought that jungle players played “from their hearts, with their soul, simply following their feelings and reacting to what is happening.” Not only do (good) junglers react to everything, often improvising in order to save the team, but they also, as Snoopy does, play according to the ideal standard.

The issue occurs when players decide to play against their jungler’s shot calls, often opting for the opposite of what they are told to do. A scenario that we have encountered the most is a singular player’s resistance toward a group call. Instead of going as five to contest a dragon, for instance, they will go to the farthest side of the map from it, the Top lane, and farm minions. There are two ways this can go: either the enemy team splits as well and sends someone or multiple players to defend the lane, and the rest to contest the dragon, or the entire

enemy team joins up to fight as five versus four on the dragon. Even if the allied team of four is at a gold and XP advantage at the moment of fighting, lacking a member of the team is a significant disadvantage, especially if the missing ally is a core part of the team, such as a tank or the strongest carry champion³¹. Sometimes, the ally that is not joining the fight is correct: it would be a bad fight, anyway. However, the purposeful ignorance of a single team member can lead to situations from which the allied team cannot recover and ultimately cannot win the game.

In other cases, players can show their resistance towards the jungler by farming their jungle monster camps instead of their own designated lane minions. By doing this, they take away the only proper way for the jungler to gather gold and XP outside of fights he would initiate in lanes. This action is another attempt at establishing power relations, as the griefing player sends a message to the jungler: we all know I cannot be reported for this. We all know that you will lag behind the enemy jungler now and lack the resources to catch up; we all know that you will be blamed for being worse than the enemy, and there is nothing you can do about it.

A non-verbal, non-reportable way to communicate dissatisfaction with players' actions is by using *pings*, a set of attention-grabbing noises with corresponding visuals. The intent of their use is for players to quickly communicate danger, an enemy missing from the lane, an enemy having vision of a dangerous area or objective, a need for help, and so on. They are also a means of communication that is available to players who are chat-restricted due to their vocabulary in previous matches. Unfortunately, the usage of these pings is not to alert in advance but to punish mistakes by repeatedly issuing the same ping around another player. As allied pings are only seen by the other members of the same team, they can be used for bullying an ally without notifying the enemy of their position. For example, two strangers that are matched to play on bot lane together do not always see eye to eye in their tactics and will often ping each other whenever they think a mistake has been made. The question mark that resembles "Enemy missing" gets a new meaning: "What are you doing? What have you done?". The exclamation mark that is supposed to alert of the enemy approaching or the enemy's location becomes a sign to back off a certain objective, or leave minions or jungle monster camps for the one who is pinging.

³¹ As a tank, the player could absorb the damage that the enemy team would attack with during the fight for the objective, or, with a missing carry, the team does not deal enough damage to defeat the enemy team in the fight



Figure 16 - Old version of the ping wheel, changed in 2023. Image taken from source (12)

Players can get easily distracted by getting pinged by their allies, as they get anxious over their movements being analyzed and criticized. In other cases, spam-pinging is simply annoying but is the most harmless way to express instant anger after a negative action has been resolved. In the case of Danger-pinging a wave of minions or a jungle monster camp, especially if done by a jungler, the resistance element is present again: by marking something as theirs in advance, junglers are inviting daring players to take it from them before they can. On the other hand, usually, after the fifteen-minute mark, when lane progression is established, and players can move around more freely according to the development of the match, junglers are not so tied to their jungle anymore, including the monsters in there. Red Brambleback and Blue Brambleback are the most helpful jungle camps, as the former gives a damage buff and is strong on marksman and fighter champions, and the latter a significant mana regen³² and ability cooldown reduction. It is expected of the allied jungler to give these to the teammates that would benefit from them the most, but as many things in this game are, it is not a rule that is mentioned anywhere and not something that can be reported if it does not happen. It is almost an expectation of the game itself that its players will do what is correct towards their teammates at all times, using the given communication methods and all other tools of tracking progress that is at their disposal. If the jungler decides that they need one of the Buff monsters more, the

³² With more mana, players can cast more abilities without having to recall to the fountain.

other allies can take that as a personal offense and, from that point, choose to enter the grieving mode. Some even alert in advance, typing in chat that they will “go afk” if the jungler does not let them take the buff at that moment. Another option is to “run it down,” which is the game community’s slang for intentionally dying in any of the lanes over and over again, which speeds up the team’s loss.

Surprisingly, there are many players who are ready to lose at a whim in Solo/Duo ranked matches, despite those being the least casual mode in the game. The findings in the two months of individual ranked playtimes of my group members have allowed me to write this chapter on anger display, which I have known a lot from my own years-long experience with ranked games. Everything that the guys thought was bad in the normal Player versus Player mode got exponentially worse in the ranked, as their presence on the teams was constantly punished by players intentionally losing, writing hateful messages, pinging without an explanation, remaining in the ally fountain with their character and not contributing to the game, and so on.

Tereels: “I still think that there is a significant lack of skill with some players. They just do not know what to do or what pings mean.”

B.B.: “But at the point of playing ranked games, you are level 30. We have been playing for months, even we know what things mean.”

Tereels: “But there is still a lack of skill which makes people trust other players less. They cannot know that Emina is right when she pings everyone to come to Baron if they cannot understand why she would be right about it.”

Emina: “But that is why I ping for assistance – if they don’t know they should come, now they do.”

Tereels: “Maybe they muted pings.”

Zeri: “You are too nice and making excuses for people.”

Tereels: “I just refuse to believe that all players are so evil, that’s all.”

In this conversation, Tereels offered an alternative perspective on players’ lack of interest in team play in significant moments. Some players can be in possession of a champion that is expected to be alone for most of the game (as some champions are designed to be lane pushers, taking down towers on their own), but that is not an argument enough for their

deliberate refusal to participate in crucial team fights. Some players decide to remain in their lane even while the enemies are hitting the inner towers and the Nexus itself, with no explanation given. Have they decided that the game is lost anyway, and they gave up on trying to defend themselves at that moment? Have they decided that the rest of the players do not deserve to win, which is a joint statement that grieving players issue as they begin trolling during the game? Have they thought that, perhaps, the enemy team cannot take the Nexus down yet and, therefore, they do not need to recall and defend the base? Either way, despite their decision being the last factor that led to the allied teams' defeat, the player is not technically reportable, nor will their refusal to defend the game from a loss be in any way punished. They do lose LP and time, just like the rest of the team, but not more than that.

When such situations occur, the game stops being a "who is going to destroy the Nexus first" 5v5 battleground. It becomes a race against time: can we win before one of our players decides that the game should be lost instead? It becomes a game of wits and persuasion: can we convince the player who has lost their morale that the match can still be won? Can we convince the angry player who wants to "run it down" that he should not do that, after all? JazzNass and Snoopy are of the opinion that typing aggressive messages increases the team's motivation to be more alert and play better; all of the group members considered that a waste of time and energy, and some refused to participate in the "begging" part of the matches altogether. "There is no difference if you ask nicely or not, but it feels better if you don't," Snoopy added. "If they don't listen to you, you don't end up looking like the weak one."

Furthermore, the group noticed how their teams tend to cling to the one player they think is the core reason for them losing lanes, fights, and objectives. This can be initiated by one player who starts pinging the other for any mistake they see, and if the rest of the team notices one of these mistakes, they may focus on the pinged player and constantly blame them for anything they do during the match. Players find a way to cope with their team's or personal disadvantage by shifting blame onto others, especially if the rest of the team joins up. This negative behaviour was present in matches where the said team was not winning. Even if the game would turn around in that team's favour, flaming would often remain. Reminding players that they did not deserve the win or that they were given a "free" win implies a certain amount of effort and skill that players expect from others in the games. Sometimes, this expectation is something that is commonly known in the community but not necessarily what makes or breaks a game. For instance, a player does not have to have a perfect score in order to win the game.

Their skill and participation can be proven by their role in team fights, like knowing when to cast a certain ability against the enemy successfully.

The general player community is also reluctant to look past players picking a champion for a lane it usually is not picked in, or the item builds they decide to go for during the game. Even if the experimenting player performs well, they are faced with skepticism throughout the match. I enjoy picking Soraka on mid-lane in certain team combinations: if our existing support player decides to choose a strong mage, and we have other champions that can benefit from Soraka's healing and items she can build to power her allies up, she is a strong choice for the later stages in the game. The laning phase will probably not be one where I will defeat the enemy Mid laner; it will most likely be a steady, uneventful lane in which I would position myself passively and wait for team fights to begin. But, if the enemy Mid lane achieves kills against other members of our team, even when due to their own faults, it will be me who will get all the pings and negative comments. As if, somehow, picking a different champion would have the effect of this situation not happening.

OverChad: "There is so much blame-shifting in this game. It is much worse than in Overwatch, because OW is such a fast-paced game. You do not get to flame so much. You do it after the game (laughing). League can also appear fast-paced to an outsider, it did to me at the beginning...but it is only like that in some moments, it is a slow game otherwise, I mean it lasts like a half-time of a football match, so it makes sense to be considered slow for a competitive video game. Everyone wants the loss to be another person's fault and are so quick to blame somebody else. I noticed in one game, that an ADC completely mispositioned themselves in the river, and got caught by the enemy Kha³³...and then after they died, they pinged me! Cause I am the support, but I was in base, I went back to buy an item and I was low on health. I was not even there, and it was my fault, because I should have, apparently, been there to save her. But she should not have been there in the first place, and I had no business staying with such low health. And guess what? Everyone was pinging me after that. And 'cause of things like this, I probably won't end up playing this game long-term."

Jimmy: "No one has patience to help you if you do not know something, they just assume everyone should know everything and that, if you make a mistake, you made it on purpose and now you are the bad guy, and everybody tells you to 'go commit die' or whatever."

³³ Short for Kha'zix, an exclusively jungle-role assassin champion that resembles a purple, monster-like insect.

With the strengths of the report system being in its ability to detect harmful chat content instead of recognizing and punishing intentionally bad playing, chronically toxic League of Legends players needed to invent a new way to express suicide and illness wishes to their peers. Jimmy's example of "go commit die" is, however, detectable as a "kys" substitute, but other variations (one of the more modern ones being "go 0/1/0 irl"³⁴) keep appearing in the chat, surprising us with their creativity. Neither of the guys in the group participated in the grieving and flaming culture themselves, other than trying to explain some of their actions which would get criticized by others. Their eloquence in the written chat was sometimes mocked and sometimes reciprocated by the more friendly strangers who would argue that getting so angry over a video game reflects children's rage over not getting what they want.

As every new match is a new beginning, anger can also remain in the previous match and disperse at the start of a new one. As JazzNass described it, it is as if *tabula rasa* was a concept applied to a video game: the ability to forget what had just happened by the start of a new match is a phenomenon that the group noticed, too. "You are only as good as your last match", explained JazzNass, "and as bad as all of them."

³⁴ The number in the middle represents the number of deaths in the League stats system, and 'irl' stands for in real life.

8. Conclusion

I began playing League of Legends because of people I wanted to be friends with. I kept playing League because I met other people online, people from all over the world, whom I wanted to stay in touch with. It was an escape from any daily routine that would weigh over my time as a student. When I was at my loneliest, living at a dormitory in a new city during the first year of my Bachelor's, I downloaded League of Legends on an ages-old laptop which would heat my bed up in the cold Winter nights. Now when I am at my busiest as of yet, and as I am completing this paper, I visited Berlin in April, to spend some time with Snoopy and his family.

Prior to starting my fieldwork, I have expected this research to be about investments in a virtual hobby in comparison to those in "reality". I was curious about the amount of money I have spent on video games without a second thought – how was it so easy for me to leave it in the virtual? During a class that was part of the Master course Finances, Markets and Resources, I shared this experience of mine with our professor and the rest of the class. The professor reassured me that there should be no feeling of money wasted. He told us to look at this as if it was any other hobby, and mentioned skiing, as an example relevant for Norwegians. People buy ski equipment and book trips to ski resorts. For me, I said, skiing is just going down the slope. I personally would not spend extra money on that, just as some would not do that with video games. But those who do either, are passionate about their hobby. It is not always about making something monetary in return, it is about pleasure as well.

For that reason, I have decided to work with young adults. Writing about something as cotemporary as video games being a part of everyday life was a task I enjoyed taking on. There has been previous research, and extensive one, too, on virtual worlds of video games (e.g. Boellstorff's engagement in *Second Life*), which focused on the dynamics of that world itself. League of Legends is not a game that simulates real life, and unlike World of Warcraft, which is the closest to it in terms of genre and style, its gameplay does not benefit from forming social relations. Due to its teamwork aspect, however, League of Legends is a globally popular e-sport, and draws in hundreds of thousands players on a daily basis. Its format is not optimal for a fieldwork experience that would only be focused on the in-game happenings. Every new match on the Summoner's Rift is a new experience and a clean slate for each of the ten contestants, but it is also a culmination of all the previous games played and time spent. With

a focus group whose majority is new to the game, I could examine which aspects of League of Legends keep the players interested in it.

Six months of shaping our schedules around League of Legends have resulted in many virtual as well as physical meetings. Encountering new players during each match helped me distinguish patterns in the groups' and general players' behaviors. There were times when the game was extremely personal, but those were mostly our pre-match meetings or after-match discussions. When introduced to people who were playing this game for many years, we could hear their stories, and motivations behind their dedication to achieving a high rank. Their friendliness and eagerness to help the group in their early, learning stages has, in turn, inspired the members to keep playing and expanding their knowledge. While some of the group members found it harder to keep track of the rules than the others, they were all just as active in all of our sessions.

Before presenting my ethnography, I wanted to describe the rules of the game as detailed as possible. These rules apply to each match we have played together, and getting to know them could make the fieldwork experience easier to read. There were some instances in which the context of a situation could not be possible to understand without knowing the rule in place first. For example, the roles that players are assigned to during the match dictate a lot how they will be perceived and how they should behave. The players embody not only the role within the 5v5 battleground, but also its equivalent on the social level. For example, junglers are allowed to be more vocal and dominant, as they are natural shotcallers. ADCs and supports, as they share a lane for most of the game, are within their rights to blame one another for the mistakes in their lane. If a support player is playing a tank, they are allowed and expected to move around the map and help others. If a support player is playing a healer, they are expected to follow their ADC and rarely leave the lane, even if that is not the more beneficial option for the team's success.

For the purposes of this research, the members of the focus group and I have played over five hundred games together. We were receiving messages of support and those of malice from many. We had more casual experiences when playing against AI bots, but we had more interesting and socially engaging sessions once the games were against real people. The group was used to playing multiplayer games. Saxman, for instance, played in two Team Fortress 2 e-sports tournaments, while Tereels and OverChad both reached the highest rank in the first season of Overwatch. Nevertheless, League of Legends was an entirely unique experience. It

is not a fast-paced shooter game like those they were used to; its pacing allowed social interactions within the match: chatting, displaying emotes, pinging players and alerting them, and so on. In the early stages of my research, these interactions would be a distraction, and the reactions of the group members on the game were not entirely positive. Once they understood the game better, they became more talkative themselves, and the overall experience was a lighter one.

Throughout the fieldwork, I put a focus on League of Legends' market. While there is a shop for champions in each match, where they can buy items during the 5v5 battle, League of Legends has a special shop in the game's client where users can buy cosmetics. Cosmetics are elements of the game which change the visual appearance of characters, wards, emotes and icons, but do not affect the gameplay. This shop is the only source of income for the game's developers, the company called Riot Games. When it came to spending money on League of Legends, I have noticed the following: players were more eager to spend money on cosmetics once they were good on the champion it was for, and would feel more motivated to play once they owned a skin. Some even used the word "obligated" when describing this feeling, as there was a sense of guilt in not playing what they spent money on. Additionally, players enjoyed the gifting aspect of the game, and their gifting practices online mirrored those in real life. Reciprocity was an obligation, analogous to discussions by anthropologists in settings far different than a video games' (Mauss, 1925; Weiner, 1902).

I have also had the chance to explore 3rd party markets which sell League of Legends accounts, and speak with the admin of one. Money that circulates among those markets has nothing to do with Riot Games. In fact, the game's report system punishes those whose gameplay is obviously below the rank of the purchased account, albeit this is hard to prove and would require multiple bad games in order for the system to recognize a *smurfing* player. The idea of the ranked system is to match similar-skilled players against each other, in order to keep it as fair as possible for all involved. Players whose main accounts are high ranked, and who decide to play among lower ranked players, make the game impossible to win for the enemy team. Similarly, player who play below the rank of the bought account make the game harder to win for the ally team. These unbalanced encounters are not pleasant, and result in negative attitudes.

League of Legends players are no strangers to displaying this negative behavior, and they seek many strategies that will leave them unpunished for their actions. Actions that lead

to intentional loss can be masked as regular mistakes and happenings in the game; a game can be lost even if players are not intentionally dying to the enemy team, and this intentional *feeding* is the only reportable gameplay option once the match is finished. Negative attitudes, giving up and going afk (not playing the match) are also reportable, but hard to prove and punish duly. Therefore, many of our games were a battlefield between those whose morale was low and the intent was to lose, and those (including us) who wanted to win and were trying to convince them the game was still worth playing. While I attempted to analyze the different reasons behind this behavior in my paper, my interlocutors who wanted to speak about their own toxic behavior considered some of their actions as valid. They disagree with intentional losing, but they support writing aggressive and offensive messages in chat.

There was an interesting dichotomy between these players' mannerisms within and outside the matches. Snoopy, JazzNass and Boxy are all using reportable vocabulary when they are dissatisfied with their teammates, turning into really loud and angry people. Once the games were done, they would revert back to the kind and friendly people they actually were. They embraced the offensive wordings as a part of the game's discourse, something that they are naturally a part of. None of the focus group members took part in this aggression, although they would often feel annoyed with the game. Again, this feeling would evaporate once the next match started. They enjoyed the game due to its social implications, and liked each other's company. Their bond strengthened during the months playing League of Legends, and they ended up doing other activities together in their free time. They confirmed this bond in-game by sending gifts to each other. The entire experience ended on a positive note, and I am very pleased to add it to my list of major events which League of Legends made possible for me or was a part of.

A big point of interest for me was the aspect of identity and its forming in a virtual world. All of these keypoints mentioned have led me to conclude the following on League of Legends' impact on identity and self: while skins and other customization options allowed players to express their individuality, within the match they would embody the role and the name of the character they are playing, and would, voluntarily or not, become a part of the game's existing social expectations and norms. By forming bonds that last only as long as a match does (especially when it came to teaming up against one player in the chat), or those which can lead to true friendships, players find ways to fit in and leave their mark. As pointed out by Castells (2009), the digital networking system allowed dissemination of collective identity, and a common purpose, that can be shared across nation-state borders.

I am hopeful that this thesis will spark discussions in the anthropology circle, as I present a highly social, unique team video game through a micro-lens, with a small group of young adults at its center. Players have taken part in many activities interesting to social scientists: forming bonds, setting social expectations and norms, transactions and gift-giving, competitiveness and identity building and expressing. This proves that, even in a game that is not focused on simulating social relations, people will find ways to establish them.

As for motivation and the rewarding aspect of video gaming, on the example of League of Legends, the rewards were different and subjective. The focus group members valued the social aspect of the game and the friendships they built from it, as well as the cosmetics which they found interesting and fun to play with. My other interlocutors were mainly motivated by their rank. Both parties enjoyed the progress and learning, and considered that a key aspect of this game's addictiveness. It was satisfying to learn and improve, and achieve victory with their own skill.

When it comes to my own experience with League of Legends, I have announced that I want to take a break from it once the paper is complete. It has been a great addition to my social life, and a connecting point between many people I have met. Unfortunately, I have developed a feeling that would appear once I would queue up for a match: do I really want to spend the next forty minutes doing this? I have been here before, many times. Perhaps it is time to do something else. I do not know how long my absence will be, but I will make sure to gift some skins out before I uninstall the game.

References

- Appadurai, A. (1986). *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1982). *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Schocken Books.
- Boellstorff, T. (2008). *Coming of age in Second Life: An anthropologist explores the virtually human*. Princeton University Press.
- Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pearce, C., & Taylor, T. L. (2012). *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method*. Princeton University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1994). *Practical reason: On the theory of action*. Stanford University Press.
- Buck-Morss, S. (1983). *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. MIT Press.
- Burke, P. J., & Freese, J. (2018). Gender, sex, and sexualities. In *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender* (pp. 45-65). Springer.
- Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of the network society: The information age: Economy, society, and culture* (Vol. 1). Blackwell Publishers.
- Castells, M. (2009). *Communication power*. Oxford University Press.
- Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the internet age*. Polity Press.
- Consalvo, M. (2002). Hot dates and fairy-tale romances: Studying sexuality in video games. *Journal of Sex Research*, 39(1), 83-90.

Eriksen, T. H. (2015). *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology* (4th ed.). Pluto Press.

Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and Society*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Doubleday.

Jansen, B. J. (2015). The logic of political coverage on Twitter: Temporal dynamics and content. *Journal of Communication*, 65(2), 239-259.

Krueger, R. A. (1997). *Moderating focus groups*. Sage Publications.

Mauss, M. (2002). *The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. Routledge.

Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. University of Chicago Press.

Morgan, D. L. (1998). *Planning focus groups*. Sage Publications.

Nardi, B. A. (2010). *My life as a night elf priest: An anthropological account of World of Warcraft*. University of Michigan Press.

NESH, The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities, 2003. Second edition published in Norwegian in 2018 and in English May 2019.

Accessed on the web-page: <https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/guidelines/social-sciences-humanities-law-and-theology/a-guide-to-internet-research-ethics/>

Postill, J. (2011). *Localizing the Internet: An Anthropological Account*. Berghahn Books.

Stiglitz, J. E. (2009). *Globalization and its discontents*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Tarde, G. (1902). The psychology of social classes. Translated by E. C. Mandell. Heinemann.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), Psychology of intergroup relations (pp. 7-24). Nelson-Hall Publishers.

Tilly, C. (1978). From Mobilization to Revolution. Random House.

Tosca, S. P. (2005). Rethinking narrative and gameplay: Introduction. In S. P. Tosca (Ed.), The Art of Procedural Rhetoric (pp. 1-28). MediaTextHack.

Weiner, A. B. (1992). Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving. University of California Press.

White, H. C. (1992). Identity and Control: A Structural Theory of Social Action. Princeton University Press.

Image Sources

1. https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3dx2dn/extremely_high_resolution_summoners_rift_image/

2. <https://www.esports.com/en/league-of-legends-101-warding-vision-208465>

3. <https://www.artstation.com/artwork/9eKmbL>

4. <https://www.mobafire.com/league-of-legends/skins/yuumi>

5. https://www.reddit.com/r/MordekaiserMains/comments/ep67si/new_skin_confirmed/

6. <https://lolskinshop.com/product/infernal-mordekaiser/>

7. <https://lolskinshop.com/product/star-guardian-jinx/>

8. <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2020/sep/10/sail-sailor-sailor-moon-turns-25/>

9. <https://www.surrenderat20.net/2013/03/315-pbe-update-zac-and-howling-abyss.html>

10. https://scontent.fosl3-2.fna.fbcdn.net/v/t39.30808-6/311298427_5530441950384537_5405663430256861626_n.png?nc_cat=106&ccb=1-7&nc_sid=9267fe&nc_ohc=o0LzHxFCCXsAX9XdMc5&nc_ht=scontent.fosl3-2.fna&oh=00_AfC1wvN4p0-NfVUwQR800C0-RUocRAMOY5d2rkI60BtqRw&oe=643BEE23

11. <https://cheezburger.com/7545282816/league-of-legends-is-a-game-of-futility>

12. [https://support-leagueoflegends.riotgames.com/hc/en-us/articles/201752974-](https://support-leagueoflegends.riotgames.com/hc/en-us/articles/201752974-Smart-Ping)

[Smart-Ping](#)