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ABSTRACT

The video game industry has become one of the biggest media industries in the world and subsequently an important producer and distributor of cultural commodities (cf. Kerr 2006; Sotamaa/Svelch 2021). While the latter can be said for most media industries, video games are unique in their cultivation of culture, spatiality, and perpetuity. Video games are not simply consumed, they constitute virtual realms that are interfaced, interactive, and multimodal. Games are places of their own (cf. Boellstorff 2008). Thus, fan cultures regarding specific video games, especially online games, often form unique dynamics of movement between spaces, distinct social etiquettes, and activism (cf. Cronin/McCarthy 2011). Important ethnographic work in and around such 'virtual worlds' has been done (e.g., Golub 2014; Taylor 2015) but not necessarily been updated to current debates around the growing economic importance of online games, their monetary practices, and virtualised and participatory fan cultures that develop in these contexts.

In this paper, the online game *League of Legends* (2009-) will be used as a case study to dissect virtualized fan culture and its unique participatory practices. In doing so, the paper complements existing approaches within game studies with an ethnographic reading of fan materials. *League of Legends* is not only a popular and long-running online game; the publisher Riot Games is also becoming one of the biggest 'broadcasters' and organizers of international e-sports tournaments and an advertiser of real-world commodities and celebrities. Fan culture surrounding this game formed unique practices around activism and protest against actions and decisions by Riot Games that will be examined and contextualized within the game itself but also in regards to larger shifts of cultural practices in and around video games.

KEYWORDS

League of Legends, game studies, fan culture, free-to-play

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Introduction

As of today, *League of Legends* (*LoL*) stands out as having one of the largest active gaming communities worldwide. There are currently nine official games set in the *LoL* universe, including *LoL*, *Legends of Runeterra* (2020), *Teamfight Tactics* (2019), *League of Legends: Wild Rift* (2020), *Ruined King: A League of Legends Story* (2021), *Song of Nunu: A League of Legends Story* (2023), *Conv/rgence: A League of Legends Story* (2023), *Bandle Tale: A League of Legends Story* (2024), and *The Mageseeker: A League of Legends Story* (2023). These games constitute a wide range of different genres, aesthetics, and social interactions, with four of the titles mentioned being multiplayer experiences and the rest being more narrative-focused single-player games. What unites them is only a loose narrative framework and Riot Games' franchising structure. What these games also constitute is a vast number of people: *LoL* alone has approximately 150 million registered players, which exceeds the population of many real-world countries. With *LoL* being an online game, this gives Riot Games, *LoL*'s developer and publisher, a particularly significant position regarding two main points: This first point is that *LoL*'s universe does not consist of fixed narrative events—as in the case of other media franchises—but of digital environments that can be traversed and have been changed over several years (*LoL* launched in 2009). This means that *LoL* fandom is participatory both in the traditional sense of textual interpretation, appropriation, and exchange with other members of the community surrounding a particular text or multiple texts (cf. Jenkins 1992), but also in the sense of interactive practices of real-time manipulation and traversing of digital environments. Online games are spatial in nature, they constitute virtual worlds (cf. Boellstorff 2008) that require a different level of involvement from fans and players than traditional linear media, while being as dynamic as cultures in the physical world.

In addition to that, a second significant distinction is that online video game fan communities are actively shaping their chosen medium, and the companies that host them rely on their participation. Much of the *LoL* franchise is based on sociality, as core titles like *LoL* itself are competitive by design and require player cooperation and communication to function. These two factors, spatiality and sociality, make Riot's position not merely that of a company managing a franchise, but more akin to that of an administration managing its population capable of shaping the commodified environment the community inhabits, as Riot Games owns this virtual world.

How Riot Games manages this population—a digitally adept and empowered one—will comprise the first part of this paper. I will focus on the gameplay, narrative, and interface aspects regarding—mainly—*LoL* as the 'core' of the franchise. I will also argue that Riot Games' endeavors in different genres and medialities are not just franchising in the narrow media-industrial sense (cf. Johnson 2013), but actively shaping the community and performing a managerial task in terms of economic considerations.

In addition to that, I will examine Riot Games' communication with players and fans and how this reflects their position as publisher, developer, and community manager. The last part of the paper will look at the player side of the franchise, including their cultural and social practices both in *LoL* and on other platforms. A central point will be how players perceive and react to Riot Games' changes to the game. My main example and object of study will be how Riot Games' position as a company and administrative entity on the one hand and that of the players as population and consumers on the other have collided in recent instances of activism and protest related to Riot Games' monetizing practices. Drawing on the anthropology of virtual worlds (cf. Taylor 2006; Boellstorff 2015), I consider "descriptive analysis" (Boellstorff 2008, p.5) a valid methodological choice for analyzing both Riot Games' strategies and the practices of the *LoL* fan community. My main point is that online video game communities are productively conceptualized in terms of politics, rather than market logics. In developing this main argument, my article aims to contribute to research at the intersection of fan studies and game production studies (cf. Sotamaa/Svelch 2021), the latter being a new field and approach going beyond the more traditional interests of game studies (cf. Juul 2001; Eskelinen 2001; Beil/Hensel/Rauscher 2018).

Core Aspects of *LoL* and Its Mechanics

In order to understand what Riot Games has created and how it has turned its creation into millions of active players and revenue, it is important to address some of the key aspects of *LoL*'s gameplay, monetization, interfaces, and narrative. Riot Games was founded in 2006 by Brandon Beck and Marc Merrill (cf. Liu 2023) with the goal of creating a free-to-play online game, which was then released in 2009 under its current name. *LoL* belongs to the genre of multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA), where two teams of five players on each side compete to destroy the opponent's base, located in the lower left and upper right sides of the square map, respectively. There are three main paths, referred to as lanes, which are lined with turrets that attack the enemy players for massive damage. They must be destroyed to proceed to the base. Between the lanes is the jungle, an area without turrets, containing non-player-controlled enemies that can be killed for experience points and a currency that is used to upgrade champions during the match.

One of the most important aspects of this type of game, and of *LoL* in particular, are the titular Legends: the champions that are chosen at the beginning of each match, during the so-called Pick-ban phase where players can choose the champion they want to play during the match and ban champions they do not want to encounter, thus blocking the enemy players from choosing them. There are currently 169 champions, ranging from archetypal hero-type characters to anthropomorphic animals. Each is represented through a splash art—an intricate, fixed design of the respective character that appears in the client and in the waiting phases at the start of each match—and in the match itself by way of a 3D model that is more or less faithful to what the splash art is trying to convey. These champions are tied to different strategic roles during a match. There are five roles that are partially adhering to the three lanes: Top-Laner, Mid-Laner, two Bot-Laners (a support and [usually] an AD carry), and a Jungler (a player that roams through all parts of the map), aiding the other players where needed.

The aesthetics, backstory, and origin of these champions are *LoL*'s main way of conveying narrative. They are tied to specific regions of the diegetic world and generally form the center of larger narrative events and plotlines. In the matches themselves, this is usually a matter of visual representation via clothing or ethnic markers and very short voice lines of dialogue, sometimes illuminating character

traits, other times hinting at relationship dynamics between two champions. The strategic, fast-paced, and competitive nature of *LoL* matches prohibits a lot of storytelling devices common in other game genres, such as cut scenes, extended dialogue, or text. This will be discussed in more detail in a later part.

Champions are also the primary target of Riot Games' monetary strategies, with the main items sold to the players being skins. Skins change the appearance of the champion they are purchased for, both in-game and in the splash art, and can be selected at the beginning of a match, during the pick-ban phase. They are priced very differently depending on the level of technical intricacy, exclusivity, and release date. Riot Games has also introduced a tier system for the different price categories, ranging from standard to transcendent. At the time of writing, the cheapest skin that is available for purchase with the main currency, Riot Points (RP), is Bird of Prey Anivia at RP 208 or about EUR 1,81. The most expensive skins purchasable with RP are in the so-called Ultimate Tier and cost RP 3250 or EUR 28,20. There are a variety of different currencies and other items that function less as a full-fledged currency but more as exchange tokens to allow players to participate in the various 'gamblified' parts of *LoL*'s economy.[1] Apart from RP, the value of these different types of currencies and tokens is often difficult to determine and is subject to change and fluctuation over the years and patches that *LoL* has gone through.

All of these purchase options fall into the category of microtransactions, a mechanic used primarily, but not exclusively, by free-to-play games, as an alternative model to the upfront payment required by most traditional video games (cf. Paul 2020). Microtransactions are usually smaller incremental payments, the type and amount of which can vary greatly depending on the genre and structure of a game. Microtransactions in the form of skins are particularly common in free online video games that have a competitive nature, as the champions themselves are an integral part of the delicate balancing system and cannot easily be locked behind a 'paywall' as in other free online games without competitive systems such as *Genshin Impact* (2020-). In these types of games, the playable characters themselves are susceptible to commodification practices, as they do not allow players to gain advantages over others, a principle that would inherently undermine the competitiveness of a game that relies on a kind of sportsmanship and test of skill to be enjoyable. This differentiation and consideration of 'good' and 'bad' microtransactions reflected in the terms 'free-to-play' and its pejorative counterpart 'pay-to-win,' which is a term introduced by Riot Games itself in order to differentiate their product (cf. Jerret 2021), is a heavily discussed and contested issue in the gaming community at large and in online games and *LoL* in particular. The type of monetization through entirely elective microtransactions employed by *LoL* is defined by Paul as follows:

> […] optional buying typically enable[s] players to purchase cosmetic elements to customize their character and approach to the game. These cosmetic elements let a player show off their support for the game developer and their dedication to a particular character or approach. (Paul 2020, p.31)

Monetization through optional buying is mostly exempt from scrutiny, and "as it ties in with dominant gamer discourse—it is hardly controversial" (van Roessel 2022, p.30).

1 The concept of 'gamblification' describes the recent tendency in the video game industry to include games of chance in aspects of their reward mechanics. These include for example, the heavily criticized (cf. Gerken 2022; Horti 2017; Saul 2022) loot-boxes, that are also present in *LoL*.

This also illustrates the aspect of sociality mentioned before, as the reason to buy skins in *LoL* is not to gain any gameplay advantages, but mostly a matter of social forces and 'dedication' as framed in the quote above. What skins embody is a kind of digital fashion, with many of the same complicated cultural and social imperatives and—perhaps more importantly—pressures that accompany fashion in the 'real' world (cf. Boughlala/Smelik 2024). In a game where everyone is essentially drawing from the same 'pool' of appearances, differentiation becomes all the more important (cf. Jarrett 2021; Reza/Chu/Ned/Gardner 2022).

Another important aspect is player cooperation. Riot Games has to strike a delicate balance between extracting value from players and keeping the game itself as accessible as possible in order to benefit from positive network effects (cf. Wu/Chen/Cho 2013). This is especially important as "they face stiff resistance from their player communities if they attempt to break out of their elective buying model" (Paul 2020, p.32). In addition to that, player count is vital to keep the game running as smoothly as possible, as at least ten players are needed for a match and the waiting times for matchmaking should be kept low so as not to disrupt the flow.

The mentioned network effects—in the case of Riot Games—do not follow the common logic of a platform housing a large and growing number of users being all the more attractive to advertisers and therefore generating more profit per user, as Riot Games does not advertise apart from collaborations outside of their software ecosystem, nor do they offer advertising canvases on their platform. Rather, network effects are utilized inwards, as the percentage of players participating in microtransactions tends to be rather low, requiring a consistently high number of players. In order to capitalize on the mostly social pressure to buy digital accessories, the platform needs to be sufficiently social to begin with. In addition, as Riot Games expands its franchise and sells and offers a range of different services, it becomes an advertiser itself, essentially selling its own products back to the community. How these franchising effects play into Riot Games' monetary strategies and community management will be discussed in the following section.

Franchising or 'Selling a Fantasy'?

Riot Games' efforts to branch out into different game genres, as well as other forms of media and platforms in order to reach a wider audience and keep its existing player base engaged, can first be observed in the respective main title's software. Starting a match of *LoL*, i.e., playing the actual game itself, is not simply done by starting the respective software. As with many online games, starting the program titled *LoL* opens the client. The basic function of a client is to manage the information and input between a device and a server or multiple servers and clients. In online video games, this is somewhat appropriated to serve a range of different roles and functions. Typically, and in the case of *LoL*, the client contains all social functionalities such as the chats and friend lists, monetarization like shops, currency exchange and battle passes, matchmaking via the top left play-button, and advertising, which, in the case of *LoL*, spotlights newly released content (like champions and skins) and e-sports and story events. Interfaces like these are comparable to web browsers as they serve as a threshold to the different options and spaces offered within them. The client is also necessary for *LoL*'s expansion into different paratexts and media, as it serves as its own closed platform to promote and advertise Riot Games' other titles, texts, and tie-ins.

At the time of writing, there are two clients that open after starting the *LoL* software. The Riot client, which launched over three years ago on October 4th, 2021, and the *LoL* client. Both clients currently feature the new *LoL* champion named Mel, who was originally introduced in the Netflix show *Arcane* (2021-), which itself takes place in the fictional city of Piltover, which is part of the *LoL* narrative world. Apart from this rather obvious case of transmedia storytelling (cf. Jenkins 2006), the Riot client itself is part of a larger strategy to expand and integrate its interactive narrative worlds. As Riot Games itself states in the announcement of the new client:

> Over the last few years, we've finally put the 's' in Riot Games, and you've created diverse and thriving communities around *Teamfight Tactics*, *Legends of Runeterra*, *VALORANT*, *Wild Rift*, and of course *League of Legends*. We wanted to develop a client that would give you the best experience possible and get you into your favorite desktop game quickly while also giving you the opportunity to explore all of what Riot has to offer. (La Londe 2021)

In addition to simplifying the access to all of Riot Games' products and services in one interface, the new client also features news, updates, and video material such as blogs, music videos, and story trailers. This makes the narrative universe surrounding their products more coherent and integrated, while also keeping the players in one spatial reality, without ignoring the fact that most of them will only be fans of one of their offerings. Riot Games has only fully realized this separate-but-connected approach to transmediality and franchising in recent years, as they also freely admit in the statement above. Their strategy seems to embrace almost every aspect of transmedia storytelling that Henry Jenkins famously outlined in *Convergence Culture*:

> A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole. Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption. (Jenkins 2006, pp.95f.)

What differs here is the perpetuity in the space of an online game and its constantly changing and evolving nature as opposed to an "expansion" through new texts and additions to the franchise that might be consumed, only to nomadically move to the next. As *LoL* is an extremely long-running game and, essentially, entertainment service, there is a need to keep changing its themes and tonalities throughout the years of its run-time, as narrative is one of the most effective ways to keep an audience and subsequent customers engaged (cf. Kim/Lloyd/Cervellon 2016; Romero/Lim/Park 2025) and "offering new levels of insight and experience refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty" (Jenkins 2006, p.96). This is done through three changing aspects, reflected primarily through the client: so-called Events, Seasons, and Game Modes, which are often intertwined and stacked on top of each other. Seasons are one-year intervals that mainly mark the progression of ranked play—where players can earn rewards, titles, and points that count towards a server leaderboard throughout the year. Events are mainly story

beats tied to the release of champions or skin lines and can change the make-up of the client and its functionality, like it was the case with the 4th Star Guardian skin releases, where the client's homepage turned into a visual novel with unlockable rewards that fed back to the main game. In line with a lot of (luxury) fashion brands (cf. Huang/Ha 2018; Visconti 2020), almost every cosmetic item that is purchasable in *LoL* is connected to a story.

While these in-game and in-client story beats and changing themes do also expand the narrative world of *LoL*, most of the storytelling takes place outside of the game in trailers, so-called spotlights (i.e., short video introductions of new champions and skins), songs or cinematics on YouTube, through short stories and comics on Riot Games' website, through the mentioned story events in the client, or through big projects like the Netflix show *Arcane*, or entirely different types of games that are better suited for classic narrative structuring. This also differs from Jenkins' (2006) remarks about transmedia storytelling, where "each medium does what it does best," because what *LoL* does best is neither storytelling nor expanding a narrative universe by exploration of a virtual world. Rather, *LoL* engages a large community through shared socially charged competitive games. Storytelling is therefore primarily used to engage and envelop the audience and player base in a narratively enriched digital space that spans across different types, forms, and genres of media.

This type of storytelling is not at all new to video games and has been employed and discussed a lot over recent years, with franchises like *Five Nights at Freddies* (*FNaF*) (2014-2024) similarly exploring their narrative through story beats scattered on the internet and hidden inside the game (cf. Paklons/Tratsaert 2021). Ana Paklons and An-Sofie Tratsaert have introduced the concept and term of a "cryptographic narrative" that must be interactively discovered by an involved fan base, where the uncovering of the "lore" becomes part of a different game altogether. As Jenkins observed years ago, "creative activity" today is less about the production of texts or regulating meaning through narrative than about creating "dynamic environments" that "provoke and reward collective meaning production" by continually providing "excess information, and extratextual expansions of the program universe" (Jenkins 2006, p.145).

The scope and strategy with which Riot Games deploys this kind of 'collective meaning production' still differ from the more established series' approach to such narrative structuring. While video games like FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* series (2011-2016) are famous for their 'cryptographic' narratives, they are entirely told inside the games, even when rather unconventional methods of narrative excavation have been deplored by their communities, like analyzing the code or leaving the boundaries of the game world through bugs, in order to uncover some of the better hidden story beats (cf. Jackson 2022; Spawforth/Millard 2017). Some of *LoL*'s stories are, similarly to FromSoftware's titles, enriched through shop descriptions, short paragraphs in the client itself, or brief voice lines of champions in the matches, but most of it is outsourced to different platforms and text genres. The level of work required to uncover *LoL*'s narrative also differs greatly. It still requires some level of community engagement but opts for variety and novelty, rather than the density and complexity of *Dark Souls*' narrative exploration, which is also the case for the *Five Nights at Freddy's* series. While *FNaF*, much like *LoL*, uncovers its story outside of the games themselves, it aims to delve deeper and explore themes already established. The collaboration of the community is required because of an excess of information, not because of the difficulty in retrieving it. This aligns with Murray's outlining of the "encyclopedic" nature of digital environments and their storytelling capacity "to represent enormous quantities of information in digital form" and to "offer a wealth of detail, to represent the world with both scope and particularity" (Murray 1998, p.84).

In addition to that, Riot Games' seemingly arbitrary use of genre and tone as a tool to engage almost every possible taste of its fan base is something that sets it apart from most 'cryptographic' or even 'encyclopedic' narratives and has more in common with joy rides, theme parks, or even the cinema of attractions (cf. Gunning 1986). *LoL*'s narrative supplementation includes almost everything from gothic horror, in the case of the short story *Voices* (2020) about the demonically possessed scarecrow Fiddlesticks, Shakespearian drama, in the form of the Ruined King event that featured the mental deterioration of a young king—the champion Viego—after his lovers' tragic death, to the Japanese animation style magical-girl story of the Star-Guardian Alternate Universe (AU) (and skin line). Especially in the case of the Star-Guardian plotline(s) we can see a willingness to cater to vastly different tastes and styles and an understanding and exploitation of what Jenkins terms "pop cosmopolitanism" by "soliciting Japanese-style content to augment their existing franchises," which further encourages collaboration "requiring not simply knowledge of Asian popular culture but an understanding of its similarities with and differences from parallel traditions in the West" by allowing "pop cosmopolitans to demonstrate their mastery, counting on them to teach other audience members how to decode the works" (Jenkins 2006, pp.168f.).

Finally, while one could call *LoL* a franchise (as I have done above), the term obviously does not fit completely. Riot Games did and still does branch out into different products and territories but ultimately perpetually integrates and updates its core product, *LoL*, to fit the needs, demands, and changing tastes of its audience, building a world around it to feed a fantasy that manifests and grows in the community and the spaces created within it. There is the current game patch named "25.S1.2" but no *LoL* 2 as this would counteract the sense of perpetuity and continuity that Riot Games relies upon to implement its strategy of continual narrative and spatial expansion, or what I have described above as a traversing of digital environments. With real-life sports events and Netflix shows, a kind of 'doubling effect' on reality is created, further blurring the lines between real and virtual worlds. This is also greatly accentuated by Riot Games' use of music and pop culture, where stars like Lil Nas X perform on stage for the world championships and are promptly turned into their own commemorative champions. Another example of this blurring of lines is the in-universe influencer, singer-songwriter, and champion Seraphine, who was showcased in her own Instagram profile that followed the start of her career and eventual breakthrough when she was discovered by the alternate universe K-pop band K/DA that Riot Games had created. The members of the band are all actual performers in the real world, further exemplifying to what degree Riot Games merges their own virtual worlds with reality and thus narratively pursues all aspects of its audience's virtual and real-world lives.

This movement through different, but continual social realities is also evident in Riot Games' strategies for self-expression and communication with fans, as I will discuss in the next section, before moving to the perspectives of fans and players.

Rioters

Riot Games has chosen the term 'Rioters,' referring to everyone working at the firm, placing itself in a narrative of disruptive and provocative self-expression. This labeling also plays an important role in both recognizing and differentiating between virtual and real boundaries, as every employee who communicates in any capacity with the fans and players has a nickname that serves a similar purpose to a gamer tag, a practice which is primarily used in online gaming spaces to carry a name or similar root name to the different spaces they inhabit (cf. Maurer 2021). Riot Games' employees, who also

play the game, carry their 'Riot name' over into *LoL* and vice versa. For example, in so-called dev-logs (development logs containing information about updates and roadmaps as well as further developments in the game), the developers who explain the changes are also referred to by their Riot names alongside their real-world names. Similarly, during e-sports events, all commentators, managers, and participating players are referred to only by their account names, the names they chose as their in-game identifiers.

This creates a sense of community and belonging and further strengthens the feeling of a shared reality inhabited by all members, including the 'rioters,' of the community. However, this may also be received as a coporate strategy by users and they may feel like this being forced upon them. While things like game events and dev-logs happen firmly within the virtual reality of the *LoL* universe, even if on different platforms, the real-world events are supplemented by the virtual through shared identifiers. These shared identifiers connect the two realities, blurring the lines between them.

Another rather unique aspect of Riot Games' interaction with both the community and their created world becomes apparent in the way they communicate changes and updates to it. As is a common practice in gaming spaces, updates and changes to *LoL* are communicated via the aforementioned dev-logs in addition to patch notes. While the latter are mostly technical in nature, the former have a more freeform approach and contain in-jokes, as well as more general information about future plans and approaches on Riot Games' side. Riot Games displays particularly open communication, especially regarding monetary practices:

> Skin Tiering
> We also want to talk about who gets what tier of skin. One of our goals is for all champions to get skins of various tiers, but this is admittedly when the process gets a bit more complicated. Higher tiers should provide more immersion, so they take more time and effort to make. And speaking from a business perspective (because we have to keep *League* on and running), it's more challenging to make higher tier skins for less popular champions. (100 pc nuggets/Riot Hylia/Li/Futanto 2024)

There are a few things to address here. Firstly, there is the apparent double-sided role that skins fulfill in *LoL*. On the one hand, they are very clearly flagged as a commodity that is sold in order 'to keep *League* running,' their economic value to the company Riot is neither hidden nor otherwise excused. On the other hand, Riot Games is simultaneously referring to skins as an object of affect where players 'get' to have skins for their preferred champion or fantasy and addressing them not just in terms of monetary value, but opportunity as part of a "reciprocal relationship shared between players and Riot Games" (Jarret 2021, p.115). This affective approach is even more explicit when 'skin performance' is addressed more directly:

> Evaluating Skin Performance
> When the average number of Ezreal skins sold is about ten times higher than the average Ivern skin, we need to come up with new ways to measure performance. The truth is that when we set out to make a skin for a low play rate champion, our core objective isn't to support the business, it's to support a core audience of dedicated players who love that champion. So how do we know whether we're meeting the mark? One of the main lenses we use is data comparing between how many champion mains purchased a skin versus how many occasional players picked it up. (Riot Bellissimoh 2020)

It is strongly suggested that making skins for less popular champions is a kind of charity, not solely (or not at all) done for monetary reasons. Of course, it must be noted that Riot Games is a company whose primary goal is to generate profit, and this communication with its community is predominantly performative. By communicating in this way, Riot Games cultivates a sense of obligation for 'mains'—a term for players that mainly play one champion—of less popular champions to show support by purchasing skins. This is explicitly written after the above quote, following a graph:

> Here we can see that almost 30% of players who main Talilyah showed up and purchased the skin—it was one of the best performing skins in recent years when it comes to mains purchasing it. (Riot Bellissimoh 2020)

This kind of language, which conveys commitment and 'duty,' is reflective of most communication between Riot Games and its players, and it goes largely unquestioned. The logic behind it is certainly sound: the product or service is free, so in order to maintain it, there must be at least some form of profit. Josh Jarret even argues that it is reminiscent of a kind of "gift economy" famously described by Marcel Mauss (1954), framing it as an "affective economy" defined by a feeling of reciprocity:

> For some players, a simple obligation to support Riot Games was expressed that follows the status of the game as a freely given gift and therefore something that should be reciprocated. (Jarret 2021, p.116)

Jarret (2021) further clarifies that this reciprocity must be understood in the context of the distinct power dynamic that exists between *LoL*/Riot Games and its players, and that this relationship is not equal, as the term reciprocity suggests in anthropological scholarship. He also notes that his research contributes to the growing body of scholarly work on "playbor" (Kücklich 2005) or affective (fan) labor in online (gaming) spaces. While the term certainly describes a particular type of labor that fans perform in these spaces, I will argue in the following chapter that the relationship between Riot Games and its fans is more managerial and almost political than notions of affective economy or fan labor suggest.

The Community of the Rift

The rules of a video game are written in code. It seems to be common knowledge that in order to understand a video game in its entirety, it is of utmost importance to look at how the game works. While that is true to some extent, it is still often overlooked to what lengths players will go to bend, circumvent, and re-interpret the rules that seem so hard-wired at first glance. As Anne Mette Thorhauge has argued, there is a discrepancy between 'the rules of the game and the rules of the player:'

> Games include a variety of rule phenomena of which some can be translated into programmed behavior, such as the rulebooks, while others depend on the specific social and communicative context, such as the distinction between the fictional context and the role-playing context, and cannot be simulated by a programmed system. (Thorhauge 2013, p.387)

Thorhauge's writing primarily focuses on the translation of rules from pen-and-paper role-playing games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), to their digital counterparts, which cannot inscribe social

rules in the same way as gameplay mechanics. As Thorhauge writes about digital role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* (2004), the rule systems she mentions differ significantly from games with a much stricter initial ruleset and a smaller scope than the vast digital worlds of RPGs (role-playing video games), such as MOBAs, to which *LoL* belongs. However, since coordination and cooperation, and thus social behavior that cannot be programmed into the game itself, are detrimental to the functioning of *LoL* and similar games, I would argue that the 'rules of the player,' or rather the implicit rules of *LoL*'s community, become much more important than might be apparent at first. While I have previously explained some of the 'rules' and hardwired goals that make up a typical match of *LoL*, I have omitted the level of cooperation needed for their functionality. Both champions and players must fulfill specific roles that are not inscribed in the code of the game. All five players on each side decide what role to fulfil before the match starts and must choose their champion accordingly. Depending on the season and patch, different champions might be stronger or weaker than average, and it is up to the player to decide whether to play the "meta" (Donaldson 2015) and choose a currently strong champion, or stick to what they know, the aforementioned 'main'. What level of knowledge players might have about the current "meta" is also entirely elective.

While it is strongly recommended that players adhere to these roles, there is no actual game rule that forbids them from simply going wherever they please. In some matches, it may even be necessary to switch roles or venture to different lanes in order to support them, thus making this level of freedom necessary when accounting for different matchups. Similarly, most champions are associated with one or two roles, which are chosen accordingly. However, 'off-meta' champion selection is neither forbidden nor particularly rare. A high level of player cooperation is necessary to keep the game functional and enjoyable. This does not necessarily mean only inter-player cooperation, but also between players and the game itself, and its competitiveness. For example, it is not unusual to see players dancing and using emotes (collectable pictures that can be used in-game to convey different moods) in the first few minutes of the game without attacking the enemy players, and breaking this short truce too early might be seen as unsportsmanlike. For *LoL* to function, there needs to be an almost democratic level of participation and acceptance of its rules, both implicit and explicit. All the aforementioned aspects of monetary, narrative, gameplay, and communication strategies on the part of Riot Games side play into this, both inside and outside the game.

Riot Games thus finds itself in a position that is as much that of a company managing its commodified service as it is that of an administration governing over a large and diverse body of people who use their infrastructure. This makes the relationship between players and the company political in nature. Riot Games must maintain a careful balance between these two positions, as the participation of the populace is critical to the functioning of their business, a fact that becomes clear when the two positions collide.

Riots, Rioters, Rioting: When Fans Protest

The two cases exemplifying collisions of player expectation and participation on the one hand and monetization and managerial strategies of Riot Games on the other that I finally want to examine now in some more detail are controversies related to the skins Immortalized Legend Ahri (released Jun. 12, 2024) and Arcane Fractured Jinx (released Dec. 11, 2024). The main point of controversy was that these skins were much more expensive than the rest of the purchasable skins, and that the latter were tied to a gambling mechanic. Both skins were also only available for a limited time. The Immortalized Legend

Ahri skin could be purchased with RP for approximately EUR 514.27. The price of Arcane Fractured Jinx is more difficult to calculate, but the currency needed to participate in the gambling for the skin, 'spark,' is currently priced at RP 400 per spark. The skin is guaranteed to drop at the 80th pull, which puts the total cost at EUR 277.70 until that point. Otherwise, the skin has a 0.5% chance of dropping per spark. The players' responses were largely negative, and the way in which Riot Games and *LoL* are contextualized as separate entities in community discourse following the release of both skins is rather interesting.

When Immortalized Legend Ahri (ILA) was released for purchase in the client, concerns quickly surfaced from inside the community regarding the much higher price compared to virtually all other skins released up to that point. To communicate to Riot Games and the members of the community who bought or were thinking about buying ILA that the pricing was unacceptable, a protest was organized, taking the form of a boycott. Interestingly, the object of the boycott was not the game itself, but rather the champion the skin was purchasable for. Using an in-game feature, the aforementioned ban mechanic, the boycott targeted the specific item and people who bought the item, by barring players from choosing Ahri in the first place, thus keeping them from using the skin in any meaningful way. As mentioned before, reasons to purchase skins are numerous, but often have a specifically social function as they allow players to express themselves to other members of the community, like clothing items in the real world.

The protest was organized mainly on the social media platform Reddit, where many of *LoL*'s subcommunities have forums dedicated to their favorite champions (such as r/ YasuoMains) and storylines (like r/StarGuardians) or create spaces for minorities (such as r/QueensOfLeague, which is a space for *LoL*'s gay and queer community). Several Riot Games developers and managers also have Reddit profiles, identifiable by their gamer tags in their usernames, where they post updates or answer questions about changes to the games. This makes Reddit posts particularly interesting for research on *LoL*'s community, as both fans and its producers inhabit the same shared space and can communicate with each other.

Particularly and perhaps surprisingly loud protests regarding ILA emerged from r/AhriMains, a subreddit for fans who—mainly—play Ahri. The sentiment and motivation for protesting are well summarized by the following post:

> Title: The best way to rebel is to boycott Ahri herself
> I think it's atrocious that riot is pricing a skin bundle that costs half my paycheck for an entire month.
> I say let's protest in a way that forces riot to the negotiating table.
> All we need to do is ban Ahri every single game. The whales[2] will never get to enjoy the skin if they cannot play the champion, and then riot will be forced to lower prices. Similar strategies worked for ryze. Let's work to get Ahri banrate to 100%. (ShotoGun 2024)

This kind of language, which blurs the lines between the two realities and the role that Riot Games plays in the relationship with its players, is rather telling of how players and fans perceive Riot Games: as both an economics entity following marketplace dynamics but can be forced "to the negotiating table" and a company that must be "forced to lower prices" (ShotoGun 2024). Seeing the game *LoL* and the company Riot Games as separate entities enables the community to place the 'picket line' within the commercial product—which *LoL* largely still is—rather than outside of it. Participation in the subject of controver-

2 'Whale' is a common term for the small percentage of players that will spend large amounts of money on items and cosmetics in general in online gaming spaces.

sy is not seen as paradoxical because *LoL* is conceptualized as a spatial or infrastructural entity that is inhabited over long periods of time. This sense of spatiality enables the expression of protest within. Additionally, the term 'negotiating table' is commonly used in the context of union negotiations, which places players and fans in a position of significant consumer activism in relation to Riot Games.

The previously mentioned affective nature of the argument comes into play when the Ahri mains address the wider *LoL* community in a post, titled "Why boycott Ahri/ The £500 Ahri skin!?," the first expressed reason is:

> They want to release a skin of this type once a year (as they said on the site dedicated to the Ahri skin.) This means it coulid be your main next, and then it'll be your problem too. It will effect EVERYONE. It also means Riot gets to add grossly overpriced skins and get away with it because we let them. (r/AhriMains 2024)

The appeal to other players is that it could be their 'main next,' thus placing champions and their skins both in a context of resource and infrastructure as well as a logic of products and markets. As explained above, this is not a coincidence but something that Riot Games readily encourages in addressing skins as a gift or reward in their communication towards the community. "It could be your main next" (r/AhriMains 2024) in this context becomes a threat to self-expression and not one of merely having the means to buy the item or not.

The ILA Skin is part of the yearly 'Hall of Fame-event,' for the pro-player 'Faker,' and is thus placed in the context of e-Sports: "to commemorate pro players from around the world who have displayed incredible resilience and mastery of *League of Legends* gameplay" (https://halloflegends.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/). E-Sports is also one of Riot Games' main arguments for the 'higher than usual price' as 30% of the revenue is shared with the pro-player and their team, and also intended for fans 'looking to flex their fandom.' Following the controversy, Andrei van Roon (gamer tag 'Meddler'), head of League Studio, also framed it as a luxury item:

> This is a time where we believe we should also offer really expensive versions, akin to Collectors editions/collectibles in other contexts. Those are created for a very small part of the audience that wants that sort of price point in exchange for a lot more exclusivity. (KIRYUx 2024)

This is communicated (as part of the same post) together with the sentiment that Riot Games must maintain the basic infrastructure of the *LoL* universe:

> There's a good opportunity to both celebrate iconic pro players and help cover the costs of esports (which is funded primarily by a mixture of sponsorships and in game cosmetic sales). (KIRYUx 2024)

This statement in particular places skins and their purchase in the context of an elective but necessary contribution to *LoL* and its real-world events as an infrastructure that the players must 'help cover the costs' of.

The same pattern is repeated with Arcane Fractured Jinx (AFJ), as that skin was tied to the Netflix series *Arcane*, which also cost Riot Games a lot to produce. Here, the main criticism from fans and players, apart from the unusually high price, was the implementation of a gambling mechanic. In displaying

a kind of solidarity among fans, the skin was discussed in terms of the most that any player needed to spend to acquire it. Many players expressed concerns directly about the gambling mechanic and the weakest members of their community. Responding to a post titled "I have failed" by a member of the subreddit r/leagueofjinx, in which the user expressed a fear of missing out after seeing other members buying it, one commenter writes: "This is exactly whats Fomo is. Just remember this PREYS on your weakness and is a humaliating [sic] practise" (Diecke 2024), expressing an understanding of fans wanting to 'show up' for their main, but contextualizing the high price alongside the gambling mechanic as predatory on the part of Riot Games.

This also aligns with what I previously outlined as Riot Games' narrative and expansion strategy, whereby fans are incentivized to participate in story events by purchasing skins. As Arcane is one of the biggest story events in the *LoL* universe, and with Jinx as one of the main characters, setting the point of entry in order to participate in the plotline at such a high price is seen as controversial.

As previously mentioned, the main sentiment is that the price point should not be too high, and that the skins' value for the community lies in self-expression rather than exclusivity or luxury. While the community at large does not oppose skins as a form of maintenance cost for what they contextualize as infrastructure, the high price point marks a rupture between the coexisting realms of market logic and perpetual spatiality that the community inhabits. This is most evident in the form of protest chosen, the language used to communicate and organize the protest, and the ways in which the monetary practices are criticized in the first place.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to contribute to research on online gaming spaces and the ways communities grow and situate themselves within them. While online video games are commercial products, the communities that emerge around them form unique relationships around monetary and economic practices related to those games, to the companies that maintain them, and to the alternate realities constructed within and around such game spaces. By examining how narrative and real-world events are tied to monetary practices, I have demonstrated that such expansion strategies not only add to a franchise's repertoire but also shape the way in which communities of online games interact with their products' monetary practices.

This is most evident in places where communities protest against the actions of gaming companies, as the contextualization of games as places rather than products is demonstrated through the lines drawn around and the means of carrying out a boycott. When protesting involves using mechanics that are programmed into the game rather than simply not playing altogether, it becomes clear to what extent such spaces are unique to the respective community, and how they express themselves and their use, as well as the contextualization of game mechanics. The ban mechanic is an integral part of the *LoL* match-making system, but it is also used as a tool for protests by the community when such measures are deemed necessary.

These communities are better described and contextualized in political terms, rather than in terms of pure market logic, as their relationship with the companies that maintain the infrastructure they use is much more reciprocal and dependent on mutual participation than is commonly described. Thus, *LoL* aptly illustrates how online gaming communities engage with such politics in the sense of "empirically verifiable and institutionally articulated actions, strategies, and assemblages of governance that mark

the management of the public sphere" (Swyngedouw 2011, p.373). Such politics institute a form of sociality and provide coherence to an otherwise sprawling narrative universe.

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