

In Pursuit of Victory:

League of Legends and a Project of the Self

by

Oliver Crosby

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Arts

in

Sociology with Specialization in Digital Humanities

Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario

©2016
Oliver Crosby

Abstract

Video games are often recognized as ephemeral arrangements of signs and symbols, arranged to mimic ‘real’ relationships of domination and subjection. The fear, then, is that the subjects produced by video games are habituated, in a straightforward way, toward certain dispositions. Yet when we look at a competitive game like League of Legends, we see an *active* player-subject, engaged in an entrepreneurial project of self-improvement. This investigation is aimed at power beyond manipulation, asking how an emplaced self is made true in-and-through the pursuit of victory. My autoethnographic account looks at how we become the object of our own conditional existence through interpellation and reflexivity. League of Legends stands as an example of a particular type of reflexive subjectification, one in which we draw on prescriptive texts, guides, and techniques of self-improvement in order to shape ourselves in response to a discursive provocation; in response to the current of opposition.

Acknowledgements

When I read about military comrades, or close friends forged in hard times, I see my fellow grad students. They were with me the whole time: every stumbling block, every bump, every time I careened down that slope that lead to hopelessness. I lucked out. Our group was organized around struggles, meeting every week or so, we called ourselves ‘Friends Against Research and Thesis Stagnation’. I am especially thankful to have worked alongside Preeti Hothi, Kent Hall, and Allison Wallis. Thank you.

I owe a lot to Bruce Curtis, who supervised and inspired me to do my MA in sociology. Bruce’s lectures were performances: there were no slides, no videos –the classroom was a stage for ideas. When he walked us through a history of sociological debates every theorist came to life, every concept bloomed. I soon realized that sociological theory was a blasting powder, such that when he made his now-familiar ‘head exploding’ gesture, I was right there with him. I got hooked on that feeling.

Outside of the lecture hall Bruce was always down to earth and friendly, with some reservations. Accolades, for example, were rare enough that when given I knew that they were genuine. I also know that he took my work seriously, read every word carefully, yet I wonder if he sees how much he is written into my thesis. It was hard to write for the imaginary Bruce I have constructed in my head, but it was worth it.

It was also a privilege to work with Dr. Aubrey Anable. Aubrey was the only professor who, upon hearing about my thesis project, endeavored to actually *play* League of Legends. I think she was as curious about the game as I was, and on several occasions she helped get be back on the rails.

My final acknowledgments go to my wife. At my side, Jana was long-suffering and yet kind, overburdened and yet strong, and inexhaustibly supportive. Writing my thesis was like getting sent off to a war inside my head. The only reason I made it through was because Jana stayed back to feed and water my body.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Epigraph.....	1
Introduction.....	2
1. ‘Emplaced and embodied’	4
2. ‘A self made true’	5
3. ‘The pursuit of victory’	6
Roadmap	7
Chapter I: Theoretical Framework.....	9
In pursuit of a subject.....	9
The subject of the video game	9
The ‘gamer’	10
The ‘power gamer’	12
The Critical Theorist.....	16
Adorno	16
Interpellation.....	19
Interpellation and film studies	21
New media studies, culture industry, and virtual reality.....	24
Interpellation in video games.....	29

The true/false binary	31
Prescriptive Texts	33
Representation and materiality	36
The disunity of the virtual.....	37
Heterotopias	39
1. Heterotopias of crisis and deviation.....	40
2. Heterotopias in different spaces.....	41
3. Incompatible juxtapositions	42
4. Temporal discontinuities.....	43
5. Permissive spaces.....	44
6. Heterotopias expand the imagination.....	45
Chapter II: Research Strategy	47
Autoethnography.....	50
A hermeneutic	55
Conclusion	59
Chapter III: Context of the Game	60
The Multiplayer Online Battle Arena	60
Multiplayer and online.....	61
Battle arena	62
Before League of Legends	64

Defence of the Ancients	67
The current of opposition.....	68
League of Legends	73
The rift	73
Champions	79
Gold and items	82
Roles	83
The Summoner.....	86
Chapter IV: An Autoethnographic Account	88
Me and my rank	88
Beginnings	91
My office.....	91
Installation and registration.....	93
Being a new player.....	97
Virtual-material conflict.....	98
Knowing my newness	102
The practical impact of private self-reflection.....	106
Idle life	107
Like newsreading	109
Playing Ranked	111

Two important rules for climbing	111
Win games.....	112
Upward one rung, downward two.....	116
The high level mindset.....	119
A chasm between the prescriptive apparatus and success	120
Scripted internal dialogue	124
A prescriptive narrative.....	124
Conclusion	126
Summary.....	126
The self made true.....	132
Final example of emplacement	133
The quality of my suckiness	135
Suzanne.....	136
The subject of the video game	137
Final considerations	138
A history of private life	139
Discipline accompanied private life.....	140
Governmentality and the internet.....	143
Bibliography	145

Epigraph

You are much worse than you think and could be much better. You are not better than anyone.... You read stuff like this to learn, you play the game to practice... winning games is not your primary goal! Improving is your primary goal.

—NMaresz , *SoloQueue and You!*

If you lose a game but still learn nothing, you need to read this guide again, because every time you lose, your opponent is showing you your weaknesses.

—rotface, *High Level Mindset*

...relegating responsibility [*sic*] to others makes you routine-blind regarding your own missteps and therefore keeps you from improving. This in itself is kind of an unpleasant thing to do and pretty hard to learn, as it forces you to tone down your mechanisms of self-protection (keeping away the things that hurt, a.k.a. blaming others) and relearn things in a more open, humble way.

—Angel_of_Clumsiness, *How To Learn*

Introduction

For those who play League of Legends, the assumption of self-proficiency is the height of neglect. It suggests that you are not attuned to the ugly fault that holds you back; the loser's indiscretion; not a mote but a beam in your eye. After all, it is easy to know that you are a poor player – rank and defeat will tell you as much – but I have learned that if you cannot *quantify* and *qualify* your inadequacy, then you are lost. It is as if you stare blankly at the screen, clicking and maneuvering randomly; reactively; passively. It is as if you wander like a sheep in the shadow of death; the shadow of defeat.

When we look at League of Legends we see technologies of sport collide with a digital fantasy medium. We see *players* – those, like me, who were once enamored by the beauty of an artfully crafted virtual world – become *competitors*. Where once I stood in the boots of a Night Elf hunter, in the sheltered forests of Teldrassil,¹ now I sit in a chair, in front of a computer screen, looking up statistics on my teammates before ‘locking in’ my ‘champion’. Gone is the sense of playful freedom I felt in video games: the freedom to explore, the freedom to see and experience beyond the confines of my earthly form.

As critics, we are urged – or we believe ourselves to be urged – to account for these changes. Yet when we look at online competitive video games, they appear to lack many of the props on which we construct our inquiries. The pillars of an aesthetic critique – attuned to stories, symbols, and other sensory elements – are now secondary.² These

¹ This is a reference to World of Warcraft, a popular online role-playing game. World of Warcraft was designed by Blizzard Entertainment, the company behind many of the real-time strategy games from which games like League of Legends emerge.

² Video game scholars, especially those who come from new media studies, often view games as ‘a new textual medium’, like a novel or a film (Simons, 2007). Andrew Hutchison (2008) defines this as “game aesthetics,” which include ‘audio-video’ and other ‘sensory’ objects. For a critique of this perspective see Markku Eskelinen (2001, 2012).

games aim not at the production of a boundless, sensually particular, virtual subject. Rather, from tireless competition we see an *actual* subject: affixed to the 'real' and the rationality of the standardized. Perhaps Theodor Adorno (1991) was right to describe sports as "the imageless counterpart to a practical life" (p. 89). "In its naked literalness, in the brutish seriousness which hardens every gesture of play into an automatic reflex, sport becomes the colourless reflection of a hardened callous life" (Adorno, 1991, p. 90). The introduction of sport, it would seem, strips the digital video game of its aesthetic qualities. Instead we are like cogs in a machine, habitually performing actions over and over:

Sport itself is not play but ritual in which the subjected celebrate their subjection. They parody freedom in their readiness for service, a service which the individual forcibly exacts from his own body for a second time. In the freedom which he exercises over his body the individual confirms what he is by inflicting upon this slave the same injustice he has already endured at the violent hands of society.

(Adorno, 1991, p. 89)

In other words, Adorno is arguing that sports invoke the very (capitalist) relationships of domination and subjection that we suffer in other aspects of our lives. Sports have us enact these relationships, and through this enactment we come to learn and reinforce them. The critical theorist, then, would fear that competitive video games reward those who comply with expectations; that they habituate inattention, docility, and passivity; that they effectively turn us into sheep.

What, then, do we make of my epigraph? Small fragments of an enormous *prescriptive apparatus*: a glimpse at a continent of instructional writing, videos, and statistical analyses that empower the active, creative, and entrepreneurial player. This was what I encountered when I undertook competitive gaming. When I adorned myself with this prescriptive equipment, I found myself engaged in an active project of critical self-reflection. I scoured myself of inattention, preyed on the inattention of others. ‘Expectations’ became a site on which I struggled. Sheep? Sheep do not play League of Legends. In spite of the metaphor, we ‘players’ are the ones with the staff and the crook. We are shepherds, or *self-shepherds*, armed and abled. This is a game that flies in the face of the critical theorist, who cannot see ‘power’ beyond manipulation. Never has it been so easy to *know my place* than it is with League of Legends. Never has a video game been so much like shadowboxing in the mirror. League of Legends *demand*s active, critical self-reflection. It asks for players who are knowers and deciders; players who can thrive in a dynamic virtual world, making proactive and predictive decisions. To do otherwise would be neglect. To do otherwise would be a willful act of ignorance.

It follows, then, that if we want to study competitive video games, then we need to adjust our line of inquiry. This investigation asks how an emplaced and embodied self is made true in-and-through the pursuit of victory. There are three aspects of this statement that need to be broken down.

1. *‘Emplaced and embodied’*

Here I refer to embodiment as the perceived bodily limit of our existence; a form of somatic knowledge and confinement. When I play League of Legends, my abilities are

attached to my body; my virtual performance and my physical body are inextricably joined.

Video game scholars are struggling with the concept of embodiment, which becomes uncertain when we look at the extension of the body from a supposedly ‘real’, spatial, material existence into the ‘ephemeral’ realm of the virtual. Many scholars view video games as a site of *disembodied telepresence*: symbolic interactionism, unadulterated by materiality. If we understand the ‘virtual’ in contrast to the ‘actual’, then it becomes unclear how to study the problem of embodiment. How can we explain the *actuality* of our embodied experience if we confine our investigation to the *virtuality* of the game? Such a conception takes for granted a somatically singular body: it attempts to describe ‘displacement’ without explaining ‘placement’ –or rather, ‘emplacement’.

Instead, I argue that the concept of ‘embodiment’ needs to be expanded to include the concept of ‘emplacement’, which looks at how we become the object of our own conditional existence through interpellation and reflexivity.

2. *‘A self made true’*

This inquiry is aimed at a particular form of reflexive subjectification. I am not talking about a ‘self’ that is given to us; I am not attempting to define or describe a specific or coherent ‘subject’ of video games. Rather, this is a self that we recognize in-and-through our struggles and experiences; a self that we work on. The self is ‘made true’ in the pluralistic sense: known, real, and lived, but also incoherent and fragmented. If we want to investigate the ‘actuality’ of an embodied experience, then we have to look beyond the forces of manipulation and verisimilitude that often emerge when we study

video games. The challenge, then is to adjust our critical tools to better recognize the modalities by which the subject emerges.

3. *'The pursuit of victory'*

I aim this investigation at *the pursuit of victory*: an entrepreneurial project of self-improvement built within a matrix of social relations and a competitive video game; a matrix of power relations. When I look at League of Legends I see more than a fantasy game. I see more than a narrative produced in a gamified virtual environment. I see players engaged in an ongoing struggle to optimize themselves; make better decisions; act with speed and precision. I see strategies of responsible self-management, techniques of reform, and self-discipline.

In pursuit of victory I played League of Legends with a genuine desire to improve. I worked to achieve a measurable level of competence; I wanted to climb the ranks; I wanted to prove that I was better than my little brother (which I am).

In pursuit of victory I came to recognize my shortcomings. I found a body of prescriptive texts: tools and techniques for self-discipline and improvement. These were the modes by which I could overcome the obstacles set forth by the game: these disruptive techniques that called attention to me, interpellated me, situating me within a discourse. I describe this as a process of reflexive subjectification through emplacement. In what follows, I explore this question.

Roadmap

Chapter one is broken up into two sections. In the first section I discuss some of the ways in which the concept of subjectification has been used in video game studies. I argue that video game scholars are preoccupied with the task of creating and analyzing specific categories of people. Instead, we should look more carefully at *modes* of subjectification. In the second section I follow a thread in cultural theory, examining Theodor Adorno's conception of the culture industry, Althusser's concept of interpellation, and the adjustment to both concepts that were made by Lev Manovich. Then I turn to the work of Michel Foucault to look at power beyond manipulation, and describe the concept of emplacement.

In chapter two I describe the autoethnographic research approach that was used in this project. I outline one of the methodological debates surrounding autoethnography, and argue that scholars should reflect on the practice of hermeneutics, and the use of an 'analytical toolkit'.

Chapter three describes the context and history of League of Legends. I look specifically at key elements that have come to define what is called the 'Multiplayer Online Battle Arena' genre of competitive video games. This chapter will provide the reader with some of the necessary contextual information by which they can understand my autoethnographic account.

Chapter four is my autoethnographic account of playing League of Legends. I begin at the moment I installed the game, I describe how the game made my newness 'apparent', calling attention to my weakness without providing a way forward. I soon discover that the way forward was in-and-through a relationship with a prescriptive

apparatus. Thus I begin to read guides, watch videos, and attempt to discipline myself. This chapter weaves together personal experiences and critical reflections.

In my conclusion, I return to the question of power beyond manipulation. I talk about how a project of self-improvement works in relation to the ‘bright white light of victory’. I also suggest that this project could be used to ground an historical investigation into practices of virtual-material emplacement.

Chapter I: Theoretical Framework

In pursuit of a subject

Critics and proponents alike tend to suggest that we are ‘shaped’ or ‘made’ by playing video games. It is often assumed, then, that video games produce distinct and recognizable ‘types’ of people. If this is true, then the emergence of ‘eSports’ and competitive video games ought to evoke a response from scholars and theorists. In critical game studies, this response typically involves a technical practice: naming and identifying certain categories of people who play video games before analyzing or critiquing their place in society. As I prepare my own investigation, I want to engage with this type of work. I argue against the assertion that there are distinct categories of people that are being made in-and-through gaming and that we as analysts should know and critique them. Instead, as I go on to discuss, I aim my investigation at the modes by which we come to know ourselves and these conditions are changed by competitive gaming.

The subject of the video game

Long before video games escaped the confines of the arcade, there were dreamers. In video games, they saw an embodied experience collide with the freedom of illustration; of sound; of aesthetics. When William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* introduced the concept of ‘cyberspace’ to the public imagination, with it came a new round of modernist dreaming. From the pages of science fiction came a ‘virtual’ place where anything could happen. Into these imagined digital worlds went the hopes of a progressive, refined, and

reshaped social environment. Untethered by the material world, many saw ‘cyberspace’ as a perfect place to shape and explore human consciousness; to build a better world. For some, this ideal has lingered on, fueling their research into video games. Jane McGonigal (2010), for example, argues that video games could dramatically improve the world. After ‘looking at the numbers’, McGonigal (2010) argues that we should aspire to spend a collective 21 billion hours per week playing video games in order to “solve problems like hunger, poverty, climate change, global conflict, [and] obesity” (1:03). For McGonigal (2011), video games are seen as a place of limitless human potential, a view of what we could become if we invested ourselves in virtual worlds ‘designed to make us happy’ (p. 3-4). Implicit in her argument is that, untethered by material constraints, video games have the power to bring about widescale societal change; to ‘teach’, ‘develop’, and ‘make’ human beings into particular subjects.³ Indeed video game scholars – especially those within the Digital Humanities – have been quick to point to this potential.

The ‘gamer’

Yet who exactly is the imagined subject of video games? According to Dan Golding (2014), one such subject is ‘the gamer’. “Based on difference and separateness,” Golding (2014) identifies ‘gamers’ historically as a group of early video game enthusiasts.

When playing games was an unusual activity, this identity was constructed in order to define and unite the group (and to help demarcate it as a targetable demographic for business). (Golding, 2014)

³ Although McGonigal does not take a Marxist perspective, it is as if she imagines video games to be a place without material conditions or class struggles; a place with unlimited resources.

These ‘gamers’ saw themselves in contrast to mainstream society, engaged as they were in the “unusual practice” of video gaming. According to Golding (2014), those who fit the gamer identity were predominantly male and grew up playing games that were violent and misogynistic (Golding, 2014). Over the years these ‘gamers’ were supposedly shaped by the games they played and are now reacting violently and misogynistically to those who play alternative or ‘progressive’ games (which refers to ‘social’ games, mobile games, or games played by women).⁴ Playing the role of the analyst, Golding (2014) goes on to connect the gamer identity to current sites of concern, explaining misbehaviour like ‘toxicity’, and ‘hostility’ towards women as a sort of defence mechanism:

Along with a mix of the hatred of women and an expansive bigotry thrown in for good measure—what is actually going on is an attempt to retain hegemony. Make no mistake: this is the exertion of power in the name of (male) gamer orthodoxy—an orthodoxy that has already begun to disappear.

In other words, Golding views the fraught collision of video games and identity politics as the death throes of a hegemonic group; ‘real’ gamers threatened by an emerging alternative.

Such a freestanding argument will quickly encounter critical and empirical confrontations. At the very least it prompts unanswered questions. We might, for example, direct our attention to the ways in which the concept of ‘power’ is understood in Golding’s argument. How did the ‘gamer’ identity go from being defined in contrast to

⁴ What Golding is describing is really a rejection of two things. The first is the inclusion of consumers who defy the conventional ‘gamer’ identity. The second is the outcry that often follows any game that does not meet expectations.

mainstream society, to the very definition of hegemony? Were white men somehow less powerful in the 1980s? How did the ‘gamer’ identity become attached to a strictly ‘white’ and ‘male’ subject? How did these gamers experience these supposedly ‘violent’ and misogynistic’ games, and how did that shape them? Something important is being overlooked here. The answer will not come from Golding, immersed as he is in a trending debate.

The ‘power gamer’

Another ‘subject’ of video games comes from the work of Bart Simon and Mark Silverman. When they looked at online role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft* and *Everquest*, Silverman and Simon (2009) found what they classified as the ‘power gamer’, or the ‘hardcore gamer’ (p. 356). The ‘power gamer’ subjectivity was produced in-and-through the disciplinary technologies employed by ‘teams’ or ‘guilds’. These guilds were devoted to high-level ‘end-game’ content, like raiding dungeons or killing large monsters. These challenges often demanded a careful and coordinated effort, the reward for which was ‘loot’ (things like items or gold). In *Everquest* these objectives often involved “managing 50+ individuals in a highly competitive, emotionally charged, and often chaotic battlefield” (Silverman & Simon, 2009, p. 367). Over time, many successful guilds became well-known institutions, with leadership structures and disciplinary mechanisms. Guilds often required players to apply for admission, modelled after the format of a job application (Silverman & Simon, 2009, p. 360). Within these guilds, a virtual labour force was managed with systems like ‘Dragon Kill Points’ which allocated in-game items and earnings according to the time and labour each player had put into guild activities (Silverman & Simon, 2009, p. 355).

If we look at the disciplinary technologies employed by these guilds, we start to get an idea as to how the ‘power gamer’ subjectivity may have been produced. Quoting Michel Foucault, Silverman and Simon (2009) argued that the Dragon Kill Point system created a condition whereupon “rank in itself serves as a reward” (p. 371). In other words, because their station within the guild was measured in ‘Dragon Kill Points’, players started to develop a ‘feel for the game’, a sense of symbolic capital accrued through the act of commitment to their guild (Silverman & Simon, 2009, pp. 371–3). Thus the Dragon Kill Point system produced a subject who took the ‘game’ seriously, beyond its playful premise. Silverman and Simon (2009) thus insisted on the seriousness of ‘playful working’, and the distinction that players make between ‘casual’ and ‘hardcore gaming’ (Silverman & Simon, 2009, p. 361).

By studying the disciplinary technologies used in gamer guild management, Silverman and Simon come close to describing a mode by which a subject could be ‘made true’ in-and-through gaming. We see discipline emerge in response to challenges posed by the game; we see the formation of ranks and hierarchies; we see a division of labour. Yet their discussion of Foucauldian disciplinary power is hamstrung by their focus on the empirical existence, rather than the historical emergence, of a specific social subject. The goal, for Silverman and Simon (2009), was to think about disciplinary power by using the power gamer subject as an ‘abstract model’ (p. 355, 371). Yet by using the power gamer as their diagram for disciplinary power, Silverman and Simon produce a definition of discipline that rests on the *reality* of the power gamer’s disciplined existence. Thus they reach a point when, faced with the intuited *ephemerality* of the power gamer’s ‘virtual’ body and ‘virtual’ labour, Silverman and Simon (2009) cannot

help but recognize the ‘ridiculousness’ of this disciplinary mechanism (p. 373).

Silverman and Simon (2009) thus conclude:

Despite its ability to inculcate an increased sense of investment in the game, power, as an effect of the [Dragon Kill Point] system, finds its limit at the point where the game stops being taken seriously... power gamers produce nothing and consume nothing. In this sense, power gaming is a simulacrum of post-industrial work not an instantiation of it, and the question becomes how does real world work approximate the power game and not the other way around... The result is less a docile subject ready for mobilization in the post-industrial workplace than a cynical subject who would rather be playing at working than actually working. (p. 373-4)

Here, we see that the model of the ‘power gamer’ has adjusted the way we look at power. For some reason power has to be something that we ‘take seriously’, something that has an ‘actual’, measurable productive capacity. How else could we definitively argue that power has ‘produced’ the ‘power gamer’ subjectivity? We are thus stuck in a rather fruitless analytical hole in which we cannot envision video games as anything other than a form of banal mimicry, like a dramatic re-enactment of the ‘real’ world. I will return to this epistemological distinction when I discuss Lev Manovich later in this chapter.

In each of these cases, video games are thought to have an impact on players. In some cases that impact is positive, helping to address many of today’s primary concerns. In some cases the impact is negative, fostering a group of volatile misogynists. In other cases the impact is banal. My concern is that we do not yet have the tools to describe *how*

subjectification might work in video games. Scholars tend to overlook or oversimplify the gaming experience, ignoring many of the subtle, unique encounters that might shape us. When subjectification *is* considered, it is too often used intellectually to manufacture questionable or critique-able subjects. In other words, the practices and experiences of gaming are made fissionable by critical theorists, and the ‘subjects’ produced by their inquiries become the fuel for political debates. These imagined subjects become the ‘identities’ in our identity politics, the ‘communities’ in our grassroots movements; the ‘gamers’ of our ‘Gamergate’ controversy.⁵ The ‘player’ fragments into imagined subcategories – the ‘hardcore gamer’, the ‘casual gamer’, the ‘social gamer’, and so on – and these categories feed into an intellectual game we mistake for cultural criticism.

If we want to look more carefully at how a self is made true in-and-through gaming, then we should start by reviewing some of the ways in which subjectification has been understood, especially in the study of media and pop culture. For these questions we cannot rely on the precedent that has been set in video game studies. What follows, then, is a review that will follow a certain thread or problematic. I follow the argument for and then against the idea that we are being tricked, duped, and manipulated by the media we consume. At the close, I argue that we should adopt some theoretical tools introduced by Michel Foucault, which will help us look at a process of reflexive subjectification.

⁵ The ‘gamergate’ controversy has been widely discussed among video game scholars. I mention it here because it became the headline for the controversy that Golding was addressing. For a full account see Stuart, 2014.

The Critical Theorist

Adorno

Theodor Adorno's critical theoretical work was one of the first attempts to understand consumerism and mass media in contemporary society. His most famous works were written during the post-war period of the 1950s and 60s. This was a time of unprecedented growth in the consumption of mass media, following the emergence of film, television, and radio. Adorno was among a number of scholars who sought to advance and develop the work of Karl Marx, focusing on popular culture, and attempting to explain the power of ideology and manipulation.

Although his writing is littered with examples of the distorting and manipulating power of ideology, Adorno clearly believed that human beings were capable of actively interpreting the world around them. Outside domination, Adorno (1991) believed that people could be "autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves" (p. 106). Writing alongside Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno described this as 'enlightenment': a program aimed at dispelling myths with facts (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 1). Enlightenment was "the progressive technical domination of nature," a form of 'Kantian schematism' whereby what we think or know about the world (conceptually, or categorically) is tested against that which we observe with our senses (Adorno, 1991, p. 106; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, pp. 1-5).

Knowledge, in this sense, is powerful because it gives us freedom from nature and superstition. Yet if knowledge is power, then in a capitalist society this power is reserved for the rich. Consider the following passage:

Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters. Just as it serves all the purposes of the bourgeois economy both in factories and on the battlefield, it is at the disposal of entrepreneurs regardless of their origins... What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 2)

We can see, then, that Adorno saw capitalism as a form of anti-enlightenment, or enlightenment turned in on itself. The power to know and dominate nature had been concentrated in the hands of the bourgeoisie, and now it was the ruling class who could know and dominate the masses. Power thus became an impediment to our natural capacities; a way of perverting our view of an 'objective' reality by supplanting reason with ideology.

Domination was accomplished by exerting control over cultural production and the mass media. Adorno described how this process worked to transform independent cultural production: folk art, or the classics, were replaced by the 'culture industry'; the telephone was replaced by the radio; theatre replaced by television; 'serious' creative music was replaced by standard commercial jazz. The culture industry made it so that the 'participant' became the 'listener'; the cultural craftsman became the amateur; the consumer was 'classified' and reconfigured as if they were a product.

Mass media and broadcast technology meant that every cultural product had to meet the approval of industry executives, and as a result, a small group of elites could exert a massive influence over society (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 96). Beholden to

the “true wielders of power” (whom Adorno imagined to be the steel, oil, electric, and chemical industries), these executives sought to block anything that did not “conform to their tables, to their concept of the consumer, or, above all, to themselves” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 96). According to Adorno, this schema sought to reproduce rather than innovate. Anything that the culture industry *did* publish would be standardized, calculable, and formulaic because capitalism wants the *population* to be standardized, calculable, and formulaic. In other words, culture was chaotic and random, and like nature it was to be chopped up, broken down, and boxed up in service to industrial capitalism. As a result, those who consumed mass media – the masses – were privy only to that which had been approved. This would become their worldview. For that reason, argued Adorno, the culture industry perverted the enlightenment process, starving or distorting the concepts and categories by which an individual could independently understand their senses and the true objective world.

The effect was discernibly totalizing. According to Adorno the entire world was filtered through the culture industry (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 96). The ideological filter of the regulatory elite, in an effort to defend its own interests in capital accumulation, shaped all forms of culture according to a metanarrative; a superstructure that reproduced the same “untruths” in slightly different ways (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 96). This poses a problem for cultural critics: if we work under conditions of total ideological domination, then alternative knowledge is impossible. We cannot think outside of ideological domination; Adorno’s grand theory cannot be disproved without a method of ideological transcendence. Yet there is room for critique, and questions that remained unanswered.

The problem with Adorno's theoretical framework is not only the debatable (and lacking, in the case of his own work) empirical evidence, but that it fails to explain *how* consumers are transformed into unreasoning cultural dupes through the process of consumption. Take, for instance, the supposed transition from telephone to radio consumption. Although this shift can be challenged on empirical grounds (telephones are still very much in use), it also overlooks the *practice* of radio listening. How do we make sense of the culture we consume? How do we engage with it, or think otherwise? Adorno only allows us to recognize a subject on the receiving end of a cultural intercourse.

It is here that we encounter our first problem in an investigation of subjectification. Adorno clearly believed that there was a process by which consumers of mass media were *made* passive, yet if this was true, then how did it work? While it is easy to recognize the different arrangements formed in-and-through capitalist relations, and while it is important to reflect on these changes, Adorno does not allow us to explain the very unique ways in which mass media is consumed, interpreted, and reflected upon. His description of the passively-positioned subject omits the ways in which the subject is also provoked by this structural arrangement. It is this crucial oversight that is taken up by Louis Althusser.

Interpellation

In his essay *Ideological State Apparatuses*, Louis Althusser (2006) sought to hone critical cultural theory so as to better recognize the subject. In doing so, Althusser helped define a process of subjectification and ideological domination. Althusser (2006) argued that ideas exist in actions, inserted into practices, and governed by physical rituals (like

funerals, kneeling, and so on). These practices form subjectivities that articulate and reproduce ideology.

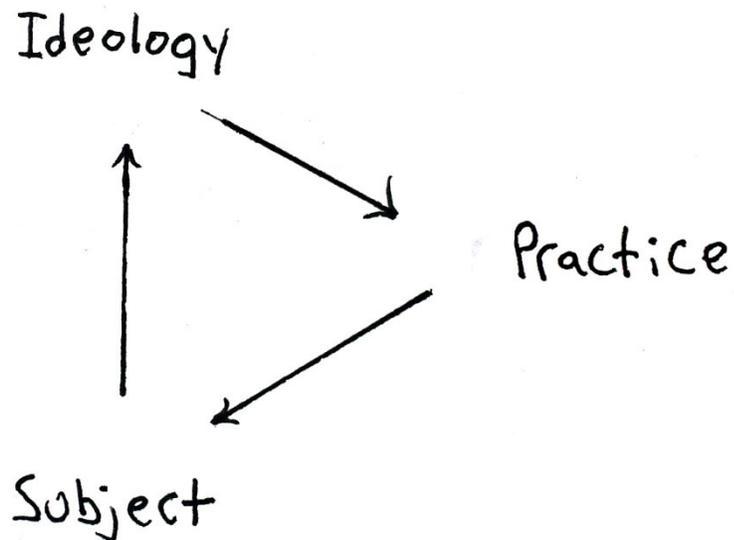


Figure 1: A simplified sketch of Althusser's process of ideological domination.

Althusser thus saw subjectification as a cyclical process with three stages: ideology produces practices which produce subjects who reproduce ideology.

Althusser (2006) went on to hone in on a very specific step in this process: that moment in which the subject comes to recognize (or misrecognize) who they are according to ideological abstractions. The key concept that Althusser (2006) introduced was 'interpellation', which was a way in which the subject (who already exists, having been formed in-and-through ritualized practices) becomes conscious of their self (p. 85). Althusser (2006) explained that this works by hailing an individual (saying 'Hey, you there!'), to which the individual will turn around (p. 86). According to Althusser (2006), "by this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversation, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him" (p. 86). In other words, the interpellation is a practice by which the subject is prompted to

recognize an abstract idea about themselves. This consciousness, Althusser (2006) cautioned, is not the same as ‘true knowledge’: interpellation allows the subject to recognize who they are, but it does not speak to the reality of their existence. Your name, for example, represents an abstract idea about who you are that does not necessarily map onto the reality of your material existence.

For Althusser, ideas are manipulative because they make our abstract experiences into something *seemingly* concrete. Althusser thus makes a distinction between that which is materially ‘real’, constant, and existing outside subjective perception – and that which is ‘seemingly’ real: ideological abstractions are made to appear concrete through interpellation.

Interpellation and film studies

The concept of interpellation was fruitful, even if it came with some baggage. Over time it was taken up by scholars interested in issues of representation and interpretation, especially in studies of new media. For the most part, interpellation adhered to Adorno’s problematic: recognizing a mode of manipulative subjectification, or a duping of the consumer. One well-read example of this comes from an essay by Jean-Louis Baudry.

Baudry (1974) was concerned with how films – a “new mode of representation” – might be mistaken for reality (p. 40). He argued that films were unique because of the ‘work’ that went into them; the ‘operations’ that distanced the final product from ‘objective reality’. These operations were as follows:

1. The film dismantled and reconstructed objective reality. The filming process included *découpage* (the scripting, planning, and technical setting of each

scene), and *montage* (the combining of shots to create an overall idea; juxtaposing content over time and space) (Baudry, 1974, p. 40). The film can thus be understood as a product, or an ‘inscription’.

2. The second operation that distanced the finished film from reality was the projection of the film. This was a practice of reproducing the light that was otherwise real.
3. The final operation was the consumption of the product, or the viewing, whereby the ‘subject’ became the ‘origin of meaning’ (Baudry, 1974, p. 40).

By focusing on these ‘operations’ Baudry hoped to explain the distance between that which is ‘objectively real’, and what is abstracted in ideology.

Baudry also sought to describe the power of this illusion. The scene is arranged (*découpage*) for ‘realism’, the location of the camera situates the viewer within the scene, taking from it the difference in light waves and wavelengths between frames. These images are written into an inscription, transported, and reproduced in a way that appears to be “truly the projection-reflection of a ‘virtual image’ whose hallucinatory reality it creates” (Baudry, 1974, p. 41). Captivated by the film product, the viewer overlooks the *work* that went into it; the setting of scenes, the juxtaposing of content over time and space; the projection of these images, unrolling in rapid succession so as to simulate the movements that it has stolen from reality.

Without knowledge of these ‘distancing operations’, the film appears to the viewer as convincingly real. The viewer mistakes the film for reality, assuming the position of the camera. The film says to the viewer ‘you are here’, and the viewer concedes. In other words, the film interpellates the viewer, hailing them into the

abstraction by using shadows, reflections, angles, and vanishing points. We can see, then, how Baudry used the tools provided by Althusser to describe a mode by which the viewer might come to mistake the abstracted pictorial reality of a film for the material reality they supposedly inhabit.

Film interpellation thus describes a processes whereby a sign, symbol, or cultural technology, obscures the gap between the signifier and the signified. Within this problematic there are three elements to consider. First, we have the use of psychological tricks, or illusions, that hail the viewer into the position of the camera. Second, we have the industry (in this case film), inclined by the laws of capitalism to supplant reason with the ideology of the ruling class. The sets, props, and actors represent and enact this ideology, and the viewer is asked to follow along. Third, we have the object of the film, an inscription or cultural technology. The film is understood as a false reality, distanced from the objective truth it sought to capture. Together, these elements work to dominate the media consumer.

Before we move on, I would like to consider the problem of domination. Even within the Frankfurt School, the power of domination in cinema was debated. Walter Benjamin (1968), for example, expressed a positive function of films:

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring common place milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and

furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. (p. 236)

Film techniques allowed the viewer to see the world differently. A gesture of the hand, for example, was often overlooked by the naked eye. Viewed in slow motion, however, the film revealed subtle movements that were otherwise unseen. Film viewers were thus given an unprecedented opportunity to explore the world: what Anne Friedberg (1993) described as a “mobilized ‘virtual’ gaze” (p. 2). We can see from these counter-arguments that Adorno’s definition of domination relies on its repressive or negative effect. If cultural domination is born of manipulation, then it dies by elucidation. This would suggest that new medias – which increasingly afford a greater capacity to explore, create, and interact with virtual representations – contradict the principles of capitalism and its effect on cultural production. This critical flaw was one of the central problems that gave birth to the ‘new media studies’.

New media studies, culture industry, and virtual reality

As time went on, many of the defining characteristics of cultural consumption were confounded by new media. Web pages did not adhere to Adorno’s conception of the culture industry, ‘interactive’ video games defied the ‘passive’ positioning assumed by the process ideological domination, and ‘social media’ became a platform for resistance. If Adorno’s theoretical framework was going to work in a world of digital technology, then significant adjustments needed to be made.

Many of these adjustments came from Lev Manovich, a theorist of new media and a professor of computer science. Like many who study video games, Manovich was immersed in debates about universals, fighting to produce a grand theory of new media, or a concrete set of rules by which new media can be critiqued, defined, and understood. These debates are self-perpetuating: one scholar insists that video games are “A”, only to have another argue that they are “B”. Later, somebody will inevitably correct both scholars because video games are, according to a new problematic, definitively “C”. This could go on for quite some time, and I have no interest in entering into the thrall. Instead I want to look at how Manovich adjusted Adorno’s framework and the concept of interpellation to define and address the problems introduced by new media.

For Manovich (2002), computers afforded an advanced process of interpellation, approaching what he described as ‘post-symbolism’ (p. 73). To support this assertion, Manovich (2002) referred to the early work of Jaron Lanier, who predicted that virtual reality technology would be ‘capable of completely objectifying, [or] better yet, transparently merging with mental processes’ (p. 72). According to Manovich (2002), Lanier believed that virtual reality would bring about an age of “post-symbolic communication” (p. 73), allowing for knowledge transmission without abstract representation.

Lanier was speaking in the 1980s, a time when ‘virtual reality’ and the enormous possibilities that came with it were relatively new. Tremendous advances in computational technology acted as a wellspring, giving philosophers like Lanier new worlds in which to pursue imaginative thought experiments. In this case, virtual reality and cyberspace were used to envision a world where private thoughts (or ‘mental

processes’) could be transferred without signification. Quoting Lanier, Manovich (2002) described how this ‘post-symbolic’ world might function: “you can make a cup that someone else can pick when there wasn’t a cup before, without having to use a picture of the word ‘cup’” (p. 73). This hypothesis assumed that technology would reach a point where our thoughts could be instantly realized in virtual reality. In such a scenario, the cup would not need to be inscribed into a format for transportation because, by rendering the cup in virtual reality, it was already common. Thus, in this rather unlikely hypothetical, virtual reality would allow ‘mental processes’ (or the thoughts that arise in one’s mind) to be made common without the use of language or symbolism.

The effect need not be totalizing. Even if post-symbolism is partially imposed, it would mean that the Adorno’s ‘culture industry’ has changed considerably. Previously, every film archetype or popular melody was an approximation of the bourgeois design, like a vessel. Accordingly, the culture industry reified the ideology of the ruling class by mass-distributing these symbolic vessels. For the consumer, these vessels constituted a space in which reason was confined. In contrast to this, with the emergence of new media, these cultural vessels became the means by which reason was *extracted*. Consider the following passage from Manovich (2002):

Unobservable and interior processes and representations were taken out of individual heads and put outside—as drawings, photographs and other visual forms. Now they could be discussed in public, employed in teaching and propaganda, standardized, and mass-distributed. What was private became public. What was unique became mass-produced. What was hidden in an individual’s mind became shared. (p. 74)

In other words, in the case of new media, private thoughts were ‘taken out of our heads’ using visual media, becoming objects/products that could be used in the capitalist economy: taught, standardized, and mass-distributed. Manovich (2002) argued that the trend was increasingly towards the ‘externalization’ of private thoughts. “Before,” wrote Manovich (2002), “we would look at an image and mentally follow our own private associations to other images. Now interactive computer media ask us instead to click on an image in order to go to another image” (p. 74). This transition is significant for two reasons.

First, it describes a more insidious form of domination, one in which consumers lose any capacity to think for themselves. Viewed as such, the computer medium becomes an intensive manipulative machine, operating at the pre-discursive level of the subconscious. This would represent a significant change to the function of the mass media. Invasive psychological domination was not necessary in Adorno’s conception of the culture industry, which controlled the working class by standardizing cultural production and restricting access to alternatives. In other words, Adorno’s culture industry did not need to directly control individual thought processes because individuals lived in a kingdom of ideology; subjects of domination. In contrast, with the emergence of new media, the culture industry is no longer concerned with the distribution of a comprehensive ideological façade. After the transition described by Manovich, the very means by which we reflect on a cultural object are outsourced. As cultural critics of new media, this means that we need not be concerned with symbolic representations. Instead – supposing that we can somehow escape the grip of the culture industry – we should turn our attention to the external compartment of cognitive functions.

Second, the theory proposed by Adorno is now being adjusted to describe a process of domination in the ‘information age’, a time when many believe we have a greater liberty to explore new ideas. Manovich’s description of ‘computer media’ contradicts its common conception as an ‘interactive’ medium. If private thoughts are being externalized by computer technology, then we can no longer view technological advancement as individually liberating. Indeed Manovich intentionally argues against the use of ‘interactivity’ as categorical definition of computer media. This is because, although we can identify different interactive structures in computer media (the use of menus, simulations, and so on), it is difficult to “theoretically deal with user experiences of these structures” (Manovich, 2002, p. 71). If our experience of interactivity is subjective, then we cannot define the human-computer relationship by its interactivity. In other words, in order to compose a grand theory of new media, Manovich curtailed the problem of difference and subjectivity. I will return to this problem later in the chapter.

Given these adjustments, it stands that the concept of interpellation should be revisited. Whereas the film asked the viewer to adopt the position of the camera – hailing them into a projected abstraction – the video gamer is asked to enact the ‘mental trajectory’ of the designer: thinking, acting, and deciding in concert with the immersive virtual structure in which they are enveloped. The logic of post-symbolic interpellation undermines the liberatory power or ‘interactivity’, because accordingly, the appearance of choice is just a trick: by giving the player the capacity to make the *wrong* choice, the ‘right’ choice (according to the mind of the designer) is better articulated. The ‘right’ choice, according to this conception of cultural domination, is one that brings the player into alignment with a dominant ideology. In other words, the ‘right’ choice is that which

distracts the player from the reality of their working class conditions; programs the subject for labour, production, and service to industry; bewilders the gamer with the illusion of choice.

Interpellation in video games

When we look at video games, the instability of the concept of interpellation is apparent. Manovich successfully converted ‘interactivity’ into a process of disillusion, but his premise relied on the *unreality* of new media. This precarious precondition is best demonstrated in the work of Matt Garite (2014), who recently applied the concept of interpellation to the study of video games. Following Manovich, Garite (2014) eschewed the liberatory aspects of new media – the capacity to explore new words and ideas – as cultural technologies, or as tools for ideological domination. “We might say that video games are ‘weaponized’ texts,” wrote Garite (2014), “or disrupters of psychic stability” (p. 8). In other words, what Garite hoped to examine, was how interpellation is empowered by the virtuality of the video games.

In order to make this argument, Garite employed a disobliging paradox. He does this by insisting on two contradictory interpretations of the video game. The first interpretation presents the video game as ‘politically significant’:

It is crucial that we dispel this myth that video games are playful, apolitical technologies of leisure and entertainment. Indeed, if we agree that video games function as technologies of interpellation, then it no longer makes sense to describe such games as ‘libidinal extravaganzas devoid of any socially productive component’. (Garite, 2014, p. 8)

If Garite wanted to frame video games as ‘aggressive’ cultural weapons of the ruling class, then he needed to assert their dominance within the realm of cultural production. This is a recurring assertion from video game scholars, who are often so unsure of the political significance of video games that their analysis is overshadowed by self-justification. I am obliged to agree with this assertion, as I could not imagine an interpretation that overlooked the incredibly meaningful impact that video games might have on society, especially today.

It is unfortunate, then, that Garite’s second interpretation presented the video game as simultaneously banal. Consider the following passage, where, by invoking the concept of interpellation, Garite (2014) sought to convey the ephemerality of interactivity:

The interactive structure of video games produces that primary ideological effect whereby subjects are interpellated or called upon to (mis)recognize themselves as distinct, autonomous, freely acting individuals. The branching structure of game narratives presents players with a series of options regarding where to go and what to do. Players are made to feel like these decisions matter or have consequence, since the imprisoning code that determines such options always remains hidden from sight. (p. 6)

In order to understand the passage above, the reader should recognize the insinuation therein. When Garite wrote that ‘players are made to feel like these decisions matter’, he was quite clearly suggesting that in reality they did not. After all, for Garite (2014), “the world of the video game is nothing more than the on-screen rendering of programmed

instructions and decrees” (p. 8). We can see, then, that when the concept of interpellation is brought into the study of video games, what emerges is a perspective that utterly overlooks the involvement of the player. On the one hand, video games have a strong role in shaping society, and on the other, they are ephemeral cyberspace, where the actions and movements of an individual are meaningless. Video games are politically significant, but the way people play them is not.

We can see, then, that Adorno’s problematic has arrived at a futile conclusion for a study of subjectification in video games. If the concept of interpellation is going to close the loop on the process of cultural domination in video games, then we need to examine one of its basic suppositions: the *unreality* of the video game. In what follows, then, I will introduce the concept of struggle as a departure from this line of thinking

The true/false binary

Let us return to the example of the film industry. It is interesting to note that Jean-Louis Baudry was writing at a time when videographic evidence and ‘optical instruments’ were working their way into the legal system and the scientific process. It is not as if these other settings were any less obscured by the ‘work’ that went into film production. Film, even in the laboratory or in the court room, was still a product of ‘operations’ like *découpage* and *montage*. It was still an inscription, transported and projected onto a screen. Yet despite (or even in consideration of) the ‘work’ that went into its production, film was being used to solve contested disputes about what was true or false with authority. This is a problem because those who adhere to both Althusser and Adorno’s theoretical framework rely on a clear and knowable distinction between what is ‘real’ and what is ‘ideology’. Ideological transcendence is the foundation of a cultural critique –yet

here we see the blurred lines that emerge when ‘truth’ becomes a contest. Even if it is impossible to know an ‘objective’ reality (like for Althusser, who believed it was impossible to be ‘subject-less’, or to see the world without ideology), the existence of this reality is paramount. How else do we recognize domination? If we recognise that ‘reality’ itself is questionable, then we have to think beyond the concept of interpellation. If ‘truth’ itself is a contest, then ‘hailing’ becomes a site of political struggle.

When we introduce struggle or contestation, the process that Althusser outlined is disrupted. It means that the ‘subject’ of ideology is given the capacity to resist. If we give the subject the capacity to struggle and resist strategically, it changes the process: suddenly we see subjects who can govern their own practices in resistance to ideology.

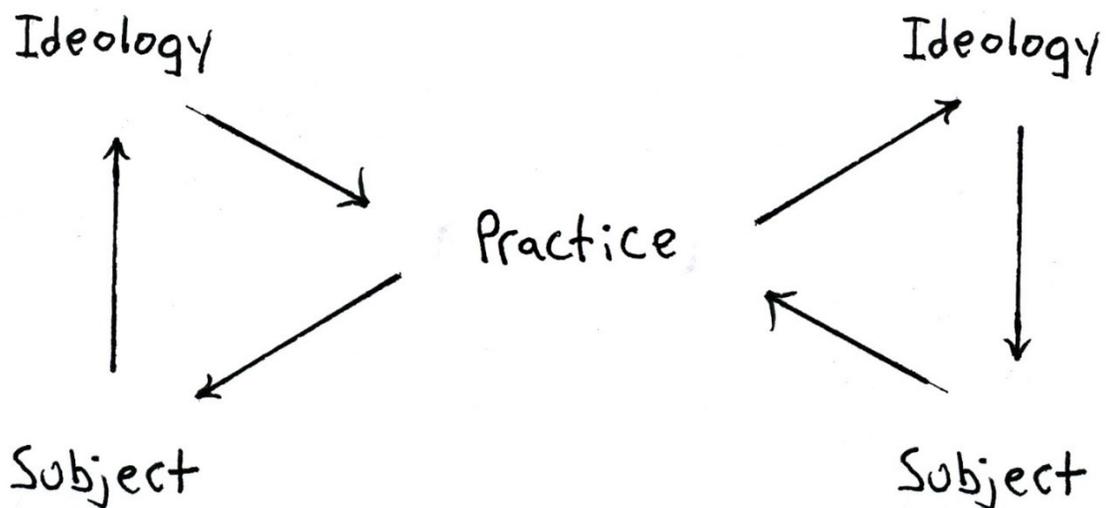


Figure 2: Sketch of ideological domination, adjusted to include resistance.

In the diagram above I have introduced a counter-current: the act of resistance. If we view the process of subjectification this way, then we have to turn our attention to the modes by which we practice resistance. Not only are we called to attend to our place within a discourse – a recognition of the hailing – but we are pushed to react accordingly.

Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt (1993) suggest that we should reframe the concept of interpellation to add in the complexity introduced by political discourse. “Interpellation does more than ‘hail’,” argue Purvis and Hunt (1993), “it situates or places subjects within specific discursive contexts” (p. 483). We need not immediately recognize ourselves in response to a hailing, but the hailing itself becomes a platform on which we can launch a project of resistance; a project of the self. In the case of a film, the viewer need not mistake their reality with that of a cultural production. Rather, the viewer could see in the film an argument for reality, whether or not they see themselves within it. They could see it as an example of what someone else imagines to be real, a reality they can consider. If we reflect, then, on the process of subjectification, we can see that interpellation is somewhat lacking: the ‘hailing’ does not itself constitute us, but rather it provides a platform on which we might recognize our situation within a discourse; it provides the context for a struggle between the self and their discursive surroundings.

Prescriptive Texts

Suppose that I were, as in the scene proposed by Althusser, called out by an officer on the street shouting ‘hey, you there!’. As the interpellated individual, the question that might arise is ‘how should I conduct myself in response to this provocation?’. We have already established that the ‘truth’ of the hailing – the supposition that I am the individual pursued by the officer – is disputable. The question that remains, then, is one of self-conduct.

We need not look at this process sequentially. I am already situated within a discourse, by virtue of the many categories that hang over my head. I know that I am a

man, a student, a father, and so on. Perhaps there are other categories too; I might be a ‘delinquent’, a ‘criminal’, or a ‘madman’. Yet even if the hailing names me, even if the officer has their mark, there are modes by which I can think otherwise. How do I conduct myself in relation to these categories? How do I become a *different* kind of man, or a *different* kind of father?

Perhaps we could argue, as would Michel Foucault, that by calling attention to the self we are engaging in the work of self-constitution. If this is true, then the manner in which we question, shape, and compose ourselves is part of the process of subjectification. When we look at Volume Two of *The History of Sexuality*, for example, we see an attempt by Foucault (1990) to explain the work that goes into the production of an ‘ethical subject’ (p. 12). More specifically, Foucault (1990) uses ‘prescriptive texts’ – “that is, texts whose main object, whatever their form (speech, dialogue, treatise, collection of precepts, etc.) is to suggest rules of conduct” – to elaborate on what he refers to as an “etho-poetic” (p. 12). When Foucault speaks of a ‘poetic’ in this sense he is referring to a method or a process by which something is expressed; the “poetic values of expression” (Foucault, 2003, p. xvi). The ‘etho-poetic’, then, is a “a way of being and doing things, [or] a way of conducting oneself corresponding to [specific] rational principles” (Foucault, 2011, p. 338). In a sense, these are the conditions upon which we practice our freedom – a freedom to defect from the discursive positioning posited by an interpellative hailing, for example.

If we want to understand the mode by which we respond to our situated existence, then we need to look at the practical instructions that guide us in our everyday life. For Foucault (1990), these are ‘practical texts,’ “designed to be read, learned, reflected upon,

and tested out, and they [are] intended to constitute the eventual framework of everyday conduct” (p. 12-13). Obviously these need not be literally textual, Foucault (1990) refers to a variety of ‘prescriptive agencies’ – the role of the family, education, or the church – by which we learn to conduct ourselves ‘morally’ (p. 25). These are the tools that shape our practices, and speak to a project of self-configuration and self-governance.

What is more, these instructional materials need not operate according to any coherent or systematic schematic. In my introduction, I referred to an assortment of player-advice as a ‘*prescriptive apparatus*’. By calling this an ‘apparatus’, I do not mean to suggest that these prescriptive agencies operate in an organized or systematic way. Indeed, I have not encountered a single piece of advice that was not contested in some manner. We could, however, imagine the *prescriptive apparatus* as a collection of equipment encountered in pursuit of victory: a machine of my own making. This would explain some of the unique ways in which we come to conduct ourselves. Consider what Foucault (1990) writes in the following passage:

It is sometimes the case that these rules and values are plainly set forth in a coherent doctrine and an explicit teaching. But it also happens that they are transmitted in a diffuse manner, so that, far from constituting a systematic ensemble, they form a complex interplay of elements that counterbalance and correct one another... (p. 25)

This explains something that Lev Manovich could not: *difference*. There are many different ways in which we can conduct ourselves, morally and ethically. There are, for example, many different ways in which I could react to the officer’s hailing, many ways to remake or shape myself in response to the prompt of a hailing. The prescriptive ‘rule’

is not binding – we do not follow a recipe word-for-word, such an action would be impossible. Rather, the prescriptive apparatus equips us, giving us the tools by which we can act, struggle, and improve.

In my introduction, I argued that the self is ‘made true’ in-and-through the pursuit of victory. Given the foregoing theoretical discussion, could we not argue that we are ‘interpellated’ into the position of an entrepreneurial subject? Perhaps, but it is the *reality* of this subjectivity that concerns me. Specifically, given that freedom from domination will not come with the arrival of truth, I want to ask about the struggle to produce, shape, transform, and improve a ‘true’ private self. With this in mind, there is one final problem that needs to be reflected on when we consider the problem of subjectification in video games.

Representation and materiality

Much of what the cultural critics have done thus far is leverage the dissonance between representation and materiality in order to produce a critique. Even the phrase ‘video game’ encapsulates these two polarizing conceptions. The ‘video’ is a mirage; a *perspectiva artificialis*; a moving picture with sound. In the ‘video’ we find a sort of non-place in which we can explore our imagination, unfettered. Yet if we can *represent*, we can also *misrepresent*. When we say that the ‘video’ is also a ‘game’, it almost seems as if we are recognizing the limits placed on the boundlessness of representation. We see virtual expressions – imaginary words - broken down into component parts, aligned so as to fit certain reward systems, framed so as to produce success and failure; rank and achievement; winners and losers. By this view, the video game is strictly a site of

manipulation and control. The subjects produced by a video game are duped, shaped, fostered, or grown.

Yet at the centre of my problematic is the *reality* of my own subjectivity. This line of inquiry runs counter to common critical conceptions of the ‘video game’, which for many is decidedly *unreal*. When I ask how a self is ‘made true’ in-and-through the pursuit of victory, I am asking about a positive power. I am asking how ‘the self’ is generated, fostered, shaped, and grown. Such an argument runs counter to a view of power as a strictly manipulative, negative, or controlling force; counter to a view of power that can be *held*, concentrated, and spent. Although it is true that we can be tricked – some aspects of who we are might be founded on deliberate lies and misinformation – this investigation seeks to look *beyond manipulation*.

The disunity of the virtual

Foucault uses the disunity of the virtual – or the conflict between representation and materiality – to describe the *emplacement* of the individual. In René Magritte’s most famous piece we find a drawing of a simple pipe above the bewitching and impossible statement: “Ceci n’est pas une pipe.”



Figure 3: René Magritte's 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' (1928-9)

Described as a sort of visual treachery, it was the framing of these disconcerting elements that drew the attention of Foucault. In Foucault's work – especially from the period between *The Order of Things* and *Archaeology of Knowledge* – we find a fascination with the intersection of ideas and things; representation and materiality; the 'actual' and the 'virtual'. In the image above it is easy to see what Foucault (2007) meant when he described the transgression of all possible thought; of imagination's boundaries; of "the table upon which, since the beginning of time, language has intersected space" (p. xvii, xix). Magritte drew our attention to the impossibility of a visual image. Infatuated, Foucault (1983) penned an essay on the drawing that opened with this:

But who would seriously contend that the collection of intersecting lines above the text *is* a pipe? Must we say: My God, how simpleminded! The statement is perfectly true, since it is quite apparent that the drawing representing the pipe is not the pipe itself. And yet there is a convention of language... because the entire function of... a drawing is to illicit recognition. To allow the object it represents to appear without hesitation

or equivocation. No matter that it is the material deposit, on a sheet of paper or a blackboard, of a little graphite or a thin dust of chalk. It does not “aim” like an arrow or a pointer toward a particular pipe in the distance or elsewhere. It *is* a pipe. (p. 19-20)

In other words, we know that the drawing of the pipe is not really the pipe, but we also cannot help but allow the image to ‘be’ a pipe. The resulting moment, when we realize that we cannot say either way that the statement is true or false, is a jarring interpellative provocation; a form of conceptual disorder through which we recognize the absurd condition of our own taxonomy, perhaps even our very consciousness. Yet we are not *exactly* interpellated. The truth is not banished, but revealed for what it is: a virtual/material contingency.

Heterotopias

Foucault elaborated on this incompatible symbolic arrangement in two brief lectures on ‘heterotopias’. We find the first thorough account of the heterotopia in a 1966 radio lecture that Foucault (2009) delivered on the topic of utopia. One year after that Foucault (1998) delivered the more widely cited recitation of the concept in his lecture entitled *Different Spaces*. Both lectures have been described as rather light-hearted and speculative (Johnson, 2006). Foucault himself never pursued the topic beyond the two lectures, yet despite its vague presentation and short-term employment, the concept of heterotopic space has inspired prolific work among academics. Described as a sort of ‘science’, heterotopias are often ‘modelled’; researchers will ‘find’ heterotopic spaces in this or that place. For the present investigation, the goal is to use these lectures as a conceptual launching off point: less of a dogma, and more of a line of inquiry. Foucault’s

lectures on heterotopia elaborate a conceptual term that has largely been ignored in Foucault's work: the concept of emplacement.

Foucault imagined 6 principles that serve as the foundation for a systematic description of heterotopic spaces. When we pay careful attention to their context in a broader corpus, we can see how they are tied to a problem of subjectification.

1. Heterotopias of crisis and deviation

The first principle recognized heterotopias of 'crisis' and 'deviation'. Crisis heterotopias are those sacred, forbidden, or privileged places reserved for people in crisis: "adolescents, menstruating women, women in labor, old people, and so on" (Foucault, 1998, p. 179). Foucault (2006) described extended 'cells' within which heterotopic relations of sovereignty worked in concert with a more dominant disciplinary power (p. 79). In the case of heterotopias of 'deviation', Foucault identified disciplinary institutions like the school, asylum, prison, or the barracks (p. 180). Deviation is a disciplinary form of crisis: new attire for the same spatial schism.

What we find in the first principle of heterotopic spaces are sites that exist in-and-through the establishment of a norm. In heterotopias of crisis we see a norm embodied in the image of the sovereign. This is the sovereign who sits at the summit of an ever-present power; born, in part, of the ruptures created by sacred, forbidden, or privileged spaces. Likewise, disciplinary power creates certain norms through the establishment of spaces of deviation – in the asylum, the prison, and so on. These spaces are noteworthy because they are *oblative*; they incorporate a certain knowledge in the individual through their very contrarian existence. Both the menstruating woman and the lunatic are compelled by the very space they are in to ask about – and indeed recognize – who and

what they are. Heterotopic spaces are thus a way of taking an external definition and inscribing it on the body of the individual.

2. Heterotopias in different spaces

The second principle of heterotopias called attention to the transformations that can occur across time and culture. Foucault (1998) wanted to ensure that we recognize a space that might remain constant, even if it serves a “precise and specific operation” that changes in accordance with its cultural context (p. 180). Cemeteries, for example, once housed the dead in the middle of the city, a focal point for a larger network of familial relations (Foucault, 1998, p. 180). Few of the dead were buried individually; those buried were among the masses awaiting resurrection day. More recent cemeteries were moved to the outskirts of the city. Better to place the bodies away from the living, the healthy, and the church. The cemetery was no longer a space of religious sacredness, and instead came to respect the right for each individual to have his own “little box for his little personal decomposition” (Foucault, 1998, p. 181).

Perhaps this second principle allows us to envision the migration of space into the virtual. Indeed, virtual spaces afford a completely new relationship with the dead. Many people now leave social media profiles behind when they die, virtually immortal unless they are deleted for inactivity or at the behest of friends or family. In the case of Facebook profiles it is likely that the dead will soon outnumber the living (Monroe, 2014). Their presence lingers like shadows, a tension that speaks to the reality of our virtual existence.

3. Incompatible juxtapositions

As a third principle, Foucault proposed that heterotopias have “the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves” (p. 181). Where Jean-Louis Baudry saw the distorting power of the ‘montage’ (juxtaposing film footage over time and space), Foucault (2007) saw a kind of impossible taxonomy ascribed to the “non-place of language;” the capacity to “desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; [heterotopias] dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences” (p. xviii, xix).

The heterotopia, in its incompatible juxtaposition, is emblemized in Foucault’s (1998) example of the mirror.

In the mirror I see myself where I am not, in an unreal space that opens up virtually behind the surface; I am over there where I am not, a kind of shadow that gives me my own visibility, that enables me to look at myself there where I am absent –a mirror utopia. (p. 179)

The subject does not exist in the mirror, transposed into an external reality – rather, they are instantiated in-and-through the mirror itself. It is as if they stepped out from the entanglement of space, rupturing something that was otherwise unbroken. Beyond a reflection, this is a subject who recognizes oneself recognizing one’s ‘self’ through an incompatible arrangement.

With this in mind when we ask about ‘emplacement’, it is as if our incompatible positioning awakens us from an existential stupor. Rather than producing sheep-like docility, we almost violently become the object of our own conditional existence. Indeed,

this third principle is the key distinction that makes Foucault's notion of heterotopia most helpful as a way of explaining the emergence of a self 'made true' by gaming. I wonder if it is tempting to overlook that Foucault is here describing the birth of the viewer. Born of an entanglement with space; cleaved from *conflict*, rather than contrast. It is this very viewer – standing before the mirror, the image, or tangled up in space – that Foucault saw emerging at the intersection of the virtual and the material. It is here that we find the objectification of the subject, the incorporation of the virtual: where 'the singular' is made distinct from the multiplicity.

4. Temporal discontinuities

As a fourth principle, Foucault (1998) suggested that heterotopias often intersect with temporal discontinuities, or heterochronias. A heterochronia is like when the hero of a Celtic legend is stranded on an island for what feels like days, only to discover that it had in fact been years (Cross, 2007). Again Foucault (1998) offers the example of the cemetery, a space where the individual lives beyond the death of their physical form (p. 182).

Heterochronias can be used to signify the internal incompatibilities of time and space; the juxtaposition of things that cannot be. This is especially true of virtual spaces, undeterred by certain realistic constraints. In a typical game of catch, for example, two players will throw a single ball back and forth. The playful challenge is in the articulation of the body and the prediction of the ball. For the most part compatibility is built into the scenario. In contrast, virtual spaces – especially video games – afford a sort of ludonarrative dissonance, as if one player is somehow throwing two balls simultaneously and the other player is forced into an uncomfortable decision-making process. In League

of Legends, for example, this might involve two ‘win-objectives’ that need to be taken at the same time. If the player goes for one, the enemy will go for the other. Because it is a zero-sum game, this kind of trade-off means that the player has to hold both the present and the future in mind – a narrative that is both now and later simultaneously. ‘How am I supposed to do this?’ the player might ask, for even in a virtual space where we may control a number of virtual characters, we may only ever be one person at a time.

5. Permissive spaces

The fifth principle of heterotopias recognized spaces of limited or specialized accessibility. Foucault (1998) spoke of Brazilian farmhouses featuring guestrooms that prohibited access to the heart of the home (p. 183). These spaces play on permissions and accessibilities. Perhaps they require ritual or purification before they may be entered, or perhaps they conceal something otherwise unclean or illegal. We could look at this fifth principle as a rather simple recognition of how conditions of entry or exit draw certain elements out of a series, disrupting succession. Yet such a process fails to *produce* those elements, once again, because it is little more than the establishment of an external definition. Instead, we can look at the fifth principle as another example of the mirror. Consider how these gestures or rituals are often understood as parochial or unguarded. The motel room, for example, provides a space where “unlawful sexuality is both absolutely sheltered and absolutely hidden” (Foucault, 1998, p. 183-4). If the constraints are understood as illusory, then they function to call into being the very existence of constraints: the representation of representation enacted through space.

6. Heterotopias expand the imagination

Foucault sought to establish the significance of heterotopic space with his final principle, asking us to consider the capacity for heterotopias to expand our imaginations and generate new thoughts. By operating as extreme examples of either order or disorder, heterotopias dispel the charm of reality by denouncing all other spaces. In this sixth principle we see the capacity for heterotopic spaces to expand our imagination by rejecting boundaries, defiling norms, and through the representation of representation. “The sailing vessel,” argued Foucault (1998), “is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without ships the dreams dry up” (p. 184). In other words, the heterotopia acts as a virtual vessel that renders our local existence outlandish.

This is not a straightforward transformation, and so I would ask the reader to consider the existential melodrama that emerges when the world is opened up by ocean sailing.

Suppose that you are a medieval peasant farmer. You live in a bright familiar world, shadowed by the dark unknown. Your immediate communal reality is endowed with stories of what lies beyond, stories that come from an arrangement of time, space, materials, and human beings; stories that are brought by words or inscriptions, carried across a network of roads that breach the wilderness. Then one day you learn of the trans-oceanic sailing ship. You learn of a content beyond the expansive ocean barrier. The reality of your condition has now changed.

You need not be hailed; you need not embark on a ‘one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversation’; you are not under the spell of a culture industry. Yet the mere knowledge of ocean travel has permanently adjusted your existence. Perhaps it is

because you recognize that the world is big and you are small. Perhaps it is because the rules by which you conduct yourself have changed. The community-defined space within which you are located has been enormously expanded: without taking a single step in the material world, you are unearthed by the knowledge of intercontinental exploration.

The virtuality of the video game has, for many years, been the ‘sailing vessel’ for today’s imagination. Consider Jeron Lanier’s ‘post-symbolic’ cyberspace, a utopian world of unfettered unity between individuals, who transcend language in-and-through technology. Then consider Lev Manovich, for whom this utopian unity is a tool for total domination.

If we want to know how the self can be ‘made true’ in a relationship to video games, then we have to begin by looking at the mirror-elements force light upon our singular existence, cleave us from the virtual experience. By looking beyond manipulation, we can begin to recognize how virtual-material emplacement becomes the axis upon which we know, practice, shape, and improve ourselves. In order to do this, and in the chapter that follows, I will discuss a strategic methodological approach.

Chapter II: Research Strategy

The competitive gaming experience is diverse. There is no method that could capture the ‘whole’ of this experience. Instead, I approach this project with a *strategy* for research – one that will use first-hand knowledge and self-exploration to further my problematic. This approach needs to be justified and considered carefully.

The pursuit of victory, as I have called it, is a project of self-improvement set within a certain arrangement, struggling against the immediate conditions of success. The practice of self-improvement is born of a relationship between the player and a competitive video game. It is an individual experience, defined by a set of practices that are encountered spontaneously, and which do not align to any preset or determined programme. This experience is often practiced privately, eluding that which is propositional or expressed. If we want to study the realization of a self within this struggle, then we need to consider the range of experiences available to players, or the field of possibilities. The challenge, then, is to grasp and recognize solitary practices of self-reflection, rumination, and consideration –practices that often take place spontaneously and in private. The question we must then ask is hermeneutical: how best to inquire into the private life of individuals?

I do not mean to suggest that the gaming experience is a secret. The private experience of gaming is expressed in books, videos, blogs, news articles, forum discussions, bulletin boards, podcasts, interviews, art, memes, guides, and so on. The individual experience is especially well articulated in the League of Legends community. At any given time there are hundreds of players broadcasting their gameplay live on Twitch.tv, interacting with tens of thousands of viewers. A demand for player-made

‘content’ has produced a market in which thoughtful and charismatic players can earn a living by sharing an autobiographical account of the experience. There is no shortage of access to information about the private experience.

There is, however, a challenge that emerges when we attempt to frame a study with these data. Wading through this ocean of experiential information, it hard for the researcher to isolate relevant details. Which accounts matter, and how? What is the *implied* meaning behind a statement? Where do I make analytical cuts? These are just a few of the questions that arise from the expansive scope of available information. Good method should take this into consideration.

According to Bent Flyvbjerg (2001), there is no universal theoretical rationality by which we can determine what ‘constitutes relevant facts, methods, and theories’ (p. 28-9). Beyond ‘truth politics’, I could not ‘objectively’ justify any technical or analytical approach to this study (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 2). Rather, such distinctions are better made in accordance with a ‘practical wisdom’, which Flyvbjerg (2001) refers to as *phronesis*’ (p. 2). Good researchers can make decisions intuitively, calling on a wealth of tacit knowledge acquired through practice. We can think of this as a ‘virtuoso expertise’; a knowledge that, for Flyvbjerg (2001), ‘cannot necessarily be intellectualized’:

Sitting at a computer, a virtuoso secretary “is one” with the machine and does not think over what finger does what on the keyboard. A virtuoso car driver is one with the car. If an American attempts to drive in a left-hand-drive country such as England, however, the experience is one of stepping backwards in the learning process: formerly

effortless, unreflected driving becomes stiff and dependent on the conscious deliberations and decisions of the beginner. (p. 18)

The goal, then, is to approach this research with my good hand; to achieve a level of virtuoso expertise, such that I can conduct my inquiry intuitively. This type of knowledge cannot be found in the vast realm of player accounts because every one of these accounts is addressed to an audience of virtuosos. Rather, it is born of a personal engagement with the object itself: the project of self-improvement in the context of League of Legends.

Even though first-hand knowledge is partial, it lends itself to the kind tacit-yet-immanent logic that facilitates good research. Alternatively, there is no guarantee that if a researcher conducted a set number of interviews with a set number of gamers and then parsed these interviews using a pre-determined analytical framework, any satisfactory contribution would be produced. Indeed, given the particularities of the gaming experience, it is quite likely that the researcher would lack the competence to interpret the interview. They would lack the necessary context that comes from tacit knowledge. This is the kind of knowledge that comes from playing League of Legends in particular ways: playing for many hours at a time; playing when you're tired or distracted; getting to the point where your skills and knowledge are written into your body.⁶ If we cannot achieve a virtuoso expertise without practice, then my research strategy should resist any formalized methodological structure and embrace a spontaneous engagement with the game. With that in mind, the question remains as to how best to explore the problem of subjectification.

⁶ For the researcher, practical expertise is contextually specific. For example, the historian of the 16th century cannot acquire first-hand experience without time-travel technology, and instead, might rely on images, artifacts, and re-enactment to acquire this 'practical wisdom'.

Playing League of Legends is like falling down a bottomless well; it is a project of perpetual learning and self-improvement. There is no conclusion to the game, there are always new things to learn, new things to improve on. If we want to investigate how a ‘self’ is ‘made true’ in the rich, detailed, complex experience of the game – how gaming becomes a lifestyle, how we come to invest ourselves in pursuit of victory – then we have to rely on first-hand knowledge. For that reason, this investigation takes the form of an autoethnography, which has emerged as a way of studying the self. In practice, my approach to this investigation was straightforward: I played League of Legends while searching for new ways to reflect on the gaming experience critically. This is a rather common and practical approach to video game studies, with some strengths and weaknesses. In this chapter I will review and reflect on autoethnography, situating its methodological relevance within contemporary debates about qualitative social inquiry. I will explore a recent and illuminating methodological debate between ‘evocative’ and ‘realist’ styles of autoethnographic writing. Then I will look beyond writing styles, arguing that we need to consider how to interrogate our own experiences using hermeneutics. I argue that these methodological considerations can best be understood using the metaphor of a ‘theoretical toolkit’.

Autoethnography

I begin with an example of the autoethnographic method. In 1993 Liz Stanley published a gripping account of the changes that took place when her mother suffered a stroke. The story described how difficult it was to adjust to her mother’s blindness and paralysis, and even more so to her ‘changed self’.

I felt as if *my* mother, my *real* mother, had gone, died almost, and that the person who was left was much like the husk of a former living experiencing interacting self' (Stanley, 1993, p. 138).

Stanley's account threaded her personal experiences in-and-through a feminist ontological debate to say something about 'the self': an *insistent* self. The challenge, for Stanley, was to convey something beyond explanation: the very subtle and tacit ways in which her mother – as a subject within a body – was changed by brain damage.

What is remarkable about this account is how heavily it relied on an evocative narrative style. In exploring her mother's post-stroke self by reflecting on her lived experience, Stanley argued that the complexity of an 'experienced' self (that is, a self that is complex, fragmented, and incoherent) could be conveyed in-and-through a narrative style. The argument thus relied on her capacity to evoke an emotional response from the reader – a reaction that goes against realist conventions. Stanley's work, which greatly resembled the autoethnographic method, could thus be viewed as a departure from some of the established forms by which we conduct and present ethnographic research.

Like many of the early autoethnographic works, Stanley described her work as a form of 'autobiography' or 'autography'. When I describe Stanley's work as autoethnographic it is because it shares a resemblance to a 'family' of research. Members of this family go by many names: self-ethnography, first-person research, self-study, self-reflexive study, self-life-writing, and so on. Autoethnography, in this sense, is not a 'set' or 'systematic' approach, but rather, it is a general style or strategy for research.

Stanley's (1993) story was told in an emotive style. The methodological tools that Stanley used have since become characteristic of autoethnographic work. It used excerpts

from some form of self-made personal documentation (in this case a journal and audio tapes), interspersed with critical reflections and connections to broad academic discussions. An important familial characteristic of a first-person ethnographic account is that it leans heavily on the narrative form. Indeed, autoethnography is often defined as a style of writing. One widely-recited definition comes from an article by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (C. Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010):

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*). (para. 1)

There are two aspects of this definition that interest me: first, it defines autoethnography as a descriptive and writing-focused methodology, and second, these descriptions use personal experiences to say something generalizable. In other words, autoethnographic studies tend to leverage the relationship between the social (ethnographic) and the subjective (autobiographical) in order to tell us something new about ‘the self’.

It is important to recognize that, for Stanley, an expressive style of writing was not merely a persuasive tactic – as if evocative writing was necessarily ‘manipulative’. Rather, Stanley’s work, and a great deal of autoethnographic work before and thereafter, was influenced by an emerging epistemological thread within feminist scholarship. If feminists wanted to argue that ‘the self’ was complex, then their autobiographical accounts needed to convey that complexity. “‘The self’,” argued Stanley (1993), “is immensely complex, and feminist conceptualisations of it, within as well as across conventional discipline boundaries, need to be correspondingly complex” (Stanley, 1993, p. 133).

Those who criticized Stanley's (1993) approach argued that autobiographical accounts were "unamenable to analytical and theoretical investigation" – as if evocative writing was too fragmented for systematic investigation (p. 133). The same criticism was echoed years later when Leon Anderson (2006) confronted what he described as 'evocative autoethnography'. The problem, according to Anderson, was that it was difficult to make any general theoretical conclusions or knowledge claims using an evocative style. Anderson (2006) sought to introduce a 'realist' approach, aimed at producing 'empirical data' with which we could theorize and generalize about broader social phenomena – a process he defined as 'analyses' (p. 378, 387).

Yet we have to wonder why Anderson would assume that 'reality' could conform to an analytical investigation such as this. Perhaps there is a reason that personal narratives are so important to feminist writing concerned with what constitutes the 'real' and the 'legitimate'. If we live in a chaotic world, then should not our accounts of this world be chaotic? Would not such accounts better align to the 'reality' of our experiences? Analytical autoethnography runs counter to what many (including chief spokespersons like Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner) argue defines the autoethnographic method: the use of vignettes, fragments, raw descriptions, and complex emotions that seem to defy explanation.⁷ In contrast to theorization, autoethnography is driven by stories that reference meanings beyond expression, open to plural interpretations (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 438).

The problem I would like to address is that the debate, thus staged, scrutinizes the mode of presentation, without ever touching on the actual *practice* of first-person

⁷ For their response to Anderson's critique see Ellis & Bochner, 2006.

research. If the method is defined by the evocation of pain, passion, love, sadness, grief, and other deeply emotional states of being, then how is this research conducted? It is almost as if autoethnography is asking the researcher to search deep within, effectively *producing* the emotional content that an evocative narrative demands. It is easy to see how this research strategy could succumb to solipsism.

Perhaps it *is* fair to say that evocative autobiographical forms of writing are ‘unamenable to critique’ – not because they fail to reduce their arguments to the rigid conventions of a systematic theoretical investigation, but because we cannot easily question the validity of the author’s *personal* experiences. Is it possible to invalidate the author’s account without disqualifying their existence as a living human being? How do we critique emotionally complex accounts of personal experiences? I could not (or would not), on empirical grounds, argue against Liz Stanley personal account of her mother’s stroke.

I could, however, engage with the connections drawn by Stanley’s autobiographical method. Indeed the strength of Stanley’s argument comes from the ways in which she connects her evocative personal experiences to something beyond. The ‘self’, according to Stanley (1993), “does not exist in isolation from interrelationship with other selves and other lives; it is grounded in the material reality of everyday life,” (p. 133). Likewise, Sam Roberts (2002) argues more generally that biographical methods are appealing because they help chart “major societal changes that are underway, but not merely at some broad social level” (p. 5). In other words, we could use the autoethnographic method to describe and situate immediate experiences, and better understand their relationship within a broader discourse. The challenge, then, is to bring

these ‘immediate experiences’ into the realm of self-reflection – to translate what Bent Flyvbjerg referred to as *phronesis*’ into a state in which it can be challenged and examined. Autoethnography, as I will now explain, should therefore accompany one’s own experiences with a form of hermeneutics.

A hermeneutic

Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) referred to a ‘hermeneutic’ as a way of making the world ‘questionable’. I developed my own style of questioning in-and-through my struggles to succeed in school. During my undergrad I learned that my best term papers were the ones that followed a similar structure: they drew questions from course concepts, applied them to ‘case’ examples, and then described a sort of *change*: a new way of thinking, a new set of questions. The ‘change’ I described would be a sort of realization, something new that can be seen when we adjust the tools with which we are working. I did not think of this as a form of hermeneutics and I did not think of my work as exegetical. Rather, I was carefully crafting a research and writing technique that made use of my passion and curiosity. It was a survival strategy. After all, the worst courses (and my worst grades) were the ones that asked questions for me, forced me into a certain framework, or worse: told me exactly what to write about. I bore easily, which is not to say that I am smug with knowledge, but that the labour involved in learning is made easy when I can follow my passion. Not a passion for a certain object of study, or a particular aesthetic. Rather, what I love are the intellectual or metaphysical changes that came from sociological reading and writing; that aching thrill that comes from realization; how certain questions can adjust the way I see the world around me.

When I began my research on subjectification in League of Legends it was this hermeneutic that sparked my initial line of questioning. How can I look at this problem differently? What are the concepts that ground our understanding of video games; what is the contingency of my own understanding?

I call this a hermeneutic because of what Gadamer (2004) wrote in *Truth and Method*. Gadamer was writing about knowledge. More specifically, he was looking at the production of knowledge through the practice of asking questions. A hermeneutical method, for Gadamer (2004), was not about building a sureness of the world – like a dogmatic captivity – but rather it was about making our experience of the world *questionable* (p. 355). Gadamer (2004) argued that “the path of all knowledge leads through the question”; that knowledge comes from asking the kinds of questions that bring things out in the open, by calling on something undetermined (p. 359). Some aspects of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutic were integrated into my research process long before I read his words. It was an attention strategy I had developed for close reading. It was the same strategy I used to focus on lengthy university lectures. It was the hermeneutic of a clueless student who probably had a mild attention deficit disorder, desperately looking for a source of motivation. As such, my notes were poor records of the *content* of each reading or lecture. Rather, they were a dialogue with the speaker; a series of questions, critiques, or comments. I cannot rightly credit this practice to any disciplinary training I received, in fact it came about in a rather undisciplined way. To this day I know of no better way to keep my mind focused on a dull, droning, university lecture than to fill my notes with a thorough critique of its content.

My passion for knowledge relied on a skill that Gadamer (2004) referred to as the ‘art of questioning’, which helped to prevent my own opinions from suppressing critical questions (p. 361). It is only now that I reflect on Gadamer (2004) that I recognize that my questions were a form of hermeneutics, or a “dialogue with the text” (p. 361):

To question means to lay open, to place in the open. As against the fixity of opinions, questioning makes the object and all its possibilities fluid. A person skilled in the ‘art’ of questioning is a person who can prevent questions from being suppressed by the dominant opinion. (p. 361)

Now that I reflect on Gadamer I can see how this opens us up to a pluralistic account of the world. When we ask these kinds of open questions we allow ourselves to consider an otherwise-world, and by seriously considering the ‘otherwise’ world we might come to recognize its existence.

If we give priority to the ‘art’ of asking good questions, then we can start to shape a set of questions or conceptual tools that will help us ask something about the specific power relations in-and-through which subjectification works in League of Legends. Furthermore, as I reflect on ‘power’ in League of Legends, this hermeneutical method will structure my investigation in one very important way. It means that I am not attempting to do what Leon Anderson suggested: to construct a systematic or coherent theory about the subject of video games. Rather, this form of analysis looks at the very local and specific. For Foucault (Foucault, 1980b), this meant that in practice we should imagine ‘theory’ as a set of tools:

The notion of theory as a toolkit [*sic*] means: (i) The theory to be constructed is not a system but an instrument, a logic of the specificity of power relations and the struggles around them; (ii) That this investigation can only be carried out step by step on the basis of reflection (which will necessarily be historical in some of its aspects) on given situations.⁸ (p. 145)

There are two important points here, and we should look at them both carefully.

First, Foucault is arguing that if we view theory as an instrument or a tool, then it quickly becomes clear that it is part of a political struggle. Certain theoretical tools are operated in-and-through political struggles to (re)define and understand the world. When he looked at prisons, for example, Foucault (1980a) recognised a sort of theoretical antagonism produced by prisoners that operated against established power relations: “a discourse against power, the counter-discourse of prisoners and those we call delinquents – and not a theory about delinquency” (p. 209). In this sense Foucault is describing a practice much like that of Hans-Georg Gadamer: an investigation that renders the world questionable, positing pluralisms. What is added, however, is a consideration of the political struggles in-and-through which conceptual tools are used.

Perhaps it is because of the context of these political struggles that Foucault goes on to the second point. In the above passage Foucault suggests that an investigation of power should be – at least in part – an historical investigation. In other words, if we consider theory as a toolkit, then our investigation should reflect and take into account

⁸ For some reason most people relay this quote without the spelling mistake. Perhaps it only occurs in my copy of the book.

the historical specificity involved in the investigation; a practice of reflexivity. We should build our theoretical tools in attendance to the object of our inquiry, and review this tool within its own context. This means that we should, as William Walters (2012) suggests, resist dogmatism and ‘applicationalism’.

Conclusion

When we look at debates surrounding the autoethnographic method, it is clear that some priority should be given to the practice of asking good questions. That is to say that of the two dominant positions being taken – one which insists on an ‘evocative’ and ‘postmodern’ approach to autoethnographic research, the other of which is aimed at analytics and applicationalism – I want to forge a third: borrowing some analytical tools while allowing myself to write about the self evocatively. Rather than building a systematic theory of the world – confining ourselves to some dogmatic analytic – I propose that we use the autoethnographic method to practice reflexivity: to reflect on our own conceptual tools and potentially adjust the way we understand the world. Before I endeavor to do so, however, and in the chapter that follows, I want to provide some context for the game.

Chapter III: Context of the Game

Text cannot render an exact approximation of the gaming experience, even if such a thing exists. Video games are an experience made up of audio-visual elements, space, movement, and time. The text that follows, then, is simply meant to set the stage for the personal account that is conveyed in chapter four. Although I thoroughly examined the context in which League of Legends emerged, I shall caution that much nuance is left out of this chapter. When I describe various elements of the game, they are described only insofar as to allow an unfamiliarised reader to approach my gaming experience. Altogether, this chapter will introduce League of Legends and explain why it is well-suited for an investigation of emplacement and the pursuit of victory.

The Multiplayer Online Battle Arena

League of Legends is the first video game created under the ‘Multiplayer Online Battle Arena’ (MOBA) genre category. It is also the most popular game in this category. Genre categories do not necessarily generate a productive discussion about a game. Often they are part of the promotional material, meant to help situate the game for browsing individuals who may be potential players. The ‘strategy’ genre, for example, is analytically useless in-of-itself, as almost any interaction a player can have with a video game can be ‘strategic’. Rather, the ‘strategy’ category is a way of speaking to potential players, telling them that this game involves problem solving, decision-making, and tactical maneuvering. Even so, it is worth reflecting on what the ‘MOBA’ designation means. If we look at the MOBA denomination closely, we begin to recognize some of the productive ways that it helps describe League of Legends.

Multiplayer and online

When we say that a game is ‘multiplayer’, we mean that is not a solo game. It is played simultaneously by two or more players. In the case of ‘online’ games, these players are connected by a network. For the most part, League of Legends is played over the Internet.⁹ Players are placed in geographic regions, which presently include Brazil, Europe, (Nordic and East), Europe (West), Latin America (North), North America, Oceania, Russia, Turkey, South East Asia, and the Republic of Korea.¹⁰ In each region players connect to a server using a local client installed on their personal computer.¹¹ Here in North America, the game server was recently moved from Riot Games’ headquarters in Santa Monica to Chicago, which was more geographically central. This changed the latency of my connection from 80 milliseconds to 30 and noticeably improved my experience of the game.

One of the key differences between a ‘solo’ and an ‘online’ game lies in the distances that data must travel. It is worth noting that even a game that is played locally (on a personal computer, without using an Internet connection) involves the movement of data. All software moves data from one place to another. For example, when a game is installed, data are moved from an installation file to an installation folder on the Hard Drive Disc. From there they move to many different places: the Random Access Memory

⁹ League of Legends tournaments that have been sponsored by Riot Games can be played over a Local Area Network. Normally this is not an option, since the game code is held on Riot Games’ servers, accessible over the Internet.

¹⁰ For a more detailed breakdown of these regions you can visit the League of Legends wiki page on ‘servers’ (“Servers,” n.d.)

¹¹ However, to say that we are ‘connected’ is simplistic. Internet speeds are not simply ‘fast’ or ‘slow’, they transmit data in differently sized packets, send the data in different directions, and render the data dynamically at each location. There is a ‘quality’ to each connection, housed in the manner in which it is achieved. This is part of an emplaced gaming experience that I will expand on in Chapter Four.

card, the soundcard, the graphics card, and the monitors. Data are sent and received, input by the keyboard and mouse, and so on. The important thing to recognize is the conceptual distinction that is being made: both solo and online games move data, but online games move data *further*.

It follows that there is a tendency to understand the ‘multiplayer online’ game as a digitally distanced space. We tend to imagine cyber-spatial virtual worlds as faraway places. Bart Simon (2007) writes that as a result of this distancing we tend to imagine a sort of ‘representational matrix’ within which online video games are played (para. 1). Because of this, we tend to understand the ‘gamer’ as a sort of ‘digital dandy’: a traveller; “dis-embedded from social and familial responsibility so that they may remain mobile” (para. 2). The subjective (or ‘unique’) experience of the gamer is reduced, then, to that of a wanderer – aloof, and divested. If we want to investigate modes by which a player comes to know a ‘true’ and emplaced self, then we have to challenge this perception. One way to do that is to look at the second half of the MOBA designator: the ‘battle arena’.

Battle arena

By looking closely at the designation of a ‘battle arena’ we can overcome some of the limitations that emerge when we imagine digital spaces as a ‘representational matrix’. What we see in the battle arena – in spaces like the boxing ring, the stadium, and the Colosseum – is a place where real bodies play, run, fight, and struggle. The word ‘arena’ comes from the Latin *harena*, a fine-grained sand used to absorb blood (Adkins & Adkins, 2014, p. 386). The arena is a place of violence, combat, and opposition. It is here that we see a style of competitive gameplay built on head-to-head struggles, tests of

strength, and survival. It is here that a reflection of the self is ‘made real’ in the way we move and act within a space that is governed and intentional.

Arena combat is distinct in that it is *orchestrated*. Many forms of combat involve structure – consider, for example, how a ‘duel’ is arranged around certain rules and practices –but the ‘battle arena’ writes these rules in stone. It is as if the rules of sport are encased the walls of the arena. Combatants compete within the confines of an architectural structure, the physical limitations of the walls, the introduction of certain obstacles, and the parameters set by the designers.

Although the ‘arena’ is structured, it is not static. For an analogy, consider some of the adjustments to the Colosseum that were chronicled by Amanda Claridge (2010):

The arena thus formed, like the amphitheatre around it, was the largest in the Roman world... It must have been able to handle enormous numbers of animals and men, in the most elaborate stagings, and to judge by the fact that at least twelve different phases can be seen in the substructures, ideas and arrangements were constantly changing. The system of eighty vertical shafts in the four parallel walls dates from about AD 300, with repairs in the C5; it apparently raised animals in cages to just below the arena floor, where they were released through trap doors. What the initial installations consisted of is not at all clear; accounts of Titus’ first games in AD 80 refer to the arena suddenly being filled with water for a display of horses.

(p. 315, bold in original removed)

It is remarkable to consider these changes being made to such as a massive structural achievement; an arrangement of stone, marble, wood, sand, and stucco. One might

assume that a structure of such magnitude would have been static or rigid, yet the Colosseum was in a perpetual state of dynamic re-arrangement. Both the games and performances that took place in the arena were subject to a changing system of obstacles, stages, and expectations. The point here is to recognize that an ‘arena’ space is a *gamified* space. This was not simply a ‘representation’ of power – like statues and parapets – but rather, it was Titus’s power written in stone and *practiced*. In the arena, this power becomes known by the body; operated and transformed in-and-through a system of struggles and diverging interests. In the arena, this power is not just structure, it is *structuring*.

Before League of Legends

When we look at the history of video games, the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena genre appears to be quite new. In his history of MOBA games, MoarExp (2014) found defining elements of the genre in a late-1990s player-built custom ‘map’ called Aeon of Strife.¹² The map was built using a map-building engine for a sci-fi themed ‘real-time strategy’ game called Starcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998). Aeon of Strife diverged from Starcraft’s core gaming, which was centered on resources collection, economic management, base building, and macro-level control of grouped units. MoarExp (2014) argues that Aeon of Strife was unique because it was “centered around upgrading one unit to push into the enemies base.” By focusing the game on a single ‘hero’ unit, many of its

¹² Most real-time strategy games impose a top-down overviewistic perspective, which gives the player a sense that the terrain itself is a ‘map’. This ‘map’ is the terrain upon-which the gameplay takes place: a visual account of ongoing events. We can also think of these ‘maps’ as particular problems or scenarios, they can be built to include particular dynamics, obstacles, and game mechanics.

macro-level ‘strategy’ elements of the game were stripped away. The gameplay was adjusted so that the player became attuned to more subtle and immediate mechanics.

We need not look at Aeon of Strife as the ‘origin’ of the MOBA genre. Rather, thinking genealogically, we can see it as a moment when particular elements were brought together to form something new. According to Machinima (2012), Aeon of Strife created a style of gameplay that borrowed from the ‘action roleplaying game’, in which players take the role of a single unit and progress through a predetermined story. “The innovation,” says Machinima (2012), “was to map that gameplay into a competitive format, with [real-time strategy]-scale battles thrown in.” The focus around controlling a *single* unit, as opposed to the macro-focused army-building practice that was common in real-time strategy games, was one of the first big steps toward the practice of self-scrutiny and micro-management that is central to the MOBA genre. This new style of gameplay was important because it fostered a more *discerning* relationship between the player and the game. It pushed players to pay close attention to very specific elements of character control. It facilitated an objectification of the gaming elements around which players struggle and compete. In observing this style of gameplay, we come to notice the complexity of the game.

In the course of my research I attempted to play the Aeon of Strife map in Starcraft. It was difficult to recreate the gameplay experience in today’s gaming context. Starcraft is now 18 years old, which is a long time for software: I would equate it to 90 in software-years. When I installed it on my computer I could tell that it was built at a

different time for different technology.



Figure 4: This is a screenshot that I took from a famous Starcraft streamer, HuskyStarcraft, 2012.

Starcraft could not conform to the size or scale of my monitor, the user interface was gigantic, and the game crashed frequently. Moreover I could not easily achieve a state in which the game felt comfortable, immersive, or believable. When I was younger, games like this were the height of computer-generated graphical capabilities. They seemed thrilling and realistic. Now I see it as a pixelated mess. On top of that it was boring. I was rarely thrilled to play a new level – not because the game was easy, but because the challenges were cumbersome. I felt as if I had little impact on the progression of the game because many of the challenges involved waiting out the clock, slowly gathering resources, or hiding inside a well-defended base. Generally, I found that the game did not respect my capacity to optimize and improve. I suppose this suggests that the transition I described in my introduction – from an ‘immersive and aesthetic’ to an ‘emplaced and

competitive' experience of gaming – is not reversible. MOBA games have permanently adjusted the way I relate to video games.

I could not get the original Aeon of Strife map to work on my computer. Nevertheless, when I played the pre-packaged Starcraft maps (not the custom maps, but the default maps provided by the game), I could sense how the shift away from a macro style of gaming might have worked. While it was easy to send troops of units into combat, it was difficult to micro-manage a single unit. When I started trying to efficiently control a single unit I started noticing elements of the game that were otherwise overlooked. I noticed the speed at which my unit would turn around, the rate at which it would fire projectiles, and the very subtle increase in damage that would come from a unit upgrade. MOBA gamers have developed very detailed and complex vocabularies around these mechanics. When we look at game guides and player discussions we see concepts like 'turn rate', 'attack speed', and 'power spike' used in a way that renders increasingly complex elements of gameplay thinkable. With this conceptual equipment, the player increasingly becomes independently responsible for success or failure. The game is disinterred and laid bare so as to expose the player.

Defence of the Ancients

Many of the genre-defining gaming elements that we see in Aeon of Strife were adapted for new games. In 2002, Blizzard Entertainment released their next real-time strategy game: Warcraft III. This new platform came with a robust 'world editor' which – especially in the 'expansions' that were later released – allowed players to cultivate and improve many of the mechanics that defined Aeon of Strife. Warcraft III's 'hero' units became more complex, with levelling systems, item upgrades, and unique abilities.

Endowed with new possibilities and inspired by Aeon of Strife, a custom map called Defense of the Ancients (DotA) soon emerged. DotA eventually became quite popular, and is widely recognized as the first ‘true’ MOBA game. As such, a common alternative name for the MOBA genre is ‘DotA style’ or ‘DotA-like’. Under this name, the DotA map would expand and develop those techniques by which the individual was exposed, emplaced, and responsabilized.

The current of opposition

During the early 2000s a committed community grew around the DotA map. Creativity flourished, as players took and developed their own variations of the concept and made them available to the community. It was during this time that DotA became what we might now recognize as a ‘legitimate’ Multiplayer Online Battle Arena game. Until now, these maps pitted players against computer-controlled opponents. During this time of change, one particular variant re-staged the map as a player-versus-player game.

Henceforth, the map would be used as the generic ‘battle arena’.

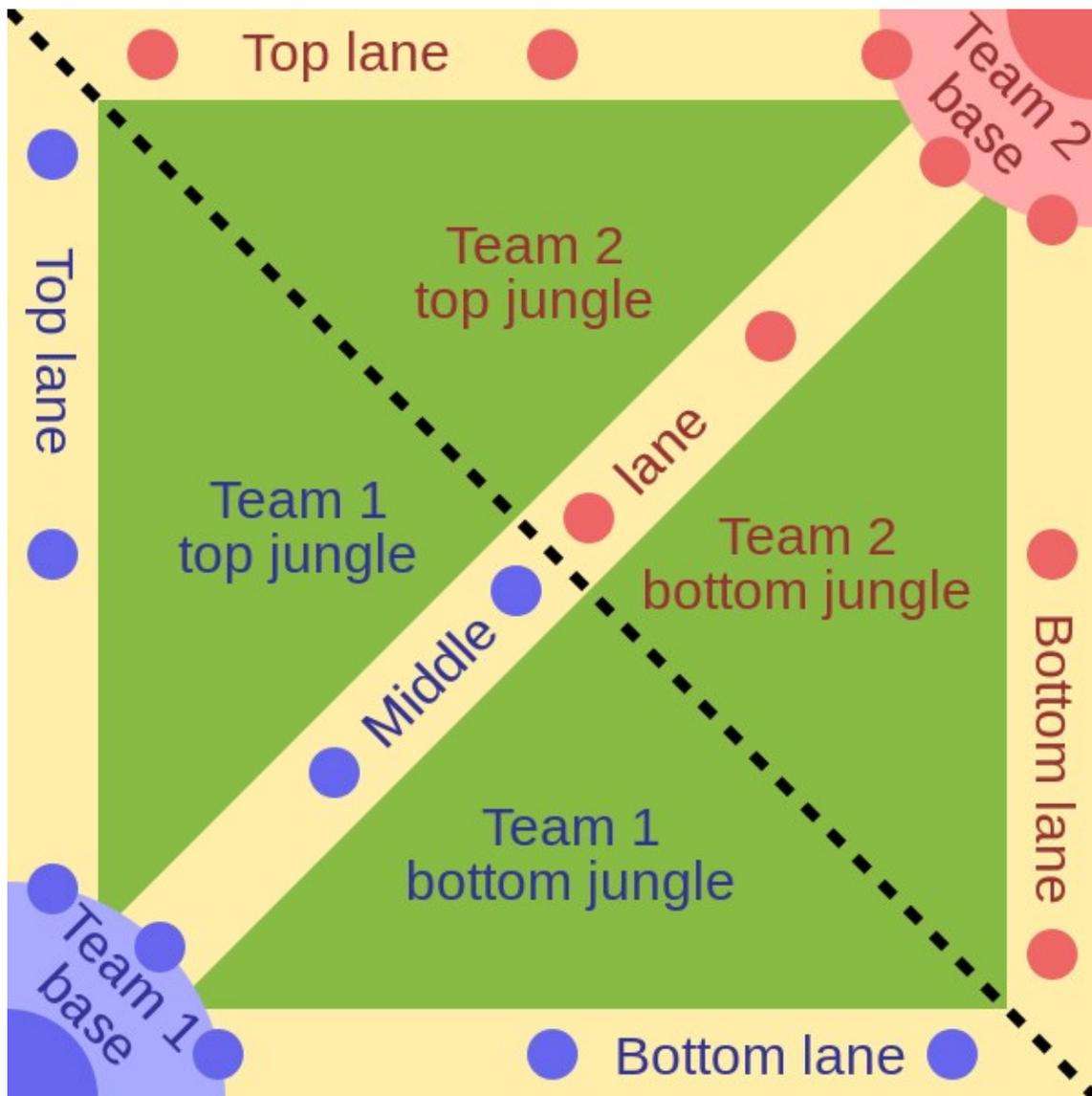


Figure 5: The generic MOBA map from “Multiplayer online battle arena,” 2015.

In the image above we see two teams facing each other on a symmetrical map. One team’s base on the bottom-left and the other is top-right. Three lanes cut through a forest of trees, leading to the enemy base. One of the lanes runs diagonally across the map while the other two follow along the sides and meet in the corners. These lanes are often intuitively referred to as ‘top’, ‘mid’, and ‘bot’. The centre of these lanes (marked above by the black dotted line) are primary sites of combat and exchange. Along the lanes each

team has a number of defensive turrets (marked as circles) protecting their half of the map against waves of encroaching ‘creeps’ or ‘minions’, which are groups of weak, non-player-controlled units that can be killed for experience points and income.

Many things changed when DotA became a player-versus-player game. Not only did this make the game more competitive (playing against the computer was not nearly as challenging), it also put the concept of balance and symmetry at the forefront of gameplay. The only fair way to pit player-against-player was to do so equitably. Balance became an organizational principle behind the game, in relation to which the player is pushed to compete optimally.

Another way to understand this change is to imagine game progression. Previously, player-versus-computer games progressed in one direction, like a current.¹³ In a roleplaying game, for example, there is only one direction for the player to go: the story only goes forward. On previous DotA maps, the player simply pushed forward, eventually overtaking the computer-driven enemy. The fun was in figuring out *how* to overcome the computer in faster, spontaneous, and innovative ways. This dynamic changes when we shift to a player-versus-player game. When we play against human

¹³ I am using the concept here to make a distinction, but we should also recognize that not every video game involves a discernable ‘progression’.

opponents, our own progression runs counter to that of the enemy.

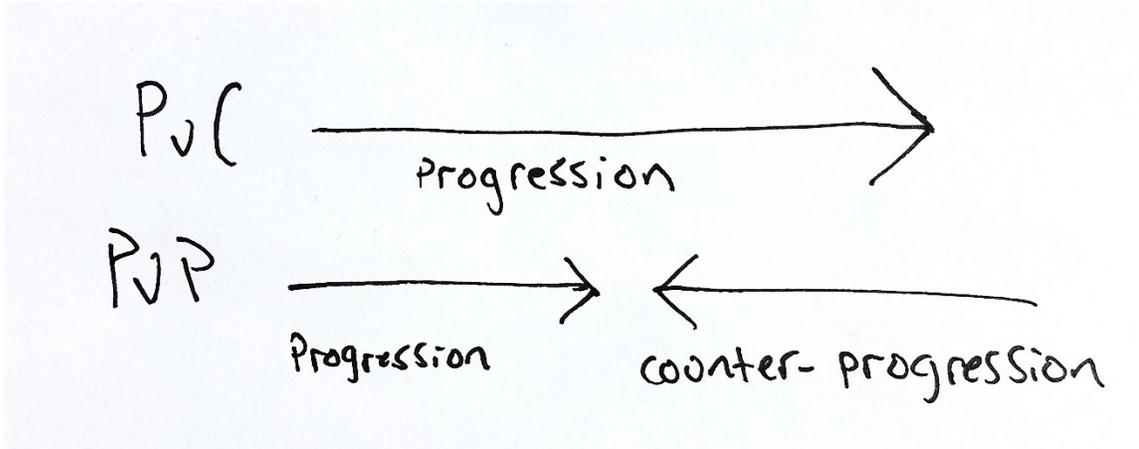


Figure 6: The current of opposition. This sketch illustrates the change in game progression from Player vs. Computer games (PvC) and Player vs. Player games (PvP).

I call this the *current of opposition*. When opponents are introduced, progress for one is regress for the other. This arrangement produces a more meaningful tension, or a pressure, under which every decision is made. In DotA, this tension was recognized and rewarded. Players earned gold for killing an opponent, simultaneously enumerating their success and tipping the scales in a zero-sum game.

Now viewed as a highly competitive game, DotA gained world-wide recognition. Sports-casted tournaments were staged, which meant that the game could reach an audience of spectators beyond the Warcraft III player-base. This recognition produced three new concerns.

First, it was hard for new players to access DotA because the game was bound to the Warcraft III platform. If someone wanted to play DotA, they would have to own Warcraft III and the expansions. Then they would have to find and download the DotA map on a third-party website and set it up correctly on their computer. In other words, Warcraft III was not designed to steer a population of competitive players towards the DotA map.

Second, the Warcraft III platform was further limiting because the game client did not allow for population control: people wanted to be able to ban players that were ‘toxic’ and rude, as well as to adjust the ways in which players were matched for each game. One of the biggest issues players had with the platform was that there was no way to dissuade players from leaving in the middle of a match, essentially losing the game for their team (defiantketchup, 2008).

Third, and perhaps the most important limitation, was that the Warcraft III client did not allow players to recognize their place within a discourse. It was difficult or impossible to track player statistics, record match histories, recognize relative skill levels, and so on.

Together, these three issues pointed to one solution: a game client in which the community (or its authorities) could assert governmental control. In many ways League of Legends was intended to be a solution to these problems.

Hitherto, MOBA maps had been built and developed voluntarily by a number of committed-yet-disparate players. According to Machinima (2012), a group of about a dozen designers eventually rallied to work on a popular variant of the DotA map. In 2008, rumors began to surface that one of those developers, Steve ‘Guinsoo’ Feak, was working on a spin-off.¹⁴ With the establishment of publisher and developer Riot Games, League of Legends was set to be the first commercially developed standalone MOBA game. Today there are over 20 independently developed video games that share historical

¹⁴ Guinsoo was at one point considered the ‘lead developer’ of the most popular DotA map: ‘DotA Allstars’. The development team was loosely structured and the true ‘authorship’ of the DotA map is still debated. Many players felt as if DotA was ‘owned’ by the community, others argue that DotA did not become popular until Guinsoo gave his leadership role to ‘Icefrog’ (who prefers to remain pseudonymous), who went on to develop the standalone game DOTA 2, which became the main competitor to League of Legends. For more this, refer to Mechinima 2012.

roots with DotA.¹⁵ Just like the variations that were designed by amateur player-developers, many of these MOBA games have moved in different directions. For its part, League of Legends remains relatively similar to most popular DotA maps. Despite having produced several alternative maps and game modes, League of Legends stands behind its main competitive map: the DotA-inspired ‘Summoner’s Rift’.

League of Legends

The rift

When we look at Summoner’s Rift we see a mountainous forest. There is a sense that the rift is wild and unkempt: small mammalian creatures scurry about, trees and foliage climb and cover the rocks. A history of civilization is implied in the cracked and

¹⁵ These games include League of Legends, Realm of the Titans, Rise of the Immortals, SMITE, Bloodline, Champions, Heroes of Newerth, DEMIGOD, DOTA 2, Core Masters, Arena of Fate, GIGANTIC, Heroes of the Storm, Overwatch, STRIFE. Infinite Crisis, Shards of War, Deadbreed, Sins of Dark Age, Church of Fate, and Dawn Gate.

fallen pillars, crumbling statues, and the old stone walls that frame the ‘lanes’.



Figure 7: A screenshot from the game. Here you see my champion in the ‘middle lane’, beside a ‘turret’. A ‘minion’ is approaching from the bottom-left.

In many ways Summoner's Rift evokes the 'high fantasy' aesthetic of the Warcraft universe, but with an interpellative twist. It is at once serious and playful; cinematic and cartoonish; fiercely competitive and cheerfully playful. In the same space you might find a valorous armor-clad Garen standing next to Annie, a maniacal flame-throwing child.



Figure 8: Here are several different clips of Annie: The Dark Child (NeeksNaman, 2013).

Annie skips around the Rift girlishly, carrying a teddy bear named Tibbers. For the player, is difficult to reconcile these thematic or narratological tensions. It does not seem as if Annie and Garen belong in the same conceptual universe. Yet they work together. In the early years of competitive play, Annie was played to great effect. She had the ability to lock down a single target by releasing Tibbers on top of it. Tibbers would then become enlarged, and follow that up with a burst of fiery magical damage. For me, listening to sportscasters describe the very real and imminent threat posed by Annie calls into

question the mode by which I should appreciate the game.¹⁶ Am I supposed to take this seriously? How could I not?

We can see, then, how the theme and aesthetics of Summoner's Rift leverage an interpellative tension: as a player, you are urged to take Annie seriously as a strategic threat, all-the-while recognizing the absurdity of her character. It is hard not to question your own placement within this discourse when you see a place where absurd and incompatible things are grouped together; real and unreal juxtaposed. Like Foucault (2007), we might stand in wonderment at the possibility of this discourse; the taxonomy that intersects space: to order, classify, name and otherwise place disparate entities of the world together on a table (p. xix, 101).

When I say that Summoner's Rift is a 'map', I mean that it is a plane on which space is arranged intentionally. We could alternatively look at it as a 'problem': like a puzzle or a maze. It is an imposition of certain rules and structures around which players engage in competitive play. Over time the map becomes recognized – either tacitly in-and-through interactions with it, or explicitly in the prescriptive literature – as a

¹⁶ I do not mean to imply that small girls or teddy bears cannot be dangerous, especially if they are fire mages. We know that Annie is designed to play off popular conceptions of childhood and innocence, which is not a particularly new trope.

‘navigation mesh’, or an arrangement of rules demarcating ‘pathable terrain’.



Figure 9: An example of the navigation mesh, from League of Legends developer blog, Lui, 2014.

As you can see from the image above, which comes from one of the game developers, there is a two dimensional framework underneath the graphical environment (Liu, 2014). This ‘pathing map’, which is the flat structure of the map, is invisible to the players. Instead, players learn to read the graphical terrain for that kind of information in-and-through their struggles to improve. The shape of the stones and walls become visual indicators of the unseen structural framework. As players struggle to play the game

optimally, these pathing rules are often deductively exposed.



Figure 10: A player's analysis of vision ward placement, from Jschi102, 2012

The above image, for example, was made by a player who was trying to determine the most effective position to place a 'vision ward' (Jschi102, 2012). Vision wards are used to extend vision into areas of the map that would otherwise be clouded in a 'fog of war'. In the image above, you can see how the player used guesses and experimentation to chart the features of the underlying pathing map. This was done in order to find a ward placement location that would provide the earliest possible warning of an incoming attacker. This is significant as it shows how players are expected to recognize the virtual representation of space critically. The tree is not a tree, the rock is not a rock: visual elements become demarcations of a strategically arranged virtual space.

The map can thus be seen as a collection of specific and contested problem-elements. In the image above, the grassy bush was outlined because it was a hiding place; the trees were noted because they represented visual obstructions. Represented visually in

three dimensions, the game is carefully deconstructed, thereby dismantling the virtuality of the space in the process of maximizing player efficiency. Thus, as with the previous example of the character Annie, we can see how League of Legends draws attention to the unreality of its own virtually represented existence.

Champions

When we talk about Summoner's Rift, we must also talk about the mode by which it is traversed. While our view of the map comes from a top-down third-person 'camera', our actions are mediated and enacted by a single 'hero' unit. In League of Legends this unit is called a 'champion'. Before every match the player selects and 'summons' a champion. Each one has a name, a backstory, a set of sounds, animations, and voice acting. They also have a unique set of abilities that define and constitute their existence on the Rift. Upon launching, League of Legends had 40 champions from which to choose. Since then 90 new champions have been released. It is impossible to master every champion. Most players come to learn a certain class of characters, or a small number that can fill each role on the team. It is, however, important to have a rough idea of what each champion can do, what role they play, and how to play with and against them.

It is tempting to look at champions as a sort of 'virtual avatar', like an inhabitable vessel for the player. In role-playing games, this virtual avatar is often considered to be the virtual vehicle in-and-through which we are 'present' – or 'telepresent' – in the game. When I played World of Warcraft, for example, I spent hours developing my own characters: skilling, training, and building them. I was invested in my World of Warcraft

characters: I played in-and-through them, acted as if I wore their shoes, developed affections for them. Edward Castronova (2003) described the experience thusly:

When we visit a virtual world, we do so by inhabiting a body that exists there, and only there. The virtual body, like the Earth body, is an avatar. When visiting a virtual world, one treats the avatar in that world like a vehicle of the self, a car that your mind is driving. You “get in,” look out the window through your virtual eyes, and then drive around by making your virtual body move. The avatar mediates our self in the virtual world: we inhabit it; we drive it; we receive all of our sensory information about the world from its standpoint. (p. 5)

In this sense video games seem to offer a second body. One component of learning a game is coming to inhabit this alternative body, orienting oneself to a virtual world. It follows that moments when a person is taken ‘out of’ the game – those moments when one can no longer suspend their disbelief – are typically undesired. I argue that something different is happening here.

In the case of League of Legends, players typically describe champions as objects, or tools, as if they were cards in a deck. I might adore the Jack of Clubs, but when I play my hand I am not role-playing; I do not *pretend* to be an aristocratic Knave.¹⁷ In League of Legends we see a similar relationship defined in the way players refer to different champions. If a player chooses to play a champion named ‘Garen’, then they will typically refer to him as ‘*a* Garen’ –just as we would say that the card player is holding ‘*a*

¹⁷ Here I am attempting to describe the place that a ‘champion’ takes within a discourse. It is dangerous to argue that somebody is not playing a role, as they may well play the game in that way. Besides, as we will come to see, the player is often playing the role of a player.

Queen'. We think of the champion as an object or a tool within the game, directing attention to our own management and articulation of this object.

During each match, which typically last about 30 minutes, champions gain levels by earning 'experience points'.¹⁸ Each new level increases the champion's base statistics (such as how much health they have, how much damage they deal, and so on) and unlocks new abilities. As champions level up they become more powerful.¹⁹ Because each level enhances the champion so significantly, earning experience points is paramount. Experience points are earned several ways: passively over time, by killing neutral or enemy units or champions, and by taking certain map objectives. Many of the macro strategies that have been developed involve coordinating the team on the map so as to maximize the amount of experience being earned.

Each champion has a certain amount of 'health' or 'hit points'. To kill a champion you have to deal enough damage, often while taking damage in return. Such an exchange is quickly complicated by each champion's unique abilities, which can range from 'skillshots' (abilities that have to be aimed and timed correctly using the mouse), to 'utility' (temporary shields, speed boosts, healing, and so on) to 'crowd control' (which displaces, stuns, or otherwise effects other units on the map). When a champion is killed

¹⁸ For clarity, it is important to make a distinction between 'champion' levels and 'summoner' levels. The 'summoner' level is attached to each League of Legends account, and reflects the number of matches they have won or lost. Each match gives a certain amount of experience points until the account reaches level 30. This is in contrast to the 'champion' level, which refers to the level of each champion within a single match.

¹⁹ Power, in this sense, is understood in terms of damage output. When I conducted a review of the League of Legends Patch notes, which chronicle many of the changes made to the game since it started in 2008, I noticed that almost everything revolved around the problem of 'damage'. Whenever the game was updated, a meta game emerged that was based on optimizing damage output. All other adjustments to the meta game were a response to the modes by which damage was being dealt. In the last few years this meta game has become more complex, and discussions around damage output have become more nuanced. Now there are discussions about 'power curves' and 'power spikes', timing and predicting burst damage, and 'controlling' map objectives.

they return to the base and cannot move until the end of a ‘death timer’. The duration of the death timer increases throughout the match.

Using an ability typically involves an ‘expense’ of the champion’s resources. Most champions have a finite amount of ‘mana’, for example, that is expended when they cast their abilities. Other champions use things like ‘energy’ or ‘rage’ to cast their abilities. These resources typically act as tempering mechanisms, a way for the game to balance each champion by controlling the rate at and conditions upon which they use their abilities. When champions are low on health or resources they can return to their team’s base to sit in the ‘fountain’ and regenerate. This is also the time for them to purchase items.

Gold and items

Each champion has six item slots. During the match players earn extra gold primarily by killing units and champions, and by taking objectives. This gold is used to purchase and upgrade items. Most items enhance certain champion statistics, allowing players to deal or, conversely, to sustain more damage. They also include unique effects and abilities. There are currently 178 items to choose from in Summoner’s Rift. Many of these are inexpensive components that combine to make enhanced items. Given that each champion has only six item slots and limited gold income, there is a very complex meta-game developed around maximizing item efficiency, thinking strategically and situationally about the best item ‘build’ for particular champions.

Roles

As I said before, there is a macro game that has developed in order to maximize the amount of experience points earned by the team. The same can be said of earning gold, killing enemy turrets, or getting ‘buffs’ (which are temporary champion enhancements) by killing the neutral monsters that inhabit the jungle. Together, these macro strategies are often referred to as a ‘meta game’: the culmination of tactics and strategies, continuously developed by players in an effort to play the game optimally.²⁰

One of the most prevalent aspects of the current meta game is the ‘role structure’ employed by most 5-player teams. During the early years of professional competitive play, teams started dividing the game into spatial and temporal sections, assigning roles and responsibilities to specific members. These five roles developed as teams struggled to collect resources from the map optimally.²¹ These roles eventually became quite rigid and well-known, and are among the first things that new players learn about the game.

1. The Top-laner, or just ‘Top’, spends the early stages of the game killing minions in the center of the top lane. Top-laners tend to choose champions that can stay in their lane for a long time before having to go back to base and regenerate.

Although it is easy to return to base (by using teleportation), it takes a considerably long time to walk all the way back to centre of the top lane. This lane is also quite far from some of the early contested map objectives, like the

²⁰ Because the ‘meta game’ is always changing, so too is the definition of a ‘meta game’. Not only is the game always changing, with updates and new champions, but so too are the conceptual tools by which we understand the game. For that reason I am attempting to describe the meta game as a process, rather than an identifiable ‘thing’.

²¹ We need not understand the meta game as being focused exclusively on gaining resources, but rather, that this became one of the best known ways for teams to achieve victory.

‘dragon’ that lives near the bottom lane, or the middle-lane turrets.²² As such, the top lane is often considered to be the loneliest lane, where two players struggle against each other, trying to gain an advantage that puts them in a stronger position later in the game.

2. The Jungler spends the early stages of the game killing neutral monsters that dwell in the jungle (the forested area between lanes). Previous macro strategies did not have a Jungler, and instead placed two champions in the top lane. Teams soon found out that if one of those champions focused on killing neutral jungle monsters, they would ultimately end up with more gold and experience points than the enemy team, giving them a level and item advantage. One of the most powerful aspects of the Jungle role is the passive pressure they apply to the map. Junglers are not confined to one lane, and can move covertly through parts of the map that are clouded in a ‘fog of war’. This produces a constant threat for enemy players, unsure of whether or not the Jungler is going to catch them off guard with an ambush, or ‘gank’.
3. The Mid-laner, or ‘Mid’, spends the early stages of the game killing minions in the centre of the middle lane. This lane is the closest to the team’s base, allowing the Mid-laner to return and regenerate without losing too much lane pressure. Because the lane is shorter, minions arrive early, allowing the Mid-laner to gain a level advantage over any other player on the map. As such, most Mid-laners

²² When I say that these objectives are ‘contested’, I mean that they are strategically valuable. Killing the dragon will give your team a ‘buff’. Destroying the enemy’s first middle turret reduces their overall vision of the map, letting you push your minions further down the lane, and opening up the map for early game rotations and control.

choose champions that scale well with levels (meaning they have high base damage statistics).

4. The Attack Damage Carry, or the ‘ADC’, emerged because teams wanted to ensure that they would be able to deal sustained and significant amounts of damage by the mid-to-late stages of the game. The champions that are designed to do this are typically vulnerable during early stages of the game, scaling with items rather than with levels.²³ As such, the ADC is paired with a second player, the Support, who helps protect them and assures that they can ‘farm’ gold by killing minions. Since these two roles work together, they spend the early stages of the game in the centre of the bottom lane, which is closer to the strategically-important ‘dragon’ monster.
5. The Support, as I mentioned, is meant to protect and enable the ADC. As such, the role can be seen as a trade-off: sacrificing damage for utility. Supports choose champions who require little gold or experience points in order to impact the game. Many of the champions they choose can stun or lock down enemies, buff up allies, create zones of displacement, or initiate team fights.

I described these roles for two reasons. The first is because they exemplify the means by which players understand their relationship to the game. We should note that the ‘role’ that each player takes is not a ‘virtual’ role. Rather, it is a set of expectations placed upon their own performance. Champions are strategically chosen in order to optimally perform this role, as are tools from a toolbox or cards from a deck.

²³ You might be curious about how this works. Basically their damage and abilities are enhanced by the *bonus* statistics that they gain from items, rather than the base statistics gained by levels. I mention this because it might help to describe the game, but it also gives you an idea of the ways in which these champions are designed to both structure and restructure the meta game.

The second reason for which I described these roles is to draw attention to the pursuit of victory. Everyone who plays League of Legends eventually learns these roles, usually quite early on. The role structure was not designed by the authors of the game, but instead, in-and-through a struggle by each player to win the game. In a sense they are one of the first ways in which the player is drawn outside the virtual-fantasy realm – asked not to think of their champion as a ‘warrior’ or a ‘mage’, but as a ‘top-laner’, a ‘mid’, or a tool.

The Summoner

When we look at the early promotional materials released by Riot Games, it is clear that they wanted to assure potential players that League of Legends would be a legitimate continuation of the Defense of the Ancients franchise. This is clear in the first theatrical trailer for the game, which mimics Blizzard’s fantasy style, featuring epic (if perhaps absurd) fantasy characters locked in a grand battle. Many of the early champions were directly inspired by popular DotA heroes. We can look at this early stage of development as a process of practice migration: production techniques from an earlier iteration of the genre were being tested in a different context. The League of Legends development team sought to recreate a particular gaming experience. In the process they had to define, describe, and understand that experience. It is interesting to reflect on this early moment in the game’s development, specifically looking at the ways in which its creators understood the role of the player. When we look at the first gameplay walkthrough, for example, we see an early attempt to operate a unique descriptive vocabulary for the game. It is here that we see Tom Cadwell describe a very early

perspective on the role of the player. “In League of Legends,” says Cadwell, “you play a summoner who summons champions to fight enemies, and hopefully win for your team” (League of Legends, 2009).

This, I argue, was a crucial moment in the history of video games. League of Legends would not be like previous fantasy video games, where players come to represent themselves in-and-through a virtual avatar. Instead we see the player written into the cannon of the game. For this reason, League of Legends is a unique and engaging site for the study of the broader social concepts of emplacement and the pursuit of victory. When Cadwell referred to the ‘summoner’ he was describing the actual body of the player, using a computer to ‘summon’ a champion into the virtual world of the game. Henceforth, the player would become the object of knowledge posited by the game itself.

Several years later, and in the account that follows, you will see that this unique virtual-material emplacement has not been abandoned. As you will read in the next chapter, League of Legends went on to expand and develop this ‘playful’ premise.

Chapter IV: An Autoethnographic Account

Me and my rank

It was fall, 2015. I was trying to figure out how to frame my research into League of Legends. I realized that although I had been playing the game for over a year, I could not say that I had a sense its ‘culture’. It was as if my interactions with other players were muffled by an Internet connection. It was hard to say anything general about the game or its players – I did not know many players, and the ones I knew were not forthcoming. I was beginning to worry that my autoethnographic account of the game would not feature any voice beyond the rambling fool in my head.²⁴ So it was that I found myself in a Carleton University residence commons filled with tables. The floor was a net of wires. There were perhaps a hundred people milling about, and half as many computers. This was the first official event put on by the newly formed Carleton University E-Sports Association. The feature was a League of Legends tournament. I was there because I was curious about the scene. My plan was to take a look around, meet some people, and talk about the game –but that never happened. Instead, upon surveying the room I became uncharacteristically shy.

I pondered this as I took a seat in the corner, hoping to go unnoticed. Although they were strangers, I knew their type. They were young students, mostly men, marked by all the greasy-haired awkwardness I would expect of a group of gamers.²⁵ Then, as I looked around, I came to recognize a more intimidating type of person: the *cool-as-shit*

²⁴ Which, I acknowledge, has come to be true.

²⁵ Of course this is hyperbole.

gamers. These guys swaggered around like they were famous – ‘*Are they famous?*’, I wondered, they might have been big-time Twitch streamers for all I knew.²⁶ I wondered how high ranked they were. ‘*Platinum? Diamond, maybe?*’ They made me feel insecure, I felt as if I was among my betters. This was when I recognized the source of my uncharacteristic shyness, for in that moment my greatest fear was that somebody would ask about my rank.

I was *bronze*, the lowest of the low. There were over a million players ranked above me in North America. I felt this rank like a burden, I worried they could read it on my face. If so they would see a noob, a halfwit, a low-ranking gamer ‘scrub’.

‘How embarrassing.’

But wait a second, why did I care about my rank in a video game? I was a self-respecting 28-year-old graduate student, a father of two, I had much of which to be proud. Besides, I had studied the ranking system, I knew that my rank was mostly trivial: it was largely a measure of the amount of time I could devote to the game, which, despite being an average of over 3 hours a day, was less than most unencumbered first-year students. My rank in League of Legends had no discernable impact on my life, yet here at this tournament my virtually-ascribed identifier somehow mattered.

It was then that I realized something profound about this game. League of Legends was the first game I had ever played in which my virtual performance and my physical body were inextricable. It was the first game to call attention to me, as a player, a human, and a body: standing at attention; confined and contingent. I was written into

²⁶ Twitch is a website where players can stream their gaming. Most Twitch streams feature real-time screen-captured video of the game, with a webcam of the streamer in the corner. Some streamers are very popular. ‘*imaqtpie*’, for example, streams daily to a regular audience of around 20,000.

the canon of the game – not as a character who happened to resemble me, or a distanced virtual avatar with whom I identified – but as an inhabited, somatically singular individual. I could not escape the limits of my own abilities, I could not *play pretend*, hiding behind a virtual avatar. When I played League of Legends, my virtual performance was my own performance.

This experience was unique to League of Legends. If I were attending any other event, I would not have felt such reticence. If, for example, I were meeting fellow role-players from *World of Warcraft*, I would not have been worried about anybody knowing my virtual standings. That is because although I was invested in my *World of Warcraft* characters – although I spent countless hours in their virtual shoes – they were something *other* than myself: I was not my Night Elf hunter; I was not my Undead rogue.²⁷ In contrast, when I play League of Legends I am only myself: I *am* a ‘summoner’; I *am* a ‘low-ranked scrub’; I *am* my match history.

I may not have met anyone interesting at the E-Sports event, but I did learn something new. I learned that my supposedly ‘virtual’ existence could follow me around in the ‘actual’ world. I came to reflect how this might have happened. How did my rank *invest* me? How was this ‘self’ made true? What follows, then, is an account of this trajectory.

²⁷ This is because World of Warcraft was, for me, a role-playing game: a performance inscribed on a virtual body. However, we should acknowledge many of the gaming elements that are in League of Legends can be found in World of Warcraft, which also features a fairly well-developed ‘competitive scene’.

Beginnings

If this is to be an account of my experience playing League of Legends, then I should start from the beginning. At the place where it all started. Bear in mind that there are other beginnings, as always. But the beating heart of my own experience starts in my office.

My office

My office extends off the south side of my house. It has a slightly sloped tin roof that leaks in the spring. You can feel the open air breeze, even when the windows are closed. Office temperatures range from just above freezing to just below boiling, depending on the season. Inside you will find neglected houseplants, a bookshelf, a fuzzy brown couch that does not smell like cigarette smoke, and clutter. So much clutter. You will also find my ‘stand-up desk’: an old Ikea kitchen table propped up on 1x1 spindles to a height of 39 inches, screwed into the wall for stability. On the desk I have a custom built computer in a large black box, two monitors, a mismatched keyboard, a sketchy wireless mouse, and a glorious set of studio speakers. I do not keep a tidy desk.

Acting on the advice of my younger brother – misguided or otherwise – I downloaded League of Legends in August of 2014. I had some spare time before I began graduate school in September.

It is not remarkable that I started playing a new video game. I have always played video games. When I was young my parents brought these massive government ‘laptop’ computers home from work. I would set them up on the dining room table and play games like *Asteroids* and *Descent*. Later we got a desktop computer. My brothers and I

would fight for turns playing games like *Road Rash*, *Warcraft*, and the original *Grand Theft Auto*.

When I turned fourteen I got my own personal computer and started playing games in the privacy of my bedroom. There, without my brothers hovering like carrion, ‘solo games’ began to take on a new meaning. I could no longer turn to my older brother if I got stuck on a level. I could no longer stick around after my turn to see how someone else played. So when these challenges arose I turned to the Internet, seeking help on search engines, bulletin boards, or discussion groups. My private digital life was formed in conjunction with my gaming. It fostered a more intimate relationship to video games. It is not as if I gamed in isolation, but rather, that gaming became a personal practice, something that was integrated into my life; a style of living. So when my wife and I found our first house, with just enough space for an office, that style of living moved in with us.

My office tells you something about my conditions, something about who I am. At the time it was a very important part of my intellectual and recreational life. It was also a negotiation of space, improvised and adjusted over time. Before I started playing League of Legends my computer was set up for paper writing, research, and internet browsing. The arrangement was suitable for playing League. I played the game on my left monitor, while the right monitor sat portrait style on a stand I made with two screws and a block of scrap wood. Over time my right-side monitor became convenient because it allowed me to reference information – things like game guides, statistics, player profiles, and so on – while playing the game on the left. League of Legends did not *require* a second monitor, but it was a resource I came to make use of.

Installation and registration

The installation process was straightforward. The game is free to play and designed with compatibility in mind. I downloaded a small piece of software that would act as my ‘client’, connecting me to the League of Legends servers. After checking for software updates I was prompted to launch the game. It was then that I was confronted a number of legal agreements. I was prompted to agree to the End-User Licence Agreement and a disclaimer. After this I was asked to register an account, once again agreeing to an End-User License Agreement as well as their Terms of Use and Privacy Policy. Eager to learn and explore a new game, I went through the routine registration process unthinkingly. I was curious, and as such, I did not think much about the web of connections that was made when I signed up for League of Legends.

These connections were subtle at first. So it is easy to overlook how this registration process situated me within a legal, governmental, and regulatory discourse. Few people actually read these sorts of policies. In this case, by clicking ‘agree’ I signed off on more than 18,000 words of legal language. It would be hard to describe this as a form of subjectification or embodiment, meshed as I was within a written legal framework. Rather, it is as if I was being framed or positioned in a particular way. It is as if a kingdom was being established, over which Riot Games was sovereign. This was unambiguously stated in the Terms of Use policy, in which Riot Games reserved the right to ‘suspend, terminate, modify or delete my account at any time for any reason or no reason’ (Riot Games, 2012). By agreeing, I was being brought into this realm as a ‘client’, or an ‘end-user’: access to the game was conditional; a privilege. I suppose at the time I thought of this as a negotiation. I agreed to let Riot Games manage and govern my

conduct within the game, while remaining reasonably confident that this legal agreement was confined to the game. In exchange I got to play the game for free.

These digital connections are commonplace. As users, we know that our virtual identification exists as a sort of phantom, only vaguely connected to our body. I knew, for example, that at that point in time Riot Games could not actually connect this account to my body. They did not have my real name, nor did they ask; they did not have my address, or Social Insurance Number.²⁸ This relationship was one of consent and convenience, I was being placed within a certain category of people: people who ‘agree’ to be subjects.

It is interesting to see how this subtle arrangement underwrites the way players understand their relationship to the game. For instance, early in 2015 Riot Games announced that they would be introducing something called ‘chroma packs’ to the game. This was met with a lot of criticism from the community, who saw it as a money grab. One of the ways in which League of Legends makes money is by selling champion ‘skins’. Skins are visual upgrades for champions, a sort of cosmetic enhancement. Often these skins take a lot of labour to produce and can involve new visuals, voice acting, and animations. ‘Chroma packs’, on the other hand, were simply recoloured versions of the base champion skins. Many in the player community saw ‘chroma packs’ as a lazy or low-cost way to sell a similar product, and a number of scathingly critical posts made it to the front page of the League of Legends subreddit. It is interesting to note that regardless of on which side of the debate they fell, almost every argument about ‘chroma

²⁸ This is not true for players who reside in South Korea, where a 13-digit resident registration number is used for much of their online interactions, including League of Legends. This number is registered along with a fingerprint. Riot Games has reportedly used this number to manage and punish various accounts. See (jacoblol7, 2016)

packs' acknowledged that Riot Games surely had the right to do whatever they want.

People might have been critical of the way the game was changed, but nobody questioned Riot Games' authority to make changes.

Although my connection to the game was minimal at first, this soon escalated. After signing up for the game I learned that Riot Games would reward my account if I connected it to various digital capillaries. If I wanted these rewards I had to 'like' League of Legends on Facebook, 'Follow' them on Twitter, 'Subscribe' to them on YouTube, and validate my email address. By doing so, I gave Riot Games some of the most productive digital identifiers available. My email address and social media profiles are keys to a cluster of digital profiling information collected and sold by companies like Facebook and Google. This meant that before I ever played the game I was threaded into a relationship with League of Legends –a fairly skewed relationship, if you consider the wealth of personal data to which they had access. Yet was I 'made true' by this arrangement? Were these connections attached to my body? Unlikely. Because the registration process is free and easy, many people have more than one account.²⁹ Many of the extra accounts have been forgotten or abandoned. What is subjectification without a

²⁹ Players are permitted to sign up for multiple accounts, which is probably why the total number of accounts according to Riot Games is surprisingly large. In 2014 Riot Games boasted 67 million League of Legends accounts in total, while an average of only 27 million accounts play the game each day, and a peak of only 7.5 million accounts are active concurrently (Tassi, 2014). While it is reasonable to assume that League of Legends is currently the most popular competitive video game in the world, we cannot know for certain how many players there are – at least not without further research. Even so, it is surprising to see how many scholars describe the size of the game using these statistics. Kou and Nardi (2013), for example wrote that in 2011 League of Legends hosted 32 million 'registered players', which is more than three times the record 10 million users that World of Warcraft had at its peak (p. 616). This number is dubious for two reasons. First, the number comes from the Riot Games CEO, who is quite obviously motivated to make the game seem popular. Unlike games that are distributed through retail platforms like Steam (which is like Amazon for games), there are no third-parties collecting detailed information about player accounts. Second, as I said before, many players sign up for multiple accounts. In the case of World of Warcraft, it was reasonable to assume that each account belonged to a unique individual because each account costs a monthly subscription fee.

human host? For those accounts that remain active, however, the registration process acts as a sort of groundwork. At the time I was little aware of the positioning that had occurred, I was not ‘emplaced’, or critical of my location within a discourse. It was only later that I came to recognise this.

When I logged into the client I was asked to create a ‘Summoner name’. Without much thought I used my gamer tag from World of Warcraft, ‘Xenait’, a meaningless word that sounded cool when I was sixteen. Unfamiliar with the client, I was struck by how much it spoke of a larger community.

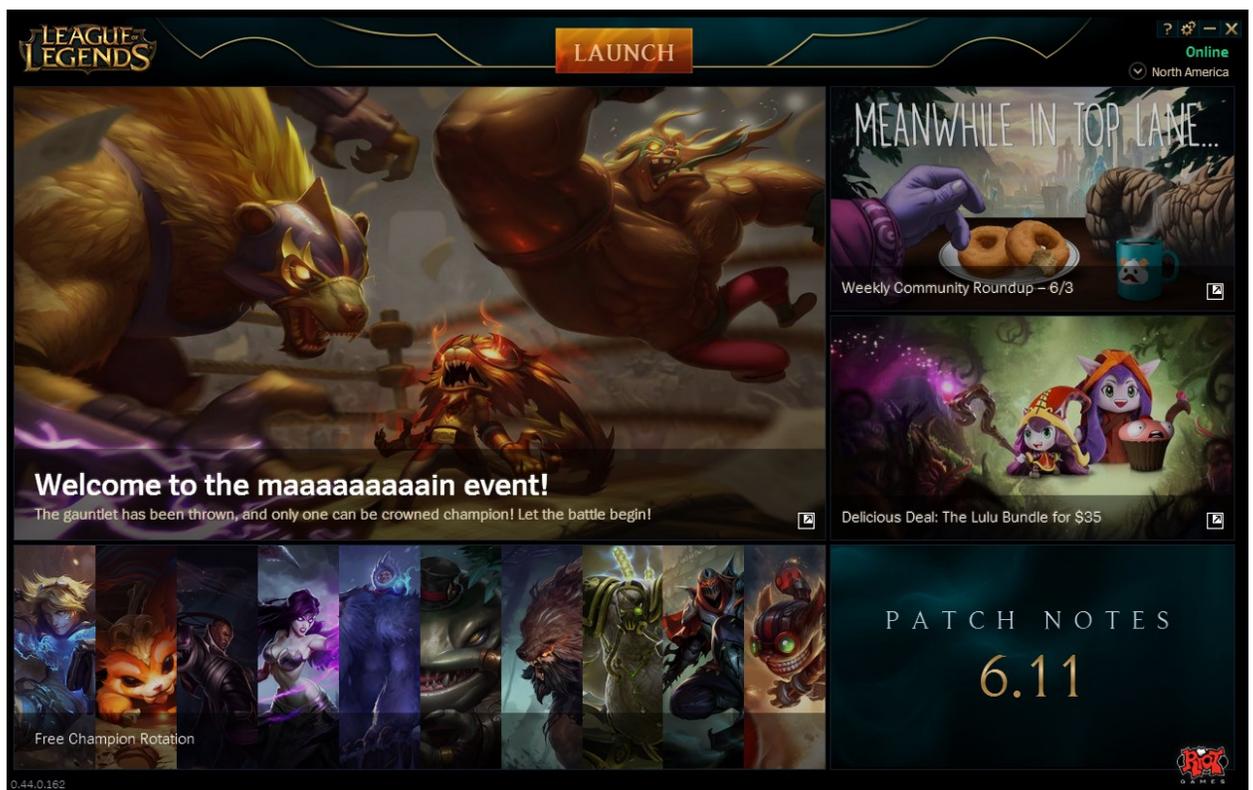


Figure 11: The login screen from the League of Legends client.

The home screen was broken up into tiles, each one had a colourful image or video. By clicking on these displays I would be sent to various locations in the community: forum discussions, development plans, fan-made videos, competitive games, art, and so on.

Even though the game client was its own piece of software, it acted as a hub through which the game could spill into other sectors, sending me to my internet browser; drawing me into a network of peripheral arrangements; a palette by which I could shape my experience of the game. It almost felt like looking at a print newspaper: there was something for everyone. The game – or the experience of gameplay subsumed by the client – was understood as the hub of this activity; the main street running through a cultural event.

Being a new player

The first few weeks of gameplay were a whirlwind of learning. There was very little disciplinary infrastructure for new players. League of Legends was unlike most games, where a variety of handcrafted quests, campaigns, or levels are designed to gradually train players on specific aspects of the game. In this case there were only a few brief tutorials before I found myself on Summoner's Rift, sword in hand, wondering what the hell was going on.

That was how I felt for a while. Generally confused, slightly bemused, and utterly useless. A discomforting restlessness was always present, spidering around the edge of my consciousness. Most new video games involve a period of awkward orientation. I had to adjust to the controls; the premise; the logic of the virtual space. Yet this was something more, something I could not put my finger on until I started thinking about the virtual-material conflict.

Virtual-material conflict

My initial sense of unease came from the map itself. It was much like many of the fantasy-themed strategy games I had played in the past. A third-person perspective allowed me to view the grander, map-wide scale of conflict. What bothered me was quite simple: the map was big and I was small; it was vast and I was lost.

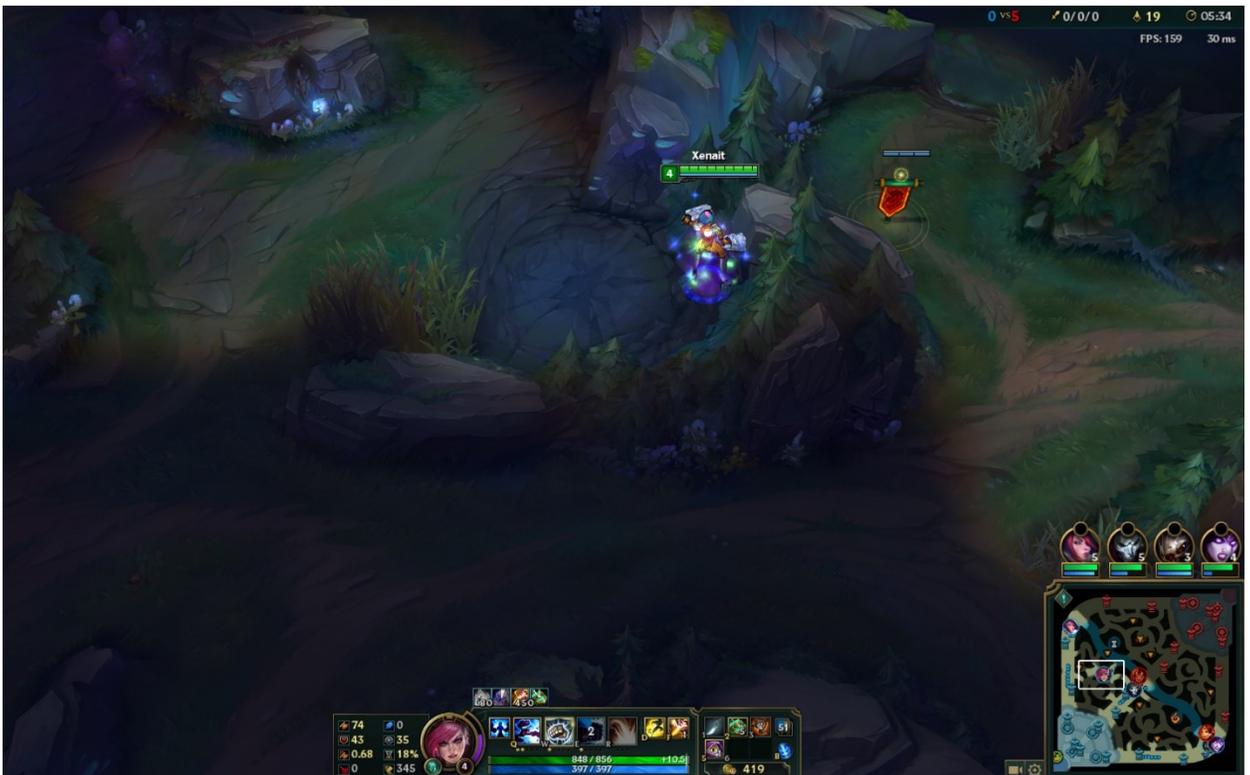


Figure 12: I used Vi to place a vision ward on the other side of a rock. You can see the shadows from the Fog of War.

Dangers lurked in the darkness of the game. That was the tension that irked me. I wanted to zoom out because I wanted to be able to see more of the map. As you can see in the image above, Summoner's Rift was shrouded in a blanket of darkness: a 'fog of war' in which enemies could be hiding. The 'fog of war' was a game mechanic that went back to early real-time strategy games like Starcraft. I was familiar with the effect: the fog

allowed me to see the static topographical features of the map while hiding any non-allied activities. That meant that in the shadows lurked a range of unseen threats.

More importantly, in shadows was the *unknown*. Naïve as I was, being so new to the game, I was painfully aware of my own lack of knowledge. Looking back now, I see myself like a child in a dangerous world: I knew just enough to be scared, but not enough to avoid exploitation.³⁰ I learned very quickly that this darkness could be used to setup an ambush, push for an objective, or hide enemy movements. Vision was the condition upon which I could know and act strategically, and in a game where individual decisions are so important, this became an obstacle around which I struggled.

Against the shadows stood my champion. As I maneuvered my champion around the map, her vision extended out around her in a circle, shedding light on that which was previously shrouded. This was what I understood as my virtually-afforded capacity to see, know, and act. According to what I tacitly understood about video games, *her* vision should be *my* vision. As I understood it, an immersive experience required as much. So I wanted to be able to zoom out more. Using the scroll of my mouse I found that I could zoom *in* quite a bit, but when I zoomed out I too-quickly found a limit. At first I thought that this restricted perspective could be fixed by adjusting my ‘camera’ settings. Soon after my first few games I watched a player-made video that instructed new players to ‘unlock’ their camera. Relieved, I re-entered the game only to discover that unlocking my camera only allowed me to shift my camera laterally across the map, and that the

³⁰ Once again I do not mean to suggest that children are incapable. Perhaps it is because most children have not spent much time in the darkness that they do not understand it. At any rate, I mean to suggest that, like a child, I was actively aware of the world around me, but that awareness was limited by my lack of experience.

camera's ascension was still limited. *'What's with this game'*, I wondered *'why can't I zoom out?'*

The problem was that I could not see the full circle of vision afforded by my champion's virtual presence; the frame was restricted by the limit of my monitor. The camera's angle, scope, and direction were fixed, and as a result the rectangular field of vision afforded by my monitor would not zoom out far enough to allow me to see the full extent of my virtually-enabled circle of vision.

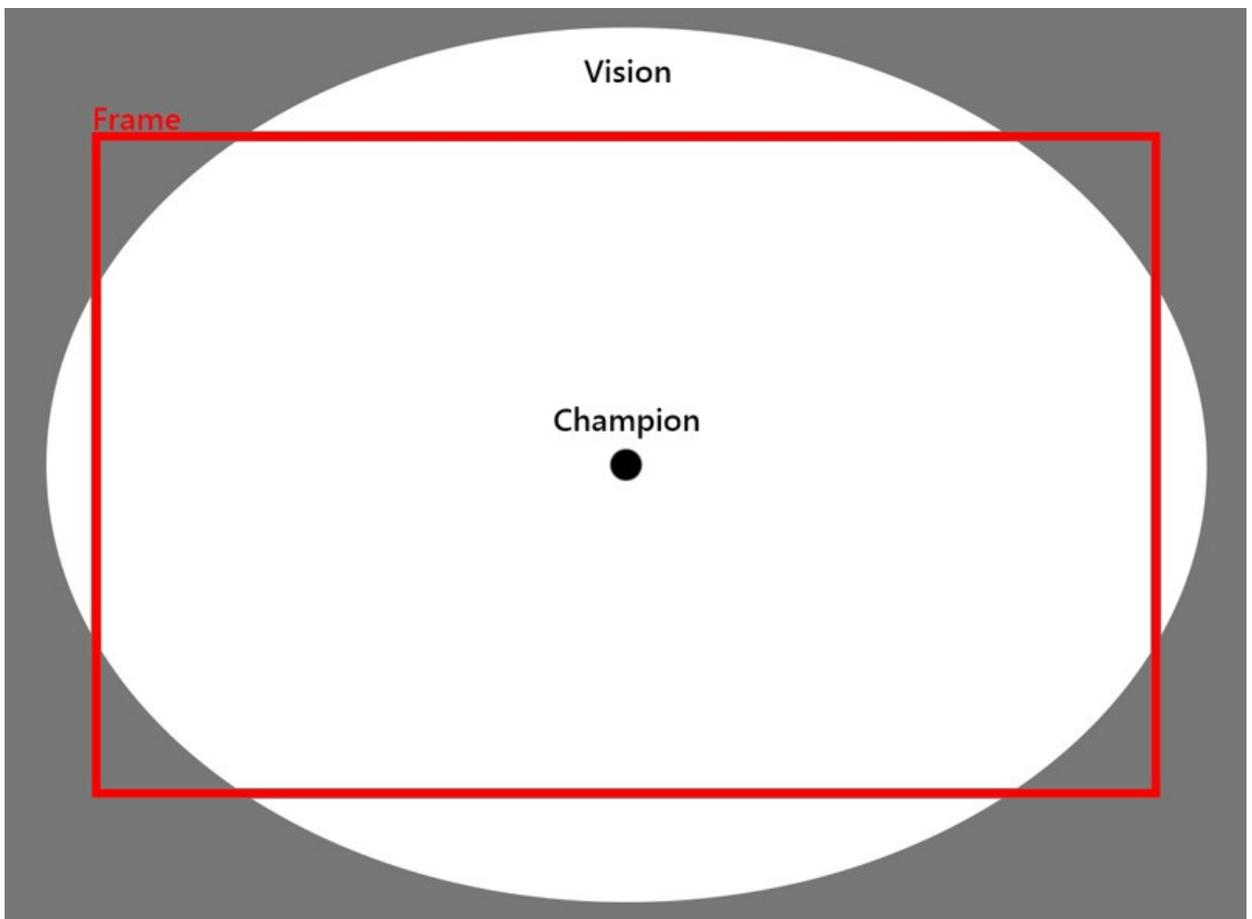


Figure 13: In this diagram the red rectangle represents the vision afforded by my monitor, while the white circle represents the vision afforded by my champion.

On all four sides of the frame there was an extra bit of vision that I could not see without shifting the camera's perspective. The result was a sort of vignette effect, where the

corners of the field of vision were dark and the rest of the space was fully visible. Consider how this perspective maliciously played on a virtual ideal, game mechanics, and the materiality of the game itself. My champion's circular field of vision represented a 'virtual reality': it was an element of the game, beholden to the dynamics of the map itself. If I had been able to zoom all the way out I would have seen the *whole* of my champion's vision, like a god looking down on a man holding a torch in the dark of night. With this narrow and limited perspective, I found that I had to shift my camera's position around the map in order to see what I ought to have been able to see. It made me recognize the map, the screen, and then 'me': emplaced within a virtual-material arrangement.

The frustration that I felt came from the fact that this was an artificial constraint. It was as if the game designers were mocking me for having a computer screen, as if they were refusing to let me fully enter this virtuality. We see, then, how the limited field of view becomes a brutal sort of thing: a harsh reality that defies conventional logic of virtuality. In a sense I could not extend myself; I could not be present in a virtual world. This was the shattering of a relational premise that I had known since I started playing video games as a child: the idea that I should be 'there' and not 'here'. The virtual-material conflict produced by the constricted camera perspective emplaced me within a discourse, provoking an awareness. Thus we can see that, rather than duping or manipulating the player, the game provoked an *emplaced* player: active and situationally-aware.

I do not know if the reduced vision mechanic was intentionally designed, nor if it was designed with this effect in mind. However, by encouraging players to adopt a

practice of ‘vision awareness’, the game cleverly provoked a project of self-skilling. Confronted by this emplacement, or by this challenge, I started learning how to shift my perspective quickly around the map, keeping an eye on the minimap, and placing vision wards on the other side of obstacles. I learned about a ‘vision meta-game’, defined and described in guides and videos.

Rather than allowing me to adjust my perspective in accordance with the logic of the virtual space, the game required me to adjust *myself*. I looked to the prescriptive apparatus, learning the logic and theory behind the vision meta. I consulted maps for the best ward placements, how to time and predict the movement of unseen enemies, and learned the ‘jungle paths’ that exploit the enemy’s lack of vision. At one point I started playing the game with a metronome, chiming every 3 seconds to remind me to check my minimap. I did not know it at the time, but this would be the first in a long list of small projects that I took on in pursuit of victory.

Whether it was intentionally designed or not, the vision meta literally shed light on certain aspects of the game, teaching players learn to watch the minimap, to keep an eye on their allies, and to place wards near objectives or gank paths.

Knowing my newness

September came with an onslaught of commitments. A full load of graduate courses met with my regular duties as an adult, a father, and a fairly dependable friend to produce a slurry of obligations. I had hobbies too, of course, all of which were neglected as my spare time went into playing League of Legends. The simple task of accessing the game became a strategic objective. I found that if I got the kids to bed early I could

accommodate an extra match. I could also fit a match in during nap time if my older one was fully occupied. Eventually I started sacrificing sleep for gaming.

Because it was difficult to fit more than one or two matches into each day, I tried to make the most of each session. ‘Learning’ eventually became ‘practicing’, which in turn became analyzing and self-criticizing. Every time I queued up for a match I felt an old knot of muscles kick into gear: hard-worn tools for self-improvement; the modes by which I lean into a new challenge. This old muscle was made up of many things: the ‘gamer’ I already was; the attention strategies of a struggling student; the disciplinary practices pressed into me by my long-suffering violin teacher; the style of correspondent coordination I picked up in hockey, always the underdog, always the upstart. Each match was precious and incremental; a revision of my previous self; a step out of the crypt of impartial knowledge.

Late one night, or perhaps nearing morning, I found myself staring blankly at a now-familiar graphic: ‘Defeat’, it said simply.

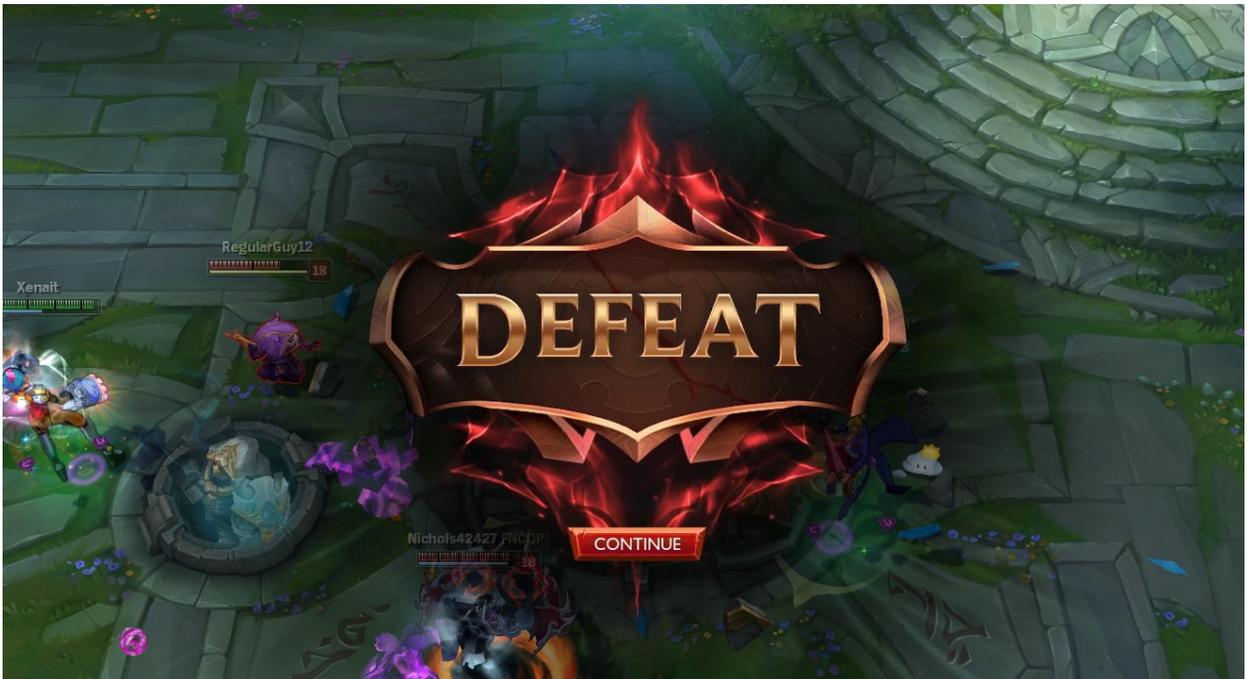


Figure 14: This ‘DEFEAT’ screen mysteriously showed up at the end of most of my games.

The match had been a stomp, the enemy team got ahead early and pushed hard down the middle lane. Team communications had been toxic and brutal, much of which was directed at my poor performance. I realized then that I had devoted most of my night to this game – to a game that was far more frustrating than it was fun, or perhaps it was mostly baffling. I was not particularly bothered by my ineptitude – after all I had only recently signed up for the game – but I was surprised by just how little impact a new player could have. I realized that this was a game where individual decisions were paramount; a game where the player assumed a central role in the turning of events, over which they had little control over; events for which I was not prepared.

Looking back I see that I was unqualified. The short tutorials provided by the game were outdated and misinformed. My understanding of the game was basic: I knew

what the controls were, that I should try to kill minions, and the general idea of trying to push forward into the enemy base. But I was never instructed on *how* to play the game: how to make use of what was available to me, how to fill a role on my team, what strategies to employ, or what items I should buy.

After the match I was placed in the post-game lobby. Frustrated, I tried to ‘read’ the feedback provided by the client. The post-match statistics were robust. They told me what level my champion was when the match ended, how much gold I earned, how many minions and ‘creeps’ I killed, how many champions I killed, how many champions I helped kill, how many times I died, and much more.

Level	Champion	K/D/A	Minions	Champions	Gold	CS
13	Xenait Wukong	9/1/3	15	1	9.9k	100
12	Dobek Tristana	8/0/3	12	0	8.8k	132
13	matthewsim Teemo	1/1/2	13	1	7.5k	143
10	bilboteabaggins8 Lulu	0/2/10	10	2	5.9k	11
13	Shino Matsuta Maokai	3/2/5	13	2	7.3k	110
12	teoteul Kayle	1/3/1	12	3	5.9k	124
12	Leyude Galio	3/4/3	12	4	6.2k	82
10	RetardedSalebote Twitch	0/7/2	10	7	5.3k	90
11	Majiklx92 Nidalee	2/7/1	11	7	5.7k	57
9	SpeshilSubmarin Taric	0/0/3	9	0	4.4k	24

Figure 15: this is a screenshot of some of the stats that the client displays after the game.

I realized that these statistics were meaningless without further signification; without context. I knew that I was making mistakes, but I could not discern what they were.

Then I came to a brutal realization: League of Legends was a game that relied heavily on the skilling of an individual it made absolutely no effort to train. I was like an

untrained soldier, thrown into a hopeless battle and given endless tries at success. I felt as if the only way forward was to take improvement on as my own endeavor.

It might have been easier if I had been playing the ‘ranked’ mode. Ranked games were tracked so that every player could be placed on a ladder, providing a single, coherent number that signified progress. Many of the guides I read said stuff like ‘Bronze players have to do this to get better’, or ‘this is what you have to do to get into Gold’. Unfortunately, because my account was so new I could not sign up for ranked matches until I reached level 30. At the time this required over 40,000 ‘experience points’. The average match would earn me about 130 points if I won, and 70 points if I lost. Even if I maintained a 50% win rate (which I likely did not), I would have had to play about 400 games before I got my account to level 30, which took me until December.

This period of time acted as an extended probationary period. It is almost as if I was trying to prepare for the professional world: there were gaps in my resume, missing qualifications, and behind it all a genuine lack of experience. I was being pushed deeper and deeper into the nuanced complexity of the game. I was being prepared for the self-made stage of ranked competitive play.

The practical impact of private self-reflection

In January I started studying League of Legends in two ways. The first was that I started applying sociological concepts to my experience of the game, reflecting on my experience, and writing about it. The second study was a concerted effort to expand my knowledge of the game. Neither study was particularly distinct. My sociological questions were part of the questions I asked about the game and *vice versa*. In the

following passage, which I wrote in one of my term papers, we can see how both of these lines of inquiry often drove in the same direction:

Apparently I can no longer turn my head off and relax. Like most players, I play League of Legends with focused intensity. Even so, I cannot help but think critically; analyzing my experience, asking seemingly unnecessary questions. Am I invested in this game or has it invested me? Is this a meaningless hobby or a powerful daily ritual? Am I a user, a player, or a gamer? Is League of Legends a service, a game, or a social space? Something important must be going on here. I am obsessed with this game, it impacts my thoughts: nothing so immediate could be insignificant. It occurs to me that I am *subject* to this game, even if I come to it willingly.

At the time I jokingly ‘blamed’ sociology for making me critically reflexive, as if my sociological training meant that I could no longer relax.³¹ Yet the truth was that the game demanded a lot from me, just as much as a sociological mode of thinking. Indeed, I found that my study of the game – my efforts to learn concepts that were applicable to the game – often filled the idle moments of my life; furnishing the gaps in my mundane daily activities. League of Legends increasingly became a part of my private life.

Idle life

I should explain what I mean by ‘idle time’. One mid-January morning I was waiting at one of Ottawa’s tranquil frigid bus stops. It was one of those days when the

³¹ At least I hope this is a joke.

cold hits your bones like a barb; raw and unrelenting. I was pondering the weather when I realized that I had been unwittingly pivoting in one spot, slowly rotating so that the low southern sun would thaw me out evenly. *'I'm spinning like a rotisserie chicken'*, I thought, *'Front. Side. Back. Side. Repeat'*.

Having had this thought, I wondered if it might be clever. Nobody at the bus stop seemed engaging, so I shook off my mittens, dug out my smartphone, and composed a tweet. Then I copied the tweet into a Facebook status update because I worried that I would not get feedback from any of my 68 Twitter followers. Idle time indeed.

My hands were cold but Facebook was distracting so I pressed on. Scrolling through my feed I read whatever caught my eye, pursued a couple unproductive questions, and responded to a text. I avoided checking the weather. Rest assured that when the bus arrived I was hard at work studying League of Legends, sifting through Reddit, saving particularly informative articles about League of Legends, and adding instructional YouTube videos to my 'watch later' list.

Although they are often overlooked, idle moments such as this make up a style of living. Because my time in front of the computer was so limited, these idle moments became opportunities to learn more about League of Legends. I reached into a world defined by keywords and Google search results, producing my own kind of community; my own kind of locus upon which I could know the game beyond gameplay. These idle moments gave me the opportunity to reflect on my gaming; to review my actions and decisions in light of a broad body of prescriptive texts. In-and-through this manifold digital existence League of Legends became an object to reflect on; something to solve in my head; theorize and strategize around. I drew that which I had learned implicitly and

reactively into the realm of the propositional. Yet in doing so, defeat became a personal confrontation. I was perpetually aware of how little I knew about the game, and how far there was to go.

This was about the time when I started recognizing the meta game. The meta game was a style of play; a response to a matrix of immanent decisions prompted by the changing structure of the game, as well as the structural rules put in place by the players themselves. There were many styles by which an individual player could play the game. There are also many different ‘team compositions’ that would work, especially in relation to the ‘composition’ of the other team. Over time I began to recognize my own place within the meta.

Like newsreading

When I started integrating news and updates about League of Legends into my daily life, it became a part of my private routine. I followed the game in much the same way as I follow the news. It became a ‘style of living’, reminiscent of the way William Stephenson (1964) described the practice of newspaper reading. When Stephenson (1964) looked at newspaper reading, he posed an important question: can we explain newspaper reading as a form of play? This question would be especially well suited for the present, as the media is increasingly understood as a political battleground: much has been written about “the complex relationship between play, media, and identity in contemporary culture” (Frissen, Lammes, de Lange, de Mul, & Raessens, 2015, p. 10). Stephenson (1964) may have been one of the first scholars to frame media consumption (in the form of newspaper reading) as a form of play. He argued that people would have read the newspaper, even if they already knew what was in it:

People are apt to want to read about something they already know about: they see a football match and then are doubly pleased to see it again on the television rerun; they read about it again the next day in the newspaper and are delighted to read further commentaries about it the day after that again. (p. 368)

Thus the practice of newspaper reading was not simply a way to gain important information about current events, not simply a way to alleviate the fear of the unknown: for Stephenson (1964), it was a practice of self-recognition.

Who hasn't claimed that his paper is better than the bare truth could attest? In reading a newspaper, who has not caught himself being self-important, or being effective (where others in the world outside are blundering along, making mistakes *we* wouldn't make)? Who hasn't caught glimpses of his own incomparable good sense, his keener discernment and more accurate appraisal of affairs? The self is everywhere in the reading, as it is in the child playing. (p. 370)

In this sense, newspaper reading is like trying out different faces in the mirror: it allows us to 'play' with different perspectives, roles, or expressions. In terms of emplacement, we can see how newspaper reading allows us to 'catch a glimpse' of a self, instantiated in stories and commentaries. This is especially true because newspaper reading is a private practice. That is to say that when we read the newspaper, we do it silently, internally; performing for nobody but ourselves.

I was doing as much in my own consumption of prescriptive literature. It allowed me to set myself within different contexts: 'me as a platinum ranked player', or 'what it

would be like if I were mechanically talented’, or ‘what the enemy jungler is going to do now’. We might trivialize video games, but consider the ‘self’ that is ‘made-true’ through the mundane, everyday practice of reading these prescriptive texts, how it filled the idle moments of my day, how I was living a whole variety of experiences in my imagination. All of this was attached to an ongoing project of self-improvement.

Playing Ranked

Two important rules for climbing

As the winter dragged on I started trying to apply my growing League of Legends knowledge to the game. Riot Games described playing ranked as a competitive ‘career’ (Riot Games, n.d.). I knew that it involved ‘promotions’, and that most players sought to have a few well-learned champions in their portfolio. I will not pretend that I did not recognize how much this smacked of neoliberalism. I could see the ‘enterprise self’ emerge in the increments of success, measured by my post-game statistics: every win, outplay, or sign of improvement. These small victories were added to my own personal *découpage*, like a script or a plan according to which I envisioned progress.

At this point, player guides, advice, and textual discussions about the game were a part of my every-day life. I was consuming prescriptive knowledge rapidly. Although ‘climbing the ranks’ was the central focus of almost every guide, there were plenty of different ways to do this. Most pieces of advice were procedural: ‘play this champion because they are strong’, or ‘try to push the top lane if the enemy is taking Dragon’. This kind of advice can quickly overwhelm, like trying to remember cascading lists on top of lists.

The idea, then, was that if I acquired enough game knowledge and governed my conduct according to a set of procedural rules, I could climb the ranked ladder. Together these guides produced a sort of ethos, a way of being and doing things that would help me win. Above all there were two general rules for climbing the ranks that almost every guide placed at the top. The first was to *win games*, and the second was to *play to improve*. I will walk you through both of these suggestions, one at a time.

Win games

The first way to climb the ranks is the literally true. Winning games is the only way to climb the ranks. Each win or loss changes your place on the ranked ladder. The ‘ladder’ is broken up into six different tiers, the lowest being ‘Bronze’ and the highest being ‘Master’ and ‘Challenger’ (however, the highest two tiers are considered to be a

league of their own).



Figure 16: From 2013, the League of Legends ranked tiers from Bronze to Challenger, excluding ‘Master’, had not yet been introduced. (Young, 2013)

After my first 10 ‘placement’ games I was placed into Bronze 3: the third division of the lowest tier. At this point I already knew that frustration was a part of this game, so while I was disappointed with my rank, I also knew that I wanted to change it.

In order to understand the logic behind the first rule of climbing the ranks (to win games), we need to take a closer look at how the ranking system worked. Riot Games initially used something called the ‘Elo system’ to determine each player’s rank. Sometime in 2013 Riot Games changed the Elo system to what they henceforth called the “Match Making Rating” (MMR) system. MMR attempted to match players of approximate skill when setting up the teams for a match. It also determined how many

‘League Points’ (LP) each player won or lost at the end of a match. Riot Games does not show players an exact number for their MMR, nor do they explain in detail how the number is calculated.³² However, the MMR system is described as a variation of the Elo system, the main difference being that the exact rating number given to each player is hidden. This means that players no longer know for sure what their exact Elo rating number is, and are forced to speculate. However, third party websites have been able to estimate players’ MMR by tracking game statistics and looking at how players are matched.

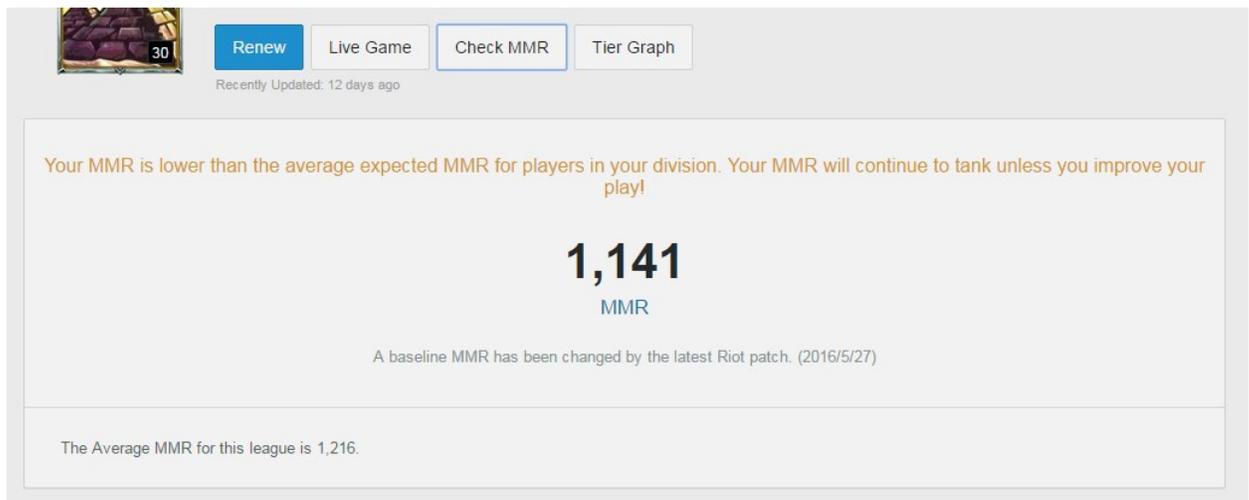


Figure 17: This is a screencap of my Match Making Rating according to a third-party website called OP.GG. Named after Arpad Elo, the Elo system was initially designed to rank chess players (“Elo rating system,” 2016). In chess, the Elo system attempted to predict the outcome of each match according to the difference in each player’s relative ‘skill rating’. If the prediction

³² One of the reasons they made this change was because the Elo system was being exploited. For example, there was one trick where if you dodged all 10 of your placement matches (that means you closed your client during the champion selection phase, cancelling the match) you would be put in the lowest rank division. Yet because you never actually lost any of your games, your Elo number would hold at the initial starting value of 1300. Then, if you won your first game in the bronze division, you would immediately slingshot into a very high division. This exploit was fixed, but by hiding the exact rating number, Riot Games can prevent people from making other calculated manipulative maneuvers.

was correct then the skill difference was confirmed, if it was wrong then the each player's ratings were adjusted. In the absence of any other factors, it was ift that this system would align the player's 'predicted relative skill rating' to their 'true relative skill rating'. This proved to be problematic in League of Legends.

If a chess match ended unexpectedly (so if the projected loser won the match), there would be no question as to the circumstances of that individual match. It is not as if the game was different that time: both players faced off on the same 64 squares and had full authority over the same 16 pieces; the pawns were pawns and the knights were knights –no defectors. In other words, victory or defeat were very much determined by *specific, identifiable decisions made by the individual*. Both players could immediately be slotted into their new place within the hierarchy of the population, according to the newly established measure of their relative skill.

The Elo system worked for chess because it was a static, comprehensive, 1-versus-1 game. In contrast, League of Legends is considerably more dynamic. The rules of the game – which are themselves much more complex – are constantly in flux. Bi-weekly updates to the game introduce or adjust things like champions, items, abilities, and so on. I would read one week that a certain champion was 'overpowered' – *'a good option for easy wins'* – then next week that champion would be 'nerfed' by the design team, pushed out of the 'meta', and less impactful. The gamified conditions upon which victory was earned were always changing, behind which the Elo system's predictions could lag.

There is more. Unlike chess, League of Legends is a team game. In a single League of Legends match, it is it is difficult to mathematically discern the impact of one

of the ten strangers playing. Players are spread out over a large map, each with different roles, strengths, and abilities. One of these players might be having an off-night, or maybe they were forced into a role they are not used to. Maybe someone on your team is having problems with their internet: has anyone ever heard of a chess match being spoiled because somebody was watching Netflix on the household WiFi? In League of Legends the statistical imprint of one player is smudged by the other nine, so the only way to measure an individual's relative skill is to look at their effect on a large sampling of randomly-arranged games. For that reason, Elo rank once again lags behind, slowly honing in on a 'true' measurement of relative skill.

In light of this, if you look at the MMR of any given player at any given time, it really only represents the system's current 'best guess' at where they fit within a population. This 'best guess' is then fed back into the matchmaking system, which places players on teams with other players who may or may not align to their 'true' relative skill. That means that the entire ranking system is perpetually testing, adjusting, and trying to catch up to a hypothetical hierarchy of relative skill. While that might make sense systematically, for the individual player, it means that it could take hundreds of games before the system places you where you 'belong'.

Upward one rung, downward two.

At one point I decided to count how many matches it would take to climb out of the Bronze tier. If I wanted to get into the next division (Bronze 2), then I needed to qualify for a best-of-three 'promotional series'. To qualify for a promotional series, I had to reach 100 'Leader Points' (LP). At that time I had 0 LP, and usually earned 25 LP for

every win while losing only 15 per loss.³³ That meant that in the most ideal situation, where I somehow won 100% of my games, it would take 6 matches to climb into the next division.³⁴ That was unlikely to happen, however, because winning every single match was impossible.

Every League of Legends match ends with equal parts winners and losers. I found that regardless of what I did as an individual player, some games were unwinnable. A match might be unwinnable because someone ‘fed’ the enemy team, letting them snowball their advantage into an easy win. Some matches were unwinnable because I had teammates who were ‘trolling’, intentionally assisting the enemy team. Most unwinnable games were due to a player quitting or disconnecting from the game, leaving my team outnumbered. When I added the inevitable losses into the above calculations, I found that

³³ This ten point advantage suggested that my hidden MMR put me above the other players in my division.

³⁴ However, if I were winning every match, then my MMR would quickly rise above my less-than-perfect peers. I have heard that if the discrepancy became large enough the system would let me skip a division when it promoted me.

my climb up the ranked ladder looked steadily steeper.

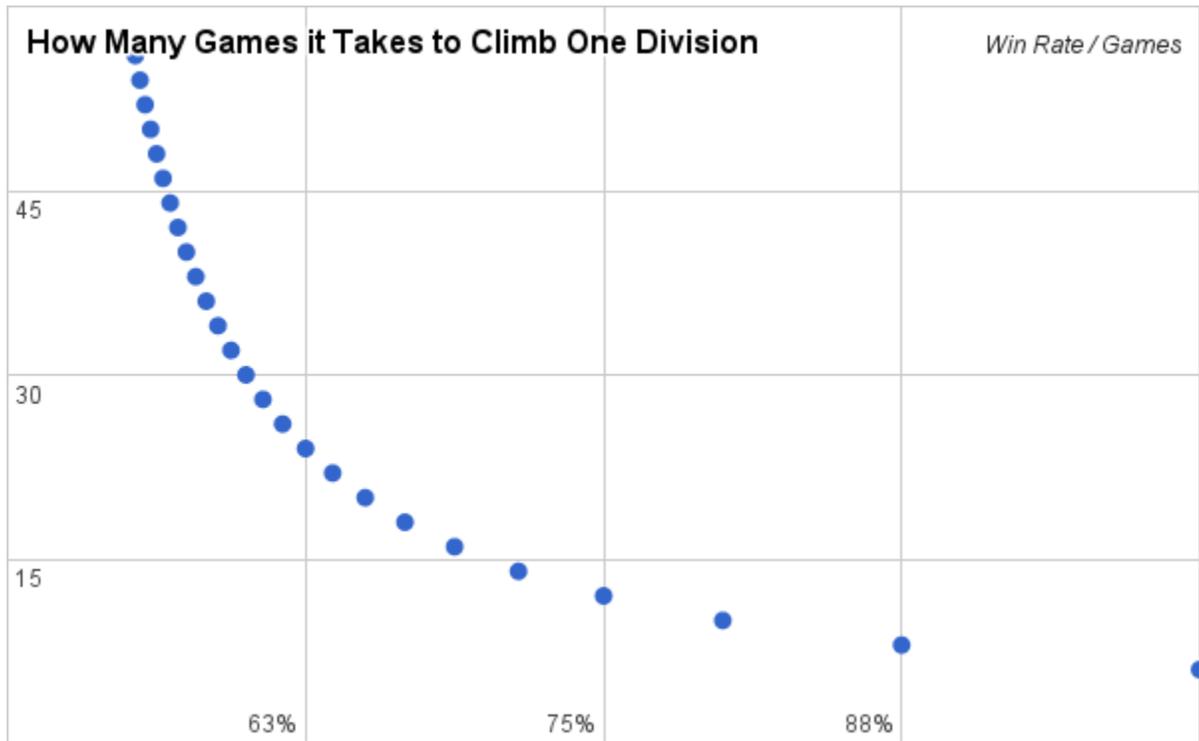


Figure 18: Here you see the minimum number of matches drop exponentially as the win rate increases. I posted this in a Reddit discussion I had on the subject (Crosby, 2016).

What took 6 matches with a perfect win rate would take 10 matches at 80%, 30 matches at 60%, and 56 matches at 55%. Every loss meant that I was getting closer to a supposedly ‘true’ and objective measure of my relative skill. That meant that the more ranked games I played, the harder it was to reject my rank. The only way to disprove the reality of my Match Making Rating was to improve. The ranking system could thus be compared to the ‘sailing vessel’ of Foucault’s heterotopia: it gave purchase self-apprehension, enumerating with increasing certainty the oceanic chasm between me and the ‘high ranked’ player; imposing my rank upon me, the response to which was a project of self-improvement.

The high level mindset

If followed, then, that the second piece of advice was immanently important: *play to improve*. As a competitive player I hoped to win as many matches as possible, but every time I entered Summoner's Rift I knew that I was just as likely to lose. If my goal was to climb, and if the only way to climb was to focus on my own improvement, then I needed to adopt a self-focused mindset. This meant that climbing the ranked ladder sometimes felt like a lonely project. I encountered one guide about climbing the ladder in which a Challenger-ranked player wrote the following about teammates:

Your **teammates** are not your **friends**. But they are not your **enemies**. They are *strangers* that you share a game with. Their *opinion* of you doesn't matter. But your *opinion* of them doesn't matter either. **You**, as a **single player**, are playing to *climb*. **You** are **not** playing to make your **team** *climb*. (Maggot_Pie, 2015, emphases in original)

It was as if the other members of my team were to be thought of as objects or obstacles. If my goal was to climb, and if the only way to climb was to focus on my own improvement, then I needed to adopt a self-focused mindset. What emerged from my engagement with the prescriptive apparatus was the concept of a 'high-level mindset': a general disposition or guiding philosophy taken by the most successful players.

In *Philosophy of Competition*, for example, NintenDOES (2015) wrote about the "mental prep" work that went into ranked competitive play. By "analyzing my struggles," wrote NintenDOES (2015), "I've been able to pinpoint with undetermined accuracy the roots of my failures, and with this, perhaps I can help others avoid the pitfalls that loom in both a competitive environment, and life itself." NintenDOES went on to describe a

“moral foundation” that fortified the mind; ways of working around ‘irrational’ fears, failure, and setting aside distracting thoughts.

Guides like this helped to outline an ethic of the self, yet they were very non-specific. They were written like inspirational speeches, or words of wisdom, and gave little prescriptive or applicable advice. Perhaps a more direct example of how the ‘high-level mindset’ could be applied came from rotface (2016), whom I quoted in my epigraph. rotface argued that players needed to forget the first rule (which was to win games) in order to actually accomplish it:

You need to start playing with a purpose. That purpose is not winning the game. You are now playing to improve, but the only way you can improve is if you play to win the game. In other words, winning the game is no longer your end result, improving is, and winning the game only serves as confirmation that you are on the right track.

This meant that I had to take personal responsibility for every loss. If I wanted to climb I would have to focus on my own mistakes, reflecting on my playing. The question, then, was how do I do this? It is not as if, upon reading ‘101 rules that lead to victory’, I can simply play with them all in my head. I needed some sort of model.

A chasm between the prescriptive apparatus and success

It was difficult to know if I was successfully enacting the high level mindset. It is as if there was a chasm between the disposition described by the high-level mindset, and the result it was designed to achieve. It is not as if the game could track my thought

process, or measure my level of self-attendance. The record of a player's performance does not include their mindfulness, rationalizations, or internal dialogue.

Rather, if we look at the profile of a player reflected in the record of the game, it looks much like this:

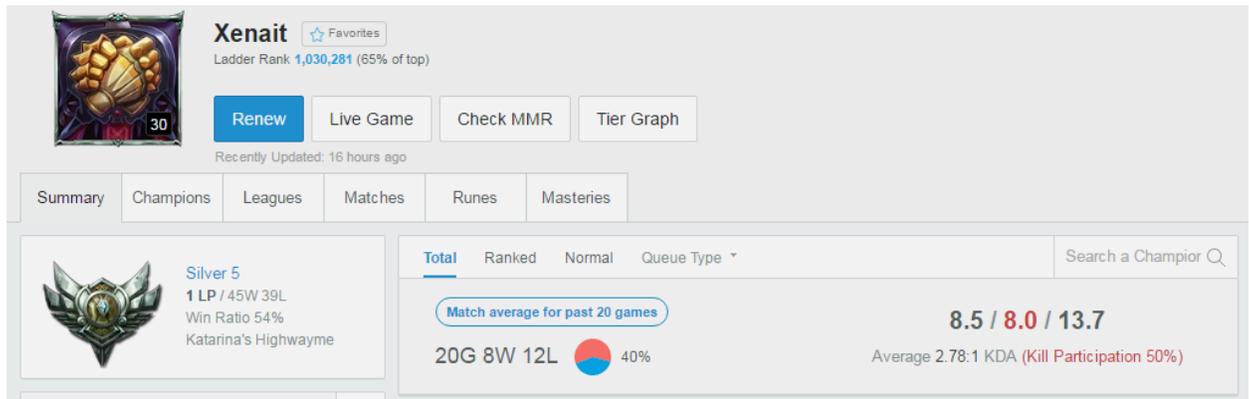


Figure 19: A view of the statistics available on my OP.GG page.

This image above was taken from OP.GG, a third-party service that collects and analyzes data on individual players.³⁵ Often I would use OP.GG when a match is loading, quickly checking statistics on the other 9 players. Although these statistics are questionable, they provide a knowledge that can be acted on. It is as if they are sketching the 'character' of an individual; an outline of their 'profile'. Immersed as I was in a literature that described the 'model' or 'high level' player, I came to learn how to read these statistics with nuance – a response to the interpellative hailing they represent. In this instance, at a glance we can see that I have a 54% win ratio, having played 84 matches in the current ranked season. This suggests that I am slightly better than I am worse. My Kill/Death/Assist statistic says something about my play-style: on average I die about once for every kill I

³⁵ Riot Games makes all of this data available by an 'Application Program Interface', which allows software to interact without the use of a graphical interface. There are dozens of popular websites making use of this data.

secure (8 deaths for every 8.5 kills), but I tend to help secure a lot of kills for my allies (13.7 assists). With this knowledge we can imagine that I am the type of player who takes risks, resulting in a lot of deaths. Many of these deaths result in kills and assists, which suggests, perhaps, that I am making a lot of plays with my team. Indeed, my ‘kill participation’ rate (which looks at how many kills I contributed to per total kills in each game) is rather high, standing at 50%. Lastly, we can see that I have only won 40% of my last 30 games, which is quite low.

While these statistics are interpellative, they also provide an opportunity for players to respond. For instance, often when I see that an enemy player is on a losing streak I will target the player in a rather cruel attempt to ‘tilt’ them into making emotional decisions.³⁶ This means that I have learned different ways to frustrate other people – often based on that which frustrates me. The current of opposition thus reflects my project of managing emotions and making ‘rational’ decisions.

Yet regardless of how a player’s statistical profile looks, it is at best a weak approximation of the ideal player imagined in the ‘high-level mindset’. I knew that these statistics only *hinted* at the player I was, so in response to some of the guides I had read I pursued more precise and comprehensive methods of self-evaluation.

One of the more fruitful ways that I learned to reflect on my performance was to watch replays of games I had recently played. League of Legends keeps a replay of every game that is played. Using this I could go over previous matches and reflect on my mistakes. I could pause the game, consider the knowledge that was available to me, the

³⁶ ‘Tilting’ is a concept borrowed from gambling and describes an emotional state in which the player loses their ability to make ‘rational’ in-game decisions because they are so upset about the state of affairs. Countless online discussions talk about the dangers of tilting, and professional players are often considered to be models of emotional control.

decisions I was making, and compare it with the model of a ‘high-level’ player that I had built using the prescriptive apparatus. This form of analysis became a skill in itself, and at one point I found that I was lending my advice to other players. I started analyzing the games of a number of ranked competitive teams. These teams were comprised of some of the ‘LoLDads’ I had met in the game.³⁷ They played casually but wanted to improve. To produce my analyses I would go over the match – often over the span of an hour or two – taking extensive notes on everything that went against the prescriptive ideal. I would then record a video of the match, pausing to explain and elaborate, and adding a rolling commentary.

This was a skill that I had picked up from many of the instructional videos I watched, especially those that used the ‘coaching’ format. In these types of videos the ‘coach’ or ‘analyst’ used their the privilege of their perspective – by which I mean a *retrospective*, existing outside of the pressure of an immediate struggle – to dismantle the match and provide practical advice. I now realize that by analyzing these matches I was engaging in a particular practice of hermeneutics: entering into a dialogue with the game; a critical engagement with the immanent relationships arranged virtually on the map. I used the rationality of the prescriptive apparatus to *render questionable* the choices that players were making – choices they made in the heat of the moment, often acting on impulse or based on a partial reading of the map. In doing so, I learned that analytical scrutiny could become infinitesimally small; that every minor movement in League of Legends could be stripped down, evaluated, and improved. Under such circumstances, I

³⁷ The LoLDads group was one of the few social groups with whom I participated. I encountered them on the ‘LoLDads’ subreddit, joined their chat room in the game client, and became the jungler for ‘Breaking Dad’, a team that played competitively about once per week. They said that ‘moms’ could join too, but I never met any.

wondered how it was even possible to be ‘good’ at League of Legends. How is a player supposed to ‘optimize’ in such an environment? How could they possibly hold all the necessary information in their head, or make decisions based on the unending cascading lists of procedural rules they take from the prescriptive apparatus? It seemed impossible to me that, given the pace and complexity of the game, a player could act according to the prescribed rationality. I needed a means by which I could write prescriptive knowledge onto my body, shaping my habits so that they act in accordance with a specific and intentional rationality. I needed to shape my own private, tacit, and affective experience of the game.

Scripted internal dialogue

A prescriptive narrative

One night I was playing League of Legends casually. That meant that I was trying out new champions in new roles, while allowing myself to be distracted. The result was a state of playing where I was half in the game and half in my head. My second monitor, which was typically devoted to things like player statistics and item build paths, was instead showing a popular Twitch stream. I could tell from his shouts and whimpers that the streamer, the inimitable ‘Trick2g’, was having a bad game. Trick2g has a well-developed audience who tend to imitate his distinct play-style as well as his proud-childish machismo. I liked the way he broke down the game as he played. In his own colourful way, Trick2g was trying to teach his audience how to think. He did this by producing a running commentary of his own rationality; by *thinking out loud*.

When we talk about how a ‘self’ is ‘made-true’, consider the significance of this moment: I am a low-ranked player, trying to change myself so that I can climb the ladder. Here, Trick2g becomes the personification of the ‘high level mindset’; a script for my internal dialogue. He would often start with the prescriptive premise: ‘You *have* to be thinking about where the enemy jungler is going. You have to anticipate their next move; like what would you do if you were them?’. This would be followed by the enactment of this logic: ‘You see, I know that his red buff is about to spawn, but he’s down bot trying to gank my botlane. That’s a free red buff for me’. Laid bare, Trick2g’s logic seemed simplistic and obvious. It was a variant of the rationality I took from the prescriptive apparatus. Yet the consistency of its enactment had an effect on me. His voice was getting stuck in my head like a catchy song. It lingered on after I closed the stream, narrating *my* game instead of his. It was as if I could spontaneously render my own little Trick2g, like an imaginary advocate sitting on my shoulder. I could use his monologue as a model for my own gaming. This meant that I was no longer learning ‘how to play’ a video game in those very explicit, propositional, step-by-step kind of ways. Rather, I was scripting my internal dialog according to the model of a high-level gamer. I was writing the ‘high level mindset’ into my thinking.

This marked the merger of a prescriptive knowledge and my own impulsive actions. It is here that I conclude my autoethnographic account. Going forward, I want to reflect on this experience and how it might adjust or respond to my problematic.

Conclusion

Summary

Before my closing remarks I am going to summarize what has been covered in this project. Chapter one looked at the problem of subjectification in two parts. In the first part I looked at the idea that we are ‘shaped’ by video games. Many video game scholars have attempted to identify specific categories of people who play video games. Projects of this variety are often used to produce critique-able subject categories. Dan Golding (2014), for example, identifies ‘gamers’ as a group of misogynistic, bigoted, and toxic men. Golding then uses the ‘gamer’ category to explain the recent combativeness that has emerged as video games and gender identity collide in the public sphere. Another subject, identified by Silverman and Simon (2009) as the ‘power gamer’, is thought to have been produced by the disciplinary practices taken up by players who needed to organize themselves around the challenges posed by online role-playing games. Although they touch on the disciplinary mechanisms by which the subject is produced, they use ‘discipline’ as a sort of analytical category, a way of saying ‘if a subject is labouring and productive, then they are disciplined’. I argued that we need to investigate the *process* of subjectification, while building conceptual tools that will help us to better understand the relationship between the self and the video game. This is something rather new in video game studies, so in the second part of the chapter I reviewed some of the ways in which the process of subjectification has been considered in the past.

I started the second part of this chapter by looking at how Theodor Adorno used the problem of subjectification to explain the power of ideology and manipulation.

Adorno argued that new media technology was creating a society of passive, uncritical dupes. This worked by centralizing cultural production under a ‘culture industry’, replacing conventional independent cultural production with broadcast systems like the radio and television. For Adorno, consumers were duped by mass media because they could not test their abstract conception of the world against an ‘objectively real’ representation of it. Instead, because the mass media was centralized under the ‘culture industry’, a small handful of media executives could control the media consumed by the masses, blocking anything that did not conform to the specific interests of the bourgeoisie (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 96). The mass media thus supplanted objective knowledge with ideology.

The problem with Adorno’s framework was that he did not consider *how* culture was consumed. What was the relationship between the subject and media? How did the subject listen to the radio, how did they make meaning around this practice, and how was ideology ‘made true’? These critical questions were taken up by Louis Althusser.

Althusser introduced the concept of interpellation as a way of resolving some of these critical questions. Interpellation works by ‘hailing’ the subject (like an officer shouting ‘hey, you there’), in response to which the subject is likely to turn around (Althusser, 2006, p. 86). According to Althusser, “by this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversation, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him” (p. 86). Interpellation helps draw our attention to certain ‘hailing’ practices by which a subject is called to attend themselves. Althusser argued that interpellation was manipulative because it made abstract ideas into something

seemingly concrete. Thus, the interpellated individual came to recognize a concrete misrepresentation of who they are.

Recently, the concept of interpellation has been adopted by new media and video game studies. Among the most important adjustments was made by Lev Manovich, who dismissed the emergence of ‘interactive’ new media. Manovich argued that people increasingly outsource ‘mental processes’ (or private thoughts) to computers. The fear, then, is that that video games and virtual reality could bring about a ‘post-symbolism’, wherein the culture industry supersedes language to perform mass thought control.

The problem with interpellation is that it does not see knowledge (or self-knowledge) as contested. When we consider that a subject might *reject* the ideas imposed by interpellation, then interpellation becomes an inadequate description of subjectification. I argue alongside Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt (1993), that we should look at interpellation as a moment in which the subject recognizes their location within a discourse. If we understand interpellation in this way, then it stands as a site upon which an individual can respond or react to the way in which they have been situated.

I thus turn to the work of Michel Foucault. If we want to understand the mode by which we respond to our situated existence, then we want to look at the practical instructions that guide us in our everyday life. Foucault referred to these instructions as ‘prescriptive texts’, which are the modes by which individuals practice their freedom to decide – the very practices by which they respond to their situated existence. Prescriptive texts give us ‘a way of being and doing things according to certain rational principles. Finally, I finish this chapter by walking through Foucault’s lecture on Heterotopias, which deals with a conflict between materiality and virtuality. Heterotopias also reframe

interpellation as emplacement, the modes by which we are made aware of our own contingent existence.

Chapter two was a discussion of my research strategy. I began this chapter with a review of Liz Stanley's (1993) autobiographical writing. Stanley used her own personal journals and audio tapes to reflect on the changes that occurred when her mother experienced brain damage from a stroke. Her story uses evocative writing to convey a complex and fragmented conception of the self. This style of writing is characteristic of autoethnography, which is often described as an approach to writing.

Realists argue that this form of autoethnography is difficult to contest on empirical grounds, insisting instead that autoethnography should attempt to theorize and generalize about broader social phenomenon. This criticism, I argue, misses the point. Rather than returning to a conventional realist approach to research, I argue that autoethnography should – as in the case of Liz Stanley's work – engage in a practice of reflexivity. I proposed that this could be done by considering the 'art of questioning', or hermeneutics. Lastly, I argue that critical scholars should resist theoretical dogmatism, opting instead to envision 'theory' reflexively as an 'analytical toolkit'.

I begin chapter three by looking at the category of a 'Multiplayer Online Battle Arena'. 'Online' games involve the movement of data over large distances. Because of this, there is a tendency to assume of the Online gaming experience as distanced and disembodied. Yet there is something distinctly bodily about the concept of a 'Battle Arena'; a place where bodies and objects are orchestrated and arranged. The Battle arena is a place where power is *practiced* and *structuring*.

I then move into some of the history that lead to League of Legends. I talk about specific game elements that were emerged in a number of player-made custom maps. When we look at the Defence of the Ancients map in particular, we see a number of game mechanics that draw the player into attention, calling forward a practice of active self-reflection. League of Legends built off of this game structure while addressing some of the limitations. Independently produced, Riot Games was able to make a ‘DotA-style’ game that was easier to access, free to play. It was also able to manage and control their population. Finally, League of Legends allowed for more statistics to be collected on the individual, giving players a stronger impression where they fit within a discourse.

I then walk through some of the key characteristics of League of Legends. I start by looking at how the map plays on the friction between ‘high fantasy’ and the fantastical. Certain visual features of the map are also used to draw attention to an invisible navigation mesh, hinting at the unreality of its own virtuality. Likewise champions are not typically thought of as conceptually ‘real’. They are objects, like playing cards, used instrumentally. The result is a meta game, where certain champions fit into certain ‘roles’, arranged in an immanent relationship, in an effort to play the game optimally.

I conclude this chapter with a quote from Riot Games designer Tom Cadwell, who said that “in League of Legends, you play a summoner who summons champions to fight enemies, and hopefully win for your team” (League of Legends, 2009). You can see, then, that the ‘player’ has been written into the cannon of the game. They are a ‘summoner’, their ‘summoner profile’ is their own profile, a record of their own failures and accomplishments.

In Chapter Four I told the story of my gaming using fragments that illustrate some of the ways in which the subject is called into attention, and called to attend to themselves. I weaved these experiences together with critical reflections, using some of the critical tools I developed in my research. This story began in my office, where I was when I installed the game on my personal computer. Even from this early stage, the registration process situated me as an ‘end-user’, or a client. What happened then was a process by which I was, in many small instances, hailed by the game: prompted to recognize my situated existence, as a body, in front of a computer, as a ‘player’ with certain skills, knowledge, and abilities. My story leans heavily on the experience of failure in competitive play, and how this failure prompted a project of self-improvement. I refer to this as the pursuit of victory, a project that was mapped onto the schema by which players were ranked, promoted, hierarchized, and recognized. I go on to describe the ways in which I took up certain pieces of prescriptive equipment, developing a daily practice of reading guides and discussions about the game. This practice came to fill my idle moments, becoming a style of living. The last part of my story touches on the use of prescriptive models using the example of ‘Twitch streamers’, who are typically high-ranked players from whom we can learn. I noticed that they often ‘thought out loud’, describing their processes and decisions. After watching many hours of certain Twitch streamers I noticed that their voice was stuck in my head: they infected the way I played the game, the way I thought about things, the way I made decisions. Thus we see a process of reflexive subjectification emerge in the practice of competitive video gaming, posited by the tools and techniques made available by the prescriptive apparatus. Part of the reason that my ‘self’ is ‘made-true’ in-and-through competitive gaming is because

prescriptive sources – the videos, guides, discussions, and Twitch streamers – work to call attention to your place within a discourse.

Chapter Five concludes this project. I propose that we use the concept of emplacement to better understand the process of subjectification in competitive video games. Reflecting on hermeneutics – the art of asking questions – I suggest that future research should take a longer historical approach, using history to contrast and compare the autoethnographic experience.

The self made true

Much of what I did in this project was exploratory. The questions I asked were aimed at producing insight into how a self is made-true in-and-through a project of entrepreneurial project of self-improvement. A friend of mine recently asked me a pointed question: ‘if your thesis is about how people come to know themselves by playing League of Legends, then what did you learn about yourself?’ On impulse I responded with a statement of the obvious: *‘I learned that I suck at League of Legends’*.

My friend thought I was joking. Yet could there be any other pronouncement asserted by my relationship with this game? After all, my suckiness is enshrined in the statistics that shape my profile. I devoted more than 1700 hours to this game, an average of almost 3 hours per day. Much of this time was spent trying to improve, trying to heed and enact the advice I took from a prescriptive apparatus. I made a thorough study of the game, endeavored to learn as much as I could about every champion, every strategy, and every trick for success. Yet I never managed to climb above the rank of Silver 3, around

the 45th percentile. At present, there are more than 1 million players ranked above me in North American.

My poor performance in League of Legends is probably the most well-documented aspect of my life, analyzed and enumerated by a cluster of independent statistical websites, written into the margins of my digital identity. This is the mode by which I came to recognize my location within a discourse. I know that this is not the sum of my existence, but as far as I can tell, it is inescapably true that I suck at League of Legends.

Yet my failure to climb above the herd is not the only way I know that I suck at League of Legends. There is a *quality* to my suckiness. Consider this final example of interpellation.

Final example of emplacement

It was the third match in a best of three. I was lost in the ebb and flow of the bot lane, a concert of movements. If I could have ‘touched’ the game, I would have closed my eyes and felt the current of moving parts: a breath for each particle sent from my ranged minions, chipping away at the enemy minions before I dealt the killing blow; a wisp as the enemy Support weaved from side to side, trying to zone me away from the minions; a gust as my Support did the same, and the enemy ADC moved in response. I would have sensed an absence, too: the enemy Jungler lurking somewhere in the fog of war, beyond the immediacy defined by the limit of my monitor. I was attuned to this immediacy; lightly aware of a hundred different details that defined the microscopic meta game taking place in the bot lane.

This was the early stages of the match, a time that was defined in small increments. Each minion I killed granted a small amount of gold, adding up to my first big item. My goal was to go even with the enemy ADC, but things were not looking good for the rest of my team. My team's mid-laner was behind in gold and the top-laner had already died three times to the enemy Tryndamere.

It was time to make something happen. My support and I were both level five. I decided that as soon as we hit level six I was going to go 'all-in' with a surprise attack. My Support and I had a synergistic 'wombo-combo' with our ultimate abilities. Anxious to engage, I was hovering over my R key –maybe not literally, because I was little aware of my actual fingers, but my mind was poised.

Then it happened: we hit level six and I pulled the trigger. Vaulting behind the enemy bot-laners, I frantically pressed R. This launched a massive cannonball into the enemy ADC, knocking him into my turret. He went down quickly, by my Support was not casting her ultimate. I had expected a tidal wave to knock up the enemy Support and secure the second kill, '*why isn't she casting her ult?*', I wondered, then came the realization: '*Shit! She isn't level 6 yet!*'. I had assumed that we had the same amount of experience points. Suddenly the enemy Jungler appeared – a Sejuani – and I only had half my health. She got me with her ult, freezing me in place, and slammed into me with her Q. I was dead before I knew it. My screen went gray –or more specifically, the hierarchy of visual elements on my screen was irregularly desaturated, a contortion that signified death, and knocked me back into my body.³⁸ Standing in my office, I watched Sejuani secure the kill on my Support.

³⁸ The 'death screen' rejects the other-wise established visual hierarchy that is present in League of Legends. The most important visual elements in the game are brighter and more saturated, first being the

My best laid plans had gone awry. When my champion revived I was determined to reform to form, reaching back into a place where I am ‘one with the game’. Then, suddenly, my absent-bodied immersion was sundered when my Support took to the team chat with three simple words: “*you fucking suck.*”

The quality of my suckiness

What a fine example of interpellation. The hailing – “you fucking suck” – was quite clearly directed at me. If I had successfully pulled off the play I would have won a double kill; I would have been a hero. Instead I was the object of derision; the object of scrutiny.

Part of playing League of Legends is tolerating the words that come from frustrated teammates. Indeed, when it comes to this game, “you fucking suck” is a fairly mild provocation. If I had summoned the voice of Trick2g, it would have been far more severe. I had slipped up, I had been careless. I could see myself through the eyes of my Support, leaping forward like a maniac, trying to pull off the kind of play that makes it into a pro gamer’s highlight reel.

What stung, then, was the weight of truth behind the rebuke. The prescriptive apparatus had equipped me to self-scrutinize: I could think of a dozen mistakes I had made; I could break down and assess the play like an expert; I could *think* like a critical

User Interface, second being champion spells and abilities, and last being the terrain. When your champion dies (unless you have opted out of this feature in settings), everything on the screen is tinted slightly gray, the terrain turns completely black and white, and the user interface is heavily desaturated. Meanwhile, champions and their abilities seem to partially retain their prominent brightness and saturation. A sense of depth and immersion is removed, and the player is reminded of their location within a virtual-material discourse.

analyst. All of this went with me when I returned to the bottom lane, following me into the next iteration; the next failure.

Suzanne

I am reminded, once again, of my violin teacher. Suzanne was likely the most enduring disciplinary influence on my life. Over the span of 12 years from age four to sixteen, Suzanne tried everything she could to train me. Many of my weekly lessons were devoted entirely to a single musical phrase. I would play through the passage, again and again; adjusting, internalizing, adjusting, and internalizing. Sometimes she would prepare me with a list of technical instructions: ‘keep your elbow in and your bow hand loose; feet shoulder width apart; remember to slur these notes and use vibrato’. As I approached the phrase she would hover her foot over mine, I would know it was there. The instant I slipped up her foot would come pressing down on mine – not hard enough to hurt, but in a way that was invective. Over and over I would attempt the verse, trying to hold the whole of her directions in my mind, like instructional juggling. This was disciplinary tutelage; this was internalization; this was a structuring of the soul.

Suzanne’s instructions were the prescriptive apparatus. They were part of a cluster of propositional statements, explicit and technical. They were practical answers to mechanical mistakes. Yet I could not simultaneously perform *all* of these instructions at a technical level. Especially in the case of League of Legends, the prescriptive apparatus was vast beyond all measure. I mentioned earlier that I sometimes felt like an untrained soldier, thrown into battle and given endless tries at success. Each try is a chance to enact these instructions; to work them into the body; to make them habitual. Each failure is an abrupt rupture of the performance; a foot pressing down on mine.

Suzanne's foot was a connection to my body. Like every instance of emplacement in League of Legends, her foot merged, structured, and organized a cacophony of discursive elements, arraying them into a knowable event. Suzanne's foot was oblativ; it sent me into myself, searching for the sin to which I must confess. Writing each mistake onto my body; my soul.

In the case of League of Legends, there was no Suzanne. The experts were diffused; broken down; parcelled up and cast about like seeds. It was the player who took on the gaze of the expert, cast upon their emplaced existence. This is rather *unlike* the theory proposed by cultural critics like Theodor Adorno and Louis Althusser. We are not, as they suggest, pressured into submission or docility. Indeed, when I say that a *self* is *made true* in-and-through the pursuit of victory, I am also referring to a *self-made* truth. It is a self I already knew; a self that I produced in-and-through my struggles; a self I am shaping. This struggle involved positing the faults that hold me back, shedding light on my inadequacies. This struggle placed a strict policy against excuses, placing 'me' at the centre of my failures. In pursuit of victory, I laid my burdens down on an examination table, I brought them under the light of the self-expert, catalogued and identified.

The subject of the video game

This comparison is limited, however, because my classical training in violin sought to provide the technical foundation upon which I could *express* myself. In contrast, every practical instruction for League of Legends is written under the current of opposition. Every prescription assumes that victory is the primary objective. The statistics I encountered did not define me, nor did the prescriptions: it was winning that mattered.

If there is a coherent or generalizable ‘subject’ produced by competitive online video games, then it is one who is known by the victory imperative. The bright white light of victory is like a lone star casting brilliant unidirectional light unto a universe of objects. The dark side of these objects is always hidden. Why would anybody play the game if not to win? If we care at all, then that care is to build ourselves into winners. Competitive gamers, armed with our prescriptive equipment and projects of self-improvement, are thus constrained. We are like the moss that only grows on the south side of a tree; relentless in our pursuit of a victorious light. Against this light, it would seem that we are ill-equipped.

Final considerations

This investigation was aimed specifically at changes to the self. There is much more that could be written and much that I have not yet learned about League of Legends. The focus of my investigation was intentionally narrow. I focused on one person (myself) in one context (video games). For the most part I played only one video game (League of Legends), which I situated in a very brief history. This narrowness served a purpose, providing a close look at a process of subjectification in the context of competitive video games, and setting the ground for future research. By adjusting the concept of interpellation to look at virtual-discursive emplacement, we are given a view into the immediate struggles of individuals. We begin to see how an expansive project of self-improvement can take form in pursuit of victory.

However, as I reflect on this investigation, it appears to be somewhat one-sided. My focus on technologies of the self is deprived by the absence of technologies of

domination. For example, in my account of the game we encountered a number of neoliberal technologies: the responsabilization of the individual, the encouragement of instrumental rationality, and so on. My hunch is that, given my account of League of Legends, we can begin to recognise significant changes to how we shape and govern populations in the digital age. While video game designers exercise strict control over the environments they build, they cannot control the agents who inhabit them – at least not completely. Certain styles of gameplay are leveraged by the designers, teamwork is encouraged, and player behaviours are monitored in order to produce a ‘healthy’ and talented community of gamers. We have begun to recognize these strategies of governance, alluding to societal changes, but there is much more work to be done.

In recognition of this, I propose an historical investigation, one that follows emplacement and the constitution of a private life. I will conclude this project by sketching this history for future research. This history would look at Western civilization, charting the relationship between technologies of the self, as they emerge to constitute a private life, and technologies of domination, as they emerge to coerce and control.

A history of private life.

When we look at the Middle Ages, we see individuals ‘enmeshed in feudal and communal solidarities’ (Ariès, 1993, p. 1). People knew each other, watched over each other, and lived within the boundaries of their community. Beyond these confines was a *terra incognita*, like a wilderness of unknown (Ariès, 1993, p. 1). Inside this space there were pockets of ‘precarious intimacy’ – “a corner by a window or in a hallway, a quiet spot beyond the orchard, a forest clearing or hut” (Ariès, 1993, p. 1). For the most part, however, the arrangement was such that a private life was minimal. It was rare for a

person to be alone and it was believed that “solitude, which causes boredom, is contrary to the human condition” (Ariès, 1993, p. 5).

In contrast, when we look towards the 19th century, we see a dramatically different arrangement. Work, leisure, and families are compartmentalized, people are anonymous, and the family is the focus of private life. The change, argued the historian Philippe Ariès (1993), occurred in part because of political-cultural events that changed our general attitude, or ‘mentality’ (Ariès, 1993, p. 2).

Discipline accompanied private life

As time went on, wealth and inequality led to greater mobility within the community (communities expanded, compartmentalized, and so on). Increasingly anonymous, people started focusing on appearances, posturing, pretending to be lords, and playing a games of ‘honor’ (Ariès, 1993, p. 3). In a sense, the private self emerged in contrast to the self enacted in public: it was the ‘true’ soul of an individual, hidden behind a guise of civility, or behind a pretense whereby ‘instincts’ and emotions were controlled and expressed strategically.

In many ways, the private self was born of these technologies, but tools of domination soon followed. Eventually the state intervened, for example, by governing ostentatiousness with things like dress codes, or keeping careful records of nobility (Ariès, 1993, p. 3). We can see, then, that administrative tools of discipline (surveillance, the judiciary, targeting the ‘soul’ of an individual) emerged in part because of (or in relation to) a new individuality.

A similar transition occurred within Christian religious organisation. Increasingly widespread literacy meant that anyone could produce their own interpretation of the

bible. Whereas devotion had once been communal, performed by the collective in body and in voice, it was now possible to worship ‘in the privacy of your soul’, “outside consecrated places and without clerical discipline, raising the possibility of heresy” (Chartier, 1993, p. 18). Disciplinary practices soon emerged to ‘ensure a proper reading’ of the bible (Chartier, 1993, p. 18). Within this disciplinary framework, a private, internal relationship with God was encouraged. A “hierarchy of spiritual exercise” placed meditation – or a direct conversation with God – at the top, behind which was bible reading, and then praying aloud (Chartier, 1993, p. 18). It is clear, then, that ‘devotional reading’ was not just a means of communication, but significantly, it was a disciplinary means by which a superior private spirituality could be achieved.

What is born of this pressure to look within the self is a declaration of one’s interiority. Writes Ariès (1993): “living became a matter of externalizing one’s inner life and private values” (p. 6). These expressions came in many forms. Furniture became an expression of the self, and things like cooking and drinking became a sophisticated art (Ariès, 1993, p. 6). This fostered what Jürgen Habermas referred to as ‘the public use of reason by private individuals’ (paraphrased in Chartier, 1993, p. 17). Roger Chartier (1993) writes that “in literary societies, Masonic lodges, clubs, and cafés, people learned to associate as intellectuals, recognizing all participants, regardless of status, as equals (p. 17). From these collectives, we begin to see a platform on which new demands could be placed on sovereign authority.

It is here that we see the thread of ‘governmentality’ emerge. Foucault introduced governmentality in an attempt to describe the ‘general problem of government’ that

emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth century (Foucault, 2009, pp. 88).³⁹ It was during this time that sovereign authority became questionable and problematic (Foucault, 2009, p. 107). In contrast to the Middle Ages, individual life was no longer surrounded by a *terra incognita*. Instead, people were increasingly enmeshed in a web of practices, games of self-expression, and a life that was located within the ‘private soul’. Accordingly, what arose from these ‘public intellectuals’ was a concern with the art of governing a ‘things’ (as in people, objects, nature, knowledge, or ‘a complex of man and things’), in contrast to territory (Foucault, 1991, pp. 93–4). From these concerns emerged the focus (or ‘target’) of governmentality: *the population* (as it was known in-and-through the science of political economy).

It is important to recognize the historical emergence of the ‘population’ as the focus of governance. As Bruce Curtis (1995) notes, “no government can intensively administer citizens about whom it knows nothing” (p. i). The process of governmentalization was thus aligned to production of certain knowledges: censuses were conducted, records were made, and individuals were traced into data. In a sense, an ‘officialdom’ was created, which in contrast to the territorial nature of a ‘kingdom’, was delineated by data.

This process of governmentalization expanded in the 19th century, when, as Ian Hacking (1990) put it, an “avalanche of printed public numbers” began to fall (p. 46). Governmentality relied on these knowledges to govern according to the population. Henceforth, the goal of good governance was not to know and reform the ‘true’ soul of an

³⁹ I say that governmentality ‘emerged’ in the 16th and 17th century, but this is not to be understood as an origination. Rather, Foucault tended to view history genealogically. Governmentality would have been the child of many free-floating historical threads –including the history of private life.

individual (as is the goal of disciplinary power), but to manage and arrange a population of *governable subjects* to a convenient end (Foucault, 2009, p. 96). In practice, this involved a number of adjustments.

Government will have to ensure that the greatest possible quantity of wealth is produced, that the people are provided with sufficient means of subsistence, that the population is enabled to multiply, and so on.

Thus, there is a whole series of specific finalities that become the objective of government as such. (Foucault, 2009, p. 99)

We see, then, that governmentality is less concerned with individuals, and more concerned with their arrangement, or more precisely, with the arrangement of their arrangement. In other words, governance becomes “a matter of organizing circulation, eliminating its dangerous elements, making a division between good and bad circulation, and maximizing the good circulation by diminishing the bad.” (Foucault, 2009, p. 18).

Governmentality and the internet

This technique of governmentality is especially well-suited for shaping conduct on the Internet. Consider how the simple up/down-voting system of the Reddit bulletin board works to reduce the visibility of that which is ‘bad’ according to a general opinion. These efforts are aimed at ‘diminishing the bad’ through diversion rather than disruption. They ignore individuals, focused instead on the arrangement of elements within diffused network.

Digital technology has provoked an exponential expansion of systems of governmentality. It is hard to imagine how an individual could be known and located within the cacophony that is the ‘Internet’. In the case of League of Legends, like many

online video games, players are perpetually evaluated by a cluster of statistics. Our chat logs are stored along with our movements and actions within the game. We are lightly bound to a variety of legal agreements, connected to a number of social media platforms, and aggregated in an ocean of data. How do we map this onto a history of private life? How do we come to know a ‘true’, private, somatically singular self within this vast ocean of moving virtual parts?

Emplacement might begin to answer this question. In-and-through a relationship with this data – a relationship defined by practices and technologies of emplacement – we come to recognize a composite of the self, reflected, situated, and simulated within and throughout a virtual-material realm. We are not duped by digital technology. Rather we are virtually instantiated within it. We have become emplaced and situated agents-in-struggle, leveraging and deploying prescribed strategies of self-improvement, or technologies of the self: we remake ourselves in light of our emplacement.

Bibliography

- Adkins, L., & Adkins, R. A. (2014). *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome*. Infobase Publishing.
- Adorno, T. W. (1991). *The culture industry: selected essays on mass culture*. (J. M. Bernstein, Ed.). London: Routledge.
- Althusser, L. (2006). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation). In M. G. Durham & D. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: keywords* (Rev. ed, pp. 79–88). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373–395.
- Ariès, P. (1993). Introduction. In R. Chartier & G. Duby (Eds.), *A History of Private Life: Passions of the Renaissance* (pp. 1–12). Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Baudry, J.-L. (1974). Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus. *Film Quarterly*, 28(2), 39–47. <http://doi.org/10.2307/1211632>
- Benjamin, W. (1968). The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. In *Illuminations* (pp. 217–252). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Castronova, E. (2003). *Theory of the Avatar* (SSRN Scholarly Paper No. ID 385103). Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network. Retrieved from <http://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=385103>
- Chartier, R. (1993). Introduction. In P. Ariès & G. Duby (Eds.), *A History of Private Life: Passions of the Renaissance* (pp. 15–20). Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

- Chartier, R., Arias, P., & Duby, G. (1993). *A History of Private Life: Passions of the Renaissance*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Claridge, A. (2010). *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*. Oxford University Press.
- Crosby, O. (2016, July). Why it's so hard to climb • /r/summonerschool. Retrieved June 2, 2016, from https://www.reddit.com/r/summonerschool/comments/436166/why_its_so_hard_to_climb/
- Cross, R. (2007). "Heterochronia" in Thomas of Erceldoune, Guingamor, "The Tale of King Herla", and The Story of Meriadoc, King of Cambria. *Neophilologus*, 92(1), 163–175. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s11061-006-9022-z>
- defiantketchup. (2008, October 7). New "League of Legends: Clash of Fates" Beta Sign-Up Traile. Retrieved from <http://www.g4tv.com/thefeed/blog/post/689883/new-league-of-legends-clash-of-fates-beta-sign-up-trailer/>
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2010). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1). Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589>
- Ellis, C. S., & Bochner, A. P. (2006). Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography An Autopsy. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 429–449.
- Elo rating system. (2016, April 5). In *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Elo_rating_system&oldid=713663000
- Eskelinen, M. (2001). Game Studies 0101: Eskelinen: The Gaming Situation. *Game Studies*, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>

- Eskelinen, M. (2012). *Cybertext Poetics: The Critical Landscape of New Media Literary Theory*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1980a). Intellectuals and power: A conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. In *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (pp. 206–217). Retrieved from <http://libcom.org/library/intellectuals-power-a-conversation-between-michel-foucault-and-gilles-deleuze>
- Foucault, M. (1980b). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1983). *This is Not a Pipe*. University of California Press.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* (Reissue edition). New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (1994). *Dits Et Écrits 1954-1988*. (D. Defert, F. Ewald, & J. Lagrange, Eds.).
- Foucault, M. (1998). Different Spaces. In J. D. Faubion (Ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (pp. 175–185). The New Press.
- Foucault, M. (2003). *The birth of the clinic an archaeology of medical perception*. London: Routledge. Retrieved from <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10639215>
- Foucault, M. (2006). *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973-1974*. (A. I. Davidson, Ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (2007). *The order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences* (Repr). London: Routledge.

- Foucault, M. (2009a). *Le corps utopique suivi de Les hétérotopies*. Lignes.
- Foucault, M. (2009b). *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*. (M. Senellart & G. Burchell, Eds.) (1. Picador ed). New York: Picador.
- Foucault, M. (2011). *The courage of truth: the government of self and others II: lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*. (F. Gros, F. Ewald, A. Fontana, & A. I. Davidson, Eds., G. Burchell, Trans.). Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Friedberg, A. (1993). *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*. University of California Press.
- Frissen, V., Lammes, S., de Lange, M., de Mul, J., & Raessens, J. (Eds.). (2015). *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*. Amsterdam University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.oapen.org/search?identifier=524070>
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and Method*. (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Eds.). Bloomsbury Publishing USA. Retrieved from <http://scholar.google.com/scholar?cluster=13753653613770896822&hl=en&oi=scholar>
- Garite, M. (2014). The Ideology of Interactivity (or Video Games and Taylorization of Leisure). Retrieved from <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/05150.15436.pdf>
- Golding, D. (2014, August 28). The End of Gamers. Retrieved May 13, 2016, from <http://dangolding.tumblr.com/post/95985875943/the-end-of-gamers>

- Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (2002). *Dialectic of enlightenment: Philosophical fragments*. (G. S. Noerr, Ed.). Stanford University Press. Retrieved from <http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=l-75zLjGIZQC&oi=fnd&pg=PR14&dq=%22easily+understand+to+what+extent+we+both+feel+responsible+for%22+%22is+no+longer+adequate+to+the+reality+of+today.+All+the%22+%22toward+real+humanity,+even+though+they+seem+powerless+in+face%22+&ots=CsLGNpS9uz&sig=5wJBreewwu4JQeCzFCXlmo4Ej7Y>
- HuskyStarcraft. (2012). *StarCraft 1 - FAN GAME - 4v4 BGH - Game 1*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RuQ4WdoT7U>
- Hutchison, A. (2008). Making the Water Move: Techno-Historic Limits in the Game Aesthetics of Myst and Doom. *Game Studies*, 8(1). Retrieved from <http://gamestudies.org/0801/articles/hutch>
- jacoblol7. (2016, March 19). You guys don't understand what Dopa is banned for. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/XG3b10>
- Johnson, P. (2006). Unravelling Foucault's "different spaces." *History of the Human Sciences*, 19(4), 75–90. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0952695106069669>
- Jschil02. (2012, March 26). league of legends - What does an AP mid do to help achieve map visibility and maintain it? - Arqade. Retrieved January 30, 2015, from <http://gaming.stackexchange.com/questions/59239/what-does-an-ap-mid-do-to-help-achieve-map-visibility-and-maintain-it>

- Kou, Y., & Nardi, B. (2013). Regulating anti-social behavior on the Internet: The example of League of Legends. Retrieved from <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/39981>
- League of Legends. (2009). **Official* League of Legends Walkthrough Trailer*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYc8CTtjnZA&feature=youtu.be>
- Liu, R. "RiotNome." (2014). Dev Blog: SR's gameplay updates. Retrieved from <http://na.leagueoflegends.com/en/news/game-updates/features/dev-blog-srs-gameplay-updates>
- Machinima. (2012). *DOTA Part 1: The Pebble that Started the Avalanche*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnQfdSEqGDA>
- Maggot_Pie. (2015). Hello, Reddit. I'm a Challenger SoloQ Player and here are my teachings on how to climb. • /r/leagueoflegends. Retrieved June 3, 2016, from https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/328i45/hello_reddit_im_a_challenger_soloq_player_and/
- Manovich, L. (2002). *The Language of New Media* (REP edition). Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- McGonigal, J. (2010). *Gaming can make a better world*. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_gaming_can_make_a_better_world?language=en
- McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. Penguin.
- MoarExp. (2014). *MOBA 101: History of MOBAs*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSEJF8FJD6Q>

- Monroe, R. (2014). Facebook of the Dead. Retrieved from <http://what-if.xkcd.com/69/>
- NeeksNaman. (2013, January 16). Visual Upgrade: Annie, the Dark Child - League of Legends Community. Retrieved May 10, 2016, from <http://forums.na.leagueoflegends.com/board/showthread.php?t=3007268&page=1#post33530439>
- NintenDOES. (2015). Philosophy of Competition: Why people fail • /r/summonerschool. Retrieved June 6, 2016, from https://www.reddit.com/r/summonerschool/comments/362ksk/philosophy_of_competition_why_people_fail/
- Purvis, T., & Hunt, A. (1993). Discourse, ideology, discourse, ideology, discourse, ideology... *British Journal of Sociology*, 473–499.
- Riot Games. (2012, October 23). TERMS OF USE AGREEMENT (TOU) LEAGUE OF LEGENDS. Retrieved from <http://na.leagueoflegends.com/legal/termsfuse>
- Riot Games. (n.d.). Ranked Play FAQ. Retrieved April 14, 2016, from <http://support.riotgames.com/hc/en-us/articles/204010760-Ranked-Play-FAQ>
- Roberts, B. (2002). *Biographical research*. Open University Press.
- rotface. (2016). High Level Mindset. Retrieved April 30, 2016, from https://www.reddit.com/r/summonerschool/comments/1q8x13/high_level_mindset_assessing_yourself_to_improve/
- Servers. (n.d.). Retrieved May 9, 2016, from <http://leagueoflegends.wikia.com/wiki/Servers>
- Silverman, M., & Simon, B. (2009). Discipline and dragon kill points in the online power game. *Games and Culture*, 4(4), 353–378.

- Simon, B. (2007). Never playing alone: The social contextures of digital gaming. *Loading...*, 1(1).
- Stanley, L. (1993). The knowing because experiencing subject. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16(3), 205–215. [http://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(93\)90051-A](http://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(93)90051-A)
- Stephenson, W. (1964). The Ludenic Theory of Newsreading. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 41(3), 367–374. <http://doi.org/10.1177/107769906404100306>
- Stuart, K. (2014, September 3). Gamergate: the community is eating itself but there should be room for all. Retrieved June 8, 2016, from <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/03/gamergate-corruption-games-anita-sarkeesian-zoe-quinn>
- Tassi, P. (2014, January 27). Riot's "League of Legends" Reveals Astonishing 27 Million Daily Players, 67 Million Monthly. Retrieved April 19, 2015, from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2014/01/27/riots-league-of-legends-reveals-astonishing-27-million-daily-players-67-million-monthly/>
- Walters, W. (2012). *Governmentality: critical encounters* (Vol. 3). Routledge.
- Young, R. (2013, January 15). League of Legends implementing tiered league system to replace current ranked ladders. Retrieved April 11, 2016, from <http://www.neoseeker.com/news/21930-league-of-legends-implementing-tiered-league-system-to-replace-current-ranked-ladders/>