THE POLITICS OF A GAME PATCH:

PATCH NOTE DOCUMENTS AND THE PATCHING PROCESSES

IN *LEAGUE OF LEGENDS*

by

Rinaldo Del Gallo

APPROVED BY SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

_____

Dr. Hong-An Wu, Chair

_____

Dr. Monica Evans

_____

Dr. Kim Knight

THE POLITICS OF A GAME PATCH:

PATCH NOTE DOCUMENTS AND THE PATCHING PROCESSES

IN *LEAGUE OF LEGENDS*

by

RINALDO DEL GALLO, BA

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The University of Texas at Dallas

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN

ARTS, TECHNOLOGY, AND EMERGING COMMUNICATION

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS

May 2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE POLITICS OF A GAME PATCH:
PATCH NOTE DOCUMENTS AND THE PATCHING PROCESSES
IN *LEAGUE OF LEGENDS*

Rinaldo Del Gallo, MA
The University of Texas at Dallas, 2023

Supervising Professor: Hong-An Wu

This thesis traces the histories of the digital game *League of Legends* through the game's

patching processes and the documentation about these patches written by the game's developers,

Riot Games. Specifically, by analyzing the game's histories of racial representation and

professional player labor through a focus on the effects of Riot Games' patching processes, this

thesis investigates the politics of a game patch in constituting a post-racial logic and precarious

labor practices for professional players and beyond. In this investigation, I begin by examining

the introduction of racial and sexual diversity game patches during the process of *League of*

Legends's rise to global popularity. By considering the introduction of characters that are

explicitly coded as racially and sexually diverse, such as Caitlyn, Lucian, and Neeko, alongside

the inclusion of microtransaction cosmetic appearances that alter the racial coding of player

characters, I argue that Riot Games reproduces the logics of racial othering in these patches

through a positioning of these differences as merely aesthetic preferences, which collectively

contribute towards *League of Legends'* status as a globally palatable game that aestheticizes race

and reinscribes a post-racial logic into the game's universe. Building on this, I proceed to

analyze the patching processes and consequences surrounding the professional gaming event Worlds 2015, a prestigious international tournament. Building on accounts of professional players alongside the journalistic entries on Worlds 2015, I connect the tenuous and precarious labor conditions of professional eSports players at the whims of developer patches with scholarly theorizations on the processes of technological obsolescence and decay. In so doing, I argue that patches are far from its conception as a strictly reactive process. Instead, patches and patching are locations whereby developer goals are actively negotiated with players. To conclude, this thesis investigation ends with a story of the rise and fall of a localized *League of Legends'* competitive scene that connects the post-racial logic and precarious labor practices in game patches. By problematizing how race and labor are intimately tethered to the processes of game patching, I highlight how patching processes can reproduce ludo-Orientalist logic in reality.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In October 2020, Riot Games announced the closure of the Oceanic Pro League (OPL), the branch of professional *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) that covered New Zealand, Australia, and Papua New Guinea with an overwhelming majority of participating players from the former two countries. The closure left a number of professional players from that region unemployed, and many had doubts about their future in the game. Their own circuit had disappeared, and an 'import rule' for professional leagues from Riot Games prevented them from playing in a circuit outside of the region they were from.

The import rule requires that teams from the four major regions of *League of Legends*' professional play, which includes China, Korea, North America, and Europe, are only allowed to field two 'import' players at any given time – a title given to players who do not have lawful permanent residence (e.g., citizenship or resident visa) in their region of competitive play. Such a rule had been implemented following two events: the dominance of the Chinese-only team LMQ in North America in 2013 and the "Korean Exodus," a name given to characterize the large number of Korean professional players that left their home scene to play in China in the few years after the 2014 World Championship (Kay, 2021). This very rule left many Oceanic professional players worried: why would any team in a large region use a valuable import slot on a player from a scene that was considered inferior to the major regions? Why would a team fill a slot with players that were seen as 'less good' than those from major regions?

In a shift that had not been seen before or since, Riot Games made an exception through an announcement on their Esports website. Against the backdrop of imminent unemployment,

Riot Games offered these Oceanic players an opportunity: the ability to play unhindered in the League Championship Series (LCS), which is the scene for North American professional players. All players with Oceanic citizenship would no longer count as an import for the LCS, though they would still count as an import for the Korean, European, and Chinese scene. This rule shift had an immediate impact on both regions. Star Oceanic players, such as Fudge, K1ng, Triple, Destiny, FBI, and Lost, would transfer over to the LCS. Even when a third-party company reestablished Oceania's professional scene just a few months later (even going so far as to securing pathways for teams to qualify for Riot Games' international tournaments), many of these players would not return.

The OPL's fate and the expansion of the LCS raises a few questions. The first is why OPL professional players would be given non-import status in the LCS alone. The second is why other minor regional scenes, whose players are given little chance to go to a larger region themselves due to the import rule, are not given a similar exception. With these two discrepancies, Riot Games functionally rehearsed and codified a presumed similarity between Oceania and North America outside of their game, whereby both regions are part of the global imaginary of the emerging west, into a central feature of their game through their institutional change. In other words, through their change that made an exception to the rule, Riot Games has effectively institutionalized, indicated, and made real that racialized North American and Oceanic players are similar and interchangeable in a way that Koreans, Europeans, and Chinese are not.

As shown through the instance noted above, Riot Games is no stranger to updating institutional rules through crisis and change. Their products and ecosystem are always changing

through constant updates. The game *League of Legends* itself undergoes frequent shifts through 'patches,' namely developer-created alterations to fix perceived design flaws and technical bugs. The changes in each patch are documented in 'patch note documents' (hereafter PND), which are public facing documents meant to inform and justify changes made to the ecology of play. These documents include updates like changes to characters, pictures of paid cosmetics, introductions to new content, and more. The patching processes utilized by Riot Games has become a normative form of long-term development for video games. Colloquially known as "live service games", *League of Legends* and other games such as *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016), *Valorant* (Riot Games, 2020), and *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) utilize patches to continuously update their games long after the initial release date. Alongside the game, the patches themselves have a history intertwined with how race is represented alongside the actual racial experiences of the gamers who play. Additionally, these patches are direct factors in the precarity of professional players.

To unpack the politics of game patches, this thesis traces the histories of the digital game *League of Legends* through the game's patching processes and the documentation about these patches written by the game's developers, Riot Games. Specifically, by analyzing the game's histories of racial representation and professional player labor through a focus on the effects of Riot Games' patching processes, this thesis investigates the politics of a game patch in constituting a post-racial logic and precarious labor practices for professional players and beyond. To do so, I begin by contextualizing game patches and patch note documents, and I situate this process of perpetual patching under the theoretical framework introduced by Wendy Chun in *Updating to Remain the Same* (2016). Guided by this framework, I closely examine the

ways in which Riot Games patch in diversity and instability through technical updates to the game as well as receptions of these patches by player communities. Afterward, I consider the rise and fall of a localized *League of Legends'* competitive scene that connects the post-racial logic and precarious labor practices through patches that are beyond technical updates. Drawing from Riot Game's patch note documents, community forum discussions, and games journalism in this investigation, I showcase the politics of patches in (re)making and (re)inscribing racial and labor relations in and through games.

Note that in documenting and analyzing patching processes, many sources include quotes and discussions from the community members of *League of Legends*. While minor corrections are made for the sake of clarity, these quotes are largely unchanged and include language that is aggressive, explicit, and at times racist, nationalistic, homophobic, or misogynistic. Given the closeness this thesis engages with community discourses, such language will appear at multiple points.

CHAPTER 2
PATCHES AND PATCH NOTE DOCUMENTS

Patches in PNDs are often accompanied with blurbs of text explaining the reasoning and justifications for a given change. These blurbs contain rhetoric that is supposed to convince the player that the change is a proper method to fixing the design flaw. Since losing credibility as a creative authority of the game can lead to harsh repercussions from the community, Riot Games puts effort in each PND to make explicit the perceived design flaw, the solution to that design flaw, and the justification for the solution chosen (over others). Consider, for example, figure 1 (Cabreros & Perscheid, 2022). In this example, you can see Riot Games pointed out the perceived design flaw (i.e. "Ekko being weak for a few patches"), the solution to the flaw (i. e. "increase his damage output"), and the justification for the solution (i.e. output increased in a way that "still leaves his opponents some counterplay opportunities"). Despite the casual tone and brevity of the statement, it and many other similar statements contain all three of these elements in order to convince players of Riot Games' capability to make proper decisions regarding the game's balance.
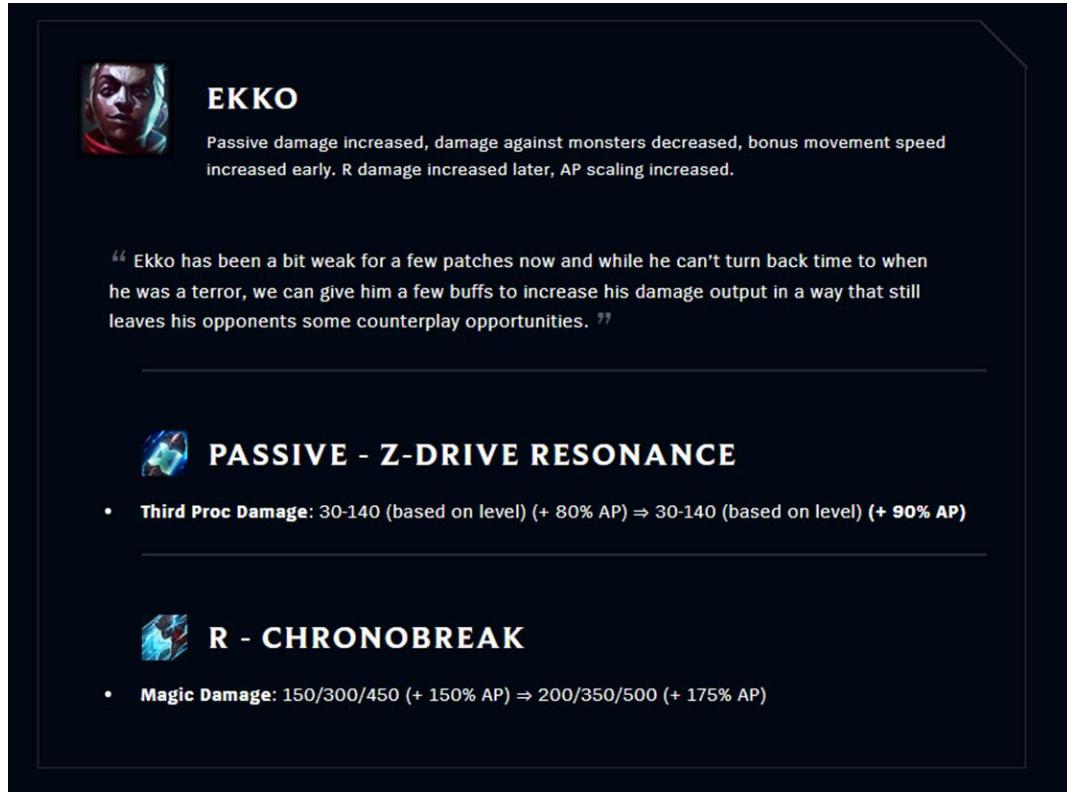
Figure 1. A patch note detailing the changes made to the character Ekko.

Patching, however, can be extended beyond the scope provided by Riot Games'
interpretation. Historically, Riot Games positioned these patches as something associated *only*
with their product and as something that *neutrally* improves upon the technological infrastructure
of their game. This separation has been tenuous however, as patches have been used to enforce
social norms approved by Riot Games. Christopher Paul's *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video
Games* (Paul, 2018) has noted how work towards "balance" has often failed to extend beyond the
scope of skilled and entrenched players. Balance, and the patches that bring them, are not
apolitical or neutral. An example of this can be seen with a play strategy popularized by
Thebausffs, a streamer.

Thebausffs (referred to as just Baus) is a Swedish streamer most known for playing the champion Sion, a character whose abilities position him as a tank. Tanks, within the context of *League of Legends*, refer to a character archetype characterized with tools that grant self-protection, the ability to disable opponents, and the capacity to survive large amounts of damage. While Sion has those tools, the character is differentiated from other characters in his archetype through his ability to briefly reanimate after death and the fact that his ultimate ability had an additional effect of damaging enemy structures – an element vital to winning the game. During this reanimation, most of the character's abilities are temporarily disabled. Sion is left with only a highly damaging basic attack alongside a boost in speed.

While the playstyle of the character intended by the developer designs was to enter the midst of a large fight, die, and remain a threat afterwards, Baus utilized Sion's two defining characteristics to play in a vastly different manner. Baus would elect to "splitpush," a strategy that involved ignoring most of the game's combat and instead focusing almost entirely on destroying enemy structures whenever the opportunity arose. While the strategy is common in *League of Legends*, it is usually not done by tanks. Additionally, Baus would often die in order to take objectives, granting the enemy team inordinate amounts of gold and experience. To put the number of deaths into perspective, Hylissang is a professional player characterized by his relatively large number of deaths in professional play. In his international competitive performances (as of 2023), Hylissang has died 266 times in 67 games, just under an average of 4 deaths per game. During the 2020 ranked season, the season where Baus achieved his highest leaderboard rank, he averaged between 8 and 9 deaths per game.

Players found this playstyle to be frustrating to play with and against. By avoiding combat and dying repeatedly, players on Baus' team would be forced to play with a manpower and resource disadvantage for a majority of the game. Additionally, Baus would often eschew purchasing items that would bolster his ability to act as a tank. Instead, the streamer would almost exclusively buy items that increased his damage, since it would inordinately increase the power of his reanimation. As a result, teams with Baus would often be unable to field a proper tank that could adequately protect the rest of the team. On the enemy team, Sion's ability to damage structures undeterred by death would render him almost impossible to stop. The strategy would become so disliked that it became pejoratively known as "Inting Sion," short for "Intentionally Feeding Sion." Intentionally Feeding refers to a behavior where the player intentionally loses a game by repeatedly dying and inflating the enemy's resource advantage.

Discourse surrounding this strategy continued for years, with the discussion becoming most prominent in late 2021. During this time, the strategy became the strongest it had ever been, with the surrounding balance and dominant strategies enabling the playstyle to become particularly effective. Additionally, Baus had released a video guide on YouTube earlier that year which has been viewed over a million times, popularizing the strategy even more (Hofverberg, 2020). On December 23, 2021, a post was made to the subreddit r/leagueoflegends titled "I realize now why people are saying Babus [another name for Baus] ruined Sion." The post directly criticized both the playstyle and the players who utilize it.

"I just keep finding Sions on my team who do absolutely nothing all game but build
exactly how Babus does, but has 0 clue how to play his build + playstyle. They will split
push all game, die 11+ times, never group with the team. And then flame when they're

pressed 3 - 4 manned and only 1 tower or something goes down because we can't always

anticipate something like that." (AetherIke, 2021)

The post received over two thousand upvotes (Reddit's equivalent of Facebook's "Likes") with 93% of all votes being positive, revealing the popularity of the poster's sentiment. A few months later, on April 21, 2022, a similar post was made titled "I will never forgive Baus for what he has created," receiving over seven thousand upvotes with 91% of all votes being positive. In it, the author directly blames Baus for the playstyle, despite seemingly never playing a game with him. Their frustration with Baus and other players is palpable in the line "Because with Baus constantly getting 30k+ viewers, i [*sic*] can already feel that more of these fuckers will come to ruin my *lovely League of Legends* experience." (okokokok1111, 2022). These posts show the direct connection between Baus, Sion, and the Inting Sion strategy.

Seemingly in response to the post in April, Riot Games would announce five days later that they were testing a "nerf" (i.e. getting in-game power taken away) of Sion's reanimation. The accompanying Reddit post received over five thousand upvotes with 98% of all votes being positive. The nerf would eventually be patched into the game in June, with Sion's reanimated attacks dealing 60% reduced damage to structures. Riot Games's statement on the nerf reads:

> *"Sion's been a bit too glorious in death. Although "inting Sion" had a good run, we*
>
> *believe it isn't a sustainable direction for him or League in the long term. Taking*
>
> *down towers by split pushing should certainly be doable even while behind, but when*
>
> *the strat requires repeatedly dying, it's not very fun for all parties involved. We're*
>
> *nerfing undead Sion's split pushing power in order to restore some balance to his*
>
> *circle of life."* (Cabreros et al., 2022)

Like with Ekko, the note's authors present the perceived design flaw (i.e. Inting Sion is not sustainable), a solution (i.e. nerfing reanimated Sion's split pushing power), and justification (i.e. "it's not very fun for all parties involved"). All three of these relate to Baus and the strategy he popularized. The post and comments revolve around how Baus will be affected by the nerf. As a result, players perceive the nerf as targeting Baus himself as opposed to Sion the character. Even though Riot Games never references Baus explicitly, the post surrounding Sion's nerf and its comments focus on how Baus (and those who use the Inting Sion strategy) would adapt to the change.

The example with Baus is not unique. Within *League of Legends* and other eSports titles, patch notes and patching processes are a consistent consideration in evaluating the ability of players. Like the characters themselves, a player's in-game ability can be perceived as in flux and at the mercy of the decision that Riot Games makes. While this connection between identity and patches are (relatively) harmless within the specific context of casual superstition and myth making, it is problematized when one looks beyond *League of Legends* as a piece of software and instead as part of the socio-cultural infrastructures of video gaming as transnational practices.

CHAPTER 3

PERPETUAL PATCHING: HABIT + CRISIS BY DESIGN

The theoretical framework of Habit + Crisis = Update can explain the dynamics of patching in the case of Baus and similar situations. Originating from Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's *Updating to Remain the Same* (2016), the formula represents the dynamic where public pressure and concern are resolved through technological updates, which often introduces new methods of surveillance while reaffirming the legitimacy of the institution that implemented the update. In other words, a technological update has become expected whenever a sensationalized event disrupts one's typical social media scrolling. Using Chun's words: "Natural disasters and technological failures are not things that simply happen to people; they are things that demand decision, action, and a constant stream of updating information, for public participation is the new norm in crisis management" (Chun, 2016, p. 67).

An example Chun provides to showcase this framework is the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370. On March 8, 2014, an airplane carrying 239 people disappeared over the South China Sea (MacLeod et al., 2014). The plane itself was never found, and the resulting social media attention given to the search demonstrated a public demand for information that would come from advanced surveillance technologies. The search itself was reported to be the most expensive search operation in aviation history, with Malaysia's Transport Minister stating the cost as equivalent to 112 million USD. The lack of information surrounding the airplane was what caused much of the commotion on social media, with initial contrasting reports from the Malaysian government leading to criticism (Branigan, 2014). Furthermore, Malaysian officials received requests from other governments to be transparent about their information, even when

said information potentially revealed the surveillance capabilities of the Malaysian military. As further reports revealed, the Malaysian government was accused of withholding information for days after the flight disappeared. There arose a feeling of mistrust and suspicion towards the government as a result, and many Chinese citizens began to publicly decry Malaysian officials and companies for their supposed failure to locate the aircraft (Demick, 2014). It was later revealed that the flight had deviated from its original path and headed towards the Indian Ocean, a detail entirely missed by Malaysian military radars. Days of searching along the original flightpath was perceived as wasted as a direct result of the failures of Malaysian surveillance technologies. In 2017, the search was suspended (Perry et al., 2017).

Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 can be broken down into the framework provided by Chun. The habituated behavior of social media scrolling had been filled with news of Flight 370's disappearance, a crisis. From there, public awareness led to public demand for trust, transparency, and solutions. This pressured the involved institutional powers, nations, and corporations, such as the Malaysian government or Malaysian Airlines, to provide more information that would in turn fill up more social media feeds. The demand for more information creates a new demand for updated surveillance technologies, as there is a conflation of silence and incompetence or guilt. In the case for Flight 370, the inability of current radar, sonar, and satellite imaging technologies to find the wreckage led to the perception that more powerful technologies needed to be developed and implemented into commercial airliners. As Chun points out that in the cases of crisis, "the fact that a government does not know everything is unacceptable, even to those to whom a government knowing everything is unacceptable. Ignorance or silence indicated conspiracy and the beginning of an endless cat-and-mouse game

of explanation and evasions in which authority is challenged and reestablished" (Chun, 2016, p.67).

Most crises in *League of Legends*'s discourse are not life-or-death situations like those observed by Malaysia Airlines Flight 370's disappearance. However, discourse of a game under heavy surveillance provided by external APIs, such as u.gg and op.gg, and played by tens of millions each day creates a similar result. Gameplay elements deemed as problematic are discussed by the public which creates a need for information from Riot Games. A failure of transparency is conflated with incompetence, which can lead to developer harassment. In turn, an expectation for a technological solution (a patch to the game) is created. Riot Games, as the creative authority on the game, is then expected to utilize their solution as a reaffirmation of their creative authority on the game. Thus, a patch is stitched.

This reaffirmation of authority is critical to Riot Games. As with other institutions in times of crisis, authority and legitimacy is challenged and reestablished. In the case of Riot Games, creative competence is continuously challenged during times of poor balance. Multiple videos, tweets, and threads of players aggressively targeting Riot Games's balance team have circulated in the community throughout the years. Examples that have gained traction in *League of Legends* discourse include Tyler1's "You're trash, fix the game" (Catastrophies, 2018), ForestWithin's "200 years of experience, 2 years of fun" (ForestWithin, 2020), Meteos's "Oh god my nipples it's so different" (Chobi7a Lobi7a, 2019), and Sasiso's "I reached Platinum playing on two accounts at once" Ask Me Anything thread (SaskioLoL, 2020). Addressing these sorts of criticisms through patching is often what alleviates pressure from the player base.

While the dynamic Chun outlines in *Updating to Remain the Same* occurs in *League of Legends*, the nature of the crisis differentiates it. Unlike the catastrophes that involve governments and corporations, the crisis in *League of Legends*'s discourse involves the consequences of decisions made by designers at Riot Games. In pursuit of patching in more content into *League of Legends*, Riot Games create their own crisis, which in turn leads to calls for more patching work and repeats the cycle again as more content is introduced. An example of this can be found in the rework of the character Nidalee and the item Ardent Censer.

In patch 4.10 (Tom, 2014), the character Nidalee received a "rework" to her design. These types of changes include large changes to a character's gameplay and visual appearance, if not outright replacing them. Riot Games justifies these changes by mentioning the character's "contentious low-risk, low-interaction" abilities, which had been a concern found in *League of Legends* discourse around the time. Players were complaining that the character was frustrating to play against and found it difficult to execute meaningful counters to the character's strategy. In other words, Nidalee was Riot Games's crisis of the time, one they addressed through patching. In the same patch, however, they introduced Ardent Censer, a new item to be used by support characters, characters unrelated to the mid-lane damage dealing Nidalee. While the item was not considered useful in that patch, additional patches brought the item to the forefront of the game. Dominant strategies ubiquitously involved playing as character who could most effectively utilize the item and allocating as many resources as possible to them in the early stages of the game. Again, like with Nidalee, Ardent Censer led to its own crisis.

Through patching in a new crisis, Riot Games has an ability to create new disruptions of social media scrolling while simultaneously addressing existing ones. The introduction of new

content alongside maintenance of existing content allows Riot Games to keep *League of Legends* in a perpetual state of crisis and in perpetual need of new solutions. As a result, other aspects of Chun's framework apply in perpetuity as well. Riot Games's authority is consistently challenged by the lambasting of gamers, players look towards Riot Games's social media, which are usually personally run accounts as opposed to a single corporate account, for communication. Most importantly for Riot Games, players demand more patches.

This perpetual state of crisis creates dynamics that differentiate *League of Legends* from situations such as Malaysia Airlines Flight 370. The first is that it creates an ever-present demand for more technological updates, perpetual crisis means perpetual social media disruption, which in turn creates perpetual engagement, which is a common goal of most games that patch over longer periods instead of releasing sequels. Secondly, Riot Games is given more autonomy in their approach to different crises. Not only is Riot Games entirely capable of creating crises on their own volition, such as with Nidalee, Ardent Censer, and other balance and content patches that will be discussed in the following section, but they are also able to create priorities for which crises to address first. *League of Legends* is an assemblage of characters, items, maps, and objectives, and at any given point there may be multiple crises existing and interacting with one another. For example, while Ardent Censer was at the forefront of the game, its cause for dominance was beyond simply its effectiveness. Not only was the item quite powerful, but the characters that could most effectively use it were allowed to do so without punishment because the historical counterstrategies (i.e. picking characters that could defeat them before they had the ability to acquire the item) were weak. Additionally, other items could be bought that accelerate the rate in which players could acquire the Ardent Censer. In effect, the crisis of Ardent Censer

had attached to it a variety of other concerns that contributed to its dominance. As such, Riot Games also has to prioritize which crisis to solve and by which means they choose to do so.

Reading patch notes through this lens of Riot Games choosing to create new crises while also prioritizing the solution to certain crises over others allows critical readings of patch notes beyond changes to a game's balance. It allows for a critical look at design decisions while avoiding pitfalls of balance and discussions on "what is best for the game." In a situation where there exists complex and overlapping issues, to select and choose which issues to focus on is an active choice that can reveal what is prioritized. Additionally, the act of patching can create crises where there was originally none.

CHAPTER 4
PATCHING IN DIVERSITY

League of Legends, like many games from 2009, did not include a variety of racial diversity. Out of the 40 characters in the original roster of champions, relatively few were non-white inclusions. Riot Games seemingly tried to rectify this by patching in multiple non-white characters over the span of the past few years. Characters like Akali, Karma, and Lucian were introduced as non-white representations in 2010, 2011, and 2013. Characters were given cosmetic skins that either made their racial or cultural influences more explicit.

Caitlyn, a sharpshooter sheriff sporting a top hat and posh accent, received a visual change that coincided with the release of Riot Games' animated series *Arcane*. While the update (Yoon & Perscheid, 2021) includes changes to her dress and firearm, elements of Caitlyn's racial coding was changed as well. Her model was changed to be given slanted eyes and lighter skin, traits commonly associated with Asian femininity. Her racial identity is made more visibly explicit in *Arcane*. Caitlyn's parents make visual appearances in the show. Her mother is coded as white, while her father is coded as Asian.

Figure 2. Caitlyn's old in-game appearance (left) compared to her current appearance (right).

In Caitlyn's case, Riot Games has made an effort to rework race, to add in a new mixed-race character where there once was none. Caitlyn's racial update might perhaps be the most visible and known across the player community. However, cosmetic skins for characters have played similar roles. Cosmetic skins are regarded to be less serious by Riot Games, as their appearance is considered "non-canon." In other words, they are not part of the primary fictional universe surrounding *League of Legends*. Nevertheless, characters such as Nidalee almost seem to defy racial constructs through her different appearances across her cosmetic skins, with players remarking on how Nidalee's skins apparently utilize race as an interchangeable aesthetic.

Figure 3. A meme posted to the subreddit r/queensofleague.

The above image was posted to a subreddit related to *League of Legends*, with the caption of "Ariana choosing her race in the morning," (April-Cherry-Blossom, 2022) referencing debate surrounding Ariana Grande's appearance and racial identity (Hellmann, 2020). Within the image are screenshots of the various cosmetic skins available to character Nidalee, with each showing

the character with a different skin tone, set against the backdrop of legs wearing heels with various racial skin tones. The original poster here makes a connection between accusations of Ariana Grande appearing as different races and Nidalee, a fictional character who seemingly changes race depending on which cosmetic skin was selected. Not included in this post is the skin Warring Kingdoms Nidalee, which presents the character as a warrior inspired by Chinese mythology. A similar post was made responding to the release of Ocean Song Nidalee, naming her as the "queen of every race" (aruhirako, 2022).
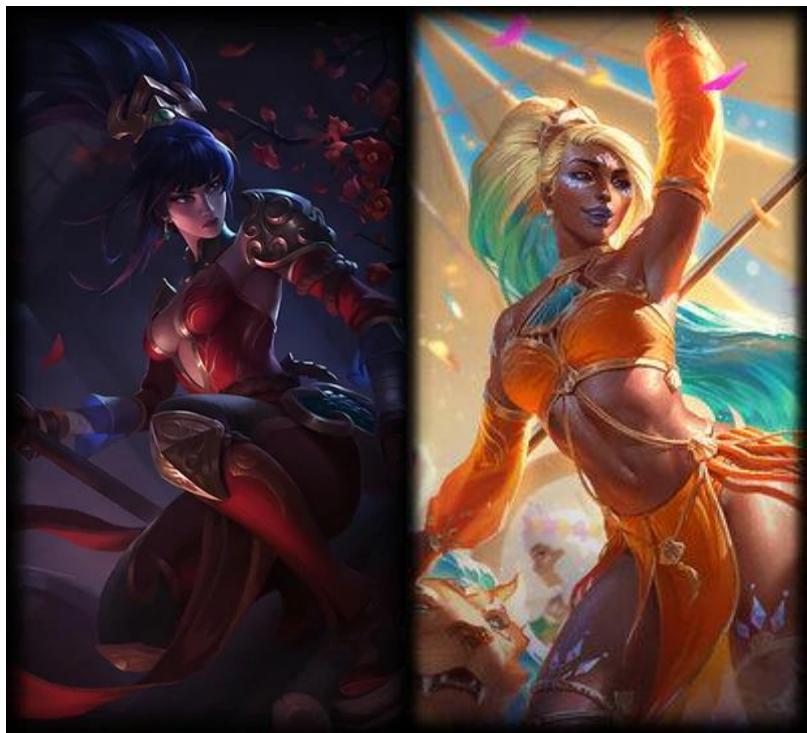
Figure 4. In-game Artwork of Warring Kingdoms Nidalee (left) and Ocean Song Nidalee (right).

Riot Games, like many other games featuring a large roster of characters, seems to be approaching what Christopher B. Patterson describes as a "global game" in his book *Open World Empire* (Patterson, 2020). Using Patterson's own words, a global game is a game which "features a large cast of characters, each with unique abilities, who span multiple ethnicities,

nationalities, and genders" (Patterson, 2020, p.38). While not explicitly stated by Patterson, sexuality is another axis of which these games include diversity. *League of Legends* in 2009 was not this type of game, featuring a dominantly white cast with little in the way of differences in genders, sexualities, and ethnicities. This is in stark contrast to the *League of Legends* of today, which features a number of identities. A recent example is the release of K'Sante, an explicitly Black and queer character with both features prominently on display.

While Patterson focuses his concepts with *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016), much of his observations can also be made in *League of Legends*. Like *Overwatch*, it utilizes diversity as a means to avoid nationalist sentiments or orientation. Both games, by Patterson's own observation, are "nearly indifferent to their imposed narratives" and include "efforts to see racial constructs as having no explicit function within the game." Indeed, *League of Legends* has had a global reach, with millions of players across servers in every continent. However, *League of Legends* differs from *Overwatch* and other global games mentioned by Patterson, such as *Street Fighter II* (Capcom, 1991) and *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games, 1992). Unlike these games, the designers of *League of Legends* have actively chosen to patch in racial diversity. Through introductions of characters like K'Sante, visual reworks such as Caitlyn, and ethnically tied skin lines such as the recurring Lunar New Year skins, *League of Legends* has been retrofitted to become diverse.

Hypervisible Identities

While the result of such retrofitting is similar to games such as *Overwatch*, the process of patching in diversity troubles the supposed indifference to racial, gender, and national origins

21

that global games try to achieve. By patching in characters characterized as "being the first" of a given sexuality, ethnicity, race, or other aspects of identity, that aspect of a character's identity becomes hypervisible. Lucian, a Black undead-slaying gunslinger, is the first Black character introduced to the game. His announcement and inclusion were met with jokes from the player community that play on Black stereotypes. Jason "Videogamedunkey" Gastrow, one of *League of Legends*' most popular content creators at the time of Lucian's introduction, dedicated an entire video to the character. The video's title is *League of Legends: Racism* (Gastrow, 2013), and it features jokes utilizing racial stereotypes. While playing Lucian, Videogamedunkey includes facetious readings of racism while performing otherwise innocuous actions in the game, playing on stereotypes of people of color being liberal with accusations of racism. Interwoven, however, are actual racial tensions. Alongside the aforementioned examples, Videogamedunkey includes a screenshot of a player's messaging a slur while feigning shock at the inclusion of a Black character as well as an image of Wikipedia's entry of Black History Month. The current top comments of the video joins in on these jokes, stating "they nerfed lucian. thats racist" or "How come NOBODY noticed lucian's biggest counter (Vayne) says: I can smell BLACK magic? Now dats some racist bullshit." Forum posts follow in the same vein, this time reading stereotypes into Lucian's gameplay elements.

> *"First of all, he's a black guy with two guns and he does drivebys. His chromas*
> *let him join the crips or the bloods. Not only that, but he gets countered by both of*
> *the cop champions. Why isn't he op in a meta where ADC's build full armour pen,*
> *but MF gets to be played without crit till late game? f***ing racist.."*
>
> (Microwaved_Eggs, 2017)

Lucian's gameplay style is that of an Attack Damage Carry (abbreviated as ADC). The common playstyle of an ADC is to use fast speed, high damage, and range to kill enemies from afar. Lucian has a relatively short effective range compared to other ADCs, and thus must compensate through the use of abilities that increase his ability to move quickly on the battlefield. While someone more commonplace in *League of Legends* today, ADCs around the time of Lucian's release were often marred by intentionally unwieldy mobility options that could only be used infrequently, making Lucian's ability to remain nimble a defining feature. Chromas are variants of cosmetic skins that typically focus on giving the character recolored clothing. His original skin's chromas have the option to dress him in blue or red clothing, colors associated with the two gangs. Champions that have much higher ranges than Lucian will be able to damage him more effectively as they could nullify the advantages gained from his nimbleness. Additionally, characters that can prevent Lucian from using his mobility options also nullify his strengths. The character with the highest attack range and is best equipped to nullify his advantages and "counter" him is Caitlyn, who is characterized as a police officer and sheriff. Her cop partner, Vi, has abilities that specialize in chasing down and immobilizing enemies, which also serves as an effective counterstrategy to Lucian's strengths. Lastly, Lucian's abilities made it so that his kit effectively utilized items that were powerful on the current patch, such as the Black Cleaver and Youmuu's Ghostblade ("armor penetration" items meant to help characters kill more defensive characters by ignoring damage reduction stats). Miss Fortune (abbreviated as MF in the quote) is another character that also utilized these items well. During the time of the post, Lucian was considered to be weaker to Miss Fortune, despite the fact that the two ADCs

utilized the same items. Rather than seriously explaining why Miss Fortune might utilize those items better than Lucian, the poster jokingly points to racism as the cause.

While these two examples are jokes that perpetuate stereotypes, they also unintentionally challenge the indifference to narrative that Riot Games applies to their game. By fixating on Lucian's Blackness, these jokes reject the global game's indifference towards narrative by situating it uncomfortably close to real world racism. Although non-serious, the ease of which players juxtaposed race and game mechanics challenge the conception that racial constructs have no explicit function in the game.

This type of reading on patching and inclusion can be seen for characters that are considered the "first" of any given component of identity. Xin Zhao, the first *League of Legends* character to be inspired by Chinese history and mythology, had his release met by CholeraNinja's now deleted "Be A Man – The Xin Zhao Tutorial" video, which makes joking connections between the character and the Li Shang from the Disney movie Mulan. Neeko, *League of Legends*'s first openly LGBT character, was met with CruffyDump's "NEEKO IS A LESBIAN" video (CruffyDump, 2018), which ironically showcases censored pornographic illustrations of the character that stem from male-oriented fetishization of lesbian intimacy.

These observations that I've noted above on racial and gender dynamics in *League of Legends'* patches and their reception by players are not just a critique on the mere inclusion of difference, but rather they are made to highlight how patching in *League of Legends* is both an active and reactive process from the perspective of Riot Games. While situations such as Baus shows how patches are reactive to players inventing strategies that Riot Games deems intolerable, the throughline between Lucian, Xin Zhao, Neeko, K'sante, and Caitlyn shows how

Riot Games can use patches to actively transform their game towards their goals of being positioned as progressive. Just as patches can be used to "fix" issues, they are also capable of retrofitting and altering the game.

Taken together, these patches can be used to trace towards an understanding of what Riot Games views as a design flaw. In this case, the perceived design flaw appears to be the same problem faced by *Overwatch* and Japan's postwar popular art. What Patterson and Koichi Iwabuchi (Villiers, 2012) observed in their respective objects of analysis (*Overwatch* and Japanese postwar popular art, respectively) was a desire to overcome the national characterization of a product in order to make said product palatable to global audiences. *League of Legends*, as it opened new servers outside of Europe and North America between 2011 and 2013, had to overcome its own national characterization in a similar manner. *Overwatch* and Japanese postwar popular art both seek to address this through the introduction of aestheticized and surface-level aesthetic influences from othered, foreign, and orientalist inclusions. These influences, due to their shallow nature, are little more than mere stereotypes. Despite this, the unserious and over-the-top tone that accommodates these characters are often enough to escape critical gazes from players, something that might not be possible if the game took the embodied experiences of each character's identity more seriously. *League of Legends* has reproduced these same stereotypes in their characters, through the race-changing alternative universe variations of Nidalee, the in-universe regions that are intentionally stereotypical blends of real-life cultures, and the muted influence of the game's lore in gameplay. Because of continuous patching, *League of Legends* now stands with its global game contemporaries of *Overwatch* and *Street Fighter*.

However, as it stands with its global game-ness patched in, its problematic and retrofitted history still shows cracks. Even within the supposed non-seriousness of cosmetic skins, *League of Legends* still finds itself caught in racial tensions. A 2019 YouTube video from Nathan "Blaustoise" Blau, a then Riot Games employee, showed a poll result that contrasts the tastes of Chinese and North American players (Blau, 2019). The results showed the top 16 characters that players pointed to from the prompt "this champion's visuals are appealing to me".

Figure 5. A graphic posted by Blausoise, showcasing visually popular champions in North America and China.

Blaustoise goes on to make the conclusion that China has more homogenous and generic visual preferences, as only attractive men and women with certain body types appeared in the top 16. He contrasts this with North American's more diverse preferences, which includes traditionally attractive men and women alongside monsters and unconventionally attractive men. After listing a few more statistics, such as significant ranking differences between characters,

Blaustoise discusses how different skinlines (i.e. collections of skins that share a similar theme and alternative universe) vary in popularity between regions as a result of that region's cultural influences. For example, the Odyssey skinline (Figure 6), which features a gunslinging sci-fi western theme, was significantly more popular in North America. Conversely, the Divine Sword skinline (a part of the Immortal Journey alternative universe, Figure 7), which features Wuxia inspirations, was significantly more popular in China. Blaustoise attributes this to the claim that "there are certain themes more in different regions."

Figure 6. In-game artwork featuring the Odyssey skinline.

Figure 7. Riot Games artwork featuring the Immortal Journey alternative universe.

In a tweet about the same topic, Blaustoise says that "League is a global game. Sometimes we have to contend with different regional preferences. AND THAT'S OKAY" (Blau, 2019). During the video and in his tweet, Blaustoise seems to address tensions between the two regions. He spends a few minutes on his video addressing the stereotype that "all Asians look the same." This is due to the criticisms surrounding the release of the Invictus Gaming skinline, which celebrates the Chinese professional team Invictus Gaming (IG) winning the prestigious tournament Worlds 2018. The criticisms surrounding the IG skinline was a racially uncomfortable one, that the characters looked identical. A post to r/leagueoflegends titled "IG Female skins splashes looks way too similar" (Ya_MaZZZim, 2019) had received over 5,600 upvotes around the same time that Blaustoise uploaded his video.

Figure 8. In-game artwork of Invictus Gaming's skinline.

While Blaustoise's video itself contained tensions, a later post in 2022 shows tensions much more clearly. In the subreddit r/LeagueOfMemes, dedicated to sharing memes and humor related to the game, a post showing the poll's results titled "Ever wonder why Riot stops monster

champ design?" reached 9,000 upvotes. The post's implication is that Riot Games does not patch in new cosmetic skins for monstrous champions such as Warwick, Kindred, or Aurelion Sol because they are showing preference towards Chinese players, which has no monsters ranked in their top 16 of most visually popular champions. The top comment of the thread ponders on the validity of the test, stating that there might be a mistranslation. Blaustoise himself addresses this concern in the comments under his YouTube video back in 2019, in which he states that the team responsible for translating the question has been competent in his experience, and that similar results were found when polling Chinese audience for other related factors (e.g. "is this character unique", "does it have a good overall theme", etc.). Despite this, some responses still demean Chinese audiences, with a reply reaching 1,600 upvotes claiming that the "Chinese playerbase is just so fucking horny because its comprised mainly of teenage and pre-teen boys that are sexually repressed and have had no genuine platonic contact with the other sex" (Hornehounds, 2022). Discourse in the post's comments also seem to focus on either justifying or explaining away the differences in results, with comments such as "Asian into kpop body types, NA into furries" and "NA players just want to be contrarian. They say they like monster champs but the highest playrate champs are all anime girls/fem boys just like China." (Ibid) While it may be perceived as humorous, serious racialization is present in these discussions surrounding the supposedly unserious cosmetics.

The hypervisibility of a character's identities, be it in appearance and in regional association, showcase problematic elements that can come from patching processes. Patches and patching are a process of design and have political implications. Specifically, through these processes of patching in diversity that positions racial and sexual differences as merely aesthetic

preferences, I argue that Riot Games reproduces the logics of racial othering in these patches, which collectively contribute towards *League of Legends'* status as a globally palatable game that aestheticizes race and reinscribes a post-racial logic into the game's universe. However, despite Riot Games' desire to relegate racialization as merely aesthetic differences, videos such as '*League of Legends*: Racism' and 'NEEKO IS A LESBIAN' both showcase how discourse around patching inscribes racial meaning onto what might otherwise be viewed as unremarkable changes to the game's code. Likewise, divisions that arise from the production of skinlines show how racial factions are remade within the context of patching. Taken together, Riot Games' intentional transition towards making *League of Legends* a global game by patching in post-racial diversity highlights how Patterson's conception of a global game is not merely an attribute of a product, but is something that is actively maintained through the tenuous, meticulous, and negotiated process of digital patchwork.

Remaking the Magic Circle

The aestheticization of race through patchworks reconstructs contributes to sentiments about the "magic circle" which treats race as unserious and racial tensions as solved. Patterson notes this directly, where a frequent patching towards balance "provides a global multicultural representation of others equally balanced in a competitive utopia, an optimistic fantasy that constructs a magic circle where race becomes playful" (Patterson, 2020, p.65). While Patterson focuses specifically on the power and capabilities of characters, the addition of alternative racial and cultural appearances creates a similar effect. Previous work has addressed problematic elements of the magic circle (Consalvo, 2009; Calleja, 2012). To summarize, the magic circle refers to the idealistic vision of a game, where the social rules and player identities are

31

momentarily forgotten and replaced with something artificial or blank. While alluring, this construction is porous, real-world politics, social constructions, and interpersonal negotiations all bleed from the players into the game they play. Additionally, not all identities are able to be forgotten equally. A feminine voice in a video game can easily shatter the magic circle and incite real harassment. Players that inhabit the game are inevitable inhabitants of the real world and are subject to the forces that exist in it. As Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux rhetorically asks, "Has there ever been a game that is absolutely unnecessary, immaterial, and ahistorical? Have there ever existed players able to resist involuntary action like the process of metabolism or the forces of gravity" (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017, p.7).

The recreation of the magic circle allows Riot Games to avoid many uncomfortable questions of labor and race that are present around the game. Tara Fickle takes note of this phenomenon in *The Race Card* (Fickle, 2019), where racially motivated harassment is explained as mere ludic logic. Chinese, Mexican, and Romanian *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) players that earned income by selling in-game currencies were deemed fun-killing and a threat to the meritocratic integrity of the game. Designated as "gold farmers", these players shattered the magic circle for other players by introducing the influence of real-world money into gamified and supposedly separate economies. As a result, these players were vilified. Players targeted gold famers for both for shattering the magic circle and their Chinese-ness (Dibbell, 2007), a connection that Fickle recognizes as a racializing characteristic of Asian players. These connections are rationalized through ludic logic. That is, games such as *World of Warcraft* are deemed as places where work and real-world money are not allowed. The punishment of players who violate this boundary are then viewed as just, even if such

punishments take on racist undertones or threaten livelihoods. *League of Legends* has a similar

market to gold farming, Elo Boosting. Elo Boosting is the practice of paying someone to either

play with them or on their account in order to achieve a certain rank. Players might seek Elo

Boosting services for a variety of reasons, such as bragging about their rank to friends, the

opportunity to learn from a skilled player, or to simulate friendship. Elo Boosting services

subvert the magic circle in similar ways to gold farming. It introduces an association with real-

life money and in-game achievement, and the labor of boosting is primarily carried out by young

players in strenuous working conditions (DongHuaP, 2021). Riot Games designates Elo

Boosting as a form of cheating (Koskinas & Paoletti, 2020), and boosters disavow boosting as

something that is harmful to the game. Additionally, it is regarded as something primarily done

by those from poorer nations. People who purchase boosting services typically offer rates that

are far below minimum wage in the purchaser's country. Players can only boost as a full-time

job when the offered rates are competitive with wages in their country. As a result, full-time

boosters can only exist in countries that have less internationally valuable currencies. There are

wealthy nations that purchase boosts, primarily the United States, and there are nations that

provide boosts, primarily those in Asia and Eastern Europe. Even though many boosters provide

services to achieve financial stability, the ludic logic of the game deems boosting as something to

eradicate. Riot Games has left the issue of Elo Boosted unaddressed, allowing it to recreate the

ludo-Orientalist narratives seems with World of Warcraft gold farmers. While it has not taken

measures on the scale of Blizzard Entertainment, it has not acknowledged it beyond the

occasional competitive ruling on professional players that boost (Lolesports Staff, 2015).

Through looking at what is patched in and what is not, it is revealed that Riot Games seeks to

recreate the logics of the magic circle rather than destroying it. Through the aestheticization of race utilized by skins and characters introduced by patches, *League of Legends* allows itself to obtain the benefits of being a "global game" without addressing the racial experiences that exist within its player base. It instead chooses to make race playful instead of a consideration within the game's ecosystem. In order to preserve the magic circle and the meritocratic ideals of "you want it, earn it" that grant meaning to the game's ranking system, Riot Games must leave Elo Boosting as an action performed by an "other" rather than embrace it as part of its ecosystem. The othering of Elo Boosters shows that players are not post-racial despite the post-racial elements of *League of Legends*. Rather than acknowledging the racialized logic observed by Fickle in *World of Warcraft*, Riot Games chooses instead to recreate it. Elo Boosters, who often boost as a means of financial stability, highlights how the post-racial magic circle is used to ascribe difference to foreign players.

Race, Ethnicity, Nationality

It is worth noting the social construction of race, ethnicity, and nationality alongside their subsequent conflation. Riot Games has worked towards traditional conceptions of technology and games as something free from the confines of real-world racial constructions. However, introducing only shallow, campy forms of representation has allowed players to patch in racial definitions themselves. Racial readings of characters such as Lucian are instances where players choose to patch in racism. Discussions surrounding cosmetic skinlines are similar, where aesthetic preference was ascribed with a totalizing racial meaning. However, this is complicated when given the context that the data was collected from two countries, the United States and China. While both contain large populations, neither nation (nor any other nation) can properly

34

act as a "racial representative". This is because racial definitions are often fabricated in conjunction with dominant ideologies, economic interests, and shifting national boundaries (Haney Lopez, 2000). Fickle notes this conflation in her analysis of gold farmers by highlighting how discourse shifted towards a colorblind perspective. After constructing Chinese gold farmers as violators of the magic circle, they were again constructed as suffering under a more universal condition of exploitation. They were compared to normative players by equating gold farming to more normalized albeit monotonous gameplay, which "violently flattens the differences in agency, economic context, and working conditions" (Fickle, 2018, p.192). These discourses, which are allowed to exist through the shallowness of representation and patching processes, continue the reductive logics behind race, ethnicity, and nationality.

Due to this conflation, analysis of player discourse can be messy. An example of this would some of the aforementioned Reddit comments, where a character's popularity in China was an indicator that all Asians were only interested in traditionally attractive women and men. Less obvious but still similar is the blending of nationality and race as a measure of skinline popularity in Blaustoise's poll. While Blaustoise acknowledges some difference between race, ethnicity, and nationality, his discussion often switches between the three sporadically. When discussing differences in skinline sales, he discusses cultural differences as the relevant factor.

> *"We do the Divine Sword skins* [part of the Immortal Journey skinline] *and like, people in North America are like, Divine Sword? They're probably* [saying] *like, oh that's that Asian skinline. They might not necessarily know the references to it, but those are like really appealing in Eastern countries, especially in China"* (Blau, 2019).

Baked into this quote are assumptions that North American players generally do not have knowledge of Wuxia or are unreceptive to it, and that non-Chinese players in "eastern countries" are receptive to Wuxia visual themes. Despite directly acknowledging the distinction of China from other countries, Blaustoise still makes a connection between Chinese players and non-Chinese Asian players. This analysis only works if you assume a meaningful cultural overlap between China and eastern countries that does not exist between China and North America. More important however, is asking where the boundaries of this cultural similarity lay at. Is it national, ethnic, or racial? None of the three individually are sufficient answers. The comparison itself is a conflation, why compare the nation of China to the geographic continent of North America? While selecting these two audiences seems intuitive as it matches how the game organizes players, it is an unhelpful distinction for discussing supposed cultural differences.

A helpful conception for understanding this discourse is Chun's "race as technology" (Chun, 2009). Chun proposes race as an amalgamation of biological, sociological, and cultural definitions that is intentionally malleable to be wielded by those who have a stake in maintaining racial difference. Importantly, it ignores ontological discussions of race, what is and is not race and whether race exists at all. Instead, it focuses on ethical discussions, what race is used to accomplish. Returning to Blaustoise, race here is used to ascribe meaning to his poll. By ascribing some difference between North American and Chinese audience, Blaustoise is able to use his poll to explain why the Invictus Gaming skinline is suitable for one audience while being received negatively by another. He does this to smooth over the controversy of the Invictus Gaming skinline

by providing a seemingly rational explanation, one that positions the reception as

something beyond the control of Riot Games. By providing his explanation, he indirectly

argues that Riot Games cannot directly address this controversy is because it is one

coming from some innate difference.

CHAPTER 5
PATCHING IN INSTABILITY

League of Legends is an old game. It was released in 2009, making its temporal contemporaries Modern Warfare 2, Assassin's Creed 2, Bayonetta, and Plants vs. Zombies. Each of these games have received multiple sequels in the years since. By contrast, *League of Legends* has been continuously patched since its public release. As such, characterizing the patching process and its effect on players through the lens of repair work and software maintenance can reveal how Riot Games chooses to repair its game.

Riot Games' ambitions for *League of Legends* is a continuous long standing game. Socio-technological negotiations have become a significant force within the design of patching in *League of Legends*, as seen in similar projects such as road infrastructure. The continuous usage of *League of Legends* alongside communities of players have created an assemblage of interests, expectations, and values that must be stitched together for the sake of maintaining the game. To ignore negotiation in the perpetual crisis of *League of Legends* is to allow alternative voices gain further credibility, which can potentially challenge or reaffirm the creative authority of Riot Games's designers. While these negotiations happen throughout the player base, it is most visible within the histories of professional play. Looking at a particular instance of when patching and professional play intersected reveals how the patching processes of *League of Legends* match and deviate from various forms of repair.

Problematizing Worlds 2015

The narrative of Worlds 2015 provides insight into how Riot Games failing negotiations can lead to negative experiences for professional players. Worlds is one of the two yearly international *League of Legends* tournaments organized by Riot Games and is considered the most prestigious competition available. Tournament participation is limited only to those who qualified through regional competitions, which took place earlier in the year on a different version (patch) of the game.

Worlds 2015 is noted as different from other Worlds tournaments as a direct result of the patches that preceded it. The tournament was played on Patch 5.18 (Scarborough, 2015), and some of the patches that preceded it introduced large swings in the strategies available to professional players. In Patch 5.16 (Scarborough, 2015), Riot made changes to the characters Garen, Darius, Mordekaiser, and Skarner. In this case, Garen, Skarner, and Darius had their abilities drastically changed, whereas Mordekaiser saw two of his abilities entirely replaced in addition to the changes to the remaining three abilities. Earlier patches did similar changes for the character Gangplank in Patch 5.14 (Tom & Scarborough, 2015). Gangplank received a rework similar to Mordekaiser, with some of their abilities being exchanged for entirely new ones.

Each of these reworks had large effects on the popular strategies in casual and professional play. Skarner was deemed far too strong in the days following his rework, receiving a "hotfix" nerf almost immediately as well as nerfs in the following patches. While similar nerfs affected Darius, Gangplank, and Mordekaiser in the patches leading up to Worlds 2015. Come the tournament, Gangplank, Mordekaiser, and Darius were considered among the strongest

champions in the entire roster. A character's Pick-Ban Rate (PB%) is the statistic used to demonstrate how impactful a given character is in a tournament. It is calculated by first adding the number of games the character has been selected to the number of games where a team decided to ban the character (a ban prevents either team from selecting the character for the duration of a single game), then dividing that number by the total number of games played in the tournament. Out of a roster of over 130 characters, Gangplank, Mordekaiser, and Darius had a PB% of 100, 98.6, and 72.6, respectively. Joining them were other characters that had been buffed in recent patches. Elise (also buffed in 5.14) and Lulu had achieved a PB% of 97.3 and 94.5, respectively. In other words, four characters were present in almost every match played in the tournament that year.

While none of these percentages are uniquely high, Worlds 2015 saw significant protest from professional players as a result of the quickness of these changes. Elise and Lulu had an existing PB% of roughly 10-20 before the tournament, but Darius, Mordekaiser, and Gangplank had near non-existent or entirely non-existent PB% before the tournament. Conversely, many of the characters which had been used throughout the competitive year were no longer considered strong picks, rendering much of the competitive year's practice obsolete in the two months before the year's largest tournament. Characters such as Kalista and Azir saw their PB% drop by 10-20%. Characters such as Rumble, Alistar, Viktor, Ryze, Maokai, and Sivir, all of whom had a PB% of 65 or higher, saw their rates drop by half or more. To make matters worse, Gragas, a champion with a roughly 90 PB% before the tournament, was unable to be picked halfway through Worlds 2015 due to players discovering a bug mid-match that Riot Games deemed as

"gamebreaking" (Warr, 2015). In other words, in the quarterfinals of the tournament, Riot Games ruled that players could not pick one of the most practiced and sought after characters.

The resulting tension between Riot Games and professional players emerged from how Riot Games had the ability to potentially invalidate a competitive season's worth of practice and strategy. The teams that had qualified for Worlds 2015 earlier that year had done so using strategies tailored towards using the strongest picks of previous patches, and seeing many of those strategies be rendered too weak to use affected teams in a way many deemed unfair. An example of this would be the Chinese team Lao Gan Die (LGD). After placing first in their regional competition, LGD had been expected to make a deep tournament run and was generally considered to be a serious contender to win it all. Despite this, the team was eliminated early into the tournament. Their inability to match expectations is attributed to the team being unsuited to utilize the new dominant strategies that arose between summer competition and Worlds 2015.

Playing to Catch Up

In 2016, Andy "Reginald" Dihn summarized the feelings of discouragement and frustration with Riot Games (theScore esports, 2016). In his interview, he positions himself as both a team owner and former professional player to articulate how patches influenced him and his players during and after the tournament.

> *"From like a spectator standpoint, it seems really funny when people don't know*
> *what they're doing and they're playing all these champions. But like, at the same*
> *time, you know, like a player standpoint and an owner standpoint, I said it was*
> *discouraging because, you know, they spend their whole entire lives and most of*

their time practicing and essentially and with just like a second without any notice

at all, the whole entire game changes and so that's like, I think that's a big reason

why you see a lot of player burnout and why players' careers are so short."

Reginald's response can be interpreted as directly in conversation with discourse surrounding Riot Games's patching decisions. While Riot Games has never released an official statement regarding their decisions, community speculation has claimed that the Juggernauts patch was released in order to create a more exciting spectator experience by promoting all new strategies. This is corroborated with Riot Games's own statements on the patch notes of 5.18 (the patch of World 2015), which state that Riot Games's designers were focused on "creating a landscape where teams have the option to invest in pocket-picks or non-standard strategies is just as important as being able to put them into practice when the time comes" (Scarborough, 2015). Reginald admits that in that regard, Riot Games was successful, but such decisions come at the expense of professional players. Worlds 2015 illustrates how the creative authority Riot Games provides can affect the labor and experience of professional players. The designers of Riot Games initially decided to release the changes as an intentional disruption of professional play in hopes of creating a better spectator experience as well as creating more attractive options for players to pick from (professional or otherwise). While they may have accomplished their goals, it came at the expense of the labor of professional players in the case of Worlds 2015.

Much more is at stake with patches than tournament winnings and devalued labor. William "Scarra" Li, the interviewer and former professional player himself, provides additional insight on how patches can affect a player's ability to even remain in the field. The interviewer's response shows the anxiety players feel about the precarity surrounding their career.

".. the average pro player life term is 2 to 3 years, so it seems really

uncomfortable because you can't really think too much about the future and I

think that sucks because I don't know what kind of applicable skills you can have

playing this game and like rotating into another kind of profession."

Reginald continues the topic by elaborating on how patches can influence the entire

direction of a player's professional career. In a scene where poor performances can lead to the

end of a career, the volatility of dominant strategies caused by patching has large ramifications

for professional players.

"... the way the system works, if you get relegated, you're done, and because the

Challenger scene is so weak, if you get relegated you pretty much lose everything.

So, team owners are really quick to change out players, and when a patch is

issued, a like, really great player can all of a sudden be really bad, right? And

they have to practice their ass off in order to get really good again by putting the

time in. And, you know, putting the ten to twelve hours a day seven days a week is

not sustainable…

… the way competitive League of Legends is, it doesn't really reward like,

knowledge, you know?... But if you're like a doctor, and you practice your

profession for ten years, you become like a master at what you do. But in LCS, it's

not rewarding because from a pro player standpoint, you learn something, you're

really good at it and then you basically lose everything that you've learned in the

last year."

Riot Games has gone on to express their "lessons learned," and changes made in the following years has made pursuing a career as a professional player outside of the LCS more viable. Nonetheless, the events of Worlds 2015 questions why the priorities of Riot Games's designers (the priorities of Riot Games the corporation notwithstanding) are privileged at all. In Reginald's interview, the topic of Worlds 2015 came up as a result of a similar situation happening in the 2016 LCS playoffs, which challenges Riot Games's previous statement. Regardless, in a situation where patching and design choices directly influence the ability for professional players to keep their job and income, it is troublesome that there can be situations where minimal safeties or considerations are made towards professional players.

Neutralizing Obsolescence

These concerns are often handwaved by reference to meritocratic and techno-solutionist answers. More often than not, a player's poor performance is individualized to the players themselves or their team. In the case of LGD, their poor performance was directly attributed to their inability to "adapt" to changes in the game. The language used to describe how players must be willing to submit to the changes done by Riot Games reads similarly to the evolutionary rhetoric used to describe technologies approaching obsolescence. The sentiment is that, like how an unfit species may go extinct, the rise and fall of strategies and character strengths are a natural process of decay. To remain a good player, one must be willing to learn and discard the ways that they interact with *League of Legends*.

Aside from the responses given in Reginald's interview, study on end-of-life software additionally contests these claims of natural decay. In the articles *Convivial Decay: Entangled*

Lifetimes in a Geriatric Infrastructure (Cohn, 2016) and *Keeping Software Present: Software as a Timely Object for STS Studies of the Digital* (Cohn, 2019)*,* Marisa Leavitt Cohn describes how software decay is an active and negotiated process, far from the conception of natural decay over time. Cohn's work interviews and studies engineers at NASA that work with software that maintains a decaying spacecraft that was scheduled for the end-of-mission (i.e. the final operations before the spacecraft runs out of fuel and is rendered unusable) in 2017. The software itself has been extensively modified throughout the spacecraft's lifespan by her interviewees, work has been done not only to keep the spacecraft operational, but also to adapt its capabilities to new mission objectives. As a result, they have an intimate and complicated understanding of the mission's software, which has been extensively modified and customized to suit each individual engineer's needs. These customizations are known as "glueware", relatively minor bits of code that are essential to the day to day activities of the team. Despite the age and apparent obsolescence of this glueware and the software that it is built for, Cohn observes that the engineers on the project still treat the software as something that can be improved and further adapted to the needs of the team. In fact, many of the engineers on the project somewhat prefer the older softwares due to their familiarity and intimacy with it.

The attitudes that the team takes towards the old software then, helps demonstrate how decay of infrastructure is irrevocably intertwined with the careers and needs of those who work on it. The decay of the software comes not from new systems being made or the aging of code (as if code ages as a person would), but from a combination of hardware breakdowns on the spacecraft, change in practice, and the physical aging of the people who work on the software. Frank, one of the engineers working on the spacecraft's software, exemplifies this. Frank is

demonstrated as being the only person familiar enough with one of the pieces of the spacecraft's software to utilize it well enough to meet the demands of the team. He is frequently asked to create custom code that others on the team cannot achieve without his help. Due to the end-of-mission nature of the spacecraft, Frank is not training a replacement engineer as well. His retirement then, is what drives the program towards obsolescence, as no one will be capable of using the software to the demands of the team. Frank also discusses how obsolescence is caused from changing situations. Throughout the spacecraft's mission, its software was programmed assuming that the spacecraft's position was outside Saturn's rings. During the final years of the mission however, the spacecraft would fly between Saturn's rings and Saturn itself, which rendered elements of the software useless. Again, the age of the code was not a consideration, but it was made obsolete due to the spacecraft's position. While the age and degradation of hardware gives obsolescence the appearance of naturalness, Frank's account leads Cohn to warn that "if we too adopt this naturalizing of obsolescence we risk essentializing the narrative of software's evolution as one of progression". Instead, Cohn characterizes obsolescence as something that arises from negotiated processes and decisions instead of something that occurs naturally by age.

This problematic naturalization, however, is one taken by designers at Riot Games. Recall that in patch notes, changes are positioned as a fix to a perceived design flaw of the game. These flaws are positioned as something that is discovered over time, as something naturally occurring within the game's obfuscated systems. Characters, items, or other systems are deemed as too strong or too weak and are changed as a result of these discoveries. Unlike space however, the systems present in *League of Legends* are entirely manufactured. Not only are all characters

and items designed and created by developers, the process of judging characters is inextricably linked to the strategies created and utilized by the players themselves. Due to the expectations of professional play, which utilizes the strongest strategies that have been discovered, professional players are particularly prone to having their methods judged by Riot Games and as a result nerfed into obsolescence. If one were to view the history of *League of Legends*'s dominant strategies as something under direct jurisdiction of Riot Games, the narratives of LGD, professional players, and the rise and fall of strategies takes on a different tone. Instead of pretty stories about the success and failures of individual players or teams, the history of professional *League of Legends* instead seems entirely subject to the whims and desires of a handful of designers at Riot Games. Strategies required to continue the careers of professional players are forced into obsolescence, putting their careers into jeopardy. Riot Games, in their efforts to patch the game, generate instability and uncertainty for those whose careers depend on the game.

Despite Riot Games's direct ability to intervene in the game, players are indirectly ascribed blame for these changes. In each patch note summary, character changes are labeled as "targeting" a specific group of players, with groups organized by skill level. Starting in patch 10.14 (Woo & Tan, 2020), Riot Games uses symbols to denote the role and skill bracket a character's nerf was meant to target. For example, the character Ashe is viable in both the Attack Damage Carry and Support role. The character might also see significantly more play in certain skill brackets than others. Riot Games, for example, might want to nerf Ashe when played in the support role specifically by players between Platinum 4 and Diamond 3 (i.e. players in the top 10% of the leaderboard, but not the top 2% or professional players). As such, they will display the icon for the Support role alongside a purple band to signify this.

Figure 9. "Nerfs" Section of 13.5 the Patch Notes Highlight.

Using 13.5's patch notes as an example, we see that Caitlyn's nerfs are done to affect all levels of player skill, whereas Twitch's nerfs are meant to target specifically the character in the Support role for "skilled" and "elite" players. Buffs do not have this accompanying guide. While never saying so directly, sharing a nerf's target demographic feeds into narratives of ascribing blame to certain players. Two archetypes of characters arise from this. The first are characters that are disproportionately strong in lower levels of play. The second are the opposite, characters that are disproportionately strong in professional play. Particularly in the second archetype, players have lamented how characters they are enthusiastic to play are relegated to being inferior picks in their non-professional skill bracket because of how much the character's abilities favor those who can optimize their use. Through this, players are characterized as creating problems that the developer must come in and patch up. The very labor they use to create new strategies then, are problematized and devalued.

Player Precarity

   The instability of professional play echoes literature surrounding the precarity of professional play in neoliberal contexts. This is displayed through two factors, both of which are prevalent in Reginald's interview. The first is the long-term instability of pursuing a career in eSports, which Reginald's interviewer discusses in his anxieties surrounding transferable skills. Careers are often less than half a decade, and since it is commonly accepted that ages 18-20 are a player's "peak" years, many players choose to delay or forsake tertiary education to pursue professional play (Zolides, 2015). The second concerns the present instead of the future, the actual working conditions of professional players are strenuous. Multiple factors contribute to the poor working conditions of eSports players, patching processes notwithstanding. Unlike traditional sports, the games that eSports congregate around are entirely owned by a single corporation. This can lead to drastic changes cutting careers short, such as a change to maximum team size (D'Anastasio, 2020). Additionally, professional players are expected to do more than play the game at a high level. A successful career mandates building a public persona that attracts corporate sponsorships and contracts (Taylor, 2015). Without those sponsorships, players find themselves with unlivable wages and low quality of life (Lin & Zhao, 2020).

   Patching processes contribute to precarity but does so in a way fundamental to how *League of Legends* is produced. A primary business objective of games with patching processes is to keep players invested and engaged continuously. If dominant strategies remained unchallenged for extended periods, players might find the game monotonous and stop playing. Patches are used to "keep the game fresh". Riot Games is selectively obsolescing strategies and the players that use those strategies to prevent competitors from obsolescing *League of Legends*.

The precarity of professional play is not a byproduct, but rather a necessity to the continued

existence of *League of Legends*. If Riot Games were to stop their patching processes, *League of

Legends* and the careers surrounding would become even more tenuous. Players view a game

ending its patching process as entering "maintenance mode", a pejorative term that brings

associations of commercial failure and obsolescence. Were *League of Legends* to enter

maintenance mode, it would be viewed as a decaying and dying game, not something worth

spending time playing. If *League of Legends* is no longer played, its professional scene will

collapse with it, as the social capital needed to gain sponsorship will no longer exist. As a result,

professional players have a vested interest in maintaining their precarity, to embrace the very

process that puts their own careers at stake.

Precarity in Non-professional Play

While discussion on obsolescing strategies is most prevalent in the cutthroat, win-

demanding dynamics of professional play, it is still a prevalent factor in casual play. While

competitive players seek optimal strategies in a coordinated team environment, casual players do

not always use optimal strategies, nor do they have the skill required to execute many strategies

properly. As a result, some strategies arise and are circulated only outside of professional play.

These strategies are still subject to patching processes. While there is less at stake in casual play,

the generation of casual strategies are also connected to theories of playbour. As Tiziana

Terranova states in *Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy*, "the best Web site,

the best way to stay visible and thriving on the Web, is to turn your site into a space that is not

only accessed, but somehow built by its users" (Terranova, 2000, p.49). While Terranova's focus

is primarily on websites and open-source projects popular in the early 2000s, her observations on

user built experiences apply to *League of Legends*. While Riot Games may patch the game to alter prevalent strategies, the burden of actually creating and displaying new strategies lies entirely on the players. It is up to the players to keep the game fresh instead of defaulting to the same strategies.

CHAPTER 6
BEYOND PATCH NOTES

The understanding of patches so far has been rooted in technological elements. However, this understanding of a patch is limited. Riot Games has in the past made large changes to the surrounding elements of *League of Legends*. These surrounding elements, related to the game but not a strict part of it, is part of what Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux have coined as a Metagame (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017). While Boluk and Lemineux state that there is not a defined, hard definition of a Metagame, they provide its shape through describing it as that which takes place about, within, around, and without games. The Metagame is an amalgamation of "phenomenal experiences, material practices, community histories, economic markets, and technical ecologies of videogames – playing, competing, spectating, cheating, trading, making and breaking videogames" (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017, p.288). In other words, it is the subjective contexts that players input on top of games that dictate how players relate themselves to a game. It is a specific way a player plays a game.

League of Legends has many such Metagames, both sanctioned and challenged by Riot Games. Alongside eSports, Riot Games contend with casual play, Elo Boosting, amateur competitive play, and spoilsports. Notably, Metagames should not be confused with "meta" (most effective tactic available) strategies, terminology often used by players.

While Metagames exist outside the video game itself, it is not immune to alterations from patching. Recalling the OPL situation, Riot Games holds the ability to make large changes to the secondary infrastructures of *League of Legends*. The changes are patchwork towards these infrastructures, addressing perceived design flaws, containing solutions, and supported with

justifications. Similarly, these patchworks can be critically read to reveal the goals of Riot
Games.

Importing Race

The closure of Oceanic Pro League, despite never incorporating a single technological
element, showcased both the elements of racialization and professional instability discussed in
the previous two sections. The aforementioned "import rule" and diaspora of professional OPL
players reveal the power of both Riot Games and their reproduction of racial logic.

The history of the import rule stems from the migration of many professional Korean
players to Chinese, North American, and European teams at the end of the 2014 competitive
year. The region had become renowned for its competitive success, with Korean professional
teams SK Telecom T1 (formerly abbreviated as SKT, now rebranded as T1) and Samsung
Galaxy White (SSW) winning the Worlds 2013 and 2014, respectively. Looking to transform
that success into brand popularity, promotional material, and competitive success for local teams,
many Chinese, European, and American corporations with eSports teams sought to hire many of
the top players of the time. The salaries offered to these players were much higher than those
offered by their current teams, so many left as a result. Simultaneously, the professional team
Chinese team LMQ was acquired by iBUYPOWER after a sixth-place result in the Chinese LPL
(Savery, 2022). As a result, the team brought its Chinese roster to compete in the North
American LCS. The rapid movement of both Korean players and LMQ sparked racial tensions
surrounding the Chinese, European, and North American scenes among fans. Fans viewed the
increase of Korean presence as an invasion, depicting the new Korean additions as tireless,

technology-addicted threats seeking to take advantage of weaker regions for money and fame.

Similarly, LMQ was viewed as exploiting a scene with better infrastructure and weaker players

in order to succeed in a way they could not in the LPL. Hughbo "SoulDra" Shim, a coach at the

time, discussed those anxieties in the video podcast China Talk, a show dedicated towards

discussing the Chinese *League of Legends* scene (Chinese LoL Broadcasting Channel, 2014). He

connects situations like the Korean Exodus and LMQ to a similar event in StarCraft II.

> "*There was a XiaoWeiXiao appreciation thread while LMQ was losing on Reddit,*
>
> *and like, wow, this really gives me hope for the online community because we*
>
> *can, like, still sing praises like this even though fans had the right to be scared,*
>
> *especially since, you know, we look at past examples in Europe with StarCraft*
>
> *where Koreans came over and completely took over the European scene…*
>
> > *… from what I understand, Koreans came in and took over the European*
>
> *scene and even* [took over] *Koreans in the United States as well, players like*
>
> *Violet, who I think live in the United States but are still technically Korean*
>
> *players. So you think about that situation and say, do I really want my NALCS,*
>
> *like our eSport, to be dominated by Korean players…"*

SoulDra is referring to the controversy surrounding Starcraft II's World

Championship Series (WCS). In 2013, a year before SoulDra would make his statements,

Blizzard Entertainment would create the WCS in order to create a standardized circuit for

StarCraft II, seeking to replicate the success of Korea's Global StarCraft League in

Europe and the United States. In doing so, however, Blizzard replaced existing circuits

that had established rules banning Korean players from competing. Many Korean

StarCraft players then entered European and North American WCS competitions and subsequently defeated local players. This event is attributed to the rapid decline of the player base and spectator count in 2014. As the eSport's financial situation recovered in 2018, the game's rise in popularity was also attributed to non-Korean players becoming competitive with Korean ones (Partin, 2018).

> *" ...Honestly, like, if EDG* (Edward Gaming) *came over and they got first place, no one would be salty...*
>
> *...because they were the first-place team in China. But since people were saying, like, LMQ is going to come over and dominate you motherfuckers even though they were the sixth-place team in the LPL, it's like measuring penis size. You know, we don't want to get, like, fucked by like these no name Chinese players..."*

Here, SoulDra refers to anxieties about the inferiority of North American competition. The year prior to LMQ's introduction into the LCS, North American teams had performed poorly at Worlds 2013, ranking outside the top four with two of three teams ranking in the bottom four. These anxieties would then flare as nationalist sentiments, as seen in SoulDra's follow up comments.

> *...and also, it's based on pride and region. Nobody fucking hates on like, Wildturtle or, like, Scarra because they're ethnically Chinese. I've never seen, like, racist comments on Reddit against them. It's mostly the fact that they* [LMQ] *came from a region deemed better than thou, which is deemed as better than the western regions, and they were a crap tier team in that [eastern] region and now*

they came to NA to seemingly get an easier shot at Worlds. And that doesn't sit

well with a lot of people especially since, you know, America is like the blue

collar country, we're like the people that work for their stuff. And LMQ has been

working for their stuff, but there's still that minority that can't really accept the

fact that this Chinese team, you know, they don't want to compete in a stronger

region so they're going to come to the weaker region and try to shit on

everybody."

Another guest on the podcast, Kelsey "Kelsey" Moser, responds to SoulDra in a way that

complicates the American perspective on LMQ.

"These players in North America are entitled to more pay, like these Korean and

Chinese players who come over [to get] *pretty much a better working*

environment…

… and of course, how is the story of someone coming from another

country to your country, like, wanting to [come to] *your region or whatever and*

wanting to represent you and play LoL for you, like how is that, like…

… if they want to get a free pass into Worlds, they're still, like,

representing our [American] *League of Legends in a sense. Like, they come and*

they either change our meta or they impact our meta and then we get to watch

them play all the time. And like, they interact with the fans. Like, LMQ is trying to

interact with the fans. "

Kelsey is tapping into sentiments American immigrant stories, where foreign

migrants come to the United States in pursuit of better conditions. Additionally, post-

game interviews with some of LMQ's players indicated that they were attempting to learn English, which many viewed as a genuine attempt to integrate into US culture. Other professional players positively received LMQ's presence in the LCS, claiming that the team's aggressive and mechanically impressive playstyle would heighten the level of competition in the region.

The resulting tension from eSports fans follow a trend discussed by Tara Fickle in *Made in China: Gold Farming as Alternative History of Esports* (Fickle, 2021), where Asians players became viewed as both a threat and as something to marvel at. Fickle defines this combined construction as ludo-Orientalism, where the characterization of Asian players in games flattens the diversity of Asian ethnicities into a single group that acts as both a model to aspire to (as skilled gamers) and a threat to western players (as skilled gamers who dominate western players in video games). Fickle notes that ludo-Orientalism emerges from reinvigorated (patched!) versions of old stereotypes, such as "the perceived agility of Asian hands," the "repetitive, localized resources extraction practices," or the "collectivist, disciplined, patient, and robotic tactics and strategies deployed by East Asian (especially Chinese) esports teams." These stereotypes are reproduced in SoulDra's discussions on LMQ, where he notes Chinese and Korean players as potential dominators of American eSports. Other articles on the Korean Exodus are similar, noting how Korea will be able to regrow talent "through rigorous training, where 16 hours a day is the norm" (Chexx, 2015).

The import rule then, is a reaction to these sentiments. The Korean Exodus was eventually seen as a failure by most teams that had signed these players. Teams cited language barriers leading to a breakdown of proper teamwork, and many of the players that had left Korea

returned (theScore esports, 2018). Despite being most affected by the Korean Exodus, the competitive success of China has not brought about the repealing of the import rule. While the Chinese competitive scene still holds a number of Korean players, Chinese players are now considered to be on equal footing with Korean ones, as multiple Chinese teams have won Worlds tournaments. Conversely, North America and Europe are still viewed as behind both Korea and China. North America in particular has been viewed as vastly inferior to Korea and China, with many players dubbing it as a "retirement home," due to the number of established European, Chinese, and Korean players who have migrated into the scene after accomplishing impressive feats in their home region. These "retirees" (despite still being active professional players) are often pointed to as a source of the region's failure. Many fans view these imported players similarly to how LMQ was, as stronger players looking to exploit North America's weaker competition in order to benefit themselves. In this case, rather than looking for an easy path towards World's qualification, the imported players are incentivized by North America's relatively larger paychecks coupled with a more relaxed competitive atmosphere. The import rule, then, now acts as an institutionalized form of protection from the supposed marvelous and threatening Asian players.

The import rule takes on an ironic feeling then when applied to the dissolving OPL, which was constituted of primarily Australian and New Zealander players. Riot Games's decision had now put them at odds with another Riot Games decision made to protect their competitively weaker scene. For a brief moment, they were forced to be aggressors, looking to migrate to other regions in order to preserve their careers. An Australian and New Zealander Exodus occurred, with many players moving to the North American LCS, the Taiwanese PCS,

and the Japanese LJL. Similarly to the Korean Exodus, many players eventually returned with the opening of a third-party competitive scene, League Circuit Oceania (LCO). However, they were not labeled as part of the wondrous yet dangerous orient, nor had the OPL found much success in international competition. From the perspective of ludo-Orientalism, it follows then that OPL players should be given the exemption that Riot Games eventually gave. OPL players were neither a marvel nor a threat, and thus did not need to be restrained by the import rule.

The dissolving of the OPL acts as a microcosm of how race, career instability, and patches coincide within *League of Legends*. Like with any other crisis, the dissolving of the OPL generated a disruption in social media feeds, which in turn pressured Riot Games to formulate a response. OPL players faced the precariousness that came from Riot Games' decision to end the OPL due to a lack of profit, regardless of the labor and work performed by the players and supporting staff. The preconceptions of ludo-Orientalist logic were absent in the predominantly white Sydney-based OPL. Each factor culminated in an update, a patch surrounding a Metagame in *League of Legends*. Riot Games performs patchworks outside the framework of *League of Legends* the game, and just as the game can be subject to the whims of designers, so can the reality of those who play it. By reading situations like the OPL as patches, it can be subject to the frameworks it shares with its technological variants.

The messiness of patches reveals the way that race itself is messy. The perspectives of OPL players in North America, Korean players in China, European "retirees," and American-born Asian players all reveal brief moments where the line between occident and orient are crossed. OPL players find themselves both sheltered and targeted by the import rule. Korean players are viewed as invaders in the Chinese scene. European players are viewed as exploiting

North America's relatively lax competition. American-born Asian players are briefly treated as North American when Chinese and Korean players provide a more foreign threat to western regions. The patchwork done by Riot Games to uphold the racial ideologies that exist in *League of Legends* reveals the active process of race not just as something that is fabricated, but also, as Chun puts it, "a technique that one uses, even as one is used by it—a carefully crafted, historically infected system of tools, mediation, or enframing that builds history and identity." Patches in *League of Legends*'s histories highlights how ludo-Orientalism expands and contracts its inclusions and exclusions.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This thesis has discussed the ways in which the histories of *League of Legends* is closely tied with, if not directly made from, the patching processes of Riot Games. It has discussed the ways in which patches interact with race, labor, professional play, and the experiences of players. Lastly, it has postulated that the patching process extends beyond its technological definition.

League of Legends is not the only game to receive patches in this manner, nor is it the only game with a history deeply intertwined with its patches. *Valorant*, another Riot Games product, has complicated histories with Elo Boosting services that challenge notions of play/labor. While competitive prices disallow American players from pursuing Elo Boosting as a full time career, Boosters from countries such as Poland, Turkey, France, and Germany can make wages comparable to other jobs in their country when taking orders from American players. Due to the distance between the client and the service provider, however, Elo Boosters find themselves playing on much higher internet latency than normal. As a result, a patch (Aragon, 2023) that changed how internet latency worked in *Valorant* put their livelihoods in line, as high latency was a much larger detriment to one's ability to succeed. Similarly, *Apex Legends* (Respawn Entertainment, 2019), introduced a patch that changed how high a player's rank increased whenever they achieved a kill or high placement (Electronic Arts, 2021). It incentivized more active, aggressive play styles that rewarded teams that constantly searched for fights instead of methodically looting uncontested areas. In doing so, however, Respawn Entertainment made a statement on how their game ought to be played, and many players found themselves being rewarded more or less depending on the way they approached the game.

Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017), used to have a much skill intensive and inaccessible building

mechanic that rewarded hardcore players that took time to master the skill while punishing

players who did not or could not dedicate the time to learn. A patch (Broseker, 2022), however,

outright removed the mechanic from the game, much to the chagrin and excitement of many

highly ranked and professional players (Byrd, 2022). Each of these examples show that patches

play a significant role in the histories of many video games, and that each of these games cannot

be analyzed as a collective. *Valorant*, *Apex Legends*, and *Fortnite* each have variations of

patching, notwithstanding differences in the games themselves and their metagames, which

require a precise look.

Patch Note Documents then, can provide a unique view of the histories of a game, and

allows a framework of understanding beyond just its current iteration, instead providing insights

on how a game came to be what it is.

REFERENCES

AetherIke. (2021, December 23). *R/leagueoflegends - I realize now why people are saying Babus ruined Sion*. reddit. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/rn12xa/i_realize_now_why_people _are_saying_babus_ruined/

Apex Legends. PC. Respawn Entertainment, 2019.

April-Cherry-Blossom. (2022, January 30). *R/queensofleague - ariana choosing her race in the morning* . Reddit. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.reddit.com/r/queensofleague/comments/sgbrrm/ariana_choosing_her_race_i n_the_morning/

Aragon, J.-E. (2023, February 7). *Valorant Patch notes 6.02*. VALORANT. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://playvalorant.com/en-us/news/game-updates/valorant-patch-notes-6-02/

aruhirako. (2022, May 24). *R/queensofleague - queen of every race is back at it again* . Reddit. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.reddit.com/r/queensofleague/comments/uwth70/queen_of_every_race_is_ba ck_at_it_again/

Blau, N. (2019, April 15). *Visual appeal of champions - north america vs China*. YouTube. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZteyvVxzwI

Blau, N. (2019, April 5). *visual appeal by region data disc and stream*. Twitter. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://twitter.com/blaustoise/status/1113994939442978817

Boluk, S., & LeMieux, P. (2017). *Metagaming: Playing, competing, spectating, cheating, trading, making, and breaking videogames*. University of Minnesota Press.

Branigan, T. (2014, March 14). *Malaysia flight MH370 Hunt sees suspicion and cooperation*. The Guardian. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/14/malaysia-flight-mh370-hunt-sees-suspicion-and-cooperation-china-us

Broseker, R. (2022, March 21). *Check out what's new in Fortnite Battle Royale chapter 3 - Season 2: Resistance*. Xbox Wire. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://news.xbox.com/en-us/2022/03/21/whats-new-fortnite-battle-royale-chapter-3-season-2-resistance/

Byrd, M. (2022, March 22). *Fortnite fans are divided over the game's controversial "No building" update*. Den of Geek. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from

https://www.denofgeek.com/games/fortnite-fans-debate-reactions-controversy-no-building-update/

Cabreros, L., & Perscheid, P. (2022, October 4). *Patch 12.19 notes*. leagueoflegends.com. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.LeagueofLegends.com/en-pl/news/game-updates/patch-12-19-notes/

Cabreros, L., Yoon, J., & Perscheid, P. (2022, May 10). *Patch 12.9 notes*. leagueoflegends.com. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.LeagueofLegends.com/en-pl/news/game-updates/patch-12-9-notes/

Calleja, G. (2012). Erasing the magic circle. *The Philosophy of Computer Games*, 77–91. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4249-9_6

Catastrophies. (2018, June 1). *Tyler1 has had enough with riot games!* YouTube. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jh-mxJNBPLg

Chexx. (2015, January 6). The Great Korean Exodus. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://tl.net/forum/league-of-legends/474668-the-great-korean-exodus

Chinese LoL Broadcasting Channel. (2014, August 31). *LPLEN hosts China talk episode 13*. YouTube. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWpD6Fyn8sA

Chobi7a Lobi7a. (2019, January 11). *Meteos on new Champ release*. YouTube. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://youtu.be/Z1UmbZ2_ylk

Chun, W. H. (2009). Introduction: Race and/as technology; or, how to do things to race. *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, *24*(1), 7–35. https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2008-013

Cohn, M. (2016). Convivial Decay: Entangled Lifetimes in a Geriatric Infrastructure. In *CSCW'16: Proceedings & companion of the ACM conference on computer-supported cooperative work and Social Computing: February 27-March 2, 2016, San Francisco, CA, USA* (pp. 1511–1523). New York, NY; Association for Computing Machinery.

Consalvo, M. (2009). There is no magic circle. *Games and Culture*, *4*(4), 408–417. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009343575

CruffyDump. (2018, December 2). *Neeko is a lesbian - community reaction*. YouTube. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmyN5tUHNYM&t=25s

D'Anastasio, C. (2020, September 10). *Esports Pros have 'dream' jobs-but game publishers have all the power*. Wired. Retrieved April 15, 2023, from https://www.wired.com/story/esports-pros-labor-game-publishers-power/

Demick, B. (2014, March 28). *Chinese boycott Malaysia over missing jetliner*. Los Angeles Times. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2014-mar-28-la-fg-wn-chinese-boycott-malaysia-over-missing-jetliner-20140328-story.html

Dibbell, J. (2007, June 17). *The life of the chinese gold farmer*. The New York Times. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/17/magazine/17lootfarmers-t.html

DongHuaP. (2021, June 14). *League of documentary - the harsh reality of Eloboosters.* YouTube. Retrieved April 7, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_LbtCzckA0

Electronic Arts. (2021, October 28). *Apex Legends: Escape patch notes*. Apex Legends. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.ea.com/en-gb/games/apex-legends/news/escape-patch-notes

Fickle, T. (2019). *The race card*. New York University Press.

Fickle, T. (2021). Made in China: Gold Farming as Alternative History of Esports. *ROMchip*, *3*(1).

ForestWithin. (2020, January 9). *200 years of experience, 2 years of fun*. YouTube. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://youtu.be/oFERPp8iG78

Fortnite. PC. Epic Games, 2017.

Gastrow, J. (2013, August 28). *League of Legends : Racism*. YouTube. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQvl_Ble7n4

Haney Lopez, I. (2000). The Social Construction of Race. In *Critical race theory: The cutting edge* (pp. 191–203). essay, Temple University Press.

Hellmann, A. (2020, July 6). *Ariana Grande & Blackfishing*. Medium. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://medium.com/@abbs664/ariana-grande-blackfishing-d42a8cb726ea

Hofverberg, S. (2020, March 29). *The Ultimate Sion Guide | thebausffs*. YouTube. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzQ7s5r7NiA

Hornehounds. (2022, October 25). *R/leagueofmemes - ever wonder why Riot stops monster champ design?* Reddit. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from

https://www.reddit.com/r/LeagueOfMemes/comments/ydi9g3/ever_wonder_why_riot_st ops_monster_champ_design/

Kay, M. (2021, March 6). *What are the import restrictions in competitive League of Legends?* Dot Esports. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from https://dotesports.com/league-of-legends/news/what-are-the-import-restrictions-in-competitive-league-of-legends

Koskinas, P., & Paoletti, M. (2020, May 8). *League of Legends*. /dev: Anti-Cheat in LoL (& More). Retrieved April 7, 2023, from https://www.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/news/dev/dev-anti-cheat-in-lol-more/

Kyong, C. W. H. (2017). *Updating to remain the same: Habitual new media*. The MIT Press.

Lin, Z., & Zhao, Y. (2020). Self-enterprising esports: Meritocracy, precarity, and disposability of esports players in China. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *23*(4), 582–599. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920903437

Lolesports Staff. (2015, August 11). *Competitive ruling: Xian "xiaoweixiao" yu*. Competitive Ruling: Xian "XiaoWeiXiao" Yu – *League of Legends*. Retrieved April 7, 2023, from https://lolesports.com/articles/competitive-ruling-xian-%E2%80%9Cxiaoweixiao%E2%80%9D-yu

League of Legends. PC. Riot Games, 2009.

MacLeod, C., Winter, M., & Gray, A. (2014, March 8). *Beijing-bound flight from Malaysia missing*. USA Today. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/03/07/malaysia-airlines-beijing-flight-missing/6187779/

Microwaved_Eggs. (2017, February 19). *Riot is f***ing racist to Lucian.* Riot is f***ing racist to Lucian. - *League of Legends*. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/954437-league-of-legends/75008801

Milella, V. (2023, February 4). *League of Legends Rank Distribution in solo queue - February 2023*. Esports Tales. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from https://www.esportstales.com/league-of-legends/rank-distribution-percentage-of-players-by-tier

Nash, J. C. (2008). Strange bedfellows. *Social Text*, *26*(4), 51–76. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2008-010

Mortal Kombat. Sega Genesis. Midway Games, 1992.

okokokok1111. (2022, April 21). *I will never forgive Baus for what he has created*. Reddit. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/u8we70/i_will_never_forgive_baus_for_what_he_has_created/

Overwatch. PC. Blizzard Entertainment, 2016.

Partin, W. (2018, July 16). *'Starcraft ii': How blizzard brought the King of Esports back from the dead*. Variety. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://variety.com/2018/gaming/features/starcraft-ii-esports-history-1202873246/

Patterson, C. B. (2020). *Open world empire: Race, erotics, and the Global Rise of video games*. New York U.P.

Paul, C. A. (2018). *The Toxic Meritocracy of video games: Why gaming culture is the worst*. University of Minnesota Press.

Perry, J., Berlinger, J., Sterling, J., & Bloom, D. (2017, January 18). *MH370: Search suspended but future hunt for missing plane not ruled out*. CNN. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/17/asia/mh370-search-suspended/

SaskioLoL. (2020, January 3). *R/leagueoflegends - hi my name is saskio, I reached platinum playing on two accounts at once Ama*. Reddit. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/ejllvq/hi_my_name_is_saskio_i_reached_platinum_playing/

Savery, A. (2022, January 20). *Chinese team, American Dream: LMQ at worlds*. Red Bull. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.redbull.com/us-en/chinese-team-american-dream-lmq-at-worlds

Scarborough, P. (2015, August 19). *Patch 5.16*. Leaguepedia | *League of Legends* Esports Wiki. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://lol.fandom.com/wiki/Patch_5.16

Scarborough, P. (2015, September 15). *Patch 5.18*. Leaguepedia | *League of Legends* Esports Wiki. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://lol.fandom.com/wiki/Patch_5.18

Street Fighter II. Arcade game. Capcom, 1991.

Shimizu, C. P. (2007). *The hypersexuality of race: Performing Asian/American women on screen and scene*. Duke University Press.

Taylor, T. L. (2015). *Raising the stakes: E-sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*. MIT Press.

Terranova, T. (2000). Free labor. *Social Text*, *18*(2), 33–58. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-18-2_63-33

*Thebausffs S13 lol profile (EUW): Master ranked solo, master ranked Flex, Champion Stats +
    match history for normals, aram, all modes*. U.GG. (n.d.). Retrieved March 27, 2023,
    from https://u.gg/lol/profile/euw1/thebausffs/champion-stats?season=14

theScore esports. (2016, August 22). *Reginald on how riot's major patch changes hurt Lol's
    competitive scene*. YouTube. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from
    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcPP45gj72M&t=1s

theScore esports. (2018, November 29). *The Great Korean Exodus: How Huge Chinese
    contracts gave us Lol's craziest offseason ever*. YouTube. Retrieved March 28, 2023,
    from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olpBaV6Eavo

Tom, C. (2014, June 18). *Patch 4.10*. Leaguepedia | *League of Legends* Esports Wiki. Retrieved
    March 28, 2023, from https://lol.fandom.com/wiki/Patch_4.10

Tom, C., & Scarborough, P. (2015, July 21). *Patch 5.14*. Leaguepedia | *League of Legends*
    Esports Wiki. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://lol.fandom.com/wiki/Patch_5.14

Valorant. PC. Riot Games, 2020.

Vertesi, J., & Ribes, D. (2019). Keeping Software Present: Software as a Timely Object for STS
    Studies of the Digital. In *DigitalSTS: A field guide for science & technology studies* (pp.
    423–446). essay, Princeton University Press.

Villiers, N. D. (2012). *Opacity and the closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol*.
    Univ. of Minnesota Press.

Warr, P. (2015, October 20). *You're barred: Gragas removed from League of Legend
    Tournament*. Rock Paper Shotgun. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from
    https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/league-of-legends-worlds-gragas-ban

Woo, H., & Tan, T. (2020, July 7). *Patch 10.14 notes*. leagueoflegends.com. Retrieved March
    28, 2023, from https://www.leagueoflegends.com/en-gb/news/game-updates/patch-10-
    14-notes/

World of Warcraft. PC. Blizzard Entertainment, 2004.

Ya_MaZZZim. (2019, April 4). *Ig female skins splashes looks way too similar*. Reddit. Retrieved
    March 28, 2023, from
    https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/b9d886/ig_female_skins_splashes_l
    ooks_way_too_similar/

Yoon, J., & Perscheid, P. (2021, November 16). *Patch 11.23 notes*. leagueoflegends.com. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from https://www.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/news/game-updates/patch-11-23-notes/

Zolides, A. (2015). Lipstick bullets: Labour and gender in professional gamer self-branding. *Persona Studies*, *1*(2), 42–53. https://doi.org/10.21153/ps2015vol1no2art467

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rinaldo Del Gallo grew up in Chandler, Arizona. After graduating from high school in 2017, he
attended Arizona State University for Philosophy. During that time, he developed an interest in
game studies and interdisciplinary work. In 2021, he entered the Arts, Technology, and
Emerging Communications program at The University of Texas at Dallas to pursue his interests.

Rinaldo Del Gallo

EDUCATION

MA   The University of Texas at Dallas   2021-Present
Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication
Emerging Media Studies

BA   Arizona State University   2017-2021
The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Philosophy

CERT Arizona State University   2017-2021
Arts and Humanities in Games
Symbolic, Cognitive, and Linguistic Systems
Computer Game Development

RESEARCH PROJECTS

BA at Arizona State University

- [Infinity Game Lab at ASU](#)
  - Workshop space focusing on interdisciplinary collaboration and digital games
  - Co-founder and Undergraduate Officer
- The Application of Bayesian Networks to Dungeons and Dragons
  - Created proof of concept Bayesian Network to determine probability of a result in a player's turn

MA at The University of Texas at Dallas

- Thesis: The Significance of Patches and Patch Notes
  - Close reading of patch notes alongside a discourse analysis of player responses
  - Treats patch notes as a cultural artifact that reinforce a developer's institutional power and promotes racial and individualist ideologies

PUBLICATIONS

Conference Proceedings

- "[Patch Notes: Just Numbers or Something More?](#)" Published in The Phoenix Papers, Vol. 5, No. 1

PRESENTATIONS

Conferences

- "[Modding and Skills for Game Development](#)" Published in the 2020 41st Annual Southwest Popular/American Culture Association Conference Proceedings
- "Patch Notes: Just Numbers or Something More?" at the 2022 8th Fandom and Neomedia Studies Conference

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

The University of Texas at Dallas: Arts, Humanities, and Technology   2021-Present
Graduate Teaching Assistant
- ATCM 4325: Race Technology and Media
- ATCM 3301: Writing for Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication
- ATCM 3388: Attitudes and Behaviors

Arizona State University: School of Computing and Augmented Intelligence   2019-2021
Undergraduate Teaching Assistant
- ASU 101-CS: The ASU Experience
- CPI 394: Game Design Fundamentals

MEMBERSHIPS

Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory   2021-Present

- Member

The Studio for Mediating Play   2021-Present

- Collaborator