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Mechanics and Metagame: Exploring Binary Expertise in *League of Legends*

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Abstract

This article examines the significance of two types of expertise in the popular multiplayer video game *League of Legends*. Previous research into multiplayer games has explored a variety of expertise models, some which concern only a player's mastery of the controls and some which take negotiation of a game's sociocultural context into account. This article analyzes play in *League of Legends* through the lens of a binary model of expertise, outlining examples of the in-game and out-of-game practices used by players in their pursuit of competitive success. I argue that forms of out-of-game or "metagame" expertise are of particular importance in *League of Legends* and are of such depth that further research would be highly valuable.

Keywords

League of Legends, expertise, metagame, game mechanics, multiplayer

Introduction

As demonstrated by a number of studies on video gaming, play does not take place in a sociocultural vacuum, as players will always draw upon existing knowledge derived from previous play experiences or engagement with extrinsic resources in

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order to achieve success (Ang, Wildon, & Zaphiris, 2010; Chen, 2010; Harper, 2010; Humphreys & de Zwart, 2012; Jansz & Martens, 2005; Lynch, 2013). Chen's (2010, p. 52) ethnographic study of popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* explores this idea, identifying that a player will likely not find success in the latter stages of the game unless he or she acquires some level of social expertise. He separates the game into two parts, divided by the maximum character level, with the acquisition of what I will refer to as "mechanical expertise"—knowledge and mastery of the game mechanics—forming a substantial portion of the "forgiving early game content" and the acquisition of social capital as a barrier of entry to the "technically difficult" post-60 content, which requires large-scale cooperation and coordination between players. A binary division of expertise is also alluded to by a number of other theorists, such as Jakobsson, Pargman, and Rambusch (2007, p. 158) in their case study of gameplay in the first-person shooter game *Counter-Strike*. They refer to the two categories of gameplay as the player's "handling of the game," which concerns the "physical and motorical" activities of gameplay, and the player's "meaning-making activities," which involves his or her "understanding of the game in terms of how the game is to be played, their role in the game and the culture around the game." Neuenschwander (2008, p. 190) notes a similar concept in the "multifaceted proposition" of learning a tabletop role-playing game, with the first stage being the accumulation of knowledge of the game rules as they are described in the rulebook and the second stage being the understanding of social rules, which might both deviate from the rulebook and differ from playgroup to playgroup. A common factor among these games is that they are either exclusively multiplayer or intended for multiple players, and that the second form of expertise concerns their respective sociocultural contexts. Single player games typically do not require this form of expertise. In their analysis of "learning curves" of single player games, Przybylski, Rigby, and Ryan (2010, p. 156) find that "mastery of controls" is the single most important factor in how a player masters such a game. The accumulation of expertise related to that, which is extrinsic to game mechanics, can certainly be referred to as being part of a "metagame," referred to by Salen and Zimmerman (2003, p. 481) as "the relationship between the game and outside elements, including everything from player attitudes and play styles to social reputations and social contexts in which the game is played." We can therefore group the extrinsic forms of expertise discussed by Chen, Neuenschwander, and Jakobsson et al. as forms of metagame expertise, which might be acquired alongside or after the accumulation of the basic level of mechanical expertise (which also differs from genre to genre) necessary for participation.

In addition to its expression as a binary model, expertise in multiplayer games has been theorized as both single- and multi-modal forms. Reeves, Brown, and Laurier offer their own exploration of expertise in *Counter-Strike* (2009, p. 213), although unlike Jakobsson et al. (2007), they find that a player's mechanical abilities are the sole measure of expertise, stating that, among these, "moving competently" is the "crux of playing well." In doing so, they make only passing references to server

selection and in-game weapon selection, decisions which are often based on the "outside elements" described by Salen and Zimmerman (2003). While highly skilled players may be able to cope with high latency brought about by poor server selection (Henderson, 2001, p. 10), a strong negative correlation has been observed between latency and in-game kills in first-person shooter games (Armitage, 2003, p. 140), meaning that correct server selection in *Counter-Strike* will provide a small benefit to the player regardless of their mechanical ability. They also observe that the gameplay of a single match will change over the course of any number of rounds, as players reflect upon rounds played and alter their play style based on their own effectiveness and their ongoing analysis of the enemy team's play style. This demonstrates the existence of a local, temporary metagame, which, as with server selection, requires from the player a form of expertise related to elements separate from in-game mechanics.

Taylor, Castell, Jenson, and Humphrey (2011) present a multimodal framework for expertise in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), unique in that it takes into account the various forms of play afforded by the genre. This play-centric (as opposed to player centric) approach means that a player may still be considered an expert even if their focus lies in only a single portion of the game (a player might focus on questing, battling other players, or socializing, for example), a possibility afforded by expansive MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* and *Guild Wars 2*. The modes of expertise include time and/or resource investment, skill, discourse, and game knowledge (which is subdivided into ludic and narrative knowledge), the acquisition of which can be augmented with third-party game add-ons (McArthur, Peyton, Jenson, Taylor, & de Castell, 2012). While the multimodal, genre-specific framework is certainly effective at describing styles of play, I feel the more general binary approaches of Chen (2010), Neuenschwander (2008), and Jakobsson et al. are more useful as they can both encompass a number of styles of play while remaining applicable to a multitude of multiplayer genres.

In the following, I will use a binary model of expertise to describe competitive play in the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game *League of Legends,* and in doing so will demonstrate the significance of metagame practices in competitive play. Having surpassed *World of Warcraft* as the world's most popular video game (Riot Games, 2014), *League of Legends* is now receiving a level of academic attention appropriate for its significance in both the eSports industry and contemporary game culture. Existing works have focus on team matchmaking (Kou & Gui, 2014), gender disparity among players (Ratan, Taylor, Hogan, Kennedy, & Williams, 2015), and the relationship between rules and player-created norms (Kou & Nardi, 2014), all of which are significant aspects of not only *League of Legends* and the player culture but the MOBA genre and competitive online gaming in general. This piece will examine and analyze the fundamentals of play in *League of Legends*, thereby providing a solid foundation for further study.

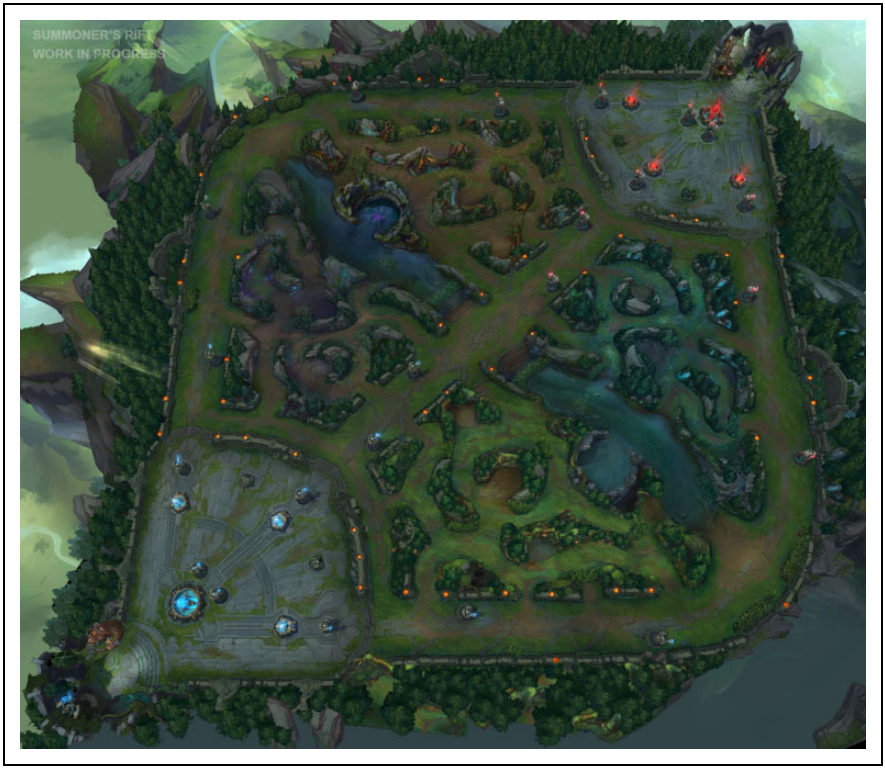

Figure 1. Summoner's Rift (2014).

League of Legends

League of Legends is a PC-based MOBA, a type of game that combines elements of role-playing, real-time strategy, and tower defense game genres. A single game of *League of Legends* consists of a strategic and oftentimes hectic battle between two teams of five players, each in control of 1 of 124 playable "champions." A typical game lasts for approximately 30 min, with longer games sometimes surpassing 1 hr.

The game's primary mode takes place in Summoner's Rift (Figure 1), a square-bordered zone with a diagonally running river separating the bottom left "Blue" side of the map from the upper right "Red" side. The area in the bottom-left is the blue team's spawn point (where the team first enters the game) and "nexus"—this is the same for the red team on the opposite side of the map. The two bases are connected by three lanes, known as "Top," "Mid," and "Bot." The mid-lane and river intersect, creating the four wedges of maze-like "jungle," which make up the rest of the map.

A winning state is brought about by the destruction of the opposing team's nexus, a large structure fortified by defensive towers, which must be destroyed before the nexus can take damage. Five of these towers are located inside the base and there are two in each lane. The towers of only one lane need to be destroyed in order to expose the enemy nexus. While the destruction of the enemy nexus is the main goal, teams will aim to fulfil subgoals, the completion of which is either necessary, such as the destruction of towers, or conducive to victory, such as the slaying of enemy champions. Individual players may too strive to attain personal goals, such as the achievement of a high kill/death ratio or a full inventory. There are also a handful of narrative-based goals that become available when certain conditions are met—for example, if the rival champions Kha'Zix and Rengar are chosen by opposing players, whomever slays their opponent first will be rewarded with a small increase in strength.

The dynamic elements on the map include "minions," "monsters," and the players themselves. Minions are weak, nonplayer characters (NPCs) whose deaths yield gold to the slayer. They spawn in "waves" from both nexuses and march down the lanes, meeting each other in the middle if unimpeded by champions or other obstacles. When in range, minions will mindlessly attack enemy minions, champions, defensive structures, and eventually the nexus itself. Minions are a primary source of income for players, and a substantial portion of the early game consists of "farming"—killing minions so as to earn gold. Monsters are neutral NPCs that populate the jungle and are immobile and harmless unless attacked. As with minions, killing monsters will provide players with a gold income.

Games can generally be divided into three "phases"—laning, mid-game, and late-game. In the laning phase, players will focus on killing minions and monsters in order to gain gold so as to purchase or upgrade equipment. Top lane and mid lane will usually house one laner each, and bot lane will usually house two. Since champions from opposing teams share the lane while farming, skirmishes can often break out between players, although this depends on how willing they are to engage during this phase. It is common that one player will take on the role of "jungler"—this player will not farm minions in lane but rather the monsters in the jungle, emerging into lane in order to kill an enemy laner if they have pushed away from the safety of their own defensive tower. In the mid-game, champions roam the map and group in an attempt to kill large monsters, destroy towers, and pick off enemy champions who stray too far from safety. If one team is "snowballing" (gaining so much gold from killing enemy champions that they become exponentially effective at killing via the items they are able to afford), it is possible for them to win the game during this phase. In the late-game, most champions will be sufficiently geared and will be looking to kill all or most of the enemy team and subsequently destroy their nexus or, if this is not possible, destroy defensive structures or kill Baron Nashor (a powerful monster whose death confers significant stat boosts for the slayer's entire team) if it is available. Once the nexus is destroyed, the game is over and players are placed into the postgame lobby where they can chat and view individual and team statistics.

League of Legends and Game Mechanics

A large portion of a player's early time spent with a video game is taken up with learning how the game system works (Taylor, 2012, p. 92). In his ethnographic account of expertise in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, Chen (2010, p. 55) describes the initial process of expertise accumulation as one of trial and error, in which new players will experiment with various combinations of items and abilities. Players will also use third-party websites (p. 54) and interface add-ons (p. 56) to hasten their learning and to decrease cognitive load, respectively. Aside from the use of interface add-ons, which are unavailable in *League of Legends*, the process is quite similar since the inbuilt mechanisms for learning are not extensive enough to give players anything beyond a basic understanding of gameplay. New players receive only limited assistance from the game system in developing mechanical expertise—a brief tutorial mode offers players an explanation of the basic control scheme and other basic mechanics, but little attention is given to higher strategy. Each champion also comes with a ''recommended'' item build, although players must often deviate from this in order to compete effectively against certain enemy team compositions.

That said, players of all skill levels will use external resources and previous experiences to build expertise because no game is played in a vacuum. Experienced gamers new to the MOBA genre will likely recognize the gameplay an amalgamation of role-playing, real-time strategy, and tower defense game genres. Most existing gamers will immediately recognize the health and resource system common in popular role-playing games like *Diablo*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Final Fantasy*, and first-person shooters such as *Halo* and *Evolve*. Role-players will recognize the stat-based method of evaluating in-game strength (a staple of role-playing games since *Dungeons & Dragons*) and the existence of a meta-narrative providing a greater context for the champions and game maps. The control scheme and camera positioning are very similar to that of real-time strategy games, such as *Starcraft II* and *Command & Conquer*, meaning players from these genres will have at least some level of mechanical expertise in this area.

A major example of required mechanical expertise in *League of Legends* is camera control. From a top-down perspective, a player controls his or her champion using a combination of keyboard and mouse actions—although players can reassign controls to suit their preference, players generally move their champion, target abilities, control the camera using the mouse, and activate abilities and use items via keystrokes. By default, the camera is locked to the player's chosen champion, but it is commonly accepted among the community that playing with ''tunnel vision'' is not conducive to victory as it prevents players from looking around the map and positioning the camera on themselves in a manner that provides the best possible strategic advantage.

The above displays a comparison of locked and unlocked cameras (Figure 2). Both images show the champion Sivir standing next to a friendly defensive tower

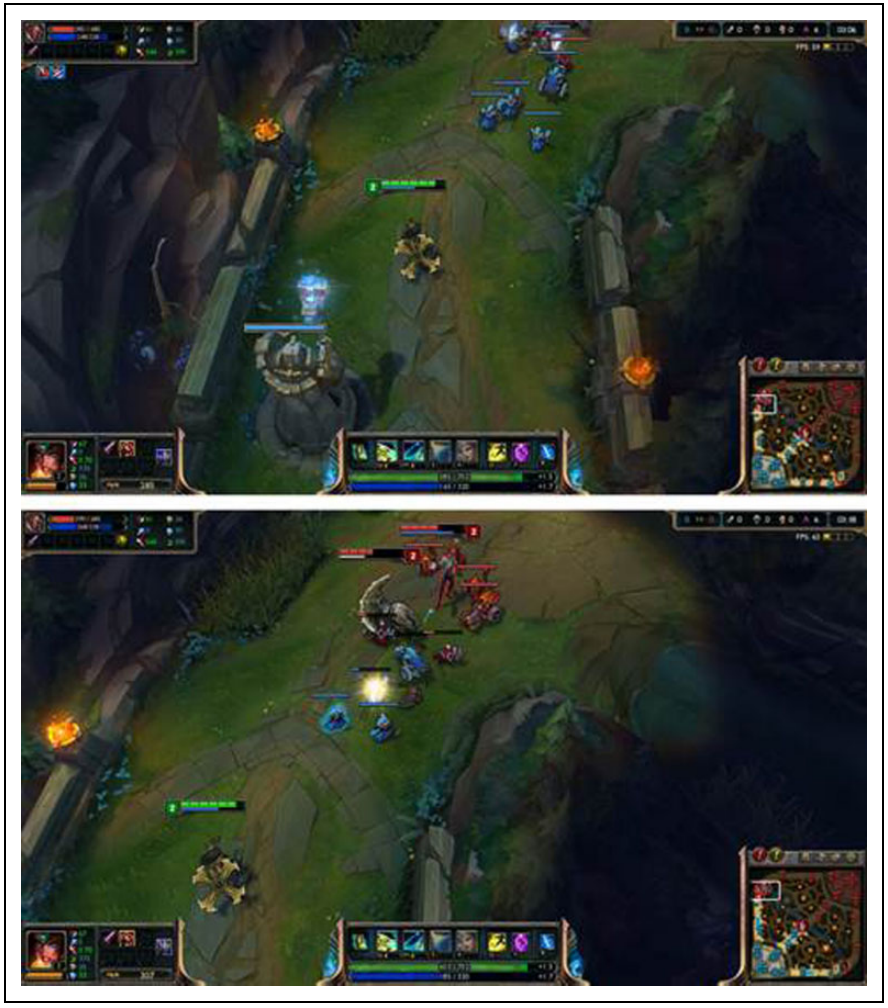

Figure 2. A comparison of locked and unlocked cameras (Riot Games, 2009).

in the top lane. The first image features a locked camera—although Sivir is in the center of the screen, her player does not have detailed vision of the potentially dangerous area ahead. The unlocked camera (also pictured) allows Sivir's player to see the enemy champions Renekton and Lucian, along with their minion wave, while remaining at a safe proximity. One of the first forms of mechanical expertise that players must acquire is the ability to continually position and reposition the game camera during play so as to maintain good vision, which will in turn allow for better strategic positioning of their champion throughout all stages of the game.

Another example of mechanical expertise is the player's knowledge of their champion's abilities and how these abilities work in combination with one another. Most champions have access to five unique abilities, each of which can be categorized as either "activated" or "passive." The former, as the name suggests, are manually activated by the player—this might be a fireball, a shield, or a teleport. Passive abilities confer a constant bonus, such as increased health regeneration or the ability to move through certain units. Many activated abilities are "skill shots" in that they are manually targeted in a direction or into a particular area, requiring mouse precision and timing for maximum effect or any effect at all. Some champions possess more than five abilities, such as transforming champions who have a set of abilities for each form, although these are few in number. A champion's abilities and how they work together (often referred to as a champion's "kit") and how easy they are to execute determine the overall difficulty of the champion. Where new players might use abilities slowly and independent of one another and struggle landing skill shots, more experienced players with stronger mechanical expertise over their champion will be able to utilize the full kit in order to defeat even enemies who have higher stats and better equipment.

One of the most popular mechanically intensive champions is Lee Sin, a highly mobile melee fighter who requires a high degree of mechanical expertise to play effectively. With creative use of his abilities, Lee Sin players can move swiftly across the battlefield and provide huge advantages for their team during skirmishes with the opposition. The mark of an adept Lee Sin player is his or her ability to make effective use of the character's ultimate ability, "Dragon's Rage," a damaging kick which shoves a single enemy champion in a chosen direction. The steps here display the professional player Thinkcard utilizing almost all of Lee Sin's kit in order to execute a perfect Dragon's Rage (Figure 3).

First, Thinkcard lands Lee Sin's skillshot ability, Sonic Wave, on the enemy Braum, controlled by Bubbadub. He then reactivates the ability to dash to Braum's position, and upon doing so immediately places a ward (a deployable item used to grant vision of the map) on the ground. ThinkCard dashes to the ward using Lee Sin's Safeguard ability, which allows him to dash to friendly champions and items. He then uses Flash, a spell accessible by all champions, to teleport behind the enemy carry (the team's main damage dealer), Caitlyn, controlled by ROBERTxLEE. Dragon's Rage is then used on Caitlyn, shoving her backward into the rest of Thinkcard's team, who easily finish her off. Even though any Lee Sin player has access to this combo, it takes practice, timing, and precision to pull off.

In addition to the process of trial and error, players will use external resources to hasten their acquisition of mechanical expertise. Given the large number of unique champions and abilities in *League of Legends*, the player base is still not aware of how certain game elements will interact if placed into contact with one another. In this light, *League of Legends* can therefore be called a game of construction rather than manipulation (Ang et al., 2010, p. 356). An interesting site of experimentation is YouTube user Holyarme Min's ongoing series *LOL Lab* (2014), which exists to

Figure 3. Thinkcard playing Lee Sin (League of Legends LCS Highlights, 2014).

answer user questions regarding uncommon ability and item interactions. In one video, a user asks what happens when the champions Sion and Malphite collide while using their ultimate abilities, both of which stipulate that the champion cannot be stopped until the ability has finished. Holyarme sets up the situation outside of a competitive context and performs the experiment, finding that Sion and Malphite simply move through each other, completely unaffected by the other's ability. Along with written guides and video tutorials, *LOL Lab* is a tool that players can use to increase their knowledge of how certain game elements interact without having to await for particular situations to arise in-game. This type of extrinsic and often collaborative activity is also popular among endgame-level players of MMORPGs—Choontanom (2012, p. 4) describes these experimental practices as ways for players to uncover the "blackboxed" mathematical rules that govern the game system.

As mentioned earlier, Chen identifies maximum level as the dividing point between mechanical and metagame expertise, as by that point, a player will generally be adept at handling the mechanical aspects of the game and in order to progress further must engage with the game's social contexts. Although it is not an MMORPG, *League of Legends* features a leveling system that, like *World of Warcraft*, determines which parts of the game a player can access. Here, players gain experience points by playing games (experience is accumulated whether a game is won or lost), and ranked mode is only unlocked once a player reaches the maximum level of 30. Until this point, players are restricted to the various unranked modes, where there are no penalties for games lost, thereby allowing new players a chance to experiment with and learn the mechanics of the game in an environment where failure is without consequence. That said, even though these modes are less "serious" than ranked, players can still gain expertise this way. In "custom" mode, a player can set up his or her own game on any of the available maps and add friends or computer-controlled bots of customizable difficulty. There is no set minimum for team size, meaning that a player can enter a game alone for the purpose of learning the map or a new champion's kit. Another popular mode is All Random, All Mid (ARAM), which takes place on the Howling Abyss, a map which consists only of a single lane. As the name suggests, players are forced to play champions chosen at random from their available pool, meaning that ARAM games are often quite unpredictable. Playing ARAM can help a player develop mechanical expertise thanks to its combination of close-quarters combat and random team compositions. The close-quarters nature of the map requires players to move efficiently and with quick reflexes so as to avoid enemy abilities, particularly those which can root the player in place, allowing easy follow-up for the rest of the enemy team. The random nature will often force the player into a champion or role he or she is unfamiliar with, and so they must learn a champion's kit over the course of the match.

Again, like *World of Warcraft*, metagame expertise is not an explicit requirement until max level, when the higher stakes tier of ranked play is unlocked and players become reliant on each other to know and understand the metagame, so they might make correct choices during both champion selection and the match itself. What

differs between the two games, however, is what the level is bound to—in *World of Warcraft*, each of the characters bound to a player have their own individual level, whereas in *League of Legends*, there is a single level tied to the player's game account. This means that once a player reaches the maximum level of 30, they will be able to compete in ranked play using any of their available characters, even those they have no experience with. However, there are 130 playable champions in *League of Legends* and it takes on average 365 games to reach maximum level, meaning that it would be unlikely for a player to garner anything other than basic mechanical expertise over each champion by the time they qualify for ranked play. This means that unlike in *World of Warcraft* and other MMORPGs, where there are far less character types (there were nine available during Chen's ethnographic study), *League of Legends* players will still be learning mechanics at max level, meaning they will have to simultaneously accumulate metagame expertise if they wish to maximize their effectiveness in ranked play.

League of Legends and the Metagame

Retaining an awareness of, and being able to respond to, the constantly changing metagame is how I theorize the second stage of expertise in *League of Legends*. Andrew Garfield divides the manifestations of the metagame into four categories: what players bring to a game, what players take away from a game, what happens between games, and what happens during a game (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 482). Within the *League of Legends* community, however, the term metagame is generally used to refer to how the game is played *based on* these four categories. The metagame changes as both the game and its players change, and so what is considered the "best" approach to the game is often in a state of flux. Players will refer to a particular metagame as an "assassin metagame" or "split-push metagame" to indicate which type of champion or strategy is currently most popular.

The current *League of Legends* metagame plays an important role in determining the particular positions and roles to which champions are commonly assigned. It is therefore important, particularly in ranked play, that players are aware of this part of the metagame, so that they may participate effectively as part of a team. Position and role assignment is negotiated by players before the game begins and determines, respectively, where each player will spend most of the laning phase and what responsibilities he or she will take on during the middle and late-game phases. For example, it is common for the top lane position to be filled by a "tank" champion—one that can withstand significant damage before dying—which can, in the later portion of the game, initiate team fights and draw enemy fire. Although this framework cannot be considered a "game rule" in the formal sense, conforming to this aspect of the metagame is at times part of the "etiquette" of *League of Legends*, therefore making it somewhat of an implicit rule at times—players who do not conform to certain standards, by playing champions in roles they are not perceived to be useful in or by playing out of position, are often reported for poor behavior. Kou and Nardi

(2014, p. 8) observe that this is due to a section in the Summoner's code (a set of implicit rules created by Riot, the game developer), which states that players should always support their team (*The* Summoner*'s Code*, 2014), and many players consider a refusal to conform to the meta as tantamount to a refusal to follow this rule. However, Riot does not feel the same way, advising that not conforming to the metagame does not constitute a violation of the Summoner's code and as such is not a reportable offense (*Reporting a Player*, 2014). Even though "breaking the meta" is a point of contention for some players, off-meta play styles might eventually become accepted (Foo & Koivisto, 2004, p. 247)—some uncommon strategies, such as the duo-top lane and the farming-only jungle often return during metagames wherein such play styles are feasible. Understanding how the standard for play operates and how to support and/or counter off-meta strategies is therefore an important part of metagame negotiation in ranked play.

There are a number of resources and activities external to gameplay, which players access and perform in order to maximize their effectiveness as both an individual player and a team member. Players engage in round table discussion in spaces such as Reddit's *League of Legends Meta* board, where they can debate the effectiveness of a particular item or strategy using theorycrafting and other forms of analysis. Reddit, a social networking and news website, allows users to create individual forums for particular topics and can within these forums hold discussions centered on individual posts. *League of Legends Meta* serves as a place for players to engage in discussion regarding strategies as they pertain to the current metagame. Common types of post take the form of "Should I buy X or Y item on this champion?" and "Why is X champion good/bad in the current metagame?" The depth of discussion can range from short comments eschewing technical details in favor of a "common sense" approach to lengthy analysis filled with in-depth calculations. The most popular post at the time of writing is titled, "Pure Ap Fizz core build itemization or 'Math in action!'" (MGoldDragon, 2013), which profiles a number of common builds for the assassin champion Fizz and includes the results of calculations determining the most cost-efficient build paths. In the post's discussion section, a number of other players debate and offer their constructive criticism of the analysis. The existence and popularity of the *League of Legends Meta* board shows that metagaming can be a collaborative group activity and that, like *LOL Lab*, players can draw on the results of this collaboration (without necessarily participating in it) to hasten their learning.

Taylor (2012, p. 96) notes that, similar to sports and other traditional games, top-level players of online multiplayer games will endeavor to use information about their opponents to maximize their advantage. The most effective way to shut down a player in *League of Legends* is to prevent them from playing their favored champions. This can be achieved during champion selection, where players from both teams take turns banning champions (thereby prohibiting their use by any player, regardless of team) and choosing their own. When the identities of players are known, as they are in professional or local play, bans might be used as a means of countering a particular player's preferred play style, thereby forcing them into

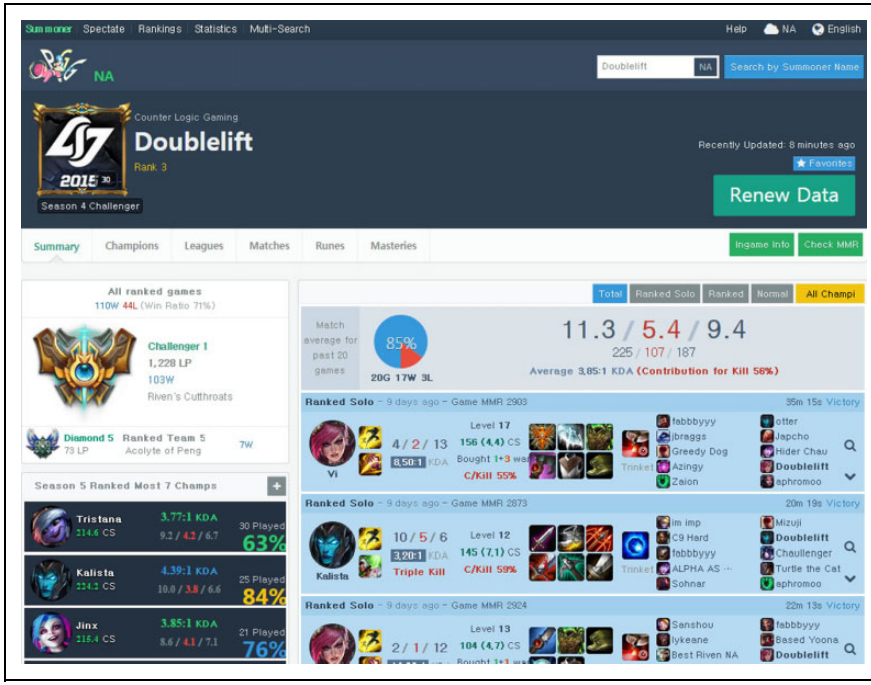

Figure 4. Professional player Doublelift's statistics and match history (OP.GG, n.d.).

a champion or role they are not comfortable in playing. This is frequently the case in professional-level play, where players with limited champion pools (the number of champions with whom he or she is mechanically skilled) will find themselves consistently banned out of their comfort zone.

In online play, players are generally not aware of the names of their opponents until they are revealed on a loading screen, which appears during the period between champion select and the game itself. During this time, players might use web applications such as OP.GG (Figure 4) or LoLKing to retrieve their opponents' match histories in order to garner information on their effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) with certain champions and items. One team may even choose to focus their attack on an opponent who is on a losing streak, so as to lower their already-fractured morale. In addition to providing match histories, these websites display a player's current rank, meaning if an opponent is identified as a substantially higher rank than all the players on the team, the team might choose to alter their strategy in order to "shut down" the more experienced player. As Lynch (2013, p. 52) points out, "Playing a game is inseparable from taking part in community development," and this is particularly true for *League of Legends*—these online services accumulate and display data from a range of categories beyond individual player records. Frequency of champion

picks based on region, rank, and game type, champion win rates, and more are available for analysis by all players. Such a concept is not exclusive to *League of Legends.* Play analytics have been a core part of metagame expertise accumulation in a number of other online multiplayer games across a variety of genres, such as *Halo Wars* (Medler, 2012), *DOTA 2*, and *World of Warcraft*.

Communication also forms a part of the metagame. In solo matchmaking, teammates can communicate to one another via text chat and a ping system, which allows players to place symbols on the game map signaling danger or a vulnerable target. By default, a language filter blocks swear words and other potentially offensive terms but this can be switched off. Cross-team chat is also off by default but can be turned on, thereby allowing communication between opponents at any point during the game. Once "all-chat" is enabled, players will often engage in the type of sledging and "psyching out" that is popular among a number of traditional sports, such as cricket and baseball. Players can also mute individual teammates or opponents. Communication options beyond text and pings do not exist within the *League of Legends* game client. However, it is common for premade teams to utilize external applications, such as Skype, to communicate by voice.

The reason for the significance of the metagame in *League of Legends* and other multiplayer games can be related to the principles of ludus and paidia, proposed by Caillois (1961), which form a central part of play theory. Where ludus represents characteristics of a "game"—where there are specific rule sets and goals—paidia represents characteristics of free and explorative play. Dormans (2011, p. 2) conceptualizes ludus and paidia as opposing ends of the same spectrum, conceding that although there are games of "pure" ludus and pure paidia, most games have elements of each, and *League of Legends* is certainly no exception. In the case of *League of Legends*, this can be explained by Jensen (2013, p. 69) who also cites a spectrum of ludus and paidia, stating that "because of the transformative influences of culture, play, and a practice that has been referred to as 'metagaming,' paidia inevitably transforms into ludus. Similarly, ludus can also regress to transform back into paidia." As stated earlier, the primary goal in a game instance of *League of Legends* is to destroy the enemy nexus. This along with the generic "restrictions" of video games (one cannot fly if such a thing is not permitted within the game code) are the core ludic elements of *League of Legends*. The game has, however, been available since 2009, and Bateman's (2005) idea that when "the same group regularly return to the same playground, patterns of play will develop [and] expressions of ludus will gradually mediate the initial anarchy" certainly holds true here.

It could be theorized, then, that the game of *League of Legends* will eventually be "figured out," but that is not so. *League of Legends*, like many other online video games, is frequently updated via patches—small pieces of mandatory downloadable content, which can add and remove content or alter preexisting code. Generally, *League of Legends* players see a new patch every 2 or 3 weeks during the competitive season, with a single massive overhaul each year. Most of the changes in each patch are piloted in the "public beta environment (PBE)," Riot Games' test server for

League of Legends. Players must apply to play on the beta server and testers are cycled out every few weeks. PBE[testers can provide feedback to changes and notify the developers of bugs via the PBE forum, the content of which is publically accessible (http://boards.pbe.leagueoflegends.com/en/). Changes made in the PBE are often reversed or changed further before their official implementation in the main servers. We can therefore refer to *League of Legends* as a game of "multiple incarnations" (Newman, 2012, p. 136), and that the *League of Legends* being played at this moment by millions of players is not the same *League of Legends* that existed just 2 months ago. DeKoven (2005, p. 520) states that the reason behind changing a game is to "restore equilibrium" between the "playing mind" and the "gaming mind"—that is, paidia and ludus, respectively. For a game to be considered interesting and enjoyable, according to DeKoven, there needs to be some level of paidia—some level of experimentation—present. Once the players have perfected the game or are at least aware of the most effective strategy, gameplay becomes stagnant. A common example of this is the inadvertent overpowering of a particular champion that might come with one particular patch—the players pick up on the oppressive nature of the champion, and he or she obtains 100% pick/ban status—that is, in professional competition, the champion is either picked or banned in every single game of the particular patch. Generally, a subsequent patch will contain a nerf (a de-powering) of whatever it is that causes the champion to be so powerful, whether that is an aspect of the champion itself, an item, or the game environment. Although most patches consist only of changes to existing game content, new champions, new items, and item removals will feature infrequently and tend to have a much larger impact on the overall metagame.

Conclusions and Further Study

As with a number of other multiplayer games, expertise in *League of Legends* is composed of binary elements. The first is mechanical expertise, which relates to in-game elements such as interface navigation and avatar control, some of which might carry over from previous play experiences. The second form of expertise is metagame expertise, which is the awareness of and ability to negotiate the game around the game: it could be the formulation of new strategies after a patch, the use of mathematical techniques to determine the effectiveness of a particular item or ability combination, or the analysis of data sets for the purposes of improving one's in-game effectiveness. It could perhaps be theorized that without this second layer of expertise, the player will find himself or herself at a disadvantage when playing against those who are more familiar with the state of the metagame, even if they have comparative mechanical expertise. This is certainly the belief of the player base at large, as it is common for toxic behavior to arise in champion select when one player demonstrates a lack of metagame expertise by choosing an out-of-meta champion, role, or position, as it assumed that this choice will place the team at an immediate disadvantage.

The *League of Legends* metagame and the process of metagaming is such a major part of competitive play that it certainly warrants further study—while it may not be required to participate, it is certainly required to be effective in the competitive environment, especially at higher levels. Here, I will outline areas in which I feel there to be opportunities for increased scholarly attention.

First, the social conventions which value or devalue player actions in and around play are potentially significant areas of study. Alluded to in this article is a distinction between conventional and unconventional forms of play—in my experience, I have found that in competitive play, conforming to the conventions of the metagame is an implicit part of behavioral etiquette, and breaking the meta can often be met by rejection from allied players. Even though Riot state clearly that a player cannot be punished for playing an off-meta champion, position or role, or purchasing an off-meta item "build," players are still expected to conform to what is collectively considered the best way to play. A qualitative or quantitative (statistical) inquiry into the social response to unconventional play forms, like that of Toh's (2014) on *Lord of the Rings* online, might be useful in order to formulate an accurate portrait of *League of Legends* players and their attitudes toward deviant play forms in the competitive arena. The styles of celebrity players such as Disco Heat, who intentionally uses off-meta champions as a way of showing the oftentimes hostile attitudes attracted by those who do not play by "the rules," and Annie Bot, a high-level player famous for playing only a single champion, are also worthwhile points of analysis. Such a study might also be used to determine the genuine worth of metagame expertise, compared to mechanical expertise, at various levels of competition. It would certainly be interesting to find how far a mechanically strong *League of Legends* player could climb in the rankings while adopting *only* out-of-meta play styles.

Also mentioned here is the unique overlap of mechanical and metagame expertise accumulation in *League of Legends*. It would therefore be useful to look at nascent forms of play enacted by those new to *League of Legends* and how these players and their play styles evolve as they simultaneously garner both mechanical and metagame expertise. There are preexisting studies of how players negotiate metagames, such as Harper's (2010) ethnographic account of social gameplay at a fighting game tournament, though it would be interesting to chart a new player's progress within a metagame as prevalent and (in some areas) prescriptive as that of *League of Legends*.

Third, observable via online stat-tracking services is, throughout all levels of play, a stark difference between the metagames of team play (i.e., when teams are premade) and solo play (when teams are made up of five unrelated players). It is apparent that when a premade team plays a game on Summoner's Rift, their play styles and champion choices are greatly influenced by the ability to coordinate their movements and team fights on account of improved communication. Unless they utilize third-party software (such as Skype), solo players may only communicate via pings and text chat, making coordination more difficult. With this being the case, certain champion picks that are priorities in solo play do not receive equal attention

in team play and vice versa. This is somewhat unique to the MOBA genre. An investigation into the relationship between the metagame and player communication would be worthwhile.

Whether it be the ability to analyze opponents, discuss strategy, and negotiate implicit rules, metagame expertise is a fundamental component of competitive effectiveness not only for *League of Legends* but also for similar strategically deep and constantly evolving, multiplayer video games. Other MOBAs, such as *DOTA 2* and *Heroes of Newerth*, sport their own deep and complex metagames, as does real-time strategy game *Starcraft 2* and the first person shooter *Counter-Strike*. Mastery of the mechanical aspects of these games is not always enough to guarantee competitive success—if a player is to maximize his or her chances of victory in ranked play, metagame expertise must be acquired.

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