



GG, EZ: Strategic Interaction within ‘League of Legends’ Ranked Games

A virtual ethnography of temporary teams from the ‘League of Legends’ gaming community

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Abstract

Online gaming communities have met a well-deserved rise in academic interest in recent years, yet the focus seems to linger on long-term or permanent communities; virtual temporary teams are a subject which leaves room for rich interpretations still. In this spirit, this thesis addresses the question of how strangers collaborate in solving complex tasks together, by way of analysing temporary teams in the “League of Legends” community. The focus of the study are the communicative and strategic practices that players employ during ranked games in their attempt to defeat the opposing team, as well as what might determine them to engage in such endeavours. The thesis sets off by presenting relevant information about the competitive League of Legends community, in the spirit of introducing the reader to a League-specific culture that will hopefully become familiar by the end of the study. This is followed by an account of related research on this matter, in terms of how previous studies connect to the one at hand. The theoretical foundation that follows is essential to the discussion of the findings. The methodological approach is essentially a cyber-ethnography, with a focus on two methods: textual analysis and semi-structured interviews. The main findings show a surprising level of complexity in what communicative and strategic patterns are concerned, which also points towards the interdependency between them. Moreover, the results show a clear connection between in-game social strata and player motivation in competitive communities. This study aims not only to update the knowledge we have on how social interactions are shaping and evolving in the context of online gaming, but also to provide results that are transferable and applicable in other fields of research; from culture and society to more particular areas such as management training and learning at work, a multitude of academic fields can benefit from and hopefully expand on the outcome of this thesis.

Keywords: League of Legends, virtual ethnography, communication, strategy, temporary teams

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Blue Team's turret has been destroyed

[Ramonsky]: guys, we should really try to end this

[Ramonsky]: group mid pls

[Tzepe]: imgonna push top, def plz

[ZanoCid]: they are in our base... back NOW

ZanoCid requests aid at the Blue Inhibitor

Tzepe is on the way

The Red Team has slain the Elder Dragon

[leopard]: we are fked. We need baron to end

[Tzepe]: bait them at baron and it's gg

[leopard]: put some wardsffs, this map is darker than my future

[madelaine]: guys go baron i def base in case they tp

Walde has ended Tzepe's killing spree

Ramonsky has ended Walde's killing spree (Bounty 500g)

ZanoCid has slain vayne123 for a triple kill

Blue team has scored an Ace

(All) [madelaine]: GG

(All) [Tzepe]: wp guys

(All) [Walde]: gg report this Zed pls, refusing to comm with team

(All)[Walde]: Tzepe honored

1. Introduction

As video games and virtual communities, in the larger context of culture and society, have increasingly gained ground in terms of scholarly studies on the matter, especially in the past two decades, more specific aspects that they entail call for researchers' attention as well. An online gaming community is nowadays a little bit more than groups of people playing together. They encompass rules, mindsets, goals and ambitions, social environments, activities to be shared with peers. We can no longer simply coin online games as the escape from reality that some teenagers need. We can hardly speak of "just a game" in front of any passionate or involved player, or as Andy Bossom and Ben Dunning recently phrased it, "the video game cannot now be ignored as a passing fad or another frivolous, adolescent past time" (2016, 8). Online gaming communities are immense; they are dynamic and, above all, extremely diverse. They have shaped their own cultures, and while some aspects related to language or behavior may be common and easily understandable in between all online players regardless of the games they play, some communities have very specific cultures and rituals which must be learned, or as Bryn Neuenschwander concisely puts it, players must "acquire social capital specific to the subculture" (2008, 190) in order to be considered a part of it. That is to say, a long time "World of Warcraft" player will probably be able to understand some, but not all of the behaviors and words used by a "League of Legends" player. Especially in the case of such large communities as the two aforementioned games have, their specific culture is very extensive. Riot Games, the founding company of 'League of Legends', reported over 100 million active users towards the end of 2016. It is high time scholars looked into the various interdisciplinary aspects that online gaming and its constantly growing community entails: "They draw upon physical world cultures in multiple ways yet at the same time create possibilities for the emergence of new cultures and practices." (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, 2012). From psychology, economy, culture and society, technology to business and marketing, there is an endless pool of knowledge that can be drawn from observing different, specific corners and angles of online gaming: "The study of gaming has always been powerfully

interdisciplinary, drawing together an array of scholarly disciplines as well as a broad range of practitioners” (Boellstorff 2006,30). In a sense, more and more virtual worlds are weighing less towards the virtual and more towards the real: “Virtual worlds are places of imagination that encompass practices of play, performance, creativity, and ritual. The social worlds that emerge within them are very real.” (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, 2012). It is also time to rise above the overused motif of game addiction when it comes to habitual players and attempt to do real research on relevant matters. Bonnie Nardi and Justin Harris point out a possible angle of research: “now that games are an important part of Internet use, we have an opportunity to recognize the collaborative aspects of online fun” (Nardi, Harris, 1).

This paper seeks to analyze collaborative play between strangers, or more explicitly, strategic communication techniques within temporary, or “pick-up” teams of five, and will be based on ranked teams that are part of the “League of Legends” community. The aim is to try and understand how and why strangers team up to solve specific tasks as part of an online community. The study will thus be conducted by way of virtual ethnography, with a specific focus on two qualitative methods: textual analysis and semi-structured interviews.

In this vein, this study is first and foremost an ambitious attempt to join the existing researchers who are exploring a daring, but still quite recent field. Hopefully, this will also help pave the way for future researchers who wish to look into virtual gaming communities as the reality and the global phenomena that they represent. Although this particular study will fall into the more general spectrum of communication studies, there is no doubt that it should be of help to researchers from any field of expertise that will embark into a similar journey in the (hopefully) near future. That being said, a single study such as this cannot cover the considerable potential that there currently is within online game studies, and thus will only focus on a specific part or aspect of it. Drawing on Tom Boellstorff’s idea of interdisciplinary, the scientific benefit of such a study is to reveal new information that can be applied across different fields. The study of how strangers collaborate towards complex aims can provide insights about the human mind and behavior when it comes to interaction that can be extremely valuable to other fields of expertise: not only does this update our current

knowledge of the online practices, but it opens the possibility of taking that knowledge out from the online and into real life, and try to predict the ways in which social interaction is changing. The following subchapters will serve to disentangle and explain some of the terms and concepts that are part of this research, as well as try to induce a “League” state of mind before going further into the study.

1.1. eSports

Michael Wagner traces the first use of the term “eSports” (term coined for “electronic sports”), in media as far back as 1999 (Wagner 2006, 1). In a very broad context, Wagner places eSports at the core of technological advances outcomes: “The emergence of eSports can thus be interpreted as a logical and irreversible consequence of a transition from an industrial society to the information and communication based society of today”(Wagner 2006, 3). This phenomenon is thought to be disruptive of traditional media, and statistics clearly show a significant rise in the number of players, which is not expected to fall in the near future – quite the other way around: “the information age has, under our noses, become the gaming age. It appears likely that gaming and its associated notion of play may become a master metaphor for a range of human social relations, with the potential for new freedoms and new creativity as well as new oppressions and inequality.” (Boellstorff 2006, 33). Apart from the number of players, or rather along with it, revenues are booming: “[...] electronic sports, or eSports, have become a global phenomenon. Millions of viewers watch competitions every month, and players train full time to compete for cash prizes that reach several figures”(Li, 2016). eSports is currently said to be disrupting the traditional media from its core, as both its users and the figures that it generates are growing at an incredible rate: “In 2019, eSports revenues will have surpassed \$1 billion and the audience will have grown to 435 million worldwide” (Global eSports Market Report, 2016). It is of essence to understand what draws people to online games of this magnitude and moreover what determines them to stay, to work with one another towards one goal, regardless of whether they know each other or not. This can only be done by understanding their culture and the medium to which some of them choose to be part of on a

daily basis. While eSports refers more specifically to playing competitively in a professional setting, this paper will focus on the competitive, which is of essence, but will not take into account professional environments necessarily. Understanding eSports as a culture is however essential before going into the competitiveness of temporary teams, as well as how they communicate, and to what ends. In fact, what nowadays is a billion dollar business, was initially a few teams of five people battling against each other in a small room.

1.2. Virtual communities

The research will examine common behaviors and patterns within pick-up teams that are part of the virtual communities of online gaming, which is why outlining and defining the term is of essence before going further with the analysis. “Virtual communities or online communities, are used when individuals within a personal or professional group choose to interact with each other via the Internet [...] The members of this community have sought membership into this particular group. Communities don’t happen randomly but are systematically organized and expanded”. Although there might be variations of this definition depending on the researcher, or perhaps the type of community, this will be the accepted and employed definition for this study. It is emphasized that all users want to take an active part in the community, and are in no way obligated to remain a part of it for longer than they desire to. “Virtual communities essentially establish parallel realities and extensions of the social environment [...] To be active in a community there must be some knowledge and competence in the focus area around which the community interacts” (Information Resources Management Association 2011, 2). Moreover, virtual communities usually have their own set of rules, even when it comes to gaming, and while participating is voluntary and solely a matter of choice, abiding by the rules of a community is a condition, and the same applies for League of Legends players, which is why the next part will be dedicated to getting acquainted with some of the League rules and customs.

2. Background

2.1. “League of Legends” Game play

League of Legends is a mass multiplayer online video game (MMORPG in short), developed by Riot Games, and has been available for free since 2009. The game is currently recognized as the world’s largest online multiplayer game. To add to this statement, Riot Games have reported for Forbes, towards the end of 2016, a record statistic of 100 million players per month, surpassing industry giants such as DoTA, or Blizzard’s “World of Warcraft”.

In order to be able to understand an in-depth analysis of League of Legends temporary teams and the ways they strategize through communication, it is important to get acquainted with the general rules of play, as well as understand a number of terms directly related to “League of Legends”, which are certain to be of use for the reader further in the study.



Figure 1 – Summoner’s Rift Map from above; each team begins on one side of the map and must fight to conquer the other, while defending their own.

The aim of an average five versus five (known as “5v5”) League of Legends game is to team up in groups of five “summoners” and fight together against an opposing team. The

common goal is to destroy enemy towers and ultimately the enemy nexus, all while defending one's own base from an opposing attack. The standard 5v5 map, called "Summoner's Rift," is divided into three lanes and the jungle between them, as can be seen in the Figure above. Each player occupies a specific location on the map, and must ensure vision on strategic parts of it. A standard team of five players is divided into five, quite different roles: a tank/fighter on top lane, which usually needs to be able to resist for a long while in a team fight and absorb immense amounts of damage, a jungler – the backbone of the team who constantly aids the other members throughout the match, a midlaner – who is supposed to deal a high amount of damage, an adc – attack damage carrier, who deals the most damage per second, and a support, which is primarily the defender of the adc, but overall aids the whole team during a team fight.

Each of the 10 participants plays a different, unique champion of their preference, but one that fits the assigned role. There are currently 136 different champions in League, with a customized set of abilities that players eventually come to know by heart. Although they start at the same level, each player earns gold used to acquire items and gain strength. The team of five has to strategically combine the items, levels of strength and abilities in a way that surpasses the opposing team. Although the average game length is 45 minutes, a game can last anywhere between 20-60 minutes, or even more in rare cases.

2.1.1. Ranked Games

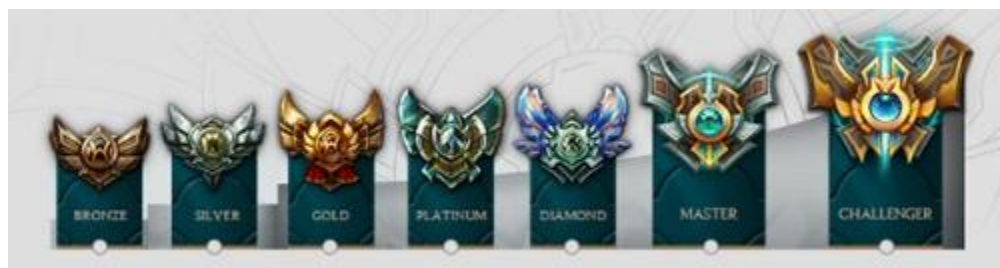


Figure 2 – Ranked Games Hierarchy, from lowest to highest

There are several ways in which a player can enjoy a game of League of Legends, but seeing as this research focuses on competitive play, the focus here will be the ranked games of League. Ranked games are highly competitive as compared to any other modes, some of which are solely for entertainment and hardly have any rules. Ranked games are reward-based – for each win, ranked players gain “League Points”, or “LP”, and as that LP accumulates, they are attributed to a division in a larger hierarchy, according to their skill set. The hierarchy is as follows: bronze, silver, gold, platinum, diamond, master and challenger, as presented in the Figure above. Bronze division is widely known for less skilled ranked players, who still have a long way to go towards performance. Challenger players are considered eligible for professional competitive play, which nowadays is a source of revenue, as League of Legends is considered an eSport, which was briefly explained earlier in the same chapter. A streak of wins will result in a player being “promoted” to the next division, whereas a losing streak will get the player “demoted” to the previous one. The difference between normal games and ranked games is essentially this reward system, which makes the whole process motivation-driven and reward-driven implicitly. Motivation and satisfaction within a ranked game is much higher compared to any other playing mode. Losing or winning a normal game has no serious or real consequence in-game, whereas something is truly at stake in a ranked game, where players basically fight for a status within a virtual community. Skill can be coined as the sole denominator between players, seeing as they do not know each other otherwise. When meeting their new teammates, players are not interested in whom they are, how old they are, and where they are from – however, the first thing they will do is form a general opinion of their skill and previous experience based on their rank.

2.1.2. In-game communication

As is to be expected, in order to determine the means through which players in League temporary teams communicate, the analysis will focus mainly on the means of interaction that the team members dispose of. In this sense, the study will break down the ways in which they are used, to what extent, and to what end. For this purpose, it is important for the reader to familiarize with the in-game communication channels, as well as what they represent.

2.1.2.1. Chat

The first contact that the five members of a team have is within champion selection. The chat enables them to talk for the whole duration, and it is generally used for them to decide on what champions to play, ask suggestions on picking, banning, and even switching roles between them if they so wish. Many times, the chat in champ select sets the tone for the entire match as it gives the players a first impression of their teammates. If the general atmosphere within the initial chat room is tense between teammates, this can mean that the game will unfold in the same manner if someone does not make a change.

Whereas premade players are generally communicating either live or through Skype, as it provides the fastest and most effective way of establishing a strategy, the players who do not know each other use the in-game chat. Although there is a limit to how many consecutive messages within a short period of time one can send, there are no restrictions to how much someone can write per game. Precautions are generally taken in order to avoid spamming and flaming. English is generally used within the game chat, but oftentimes players from the same country recognize each other's common ground and may come to communicate in another language. Players are also able to communicate with the opposing team, which is another interesting aspect of temporary teams.

2.1.2.2. The Smart Ping System

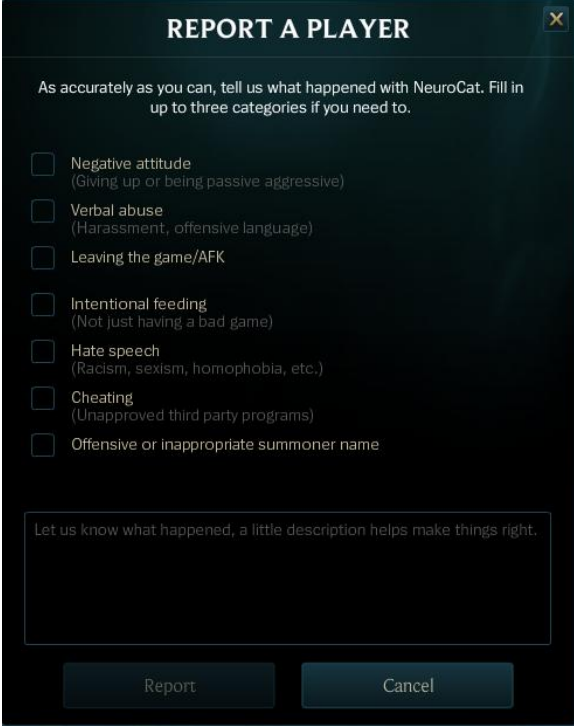


Figure 3 - The Smart Ping System; signs and the message they entail

There is another means of communication, custom made for facilitating the quickest way to convey a message to an unknown teammate: the ping system. By pressing an assigned character on (generally 'G' or 'alt' keys) and dragging the mouse in the desired direction, a player can send a quick signal to his teammates. The ping is audible, each of the four having their own, specific sound effects, appears written in the chat, and also conveys a small icon on the map, where the ping was issued. The table in the figure contains the four pings as well as the assigned meaning. The ping system is extensively used in every game, and while there may be entire matches with little to no chat communication, it is nearly impossible to go through a ranked game without anyone issuing pings. The reason why the ping system is effective is that it goes beyond language or cultural barriers, and is universally known and understood in the same way by every player. Moreover, it tightens the communication between teammates in the sense that they can ask for each other's help, warn of danger, and respectively assure each

other that help is coming. The system is self-explanatory and relevant for the study of the communication between members of temporary teams.

2.1.3. The Tribunal System



The screenshot shows a dark-themed window titled "REPORT A PLAYER" with a close button (X) in the top right corner. Below the title, a subtitle reads: "As accurately as you can, tell us what happened with NeuroCat. Fill in up to three categories if you need to." There is a list of seven categories, each with an unchecked checkbox and a brief description in parentheses: "Negative attitude (Giving up or being passive aggressive)", "Verbal abuse (Harassment, offensive language)", "Leaving the game/AFK", "Intentional feeding (Not just having a bad game)", "Hate speech (Racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.)", "Cheating (Unapproved third party programs)", and "Offensive or inappropriate summoner name". Below this list is a text input field with the placeholder text "Let us know what happened, a little description helps make things right." At the bottom of the window are two buttons: "Report" and "Cancel".

Figure 4 – The Report Card available at the end of each game; contains categories of offenses and what they entail

Whereas communication is facilitated in the ways described above, there is undeniably a need for restriction of negative language and negative behavior in general. The tribunal system is implemented in order to systematically rid the community of toxic players. Whereas premade teams usually consists of friends or partners and will not solve their issues through the tribunal, for teammates who do not know each other, it is the best way to ensure that negative behavior within the match will be faced with punishment. The “report” system is the way through which players can issue a complaint to the tribunal regarding one or more players and their in-game behavior. This can be done only at the end of a match, by choosing up to three

accusations, as are presented in the Figure above. Flaming(harassment and verbal abuse of another player), spamming, feeding (intentionally assisting the enemy team), racial slurs, a generally negative attitude throughout the game, as well as sexist and/or homophobic remarks are strongly discouraged, but all in all these events occur more often than not. Punishments range from a simple warning, to bans from the chat or even from the game, either for several days or permanently, depending directly on the gravity of the offense.

2.1.4. The Honor System

As players are punished for their negative behavior, there is a simpler system in place designed to rewards them for the positive impact that they may have had on the team, or a player in particular. At the end of any match, a player can vote on one of their teammates as having been either friendly, helpful, or simply to reward their team work. Moreover, they can “honor” an opponent with points, for having been “graceful in defeat”, as Riot Games explains the term. This is a great way to appreciate not only the efforts of your own team, either in victory or defeat, but to also acknowledge the effort and attitude of a specific adversary.

Although this section has more of an informative character, meant to direct the reader into the general atmosphere of the game, it is nonetheless a result of participatory observation and months spent as part of the community, in order to get a sense of it. This part is essential to understanding the following part of the research. The following chapter is dedicated to understanding the more specific aim of this study, as well as the research questions that will guide it.

3. Aim and Research Questions

The general aim of this research is to analyze the way in which strangers team up to solve complex tasks together, by studying the communication and strategic practices of temporary, or “pick-up” teams within virtual communities formed in online video games. To narrow this down, the focus will be on competitive play, and more specifically “League of Legends” ranked games. The research questions that will guide the thesis are as follows:

1. What are the communicative practices that can be identified as patterns in “League of Legends” ranked games? How do they help teams of five collaborate towards a certain goal?
 - 1.1. What is the role of language in such ranked games settings?
2. What are the strategic customs of the players of superior skill in League of Legends ranked games?
 - 2.1. What determines players to team up with strangers in League of Legends and employ said strategies?
3. What is the relationship between strategy and communication when it comes to ranked games?

The research specifically seeks to understand the ways in which up to five strangers can form a team and collaborate within a virtual medium, towards reaching the same goal as the opposing team is aiming for. It is relevant to see what type of communication and interactive processes the players prioritize within a limited timeframe in order to co-operate and come up with an efficient strategy, and especially the ways in which they use these communication channels. The study will look into what works and what does not in terms of first (and last)-time contact between the “League of Legends” players, as well as try to determine what drives

players in choosing to team up with four other strangers towards solving complex tasks. A number of 100 million players per month who actively choose to team up with strangers online is not something to be easily ignored, and calls for active research on the matter. Few studies have been conducted on this particular topic, most of which are either only partly related to the study at hand, or simply not extensive enough. As stated in the introduction, revealing what drives people to cooperate with strangers for a specific goal and more importantly how they achieve this, can result into knowledge that can be shared beyond game theory and online communities and into other scientific fields. Surely, game studies and game design can benefit from the updated knowledge on user interaction in video games, by being able to capitalize on the new information and improve their future games accordingly. Beyond that, researchers such as Constance Steinkuehler(2005) or Sara deFreitas and Paul Maharg (2011), for instance, have studied extensively the connection between online games and learning, in terms of how and what people can acquire through online play and respectively how these skills can be connected to real life endeavors, as well as how digital games can impact on learning experiences. As Wagner's idea was pointed out in the previous chapter, management and training is another relevant field which could make real use of understanding how strangers collaborate to solve complex tasks, in terms of aims and mechanisms of interaction, in order to train highly-functional teams. This accounts for the high flexibility and transferability of the information that this study can reveal, and its usefulness in the broader spectrum of understanding how social interaction is changing and evolving at present.

4. Literature Review

This chapter aims not only to present an account of the existing studies and scholarly perspectives upon the matter at hand, but more importantly to determine the ways in which they are relevant to this study. What are their main findings, how can this study add to them, and how can they be connected? How are they relevant to the research questions?

4.1. On online communities

Although temporary teams in connection to MOBA (“multiplayer online battle arena”) games are not an issue that has been largely discussed in scholarly terms, there are useful studies conducted in this sense, and many more concerning online long-term/permanent communities. It is naturally intriguing to look into the formations, customs and dynamics of long-term communities in online games, and indeed some knowledge can be applied to the case of “pick-up” teams. One relevant example is Bonnie Nardi’s virtual ethnography, “My Life as a Night Elf Priest”, focused on the virtual community of Blizzard’s ever-popular “World of Warcraft” – although the game differs in many respects, the study, along with its methods and analyses are very relevant to the analysis of League of Legends communities. Although Nardi’s study does not directly relate to the research questions at hand, it is an impressive account of an in-depth virtual ethnography on online gaming communities, and thus relevant to the aim of this thesis. Nardi looks at this experience as the process of investigating a cultural space: “to journey to a foreign land, to discover and experience the strangeness of a new culture, to find out what the natives are doing and what they think about what they are doing” (Nardi 2010, 27). The “foreign land” of “World of Warcraft” is indisputably and considerably larger than that of League of Legends in many respects, which is what makes the latter more competitive and PvP based. Drawing on this idea, it is also what calls for more focus on analyzing communication strategies within a team, rather than the community as a whole. Nardi also analyzes to a considerable extent the means and types of communication between players, but takes on a more social and personal approach. That is to say, the study helps us understand

more of how each player's social status or personal life is, to a varying extent, included in the game and "guild", and consequently influences it. The guilds in "World of Warcraft" many times resemble the dynamic of a family or group of friends, due to the amount of time spent together in the same online medium. This is however different for "League of Legends" teams. This study looks indeed into communication between players, but temporary teams such as the ones in "League of Legends" provide much less insight into individual social context, and focus on the type of interactions that arise within a limited time. The first theoretical assumption here is that players will instinctively prioritize game-relevant information, rather than personal information. That is, within a given time-frame, they will choose the knowledge that will help guide the team to victory, rather than the knowledge that will get them more acquainted and socially closer together to their team.

In "World of Warcraft", guilds represent stability, belonging to the same group until one party or the other decides otherwise. The members of a guild recurrently play together against certain aims and constantly review their performances in order to assess their skill sets, and how they may benefit to the team as a whole. Undoubtedly there is much to say about permanent teams such as this. However, this is not the only way to go about virtual communities or MMOs. Nardi invokes the connection between work and play: "play is, at the highest level, a freely chosen activity while at the same time opening the potential for work like results" (Nardi 2010, 101). This entails that, indeed, teams in online communities take up a tasks with an unexpected level of seriousness, and willingly "work" towards them. While she has argued for the "World of Warcraft" teams, this can be extended towards pick-up teams as well. Another idea that could potentially apply to this case is that players in temporary teams choose to play competitive games in order to observe a certain evolution in the way that they perform.

4.2. Temporary teams: 'playing with strangers'

It is perhaps all the more interesting to research temporary teams, which are the focus of this study. As both the research questions and the virtual ethnography as a whole revolve around the strategic and communicative patterns of pick-up teams, it is essential to refer to

previous studies on this subject in order to get a better understanding of them. In League of Legends solo/duo queues, no more than two people can know one another, as the name suggests. While the two people who know each other beforehand can recurrently play as “premades” for as many times as they wish, the rest of the three teammates will constantly change. This means that communication is key within a temporary team, who has between 20-50 minutes to get to know each other, establish a plan, work together towards it and see the end of the match. How do they manage? Simon Ferrari (2013, 15) emphasizes: “Players come together in matches and on forums to formulate best practices, codes of conduct, how-to guides, and theory-crafted heuristics for navigating a dense decision tree.”

The presumption here is that the members in teams of five collaborate short-term by use of a combination of direct communication and mechanisms designed to facilitate user interaction, as is the ping system, for instance, which was concisely presented in the background chapter. The study will look into how they work for users; how they are used, and analyze the game-specific language that will undoubtedly emerge upon analyzing the team chats, and the ways in which it facilitates collaboration. More on the specificity of methods will be discussed later.

Going more specifically into temporary teams, Wagner has proposed a game theoretic approach to eSports, which sheds light on the functionality of online teams, as well as their relevance in offline endeavors. This knowledge can be extended and is very much applicable to pick-up teams. This approach can “foster the importance of competitive computer games as a tool to train ‘high speed strategic decision making’ in management training” (Wagner 2006, 4). He emphasizes the effectiveness of teams that work towards a goal within a timeframe, as well as the usefulness of this strategy in virtually any team. Yubo Kou and Xinning Gui (2016) recently invoked the concept of temporary teams in online gaming in a short study aimed at better understanding such teams, driven by the same lack of prior research on the matter: “Few studies have been done to understand how temporary teams (or pickup groups) composed of strangers fulfill complex tasks” (Kou and Gui, 2016, 161). Their study is indeed one of the few that analyze “League of Legends” from this standpoint. They argue that social in-

game interaction is of essence within temporary teams, and more often than not the success of a match may well depend on this. In this sense, their study is based largely on the interviews with other players, and as a result of these interviews, on the idea that players within a team must assure a positive atmosphere throughout the game: “A successful temporary team builds on players’ proactive endeavors to create a harmonious atmosphere for communication, to take the leadership, and to deal with deviant players.” (Kou and Gui 2016, 164). Moreover, deviant or “toxic” behavior, as it is coined by Riot Games, is more often than not the number one reason why a team may be failing. The main finding relevant to this case is the fact that it is communication, and not personal skill level, that represents the pillar of a successful match within League pick-up teams: “Players must figure out the right way to communicate and coordinate. They must carefully handle in-game conflicts and maintain a positive atmosphere. Players” (Kou and Gui 2016, 167). Their analysis is entirely relevant as it is one of the few account that refer to temporary teams in terms of their communicative strategies, which is what the first research question of this study is aimed at. However, their study does not reflect conclusions or extensive research outside the information given by the interviewees. Its focus on the effects of positive versus negative attitudes within a game overshadows, or at times simply ignores other means of communication that are in fact central to the interaction and communication of League team play. This is also a cause of having used a single research method for their case. However, some theoretical basis can surely be extracted – on the one hand, the need for prioritizing communication, and on the other, related to this, is the need for temporary teams to manage themselves very effectively.

4.3. Non-verbal communication

Niclas Jorvid (2014), on the other hand, has studied the types of interactions that Kou and Gai chose to overlook: he analyzes non-verbal communication in League of Legends from Roland Barthes’ semiotic standpoint. In this case, the ping system and its implications within facilitating team play and user first-hand interaction. One of the most important points made in the study and relevant to this study is the role that the smart ping system plays within multicultural online gaming platforms, and the very easy manner in which it can bring a

common language to users that are strangers to one other: “It is important to note a solution visual communication provide by itself, specifically helping to break down the language barrier” (Jorvid 2014). Undoubtedly, this is one of the points that will also show up in the later discussion of results of this study. While the study in itself is extremely useful from an informative view-point, breaking down the meanings and usefulness of each of the four pings, its character is rather functional and technical. The sole research method used is visual analysis, which ignores user input on the matter, and simply applies Barthes’ theories to the ping system, without a complementary method for instance. The author himself notes how any other analysis upon the same system is well expected to come with different results. In a sense, however, it is complementary to the study provided by Kou and Gui.

4.4. Governance

Coming back to Nardi, she herself has studied League of Legends on a different occasion, although the study is not as extensive as the book presented on “World of Warcraft”. Kou and Nardi study online community governance, with a focus on “League of Legends” and implicitly into the tribunal system that has been presented shortly in the introductory chapter. The main idea here is that the tribunal system, as designed by Riot Games, is thought out in such a way that it leaves room for user interpretation upon the rules. That is to say, some rules and norms are intentionally vague, in the interest of offering players the last word into deciding what is right and what is wrong: “Riot Games is committed to empowering players to govern their community, and believes the Tribunal can productively engage players in governance.” (Nardi & Kou, 2014). This is another clue into the direction temporary team collaboration – it implies that, apart from working towards a strategy to defeat the opposing team, pick-up teams have to also govern themselves while doing so: be self-disciplined and apply the same discipline onto the other players if necessary. Nardi and Kou do analyze the governance by taking the “League” example of the tribunal, but have little empirical input from players, or in-game examples. However, their findings are sustained in part by the empirical knowledge that Kou and Gai have gathered in their research, which points towards the need of self-governance and a sort of checks and balances required between players; the need for someone to step up and

banish negative behavior. Ferrari (2013) argues why communication is particularly essential in these cases: “Cooperation becomes extraordinary important in MOBA performance, because of the compound cost of making a bad play.” This explains how, in competitive play, a minor mistake of a single person can affect the entire match, for the whole team: “As in many mental or mathematical sports, “snowballing” rules built into the genre punish the underdog with negative feedback” (Ferrari 2013, 4). The tendency under pressure is to blame one’s own teammate, which can result in even worse repercussions. This is precisely why self-awareness, when it comes to managing negative acts, is so essential. The idea of self-governance within online temporary teams hold great relevance to this study, as it provides interesting clues to regarding the level of complexity that goes into team collaboration and interaction.

5. Theoretical Framework

The earlier chapter on Literature Review has helped put League of Legends on the map of earlier research and has provided valuable information for the current study. Keeping that information in mind and adding to it the direction that the Aim and Research Questions are pointing towards, this chapter is set to lay the theoretical foundation of this study, by defining some essential concepts that will guide the following analysis. The concepts will thus be defined and analysed for the purpose of being applied later in the Discussion section, in direct connection to the results of the study. In short, this chapter seeks to theorize the ‘what, how and why’ of the focus of this study.

5.1. Knotworking

It is clear by now that one of the overarching themes of the study is “collaboration”, although the specific context in which it is used is collaboration between strangers with the purpose of solving complex tasks. By this, we understand that a temporary team is comprised of people who would otherwise have no connection to each other, and is thus bound and brought together by one aim, for a limited period of time. Yrjö Engeström has theorized this exact type of endeavour into the concept of “knotworking”, defined by him and used

recurrently in his later works: “Knotworking” is characterized by a pulsating movement of tying, untying and retying together otherwise separate threads of activity. The tying and dissolution of a knot of collaborative work is not reducible to any specific individual or fixed organizational entity as the center of control. The center does not hold.” (Engeström 2010, 83). Although Engeström’s concept is related to the larger theme of learning at work, it is clearly applicable in connection to temporary teams in video games. Similarly to how players only come together in a team of five for the specific purpose of defeating the enemy team, a knot can only be the sum of its otherwise unrelated parts: “The notion of knot refers to rapidly pulsating, distributed and partially improvised orchestration of collaborative performance between otherwise loosely connected actors and activity systems.” (Engeström 2010, 83). Knotworking, with the intended resemblance to “networking”, has also been put in direct connection to video games by Nardi and Harris, in their study about collaborative play in World of Warcraft, with the paramount observation on how temporary collaboration offers a fresh view on the evolution of social interaction: “Many collaborations spontaneously take place with strangers—a striking phenomenon that seems unusually prevalent in multiplayer games and suggests the emergence of new kinds of social relations developing within contexts provided by the Internet” (Nardi& Harris 2006, 1). Their study clearly connects ‘knots’ to the idea of pick-up teams: “In knots strangers “tie a knot” to accomplish something together, as opposed to teams where members know one another and have persistent relationships” (Nardi& Harris 2006, 6). This concept serves to understand and clarify the nature of temporary collaboration, and specifically place it within the realm of online gaming. However, the lack of offline connection between the ‘knots’ of a temporary team leaves room to predict some of the difficulties that might arise in communication. Kou and Gai note that the ephemeral character of this setting does not come without a price: “Players must cautiously choose the ways to communicate with strangers, because the relationships between them are temporary and fragile.” (Kou &Gai 2014, 166). The Discussion chapter will seek to understand how the results place League of Legends teams into ‘knots’. Having conceptualized temporary teams and their characteristics, or having understood the ‘what’, it is natural to form a theoretical frame for the strategies on ‘how’ these teams can collaborate effectively on such a short time span.

5.2. The 'socio-technical game apparatus'

Beyond doubt, communication of different kinds stands at the basis of any type of collaboration. When it comes to strangers attempting to solve a task, it becomes absolutely essential. In terms of in-game communication, MOBA games have long been subject to research, but mostly with a focus on the socializing potential that they entail. However, the subject of communication in temporary teams was not met with research as extensive, as Anders Drachen points out: "Verbal communication between players of video games is, however, a subject that has received minimal attention from game studies as well as the media and communication research fields" (Drachen in Crawford et. Al, 2011, 201). Drachen and Jonas Heide Smith have studied the role of communication in multiplayer online games, and have established three general hypotheses of why players might communicate during the game. In short, the theories are as follows:

1. The *functionalist* perspective, which entails communication as a basis for sharing relevant information and thus facilitating coordination and negotiation.
2. The *strategic* perspective, which entails a clear focus on communication for goal-oriented purposes. Both these perspectives are thought to be very limited and solely oriented on the game.
3. The *socializing* perspective, which can be extensive and may well involve topics outside of the game. (Drachen and Smith, 2008, 55-56).

Virtual communities in online games must adapt to a specific culture, which each player acquires by experience, and in the case of League ranked games, this experience comes many times by learning on one's own, whether this entail communicative or strategic practices. Crawford et. al point out that "MMORPGs, involve and develop elaborate forms of communication and social order" (Crawford et. al 2011, 12), while Taylor goes as far as conceptualizing it as a "broader game apparatus, a socio-technical one" (Taylor 2009, 32). This

speaks for the complexity of communication that unfolds within teams, and more so within temporary ones.

As this study will analyse the types of communication present in League of Legends temporary teams, these hypotheses will serve as guidelines in later discussing the results in light of the research questions: by breaking down the socio-technical apparatus that is required by players in ranked games, knowledge about communicative practices and strategic patterns of the players will be revealed and more easily understood. After determining the ‘how’ that led to strategy and communication, there remains the ‘why’.

5.3. Social strata as catalyst

Looking into temporary teams that solve complex tasks by way of analysing League of Legends ranked games will undoubtedly provide extensive knowledge about how these teams operate. However, doing so without looking into what motivates people to engage in such games would potentially limit the quality of the information. This study is not aimed specifically at player motivation in online games, but to understand how players manage to form a ‘knot’, it is interesting to think of what might drive them, beyond the clear satisfaction that winning something generally can give, especially since ranked games are the nucleus of this research. The chapter on Background has attempted to shed light on the importance and complexity of League of Legends ranked games, yet a theoretical basis is needed to understand and predict player goals when they embark in ranked matches.

Kou and Gai have briefly researched ranked games in connection to motivation and have theorized that hierarchy, which is the purpose of ranked games, “was incorporated into player narratives of their performance and progress, and impacted the practices of learning and collaboration.” (Kou &Gai, 2016, 1). Thus the effect of existing social strata in the League community is potentially two-fold: on the one hand, on the individual level, connecting “more prestigious ranks and the associated feelings of increased self-efficacy” (King et. Al 2009, 95). On the other hand, there is the clear influence of ranking on the means of collaboration and interaction between strangers; the assumption is that “players judge their teammates based on the latter’s ranking information.” (Kou &Gai 2016, 3), and this might be directly concerned with

how they will choose to strategize with them. The fact that ranking and hierarchy can directly alter or aid the means of strategy and communication stresses the importance of setting this theoretical frame, of analyzing the 'why'.

Having laid a theoretical foundation that will be discussed in connection to the empirical data later in this study, what follows is to pave the way towards it. The upcoming chapter will thus discuss the methodological approaches that will be used to gather and analyze the necessary data.

6. Methodology

6.1. Virtual / Online ethnography

Also coined as cyber-ethnography, this general method will be used in order to take part in and observe the online community of "League of Legends" in competitive play, specifically in ranked games on the EUNE servers: "In its basic form, ethnography consists of a researcher spending an extended period of time immersed in a field setting, taking account of the relationships, activities and understandings of those in the setting and participating in those processes" (Hine, 4-5). Virtual ethnography is a relatively recent practice, but its methods are very well documented in the work of Boelstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor: "Ethnography and virtual worlds", who have put together a useful handbook for researchers who aspire towards attempting a virtual ethnography. The authors coin virtual worlds as spaces for cultural practice: "we aim to study virtual worlds as valid venues for cultural practice, seeking to understand both how they resemble and how they differ from other forms of culture". However, they are not looking into it as something out of the ordinary, but quite conversely: "what interests us about virtual worlds is not what is extraordinary about them, but what is ordinary. We are intrigued not only by the individuals in a group, but by the sum of the parts". In other words, virtual ethnography can be seen as a means of investigating normal lives in

different mediums – the League community can easily be considered one of them. Considering the variety of methods that can be used as part of ethnography, this practice can be used to observe the differences between what players say and what they do: “ethnographers must study people in their “natural habitat” to understand the fissures between practices and discourses” (Burawoy in Hallet & Barber, 2014, 307). Boellstorff emphasizes the practicality of digital ethnography in the possibility to witness essential acts as they happen: “The methodological contribution of participant observation is that it provides ethnographers insight into practices and meanings as they unfold” (2012, 55). In the same vein, it offers a multitude of such acts, all of them equally veridical and immediate: “conversations as they occur, activities, embodiments, movements through space, and built environments.” (2012, 55)

Thus, this qualitative method will be used for online participatory observation within the community, by either ‘spectating’ or taking an active part in the games. While ‘spectate’ mode is useful for the first research question, because it allows the researcher to observe freely without the users being aware of her presence, the active participation is more suitable for answering the second research question, since it is possible to actively communicate with the team through the in-game chat. This will be done through a Gold V -level, Silver II -division account with the user name of “Ramonsky” that has already been part of the community for several years, on the EUNE servers (referring to Eastern and Northern European regions), and has established a network within the community. The game client gives the possibility of downloading the match to a person’s personal computer at the end of each game, thus making it possible to observe it afterwards. Desktop recording devices will be used as a means to record the chat logs, as they are currently the sole way of reading the chat after a game. The overall ethnographic observation, or more concretely the participatory observation includes a number of 60 ranked games that summoner Ramonsky has participated in over a period of two months.

However, ethnography is an ‘umbrella’ term, or rather an ‘umbrella’ method, in that a thorough virtual ethnography encompasses a variety of other methods of research. Boellstorff, in fact, states that “ethnography is not a method; it is the written product of a set of methods,

as the suffix -graphy (to write) indicates” (Boellstorff 2012, 53). The following methods will thus be used as part of the whole process of ethnography, and not as something separate. Using any of them in a separate context, or on their own rather than in a complementary manner, would not entail ethnography.

6.2. Textual analysis

In order to address the first question, a textual analysis will be performed, so as to analyze the game-specific language used in ranked games on EUNE servers: “textual analysis is the in-depth study of a text [...] using the text as a sample or case study to understand a specific issue or topic”(Fernandez-Vara, 2014). This is specifically useful for online communities, because “textual approaches to language have emphasized the multi-functionality of texts [...] That is, texts simultaneously represent aspects of the world; enact social relations between participants in social events and attitudes, desires and values of participants.” (Fairclough, 27). The messages in the chat are a significant part of the communication between the players in team, especially since chances are they do not know each other at all. In order to observe the chat, however, a participatory observation must be conducted, as the chat is only available to players in game. This means the virtual ethnography method will provide the setting for gathering data that will be used for this second method. In this sense, the first method is part of the process of ethnography. Virtual ethnographers, in fact, emphasize on the significance of gathering chat logs during their observation process: “Chat logs may end up containing a wide range of intermingled ethnographic data – from formal interviews to informal conversations, and environmental data generated by the virtual software” (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor 113). Not only is the information extremely relevant, but it can help draw possible conclusions that can be applied outside of the specific situations, “using inductive methods by taking specific examples and drawing general conclusion that can be applicable outside of this spectre”. (Fernandez-vara, 2014). In this vein, the textual analysis will have a thematic character, in order to identify and organize patterns within the text provided from the chat logs. The communication channels available in the game have been shortly presented in the introductory chapter. The analysis will be performed on the chat logs recorded from the 60

League of Legends ranked matches played on EUNE servers under the username Ramonsky. The data was collected through February and March 2017.

6.3. Interviews

Drawing on the concept of ‘umbrella’ method, interviews are indeed a significant part of an ethnography, and more often than not it is a go-to method for researchers looking into a community, be it virtual or otherwise:” interviews are so central to effective ethnographic research that we cannot imagine a project that did not include them” (Boelstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor 92). There is only so much that can be said, or rather written, in an in-game chat, and there is much more to know about the methods and strategy of communication of players who meet for the first time to achieve a goal. The best way to find them out, apart from observing, is to ask the actual players. Boelstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor emphasize the importance of using interviews as part of virtually any ethnographic research: “we noted that the method allows researchers to grasp the relationship between what people “say they do” and “what they do.” (Boelstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor 92), and especially stress the fact that interviews themselves, as a single method, do not represent ethnographic research, unless accompanied by other methods and practices. The method will thus be applied through semi-structured, open-ended interviews of ranked players (that is, players of level 30, who have had considerable experience in PvP mode). It will revolve around the information that cannot be easily drawn from chat logs and game observations, for the purpose of complementing methods and completing the knowledge upon the community. More specifically, the questions will first be aimed towards more technical questions, such as rank, division and player history within the community. It will later on adopt a more open-ended tone regarding, at first, the communication strategies preferred by a player towards establishing a short-term cooperation with strangers, as well as the possible advantages and limitations that might emerge. Lastly, the interview will be directed towards the players’ personal input on possible improvements when it comes to the game. Seeing how demanding a ranked game of “League of Legends” is, interviews during game are near impossible to obtain, as it would distract at least two of five members from their goal. Thus, the well-known online platform ‘Reddit’, will be used in order

to reach out to the League community and seek for volunteers that fit the general descriptions. The 18 interviews will be conducted with different players of superior skill from around the world and are expected to provide information on a variety of topics when it comes to League game play, tactics, communication and overall opinions. Although some of the players are from different servers due to their location, the game remains exactly the same, as they all fall into a superior skill level, ranging from gold to diamond leagues.

7. Results

This section stands to present the results generated by the virtual ethnography, with the focus on the two methods. This will be a systematic approach –this section in particular will present and analyze the results of each method separately; a discussion section will look at how the empirical results generated by the two methods come together and what information they bring as a whole. This will finally round up the study by seeing how the research questions were addressed by the methods and results.

7.1. Ethnography before methods

Before going into the results generated by the two methods, it is important to view the League games as a whole, to discuss certain aspects of a ranked game that one could not as easily take out only from the interviews or chat logs. That is not to say that the means selected for the study were not sufficient, but rather stands to reaffirm that indeed virtual ethnography is by no means one method or another, but understanding a small universe from so many different angles. Participatory observation comes with the added possibility of filling the gaps between all of its additional methods.

After having been both participant and observer to 60 ranked games, the first thought is that there are strategic and communication aspects that are essential to discuss in the results section. Although language is very often simplified for certain aims, such as to avoid wasting

time during games and not interrupt the act of playing with that of writing, the language used is in no way simplistic. The majority of players are aware of concepts and terms that are more complex than for most online games. Users have strategic aims and communication and in-game interaction is an absolute must in order to reach them. This part of the Results chapter is dedicated to breaking down these aspects of the game, as well as understand how they link to means of strategic interaction, and how do require the use of communication in doing so. This addresses both research questions to some extent: one the one hand, these are terms that are constantly present in the vocabulary of a League of Legends ranked player, which means that it offers insight in the uses of language within ranked matches; one the other hand, the terms represent strategies that are part of the skill set of many ranked player, and which directly addresses the second research question.

7.1.1. Synergy



Figure 5 – Two premade pairs on botlane

As the word itself suggest, synergy refers to creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Although it can apply to any two or more teammates, most often synergy is used to refer to the botlane duo: the adc and the support (more on the roles has been explained in the Background chapter). While other members do not necessarily have to work together until mid-game, the bottom lane duo is by all means constant cooperation. Synergy is used to refer to a near-perfect strategic cooperation between the two botlane players. What must be kept in mind is that synergy is a combination of strategy, skill and communication between the two people that manage to put it all into practice. That is to say, the two people from botlane may not know each other at all, or may have very different views of the game, but can still achieve a great synergy and dominate their lane. Thus, although it is naturally expected for premade duos to have more synergy than others, players who meet for the first time may find that they can harmoniously cooperate with one another. On an ideal level, this is what everyone who plays a solo/duo ranked game wishes for; it is the best that can happen for a player who goes into a strategic match alone – finding synergy with their team mates.

7.1.2. Objective control



Figure 6 – Players attempting to destroy a turret

One of the most important aims that can be achieved through team communication towards winning a match is known as objective control. This is used to refer to the prioritization system of a team: are they interested in crushing their opponents on a player versus player basis and gaining as much kills and assists as possible, or are they more keen on strategically dominating the map by taking objectives that will help the entire team in the long-run? Although communication is key here, sometimes players of the same team do not wish to cooperate towards the same aim. Focusing on objectives can be tiresome - it is more difficult than one would expect to be able to talk an objective-oriented strategy, as well as see it through. Killing enemy champions is often a show of skill superiority, and gives a sense of satisfaction that objective-control can take away. However, the latter is more effective, and here is the root of some possible conflicts that may arise within the team.

7.1.3. Shot-Calling

It is, more often than not, very difficult for five complete strangers to fall into place with the same strategy. As it would be expected, it often does not go as planned. However, many teams have a “shot-caller”, who makes major decisions within the team, and which the rest of the team usually follows. What is most interesting about the shot-caller is that there is no process to pick one, nor an official statement of who should call shots within the team. The role is unanimously chosen, but unspoken. In general, the shot-caller is the person who demonstrates an obvious advantage within the team, such as having a positive score, or making a series of advantageous plays, who shows a display of maturity when it comes to decision making for the good of the team. The rest of the team members naturally come to rely on him for the rest of the match. Shot-callers focus on the earlier mentioned objective-control, which is why they are reliable to begin with. Teams who have one or even two such shot-callers are significantly more inclined towards victory.

7.1.4. Prediction

The term holds the general meaning of being able to foretell one of more actions or outcomes. In competitive play, prediction is a rather rare part of a player's skill set. This is also what makes it so very valuable. Prediction in ranked games refers more specifically to a player being able to foretell what the next few moves of his enemy are, and moreover to act accordingly. Playing based on prediction is a high-risk/high-reward type of play. One must have very extensive experience with the game in order to be able to observe patterns within player behavior, and be able to predict one's moves. Prediction, however, can also occur at team level, and this it is what can make or break a game. Team communication is paramount in order to break down what the enemy team might be up to when they are out of sight, and acting on that type of information is what can make a team very successful.

7.1.5. Composition

Very widely used as 'team-comp', this refers to the combined power of the five champions that are chosen. Do they complement each other in terms of spells, can they last long in a team fight, can they take objectives effectively, and are they team-oriented champions? Are they, conversely, more inclined towards individual play making? Team comp is established in champion select, and is vital to the outcome of the game. Players can have good synergy or cooperation, but their team composition may be lacking in a way that cannot be saved by in-game interaction. This is why team composition should be discussed within team players before it is picked. It is an essential part of the strategy of the team and also a reason for many disputes; some champions are simply not as easy or fun to play as others, even though they are extremely effective for the team composition; that is how team mates can come into conflict very early in the game.

League is, at first sight, a routine game, as compared to other games, especially when it comes to ranked matches. It is played on the same map, everyone eventually comes to learn what every champion does by heart, and the overall objective remains eternally the same, with

smaller objectives that help get to that point. In all of its apparent simplicity, however, lie all of these strategies that can be deemed quite intricate, and while shifting from player to ethnographer, it is increasingly difficult to believe that it is, truly, a video game being analyzed. Pass-time activities such as video games are thought to be purely for fun and leisure, and yet millions of players actively engage into the strategic planning that goes into a ranked game of League. Being a new, level one League player can be quite difficult for instance, because one goes in this subculture without being aware of any of the terms or strategies used. Simply knowing that one should dominate the enemy base is far from enough to actually achieve that goal. When it comes to being considered a part of the League community, it is not at all about what important players you know, or who you play with. It is about having knowledge of the LoL culture, about knowing how to communicate within a team, and how to handle being part of a temporary team. As opposed to a World of Warcraft guild, in League games no one wants to know how another player's day went. They want to know that they can win, and being aware of strategies and means of interaction is a great part of this. In this vein, the valuable information that the two methods have shown will be presented in the following sections of this chapter.

7.2. Textual analysis

Having observed over 60 games and recorded the chat logs for half of them, the textual analysis turned out to be rich in valuable information. The in-game chat is the most used means of communication, along with the ping system (which is in part incorporated in the chat), which made it essential for the observation of interactive means between strangers in temporary teams. Before going into actual interaction, it is important to break down some of the most used, game-specific terms and abbreviations used by players. This will greatly aid at understanding the results from the chat logs, some of which will be displayed further in the section. The list below contains the terms that have been used repeatedly within the 60 games and for which players have proved a mutual understanding. Learning the terms is a result of extended experience in League ranked games. It stands to show once again the methods that are used by players in order to make the best of their time. Some terms require lengthier

explanations and are quite complex, which implies that a significant amount of time is being saved when these terms are used in the game chat. More so than in the chat, many terms have been used by players when they responded to the interviews, which makes this graphic all the more useful for understanding the results section. This offers considerable information in light of the first research question, for understanding the communicative practices employed by the players in temporary teams, but more specifically it helps understand the essential role that language plays in ranked games.

7.2.1. Game-specific terms and abbreviations

Figure 7

Abbreviation	Meaning
ss	Written in chat to announce that an enemy is missing. Implies that other team mates should be alert and play safer.
cc	Stands for 'crowd control'. Refers to essential spells that can potentially impair an entire team.
Nerf	Modifying a champion so that it is less powerful.
Buff	Modifying a champion so that it is more powerful.
Omww	On my way. Letting other team mates know help is coming soon.
Gl	Good Luck
Gg	Good Game
Hf	Have Fun
L2p	Learn to play
Drake	Dragon, a game-generated character
KDA	Kill/Death/Assist ratio, calculated to show the effectiveness of a player. The mathematical means to do that is $(K + A) / D$
Ap	Ability power of a champion / magical damage
Ad	Attack damage of a champion / physical damage
Op	Over powered / too strong
Cs	Creeps / minions
Ks	Kill steal; when someone deals very little damage to take a kill that another player has worked for.
Aa	Auto attack
Kite	Skill-related; when the Adc hits an enemy champion while also dodging their attacks
Ace	When the entire team is dead

Afk	Away from keyboard; when a player leaves the game
Aoe	Area of effect; used when a spell damages more than one player.
Bg	Bad game
Broken	Similar to OP, when a champion is unfairly strong.
Balanced	The opposite of broken; when a champion has reasonable stats.
Cd	Cooldown; the time that passes until one can use an ability or spell.
Def	Defensive or passive play-mode; non-aggressive, with a focus on survival.
Dive	When a single player goes in the middle of the enemy team.
Ez/izi	Easy game
Elo	Rank based on the skill of a player. Related to MMR
Throw	When a certain victory turns into defeat due to a series of mistakes.
Gap closer	A spell or ability that brings one from one point to another very fast.
Gank	When the jungler comes to help his team mates on any lane.
Main	The most played champion of a player.
Macro-play	A long-term strategy with important objectives that involves the whole team.
Meta	The general play-style and champion picks that are considered the best for the current game patch.
MMR	Match-making rate – the idea that a high-skill player, who wins a lot of games, will be placed with similarly-skilled team mates, as well as opponents.
Noob	A low-skill player, usually new; used negatively.
Poke	To damage enemy champions from a fair distance.
Premade	Two or more persons that know each other playing together.
Push	Advancing closer to the enemy base.
Qq	“Cry”; used negatively to imply that a person is whining.
Rage	When a person starts acting negatively due to losing.
Ragequit	When a person leaves the game because it was not going well.
Roam	To leave one’s own lane and position in order to help other lanes
Scrub	A new player with a low skill level; used negatively
Tf	Team fight.
wp	Well played.

Language has thus been adapted for maximum advantage when it comes to time-saving during the match – so much so, that even derogatory language is being shortened or abbreviated. This implies a sense of adaptability of the players to the environment, in order to make the best out of the given time. It is important to note that, although many players are fluent, some even proficient in written English, they choose to speak with limited words,

oftentimes incorrectly; simply because they know the sentence will make sense to everyone, regardless of sentence topic or grammatical rules. After having seen what type of language is used, it follows to look into how and when it is used, or for what main purposes, during the actual ranked matches.

When analyzing language and chat logs, a filter was needed in order to categorize the type of interaction that was occurring. The categories were constructed as the analysis progressed, and as certain patterns were observed when it came to different types of communication, and were materialized into the themes below with the necessary adaptations. For each of the following themes, a relevant chat-log caption was used in order to exemplify. The guideline for this was as follows in the figure:

Strategic interaction	Feedback	Conflict	Early game chatter
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ objectives prioritization ○ possible plays ○ match prospects ○ builds ○ team-composition ○ asking for/offering assistance ○ other calls for action ○ making use of the ping system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ thanking for help ○ acknowledging good decisions ○ giving credit for impressive plays ○ pointing out failures or poor decisions on both player and team level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ flaming ○ trolling ○ intentionally feeding ○ assisting enemy team ○ toxicity ○ unresponsive players 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ jokes ○ exchanging formalities ○ talking early prospects ○ dancing ○ any other, non-league related topic

7.2.2. One-minute strategies

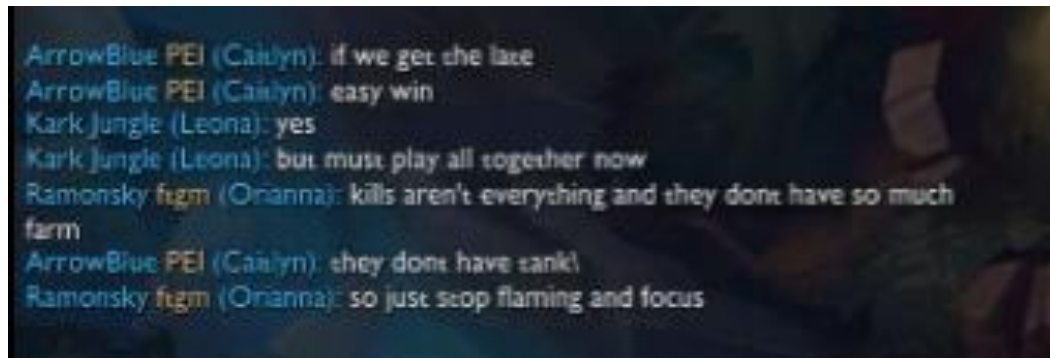


Figure 8 – Chat log of a mid-game strategy breakdown

Figure 6 from above shows a record of an in-game chat log from the middle of a ranked match. A simple string of replies such as this gives a significant amount of information on how the game has been progressing, as well as how it will potentially go on, and it only took three out of the five team players to be able to have this mid-game self-check and status report. The general feeling is that the team has been struggling up until this point, but there is still hope, which is why this short game breakdown is happening. Player ArrowBlue is focusing on the importance of their team composition (see earlier section on ethnography for more details). She is implying that their champions have significant winning potential, as long as they manage to resist until later in the game. Her argument is that the enemy team does not have tanks, and thus will be easily manageable in the very near future. User Kark Jungle agrees, and brings her own take on this situation, by pointing out the importance of playing as a team. This suggests earlier disruption or incoordination within it, which these team mates are willing to overlook for the sake of winning. User Ramonsky points out that the current situation of the enemy team is not as favorable as it looks, and brings her own player behavior-oriented argument on how the game should progress: if the team manages to focus and avoid conflict, all might work out well.

All of this was taken out of such a short dialogue that did not last more than a minute, because all the team members were on the same page about what they wanted to do. The sense of awareness, the maturity to admit that the behavior has not been impeccable, and the

willingness to regroup and rethink show a strategic mindset within this team, which they are able to break down in a very short timeframe by communicating openly. These players are complete strangers to one another, which makes this matter all the more intriguing.

7.2.3. Communicating without typing



Figure 9 – Chat log of strategic communication

If taking out so much information about a game through simple one-minute strategies was impressive, it is even more interesting to look into how a team communicates and sets out potential plays by typing nothing at all. All the information conveyed in Figure 7 is sent to the other members using the Ping System, within a matter of seconds. User CorneliuVadimTud is laying out the timers (or cooldowns) left on his essential spells. He does this to tell the four other players how long it will be before he can actively participate in any significant team-fight or play. Until that time comes, the rest of the team will not rely on him as much as they otherwise would, knowing that he is temporarily unable to perform some spells. User King Plys is asking for help at a specific location on the map, which is most likely under attack, or just about to fall to the enemy advantage. At this point, three other team mates immediately state that they are on their way to the damaged area, in order to attempt to save it. User CorneliuVadimTud has estimated the potential danger of the general area himself, and is warning his teammates to play safely.

This whole exchange of information has been possible with minimum physical communication. The effort put into this by the players is materialized in a few mouse clicks, and thus is the effectiveness of the ping system. The fact that team mates followed up so quickly on the request that was made is indicating the awareness of all the players of how everything is working when it comes to communicating with one another. Four out of five team mates participated in this short exchange of information and planning, which also shows a high cooperative level of the team as a whole. Protecting their outer turret is an important task, and thus they show that they are objective oriented indeed (see previous section on strategies for more details).

7.2.4. Conflict



Figure 10 – Chat log with a four-player conflict

It was very often the case, within the games observed, that negative behavior was exhibited. The issue with negative behavior is that it is very difficult for other players not to respond to it, so that it rarely remains a one-person negative attitude. It is possible, within the game, for players to mute each other, that is to stop seeing what another person is writing. This is a recommended action in response to possible conflict within the team, but it ultimately is simply ignoring a problem, and not solving it. There are four out of five players implicated in this conflict. Two of them have caused it by making a mistake, and the blaming process is what escalates the situation. User DimetrodonPetrov is flaming by yelling at his team mate (writing in

all caps), instead of trying to solve this in a reasonable fashion. User CorneliuVadimTud is taking his side, and thus user Chudy chooses to mute his entire team. Not only is conflict bad in itself, but the outcome is that one player will stop interacting with his team as a result, which makes future cooperation much less possible. To add insult to injury, user xHeisen brings no argument or contribution, but simply intervenes to flame. At this point in the game, the team has very little chance of discussing a sound strategy, as they have chosen to capitalize on a mistake, instead of thinking how it can be mended, or even reassuring themselves that it is not the end of the game for them.

7.2.5. Feedback

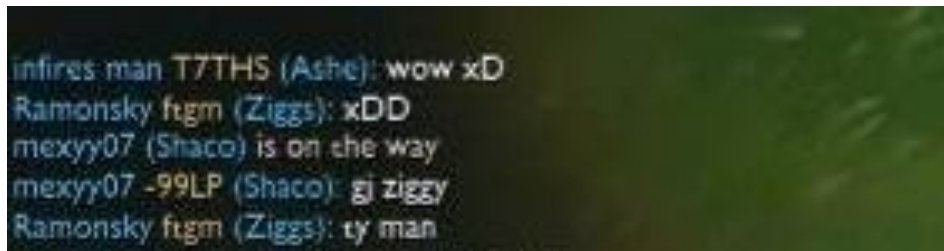


Figure 11 – Player congratulating his team mate

Feedback during League ranked matches can largely be of two kinds. It often comes as a result of a play, be it good or bad, when the team shares thoughts on how it went: they complement a team mate on their good game play or the impressive sense of focus, for instance (or lack thereof). Alternatively, it can come in the form of suggestions; although the 10 players are matched based on similar skill levels, some players naturally are more experienced and might have advice for their team mates, as to what they can do to improve their situation. If the team mates are not premade, the only way to do this is by chat, and although it can be time-consuming, it is considered worthwhile by many, due to the positive effects it can have on the outcome of the match. Figure 11 from above shows a player telling his team mate he did a good job ('gj'). Of course, feedback is a double-edged knife, as it can many times not be received positively in temporary times, and can be seen as condescending; if that is the case, this may very well result in conflicts similar to the one presented earlier.

7.2.6. Small-Talk ?



Figure 12 – Two players dancing at the beginning of the game

It is interesting to see how, despite being such an amazingly large and growing community, there is little to no personal talk within the team – that is, players only speak game-related aspects, and very rarely engage in any other types of conversation. Players do not make an active effort to connect with their team mates in ways other than discussing strategies. The little interaction that does happen outside of game strategy is usually limited to a few lines of jokes at the beginning of the game, when players have 1-2 minutes to organize and can find the time to type. Sometimes, as seen in Figure 12 from above, players can make their characters dance, which is considered bonding with the team mates in the little time they have. Indeed the lack of time is the most reasonable explanation for the lack of personal interaction; However, it is specifically the character of these temporary teams that leaves little room for befriending fellow players. Knowing that one's team will change completely in the following 30 minutes makes it difficult to wish to interact with someone on a deeper level.

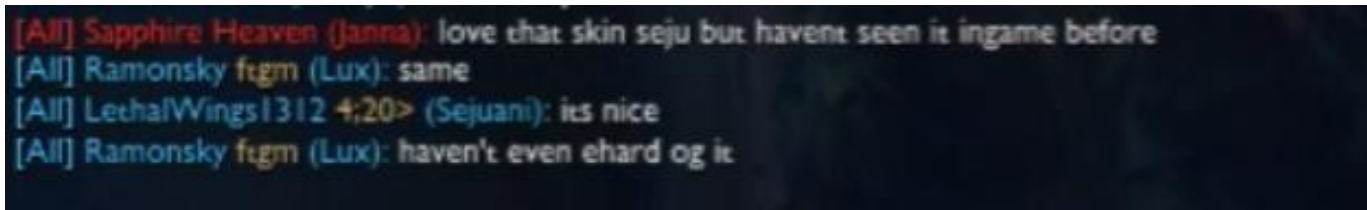


Figure 13 – Chat log with a short non-strategic interaction

As can be seen in Figure 13 from above, three players from both teams are exchanging thoughts on the skin of one of the champions. A skin is something that can be bought, and consists in having a different look for one of your champions, one that makes it stand out. Although the talk has nothing to do with the match at hand, the short exchange is still related to League. The players above were at the very beginning of the match, when remarks such as this usually occur. 20 minutes into the game, these players may well be in any of the situations analyzed above; this shows how well players actually separate their everyday life and their game time. While playing as part of the ethnographical research, there was little to no talk of anything outside of the game, and this was a mutual feeling. Small-talk is not needed, as long as the team knows what the goals are. A very interesting detail to note here is also that players assign genders to one another based on the gender of their champion. For instance, if someone is playing the champion called Miss Fortune, who is female, the player will be referred to as a female as well, regardless of their real gender. Conversely, if the player chooses the champion named Viktor for a specific match, he will be referred to as a male for the rest of the game. This has to do directly with people not knowing one another, and not having the time to get to know one another. This pattern has been observed in all matches, and is by no means a rule or a necessity. Much like the abbreviations explained earlier, it is simply something players unconsciously pick up, as it facilitates, to an extent, communication with their team mates.

7.3. Interviews

This section will deal with the outcome of the second method, the interview. As it is not possible, time-wise, to take interviews during a match, and players are eager to get to the next match after having finished one, interviews were made either face-to-face, on the client chat room with players from the friend list, or from the League community as a whole. Reddit is a website known for its hosting of a large League of Legends community, where people are actively engaged in interacting on different topics that are related to everything League and eSports. By using a call to action explaining the purpose of this thesis, the community was informed about its general aim, and invited to take part in the interview through private messages. Several members of the community turned out to be very willing to participate, even though some fell slightly out of the spectrum and ranges selected for the study. The aim here was to complement the knowledge and information taken out of the textual analysis with the personal insights of players. It is interesting to look into what people do, as compared to what they feel or say about this matter. Below is the caption with the invitation for the League players:



Figure 14 – Reaching out to the community

While some of the respondents avoided giving their username, most of them were quite open and everyone treated the questions with seriousness. Due to language and cultural differences, some questions had to be rephrased within private messaging; the guideline used for the interview can be found in Annex 1, divided thematically in order to facilitate interpretation.

The interviews will thus be presented and discussed thematically, largely according to the categories selected in the guideline, which help filter the high amount of input received from the players. The players were very opinionated in regards to every aspect that was discussed, and familiar with every topic that was brought up by the questions. The citations used for reporting the results will be extracted directly from the interviews, and will not be altered in any way, which means that errors of grammatical nature may occur, seeing as English is not the primary language of most of the respondents. It is also important to take once again note of the abbreviations explained earlier in the same chapter, as respondents made extensive use of game-specific language during the interview. The analysis carried out has a thematic character, and is divided into several subsections, according to the patterns that were observed in the answers. Moreover, the analysis is conducted cross-case, that is taking under consideration all of the responses rather than taking them individually – this offers a more holistic view on the matter instead of a sectioned, limited one. This method was aimed primarily at providing an answer for the second research question, as it helps identify strategic patterns of game play, as well as point towards what may drive players to engage in competitive play as part of temporary teams.

7.3.1. How often to the Rift?

Before going into game-specific details, the interview started off with a few general questions, which helped to get a sense of how involved the players are with League. One important aspect of this section was finding out, with approximation, how much time per day or week these players spend engaged in battles on Summoner's Rift. Their high skill level alone suggests that these players are likely to spend a significant amount of time playing ranked games in order to be able to perform as such; this was simply a logical assumption, but it turned out to be true according to the statements of the players. Most of them, in fact, state that if they do not have the time to play daily, they still manage to play almost every day. Some of the interviewees were very well-documented and precise in their answers, all of them surprisingly aware of the time it takes to be proficient:

Daily, or almost every day. I have more than 3500 hours played. I do not regret those hours.

eyy! math <3 so if we take the numbers of hours ingame we get from wol.ggi have wasted 2628 hours playing league (on my main) which is 1,44 hours every day for 5 years. if i add my smurfs (i have 3 for reasons...),the number goes up to 3917 hours which is 2,1 hours every day for 5 years.

7.3.2. Why ranked?

Players of this skill level and which spend so much time playing League ranked game are obviously putting an effort into the game, and are taking it very seriously. This brings forth the question of why they dedicate themselves to ranked games to such an extent, instead of simply playing normal games, which have less implications and are just as fun, without the effort. The responses were highly interesting, as clearly the players have put thought into it. One of the recurring aspects that were brought up by the respondents was related to personal growth within the game. They all know League is competitive, and even more so when it comes to ranked, which for them means that this is a way to get feedback on their play style and skill level, and a way to improve themselves. Moreover, this is the same reason why player prefer to play ranked by themselves, instead of play it with friends or other people they know. Many feel that a full premade team of four or five friends, for instance, cannot be expected to turn out into a serious game, and more often than not they will play entirely for fun, experimenting with items and champions:

I prefer solo ranked, because it lets me enter a 'me against the world' mental state, where all things that go wrong will be my fault, allowing me to learn and grow from my mistakes.

People play more seriously, so the quality of the games are higher. Also I want to get better, and soloq shows me a clear progression or stagnation.

Possibly the most expected reason for people to play ranked is the level of competitiveness that they are more than happy to engage in. Whereas they deem normal games fun and a place for people to experiment unfamiliar plays without any consequences, ranked gives purpose, and it gives something back when they win. In a sense, people seem to need the seriousness and organization of the ranked mode, as they want rules and order to be followed by their teammates:

On ranked I expect people try their best and play their best. Everyone wants to climb up. You need to understand that if you queue there, you have to be prepared for people which might be bad towards you for whatever reason. All because they want to win.

In ranked, players are trying to showcase the best that they have

In the same vein, players seem to put much value on having an equal opponent. League of Legends has a matchmaking system that ensures ranked games players of a certain skill will only play with people of a similar level. Otherwise, the weaker players would never be able to climb, and the ones that are already on a higher rank will climb too easily:

Normal games is mostly about trying out new champions and have fun feeding, I can also get matched with silver/bronze players a lot and I find no challenge or enjoyment in beating them.

The appeal of the game does not stop simply at the word ‘competition’ – players appreciate a real challenge when they must struggle to win the game. If wins come too easy, players lose interest, because their ability is no longer tested at a satisfactory level.

7.3.3. Getting technical: play style and strategy

The interview questions advance with the aim of exploring the players’ in-depth understanding of the game. This is one of the sections in which respondents were most explicit, and where a passion for League was increasingly visible as they relate on play styles, personal preferences

and priorities, mechanics and objectives. At this points, game-specific language is heavily relied on by many of the players. The respondents felt comfortable enough to engage in a player-to-player conversation, as the questions were designed to fit right into League culture. The question was open-ended enough for players to feel free to explore anything that they felt was important or relevant when it comes to League play style, but did offer examples as guidelines for possible directions of the answer. In this manner, the responses all had a very explicit strategic character in common, while at the same time offered information on a surprising variety of aspects and subtopics.

Although they were not asked to do so, many of the players felt a need to specify the roles that they play most often, or “main”, and even name the champions that they prefer when playing ranked. The reasoning is that they feel their play style and strategy changes as they change lanes or champions:

My two primary roles are mid lane and support. I play very proactively on both roles, trying to initiate team fights and small skirmishes. In mid lane, I'm trying to get a lead through kills or by roaming and impacting the map. On support, I'm looking for opportunities to make plays, playing upfront and in the minions lines. On both roles, I will always prioritize towers and global objectives.

Once more, the players show an amazing sense of self-awareness when it comes to their League performance; they make very active choices with the assumed risks that they bring along. Many of the questions thus enforced the idea that players are indeed serious about monitoring their skill level with the aim of getting better.

I usually have a large priority on winning lane which also means that I tend to play a bit too aggressively which leaves me vulnerable to ganks.

I like to let myself get carried. Play passively, wait for help and then go super aggressive. I prioritise not dying over getting another kill.

Another recurrent aspect of the answers was the tendency of players to point out how their play style is heavily influenced or somehow connected to the play style and decisions of their teammates. They argue for the necessity of collaborating and even trusting in their team

in order to make successful plays. More so, what interestingly surfaced was the idea of sacrifice – taking on extra risk for the sake of a vulnerable team mate. Players put victory above everything else, and if that means putting themselves in risky plays, they will definitely take it:

Support main, usually peel for my adc's. Try to be a punching bag for the team. Prioritize vision a lot. If theres a skill shot thats headed your way and it might kill you, I'll flash into it for you.

I'm a lane bully and I always want to make sure that my opponent either dies a lot or loses tons of cs and I lure everyone to my lane taking off the pressure of my teammates

I always play how my support played. You gotta work together there and the best way to do it is leave the final word to the person which protects you. If he feels fine to be aggressive, help him to it.

The lengths to which players commit themselves to League ranked games does not stop here. Whereas the question was a more general inquiry of personal style, players let some of their secrets slip out, and explained how analytical they get when it comes to the psychological sides of the battle. This unveiled some very cerebral play styles and techniques, as players relate how they capitalize on enemy mistakes or weaknesses, as well as the questions that they ask themselves in order to try and get ahead of the enemy:

I prefer playing really aggressive in lane, which puts off guard most of the enemy players. In my opinion, in soloQ is early game the most important part of the game, mainly because of the psychological factor. If I win my lane hard enough, it leaves the enemies depressed, they start flaming one another, which makes them focus less on the game, increasing my chances to victory.

This once again stands to show that League is in no way a mindless wandering around on a map for an average of 30 minutes and taking other champions out. Some of the strategies that respondents explained were in many ways similar to strategies chess players have to carry out in their head, especially since they are largely based on predictions and calculated risks:

i focus alot of my attention to mind games. where is the enemy jungler? where is their midlaner? where is their wards? where can i slip past for a roam mid? how wil the minions move? can i line a hook through the minions? and usually play scenarios in my head all the time.

Results clearly show how there is little to no personal talk between team mates, and at the same time assures the lengths of personal involvement that go into a ranked game of League. This may make the game seem more individualistic than the idea of a team of five would inspire. So what do the users communicate when actually talking to each other?

7.3.4. Going against the odds

After having set the ranked atmosphere and broke down some strategies, the interview turned to the way in which players dwell on small percentages of win rates. How do they play from behind the enemy team, when the ranked match has not been going great? The question was indirect in this sense, and rather asked the players to recall games that they may have turned around in their favour. Once again the respondents were very specific, with sometimes detailed accounts of how the game unfolded. This is surprising in light of the high number of games these players are estimated to play per week. This however argues for the unique character of each match, in spite of playing on the same map and by the same rules each time. If talking strategies resulted into passionate discourses on the topic, going into unlikely victories triggered the intensity of determination that most players display during these matches. Respondents vouched for the advantages of being a stubborn player, and the importance of never surrendering, no matter how grim the chances of victory may seem:

I never surrender (there are exceptions, like tilt) because I believe in my own ability

I'm that annoying kind of person, that just rarely presses YES in a surrender vote.

The sense of accomplishment and earned success in these cases is clearly worth the extra stress and focus for any devoted League player. It goes above a normal victory and makes for memorable moments for players:

There's always a rush of excitement when my team makes the pick, and then a flood of happiness and relief when we can claim their nexus as our own. Being invested in a game like this is super taxing!

You feel a great sensation of accomplishment in doing so. Which is something all humans strive after.

Another interesting aspect arose when the players expressed the joy of having turned games around, with the mention that their own skill must be a factor of this result. That is to say, players admitted that simply capitalizing on enemy mistakes is often how games are turned around, which sometimes may not be rewarding; if their own coordination with the team and decision-making plays an important part of this, they are left much more satisfied. Simply winning is not enough for most League players, and the journey seems to be the most important part.

Plenty of times, usually it happens when the enemy team makes a poor baron call and our team capitalizes on it. Usually I feel unsatisfied after these kind of games since I feel like the win can't be attributed to me playing well.

I've turned a lot of games around. That feeling is great. Specially when you know that you are the one who carried.

7.3.5. 'You take the Dragon, I will push bot' – strategic communication

As there has been established a clear connection between strategy and communication by analysing the chat logs, this part of the interview seeks to understand how exactly players prioritize their communicative purposes in cooperative play. The aim here is to gain complementary insight on the matter, from the League player's angle. In this vein, interviewees were asked about their general preferences when it comes to communication channels in League, their main purpose when it comes to sending messages across to their team mates, and finally their personal input on how the system can be improved.

Most of the respondents vouched for the effectiveness of the voice chats by using programs such as Skype or Discord, but pointed out that they mainly use them when playing with their premades. Players argued for the valuable time that can be saved by discussing a

strategy out loud instead of using the chat. On the same topic, several players proposed that a possible improvement would be an in-game voice chat, that would allow all members of the team to talk to one another without having to install other programs. However, they were aware of how this can lead to aggravating the case of toxicity and negative tendencies, and thus proposed a built-in mute option.

The ping system is especially appreciated by players, due to both precision and the possibility of avoiding typing and thus saving time. They agreed that a lot of information must be exchanged within a team and many times this is the best solution for them. Some of them would improve it by adding even more options to it.

The chat is the most commonly used, but not extensively: players are aware of the time it takes to type, and how vital even a few seconds can be in a League match. This is mainly the reason for so many abbreviations, as presented earlier in this chapter. Thus respondents predominantly agree that their main purpose is twofold: either exchange of information on strategy, such as objectives or possible plays, or feedback. It can be difficult to pay attention to everything that happens on the map, which is why some players make use of the chat to keep their team mates up to date with the status of their lane. In the same manner, chats are perfect for calls to action, and a good way for one member to try and mobilize the others:

Remind them what we need to do as a team and to not autopilot.

My main purpose is to either get my team to do objectives or to recognize them for doing something good, or to thank them for helping me out.

Keeping things civil, creating a positive attitude and communicate effectively.

The part about feedback is essential to point out, because despite the essential few seconds they lose, players still sacrifice them in order to tell a team mate that they have done well, or to thank them for their help. This shows why having a positive atmosphere can make so much difference, and that the good mood of a player can result in overall favourable outcomes

for their team. Communication is thus not only important for strategy, but for giving credit where credit is due and ideally receiving it back.

7.3.6. Game-talk or no talk.

Among the specifically game- and strategy-related questions, the players were asked whether they make use of the chat in order to communicate to their team-mates (or enemies) about anything else other than the game. The reasoning for this was to try and establish whether players are trying to build any sort of connection with one another, that could potentially influence the unfolding and outcome of the game in any manner. In this respect, however, every one of the respondents affirmed that there is no in-game talk about anything other than that. The extent to which any type of casual conversation may go is to try and create a good atmosphere by making some jokes. Even these, however, are in some way relate to League, such as an impressive skin or an amusing summoner name:

I rarely talk about other things than the game with random players, since I'll probably never meet them again and LoL community is really toxic.

In a ranked game, there isn't much room for that kind of chitchat. The desire to win a ranked game is greater than wanting to know more about a player who you might only see for 30 minutes.

Not really. Because I won't ever (probably) see them again in my life.

I've never asked anyone about their personal affairs in-game, it's all about the game.

The reasoning for this clearly varies to some extent – prioritizing the outcome of the game over familiarizing with team mates, the disappointment of having encountered numerous toxic players in the past or the limited amount of time at one's disposal. However, the overarching motif is precisely the temporary character of these teams. These players are aware that this community is not based on the popular World of Warcraft guilds for instance, but on constant change of team dynamics. It may indeed be all about the game.

However, the exception may prove the rule. Out of all respondents, there is one that shared the story of a long-term friendship built due to League of Legends, which proves that indeed the community can be a place to unite players for more than half an hour:

i've been playing duoQ with this dude from sweden, he's been my adc for 3 years. and we've become good friends. he'vetalkted to my friend group, i've talked to his friend group all cool guys. so a few months ago we decided to meet up irl. so i lived with him for a week and had a blast with him and his friends. and we all meet over league.

What made the friendship possible was the fact that the players became premade, that is kept playing ranked games together as a duo botlane. This means that their conversations went further than the in-game chat, and was initially based on the similar skill level, on the one hand, and on an amazing synergy between the two.

7.3.7. Saltiest place on Earth - League toxicity

As brought up in earlier sections, negative behaviour is a real issue that has to be discussed when it comes to communication and strategic interaction within a team. The case of temporary teams is precisely what causes this situation; knowing that it is highly unlikely to play with the same team ever again, members of temporary teams tend to be very aggressive towards their team mates when things do not work out as planned. In the multiple games that were analysed, negative behaviour can come up for a number of reasons: the frustration of not being able to face the enemy team at the desired performance, the lack of help or cooperation from the team, not seeing eye to eye with other team members when it comes to strategy, and so forth. Players were asked several questions regarding toxicity, with the aim of determining how affected they are by it, or if they ever engage in it themselves. The responses were especially well thought out, and clearly came out of numerous experiences with negative behaviour. The main finding from this is that indeed the slightest of negative influences in the team can have disastrous consequences for the match. Many teams can lose not because they are unskilled, neither due to their lack of strategic play, but simply because of the effect that one constantly negative person has on the other four. Capitalizing on one mistake does not solve it, but almost always leads to others in a domino effect:

it tilts people, and destroys healthy gameplay.

One of the factors in any team game or sport is morale. If you have that one guy that keeps impacting your own team's morale with blame, rage and denial, the team can't make their best decisions and can't fully focus

On a deeper level, this reveals the sense of perfectionism that players go into ranked games with, the idea that no mistake should be made by either members, and everyone should comply to a set of rules.

Another interesting point that can be drawn from this is that, even though players do not have the time to bond with their team mates, they are still emotionally invested in the game in other ways. This is clearly shown by the ways in which they react. Many of the respondents have mentioned 'tilt' as a main effect of negative behaviour. In League of Legends, and undoubtedly other MOBA games as well, 'tilt' or 'being tilted' refers to a player not being able to perform on a satisfactory level, because of a recent mistake that is taking a toll. The player is either angry or simply frustrated with their game play, to the point which their following actions will be affected negatively as well. This term is often used in professional poker, with very similar meaning, which stands to show once again the strategic complexity of the game. Although the respondents are clearly against flaming and fully aware of its negative effects for the outcome of the game, most of them admit to adopting a negative behaviour themselves, as a result of their teammates flaming to a point which can no longer be ignored:

I try to control myself. But, of course, I'm a human and I have emotions, which are quite hard to control at times

I do. I don't know why. I never start to flame, but after being flamed or seeing someone flame another, I tend to get into a defensive position and talk back. Instead of just ignoring them.

However, players also admitted that they can engage in flaming if they had a bad day, or a streak of losing games. This shows the other face of how much the general mood of the player

can influence the game, and how easy it sometimes it to forget that there are real people behind the screens, and not computer generated players.

7.4. Computer-generated feedback



Figure 15 – Statistics from OP.GG on user performance

The results of the interviews in fact called for a need of the ethnography to stress the importance of computer-generated feedback. There are several websites that calculate with high precision how a player has been performing in a given period of time. Based on this information, players can have a panoramic view of their results, and change or adapt their game play accordingly. How well are they performing on a champion? What roles seem to be more suitable for them? Whom have they won most games with? How are they doing as

compared to other players from their servers? These are some of the many complex issues that these websites address, within a matter of seconds. Figure 15 from above shows examples of how the player has been performing lately, and is taken from one of the most popular websites, “OP.GG”, which was mentioned by players in the interview. Very often, as the respondents have pointed out, these sites are used to run the equivalent of a background check on their teammates or opponents. The information extracted from there is very valuable, as it gives players a statistical account of how strong their enemies are likely to be, and they can in effect act on this knowledge. Additional excerpts from another reliable performance website, LolKing, can be found in Annex 3 of the Appendix.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

This study represents an extensive analysis on strangers teaming up temporarily online in order to solve complex tasks, by way of analyzing ranked teams in “League of Legends”; the focus when studying the teams was on their general characteristics, their communicative and strategic practices, as well as what might drive players to get actively involved in such games.

While the Results chapter had more of a reporting tone, and the analysis was conducted on each of the methods individually, this chapter aims to bring everything together. The questions it aims to clarify are as follows: What does each method bring in terms of results? How can the results be discussed in connection to the theoretical constructs that were earlier established? How does everything address the initial research questions? What were the limitations? Lastly, how does this study open possibilities for future studies?

8.1. Methods

As predicted earlier in the Methodology section, the two methods used for this study proved to be a favourable choice from the pool of possibilities that virtual ethnography offers. The complementary character for which they were selected was indeed confirmed by the quality of the results.

The relationship between the two methods is that the interviews explained more in-depth what the in-game chat simply shows. Many of the behaviours in the chat were rendered more complex by the interviewees, mainly because they humanize what is reported by the textual analysis. The latter shows accounts of intense conflict, of quick strategy, of very effective exchange of information. The chat logs undoubtedly offer relevant knowledge in the context of a virtual ethnography, by giving the researcher the possibility to track and analyse patterns in player behaviour during ranked games. However, is this information enough to understand temporary teams? Interviewees helped explain what causes the salty conflicts that the chat logs have shown on many occasions; they expand on what exactly is the value of taking the time to tell a team mate he did well or to suggest how they may improve. Conversely, it shines light on the issue of little to no casual conversation. Most of all, it helps to reflect on why players spend so much time doing this, and while textual analysis tells very much about how a team of five acts, interviews say more about how each individual in that team thinks. Finally, interviews reveal a passion and determination that could not stem in the same way from the chat logs.

This once more stands to validate the idea that virtual ethnography is much more than methods taken individually or at random, and that many times it implies going beyond the methods chosen. League of Legends ranked games make it undeniably difficult to assume the role of a researcher during the game, which is why I was first and foremost a dedicated player. This was important not only for ethnography, but to be able to effectively apply the methods: analysing the chat logs would not be as fruitful without a deep understanding of League, and connecting with other players through interviews would not have been as rewarding without knowing how to communicate to them on a player-to-player basis.

8.2. Research Questions: tying loose ends

By bringing together the communicative practices that players make use of during ranked games, conclusions can be drawn on the role of language in ranked games. If there is one strong resonance between what players say and what they do, it translates into this idea: language is a clear strategy facilitator, and this makes communication key in collaborative play.

Although language used in League of Legends can undoubtedly seem incorrect or simplistic from the outside, studying it as an active and involved player shows the exact opposite: how very complex and practical it is, in all of its forms. Moreover, it helps set a common communication channel across different countries and cultures, even if none of them have English as a native language. This strengthens Tom Chatfield's remark on online games: "games as interactive systems increasingly connect to the ways in which we work, communicate, plan and express ourselves" (Chatfield 2010)

So what is, then, the relationship between strategy and communication? The study concludes that, in the case of ranked games, communication and strategy are interdependent; this may seem unlikely, and raise the question of how communication can depend on strategy. Strategy most clearly cannot occur at a team level without some form of communication or another, because "successful play depends on consensus-building among the participants" (Neuenschwander 2008, 192), but as the results have shown, communication rarely does occur without the need to break down strategy in one way or the other. In this sense, they are very strongly determined by one another.

Where does this fall in the spectrum of Drachen's hypotheses on communicative purposes in online games? (2008) The empirical data concluded that functional and strategic purposes are the two dominant, and moreover strongly interrelated aspects of ranked game communication. So much so, that it is very difficult to differentiate between the two types: when players exchange information with their teammates for a functional purpose, it is most of the time a part of the higher strategic purpose of their game. The two are not delimited, but intertwined. What was least expected, however, was for the socializing function to not only be very reduced quantitatively, but very rarely present outside the context of the game. This is not expected when talking about mass multiplayer online games, and as the results have revealed, the rule is not without exceptions, but the reality is that ranked games leave little time for socializing functions, and that ranked players do not go out of their way to make any. This is clear both from the textual analysis and from the interviews. From the ethnographer's viewpoint, however, it is also completely understandable. The explanation for this is, in fact,

very much connected to both strategy and motivation: it connects to strategy because it is the main cause for the lack of socializing functions, and it connects to motivation because the ultimate goal in prioritizing strategy is to win.

This study shows the ability of people to adapt and self-govern within a given set of objectives and circumstances: to form a set of mechanics and strategies, to develop or adopt new language and communication patterns that maximize time and minimize effort, and to collaborate effectively towards the same goal. Moreover, it is impressive to see how players take it upon themselves to check their performance and trace the improvement or setback that they might have encountered without noticing. What the results have revealed about strangers solving complex issues together does in fact reveal a more individualistic direction that was initially expected. Although the teams are composed of five people, it is hard to ignore that prioritization of strategy is key in ranked games, conflicts can arise from the smallest of issues, and players are extremely keen on keeping up performance. This suggests that players value their own evolution more than anything else, and if this means solving a problem alongside four other strangers, then so be it. This particular fact explains even more effectively why players would rather play ranked games with an experienced stranger than with an average-skilled close friend. Although exceptions show that League of Legends can, as most MMO games, be an occasion for offline friendships, clearly the main aim is not connected to that. Players were not hesitant to admit that their friends can bring them down in terms of performance. This in fact is tied directly to the social strata that Taylor (2009, 32) theorized in connection to online games, and strengthens the idea that hierarchy is the strongest motivator. To further sustain this idea, empirical results showed a thought-provoking aspect: although they were not asked to reveal their favourite champions or roles, many of the respondents took it upon themselves to make a short presentation of about how skilled they are, what they play most, or even explain how they managed to get that high up the hierarchy ladder.

8.3. Limitations

What is relevant to note about “League of Legends” in relation game play is that what is applicable or correct today about the game may not be the same next year, nor even in a few

months. The reason for this is that Riot Games constantly adapt and add to the game, changes are constant within it, as new meta, new items, new champions and even new rules are implemented with every “patch”, known more commonly by users as an ‘update’. This, however, simply reveals and considers the very dynamic character of online games. This study focused less on game play and more on the dynamics of temporary teams and their strategic communication, as well as what drives players to engage in such teams.

Moreover, it is difficult to generalize any one concept related to League players as applicable to all, given the immense number of active players all over the world. This is natural when it comes to online games and communities, but it does not mean that so many of the customs and strategic practices are not known and shared across servers and cultures. While some aspects might be adapted in the future, the study reveals much about the way in which strangers collaborate towards solving complex tasks, and this is not something likely to change along with game play changes

8.4. Future studies

What collaborative play and strategic communication tells us about players does not only hold true for them as online players, but for them as people. This means that many traits of their behaviour can be applicable in other fields: “all gaming and internet use is social and culturally created and located, and will have implications and consequences beyond the online worlds and in games.”(Crawford 2013, 13)

With a psychological take on the matter, researchers can determine more accurately what drives players to keep motivated in playing with strangers, and what their ultimate, long-term goal is when playing ranked games. How can the motivation they have for video games be translated into practical, real-life tasks with higher stakes?

Another possible direction is that of expanding on game-based learning and the benefits it may have for players outside the online realm: how do the skills acquired during ranked games materialize in real-life endeavours? Connecting learning and games is not a new field, but connecting mass multiplayer games and learning still leaves room for research.

It goes without saying that a linguistic approach on the language developed by players for the purpose of strategic communication can be extremely rewarding for a researcher in this field. As this type of communicative improvisation is adopted (and adapted) by an impressive number of people, it bears striking similitude to the way pidgin and creole languages are formed. This could surely be a modern way to look at the matter.

In many ways, what Chatfield very well summarizes about video games is even more so applicable to League of Legends ranked games: “video games amplify particular human tendencies: our innate hunger for learning, our delight in solving problems and challenges, our sociability and rivalries, our pleasure in escaping the uncertainties of the world in more predictable rewards” (Chatfield 2010).

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10.Appendix

Annex 1. Interview questions and guidelines

General

1. State Summoner name and Server
2. State league/division
3. How long have you been playing League of Legends for?
4. How often do you play League of Legends?
5. Why do you prefer it over other games?
6. Why do you prefer solo/duo ranked over ranked flex?
7. In your opinion, what makes ranked games different from normal games?

On strategy and interaction

8. What means of communication do you prefer in-game? (e.g. chat, pings, skype, other)
9. Which do you believe is the most effective means of communication available to you while playing a ranked game? Why?
10. Tell me about your general play style (what's your rhythm, what do you prioritize, etc)
11. Is there any action you take to actively sustain team cooperation while in a ranked game?
12. In your experience, what is the key towards a ranked game victory?
13. Have you ever turned a game around, won it when you thought there was no way to win? How did that happen and how did you feel?
14. Do you use the in-game chat often?
15. What is the main purpose when addressing your team mates?
16. Do you talk to them in-game about things other than the game, as in their personal lives or how they are doing? Why?

On negative attitude and toxic behavior

17. Do you encounter negative attitudes often during ranked games?
18. How do you react to such attitudes?
19. How do you think they influence the game?

- 20. Can they be mended?
- 21. Do you find yourself engaging in the same behavior at times? Why?
- 22. Do you find the tribunal system effective? How so?

Outlook and personal views on possible changes

- 23. How would you personally improve League when it comes to communication within a team?
- 24. How would you personally improve the League tribunal system?

Annex 2. Interview response sample

1: Haruna - North America

2: Gold 5

3: I started playing League right after the Summoner's Rift visual update, so about 3 1/2 years

4: I play mostly on the weekends due to school. If I am free on weekdays, and some of my friends are online and willing to play, I will play during these times as well.

5: The only other types of games I play are rhythm games, which do not have much in terms of multiplayer capabilities. I value playing with my friends a lot.

6: I feel like flex queue is no different than a normal game. I almost always play flex queue as a premade of 5, so my group usually just treats it the same way.

7: In ranked games, people are trying their best to win. I see people in normal games trying out unusual builds, champions they don't usually play, or something similar to that. In ranked, players are trying to showcase the best that they have; to try and get to a rating that they think they deserve. You wouldn't see something like a five-jungler team in a ranked game. That would be something you would see in a normal game. It is interesting to note that the only real difference is the name of the queue! With sites like op.gg, you can roughly estimate the MMR of both teams in normal games, which is a good indicator of where you could belong in ranked.

8: I prefer voice communication, like Skype or Discord.

9: I believe a combination of voice comms and pings is the best way to communicate in ranked games. There is so much information to share in a game of League, which makes voice communication the only way to efficiently inform your team on what is going on around the map.

10: My two primary roles are mid lane and support. I play very proactively on both roles, trying to initiate teamfights and small skirmishes. In mid lane, I'm trying to get a lead through kills or by roaming and impacting the map. On support, I'm looking for opportunities to make plays, playing upfront and in the minions lines. On both roles, I will always prioritize towers and global objectives.

11: I never flame my teammates in chat. I might be yelling profanities onto my monitor, but it never comes into the game chat. I try to motivate them and compliment their plays instead. There's no point in breaking down your teammates; you both want to win.

12: I believe that team cooperation is the single greatest factor in winning games. There is no way you can win if your team isn't agreeing on what to do.

13: Yes! In games like this, it is usually a very one-sided stomp for the enemy team at first, but gradually becomes a closer game. These tight games have lasted for over an hour before, and have always been ended because of a pick on one or two members. It's always exciting to be in these games, because you don't know who is going to win anymore. There's always a rush of excitement when my team makes the pick, and then a flood of happiness and relief when we can claim their nexus as our own. Being invested in a game like this is super taxing!

14: No, only for games where I am not in a premade of 5. Even then, I will only really use the ingame chat to make jokes with either team.

15: I am always encouraging my team in chat. I don't flame, because it provides my team no extra chance in winning the game. I'm trying to win the game, and so are they. So, I compliment them on their plays instead!

16: Sometimes. In a normal game, I can take the time to make some jokes and get to know them a little bit. In a ranked game, there isn't much room for that kind of chitchat. The desire to win a ranked game is greater than wanting to know more about a player who you might only see for 30 minutes.

17: Yes, all the time.

18: I ignore it. After all, feeding fuel to the flame only makes it bigger. I don't have the energy to care much about a flamer.

19: They definitely make the morale of the team go down. When somebody is bashing another player for not performing well, that player typically does even worse afterwards, leading to more and more abuse. It's not good for anybody involved.

20: Everybody has the option to mute a player if they don't want to see their messages. I think that chat restrictions help with this attitude, but most of the time nothing changes at all. The type of people who will flame others on the internet are generally the people who believe they

are the best; "everybody needs to listen to me because you're all trash." They're the people who can't stop typing. I really think that it's a lost cause for most of them, and cannot be mended.

21: I do it all the time, actually. I believe that everybody does it, "Oh, this guy is so bad. Why did he think that was a good idea?" is probably something everybody has asked themselves during a League game. It happens! What's important to me is that I don't affect my team while doing so. I will never flame a teammate in chat.

22: I think that a lot of people are punished fairly by the tribunal system. Despite this, there are a lot of people who go unpunished, but do comparatively worse things like threatening to intentionally lose the game if they don't get their preferred role in champion select. The system could definitely be punishing these players too!

23: I think that voice communication is a little too much to ask for in League. Instead, I think that adding more pings could help communication a lot as well. Being able to ping that an area is warded, how much time left for a recall to finish, or even an estimate on how long it would take for you to reach an area based on your movement speed would be super useful. A lot of the time, pings are the only way to communicate in solo queue. Being able to convey this much information very quickly is really important.

24: I would try to allow reports in champion select if somebody is holding the lobby hostage. I've had several games where I have had to dodge to prevent somebody from just trolling due to not getting what they wanted. Being able to report in champion select would help out a lot when trying to eliminate negative behavior.

Annex 3. Excerpts from OP.GG and LoLKing

