

# 6

## Toxic Allies and Caring Friends: Social Systems and Behavioral Norms in *League of Legends* and *Guild Wars 2*

MAUDE BONENFANT, LAURA ISEUT LAFRANCE  
ST-MARTIN, FÉLIX PRÉGENT, AND LUCILE CRÉMIER

### 6.1 Introduction

Video games offer diverse gaming experiences (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008; Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Ensslin & Muse, 2011; Pearce & Artesmesia, 2009; Sicart, 2009; Taylor, 2006, among others). Far from being neutral, these technological platforms are sociotechnical apparatuses that shape social interactions through the institution of relationships of power (Foucault, 1976, 2001 [1971]). Based on the approach of soft technological determinism (Chandler, 1995; Smith & Marx, 1994), we suggest that online video games not only influence players' experience within the apparatus, but also inform the production of collective identities, as each game elaborates a specific form of video game community through which players recognize each other, communicate, and normalize behaviors and social practices. In other words, video games are contexts in which social systems develop through behavioral norms, that is to say, "standard[s] of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity" (Finomore & Sikkink, 1998).

While the online gaming community of *Guild Wars 2* (GW2) (ArenaNet, 2012) is reputed to be "welcoming, respectful and peaceful," the *League of Legends* (LoL) (Riot Games, 2009) community is instead viewed as being "toxic, competitive and harsh." We argue that structural parameters within each game may allow, encourage, or prevent certain behaviors, and therefore participate in the production of identities and social norms that reproduce game-specific behavioral patterns. More precisely, some elements of both game design and gameplay mechanics may encourage either self-interest (LoL) or sharing (GW2), which informs players' socialization practices. While the reasons why these two games were selected will be explained in the first section of this chapter, we would like to insist on the goals of this research. Indeed, we undertook two distinct case studies, using the same set of methodological tools

and the same theoretical perspective, in order to expose observable similarities in our results rather than proceed to a comparative analysis. In other words, if the two games are in many ways diametrically opposed, our objective was to highlight their significant intersections and the existing parallels between them. This approach provides crucial insights into the direct effects of game design choices on communicational and social practices in video game communities. In this way, this does not constitute game analysis in its strictest sense, but rather an analysis of gaming communities from the consideration of the effects that the game platform has on social relationships.

Some researchers have studied GW2 (Scott, 2012) and LoL (Kou, 2014; Kou & Gui, 2014; Kwak & Blackburn, 2014) in the past, yet only few works look into these two highly popular games. Therefore, this chapter presents the results of our analysis of the production of social norms within these two games' communities of players based on a semiotic study of their main organizing principles. To identify how the two communities differ, we exhaustively describe signs and sign systems that constitute the two interfaces as well as the representations and features that further or impede specific actions in-game. We propose that analyzing in-game social attitudes implies observing the specific features, tools, and mechanics from which they emerge, such as the modes of avatar selection, the abilities and complementarity of avatars, the modes of group formation, the stability or instability of groups, the modes of communication, the sharing of rewards, the relationship to competition, the types of relationships between players, and the types of sanctions. Subsequently, we highlight the ways in which social dynamics are performed and normalized in each video game.

In addition to the semiotic study of the production of signification resulting from the interaction of players with game platforms, we analyze both video games' vocabulary, as well as the discourses used in the two companies' official documents. Semistructured interviews with GW2 and LoL players, whether they frequently play one or both games, come to complement our research. Players' gaming experience are taken into account so that we may not only identify how game design affects social relationships, but also observe how the community's culture is coconstructed within this environment.

We will first introduce our conceptual approach and the methodology of this research. We will then go through the main results of our research, which successively look at learning curves, expectations toward players, collective and personal goals, perceptions of competition and metrics, the intensity of playing practices, consequences of players' actions on other players, the management of toxic behaviors, stability in social relationships, and modes of communication. The structure of this chapter follows a typical player's progression

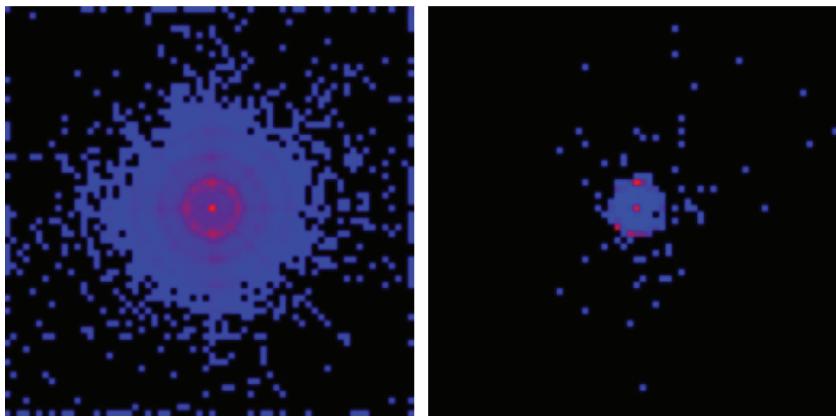


Figure 1.3 Step entropy histograms for two players: (left) higher entropy, (right) lower entropy.

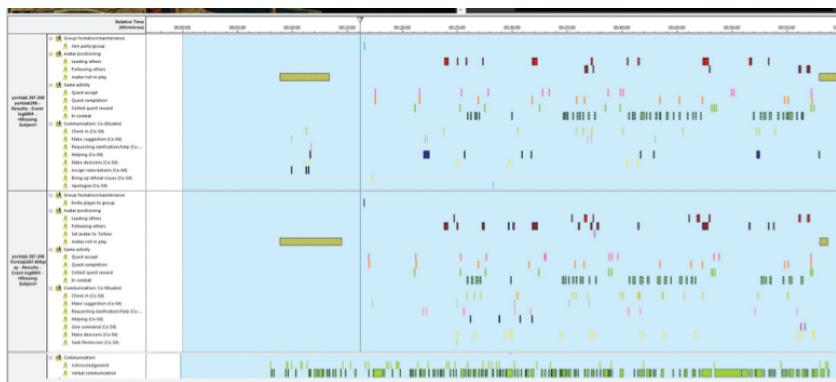


Figure 7.1 Leadership-related communication for Sfulab207 and Sfulab208.



Figure 8.1 The virtual world of *Travian*.

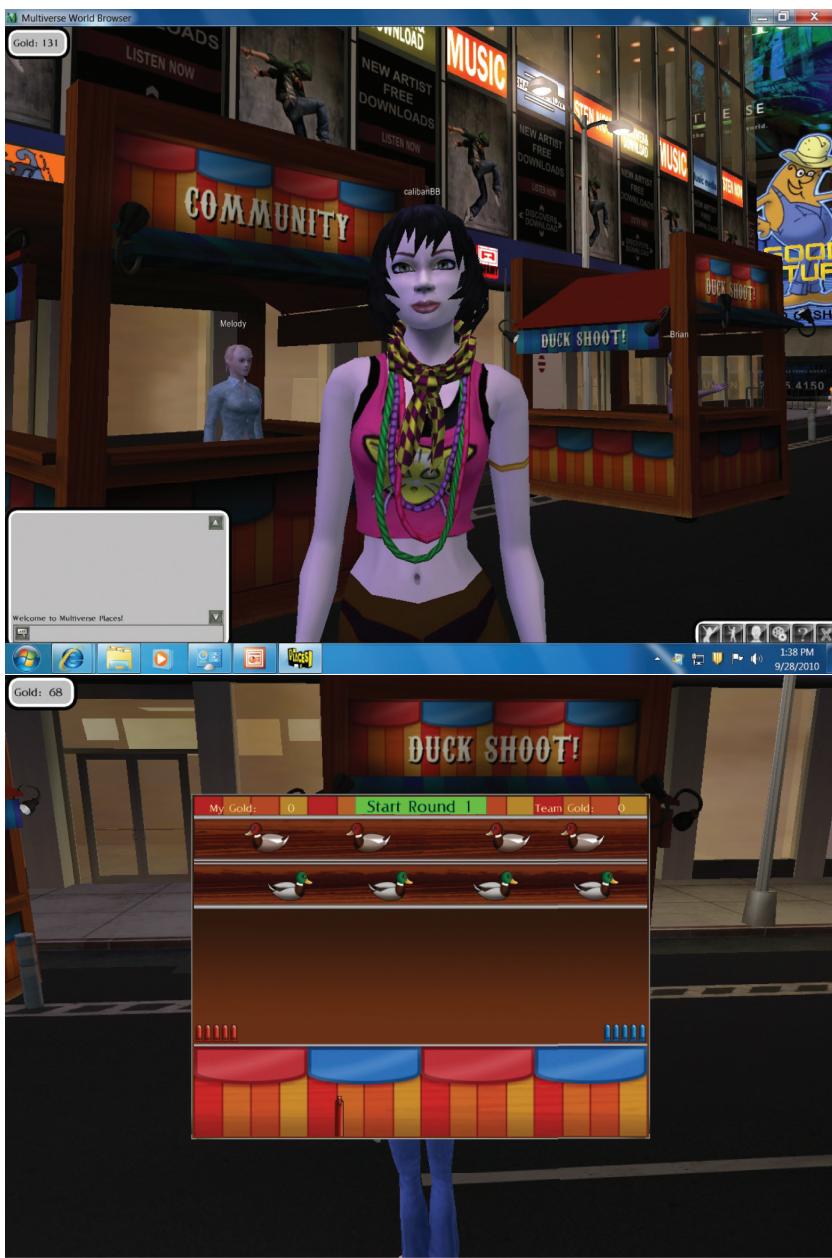


Figure 9.3 The virtual funfair *Sherwood* (top) and the pop-up Duck Shoot interface (bottom).



Figure 10.1 A cluster of buildings constructed by players at a Nile crossing point.

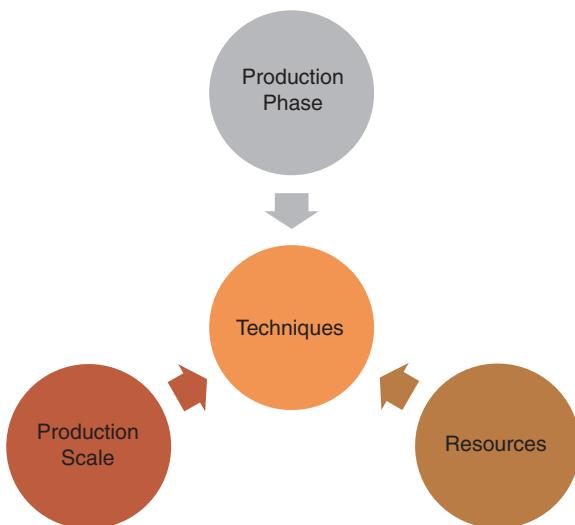
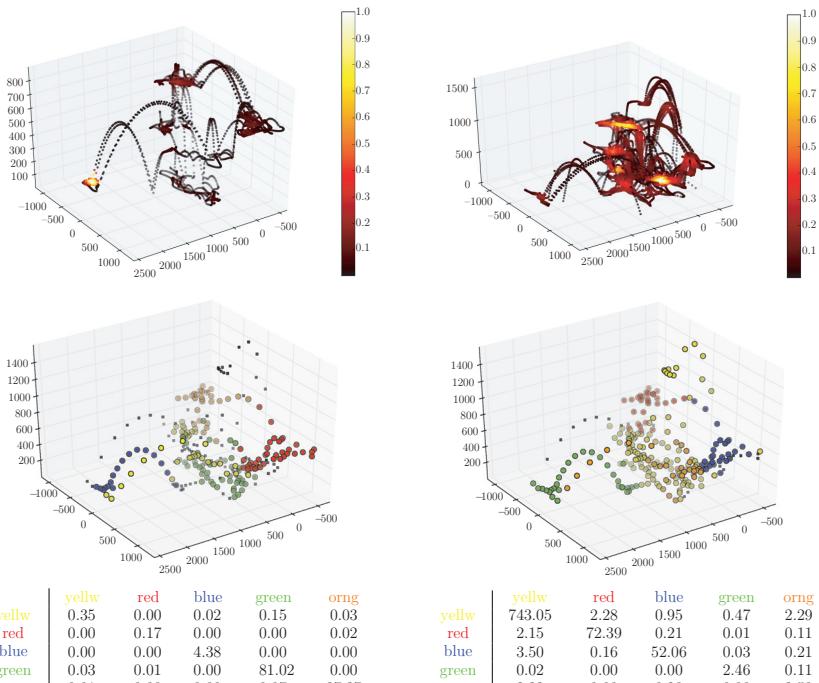


Figure 13.1 The techniques available for behavioral profiling in games rest on a variety of factors, notably: (1) the active production phase of a game, which determines what kinds of data are available; (2) the production scale, which determines the variety of data available, from a few key features to hundreds or more; and (3) the overall level of resources dedicated to analytics in the company and the active production.



(a) a “camper” player

(b) a semi professional “mover” player

Figure 13.5 Comparative analysis (derived from Bauckhage et al. (2014)) of movements of two different players on the *Quake III* map *q3dm17*. From top to bottom, each part of the figure respectively illustrates a heatmap indicating the frequently visited areas on the map, waypoints (in black) and DESICOM clusters (shown in color), and, finally, automatically determined affinities between the identified clusters.

in gaming practice. First, we focus on players' learning processes from their first gaming session to intensive practice. Second, we describe the key types of in-game social relationships. Third, we examine the ways in which practice is maintained through social groups and modes of communication. To conclude the chapter, we present a synthesis of our main arguments and offer some food for thought regarding our thesis that soft technological determinism does not entirely condition the development of video game communities, as appropriative and subversive practices remain central to the evolution of gaming practices.

## 6.2 Background: Semiotic Approach and Soft Technological Determinism

According to a semiotic approach to research, human beings are surrounded and immersed in signs that they interpret through the endless process of semiosis (sign-making). In that sense, reality is always already mediated by representations that shape the world in which humans socialize and form a sense of individual and collective identity. Although individual and social representations are organized in different ways and through different media, they always result from a process of interpretation that unfolds through a variety of human and technical productions. Human productions are effects of a cultural, ideological, institutional, and normative context, but they also elaborate their own cultural, ideological, institutional, and normative content. Studying the interactions between semiotic objects' conditions of production (engendering) and conditions of reception (recognition) forms part of the sociosemiotic approach to research, in which processes of signification are analyzed through the lens of specific human productions considered in their social context (Cobley & Randvir, 2009; Landowski, 1993; Veron, 1987).

One kind of human production that has been largely addressed by the literature is technology, which has transformed our societies since the emergence of language and tools (Leroi-Gourhan, 1964, 1965). Indeed, many important authors have shown the scope of technology's influence on human becoming as well as human activity's increasing subordination to technological processes (Ellul, 1954; Mumford, 1967, 1970; Simondon, 1958; Stiegler, 1994, 1996, 2001). Yet, some thinkers have argued that individuals may develop transformative strategies that circumvent, subvert, and defy hegemonic technological practices, thus changing power dynamics between humans and technology (De Certeau, 1980; Maigret, 2003). In that sense, while it shapes the world we live in and affects both individuals and societies in many ways, one must keep in

mind that technology is elaborated by individuals acting as socialized subjects, that is to say, within the context of a given society's norms and customs.

Asserting technology's role as a mode of human production and a means of social reproduction and taking the context of emergence and use of technology into account while analyzing specific case studies characterizes the soft technological determinism approach. Bearing in mind the numerous critiques raised against technological determinism, one may argue that soft determinism does not presuppose that an ineluctable force imposes its rule on the whole of humanity – upholding technology as a primary catalyst of social and cultural change – but rather asserts that technology's tangible effects on humans can be studied within a social context: "Instead of treating 'technology' *per se* as the locus of historical agency, the soft determinists locate it in a far more various and complex social, economic, political, and cultural matrix" (Smith & Marx, 1994, p. xiii). Chandler (1995) refines this idea while arguing that

[t]echnology is one of a number of mediating factors in human behaviour and social change, which both acts on and is acted on by other phenomena. Being critical of technological determinism is not to discount the importance of the fact that the technical features of different communication technologies facilitate different kinds of use, though the potential applications of technologies are not necessarily realized.<sup>1</sup>

Within this context and according to our sociosemiotic approach, soft technological determinism considers the development and use of technology as a site for relationships of power to unfold and produce social norms that will in turn reinforce or transform power dynamics (Foucault, 1971, 1976). As argued earlier, we consider technology as the effect of a cultural, ideological, institutional, and normative context, but we also acknowledge that it engenders cultural, ideological, and institutional content as well as social norms. "The important task [for the researcher] becomes . . . evaluating the material and social infrastructures specific technologies create for our life's activity" (Winner, 1986, p. 55). In that sense, we chose to study two online video games as technological artefacts, in order to highlight not only their impacts on their respective video game communities but also the development of specific cultural practices on each one of these digital platforms.

To this end, we adopt Charles Sanders Peirce's approach to the sign and its model, in which the sign is understood by means of its referential function. According to the pragmaticist and philosopher, the sign is defined as a relation between (1) a representamen, that is, how the sign appears to the senses, (2) an object, which is the thing being referred to as it is in the world and to the

<sup>1</sup> <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/tecdet/tdet13.html> (accessed July 11, 2016).

mind, and (3) an interpretant, which is the (logical, kinetic, etc.) effect of the relation between representamen and object, that is to say, its contingent and specific signification. An interpretant is an always-already partial and circumstantial result of an interpretative process through which a particular mind (the interpreter) produces a relation among what it perceives, the object of that perception, and a resulting meaning or action. The stabilization of an interpretant implies that the sign's meaning has become a semiotic habit, that is to say, a habit of signification: "... what a thing means is simply what habits it involves" (Peirce, 1878, p. 131). More precisely:

... the identity of a habit depends on when and how it might lead us to act, not merely under such circumstances as are likely to arise, but under such as might possibly occur, no matter how improbable they may be. What the habit is depends on *when* and *how* it causes us to act. As for the *when*, every stimulus to action is derived from perception; as for the *how*, every purpose of action is to produce some sensible result. Thus, we come down to what is tangible and practical, as the root of every real distinction of thought, no matter how subtle it may be; and there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. (Peirce 1878, p. 131)

Thus, as semioticians, our task is to characterize video game players' different practices, based on an analysis of the semiotic habits that emerge from sign-making processes. In other words, we start from what is perceived by players in order to make inferences about the establishment of specific interpretants, which allows us to deduce semiotic habits as well as the practices they entail, depending on pragmatic contexts of interpretation. To ensure the credibility of such an approach, researchers must collect a significant corpus of signs that strengthen their analyses: the more "examples" there are, the more solid their "argument" will be. To this end, they can count on a number of semiotic tools (typologies of signs, levels of interpretation, sign-making models, etc.) that are rigorously organized, for instance, in analysis grids to be systematically filled in.

The rigorous character of this semiotic approach secures the validity of the analyses and interpretations that it yields. Indeed, this approach to the production of knowledge means that one researcher alone can produce accurate analyses. While this could be seen as a weakness of the semiotic approach, collaborative work and the cross-referencing of results can minimize the biases intrinsic to individual research, as intersubjectivity fosters a sense of objectivity. In that sense, reception analysis or audience-focused studies (i.e., research based on the inquiry into a set of interpreters via questionnaires, interviews, etc.) are not necessary to establish the validity of semiotic research. Hybrid research methods that articulate both reception-focused and meaning production-focused

studies remain possible, which can serve to validate semiotic observations or enrich findings with other information sources.

### 6.3 Case Studies

As mentioned earlier, our two case studies were independently selected, and we do not aim to compare them in any systematic way. Rather, our choice was informed by a focus on the degree of clarity with which the community's identity is defined, so as to be able to highlight sign systems that inform that community's semiotic habits and resulting practices. Several criteria structured our choice of case studies. First of all, we considered the reputation of individual games' communities, and the nature and tone of in-game exchanges between players. Second, we sought two cases in which players have the possibility to interact via avatars and communicate through chats. Moreover, case studies had to be both popular and recent enough to gather a significant number of players in stable online gaming communities with established and recognized characteristics. Finally, selected games had to provide players with the opportunity to play with new players at all times, through ad hoc temporary groups, for instance. These criteria influenced our choice of *League of Legends*, which was developed by Riot Games and released in 2009, and *Guild Wars 2*, developed by ArenaNet and released in 2012. According to the companies' official statistics, the former gathered a community of 67 million players in 2014<sup>2</sup> while the latter had sold 3.5 million copies one year after its release, in 2013.<sup>3</sup>

The *League of Legends* (LoL) community quickly became reputed for demonstrating toxic and harsh behaviors as well as making widespread use of slurs and insults. Meanwhile, the *Guild Wars 2* (GW2) community acquired a positive reputation for its friendliness and its welcoming and helpful attitude toward newcomers.

[LoL] is a really weird community. High levels are thoroughly encouraged. You have to follow better players everywhere. If you don't play well enough, you can really get into deep trouble. In *Guild Wars 2*, there's more of a feeling of "let's help the community". In *League*, I think everything is highly capitalist. In the end, it's just "every one for themselves", may the best player win. And if others slow you down, it's their problem and it's their fault, ok?" (LG03\_M\_18<sup>4</sup>)

<sup>2</sup> [www.riotgames.com/articles/20140711/1322/league-players-reach-new-heights-2014](http://www.riotgames.com/articles/20140711/1322/league-players-reach-new-heights-2014) (accessed July 11, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> [www.guildwars2.com/en/news/guild-wars-2-the-first-year/](http://www.guildwars2.com/en/news/guild-wars-2-the-first-year/) (accessed July 11, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms are codified as follows: game(s) played interviewee number\_sex\_age. *League of Legends* is abbreviated as "LG" and *Guild Wars 2* as "GW".

While some of the players we interviewed play both games regularly and adopt an either toxic or friendly attitude depending on the game, one may ask the following question: How do specific signifying practices encourage toxic or friendly behaviors in these two communities?

At first glance, the difference in type between the two games could seem to answer that question. While LoL is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA), GW2 is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). On the one hand, LoL is mechanic driven. It consists in a fighting arena in which two five-player teams cooperate with and confront each other in order to destroy the enemy base. Players perform as individual avatars called “champions.” On the other hand, GW2 is lore driven. Different types of individual or group activities are proposed around the elaboration of avatars in a persistent world, such as accomplishing goals through events,<sup>5</sup> exercising professions, doing dungeons, exploring the lore, etc. One could infer that LoL attracts primarily gamers who are used to first-person shooters (FPS) while GW2 massively appeals to role players. If our analysis of the two video game communities explains many but not all of their differences, then it offers only a partial answer to our question. Indeed, some MOBAs such as *Heroes of the Storm* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015) present welcoming environments, while certain MMORPG communities can be aggressive, as the case of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) shows. In that sense, if game types and target audiences are decisive factors in the making of video game communities, they certainly do not account for the social discrepancy between the so-called “toxic” LoL community and its purportedly “welcoming” counterpart that is the GW2 community. Therefore, game type was not a significant criterion in the selection of our two case studies, and we preferred to focus specifically on empirically observable social dynamics and gaming atmospheres.

#### 6.4 Methodological Considerations

In order to diversify the approach to our question, we collected data following specific protocols across a 12-month time period (autumn 2014–summer 2015). Although our work is based on a semiotic approach, we gathered data that we proceeded to encode in an observation table (color, shape, location, size, function, etc. of observed signs) before codifying them in an analysis grid based on such criteria as the Peircean typology of signs (icons, indexes, symbols,

<sup>5</sup> “Events” are relatively small-scale quests. Reaching an objective gives all participating players rewards and experience points (xp).

etc.), the level of analysis (syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, etc.), and the semiotic paradigm being used (linguistic, rhetorical, semiopragmatic, sociosemiotic, etc.). Elements or documents that were considered as data are screenshots of gaming interfaces (all windows, features, tools, and main gaming experiences), screenshots of the games' official websites and forums, as well as official documents produced by the companies (websites, legal documents, ads, conferences). We focused on the organization of visual signs, on the presence or absence of features and tools, game mechanics, vocabulary and lexical fields used, etc. We also mapped the main websites on which players in the two video game communities can be seen.

To complete our observations and analyses, we organized 30- to 60 minute-long semistructured interviews with adult players (19–37 years old), most of whom were men (16 out of 18). Six subjects only played GW2 and another six only played LoL; the remaining six were well acquainted with both games. This stratified sample consisted of a homogeneous group of adults who speak French or English, who live in Quebec, and who have been playing for more than one year and practice at least five hours per week. A random sample was then drawn from that original sample. This random sample is obviously not likely to be representative of all players' opinions or illustrate the games' respective communities in a comprehensive way and hence cannot be generalized. However, we considered only one specific type of player and interviewed relatively few players because this kind of data collection was not our main source of information. Indeed, according to the semiotic approach described earlier, which we adopted in this study, reception analysis is not necessary to ensure the credibility of results. In that sense, we merely wanted to complement our observations with players' own opinions and voices at the end of the data collection stage. We wanted to hear from players about their perceptions of the games and their experiences, preferences, and critiques, as well as what they thought of their community's culture. Against the objectifying tendency of the semiotic approach, semistructured interviews made space for subjective interpretations of gaming experiences. Furthermore, data collection and interviews were facilitated by our research team's extensive experience with both games.

Finally, it should be mentioned that this research looks only at behaviors that are generally prescribed by the apparatus and its culture, that is to say, the "normalized" use of the two gaming platforms. Indeed, according to our soft technological determinist approach, subversive and deviant behaviors that transgress established norms, be it on a smaller or larger scale, always remain possible. Playing exclusively with friends, for instance, is one way in which one can have a fundamentally different gaming experience. However, within

the scope of this chapter, only mainstream behaviors are discussed; we will not be extensively addressing transgressive behaviors. For the purpose of clarity and legibility, we also bypass a number of details and nuances. Furthermore, one must highlight that we do not aim to make any value judgments about either of the games under study. We do not claim, for instance, that GW2 is a “better game” than LoL. We believe that the value of any game experience depends on players’ motivations. One cannot assess the ethical value of a game based solely on whether a game rewards behaviors driven by the principle of mutual aid (GW2), or promotes individualistic attitudes (LoL). All in all, we rather aim to show that while social experiences offered in each game vary greatly, such variety responds to different desires in terms of gaming experience.

## 6.5 Summary of Results

### 6.5.1 Learning Curves and Mutual Expectations among Players

To structure the presentation of our results, we follow players’ progression in a game, starting with his or her learning of the game’s fundamental rules, after being introduced to a game. On the one hand, our analysis reveals that GW2’s soft learning curve is one of the main reasons for the community’s welcoming attitude. Indeed, up to level 20, the game consists of a tutorial through which players are progressively introduced to different modes and activities. New elements are added to players’ interfaces along the way, allowing them to steadily adapt to new gameplay features. Each new element (all new instances, mini-games, etc.) are explained by blocks of text. In this way, players progressively come to understand what is expected of them. Given the explicit presentation of information, the game effectively looks after a large part of players’ learning process.

On the other hand, since its release, LoL has offered a tutorial to new players. The tutorial was improved in 2010 with the addition of battle training, which explains the game’s basic principles, from minions, objectives, and champions to items and the importance of rounds. It was enhanced in 2011, and once again in 2012 with the *Coop vs AI* mode. In spite of these improvements to the original version, space for in-game learning is rather limited. Few strategies are taught and the tutorial does not reflect an actual experience of the game’s competitive mode. Indeed, the gameplay is much more complex than what is revealed in the tutorial, and simulations differ greatly from games with real players. The gap between simulated practice and “real” games makes for a steep learning curve for new players, especially considering that metagaming is not taught in the tutorial.

Metagaming designates the norms and strategies that dictate the way in which players should navigate through the game. Although it is entirely defined by players, it can seem arbitrary. Yet, metagaming rules are highly elaborated, as their function is to optimize the efficacy of champions' actions and team efficiency during games. For instance, in a five-player team, there is always a tank/bruiser in the top lane, an apcarry in the midlane, an adcarry and support couple in the bottom lane, and a player in the jungle.<sup>6</sup> Any changes in the established organization of players' roles and champion types on the map can lead to the team's defeat. All advanced players expect others to master these implicit rules defined by the metagame system. However, a champion could be assigned a top role by Riot Games even if players judged that he or she would be more useful as support based on experience. Once he or she becomes support, that player is expected to take a combination of support-related items, the knowledge of which is also implicit in the metagame system. Players must learn those numerous and highly specific rules in advance, either by playing with the help of a more experienced friend, or by finding the information on external platforms such as wikis and forums, which are most often very well developed. It is the player's responsibility to seek the information on these platforms, especially regarding their player's builds, which are often complex. While everyone takes for granted that all players study gameplay mechanics on their own, players will rarely help each other in-game, and conflicts can emerge from a player's failure to optimize his or her build. Within this context, mutual expectations among (both new and experienced) players are very high, and it seems that players must know how to play well before they even start actually playing the game.

This phenomenon is all the more evident given that more experienced players can invest lower level categories, thus complicating new players' integration in LoL. While these "smurfs" are much more efficient in lower level categories, they may throw the gameplay off balance and put pressure on new players.

<sup>6</sup> The tank/bruiser is a powerful champion (thanks to a great quantity of life points or strong armors or both). He is usually placed at the top of the map. His main goal is to initiate fights thanks to his crowd control abilities, as well as protect the top lane and perform split pushes (i.e., destroy another line while adversaries are not trying to kill him). He is also a significant target for the team's opponents. Tanks and bruisers are mostly alike; however, if a bruiser performs too well too fast, he can become the team's main engine (carry).

The adcarry (attack damage carry) is a champion whose goal is to deal high amounts of sustained damage with regular attacks.

The apcarry (ability power carry) is typically a mage whose goal is to quickly inflict important damage (burst damage) to the team's opponents.

The support's goal is to protect the adcarry while giving him bonus points and kills. He may also support the whole team while healing teammates and incapacitating adversaries.

The jungle occasionally supports other champions in the team while carrying out surprise attacks.

There's actually a lot of smurfing, so if you're a newcomer, you're not going to feel welcomed. Increasingly, you'll be seeing fewer and fewer new players. Like if you try to start playing LoL, you realize right away that many high level players create new accounts either because their original one was banned or because they're tired of playing at their level, as they don't find themselves good enough. They just want to get that feeling of victory so they create another account at a lower level. And that doesn't make for a pleasant atmosphere, as you never get the impression that you're making progress in *League of Legends*. (GWLG05\_M\_24)

This added difficulty in the learning curve is not compensated by any help feature: no in-game structure allows players who are new to the game or ignorant of some information to find help. In other words, in LoL, the elaboration of collective representations and the acquisition of semiotic habits is not performed *in-game*, as many rules and norms (the game mechanics and metagaming) have to be learned elsewhere.

In contrast, mutual help features and tools are numerous in GW2, the first of which is the “Looking for group” feature that allows players to not only ask for but also offer help. While some guilds give tutorials for new players within their group, guild structures also offer great support (as we show in the text that follows). Moreover, features such as guild inventories incite players in each guild to drop and take items or currency at will according to their needs and possessions. This promotes sharing within the community as well as a collaborative early experience for new players, as they get access to common inventories only three days after admission in the guild.

The sharing of loot, experience points, and resources through duplication is another feature of gameplay mechanics that encourages mutual aid. Instead of being equally or unequally distributed among players, resources and rewards are simply duplicated for all players who participated in a fight or gathered items.<sup>7</sup> Hence, players do not compete for resources and rewards, and the number of players involved in an action does not negatively impact their chances of amassing loot and resources. In addition, difficulty levels are always proportional, as the level of avatars to attack varies according to the number of involved players. The more players there are in a group, the harder it will be to kill a “monster,” and the higher the quality of rewards. From the perspective of gameplay mechanics, playing as a team does not present any disadvantage and can even be advantageous as far as rewards are concerned.

Likewise, in GW2, the level of players’ avatars depends on region levels, that is to say, that whatever a player’s level, his or her power can be adjusted

<sup>7</sup> Duplication does not function as identical copy but rather depends on randomized attribution, that is to say, that all players may access rewards or resources, the value or quantity of which is randomized at any time for each player.

by the game system (and most often brought down) according to the general level in a given zone. Therefore, power leveling does not impact other players and new players can be as powerful as others in a specific zone, which makes their integration and learning experience easier and favors more convivial gaming practices. Also, in player versus player (PvP) mode, all players have similar stats and may access identical weapons and armors: this makes overpower impossible and facilitates a balance in gameplay.

The peculiar relationship to random elements and randoming also illustrates the absence of overpower in GW2. Indeed, all skills have a large range of efficiency: exact calculations of damage, for instance, are more difficult because there can be an up to a 200-point difference in range at any given time, that is, an 18% difference (between 900 and 1,100 damage points). Therefore, it is difficult to entirely predict and optimize one's performance, as part of it is left to chance. As a portion of the outcomes is out of players' control, individual responsibility is somehow minimized in case of failure on the part of players.

In contrast, LoL seeks to minimize random factors so that all parameters may be calibrated and measured. This complete absence of random elements, except for critical chance that remains random, partly explains the positive valuation of optimization. Indeed, the community puts great emphasis on optimal builds as well as complex and accurate calculations. In an environment where all game mechanics are, in theory, under players' complete control, players are made responsible for optimizing their performances. This sense of individual responsibility is one of the main triggers for conflict and disrespectful dynamics between players (slurs, insults), whatever their level of experience with the game.

### 6.5.2 Collective and Personal Goals

The dynamics of individual or shared responsibility are also manifest in the games' objectives. Whereas goals are mainly individual in LoL, they are collective in GW2. First of all, it should be noted that GW2 offers numerous objectives, a great diversity of experiences, and a large game space. Even if it is possible to play alone in some cases, most activities require teamwork, which means that individual players' actions are often motivated by common objectives that guide the whole group. Moreover, common objectives are actually defined while groups are being set up, which promotes social cohesion within groups. In addition, as argued earlier, collective actions are encouraged as resources or rewards are obtained through duplication rather than (equitable or inequitable) division among players. All players involved in a fight randomly receive rewards after it ends.

Furthermore, in player versus environment (PvE) mode, giving life to other players is rewarded, as resuscitating an avatar (rez) gives experience points. In this way, players have a direct personal interest in helping other players during fights, whether they are strangers or friends: not only do they all receive rewards, but also no part of the operation deprives any player of his or her rewards. Such mechanics effectively prevent unpleasant behaviors such as kills theft (striking the final stroke in order to obtain rewards), “camping” (hiding during a fight so as to come out only for the final shot and collect rewards) and “ninja looting” (stealing a resource from a player while he or she fights near that resource).

If, in LoL, the main goal (winning the fight) is common to all players involved in a team, many subobjectives or more global objectives are individual, which encourages an individualistic outlook in-game. Indeed, objectives are shaped by a limited game space and repetitive patterns in gameplay. This repetitive structure allows players to perfect their abilities round after round, and players’ progress is reflected in the game’s ranking system. Whether or not one plays in ranked mode, the matching system is based on rank (match making rating). The exact Elo system, which is a normalized mode of ranking used in chess, for instance, is not made available to players. Yet, it is based entirely on a specific ratio between games won, games played, defeated players’ strength, and other factors. The matchmaking rating is a modified version of the Elo. It is based on the same system of point attribution, but it also considers whether players play alone or in teams.

This ranking system means that players are in constant competition against each other. However, players do not value all games equally: one game might be simultaneously crucial for one or two players and ordinary for others. This is especially the case for “promo” games, in which players attempt to go from one rank to another. They must obtain a 2 out of 3 or a 3 out of 5. If they fail, they will be sanctioned and will lose a few ranking points. This discrepancy between players’ perceptions of the stakes in a given game constitutes another source of conflict. Indeed, some players might put pressure on others in the team given the importance of that game for their individual progression, while others might be rather detached; this situation can be frustrating for both parties.

In addition, resources are unequally shared among players, as each player accumulates his or her own rewards. This means that individual goals in LoL can become greatly dissimilar, if not incompatible. For instance, even if all players receive rewards after attacking the tower, the baron, and the dragon, the player who reaches the objective will obtain the most rewards. As far as kills are concerned, experience is shared among all players, yet assists receive between 0 and 150 points while the player who performs the kill receives around

300 points depending on several factors, such as first blood. Kills are extremely important in quantifying performances, so that the imbalance in reward points motivates kill “thefts,” which are even more obvious when smurfs take advantage of less experienced players’ lower performance level. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the snowball effect, in which all actions have repercussions for the duration of the game and come one after the other in an exponential way. This means that the more a player wins, the more powerful he or she becomes, and vice versa. Finally, although specific items allow some champions to heal, players cannot resuscitate (rez) each other and all players must deal with the penalties resulting from their avatar’s death on their own.

### 6.5.3 Relationship to Competition and Metrics

If, at first glance, all five players in an LoL team seem to share a similar objective, that is, to coordinate the roles of each champion in order to destroy the opponent’s base, other goals transcend each particular game, such as the optimization of one’s position in the ranking system. This keeps players in competition against each other, inciting them to navigate gameplay mechanics with their self-interest rather than the group’s collective interest in mind. Other personal objectives in the game can also justify an individualistic attitude, which can easily create imbalances in teamwork efforts. In contrast, although all players remain relatively equal in GW2, they are encouraged to help each other through gameplay mechanics that reward teamwork. So, they may compete only against themselves. Therefore, players have an interest in collaborating throughout their progress in the game.

These two very different ways of framing competitiveness and competition, be it against oneself or against others, are also revealed by the games’ use of qualitative and quantitative representations. Indeed, while it greatly reduces the importance of metrics, GW2 prioritizes a qualitative relationship to the game, which is unusual in MMORPGs. Players cannot access any statistics regarding their performances and the effects of one’s build are not clearly identified; hence, it is difficult to significantly optimize one’s avatar. Likewise, there are no statistics regarding other players’ abilities, builds, or profiles. This means that players must trust each other on what they claim about their build in order to ensure balance and cohesion within the team.

What is the specificity of GW2? I would say that what really struck me is the lack—the absence of competition between players. This community is more interesting because, in WoW, everything you do is measured, and it’s the same in League: the kills you do, the gold you amass, your creep score . . . everything is displayed. If you’re low on something, people will come and mess with you. In GW2, there’s no

damage meter, nothing like that . . . You don't know whether you're good; you don't even know who's good. Obviously, you notice that when you see someone strike, you see if they inflict damage or keep dying, but there really isn't a metric to measure that" (GWLG02\_M\_32)

Unlike many games of its type, GW2 does not make weapons and armors identifiable status symbols, that is to say that the "quality" of a player's stock is not necessarily indicative of a player's level. Weapons and armors are not necessarily linked to any statistics and only serve an aesthetic purpose. Incidentally, endgame stock is relatively easy to obtain through crafting, for instance. Players "dress" their avatars according to looks rather than power, as this player of both LoL and GW2 testifies:

In a way, the OP [overpower] tendency of the power gamer in me was a little disappointed by the fact that there were no metrics [in GW2]. Perhaps it was a good thing though. It's what makes the game what it is. It forced me to focus less on stats and more on other things like my avatar's look. I had never – I didn't *care*, I just wanted to be as powerful as possible. Well, oddly enough, I found myself wanting my avatar to look good." (GWLG02\_M\_37)

Furthermore, apart from level ranking, which is relative to the space in which players evolve, there is no ranking system in GW2. While all players may gain access to the top, which is not hierarchically defined, there is no sense of competition among players to reach first place. This means that players share a common interest in collaborating to reach their objectives rapidly.

Meanwhile, metrics are crucial in LoL, as game dynamics are almost entirely structured by its complex ranking system. Statistics regarding performances, one's own build, as well as other players' skills and builds are clearly identified. Players may easily access other players' profiles and evaluate their power based on the quantification of performances; hence, profiles become identifiable marks of player status.

Want it or not, [in LoL] you fall into a sort of playground mentality that requires you to perform better than others, to be tougher than others and show it. It's a bit hard to make friends and have fun interactions in that kind of environment. (GWLG01\_M\_23)

Each player's kill, death, and assist counts are visible in-game in real time. Hence, everyone may judge others' performances in each game. Even the honor banner system, introduced in 2012 to encourage "good" behaviors, quantifies players' positive impact. This system, which was popular in the early days of LoL but then quickly became obsolete, offered honor banners to players based on a specific ratio determined by the number of honors they received from other players as well as the number of games they played. Therefore, in LoL, even

behaviors that are qualitatively perceived as “good” are quantified and inscribed in the game’s complex metrics system.

#### 6.5.4 Practice Intensity

In LoL, both the ranking system and the important role of stats in judging others’ as well as one’s own performance encourage an intensive gaming practice. Indeed, playing very regularly furthers one’s chances to move upward in the ranking system and eventually get from one league to another. Whereas pointing to a player’s presence in a lower league (e.g., bronze) is a common means to put other players down and often stands for a proper insult, it is clear that vertical mobility (moving upward from one league to another) is highly valued and induces respect. Also, when players progress from league to league, their margin of error shrinks as they compete with increasingly expert players. Showing off one’s skills and level thus becomes all the more difficult and requires intensive practice. This explains the development of e-sport leagues such as Master and Challenger, assuming that Challenger players qualify as e-sport-level players.

The fact that players have to start from scratch and rebuild their avatar for each game also incites repetitive practice. Players may rebuild the same champion(s) with a similar build in order to improve it as much as possible. The complexity of each build and the quantity of champions (more than 120) justifies practice intensity as well, considering not only players’ genuine desire to master the game but also that constant changes brought into gameplay mechanics demand a high level of adaptability on the part of players. One player explains: “You constantly have to adapt to new metagaming rules, new patches, because they nerfed this guy and buffed that one. In this game, if you stop playing for a week, you’re already rusty, you’ve already lost your skills” (GWLG04\_M\_30). Indeed, the longer a player is absent from the game, the harder it will be for him or her to come back to it. For instance, while seasons last for about 12 months, leaving during one season and coming back during the next entails copious amounts of reading in order to learn all the new mechanics and metagaming rules. It is just as if one had to learn how to play an entirely new game.

Such incentives for players to practice more intensively result in an increase in the number of games played, which can minimize the relative importance of each game (promo games set aside). Such trivialization of individual games can be correlated to the banalization of relationships with other players. As the quantity of games makes events and interactions within a particular game less meaningful than outcomes and resulting rankings, appreciating the quality

of one's interactions with other players becomes more difficult or less obvious. In this way, players may dismiss their own toxic behaviors as being rather infrequent, or determined by rather insignificant particular circumstances. The tendency to interpret toxic behaviors as minor incidents given the important number of games played was confirmed by Jeffrey Lin, LoL's lead social systems designer, in his conference entitled "The Science behind Shaping Player Behavior in Online Games" (2013).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, he asserts that although 98% of LoL players show nontoxic behavioral profiles, great majority of players does "have [its] own toxic behaviors, but it's not too severe, it's not too frequent. And this makes sense: all of us have our bad days."<sup>9</sup> In other words, millions of LoL players generally show good behaviors. Yet, out of any 10 players present in a game, it is quite probable to meet at least one who is going through a "bad day." This would explain LoL's reputation for the toxicity of its social interactions. Yet, according to the company's argument, it is "normal" for negative behavioral patterns to manifest in players' interactions with other players.

### 6.5.5 Consequences of Players' Actions on Other Players

One player's behavior may significantly affect other players' gaming experience. Once more, major differences can be observed between the ways in which players' actions impact others in the two games under study. First of all, with regard to avatar complementarity, one may notice that the threshold of complementarity is very low in GW2. Except for exceptional cases, specific team compositions according to predetermined roles are not required for events and dungeons. In this way, players may progress in the game and form teams as they please. Also, players may temporarily leave one thread of action and change avatars without missing out on the event their team is working on. Moreover, leaving a group never results in negative consequences for oneself or for other players, as there are no sanctions for leaving and players who have left are easily replaced thanks to the "looking for group" feature. Conversely, groups can decide to dismiss players when their unpleasant or harmful attitude warrants it: guild leaders can directly expel players from their guild, and players can use the "kick" feature through a democratic vote within the group.

In contrast, in LoL, the high degree of complementarity between avatars pushes players to select a champion according to its coherence with team strategies. As explained earlier, in the absence of one of the roles prescribed by

<sup>8</sup> <http://gdcvault.com/play/1017940/The-Science-Behind-Shaping-Player> (accessed July 11, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> <http://gdcvault.com/play/1017940/The-Science-Behind-Shaping-Player>, 3:48 to 3:56 (accessed July 11, 2016).

metagaming rules, team imbalances can lead to defeat. So, players are implicitly compelled to make choices in line with other players' decisions. Players "call" their role on the lobby's chat room, and then go on to choose their champion bearing in mind the role that they announced. All five players in a team usually participate in deciding each role's composition so as to ensure proper balance between roles. Choices are then locked using the "lock" feature. If one player locks his or her own choice of champion before collective decision making has taken place ("insta-lock"), the rest of the team must then take decisions according to the insta-locker's choice. Such individualistic behavior is detrimental to the whole team, as it increases the likelihood of defeat and undermines other players' freedom in building their champions. Therefore, before the game even starts, champion selection is a significant source of conflict between players.

Furthermore, in LoL, leaving a group can bear dire consequences for both oneself and other players. Indeed, players who leave a group during a game are sanctioned: they may not play until the game is over. Also, if the behavior is recurrent, warnings may be issued, potentially leading to a ban. This system puts considerable pressure on players to stay in their team, even when the atmosphere in a game becomes nasty. While players are "obliged" to go through such unpleasant gaming experiences, they may be more likely to vent their frustration in the next game, hence causing negative affects in other players, and so on. While players may not be replaced halfway through a game, one player's decision to leave a game regardless of sanctions destabilizes the team. This has considerable consequences for other players, as it leads to an important power differential in the fight (four against five) and, most likely, to defeat. Surrendering is the only way in which players may stop a fight using game features. This requires that the team take a collective decision to end the fight and grant victory to their opponents. However, this feature is made available only 20 minutes into a fight, which seems like a long time if the atmosphere quickly becomes belligerent and escalates into toxic behaviors.

### 6.5.6 Managing Toxic Behaviors

ArenaNet relies on managers to deal with unpleasant behaviors. In GW2, managers' presence is visible through clearly identifiable avatars that travel across the game, giving information, registering complaints, and helping players. The company is also very present on GW2's official forum to make sure to offer as much support to players as possible. Furthermore, the "report" feature allows anyone to flag toxic behaviors and ArenaNet has the ability to ban perpetrators from the game if and when incidents are found to be serious or recurrent.

However, the company's unorthodox methods of reprisal against one player caused controversy in a 2015 case. The player in question had discovered a loophole in the structure of the game, and took advantage of it so as to "terrorize" a large number of players during a *World versus World* (WvW) game. The incident lasted for weeks. While the player's behavior was deemed unacceptable according to the software's rules, ArenaNet proceeded to an in-game "public humiliation" in May 2015. The company took control of the player's avatar, undressed it, and forced it to jump from a high floor of Divinity's Reach, hence precipitating its symbolic "death."<sup>10</sup> While it was reclaimed by the GW2 community, this kind of sanction remains exceptional, as its ethics are, to say the least, debatable. Nonetheless, this incident shows that the company took responsibility in the management of such toxic behavior.

Likewise, Riot Games is also very active on forums and encourages positive modes of interactions between players in LoL, especially through its code of conduct, which is available online.<sup>11</sup> The company also produced an ad campaign to encourage good gaming practices and promote cooperation in-game, arguing that this approach leads to success and victories just as well as confrontation.<sup>12</sup> However, Riot Games counts primarily on a "tribunal" with regard to the management of toxic behaviors. This tribunal, which was set up in 2011 (and disabled in 2014), is a self-managed institution run by and for players. It operates via a social voting system: any player can log into the tribunal, examine cases under scrutiny by reading the game's chat, and recommend appropriate sanctions. If the player whose behavior is being examined is found guilty, the tribunal pronounces an official sanction, which is adjusted according to the nature of the fault as well as the number of counts. This means that Riot Games places responsibility for handling harmful attitudes and actions between the hands of players themselves. In other words, players have to self-manage behaviors within their community. In this way, the company delegates responsibility for the task. Aside from the ethical questions that this form of mob justice raises, one may highlight the possibility of false reports and the banalization of harm in such a system. Some toxic behaviors might well be minimized, if not tolerated, especially in cases in which insults would seem

<sup>10</sup> [www.engadget.com/2015/05/07/guild-wars-2-cheater-humiliation/](http://www.engadget.com/2015/05/07/guild-wars-2-cheater-humiliation/) ; [www.polygon.com/2015/5/6/8559503/guild-wars-2-cheater-banned-video](http://www.polygon.com/2015/5/6/8559503/guild-wars-2-cheater-banned-video) ; [www.idigitaltimes.com/cheating-hackers-guild-wars-2-character-stripped-naked-killed-banning-watch-hilarious-439031](http://www.idigitaltimes.com/cheating-hackers-guild-wars-2-character-stripped-naked-killed-banning-watch-hilarious-439031) (accessed July 11, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> <http://gameinfo.na.leagueoflegends.com/en/game-info/get-started/summoners-code/> (accessed July 11, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> <http://na.leagueoflegends.com/en/news/game-updates/player-behavior/does-teamwork-win-more-games>; <http://na.leagueoflegends.com/en/media/art/teamwork-op> (accessed July 11, 2016).

justifiable. There is a significant possibility that one may be judged according to criteria that lie outside of the scope of justice.

### 6.5.7 Social Stability

Social structures in LoL also explain such banalization of in-game toxic behaviors. Players seldom stick to a single team and often prefer to follow their own trajectories, as shown by the solo queue mode. The standardized format of players' representation through champions may encourage players to instrumentalize other players, or even forget about the fact that other players are human subjects, as their multifaceted subjectivity as human agents is barely visible through the singular plane of their avatar identity. One player confirms that trend:

In the end, you end up not really caring who is and who is not in your team, it continually changes, unless you play in a premade team. If you are in a premade team, you have to play with people you already know. So, putting such cases aside, you really don't care about who you're playing with. So you don't need [to interact with them] – like I'm not chatting while I'm playing League. People will rarely say nice things; sometimes, most times, they will say irritating things. I ignore them, I play my game." (LG06\_M\_26)

The stability of relationships between players, illustrated by the recurrence and intensity of contact between players, is a crucial element in furthering harmonious gaming experiences and behaviors in any video game. Chances for the development of mutual respect, or even friendship, increase as players spend more time playing together. Both games under study offer different means to form groups, be it through team building and the "looking for group" or "squad" feature in GW2, or group formation in ranked solo/duo, ranked team, team builder, or normal mode in LoL. Yet, it is significant that GW2 encourages teaming up with "known" players first and foremost, even if it remains possible to engage in games with complete strangers.

In GW2, guilds are stable groups of players that make certain features available to their members and organize players' socialization. In this way, guilds promote stability in social relationships. As hierarchized tribes, guilds provide support to all members on both functional and symbolic levels. Aside from guild inventories, several features promote cohesion within the group, such as an exclusive chat box, an open list of online members, guild-specific quests and puzzles, and guild points that allow members to unlock content in the game. Furthermore, guild membership is made clearly legible, as bracketed acronyms next to avatars' names signal players' affiliations. Such signs thus

provide evidence for social position but also produce contextualized identities. One GW2 player explains how the features of his avatar impact his gaming practice:

There are 260 members [in my guild]: I'm pretty sure to find someone who's already visited a certain region and knows it better than I do. I'm pretty sure that I'll have resources in a region that I'm not sure how to use, or resources for an event that I don't know how to finish. Because I acquired the resource in World versus World [WvW], I act as a resource for a lot of people. Helping and guiding people is very time-consuming. (GW06\_M\_25)

Moreover, gameplay mechanics increase one's chances to come across the same players during group formation thanks to guild membership, automatic teaming up by megaservers, and the friends list. Players may choose whom to add in their friends list and can also be added by other players. Also, friends lists are linked to the user's account rather than a specific avatar. Conversely, GW2 also proposes a blocking feature that allows players to mute disruptive players' accounts. Therefore, it is important to mention that team making is influenced not only by such features as friends lists, but also by the matching algorithms producing those friends lists. In other words, if in-game identity signaling significantly impacts communication and practices such as mutual help, the automated mode of team "suggestion" (e.g., processes involving megaservers) also play a role in determining players' choices. This means that technological mediation itself contributes to shaping specific socialization practices.

Identity recognition is another factor promoting stable social relationships. In GW2, playing as different avatars is common, as a regular account allows for five avatars, but the account name is clearly indicated and accessible to other players at all times. The visual predominance of pseudonyms over avatars, that is to say the ability to see players' names more easily than avatar names, means that players use each other's names instead of avatar names when communicating with each other. The fact that players refer to each other in this way furthers a more complex sense of identity in processes of mutual recognition as well as self-reflective identity formation. Also, avatars can be personalized in different ways: players may modify some features of their physical appearance, elaborate on their background, and customize their appearance through accessories and gear. Also, as power discrepancies do not affect actual gameplay, the fact that avatars in each region are leveled encourages players to practice with friends, be it out-game acquaintances or users known through other avatars. Hardcore gamers can play with less experienced players in a harmonious way. It is even possible to choose one's avatar according to whom one wants to play

with, which allows selecting a lower level avatar for games with friends who practice on a more occasional basis, for instance.

Meanwhile, LoL encourages two types of gaming practice. On the one hand, in nonranked mode, players may team up on the spot with as many “friends” as they want or form new teams with strangers before each game. On the other hand, in ranked mode, one may play solo or duo, or form stable teams provided that one plays regularly enough to ensure constancy. Although it is always possible to play in stable teams (premade teams), that is to say, with the same players (e.g., friends from real life), organizing regular practices with other players is a substantial logistic challenge. Besides, ranked teams start out at the Bronze 5 level, and (five-player) team-ranking functions in the same way as solo player ranking. Therefore, the stakes in team building are considerably high: if a player is less efficient than his or her teammates, he or she might become a “weak link,” which may create tensions and conflicts within the group and lead to the player’s exclusion. Therefore, while friendship and competition make for stronger social ties, stable teams remain the best way to prevent toxic behaviors nonetheless.

I try to stick to the same group of people. I don’t mind playing with other Quebecers, I can Skype with them sometimes, which is cool, but when I talk to a random stranger, it’s pretty rare that they try to be even remotely sympathetic in-game or that they attempt to do anything apart from dissing others.  
(LG03\_M\_18)

Nevertheless, in LoL, the fact that players have to form a new team at the beginning of each game (assisted by the Elo system) does not favor stability in social ties. Without a conscious intention and effort to do so, one may never play with the same players twice. Such dynamics are confirmed by the sheer size of the community. Harmful behaviors might be further banalized given that players are almost completely anonymous.

Moreover, in LoL, emphasis is put on champions’ rather than players’ identity. Champion names are more visible than pseudonyms on the interface and players use champion names to call out to each other during fights. This means that the identity of players themselves is only secondary, if it is considered at all, given that avatars’ capabilities are determined by the characteristics of champions. Champions may be personalized with skins, which are identical for all players and come at a (monetary) cost. Owning rare and expensive skins enhances social status and destandardizes players’ identity to a certain extent, as a majority of players are not willing to spend money on their avatar’s appearance. Even if specific abilities such as runes, skills, and summoner abilities make avatars more personalized, champions’ abilities are generally stable and

even come to define players' roles in the metagame. While profile metrics define players' sense of identity more so than visual signs, the preeminence of quantitative individuation and player interactions leaves relatively little space for in-game social recognition.

### 6.5.8 Communication

Lastly, communication should also be considered as a crucial catalyst of social relationships. Even if it is possible to play without verbally communicating with other players and to "mute" unhelpful players in both games, there are observable differences in the way each game produces the conditions for communication. Whereas in GW2 communicating with other player is not compulsory as long as the required actions are performed within the framework of the group's objectives, it is crucial in LoL. Indeed, a failure in communication can result in defeat if players do not convey what is expected of them. As argued earlier, mutual expectations among players are high in LoL, as players' individual success depends on other players' actions. For instance, the "vision" of each individual player coconstitutes the team's general "vision," that is to say, the visual identification of enemies on the game's map depends on the combination of active avatars' positions on the map. If one player loses sight of an opponent, the latter will disappear from the map, which is called the "fog of war." Players must rapidly inform their teammates in that situation.

It is important to stress that communicational tools in LoL are very efficient owing to the specificity of their function. Therefore, conversational content is mostly instrumental and seldom requires politeness or decorum, which means that communication is not a catalyst for social relationships in and of itself. For instance, "pings" are used extensively during games. They consist of five clearly identifiable icons, which can be placed on the playing ground to signal simple information to other players: "need help," "on my way," "missing enemy," "danger," as well as a red sign, the signification of which changes depending on its position on the playing surface. Transmission must be quick. The function of these signs is not to engage in elaborated discussions but to trigger action, as shown by the fact that they are predominantly indexical (action-inducing rather than reflexion-inducing). Putting aside the red sign's contextual interpretation, pings' signification must be univocal, which stresses the importance of a quick and unambiguous semiotic process motivated by a signaling rather than communicational purpose: "I go 'ping,' to talk to them and say 'we do this and this and that.' Sometimes I'll swear as well, but that's rare" (LG03\_M\_18).

Pings also emit clearly audible sounds at each activation, which further draws teammates' attention to the message, thus amplifying their communicational effect. However, although pings are difficult to ignore, they become omnipresent in one's gaming experience, and can even be used to bother other players. Similarly, the (written) chat box, which is the other main means of communication in LoL, consists of a large and very visible window, which means that toxic verbal content is hard to ignore. Therefore, both pings and the chat room can act as invasive and disruptive signs rather than helpful communicational tools in the context of their purportedly detrimental use.

Conversely, in GW2, different types of chat rooms structure group interactions: the guild, proximity, map, party, squad, team (in both PvP and WvW modes), and private chat rooms. The written chat window is adjustable in size; it can also be made transparent, and thus almost invisible. In this way, it is easy to ignore unpleasant conversations.

It feels like playing and being on a forum simultaneously, but the chat interface is so discreet that you can hardly notice it, even when you play for hours. If you want to talk about something, whatever it is, then just do it, but if that doesn't appeal to you, you really don't get the impression that you're missing out on anything.

(GWLG01\_M\_23)

Besides, while the gameplay does not require players to interact directly through conversation, GW2 produces the general conditions for extensive communication, from interpersonal communication about topics beyond the scope of the game itself to, most importantly, mutual aid in the form of requests for help or information. For instance, it is common for more experienced players to ensure that other players understand how to reach an objective before starting a quest or a fight, which is a very rare behavior in LoL.

In that sense, although communication habits and patterns greatly differ between LoL and GW2, they constitute pertinent indicators of cultural norms within the two communities. In GW2, players try to maintain friendly social relations, as shown by the widespread expression of gratitude, thanks, and congratulations when objectives are met. Also, if the term "noob" is generally understood as a derogatory term in LoL, even by players in the lower levels (who are "new" to the game themselves), the word is rather used to ask for advice and help in GW2. As a matter of fact, such requests rarely remain unanswered in GW2, as mutual help is one of the community's main identity traits. "There is always a positive state of mind in GW2. There will always be people who are ready to participate and help out. But I would say that it is not surprising at all, as this is something that is deeply engrained in the game's functioning" (GWLG03\_M\_37). Indeed, one may add that the GW2

community has successfully appropriated game features in order to further its ethics of mutual aid. For instance, the “looking for group” feature is often used as a transportation tool, allowing players to guide others through a map.

While it is common practice in GW2, mutual assistance can still be observed in LoL, yet almost exclusively on external websites such as the League of Legends Wiki, Mobafire, LoLPro, LoLKing, and solomid.net, where the community shares an array of information, resources, and build optimization tools. The impressive quantity of cultural productions, ranging from fanart,<sup>13</sup> parodies,<sup>14</sup> and streaming<sup>15</sup> to music,<sup>16</sup> fanfilms,<sup>17</sup> cosplay,<sup>18</sup> and more, reflects the active, prolific, and passionate temperament of the LoL community. Nevertheless, this culture of sharing seems to be most often set aside while in-game, as it is replaced by the adversarial use of slurs as well as vulgar and harsh language, sometimes right from the outset (at one’s entry in the lobby) before any action is even performed.

It seems important to stress that there are many ways to negatively impact other players’ gaming experiences in LoL: for instance, using the insta-lock feature during players’ choice of a champion, harassing players in chat windows both in the lobby and during games, using “pings” excessively, stealing enemies’ or minions’ kills, voluntarily letting oneself die, putting oneself away from keyboard (AFK), rage quitting, refusing to follow team tactics or basic strategies (established by the metagame), or smurfing in lower categories. Also, subscription to the game is free and requires only an email address. Hence, it is easy to open several accounts on LoL, which makes banning users less efficient. Conversely, GW2 players pay a membership fee,<sup>19</sup> which deters users from opening more than one account and may even dissuade certain types of players from subscribing at all. This also permits decreasing the recurrence of bans. In addition, GW2 greatly limits opportunities to harm others. Remaining passive, that is to say, not helping (not healing, not resuscitating [rez], not participating during fights), may well be the worst possible attitude. However, passivity yields no results, as passive players do not earn experience points; neither do they obtain rewards that they would have obtained had they helped their teammates. Harassing players in chat rooms is still possible, yet the fact

<sup>13</sup> <http://na.leagueoflegends.com/en/media/art/Fan%20Art> (accessed on July 11, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Idz7MZz9-vc&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Idz7MZz9-vc&feature=youtu.be) (accessed July 11, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> [www.solomid.netstreams](http://www.solomid.netstreams) (accessed July 11, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xk6OyJii4E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xk6OyJii4E) (accessed July 11, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8UdPiZaP2U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8UdPiZaP2U) (accessed July 11, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> [www.lolcosplay.com/](http://www.lolcosplay.com/) (accessed July 11, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> A free mode was introduced on August 29, 2016. However, this change in accessibility does not seem to have significantly affected the identity of GW2’s community.

that the chat window may be minimized or made transparent makes it easier for targeted players to overlook slurs and insults.

## 6.6 Discussion

Our observations highlight the fact that while video games allow, encourage, or prevent certain actions and strategies, they normalize specific behaviors and influence cultural elaborations in each video game community. Indeed, we have identified a number of signs and sign systems, the effects and recurrence of which foster the elaboration of interpretative habits. While such habits come to influence the way players not only adapt to game mechanisms but also shape collective meaning-making practices, our semiotic analysis has allowed us to better understand the construction and reinforcement of “a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 891). In other words, we have highlighted a set of in-game representations and we have shown how these representations, once their meaning is collectively stabilized, both influence and directly trigger specific actions and behaviors. Accumulating evidence for the strong link between such observable signs and “toxic, competitive and harsh” or “welcoming, respectful and peaceful” behavioral patterns has helped us understand better the two games’ respective reputations as well as the reasons why certain behaviors and types of interpersonal relationships are promoted or discouraged. The way in which new players are introduced to games has provided meaningful insights in this regard: if GW2 players’ habits are first and foremost influenced by the technological apparatus and writers’ design choices, new LoL players rather rely on the community’s preexisting interpretative habits in order to define their own gaming practices. This partly explains why expectations toward players are so high in LoL. Indeed, players must demonstrate knowledge of many facts and features that are often not introduced in the game. The opposite can be found in GW2, where expectations are rather low given that players may remain in the initial tutorial section and move up toward interpersonal interactions once their knowledge of the game has stabilized. Therefore, following Umberto Eco’s semiotic terminology (1984), one may argue that LoL players’ encyclopedias largely depend on knowledge and experiences developed through the community, whereas GW2 players’ are, to a certain extent and up to a certain level of practice, elaborated on an individual learning process.

Such reliance on collective knowledge and experiences in LoL is reinforced by avatar complementarity. Indeed, the important interdependence of avatars exacerbates expectations toward other players, as failure on the part of one

player can have repercussions on the team as a whole. In that sense, consequences of players' actions on other players are very important and it is impossible not to take others into account. In contrast, although it is possible to play alone or go solo in GW2, consequences of other players' actions are minimized by many different mechanics, including the "looking for group" feature. In this way, GW2 players' encyclopedias, which determine their semiotic habits and their actions, are allowed to develop gradually and relatively free of peer pressure.

Moreover, common objectives, which are shared by all players within a group, as well as reward duplication among all players participating in an action, promote harmonious relations between members of a group and can even stimulate teamwork in GW2. Meanwhile, personal objectives in LoL, which are articulated mainly around ranking and Elo, encourage individualistic behaviors that are all the more present in-game, as rewards are not equitably distributed. Metrics, as a specific mode of information visualization, produce highly connotated signs, as numbers and stats are usually associated with rigor and accuracy and have thus come to possess relatively unquestioned truth value and authority. In this sense, expectations among players in LoL are incredibly high given that performances are perceived to be rigorously and accurately recorded. Therefore, the predominance of metrics in LoL contributes to the dynamic of competition between players. Conversely, in GW2, players only compete against themselves, as overpower is nonexistent. Also, performances cannot be quantified; hence, evaluation remains qualitative and vague. While avatars are leveled out according to playing fields (zones), significant power imbalances cannot arise. Such imbalances are visible in LoL, as seen in the case of "smurfs," in which some key signs (representamens) referring specifically to involved agents fail to convey useful information. Indeed, an avatar's appearance should normally signal the player's level, which is supposed to be lower in lower leagues. If a smurf invests a lower league, other players cannot trust the available information (visual and textual signs) about other players anymore: the meaning of those signs is unstable and latent, which may cause not only distrust but also anxiety in the interpreter, who can't grasp what signs really stand for or who or what they really refer to. This justifies the view that LoL is a "jungle" in which only the fittest survive.

This "every one for themselves" mentality, which reflects differently for every LoL player according to their pragmatic context, is also revealed by the difficulty to maintain a team or play with the same players game after game. Although temporary groups are commonplace in GW2, within the context of specific quests for instance, and could very well trigger aggressive and toxic behaviors, such patterns are rarely seen because key game features (described

earlier) prevent them, and because pragmatic contexts of interpretations are most often the same for all players involved in a common objective. Besides, the social structures prescribed by guilds and communicational habits promote harmonious relationships: the stability of groups in which social ties are solid and based on the recognition of others prevents many forms of toxic behavior. Although stable teams in LoL may work toward common objectives, teams are still difficult to maintain because all players must have roughly the same amount of practice in order to be ranked closely enough to each other. Without such conditions, harmonious practice is not easy to achieve, as individual players' pragmatic contexts diverge.

Furthermore, in LoL, communication between players is both limited by pings and highly present in the form of text chat windows, and plays a specific role in the proliferation of toxic behaviors. The signaling function of pings requires not only quick, processual interpretation on the part of individual players, but also entirely conditioned triggers for action, which puts pressure on less experienced players. Within a general context of toxicity, opportunities for expressing dissatisfaction or frustration are numerous and even promoted by the important space taken by chat boxes, which then become places of individualist self-expression more so than spaces for sharing and reciprocal exchanges.

Such toxic behaviors are handled differently in GW2 and LoL: in the former case, one witnesses direct interventions in the game, while in the latter case, incidents are to be addressed by a self-managed tribunal. Therefore, in the face of behaviors that deviate from the norm of acceptable interactions and negatively impact the game's optimal functioning, we witness two different systems with similar *objects* yet diverging sets of *criteria* put in place to address them, as the *agents* in charge of the interpretation process are different. On the one hand, in GW2, administrators and game creators are responsible for the normalization of practices, and influence semiotic habits and social practices in this way. On the other hand, in LoL, players are responsible for establishing appropriate standards of practice in-game. This puts the weight of ethical decisions on their shoulders, which can either be an advantage or an inconvenient depending on the way in which such power is managed. In the specific case of LoL, the tribunal does not seem to have fulfilled its function: the institution had to be disabled so that irresponsible tendencies would stop happening.

Nevertheless, all of these factors do not entirely and univocally determine behaviors and attitudes, as harmful dynamics can be witnessed in GW2 and as fights devoid of toxic interactions can lead to harmonious experiences in LoL. Indeed, LoL is exploited by many as a free socialization platform conducive to mutually helpful practices and enduring friendships between passionate gamers.

I didn't know everyone in real life, but I made great friends that I then met in real life. I knew our mid laner when we were younger, then we lost touch when my family moved out, but then we started speaking again and started playing League together. Then he introduced me to new worlds that we played together. We often talk on Skype nowadays. I met them in real life and I've been to their place several times and they've become great friends. I really met some people *through the game*. (LG03\_M\_18)

The option to form teams with friendly players always remains available and one can always check who is online at any given time on the friends list. Furthermore, while certain mechanics encourage intensive practice in LoL, the game may be played off-ranking (casual game) and thus on an occasional basis. Also, the ARAM (all random all mid) mode allows quicker rounds that minimize the possibility of substantial harm to others. Game custom tools allow players to choose the number and identity of players to be involved, the number of bots, etc. Therefore, harmonious experiences in LoL remain entirely possible.

Also, one should highlight the importance of LoL's active and collaborative fanbase, which exists, in part, because of the high intensity of many players' practice as well as players' dependence on the community for the definition of their encyclopedias. While players are highly invested in their community, they demonstrate a rich and diversified culture through numerous cultural productions. The community appears passionate and dedicated, as shown by its welcoming attitude on these external cultural platforms where players share a large amount of material. One may note that there are many more websites about LoL than GW2, for instance. Such diverse cultural elaborations around LoL are an important factor of social cohesion, as players share common norms and referents, be it in their vocabulary, jokes, or imaginary. Moreover, e-sport is extremely developed around commissioned and highly spectacular international contests,<sup>20</sup> which encourages a very active collective life. That type of activities contributes to various degrees of social recognition among players.

Finally, all of these observations illustrate the fact that the production, use, and evolution of signs have a direct and very real impact on both individual and collective gaming practices. For instance, throughout this chapter, we have highlighted the efficiency (or lack thereof) of specific signs that intervene in-game, such as quantitative and qualitative markers of performance, communicational conventions, and status symbols. The example of the term "noob," which is often used as an insult in LoL but rather functions as a referent for help-seeking in GW2, showed that identical representamens can lead to different interpretations and courses of action according to the identity of interpreters

<sup>20</sup> [www.lolesports.com/en\\_US/](http://www.lolesports.com/en_US/) (accessed July 11, 2016).

and their communities, as well as the pragmatic contexts of interpretation. Similarly, the evolution of the honour banner system in LoL illustrated the contingent and malleable nature of signs and their impact on pragmatic changes in gaming habits. The honor banner system quickly became obsolete because its qualitative markers of performance did not really fit in with the game's highly quantified and complex metrics system. In other words, the conventional organization and visualization of signs in LoL contributed to preventing such qualitative signs from enduring as semiotic habits. This also conveys the importance of ethical valuation in the stabilization of interpretants: as honor banners failed to be valued as significant social cues, their use was less and less motivated, and they gradually lost relevance.

Therefore, not only do signs' *functions* determine specific uses, but beliefs and feelings about the *value* of signs also influence their efficiency. Some signs are not always used in the same way depending on the value system of the community under study (as shown in the case of the term "noob"). Specific signs are not actualized by video game communities the way game designers intended, as seen through our last example. In that sense, semiosis and the (de)stabilization of meaning-making habits appear to be intrinsically adaptive processes in which intersubjective experiences and learning are central: no social and cultural dynamics can be entirely and unambiguously *determined* by prescribed game mechanics or video game infrastructure because interactions with the platform and with other players always depend on semiotic processes that are multipolar (involving several interpreting minds), affected (subject to individual and collective beliefs and feelings), and contingent (subject to pragmatic contexts).

## 6.7 Conclusion

All in all, while one may identify many signifying practices and modes of representation that encourage or discourage certain behaviors and influence the development of cultural norms, video games cannot entirely constrain gaming experiences. According to soft technological determinism, behaviors are normalized through players' interaction with video games. Yet transgressive and appropriative behaviors maintain the possibility for gaming practices that subvert and surpass technologically and culturally prescribed experiences. Nevertheless, if we started this chapter by recognizing that relationships of power are embedded within world views, modes of intersubjectivity, and actions and values that are prescribed within particular communities, this research has also shown how power dynamics are intrinsic to semiotic processes and uses of signs

like specific game features, mechanics, and procedures. In other words, relationships of power and semiotic practices are mutually informed and shaped: not only does analyzing specific social, cultural, and political practices entail a need to pay attention to sign production, but there also are crucial political stakes in the way communities produce meaning. Therefore, as objects of semiotic study, video games can be analyzed as effects of specific cultural, ideological, and institutional contexts, but they also produce cultural, ideological, and institutional norms. As such, they can never be ethically and politically neutral. In light of the analyses presented in the preceding text, it seems hard not to consider LoL as the mirror of neoliberal individualism, and view GW2 as the fantasy of socialist collectivism.

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