

The Ongoing Product Lifecycle of a Games as Service Model: a *League of Legends* Case Study

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Keywords

Games as a Service, Co-creativity, Free-to-play, Product lifecycle, League of Legends

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The term ‘games as a service’ (GaaS) has become a widely used one in the games industry to describe a shift in the way single videogames are played and monetised over increasingly longer periods of time. This trend was evidenced in 2016 by the statistic that among the top five most played games on Valve Corporation’s *Steam* platform, none of these games were actually released in 2016 (Grayson, 2017). Furthermore, this trend has been recognised by award giving bodies such as the *British Academy Games Awards* who in 2017, created a category for ‘Best Evolving Game’. This award goes to the game that ‘displays [the best] ongoing evolution and developer support, including games as a service, persistent online games, massively multiplayer online games, evolving free to play games, and any other types of game that receive ongoing updates.’ (BAFTA: 2017: 7) Game studies researchers have approached the paradigm of GaaS variously, through focusing on emerging models of free-to-play and microtransactions (Alha et al, 2014; Kerr, 2017); through looking at emerging paratextual activities such as live-streaming or the esports industry (Taylor, 2012, 2018; Woodcock and Johnson, 2018); and through critically viewing these co-creative agencies as an emerging set of hybridised consumer relations (Banks and Humphreys, 2008; Banks, 2013). However, at present, there has been a relative lack of direct engagement with the term GaaS and what it critically represents to the games industry as a fundamentally new paradigm in the play and production of videogames.

This paper aims to intervene in the literature surrounding co-creativity by critically considering the product lifecycle of a single game operating according to the GaaS model. Through drawing on data gathered from participatory open discussions, this paper focuses on the popular F2P, esports, MOBA and GaaS title *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009 – present). Through bringing in the experiences of players who regularly play and make purchases in *League of Legends*, this paper posits the views of players that experience the GaaS model as representative of an ongoing affective and economic relationship with the game. A sample of two of the responses from players in one discussion describing the reasons why players spend money include:

‘To me league is my primary form of entertainment. I don't pay for cable tv or anything like that which means purchasing RP [Riot points] could be looked at as my "payment" or "subscription" in order to play league. I don't feel obligated to purchase RP but it makes the game that much more

Proceedings of DiGRA 2020

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enjoyable for me. I have also been playing for the last 4 years and spent over \$1000 on the game. While that is a tremendous amount, if you calculate out the money spent/hour played, the cost is actually really low. Maybe that is just me justifying it but seeing as I play multiple games every single day, it's worth it to me.' (Participant one)

'Free to play games often have increased longevity. They aren't usually "one and done" games with an upfront price tag and an average or expected play time, excluding any replay value.

Some games are done in a few days or weeks. So in the case of an RPG of about 100 hours. Spending money "Frequently" on a free to play game feels worthwhile to support the company when you get so much play time out of it. I've actually spent upwards of 2-3 *thousand* dollars on League. It sounds like a lot, it is a lot, but it's also over the span of almost 3 years. That's what, 100 bucks every few weeks/month for a game I play almost every day? I don't think that's not worth it.' (Participant two)

Views from players such as these point towards an extended product lifecycle that differs in fundamental ways to the filmic model of cover prices that Kline et al (2003: 66) once described as the 'perpetual innovation' that commercially underpins the games industry. Although perpetual innovation still takes place in games such as *League of Legends* through the form of frequent game patches, updates, new skins and paratextual modes of engagement such as live streams or esports, the foundation (and name) of the game remains the same. This model of games production has far reaching consequences for the ongoing governance of a game that increasingly acts as a platform to surrounding industries such as esports (Karhulahti, 2017; Jarrett, 2020). Moreover though, this foundational structure of GaaS models acting as digital platforms of continuous monetisation and production puts players in a place of increased scrutiny and datafication.

In Celia Pearce's (2006: 7-8) ethnography of the MMOG *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, she points out that the advent of single player games genres are a 'historical aberration of digital technology'. Viewing games historically, Pearce notes that 'Prior to the introduction of the computer as a games-playing platform, the majority of games played by hundreds of cultures for thousands of years, with few exceptions, were multiplayer.' Although Pearce only mentions the historical significance of playing habits in passing, game designers have followed a similar line of inquiry when considering the implications of genres such as MMOGs, MOBAs, and their associated models of co-creativity and F2P monetisation (Cook, 2013; Green, 2013). This historical consideration for the way playing practices are changing (or reverting) due to GaaS models is a critical consideration of this paper. Moreover though, it is the aim of this paper to identify the social quality of players affective experiences in the GaaS model through the case study of *League of Legends*. The findings suggest that players are increasingly choosing to stick with *League of Legends* over many different games due to the variety of playfully emergent experiences available, the social network of the game and its surrounding paratextual industries of esports and live streams.

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