

Metagaming and Subversive Play in *League of Legends*

Scott Donaldson

Curtin University

Kent Street

Bentley 6102, Western Australia

+61 416503994

scott.donaldson1@postgrad.curtin.edu.au

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Many recent studies of competitive video games have noted the importance of a concept known as “metagaming”, which concerns the use out-of-game resources and strategic analysis in addition to the deployment of mechanical skill in players’ attempts to conquer their chosen battlegrounds. My research is concerned with the metagaming practices of high-level players of the popular multiplayer game, *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009), and seeks to uncover how these players negotiate a competitive metagame that is in a state of constant flux due to frequent patches to the core game. Interviews have suggested that players view the scope for experimental play as highly limited due to implicit strategic norms that form a strict foundation for metagaming practices.

Richard Garfield (2000, 16) states that metagaming can be divided into four parts: what a player brings to the game, what a player takes away from a game, what happens between games, and what happens during the game other than the game itself. Salen and Zimmerman (2003, 481) offer a more refined definition, in that the metagame is “the relationship between the game and outside elements, including everything from player attitudes and play styles to social reputations and social contexts.” More recently, Carter et al. (2012, 15) have argued for a definition of metagame that includes *only* pursuits related to “the goals and symbols of advancement implicit in the game architecture.” Such practices have been observed in a number of studies of multiplayer video games (Chen 2010; Lynch 2013; Reeves et al. 2009; Harper 2010).

League of Legends is an online strategy game which is frequently updated with new content and gameplay tweaks, thereby making ongoing strategic development a core part of competitive play. In the game, two teams of five players battle across a fantasy-themed map in an attempt to destroy the opposing team’s base. Interviews with thirteen high-level players from across both the Korean and Oceanic servers were performed at the end of the 2015 competitive season, with findings showing that the competitive metagame is made up in part by a system of community-enforced strategic norms which strongly influence the way in which individual players approach to the game. This system concerns the positions and roles that players inhabit upon their entry into each game, and is ubiquitous throughout all levels of play.

Several interviewees cited frustration with game updates which hindered the effectiveness of their usual position and role combinations. In response, these players chose to either switch to

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different pre-existing combinations or maintain their regular play style, the latter of which reportedly led to less enjoyable experiences. Interestingly, the idea of moving beyond the game's strategic norms in response to these patches was not considered. Although it is difficult to argue whether or not alternative approaches would have been more effective, it is nonetheless interesting that a subversion of the strategic norms was not part of these players' metagaming processes, even when conforming to these norms was not conducive to their personal enjoyment of the game. Surprisingly, only one interviewee described employing metagaming strategies which subverted the ubiquitous strategic norms. This player was able to reach the second-highest ranked tier during the 2015 competitive season by utilising alternative positions and role combinations. His metagaming process isn't restricted to the boundaries set by the strategic norms and therefore results in new play styles which take advantage of those opponents unfamiliar with strategies that are not "in the meta". While many players view this type of subversive play as tantamount to a refusal to comply with an end-user agreement which requires players to support their teams (Kou & Nardi 2012, 8), it should be noted that this player has never once been faced with behavioural reprimands.

Regardless of whether or not the position and role system is the "best" way for teams to compete in *League of Legends*, my ongoing research has highlighted a unique player attitude towards metagames and metagaming. Most players interviewed were averse to subversive play in an arena where such an approach was demonstrably possible and, at the time, permitted by both game developer and system. The existence of this attitude therefore raises questions regarding the assumed effectiveness of strategic norms, the significance of subversive play, and the relationship between community and developer in online multiplayer games which are subject to frequent changes.

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