

I Predict a Riot: Making and Breaking Rules and Norms in League of Legends

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationships between player community norms and developer-created rules of play in the competitive team game, *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009). Since the game's release, players have established their own sets of strategic norms – much like player positioning systems in sport – which are used as a de facto baseline for play at all levels of competition. Since these norms are distinct from the game developer's rules concerning online behaviour, however, it is unclear as to whether individual players have the 'right' to enact experimental game strategies that fall outside of the pre-existing framework. In November of 2016, however, it was revealed in one of the game's online community hubs that a player had been threatened with a permanent account ban after repeatedly engaging in one such experimental strategy. A study of the following discussion as it played out within the player community shows that players are aware of larger issues concerning meaning-making in competitive *League of Legends*, and that they identify the game developer as a key figure in this ongoing process.

Keywords

Rules, norms, governance, online multiplayer, MOBA

INTRODUCTION

In an application of Foucault's model of power to games, Tulloch (2014, 348) writes, "Players are far from unwitting prisoners of restrictive rules; they are active agents in the construction of play," and to suggest that rules are wholly restrictive would deny "the creativity and agency of the playing community." In competitive digital games, this level of creativity and agency results in a "mutual understanding of how the game should be played" (Smith, 2004) – an understanding which might concern, for example, the utilisation of available game rules to achieve satisfying in-game experiences, or the construction of social norms and how best to enforce them. In the popular multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game, *League of Legends*, players have formed such mutual understandings concerning team strategy. Due to the emergent nature of gameplay, players have established a standard approach to strategic team positioning, referred to by both the player community and game developer, Riot Games, as the "meta" or "metagame". The mutual understanding of the meta allows teams of randomly-matched individual players to quickly and efficiently form cohesive team compositions and begin a game with little need for extended strategising.

Although the meta is well-documented, there remains a lack of mutual understanding concerning how this system of norms relates to the documented behavioural rules established by Riot Games. For matters of behaviour, players submit reports to the developer, using two developer-authored

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documents as a means of determining what is or is not a reportable action. These documents are the “Summoner’s Code,” a blueprint for the ‘ideal’ player model, and a list of more specific behaviours or actions deemed by the developer to be reportable or not reportable (“Reporting a Player”). However, the somewhat vague and apparently contradictory rules laid out in these documents has prevented the player community from reaching a mutual understanding of the ‘reportability’ of certain deviant behaviours. This paper will analyse one such occasion wherein a deviant player, engaged in what I argue can be described as a form of “greed play” (Foo & Koivisto, 2004) by employing strategy outside of the meta, was threatened with a permanent ban, and whose case soon became the subject of intense debate and discussion. I will analyse portions of this conversation to answer the following question: *How do players of League of Legends evaluate deviant behaviours which are not only contentious within the community, but also ill-defined by the developer-set rules of play?*

To sufficiently answer this question, I will first perform a review of previous literature concerning deviant behaviour in online games, with specific attention paid to how Foo and Koivisto’s (2004) idea of “greed play” in massively multiplayer online games can be applied to the MOBA. This will be followed by an overview of *League of Legends*, which will highlight the characteristics of the meta and the official rules documents that are relevant to this paper. Finally, the paper will analyse the case of “AdellaideSkyhart,” a North American player who was threatened with an account ban for a range of deviant behaviours, and how the player community interpreted the reasoning for this threat, and what they debated and discussed in response. This case is explored via content analysis of a selection of posts from a popular *League of Legends* discussion board. In compiling these, an examination of top-level posts with replies from three key discussions was performed, and individual posts were selected from within these threads based on their implicit relationship to the idea of “greed play”.

PREVIOUS LITERATURE

When Smith (2014) asserts that games are dependent on players reaching a “mutual understanding” of how a game should be played, it is important to discuss how he conceptualises the scope of these understandings. A key example used is the individual play servers of *Battlefield 1942*, wherein each server is a demarcated and separate play space that might hold its own unique set of player-created rules concerning fair play and proper behaviour, such as “no spawn camping”. These understandings, therefore might differ from server to server, and are therefore only “mutual” within each group of players. The reason it is worthwhile to revisit the idea of ‘mutual-ness’ here is due to the prevalence of both ‘always-online’ play and developer oversight of game spaces and rule enforcement. In *League of Legends*, players *must* be connected to Riot Games’ servers to participate in the game, and therefore play will *always* occur under the umbrella of the latest Terms of Use agreement, and *always* on the latest version of the game system itself. Due to the prevalence of online connectivity and developer oversight, it is therefore prudent to draw upon studies of player behaviour and rules implementation in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Although these are not games of direct competition, they nonetheless feature competitive spaces and/or modes *within* the wider game world, and they feature the same terms-of-use-governed, highly-populated and connected communities of players as contemporary online competitive games. It can be said that in these games, the pursuit of fair and equitable play experiences relies on a mutual understanding no longer just between players, but between players *and* the game developer.

Here, deviant play forms can be identified as those which fall somewhere outside the bounds of the play “contract” which combines “both the legal documents that players agree to when signing up for the game and the whole gamut of player-created social protocols, etiquette and other social rules and guidelines” (Glas, 2012, 30). Of these forms, acts of “grief play” are ones which “specifically disrupt other players’ gaming experiences” (Foo & Koivisto, 2004, 245) and are performed for the enjoyment of the griefer. However, when an act of grief play is defined as such *only* in terms of the community’s social norms and is not immediately punishable by the game developer, these acts will be subject to “both sides of the grief conduct” and have even been observed to become normalised within clans of

griefers themselves (Lin & Sun, 2005). Since these subsections of the player community cannot effectively separate themselves from one another, it is no longer as easy to say that players of online-only games possess “mutual” understandings of how to play the game, with various groups of players with contrasting interpretations of these norms shaping “both the community and the game itself, as the constant negotiations about the proper codes of practice can also said to be negotiations about the boundaries and meaning of play” (Glas, 2012, 32). Given this ongoing negotiation, it is therefore more difficult to make clear distinctions between ‘standard’ play, deviant play, and grief play in online games where players cannot so easily separate themselves from one another.

One such play type that is difficult to pin down is “greed play”, which is defined by Foo and Koivisto (2004, 249) as a play act that is “not specifically intended to disrupt and yet the actor is the sole beneficiary.” Although the player in this case may have no intention to grief others and their actions are not in breach of any developer-instigated rule, these other players may yet “feel grieved if they have been annoyed or disturbed as a result of that action nonetheless.” The idea is applied within *World of Warcraft*, where there is found to be several play acts which can quite easily be categorised as forms of greed play, such as ninja looting (taking loot from enemies slain by somebody else), kill stealing (landing the final, experience-granting blow on an enemy damaged by another player), and mob camping (repeatedly killing the same enemies as they respawn). This idea of the greed player as one who does not specifically intend to disrupt, although whose actions might easily cause disruptions nonetheless, is an apt way to describe the breaking of strategic norms in *League of Legends*. Here, a greed player may disregard the strategies implicit in the meta and instead opt for an experimental approach to competition. In this case, even though the player in question might be aligned with the rest of their team in their *desire* to win the game, their unique and potentially contentious approach to *how* the win the game is key to their manifestation as a potentially disruptive force.

As with many competitive online games, *League of Legends* is the subject of frequent patches which occasionally bring sweeping changes to both the game client and the core mechanics of gameplay. As mentioned previously, the game is online only, and players *must* download the latest version of the game if they wish to play – in effect, older versions of the game are unavailable to consumers, and won’t be until such times that Riot Games makes these versions available. As such, before moving on to the discussion of *League of Legends* proper, it is appropriate to reference the works of Carter (2015) and Newman (2012), which argue for the recognition of these transformative properties in scholarly works, with Newman (2012, 141) stating that such games are not standalone and definable objects but rather “part of an extensive, growing and mutating collection of many related objects that evolve over time.” As an example, neither certain game mechanics referenced by Ferrari (2013) and the player-based ‘Tribunal’ system of governance discussed by Kou and Nardi (2014) no longer exist as part of *League of Legends*. While the overall themes, intentions, and scholarly value of these works remain (and I intend for this work to be the same in these respects), it is nonetheless important to highlight the fact that the specific game content examples to be discussed are not exempt from eradication at the hands of ongoing game development.

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

League of Legends is a popular MOBA game in which two teams of five players fight to destroy the opposing team’s base while at the same time working to defend their own. Games offer a combination of tower-defence, real-time strategy, and role-playing gameplay, with players required to master both macro-strategy and fast-paced individual combat in their efforts to win games consistently. A game of *League of Legends* can last anywhere between fifteen and seventy minutes, though games typically run between twenty-five and forty minutes each.

Each player takes command of one of (at the time of writing) 134 playable “Champions”, and makes this selection before entering the game instance proper. In the competitive ranked modes, Champion selection takes the form of a draft, wherein teams take turns banning Champions from selection (by

either team) and selecting their own. Depending on their potential for a variety of in-game item and spell “builds”, any given Champion will generally fall into one or two playstyle-based roles, such as “Tank” or “Bruiser”, and “Mage” or “Assassin”, and “Jungler” or “Fighter”.

While players may team up and queue for a game as a party of anywhere from two to five, the most popular mode is “solo queue”, a ranked mode wherein players may queue only solo or with *one* other player. This means that in any given solo queue team, a player will be matched with either three or four strangers, thereby making the need for a set of mutually-held norms (both social and strategic) a key factor of solo queue play.

The Metagame

Since the game’s release, the player community has developed a position and role-based strategic framework, referred to as the “meta” or “metagame”, which allows for teams of solo players to quickly form cohesive team compositions during the brief Champion selection period. Since its inception, the meta has been a core tenet of play across all levels of competition and across all major game servers, and while Champions themselves might find themselves assigned new positions due to updates and changes to the game, the core positional framework has for the most part remained unchanged since its inception. The positions and roles concerned by the meta’s strategic norms are as follows:

Top: Positioned at the top of the map, the top player will often use a combat-oriented and difficult-to-kill Champion, and equip a teleport spell so that they may join their team in skirmishes when they are needed.

Mid: Positioned in the middle of the map, the mid player has the quickest access to the rest of the map, and as such they will usually pick powerful mages or assassins who can efficiently roam to the top or bottom of the map for quick kills.

Jungle: The jungler roams the areas between their teammates and seeks to control the flow of the game by ensuring their team has vision across the map and joining up with their teammates when the enemy is vulnerable.

Bot/Support: Both players are positioned together at the bottom of the map. The bot player will usually take control of a weak and vulnerable Champion (often referred to as an “ADC”, or “Attack Damage Carry”) who requires time to level up and acquire powerful equipment. The Support player protects the Bot player using a utility-based Champion.

Prior to the 2016 game season, players would negotiate with one another during Champion selection to ensure fair and equitable position assignments. The game client itself, however, paid no mind to these preferences, and as such, disagreements were not uncommon, generally situating around two players who wanted to play the same position. In early 2016, however, Riot “enforced” the meta by introducing a new game queue system which has players select their two preferred positions *prior* to entering the queue proper. The change to the role-based queueing system as mentioned has for the most part curtailed the necessity of pre-game negotiations of the sort mentioned.

Rules of Play

The basis for developer-defined fair and enjoyable play in *League of Legends* can be deciphered through two official rules documents. The first, “The Summoner’s Code”, is a “blueprint for positive behaviour”, and although many of its items concern broad themes and behaviours, it is these rules that are used as a baseline for players in their evaluations of deviant behaviour. They are as follows:

- Support Your Team
- Drive Constructive Feedback
- Facilitate Civil Discussion

- Enjoy Yourself, but not at Anyone Else's Expense
- Build Relationships
- Show Humility in Victory, and Grace in Defeat
- Be Resolute, not Indignant
- Leave No Newbie Behind!
- Lead by Example

While the Summoner's Code can effectively be used to evaluate a wide range of behaviour, Riot Games nonetheless maintain several key rules concerning the extreme behaviours they deem to be reportable in all cases and, conversely, behaviours or actions which are *not* to be reported ("Reporting a Player"). "Reportable behaviour" is as follows:

- Direct offensiveness
- Socially offensive/explicit language
- Purposefully losing the game or empowering the enemy team through deliberate action
- Not focusing on the team aspect of the game
- Deliberately refusing to participate in the game

The "acceptable behaviours" listed in this same document are:

- Making mistakes or poor judgement calls
- Strong but non-derogatory terms to emphasise an event in the game
- Tactical disagreements
- Not speaking the same language
- Not sticking to the metagame

If a player is reported enough times for enacting one or more of the reportable behaviours, an automated "instant feedback system" will check the reports for validity, and will follow up (in the case that the reports are valid) with an appropriate punishment, such as a chat restriction, or in extreme cases, account suspensions or permanent bans. Some behaviours, however, such as being AFK (away from keyboard) for extended periods during a game, can be detected and punished automatically, regardless of player reports.

Kou and Nardi (2014) find that these rules of engagement are too unclear to allow players the ability to make clear-cut decisions about certain deviant behaviours. For example, it is found that even though Riot have enacted a rule prohibiting players for reporting others based on tactical disagreements or for refusing to stick to the metagame, players might nonetheless identify these behaviours as being tantamount to a refusal to follow the "Support Your Team" rule. As will be explored in the following case, players are in fact quite aware of the vagueness of these rules, often using this as a point to critique or undermine Riot Games' decision making in its role as the rules enforcer.

THE CASE OF ADELLAIDESKYHART

In November 2016, it came to the attention of the *League of Legends* player community that 'AdelaideSkyhart', a player on the North American game server, had been threatened with a permanent account ban due to deviant in-game behaviour. This behaviour, while certainly deviant to some degree, was not so clearly definable as a "reportable offense" in terms of Riot Games' rules. With the official *League of Legends*' Reddit board (or 'subreddit') as the main discussion space, players engaged in analysis of this behaviour and whether the punishment would be warranted, using their own understandings of how the game should be played, to do so.

AdelaideSkyhart is of a player type referred to within the *League of Legends* community as a "meta-breaker" – a player who engages in strategies that fall outside of the commonly-understood strategic

framework described earlier. While typical deviant play of this sort involves playing Champions ‘out of position’, such as playing a Support Champion in the Jungle, for example, AdellaideSkyhart instead employed a strategy that operated outside of the positional framework *entirely* – thereby subverting not only the players’ mutual understanding of how to play, but also the position-based queue system itself. The specifics of the strategy are as follows.

AdellaideSkyhart is a player of a unique Champion known as “Singed”, a character known for his strong defensive and evasive qualities, and his unique combat style. Unlike most Champions which engage in combat via auto-attacks and activated abilities, Singed’s primary method of offense is a poisonous gas which trails behind him as he moves around the map. Entering this gas cloud causes enemies to take damage over time, and staying in the gas for a prolonged period can result in a quite unexpected death, as one’s health will continue to ‘tick down’ for a while even after leaving the cloud – hence one of the core tenets of *League of Legends* play: “Don’t chase Singed”. Although commonly employed as a Top Champion, AdellaideSkyhart would instead queue for the Support position, but instead of playing with and protecting the Bot player, he would roam the map, delving into enemy territory to steal resources and disrupt the strategies of his opponents who could do little to fight back (Don’t chase Singed). Since this strategy was enacted as part of a clear attempt to win the game, though was independent of the wishes of any teammates, it is therefore appropriate to categorise the behaviour as a form of greed play.

On November 14, 2016, a user named “emernic” alerted the official *League of Legends* subreddit of the news that AdellaideSkyhart had been threatened by a ban with a post entitled, “2 million mastery point smite support singed receives threat of permaban”. In the post, emernic shares a screenshot of a conversation between AdellaideSkyhart and a representative of Riot Games, in which AdellaideSkyhart requests clarification as to why his account has been repeatedly suspended without clear reasoning. Riot Games’ response is as follows:

“Your account was manually audited and was found to be engaging in negative behaviour. This is different from the instant feedback system. Your account was found to be affecting a lot of players negatively and therefore have been placed on a two week suspension. Should this behaviour continue and another manual audit happens, it will result in a permanent suspension

“While picking Singed Support isn’t inherently bannable, refusing to work with your teammates is. This includes communicating with your teammates what you want to do. You are affecting a lot of players negatively and this is bannable. I highly recommend not doing it anymore except doing it with a group of friends who don’t mind that you’re playing Singed support to go counter jungle, not build Sightstone [a common item for Support players], and roam.

“I understand you want to play Singed Support, however, your teammates do not want you to play Singed Support.”

Emernic subsequently offers the following analysis of the situation:

“The warning does say that "picking Singed Support isn't inherently bannable." However, the other two reasons given are "refusing to communicate with team" and "refusing to work with team"... There is no explanation of how he is "refusing to work with team" other than the fact that he is playing the (admittedly unpopular) role of support Singed. This guy isn't trolling, he is legitimately TRYING to win....

“...If we weren't allowed to try new things in a competitive environment, how would we ever discover what works?... Why is innovation being stamped out? These people aren't trolls, they are part of what makes league interesting rather than a dull stagnant

environment. People are encouraged to "try new strategies" during preseason, but then are banned when they actually do?"

Emernic identifies two aspects of AdellaideSkyhart's play that he argues should exempt him from the potential ban: firstly, his desire to win games with the strategy (as opposed to intentionally grief his teammates), and secondly, his value as a player-innovator. The first can be quite easily aligned with an interpretation of the following two rules: "Support Your Team", and the rule prohibiting players for reporting teammates due to tactical disagreements – here, although emernic accepts the deviant nature of AdellaideSkyhart's approach, they should nonetheless be protected due to their adherence to *this particular interpretation* of these two rules. The second clearly relates to the prohibition of player reports of teammates who do not stick to the meta, which again, emernic believes should exempt AdellaideSkyhart from punitive measures due to the value of player freedom to experiment with strategies.

At the time of writing, emernic's post has reached almost 8000 user comments. The top-rated comment (based on Reddit's system of user voting) is from user "Ask_If_Im_A_Cat", who asks, "In the link the Rito Support said "not building sightstone", so basically I can report my support if he doesnt build sightstone?" While the Sightstone is a highly-valued Support item given its ability to provide one's team with excellent vision of otherwise hidden parts of the game map, the rules provision regarding reports for "tactical agreements" does appear to protect players who choose *not* to purchase the item from punishment – as user "hoihoi661" points out with the comment, "Sigh, riot oh sweet sweet contradictory riot," followed by a link to the "Reporting a Player" guidelines which includes this provision. This highlights a key issue with the "Summoner's Code", in that although its open-endedness is employed so that Riot Games and the player base may continually renegotiate conceptions of acceptable approaches to play, the lack of concrete language regarding in-game mechanical and strategic elements makes it difficult for players to evaluate judgements such as the one cast down to AdellaideSkyhart.

Players will also use eSports as a de facto measuring stick for how amateur or casual players might approach their own games. Razzbry comments simply, "*TFW MF SUPPORT*", a reference to the Season 6 World Championship tournament, in which a Korean team selected Miss Fortune (MF), usually played as a Bot Champion, as their Support. In response, another makes the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that the professional player who 'pioneered' MF Support, will be suspended for his refusal to stick to the meta. Although their comparison here is not completely apt (Miss Fortune was revealed to be a surprise counter-play against a single enemy Champion), players are nonetheless quick to highlight perceived inconsistencies in Riot Games' treatment of its player base.

The original poster, emernic, also makes an interesting comparison between their interpretation of Riot Games' stance on experimental strategies and the more commonly-accepted, though unsuccessful strategies: "If I see a teammate pick something like Vayne bot, can I report them for "refusing to work with team" if they don't pick a different champion just because I hate Vayne bot?" "Barbecue-Ribs" makes a similar point: "...who is to decide what is viable or not? The meta? Riot? Can we...ban all shitty Yasuos from ranked? What about shitty Vayne players? What is different, fundamentally, from this Singed player and a bronze Yasuo with a 0.5 KDA?" While these may initially seem like limited assessments of the situation, the correlation between Champion popularity and success rate is highly surprising (see Figure 1).

| # | Champion | Win rate | Games played |
|-----|--------------|----------|--------------|
| 65 | Jhin | 49.40% | 479,097 |
| 4 | Miss Fortune | 52.75% | 311,017 |
| 106 | Thresh | 47.13% | 308,762 |
| 50 | Varus | 49.89% | 303,016 |
| 81 | Caitlyn | 48.29% | 276,105 |
| 113 | Lee Sin | 46.67% | 274,631 |
| 80 | Lux | 48.35% | 229,611 |
| 92 | Vayne | 47.75% | 216,564 |
| 43 | Graves | 50.29% | 214,522 |
| 118 | Ezreal | 46.24% | 214,033 |

Figure 1: The ten most-played Champions on the Silver league of the North American *League of Legends* server during the month of February 2017 (“Game stats by champion”)

The success of these Champions clearly has little effect on their actual popularity in the game, with the ‘worst of the best’, Ezreal, then the 17th worst-performing out of all 134 available Champions. Emeric’s tongue-in-cheek suggestion, therefore, is that if a Champion has a reputation or is known for being a ‘bad’ pick, then perhaps the player of this Champion is breaking the “Support Your Team” or “Enjoy Yourself, but not at Anyone’s Expense” rules. The implicit question being raised, therefore, is whether a strategy with an unknown success rate is more acceptable than a strategy with a poor success rate.

Where emernic and others place the most value on AdellaideSkyhart’s *drive* to win games and their value to the community as an “innovator” (as opposed to deviant), a great number of players are not sympathetic, instead placing more value on an enjoyable play environment regardless of the ‘spirit’ of competition. “Pablowa” authors a response post which argues for a reconceptualisation of the limits within which players like AdellaideSkyhart should be free to experiment (“The difference between an off-meta pick and an off-role pick”):

“I am completely fine with people playing off-meta picks. If you wanna play only lee sin support, go for it... That is completely fine and nobody should be banned for that in my opinion... Here is the thing though: That guy is not playing Singed Support. He is not supporting his adc. He doesn’t buy wards, he doesn’t help his adc scale into lategame. he doesn’t make sure that his adc has a chance to play his game properly. And i am not denieng that roaming and invading the enemy jungler can not be very helpful to your team, but at this point you are not palyng support. You are playing Counterjungler-Roamer... If you choose Draft pick, you agree to play the meta. And if you are clearly not doing that, you may be ruiing the game for your team, and therefore may be banned for it.”

This shows how the meta’s switch from a purely player-held construction to an explicit part of the ranked queue system has impacted the player community’s conception of the meta itself. Here, two

rules are in almost direct competition with one another: the rules of the game system, which have players select positions prior to ranked games, and the rule of not reporting players who do not conform to the meta. One might consider this in terms of how literally one considers the term “metagame” – does it exist as a simple colloquial term within the *League of Legends* community to define popular player-created strategy, or does it refer to *only* out-of-game strategies in the way that its scholarly definition implies? Pablowa is clearly arguing for a conception similar to the latter. Therefore, by directly operating outside of the responsibilities inherent in the position (which, ironically, are still defined by players, even if the position itself is not) assigned to them *by the game client itself*, AdellaideSkyhart’s play could be considered a breach of the Summoner’s Code.

User “McSmallFries” disagrees with Pablowa with the assertion that “meta isn’t a rule,” and goes on to make a clear distinction between the Summoner’s Code rules and the social norms AdellaideSkyhart is ostensibly in violation of: “It isn’t as if this player hasn’t seen success with this pick, he has 2 million mastery points and a decent w/r [win-rate]. The rule is “Intentionally feeding”, “Trolling”, “Griefing”. This player isn’t doing any of those things.” Davidboo25 expands: “. . . Riot never explains what a “support” should be. Sure, the meta is duo bot lane and buy sightstone. But Riot never explicitly says that this is the only way that support should be played. If the player wants to “support” his way then let him. He shouldn’t be banned for not playing the game the same way as everyone else.” This raises another issue of vocabulary, in that the responsibilities inherent of the “support” position are distinct from the more general responsibilities made explicit by the “support your team” rule – this is clear by DogTheGayFish’s addition: “Isn’t the job of a support to support the whole team?” These observations appear to have resulted from Riot’s incorporation of the meta into the game client *without an accompanying change in the legal rules*. Considering this lack of clarification on the part of the developer, it would appear that both Pablowa and his or her detractors have perfectly reasonable interpretations of the (both legal and code-based) rules of the game.

Many of these statements have addressed the rights of the *League of Legends* player to engage in experimental strategy. Some, like emernic, have vehemently defended that right in light of the perception that AdellaideSkyhart’s ban is essentially an affront to this right, whereas Pablowa takes the stance that the player’s rights in this arena are limited in order to maintain a high quality of game experience. What is interesting is that although discussions have centred around this issue of strategic freedom, Riot Games’ original message to AdellaideSkyhart is concerned by a wider range of behaviour, such as communication – even if the developer isn’t specific about how these infringements allegedly manifest in-game.

“MidAhriOrFeed” attempts to elucidate that which is unclear in the developer’s original message:

“By forcefully breaking the meta against 4 other people’s will, you are not being innovative. You are straight up ruining people’s games. Nobody should be forced to break the meta with you because the current meta is the safest way to play and breaking the meta has its risks.”

Here, MidAhriOrFeed is suggesting that the team of strangers is made cohesive by the existence of the meta – by the commonly-held understanding of how the game is to be played. Therefore, if *one* solo player employs an experimental strategy, *all other players* are therefore party to this experiment, regardless of their individual willingness to be a part of it in the first place. The abandoned Bot player, for example, *must* alter their playstyle to be successful in some way, and this change in playstyle will have an impact on the remaining three players. This understanding of play places “Enjoy Yourself, but not at Anyone’s Expense” at the top of the hierarchy of competing rules, thereby situating AdellaideSkyhart’s style of greed play as a punishable offense.

Although the exact behaviours enacted by AdellaideSkyhart *beyond* their choice of strategy are unclear, the point of this qualitative analysis isn’t to cast judgement or take sides in the player

discussion – rather, it is to demonstrate how players might interpret the unclear, and perhaps even vague and contradictory, legal rules of *League of Legends* when Riot Games’ casts a contentious judgement.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The case of AdellaideSkyhart paints an intriguing picture of norm and rule interpretation in and around an online game and its community. Unfortunately, however, a joint conclusion to the issue has not yet been reached, and in fact, February of 2017 saw another competitively-successful player struck with punitive measures for many of the same reasons. While the point of this paper is not to form an account of how some event played out within a player community, some sort of definitive outcome (if there ever is one) could quite easily form the basis for similar research given the uniqueness of this interplay of norms and rules.

CONCLUSION

The discussions that took place around the banning of AdellaideSkyhart demonstrate the existence of closely-held relationships between *League of Legends* players and their respective conceptions of *how* the game should be played based on interpretations of what are fundamentally unclear behavioural rules. When evaluating deviant behaviour, players here may not be content to blindly accept rulings handed down by Riot Games, since the vague nature of the rules themselves means that these rulings *must also* stem from the developer’s subjective interpretation. In the case of AdellaideSkyhart, players draw from their own experiences, previous rulings, and understanding of the rules and norms in their expressions of satisfaction/dissatisfaction regarding the behavioural ruling.

Importantly, however, the fate of AdellaideSkyhart is *not* the only thing at stake here. As the ultimate enforcer of the rules, Riot Games’ interpretations of these rules and their relationship to player-developed norms play a significant role in shaping an understanding of how the game should be understood and played. The comments presented here (even those featuring a degree of humour) go beyond AdellaideSkyhart and seek instead to address larger issues related to meaning-making in competitive *League of Legends*. Whether they agree with the behaviours in question or not, here players evaluate deviant behaviours not as isolated occurrences, but rather as representations of an understanding of what it is to play *League of Legends*. Therefore, when these approaches to the game are specifically addressed by the game developer and evaluated based on a singular interpretation of imprecise rules, it is recognised that an important shift in understanding may be underway.

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