

Lore v. Representation: Narrative Communication of Power with Regard to Gender in *League of Legends*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the differences in narrative presented in the lore (the canonical history, aims and personality) and the digital representation of characters in the game *League of Legends*. We use a combination of close media analysis and broader trend analysis of the champion roster in order to demonstrate this ludonarrative dissonance, alongside metanarrative discussion from the community forum. We discuss the implications of discordance between lore and implementation from a gender-power perspective, highlighting in particular the presentation of performative femininity as a design factor superseding that of narrative logic. Implications of these findings are discussed.

General Terms

Design, Human Factors.

Keywords

League of Legends, narrative, culture, video game studies, gender, objectification, avatars.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we examine the expression of social power difference through creative construction. Specifically, we seek to analyse how this balance of power is communicated through the presentation of characters in the multiplayer-online-battle-arena game *League of Legends*. We examine the narrative of playable characters ('champions') as presented in the official lore (the canonical history, aims and personality of these characters), and the digital representation of characters in the game (their visual appearance, gameplay traits, and voice acting). These combine to form a meta-narrative that is consumed by approximately 27 million players, and then re-produced and re-presented in discussions on online forums, fan-theories of lore and upcoming changes to the game, and fan-fiction featuring places and characters from the game.

The meta-narrative for many champions is discordant and often clumsy for a number of reasons which we consider meaningful to our argument. We aim to show that in particular gender tropes in the representation of female characters conflict with, or take precedence over, their narrative construction. We argue that is the result and expression of a cultural hegemony in which the male gaze is privileged and legitimized.

1.1 Context

This paper begins with certain assumptions regarding the socio-cultural construction of objects. We accept the established view that a given artefact does not exist in isolation, but is both result and part of wider networks of meaning-making and power [1, 3, 5, 13]. This assumption allows us to view cultural objects as being coded with socio-cultural meaning, which may be deciphered using different perspectives and modes of analysis. Narrative objects may therefore carry meaning in two ways; firstly as part of the story to which they belong and secondly as social products. This is the epistemological standpoint informing our discussion of League of Legends champions as narrative constructs. We seek to compare the narrative informing their existence in a fantasy game world with the coded real-world socio-cultural meanings embodied through them.

Riot games, the publishers of League of Legends, are in continuous dialogue with fans and players. The community has a large say in how and which changes are implemented (although the final say is always with the developers) and the development of an effective metagame is considered to be of particular importance to the community [2]. This exemplifies the co-constructive relationship between game developers and their audience, in which cultural products (video games) are made and consumed, and therefore works comfortably within our constructionist epistemology.

League of Legends champions offer several unique methodological affordances. They exist as semi-discrete objects in the context of League of Legends. This means that they can be looked at independently as they are not dependent on or crucial to wider plot. Like most video game characters they are given logic for their existence in the form of 'lore'. It is through lore, play mechanics, and image that champions are narratively coded. Champions are also constantly in a state of existential flux. The world to which they 'belong' is continuously being worked and re-worked as patches are applied and new champions are added. Not only this, but their individual backstories may be retro-fitted to better suit new narratives as the 'story' of League of Legends is changed. This iterative process of creation, in which backstories and play mechanics are continuously changed according to audience feedback and top-down design approaches, contributes to noticeable amounts of discordance between lore and play, which we term 'ludonarrative dissonance'[6, 14]. This is not a new concept in game studies, but our decision to examine it as an expression of gendered hypernarrative is novel.

1.2 Hypotheses

- That there is dissonance between the narrative construction of characters as presented by the game lore, their graphical design and representation, and their gameplay style.

- That in female characters this disjuncture will be predominantly influenced by the need to visually code them as feminine and erotic objects.
- That the gendered difference of this disjuncture is an expression of power networks in which ‘femaleness’ is continuously produced and reproduced as ‘other’ and essential regardless of other narrative logics.

2. METHODOLOGY

1.1 The research site: A brief overview of League of Legends

Unlike other game worlds, the world in which League of Legends is situated is not established through libraries of pulp fiction or narrative-based in-game quests. The lore created to give the League of Legends battle arena provenance is subject to change, and narratives which were at one time canonical are subject to change or removal. This is in part due to its origins as a ‘mod’ of Warcraft III, a fantasy-based RTSG with a substantial backstory. In making League of Legends a discrete game its creators could no longer use the copyrighted narratives of the Warcraft universe, but chose to develop a different fantasy setting in which the game would take place. Runeterra, Valoran, and the League of Justice were created as a result.

Runeterra is a fantasy world in which magical wars have split the land into continents. Valoran is one of these continents, populated by humans, animals, and magical hybrids of both. Its populace predominantly live in governed countries and city-states, of which there are nine.

The city-states are as follows: Demacia, Shurima, Freljord, Noxus, Ionia, Zaun, Piltover, Bandle City, and Bilgewater. There appears to be little logic behind the design of the regions of Valoran beyond providing background colour to the champions. Demacia is a caricature of medieval morality led by a constitutional monarchy. Its arch-rival, Noxus, is the antithesis of Demacia as its citizens value power above all else.

As proof of their mettle as a cruel and power-hungry adversary, Noxus obligingly invades and lays waste to surrounding lands. The ‘oriental’ lands of Shurima and Ionia suffer in particular. Shurima is vaguely themed around ancient Egypt and was once a great empire built on the backs of slaves. At this time in the lore it is once again rising from the desert thanks to its inhabitant human-animal hybrid demi-gods and ‘ascended’ spirits. Ionia is the ‘far east’ of Valoran whose inhabitants are non-violent masters of martial arts [sic] who strive for inner spiritual peace. Other ‘lands’ without direct governance include the Kumungu jungle, the Void (a space between the worlds which occasionally spawns hideous monsters), and the Shadow Isles.

After these states’ constant squabbling threatened to wreak further destruction on the landscape, a council of key magicians and ‘summoners’ (sorcerers) found a new way for the states to resolve political differences and disputes, and formed an organisation named the League of Legends. The League was an effectively utilitarian solution to the problem of war. As diplomatic resolution to conflict was unlikely, and war ill-advised, a microcosm of violence was created. Each city was described sends representative ‘champions’ to the League to battle. Additionally, individual fighters attracted by chances of fame or the opportunity to do battle with their enemies are also allowed to fight, as voluntary gladiators were.

That the world in which the League is situated was stitched together from need rather than as a unique fantasy is clear from its

construction. This lack of foundational logic also forces continuous retro-fitting and plot-hole patching. It relies heavily on comfortable tropes and stereotypes which form easily-recognisable codes for players to read and understand as meaningful. It also allows its genre genealogy to show through. Early champions have obvious DOTA2 counterparts, which were themselves descendants of the Warcraft universe. Later character designs make the effort to produce unique champions, and retrofitted lore changes intend to make the world more distinct from its predecessors and counterparts. This aims to create a more satisfying for players who look for more than effective mechanics in their online games and want the illusion of a virtual fantasy world as a foundation [15], but is often not consistently carried out, contributing to the ludonarrative dissonance which is so problematic in *League*.

The largest of these changes took place in 2015, when the lore surrounding the League of Justice was removed entirely, along with the logic of players as ‘summoners’. There is therefore nothing currently coercing champions to fight beyond their own will.

1.2 Method

There are 130 playable champions in the League of Legends roster at the time of writing. A full discussion of each champion would be unfeasible for the scope of a position paper. Instead we created a taxonomy to describe the physical characteristics of champions and queried it to identify overall gendered trends in representation. We then narrowed our approach with with a small random sample of champions by gender: three males and three females.

| Male | Female |
|----------|------------|
| Garen | Wayne |
| Malzahar | Shyvana |
| Swain | Cassiopeia |

Table 1. Champions selected for close analysis.

We analysed each champion in our sample in terms of their construction. We aimed to break down each champion into components of narrative construction (made up of their lore, speech and visual representation), and their mechanical construction (play mechanics, additional ‘skins’, movements, and trivia) in order to gauge ludonarrative consistency. We paid particular attention to the ways in which these codes differed, and what these differences said about cultural products, and about social attitudes towards gender.

We also examined how players of the game perceive these elements and the relation between them by searching for each champion by name on the (predominantly English-speaking) North American and Europe-West community forums¹ and examining threads over the course of the last year that related specifically to lore and/or gameplay. In this paper, we provide a small sample of comments made as an illustration, but a future study to quantify the number of comment types (gameplay, lore, etc.) and their position on these issues (over/under-powered, harmonious/dissonant, etc.), may also prove valuable.

¹ [http://boards.\[na/euw\].leagueoflegends.com](http://boards.[na/euw].leagueoflegends.com)

3. ANALYSIS

3.1 Overview

Of the 130 characters currently available in *League*, only 44 are female (33.8%). This reflects current trends in wider media and pop culture, in which female characters are generally outnumbered by their male counterparts. In many video games the fashion is for muscle-bound, mesomorphic male characters [4, 8] and while half (51%) of male champions fit this stereotype, male champions also exhibit a wide range in physicality. Characters only vaguely humanoid in biology or even wholly monstrous or animal in appearance are overwhelmingly male (94%). This demonstrates that there is no perceived need to communicate to the audience through a meta-narrative that the character is, indeed, male. Thus maleness is communicated to be normative and inessential [4, 12].

Compared to this, the presentation of female champions largely as slim, large-breasted, white and Western (64%) is especially problematic. Hyper-muscular and monster female characters are notable for being exceptional (7%). Where male animal-human hybrids look more like the animal, female hybrids overwhelming retain secondary sex characteristics associated with ‘femaleness’. The perceived need to communicate femaleness to the audience through the meta-narrative supersedes all other requirements. This is expressive of a power hierarchy which positions maleness as normal and femaleness as performative [4].

3.2 Close Analysis: Male Champions

1.2.1 Garen: The Might of Demacia

Lore: In a stellar case of nominative determinism, Garen Crownguard is the captain of the royal Dauntless Vanguard and a valiant warrior. Garen was introduced as the antithesis of an ‘edgy’ champion by his designers, and this can be seen in both his lore and visual representation. He is strong-jawed, Aryan in appearance, and heavily kitted in shining plate and mail armour along with an enormous sword. He hails from Demacia (see section 3.1) and as such adheres to a rigid moral code. He does, however, harbor secret and complicated feelings for Katarina, a Noxian assassin, sworn enemy, and also a champion in the League of Legends.

Representation: The descriptive narrative of Garen as a mighty and just warrior is carried out in all aspects of his construction. His expressions are voiced by Jamieson Price, a voice actor known for his deep, booming tones and reflect Garen’s uncomplicated, patriotic personality. His skins, too, are variations on armour with fantasy and historical influences. When played in a team with or against Katarina his interactions become mildly flirtatious, playing on cultural tropes of performative masculinity in the form of displays of strength. His gameplay is similarly straightforward, consisting of single-target and area-of-effect attacks with his enormous sword. The only perceivable break from the straight-faced presentation of a stalwart warrior character is in his dance, which is that of the cartoon character and parody of masculinity Johnny Bravo. This adds a knowing, tongue-in-cheek aspect to Garen’s play which is not overt in his narrative construction given the prevalence of similarly muscle-bound and stereotypically ‘heroic’ characters.

Meta-Narrative:

In terms of discussion about Garen’s mechanics, there was broad disagreement of his viability in the metagame. Some users suggested as he was designed as simple champion for new players

to learn on, he was weaker than more complex counterparts, whereas others suggested he was currently too powerful:

“He’s meant to be a newbie champion, as such he’s incredibly one-dimensional and has a very boring style of play.”

“Garen have never being a tank, he is a bruiser. 90% of lol player played him whit only defence item...build deal senseless damage on him while being still tanky enough to run trough enemy team...”

“Pls Rito nerf Garen!!!!”

One particularly interesting comment noted that a recent change to Garen’s mechanics (dealing bonus damage against a designated “villain”) integrated well with his lore:

“by adding mechanics, they tell out a major part of Garen’s lore without writing out a new chunk of text to deem “Canon”...You’re stuck with this strict set of rules that you think are hurting you ultimately, and are unsure if you should break them because of what you think is good, or what the set of rules says. This is nearly a direct parallel to Garen’s more literal lore, in which he supposedly broke the Demacian code to hunt Katarina, even though that is beyond taboo for any good Demacian citizen.”

1.2.2 Malzahar: The Prophet of the Void

Lore: In aeons past, according to the lore, there existed in what are now the desert lands of Shurima (see section 3.1) a storied, cyclopean city named Icatia. The seer Malzahar traveled on foot through the desert in search of it, without food or water. Finding it cost him his sanity. The Void filled him with power and hideous premonitions of Void-spawn monsters eating the world. Malzahar shares this history with ‘the mad Arab Abdul al’Hazred’, a recurring character in Lovecraftian mythos.

Representation: Malzahar’s appearance is a fantasy approach to the orientalist Arabian trope – an Aladdin lookalike in turban, mask, and loose silken clothing. His possession by Void powers gives him glowing eyes and the ability to float over the ground. His powers include spawning miniature void monsters, creating pools of negative energy, and infecting enemy minds with malefic visions. Despite the overt orientalist notes of Malzahar’s appearance, his visual coding and lore do maintain a certain coherence. His skins, too, are informed by the same aesthetics. Exceptions to this are his ‘Snow Day’ skin, a limited-edition release which subverted his narrative of malevolent Eastern mystery, and his dance, that of MC Hammer’s ‘Can’t Touch This’ (a joke playing on the similarity of their legwear).

Meta-Narrative:

As with Garen, there was widespread disagreement on Malzahar’s abilities and utility, with some users derisively stating that he takes little skill to perform well, with others arguing that his mechanics are more complex:

“except for someone extremely tanky he is just going to ult you and melt you down, and people say all you have to do is build a qss [an in-game item] but it doesn’t help that much and there shouldn’t be a champ that forces me to buy a certain item ...please rework malzahar so that his champ takes skill, and can’t just one shot everyone that goes mid lane.”

There were a number of comments calling for his appearance to be updated and improved:

“think malzahar really needs an visual update...I honestly think you could make him look abit better so that he fits in with everyone else and their updates.”

There was also some discussion of his lore, which mainly focused on theorising at his “true” motivations:

“I have a theory: what if Malzahar hasn't actually sided with the Void, but is only "faking" it?”

1.2.3 Swain: The Master Tactician

Lore: Jericho Swain is a citizen of Noxus (see section 3.1) who walks with a crutch as a result of a childhood injury for which he refused magical treatment. At this time a six-eyed raven was already his constant companion. Despite the limp which would normally have seen him cast out of Noxus, Swain rose through military ranks, finally beating Keiran Darkwill to become grand general. Despite his frail middle-aged appearance Swain is described as stoic and strong.

Representation: The lore is carried strongly through Swain’s appearance and further skins, which follow military and/or otherwise menacing aesthetic lines. His voice, which in lore is described as harsh and deep, is similarly consistently presented. His gameplay, on the other hand, is completely apart from this narrative logic. Swain is played as a close-range mage with the ability to transform into an enormous demonic bird-creature. The raven on his shoulder, for which there is little to no official information apart from its name (Beatrice), plays a major part in magical attacks including a rooting ability named ‘Nevermove’. While suitably malevolent for a citizen of Noxus, it bears no relation to Swain’s lore as a soldier or military commander.

Meta-Narrative:

While champion lore is usually an uncommon topic of discussion among players compared to gameplay, the mis-match of Swain’s lore and gameplay is noticeable enough to prompt discussion:

“According to his lore, swain is a master tactitioner who beats his enemies with strategic planning rather than raw power. In reality swain turns into a bird and runs into people while sustaining the damage he takes. I find it kind of funny.”

“...how is it that Swain is a mage? I mean, they never mention anything of it in his lore.”

“Swains background is a complete mystery and so are the origins of his abilities.”

3.3 Close Analysis: Female Champions

1.2.4 Vayne: The Night Hunter

Lore: Shauna Vayne’s design and narrative are influenced by a number of streams in popular culture and media including Bram Stoker’s Dracula. Her lore is very similar to that of DC Comics’ Batman or Huntress characters, but while they eschew murder she is on a crusade of vengeance following the death of her parents.

Representation: This lore positions her as an assassin, but in gameplay and mechanics she executes a ranged damage style associated with steady damage over time. Her visual presentation is influenced by even more disparate sources, including Marvel Comics’ Blade and PlatinumGames’ Bayonetta, producing a costume consisting of a slinky catsuit, stiletto boots, cape, and tinted glasses. Although not described as having magical abilities, Vayne comfortably carries an enormous crossbow on her slim back with no noticeable difficulty.

Vayne lacks a unified character but the overall character tropes associated with a vengeful hunter are carried through into her speech (if given the ‘joke’ command, for example, she will refuse)

and other actions (her ‘dance’ is based on a martial arts routine). This does not, however, extend to her skins, which vary greatly in their presentation of the champion. While the ‘vindicator’ and ‘aristocratic’ permutations remain close to the champion origins, the ‘dragonlayer’ and ‘arlight’ lose this narrative logic in favour of skimpiness. By far the most jarring is the ‘heartseeker’ skin, which re-imagines Vayne as a cutesy Cupid-like character in striped pink stockings and bedecked with love hearts, presumably as an amusing and ‘sexy’ juxtaposition to her normally stern demeanor.

Meta-Narrative:

Interestingly, the community seems to be in agreement that Vayne is a very powerful champion, and actually *dislikes* her for this reason:

“Vayne is pretty much a ranged [version of the melee champion] lee sin. This abomination can duel anyone.”

Her lore has also stimulated debate as to whether she might form an alliance with Lucian, another character with a similar background. However, some of her character traits make other players skeptical:

“...Vayne and Lucian's lore...seems like they have common goals. Are they going to form some kind of team or alliance in the future?”

“...a rioter posted about how Vayne and Lucian are like two sides to the same coin. They're fighting the same fight, but on very different fronts. So it would take quite an event to get them to team up together.”

“On my personal analysis, I don't know that either of them COULD work with others, on a psychological level. Vayne is the loner of all loners and Lucian just lost his partner and Wife.”

1.2.5 Shyvana: The Half-Dragon

Lore: Shyvana’s lore has been changed twice since her release, and in that time she has also received a number of updates to her design and skins. This has been intended to modify her lore to better fit current metanarratives, but has also changed her ‘personality’ from somber, to fierce, and finally to dualistically savage. Throughout it has been implied that her father was a dragon, and as such she has maintained the ability to transform into a dragon as a powerful attack.

Representation: Shyvana is a strong example of the bikini-armour which lingers in female character design. Despite a backstory which is largely asexual, her skins dress her variously in bodices and even thong underwear. As her appearance varies in different skins, so her dragon form also changes appearance. This raises some questions about how her armour and clothing change according to her shape-shifting, as her dragon form wears entirely different (and far less provocative) armour.

Meta-Narrative:

Discussion of Shyvana’s lore predominantly concerns her interpersonal relationship with Jarvan, the king of Demacia:

“So in the lore, it feels Jarvan treats Shyvana like a daughter. Is it because he saved her from death a long time ago when she was a child? Could it be that Jarvan is a father figure to Shyvana?”

“I think it's implied Shyv has feelings for Jarvan, so that could be a bit weird.”

"There's no reason why Jarvan can't think of Shyvana as sort of a daughter but she thinks of him otherwise. People have lopsided attractions/expectations in reality all the time."

1.2.6 Cassiopeia: the Serpent's Embrace

Lore: Cassiopeia, like Shyvana, is an older champion and has undergone a number of redesigns in lore and artwork. Originally it was similar to that of Medusa, the gorgon slain by Perseus in Greek mythology in that Cassiopeia was cursed to take snake form as a form of punishment for her cruel and seductive behaviour. In newer lore she is still described as seductive but her curse is a punishment for releasing the champions Xerath and Renekton from imprisonment in Shurima (see section 3.1).

Representation: At odds with her backstory, Cassiopeia's portrayal is strongly influenced by ancient Egyptian themes, recalling the pharaoh Cleopatra. Her snake anatomy begins only from the waist down, allowing Cassiopeia to otherwise sport a bra and headdress. Early character art rather failed to carry through Cassiopeia's seductive qualities, but as her artwork has improved so has it become more overtly sexual. Her skins mostly maintain the jumble of classical themes introduced elsewhere, while her movements have been designed to convey both snakelike grace and a seductive sashay.

Meta-Narrative:

Perhaps as expected, discussion of Cassiopeia's visual art style is strongly centered on her sexual characteristics:

"Ok so we all know Cassiopeia. The sexy, sassy, and strong reptile lady."

"[A new skin is a] good idea as long as it ISN'T for gratuitous sexiness. We have that already."

One user also found the dissonance between Cassiopeia's lore as a scheming manipulator and her highly aggressive updated gameplay to be a particular annoyance:

"Cass, who is (or used to be, I don't even know anymore...) a manipulative, conniving bitch plays like a trigger-happy killer."

4. COMPARISON AND CONCLUSIONS

We hypothesized that due to the retrofitted, participatory, and somewhat clumsy attribution of often-changing lore to semi-independent champions there would be some mismatch between their narrative construction, their realisation as cultural products and, and their engineering as avatars for play. Close analysis of individual champions has demonstrated discordance between the narrative, creative, and mechanical aspects of champion construction. This is further illustrated by quotes from the *League of Legends* community pages, which identify areas of ludonarrative dissonance from a lay perspective. Most community discussion is metanarrative: it is informed by all aspects of champion production from gameplay to appearance. There are also discussions based on visual appearance including suggestions for vanity skins: in the case of male champions these requests are rarely, if ever, sexually provocative.

We further hypothesized that this difference would more exaggerated in female characters as their construction as warriors and fighters would be sublimated by their cultural construction as women. This hypothesis stemmed from feminist film and video game criticism which posits that female bodies in media are usually constructed as sex objects first and foremost, and subjects with agency second [4, 7-11]. This hypothesis has been supported

in both close analysis and in examining overall trends in character presentation.

Finally we argue that the insistence on communicating not only femaleness but also desirability to the audience through the meta-narrative at the cost of narrative logic is extremely telling. The effects of heteronormativity and masculine hegemony are further ideated through community discussion which discuss the sexuality of female champions' appearance. It is expressive of a power hierarchy which positions maleness as normal and femaleness as performative and objectified.

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