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The Social Function of Toxic Behaviour in an Online Video Game

BY

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ABSTRACT

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF TOXIC BEHAVIOUR IN AN ONLINE VIDEO GAME

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This thesis argues that toxic behaviour practices in the game *League of Legends* are structural and constructive. Using practice theory I demonstrate that social and play rules within the game are expressed, challenged, and re-created through actions and utterances which have been deemed problematic or otherwise 'toxic'. In order to achieve this I have conducted an ethnographic study into League of Legends followed by a series of semi-structured interviews. The ethnography demonstrates a novel insight into the game and its community but also serves the purpose of explicating the relationship between League of Legends and Bourdieu's conceptual model of practice. Informed by this context I discuss the rationale for and perception of disruptive, transgressive, or otherwise 'toxic' behaviours, challenging assumptions that they are fundamentally anti-social or destructive and proposing ways in which they contribute to a self-recognising online community. Finally I demonstrate that the formative conditions of play along with toxic play practices combine in League of Legends to create an environment which is problematically gendered.

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Elzabi Meiring Rimington, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF TOXIC BEHAVIOUR IN AN ONLINE VIDEO GAME

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Either none of this work has been published before submission, or parts of this work have been published as:

   Lore v. Representation: Narrative Communication of Power and Gender in League of Legends
   Rimington, E. Blount, T. In *Extended Proceedings from Hypertext and Social Media.* Halifax, Canada (2016)

   A Theoretical Framework for Online Game Society: The Case of League of Legends
   Rimington, E. Weal, M. Leonard, P. In *Proceedings of the 8th ACM Web Science Conference.* Hannover, Germany (2016).

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Outside of a small but growing academic discipline, telling people that one is writing a doctoral thesis on online video game society often generates surprise, amazement and even ire. However I remain firmly of the belief that what we as human agents in the vast network of culture and society do in our spare time (and where we do it) is not only worthy of anthropological and sociological study, but crucial to understanding the shape of technological humanity to come. My work in this field is inspired by calls for activist and thoughtful research into the social place of video games by leaders in the field such as Consalvo (2012) and Boellstorff (2006). The transposition of 'third (i.e. leisure) spaces' from the bowling alley (Putnam, 1995) to the virtual environment is one worth capturing and critically studying.

In this thesis I address certain social and behavioural practices that take place in online video games. It is an ambitious project, drawing together many strands of sociological, political, and feminist thought in an area of mediated society less than thirty years old. My aim is to analyse the social role and function of 'toxic' behaviour in online games and set it within a critical context of culture and society.

The term 'toxic behaviour' refers to a number of actions that take place in virtual social spaces. It is referred to by many different names, such as trolling, griefing, and e-bile. It is blanket terminology for what in the material world might be called verbal harassment, and yet it is more than that. It is the online equivalent of a child who, upon realising that they are losing a game, declares themselves as 'not playing' and stalks into a corner to sulk (leaving their team a player short). It is a prankster playing an inappropriate joke at an inappropriate time. It is poisonously ephemeral – hard to pinpoint yet malignant and often infectious. It can be the worst of people's frustrations and prejudices, screamed into the anonymity of the Web. It is performed action that it not necessarily illegal but is certainly unpleasant, irritating, and exhausting.

In this thesis I argue that these practices are the product and producer of social structures within video game communities, and can therefore be argued as structural phenomena within a Bourdieusian theoretical framework. I further argue that a virtual environment can foster problematic attitudes towards gender through both its design and the play practices that take place in it, resulting in specifically gendered toxic behaviour. In order to achieve this I undertake a number of different research methods as part of a cohesive methodology, taking as a research site the popular online game *League of Legends* (2009) also known as *League* or *LoL*. .

League of Legends was initially chosen for its immense popularity and rich community presence. In 2014 it had 32 million active monthly players worldwide, according to data released by parent company Riot Games. By the end of 2016 that number was claimed to have reached 100 million (Kollar, 2016). It's a staggering number, especially given that *League* is complicated, difficult to play, and bounded to play on personal computers. Fans and players engage deeply with *League,* taking to the Web to discuss play strategies in forums, read game news, and watch professional competitive player live streams. And yet something is rotten. All too often in-game chat descends into name-calling and abuse, sometimes for what seem like comparatively minor reasons. It is this, and other forms of toxic behaviour in *League of Legends*, that I study in this project.

I begin this thesis with an overview of research and literature which has most saliently contributed to the body of knowledge informing this research. The literature review brings forward several questions which I address by drawing attention to gaps in the literature surrounding toxic and antisocial behaviour. In particular, I draw attention to the lack of distinction between individual motivations and implications for toxic behaviour and the broader cultural reasons for inequality and conflict online. Online anti-social behaviour is therefore often phenomenologically analysed from the reaction it provokes. Instead, I propose a deeper structural approach which intends to place toxic practices in their social context. As such the primary question driving this research project is

What is the social function of toxic behaviour in League of Legends?

By this I do not intend a teleological framing of the kind the social sciences are sometimes accused of [1] – I do not suggest that anti-social practices are performed with an end goal in mind beyond their immediate consequences of infuriation or gratification. Rather, I intend a socio-structural cast to the question, arguing that social meta-structures are expressed and created by micro-scale group interactions. I accept and build on the understanding that individual behaviours may affect group identity and function, particularly if these behaviours are performed by a number of different individuals over a number of difference occasions. With toxic practices as an example of this, it should be feasible to identify and analyse their social effect beyond the immediate. This would discern their potential constructive and destructive effects, as well as learning their possible differences in form across platforms and ways in which they are otherwise gendered, raced, and classed.

This thesis is undertaken with certain accepted epistemologies informed by a large body literature. I accept the argument put forward by researchers like Wajcman (1991, 2007), and Williams (2009a, 2009b, 2008, 2006b) that technology and society are co-productive, and adopt the position that therefore video games (as technological artefacts) and culture (as an expression of society) are also co-productive. I respond to

[1] Ranciere (2003), for example, accuses sociologists of 'keeping the truth on a leash'.

Boellstorff's (2006) call for social science approaches to the interplay of video games and culture. Therefore I approach my thesis from a standpoint of constructionism and interactionism. I argue along Bourdieusian lines that the personal is a result and expression of the social, and *vice versa*. I also adopt a critical approach informed by feminist media study and feminist science and technology studies. This combined epistemology is an extremely effective way to look at societies in online spaces because it allows for critical discussion of the role played by technology and hegemony in online societies, while not discounting the contributions made by individuals as part of a social group.

Research into online communities is crucial to understanding portions of society, but is difficult due to the novelty of the field and the ephemeral nature of the medium. Because of the continuous evolution of technologies, platforms for online communities are in constant flux, and social engagement can take place across multiple platforms (Bergstrom, 2011, Gatson and Zweerink, 2004). Keeping track of individuals and the groups they engage with is nearly impossible, but following online communities across their many platforms becomes crucial to gaining a complete picture. This rapid change poses a number of challenges to the more slow-moving gears of academic study. For this reason in the methodology chapter of this thesis I describe the multi-sited approach which I undertook in order to gain as complete a picture of the community in question as possible.

I chose ethnography as the first stage of data collection in part because *League of Legends* is not currently particularly well understood by the research community. Compared to the many ethnographies that have taken place in the massive online game *World of Warcraft* for example, study into the similarly-massive *League of Legends* (aka '*LoL*') has tended to focus on its aspects in isolation - for example how its players perceive 'expertise' compared to *World of Warcraft* (Donaldson, 2015) and that its female players are grossly outnumbered (Ratan et al., 2015). In some ways this use of ethnographic methods does not constitute a 'true' ethnography as it does not include complete and intimate immersion in the target community. Instead, it is used here as a scoping tool, gathering early data and learning to understand the community and its modes of practice.

Nonetheless I use the term 'ethnography' in this thesis because of certain stated aims and outcomes. One of my intentions in using an ethnographic methodology is to maintain a certain degree of truth to the research site. I believe that the subjects of an ethnography should be able to recognise themselves in the researcher's narrative. As such I do not shy away from using game-specific argot and slang terms. While I encourage readers to try and 'hear' the terms as they are used by members of the community, I have also included a glossary of terms as an appendix to this document.

As in the wider world, so it is in academia that *LoL* is best known for its 'toxic' community. However even in the case of ethnographies such as that of Kou and Nardi (2014) the focus is on *how* anti-social behaviour manifests and *how* it is punished rather than why it manifests with such regularity and what the wider social

consequence of this is. I instead hope in my project to access the rich description of being in the field afforded by ethnographic write-up, narratively communicating the play environment. *League of Legends* is an exceptionally popular global game and should, I believe, be approached as a cohesive or at least self-understanding community with its own unique modes of practice as indicated by Kou and Nardi (2014), that nonetheless throws a critical reflection of gaming culture more broadly.

Ethnography predominantly took place in the game but was also informed by cross-platform field research across the Web. Following months of data collection I was driven to a narrative direction by the data that emerged as most thematically important from not only my perspective but also that of the research participants. Bourdieu practice theory was chosen as a theoretical framework because it proved extremely appropriate for the case at hand and additionally allowed a great deal of analytic insight. There is also a good deal of usefulness in adapting Bourdieu's insights on class and culture for critical feminist study, as Skeggs (2004a, 2004b) has repeatedly shown. A series of semi-structured interviews expanded on and refined these early insights into the social practices at play in *League of Legends*.

The next three chapters form the primary original contribution of this thesis. Chapter four situates *League of Legends* into a practice theory framework in a way which is intended to also give insight into the ethnographic *Dasein* of play. It also indicates how crucial study into *toxic* behaviour in particular is when looking at game communities generally and the *League of Legends* community specifically. It breaks down ethnographic analysis conceptually according to the theoretical framework, covering the remediation of habitus, field, capital, symbolic violence, and class in an online game society. It delineates areas in which further study could develop, as well as narratively signposting the crucial themes in this research.

In chapter five I demonstrate how toxicity manifests in *League of Legends* in particular. In it I offer a three-category typology of toxic behaviour, informed by the literature and grounded in data analysis. I illustrate this typology with examples from ethnography and participant interviews, and discuss the differentiation and potential overlap of these categories. I also discuss the social role of these different types of toxic behaviour, using a lens of practice theory to place them within a structural model. My intention in this chapter is to not lay a moralising judgment on those who engage in what would in other places be termed verbal abuse, but to situate their actions within the social context that they are practiced in. This does not mean that I excuse actions which have real subjugating and alienating effects on other human agents, but that I lay bare the social conflicts at work in the field with, as much as possible, the native perspective allowed by ethnography.

Chapter 6 focuses particularly on the phenomenon of gendered toxicity in *League of Legends*. In it I begin with a description of the practical ways in which in-game toxic behaviours may manifest as uniquely gendered, including harassment and exclusion based on gender and the erasure of female players. I then deconstruct the systemic context that leads to these actions, and how this background is remediated through the *League of Legends* game environment. At this point it becomes helpful to introduce and utilise

approaches from feminist media studies in order to discuss the pertinence of sexually objectified female characters to this problem.

In the conclusion I pull together these strands of argument to lay out a 'state of play' for toxic behaviour in the game *League of Legends*. I cover the ways in which it manifests and what this means for both the *LoL* community and society more broadly. In addition I evaluate the affordances and limits of my work and outline possible future work deriving from this project. Finally, I clarify my own original contributions in terms of methodology and theory, and indicate my conclusions in terms of policy and practice for the games industry and for academia.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Context

The introduction to the very first issue of *Games and Culture* (2006) called for an increase in the application of cultural theory and ethnography in video games studies. Boellstorff, who has since become a leading voice in video games research, argued that given the growing market and audience of games and gaming, serious academic study was called for to look at the people who played games, as well as to look at the games themselves. While games studies had always been intrinsically interdisciplinary, there had grown a need to address issues of social inequalities such as access, race, class, and gender - "given the importance of profit, consumerism, and capitalism more generally in gaming" (Boellstorff, 2006: 2). He defined three potential areas for the anthropological study of games and culture which both emphasise the discreteness of game-world and real-world culture, and emphasise their reflexivity: 'Game cultures' (game-specific cultural practices), 'cultures of gaming' (gaming as a cultural practice), and 'gaming of cultures' (the effect of gaming on broader non-virtual culture). Of these overlapping spheres, it is the potential of 'game cultures' which interests me in particular, describing as it did a player microcosm which shares a collective cultural unconscious expressed through environments such as virtual game-worlds and online blogs and communities (described by authors such as Kowert et al. (2012) and Shaw (2011)).

Ten years after Boellstorff's call to arms, the video games industry has continued to grow and develop, along with its audience. Digital inequalities including inequality of representation and oppressive practices have proliferated in online spaces (see e.g. Nakamura, 2012), including online video games, but so has study into them. In this literature review I will provide an overview of the research contributing to understanding this growing and changing field, and describe the development of online games as social yet unequal spaces. I consider how the collective social identity of a game world's inhabitants is constructed and reproduced. I will begin by considering the place of the individual in a social network. I then consider individual representation in the form of the graphical game avatar and its consequences for self-expression and objectification in virtual spaces. This will lead into a discussion of online gender and gender politics.

Finally, I will demonstrate the gendered nature of conflict in video games and on the Web more broadly, before summarising the gaps in the literature as it currently stands and explaining how they drive me toward the focus of my research.

2.2 Virtual Communities and Reconstructed Hegemonies

Online communities have intrigued social scientists since their inception in the early- to mid-1990s. The research sites have evolved as the communities have; from early chatrooms and multi-user dungeons (MUDs) (see, e.g. Spender, 1995, Castells, 2010 (first published 1996)) to immersive virtual worlds such as *Second Life* (2003) and then to groups linked by ubiquitous mobile technologies. Research into online communities is crucial to understanding the social activity of their participants, but is difficult due to its comparative newness and the ephemeral nature of the medium. Due to the constant evolution of technologies, the places where online communities meet may emerge and then disappear, and engagement can take place across many platforms (Bergstrom, 2011, Gatson and Zweerink, 2004). Studies have looked at the motives for joining virtual communities, the consequences of doing so , and the practices of knowledge-sharing that take place in them (Aroles, 2015). These observations may change or become outdated as culture and technology change. Even since beginning this doctoral research project in 2013, new innovations in virtual reality technologies promise to put forward new disruptions and challenges. But I believe that describing the brief, transient identity and unique practices of an online community takes on a new significance as a form of historical record-keeping against almost certain future obsolescence. The stories of online lives are no less significant for their brevity.

Part of what makes this field engaging is that in a time when it is argued by some that 'third spaces' – that is, social spaces intended purely for socialising – are in decline (Putnam, 1995), virtual communities are rapidly growing (Williams, 2006b, Malaby, 2006, Prell, 2006, Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006). Members of virtual game communities recognise themselves and outsiders, according to Aroles (2015:3), who writes that nativeness in online communities is a continuous practice, that certain "characteristics suggest the possibility to distinguish clearly between the members of the community (the so-called natives) and the others." The collective identity of an online community, its native-ness, is not however tied to persistent and persisting members, but rather can exist despite a large, anonymous and ephemeral userbase (Bernstein et al., 2011).

While Aroles (2015) identifies a shared online time, space, and language quite distinct from that of the offline world as key to forming virtual communities, researchers such as Wilson and Peterson (2002, cited in Aroles (2015:3)) and Consalvo (2009) suggest bypassing online-offline dualisms and argue in favour of a fluid approach to the understanding of communities. Studies researching the flow of social capital in online communities support this in their observations (e.g. Blanchard and Horan, 1998). Social capital in the form of network ties, friendship, and other relationships is not limited to online spaces and offline spaces as distinct spheres, but flows into and out of the material world (Carter et al., 2015, Collins and Freeman, 2013, Valenzuela et al., 2009, Ducheneaut and Moore, 2005, Prell, 2006). This indicates that virtual ethnography bounded to a single platform, or conducted only in online spaces, is likely to only partially reveal the truth.

This need to work not only in but around digital research spaces is reflected in both Kendall (2002) and Carter's (2016, 2005) ethnographic research.

Kendall (2002, 2000, 1998), Carter (2005) and Hine (2008) all studied forum- and chat room-based online communities rather than game world societies, but their contributions to the field of virtual ethnography have been hugely influential. Their approaches conflict in methodology yet not in epistemology, as their findings corroborate and expand each other's'. Carter took a consciously longitudinal approach, and from her we can learn the transposition of 'pure' ethnography meant to impose a sense of *Dasein* to online spaces. She observed and took part in an international online community (alias *Cybercity*) every day for three years, essentially analysing the ways in which a community made sense of and identified itself online. This meant more than comparatively simple participant observation. In addition to "living and working" in *Cybercity,* she used several complementary qualitative research methods in order to collect as wide a variety of data as possible, including questionnaires and semi-structured interviews undertaken in an offline environment. In terms of ethics, the concerns of conducting cyberethnography are, according to Carter, similar to those of conventional ethnography. This is because "the four main moral obligations" which dictate strictures in conducting human subject research remain consistent: "the principle of non-malificence, the protection of anonymity, the confidentiality of data, and the obtaining of informed consent" (Carter, 2005: 152).

Although Carter met with four participants face-to-face in order to provide background illustration in discussions regarding "authenticity and truthfulness", her primary aim was not to compare real-world and computer-mediated communication. Instead, Carter focussed on personal negotiations of what authenticity means, based on Hine's proposition that it is not for the ethnographer to judge "what is safe to believe" in online exchanges against an external standard, "but rather to come to understand how it is that informants judge authenticity", accepting that there is not necessarily a definitive objective truth. She found that, in fact, participants tended towards consistency in their online behaviours, although this could be attributed at least in part to what was accepted practice in this community in particular - a recognised habit of "authentic self-presentation" (Carter, 2005:152).

Another aspect of Carter's research was the process by which friendships form online, as unlike in the material world they are not necessarily formed out of necessity or proximity. In this environment, *Cybercity* acted as "just another place to meet friends", with the majority of her participants citing a desire to make friends as their primary reason for 'living' in *Cybercity.* This is a transformation of the spheres in which interpersonal relationships take place from the home, workplace, or designated leisure 'third spaces' (Putnam, 1995) to virtual spaces (Carter, 2005:164), as also proposed by Malaby (2006). This is not to say that participants "widening their webs of personal relationships to include cyberspace" constituted a separation from real-world relationships (Carter, 2005:155). Rather, Carter found that online friendships often became embedded in participants' offline lives, with real-world meetings between participants who had met online

not uncommon. This implies the embedding of cyberspace as a cultural and social space into the real world rather than its existence as a parallel, discrete space, supporting more recent research by Malaby (2006), Steinfield et al. (2008), Lehdonvirta (2010), and Consalvo (2009).

Kendall (2000), (2002) has also undertaken long-term ethnographic study in a virtual environment looking at identity, and particularly gender identity, in an online community dubbed *BlueSky*. While Carter honestly transcribed the digital culture in which she found herself, Kendall introduced a more critical lens to the social action of her participants. Her findings are an early indicator of the ways in which sub-cultures of self-identified 'nerds' built digital communities based on shared negotiation of otherness and non-hegemonic masculinity. She also devotes a chapter to discussing the unique challenges of conducting research in a virtual environment. For instance, as participants in her study communicated textually, a large part of the ethnographer's task of 'writing' people and cultures becomes a task of "writing about writing" (Kendall, 2002:233). This called for methods based on discourse and text analysis.

Nonetheless the communications were largely undertaken in a conversational format of brief sentence fragments and unstructured dialogue and look, to an outside observer, like a morass of flat and banal data. The logs therefore had to be broken down and rebuilt into a context that makes sense to later readers who may "not share participants' knowledge of the dense history of associations attached to particular phrases and habits of speech" (Kendall, 2002:233). In-jokes, shared histories, and the practices by which participants imparted nuance to exchanges which lacked the physical cues of face-to-face interactions all required explanation in order to "bridge the gap between participant and reader understandings", according to Kendall (2002:234). This highlights the importance of a 'present' researcher in virtual ethnographies, in situations where it may appear that a text-scraping piece of software could perform the task of data collection equally effectively.

As well as being a central theme in Kendall's *Blue Sky* research, negotiating identity was also central to designing an effective methodology. In conventional ethnography, the physicality and socio-economic status of participants can have major contextual effects, with descriptions of participants acting as illustrative detail. While determining participants' offline appearances would not be impossible, Kendall (2002:234) consciously rejects doing so in order to not "risk reifying the very hierarches [she seeks] to critique". She claims that introducing participants by race and gender could "reassert the belief that such aspects of identity are inherent in the physical body and as such exist as pre-social facts" (2002:234) - a notion which Kendall seeks to deconstruct – instead emphasising the performative aspects of identity, in which markers such as class and gender are practices as much as they are attributes. Kendall (2002:225) chose to retain the "ambiguities deriving from the communication of identity through text" which allow users to potentially hide identity characteristics either by accident or by choice.

That is not to say that the categories which people rapidly assign in face-to-face encounters are erased, rather that this assignment takes longer. Both Carter and Kendall pointed out the importance placed by their participants on ascertaining offline identity when pursuing online friendships, comments echoed in later work by Hussain and Griffiths (2008), Gray (2012), and Lehdonvirta et al. (2011), among others. In the meantime temporary (or not so temporary) assumptions are made, with the default being of an adult, white, heterosexual male (Kendall, 2002, Martey, 2010, Nakamura, 2012). This is partially a result of demographics: online spaces in 2002 were "a realm populated mostly by the white and middle class and [are] still largely dominated by men" (Kendall, 2002:235).

For Kendall, even her research discipline proved contentious for some of the participants who, while respecting positivist scientific methods as members of a technologically forward-thinking, technologically savvy subculture, nonetheless possessed a negative view toward social science research, with survey research apparently earning their deepest suspicion (Kendall, 2002). This, along with Kendall's status as a woman conducting research on gender and in particular masculinity, cast a sharp light on an unquestioned sexism within the community and created a power imbalance between her and participants (2002:244). This is not an unexpected or new problem, but rather a re-staging of the problem of status and context which must be taken into account in all research, particularly qualitative research dealing in human behaviour.

In this we can see the products of structural power imbalances translated into virtual environments. Issues of access and inequality are exacerbated by exclusionary behaviours, whether conscious or unconscious. As detailed by Carter (2005), social interactions online do not take place discretely from the real world, and prejudices can be explicated or simply not addressed as a potential problem. Silence is read as assent. As Kendall (2002:221) put it, "online participants can 'see no evil, hear no evil' and claim to speak no evil' without making any attempts to create a more inclusive environment", thus creating an environment predominantly geared towards the already-privileged.

While digital demographics have shifted since Carter and Kendall conducted their ethnographies, power imbalances between society's privileged and less-privileged members continue to be visible. Ballard and Welch (2015), for example, found that as well as males being the more likely perpetrators of cyber-bullying in Massively Multiplayer Online Games including *League of Legends*, heterosexuals were more likely perpetrators than lesbian, gay, bisexuals and transgender (LGBT+) participants. This evidence is supported by researchers such as Alonzo and Aiken (2004). I argue in later chapters that masculine hegemony continues to be a real and present problem online (Nakamura, 2017, Turton-Turner, 2013), informed not only by the literature but also by my own data.l

This section has outlined some of the literature surrounding online spaces, included their aspects as social and communal environments. In particular, I indicated how the boundary between virtual and material is broken down – in both positive and negative ways. While friendships can transcend physicality so too,

apparently, can power imbalances. These structural inequalities are, at least in part, written along the lines of the body-politic – race and gender being particularly prominent. In this way the body is not allowed to be forgotten, and in fact takes on new significance as a form of representation in virtual environments. The following section questions self-presentation and the body in online contexts.

2.3 Online Self-Presentation and the Virtual Body

As a part of play, most video games offer players a representation of their in-game actions in some form – some sign that their decisions affect the virtual environment. These actions may be carried out by a graphical character puppeted by controller inputs – an avatar. The avatar is a major part of what players experience of a game world, as well as some part of *how* they experience it. While avatars fundamentally act as a player's projection and representation of themselves, their use is mediated through technology while the use of technology in videogame play is mediated through the body. There exists a great deal of debate on to what extent players maintain their bodies and their distance from avatars, or conversely 'become' their avatars, inhabiting virtual spaces. Rehak (2003:106) describes avatars as "supernatural ambassador[s] of agency", recalling their roles as digital puppets (digital, separate bodies) to be controlled from beyond a screen. In this respect they act as "both self and other, symbol and index" (Rehak, 2003:106), a non-material body through which a player enacts behaviour. For Reid, (in Filiciak, 2003) the attribution of behaviour and body makes avatars a "manifestation of the self beyond the realms of the physical, existing in a space where identity is self-defined rather than pre-ordained". For Turkle (in Lahti, 2003), the game player is already "subsumed by the computer, already … a cyborg". This vision of the psyche embodying a machine shell rather than a biological one is supported by claims by gamers that "when I play I am more my own avatar than the person sitting by the console/computer" (Filiciak, 2003:92).

Avatars, above all, are products of and agents within a technological system. They can be programmed and customised to, in theory at least, look and behave in any way that users desire. In virtual spaces, the virtual body and personality traits can to some extent be chosen (Kafai et al., 2009a, Kafai et al., 2009b, Bessière et al., 2007). These choices are of course limited by technology – whether by the capabilities of hardware or the architecture of the software in which an avatar is being used. But even if, as Reid would have it, avatars are aspects of identity which are truly "self-defined rather than pre-ordained" (in Filiciak, 2003:90), our identities and individuated practices are socially contingent and are informed by much more than some essential Freudian 'self'. Research conducted by Ducheneaut et al. (2009) showed that synthetic worlds may be used by players to experiment with digital bodies very different from their own, but in the majority of cases, these bodies were designed to fit closely with the image of the Western ideal, with players creating "leaner, younger, more fashionable versions of themselves".

Concurrently, Nguyen offers a rather more cynical reading of the possibilities for exploration with avatar bodies. While game worlds might allow users to “generate new bodies and design new selves" through what she terms ‘cybernetic drag’, these processes of self-creation might pose “an incipient and significant challenge" to the nature of identity, or may be so much virtual make-up to be changed at will. Nguyen (2009a:381) refers to a phenomenon of ‘incoherence’, in which digital bodies can be made anew according to the whims of their users, and “social identity detached from material flesh", yet these indicators of change and fluidity are not “the apex of freedoms" as they can be reaccommodated into hegemonic realities by “equally fluid rearticulations of power". Her warning is that playing at difference in virtual appearance does not necessarily indicate a desire or tendency towards personal growth or change, nor a softening of society’s sex/gender/race boundaries.

Other researchers argue against this. They reason that as the “primary identity cue" in online environments, it may be expected that “our avatars have a significant impact on how we behave online" as players conform “to the expectations and stereotypes of the identity of their avatars" (Fox et al., 2013:931, Yee and Bailenson, 2007, Pena et al., 2009, Fox and Bailenson, 2009). Much more surprising, though, is the potential of the avatar to affect behaviour in the material world. Due to the effects of mediated embodiment, players who create avatars that look and behave less like themselves might experience a shift in their own behaviour and how they perceive themselves, partially adhering to a “new identity that is inferred from their avatars" (Fox et al., 2013:932) as part of a phenomenon known as the Proteus effect (Yee, 2014). This illustrates the agency of the avatar as an artefact, and the potential for technologies to affect their users as much as users affect technologies. Of course, in many games this ‘body’ is already ‘finished’ – a character prepared for the player’s use in a narrative. What effect this narrative object has on the player using it, and how it differs from the avatars created for study in psychological trials is not explored.

The vast differences in customisation and conformity of graphical avatars make debating the link between online representation and self-identity deeply complex. As such, I put the minutiae of this debate aside in my own research, instead taking from it the knowledge that presentation in online spaces is an important part of the player experience. More interesting to me is the practice of ‘being’ in online spaces – how players engage socially in a predominantly graphical environment. To some extent, the player-as-avatar practises the same social conventions as the material, such as communications both verbal (text or voice chat) and non-verbal (hand gestures) and “visual depictions of emotions" (McCreery et al., 2012:976). Additionally, despite its separation from material space, it is usually given a gender, race and sexual orientation as well (Consalvo, 2003:173). For avatar bodies then (especially female or raced avatar bodies), obeying normal social conventions means being subjected to the same power narratives that govern all mediated and socialised bodies.

Mulvey's (1975, republished 1990) seminal, oft-contested, and occasionally derided piece of feminist film criticism *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* uses psychoanalytical theory to deconstruct media images in terms of gender. She proposed what has become known as 'gaze theory'; that of "woman as image, man as bearer of the look" (1990, p.33). This effectively builds on previous feminist discourse which claims that Western culture situates the masculine as normative and the feminine as 'other', and the feminine is ascribed and performative (de Beauvoir, 1997, Doane, 1982). Within this imbalanced society, 'looking' as a pleasurable activity is divided into the active, male viewer, and passive, female 'object'. She argued that the camera represents an innately masculine, penetrative gaze, which imparts voyeuristic pleasure on an audience in its framing of the image. The image-object of the gaze is both discursively constructed as feminine, and literally female. In the feminine object it is receptive and passive, recalling Dworkin's deconstruction of 'woman' as "made to be penetrated" (Dworkin, 2007:239-240). As the gaze is subjective it defines its object, projecting "its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (Mulvey, 1990:33). In this framework, woman is made both to be displayed and to be looked at, "their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1990:33).

Applying this theory to video games in general and avatar theories in particular is problematic because the avatar, no matter its body's to-be-looked-at-ness, is an agent of player subjectivity. As such it cannot be wholly passive. Furthermore, the female body in its objectified state exists as extra-diegetic and, crucially, non-active and non-subjective. But avatars are not truly free, no matter the autonomy of its player. Player behaviour is governed, and to some extent prescribed, by virtual-world laws and in-game mechanics and the avatar body even more so. I argue that these architectures are, as previously discussed, masculine constructions imbued with gender power.

In many ways the female avatar body is primed to be seen as a sex object. Female characters in video games are forced into "a narrow set of highly codified, pre-existing categories to be temporally inhabited as an easily assumed, ready-to-be-invaded vessel" (Lahti, 2003, p.167). For the most part they are passive sexual objects acting as visual adornment for the target audience (which is presumed to be male) (Ivory, 2006). This is not to say that male character bodies are any less stereotypes of masculinity, but that these caricatures are of strength and power (Corneliussen, 2008), recalling Schmerz's (1993) description of Arnold Schwarzenegger's archetypal masculinity as that of "an anthropomorphised penis". Whatever the motivation and narrative of hypersexualised female characters, their body idiom (as Goffman would put it) within current discursive construction and player habitus conveys nothing but sexual availability and objectification (Rimington, 2016).

Using gaze theory as an interpretative tool has the potential to add an extra layer of evaluation to player behaviours. For example Ducheneaut et al. (2009) suggest that the common player behaviour of creating "leaner, younger, more fashionable" avatars that often look very different from themselves is a self-improvement practice. Appropriating the voyeuristic gaze reconstructs these findings as the creation of an

aesthetically-pleasing in-game object for the player to enjoy. Furthermore, it is a reminder that the 'ideal' body for men is physically powerful; for women it is attractive at the most base level. It is therefore indicated that experience of game worlds is affected by material-world body politics. They are visible in the body choices given to players, and the bodies made by them to play with. The gendering of the digital body is part of this. Not only does the way that gender is positioned and portrayed in game-worlds affect players of both genders in different ways, but the individual player performs their gender and has it affect their experience as a socially-constituted fact. Power structures are fluid and socially reconstructed in online spaces and virtual worlds. Gender power structures are reconstituted in online worlds in a number of ways, which I outline in the following section.

2.4 Digital Gender Politics

Goffman, cited in Seymour (2001:155), is among the classic sociological theorists who maintained the centrality of the physical body in social interactions and development. To Goffman, the body occupies a mediating stance in negotiating identity between self and self-representation, personal and social, as well as participating in the practices that make up routines and behaviours (Goffman, 1990). While Goffman retains his influence, a great deal of later theory contradicts this conceptualisation of the body as mediator, instead approaching it as a site of power struggle (e.g. (Butler, 1990, Skeggs, 2004a). However, I argue that Goffman's descriptions of body power struggles resonate with discussions on the virtual body politic. Goffman's 'body' is encumbered by its physicality, mired in convention and labouring through "bodily appearance and personal acts: dress, bearing, movement and position" (Goffman, quoted in Seymour, 2001: 155-156).

Among the most 'cumbersome' of the body practices described by Goffman is gender. Its practice is heavily internalised and performed through the body. While initial research into gender difference intended to delineate what separated object 'man' from object 'woman' , with an underlying assumption that these differences were somehow essential characteristics, more recently gender has been understood as discursive and created, a result of the varying social roles that men and women have traditionally occupied (Christofides et al., 2009:897). Butler (1990) built on Foucaultian readings of the discursive body, describing gender as a series of practices and meanings sited on the sexed body (Butler, 1990:9). She pointed to gender's changing and inconsistent constitution across different historical and cultural contexts as an indication of its objective meaninglessness (Butler, 1990:4). In her words, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990:34). The resultant gender practice is what Foucault might consider productive – a division of cultural practice into a binary based on institutionalised sexual difference. Video games, for example, are somehow 'for boys' (see, e.g. van Reijmersdal et al., 2013, Williams et al., 2009b, Imhof et al., 2007) as a result of a long-term cultural construction which frames technology as 'masculine' (Bray, 2007, Wajcman, 2007). That this

could have any kind of body-essentialist truth, rather than being constructed, has even been considered by researchers such as Kirkpatrick (2010), who considered the possibility that technical capital is somehow made in the sexed brain rather than achieved through socialisation.

These debates on the essentialist truth of gender and the political performance of the gendered body have provoked numerous responses in feminist and queer theory. Haraway (1991), in her polemic `*Cyborg Manifesto*', proposed winning freedom from the `encumbering' body by the conscious construction of a post-body, technologically constructed social `person', the cyborg. She describes the cyborg as "action mapping our social and bodily reality" - the mind free of the burdens and politics of the body. It is a semi-ironic, futuristic vision, straddling science fiction and current theory, a "condensed image of both imagination and material reality". The disembodied virtual experience envisioned by cyberfeminism is of a genderless utopia in which the mind is connected to a networked machine, leaving the body and its uncomfortable politics behind (Wajcman, 2007).

In the West, technology has historically been primarily coded as masculine (Bray, 2007, Wajcman, 2007, Wajcman, 1991). Wajcman (1991) thinks this is grounded in two ideals of manhood - that of the practical, tough `alpha male' for whom adaptation is considered to be second nature, and that of the intellectual adept, the male face of invention and science. Considering this coding, it is not surprising that radical and eco-feminists in the 1970s decried technological advances as "innately oppressive to women" (Bray, 2007:39). According to Kelan (2007), there is even some indication that women tend to downplay their own technical competence in relation to information technologies since they perceive overt displays of technical competence as `unfeminine'. Despite this predominant construction of technology as 'masculine' and in conflict with feminine 'nature' (Haraway, 1991), in the early 90s it seemed as if the Web might offer a realisation of the asexual utopia envisioned by Haraway (Wajcman, 2007) and was therefore embraced by many gender scholars. Rellstab (2007:765) pointed to the opportunities afforded by the 'radical disarticulation' of online gender from biological sex. Fernandez (cited in Nakamura, 2012) Gimenez (2000:83) and Martey (2010:1218) described Internet communities as, in principal, blind to differences like race, class, and gender, instead creating a more equal, anonymous playing field.

Unfortunately these hopes have been found to be at best naïve and at worst "vacuous," in the words of Kitchin (2000:150), due to the failure to understand cyberspace within "the broader social and economic contexts within which we live". Lahti (2003:169) reinforces this reasoning, stating that "if something is left behind when we [enter virtual worlds], it is not the body … We remain flesh as we become machines." Certainly, we do not leave behind our body politics. Race, class, and gender are not superficially ascribed but internalised and practised online just as they are in material worlds (Youngblood, 2013, Bryson, 2004). Gender inequalities and cases of stereotyping have sometimes even been enhanced online (Christofides et al., 2009). Researchers such as West and Fenstermaker (1995:13) have emphasized the importance of understanding the

effect of social context; that "all social exchanges [including those which occur online], regardless of the participants or the outcome, are simultaneously 'gendered,' 'raced,' and 'classed'" and the `difference' they enable is a result of ongoing social practice (West and Fenstermaker, 1995:8). Linguists studying computer-mediated communication in particular have argued that gender leaves traces online in the form of discourse styles and patterns (West and Fenstermaker, 1995, Rellstab, 2007), while even technology use-patterns are gendered (Herring et al., 2002, Kelan, 2007, Bray, 2007). Race-blindness too, has failed to materialise on the Web (Kafai et al., 2009a, Dietrich, 2013). Instead, according to Nakamura (2012) and Youngblood (2013) body power relations and identity are reconstructed in novel (but nevertheless still inequitable) ways. Accepting the role of these systems of inequality, researchers like Youngblood (2013), and Langer (2008) have instead called for approaches which might identify and thereby challenge them.

This, however, is no simple task. Technologies are not created in a cultural vacuum, but to what extent their use is dictated by their architecture is a question of ideology and theory as well as practice. Researchers such as Wajcman (1991) and Bijker et al. (2012) would argue that use and creation are co-constructed and that the cultural context of a technological artefact can be 'subverted' through its use. In this they believe that artefacts constitute sites of resistance against hegemony. By contrast, writers like Winner (2000) would argue for a 'soft' form of technological determinism, in which the internalised politics of an artefact affect their users with or without their consent. Some feminist theory reinforces this reading, viewing technological systems as imbued with the gender power struggles they were created within, according to Wajcman (2007). She writes that "socialist feminist frameworks … saw masculinity as embedded in the machinery itself, marking the role of technology as a key source of male power.

When we look at game worlds they often manifest rearticulations of hegemonic power systems representative of that of online society more broadly. Salen and Zimmerman (2005) and Carter (2005) are amongst those who argue that games can be seen as reflections or extensions of material-world hegemonies. As such, I argue that virtual worlds at this time are socially constructed as masculine and sometimes misogynistic spaces in which female players are underrepresented, stereotyped, and erased (Christofides et al., 2009, Spender, 1995, Green and Adam, 1998).

This critical stance built on decades of feminist theory is nonetheless somewhat controversial. The counter-argument runs that huge gender disparities in many video games is a 'natural' result of differences in taste (Yee, 2008). Some video games are apparently 'for men', and others 'for women' (Griffiths et al., 2003, Consalvo, 2012, Shaw, 2011, Vanderhoef, 2013, Vermeulen and Van Looy, 2014). This vapid argument not only ignores the power of social priming but is furthermore overwhelmed by a body of evidence to the everyday, banal denigration that women face in online spaces (e.g. Jane, 2012) and the vicious misogyny of movements like GamerGate (Mortensen, 2016, Chess, 2015).

Ironically, women's individual coping mechanisms for avoiding harassment while still participating may contribute to the problem of their collective non-visibility. Some may choose to obscure their gender rather than face denigration (Beyer, 2012, Consalvo, 2012, Lysloff, 2003, Fox and Tang, 2016). This reinforces a gender imbalance and contributes to a self-perpetuating cycle in which games are developed by men who have predominantly played games developed for a male audience (Fox and Tang, 2013). The male point of view is therefore "entrenched and largely unquestioned". The fetishistic aspects of these male fantasies have become largely invisible to male gamers" (Yee, 2014, p.104), but are noticed and criticized by female game-players, for whom manifestations of masculine hegemony such as sexualised female avatars act as a constant reminder of their not-belonging. Femininity is kept at a distance through practices of objectification or the harassment and even abuse of women in these spaces (Fox et al., 2013, Fox and Tang, 2013, Kendall, 2000, Kendall, 2002, Martey, 2010, etc.). Eventually these behaviours are seen as normal, unquestioned, and even expected. It is these practices of exclusion and subjugation in online spaces, particularly online video games, which I outline in the following section.

2.5 Online Toxic Behaviour

Online game worlds are fraught with conflict. Video game publishers struggle endlessly against the toxic behaviours of 'trolls' that make virtual environments unpleasant places to be. The term 'trolling' comes from the fishing industry, in which it refers to a baited line dragged or 'trolled' behind a boat (Herring et al., 2002). In 'classic' Internet terms, this translated to online forum users laying 'bait' with a discussion topic that was mildly to moderately inflammatory, offensive, or otherwise [likely to engender engagement from the community]. The discussion would then rapidly devolve into heated argument and insult-flinging, to the amusement of the 'troll'. Herring et al. (2002) described it in the context of a feminist forum, in which trolls would pose seemingly innocuous questions to the community, only to slowly 'reveal' anti-feminist sentiments in their responses once they had engaged the attention of a regular poster.

Trolling may take the form of intentionally causing offence or provoking a reaction, or starting an argument to lure the unwary into pointless debate which derails an online conversation from its intended topic (Coles and West, 2016). According to Coles and West (2016:233) trolling is intended to "disrupt interactions, aggravate interactional partners and lure them into fruitless argumentation." However the original etymology of the word has been lost by many who use it. 'Trolls' are instead referred to as "living under a bridge" as monsters in fairy tales (Coles and West, 2016). The term has developed in the last decade to have many "different, inconsistent and sometimes conflicting meanings (Coles and West, 2016). It has come to incorporate almost any online behaviour meant to spur anger or frustration and carried out for amusement[2].

[2] 'For the lulz'.

Names given to varieties of 'trolling' include 'nostalgia trolling' (Coles and West, 2016), 'concern trolling (Easterbrook, 2012)', 'e-bile' (Jane, 2012, Jane, 2015), 'kudos-trolling'(Coles and West, 2016).

Far from being exclusive to online gaming, trolling has been documented as occurring in all kinds of online spaces, from social media to Wikipedia (Coles and West, 2016), and even in the offline world. Those who engage in it do so for a number of different reasons, whether due to boredom, attention seeking, or personality disorders (Bakioglu, 2009, Hutchens et al., 2014, Bae, 2016, Fichman and Sanfilippo, 2010). Psycho-social research into internet trolls have drawn links between the practice and anti-social traits including 'dark triad' personality indicators, as well as the format of computer-mediated communication itself (Bae, 2016, Herring et al., 2002, Kwak et al., 2015). According to Coles and West (2016) you may also find the 'vigilante' troll, who intends to "hold up a mirror" (Coles and West, 2016: 241) to bullies by 'trolling the trolls'.

On the other hand, trolling can also be intended as humorous or entertaining. Some players argue that what Bakioglu (2009) calls 'grief play' is a legitimate form of play. 'Artful' trolling communities exist to compare notes and show off their work (Bakioglu, 2009, Coleman, 2011, Lin and Sun, 2005), . This may seem bizarre, but it would be difficult to look at the work of 'master trolls' like 'Ken M' or David '27bslash6' Thorne (whose best-selling book *The Internet is a Playground* includes an account of attempting to pay an outstanding loan with a drawing of a seven-legged spider) without appreciating the comedy and effort that's gone into their strange 'hobby'. Both 'Ken M' and Thorne play on the anonymity and afforded by the internet to play as foolish, naïve characters, reminiscent of Andy Kaufman and other character comedians.

That's not to say that trolling is always productive or creative in a positive way. Some of what Jane (2015) has termed 'e-bile' in the form of doxing[3], death threats and rape threats would tally as 'trolling' because of the perpetrator's intention to provoke a response or series of responses (in particular: fear). Nonetheless, they are illegal and very frightening forms of harassment often meant to silence people - particularly women - who speak out online (Jane, 2012, Jane, 2015, Nooney, 2013, Bliss, 2017). In terms of law and criminology, it may cross into the definitions of cyber-violence and stalking (Pittaro, 2007).

This category overlaps with what is known as 'flaming'. While other terms used for online hostility may refer vaguely to several overlapping speech categories, 'flaming' has been framed almost exclusively as heated or otherwise profane online communications involving invective, insults, and other forms of verbal harassment or abuse (Jane, 2015, O'Sullivan and Flanagain, 2003). Bae (2016: 300) further defines it as "hostile, aggressive, and inflammatory online remarks" while Johnson et al. (2009) prefer the more euphemistic "antinormative hostile communication of emotion". 'Toxic disinhibition' is a common link across definitions – describing a loss of control or lack of restraint in the expression of strong emotions, in particular anger.

[3] Publishing private or identifying information about an individual on the Internet, usually with malicious intent such as sending hate mail or stalking.

As many of these terms do, 'flaming' goes by many names across disciplines, varying in degree of jargon. Jane (2012, 2015), as a feminist researcher calling attention to the venomous misogyny present in a great deal of online communication, terms it 'e-bile'. In games studies it is sometimes referred to as 'griefing' – described by Blackburn and Kwak (2014) as cyberbullying in online gaming. It is common across all means of computer-mediated communication and as such is suggested to be "a communicative episode fundamentally independent of, although possibly shaped by, the communication channel" (Jane, 2015: 68). Nonetheless, a study on Youtube flaming suggests that the majority of users perceive flaming "annoying" and "[deviating from] an honest way of expressing disagreement" (Cho and Kwon, 2015: 363), highlighting its deviance from behaviour that is normal or acceptable for a given channel of online communication. It is furthermore a tiring, stressful, and unpleasant experience. "The stress caused by harassment and other forms of toxic behaviour can cause players to become fatigued" according to Blackburn and Kwak (2014).

2.6 Tits or GTFO

Despite roughly equal numbers of men and women playing video games and using the Web, discussions of toxic behaviour in gaming and online trolling more broadly cannot ignore the gendered nature of a great deal of online conflict. While men and women suffer approximately similar amounts of harassment online, that suffered by women is different from that suffered by men (Bliss, 2017) and men are more likely to commit acts of harassment (Johnson et al., 2009, Alonzo and Aiken, 2004). It is usually more gendered and more likely to be sexual in nature (Duggan et al., 2014). As a result an environment is created in which female gamers face vitriolic sexual and verbal harassment, as well as sexist language, increasingly as part of the standard gaming experience (Consalvo, 2012, Martey et al., 2014).

In 2000, Herring wrote that the predominance of male players and the maintenance of digital technologies (including video games) as areas of masculinity meant that female players in MMORPGs were often expected to be poorer players, and to potentially need help from male players. In several cases this help was not given altruistically but with the expectation of sexual favours in return (Yee, 2014, Martey et al., 2014, Lehdonvirta et al., 2011, Herring, 2000). There is still, more than ten years later, evidence that just possessing a female moniker in multiplayer games can prompt threats of violence, and in particular sexual violence (Caldwell, 2013). This phenomenon does not mean that women completely stop playing games, but that long-term exposure to this kind of gender dynamic may put female gamers' mental well-being at active risk (Ivory et al., 2009:105, Funk and Buchman, 1996).

Connell (1995:77) defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy." This is apparent in the extension of gender strictures to online spaces. Male hegemonic power extends to a certain `gender policing' in online discourse, in which people whose gender identity cannot be easily ascertained, or who are

deliberately ambivalent in this regard are often excluded from conversation (Rellstab, 2007). O'Brien (1999:82) pointed out that conversation participants may even find the idea of engaging with someone who is obfuscating this aspect of their identity "embarrassing". This manifests in vulgar demands that female participants in online discussion not only reveal themselves as female, but that they also prove it by showing their breasts[4] (Manivannan, 2013, Bernstein et al., 2011). Within these communities, masculinity as gender practice is not a feature or theme, instead being part of the framework within which video gaming and communities based on them can occur. It is apparent that the image of the Internet as an extension of male-dominated technological domains persists, creating an uncomfortable feeling of otherness or 'outsiderness' for some women (Martey, 2010:1220).

This can influence women to obfuscate their gender identity online. Some choose to obscure their gender rather than face denigration (Beyer, 2012, Consalvo, 2012, Lysloff, 2003, Fox and Tang, 2013, Fox and Tang, 2016). Hussain and Griffiths (2008) suggest that a common response to this is avatar crossdressing. One respondent stated that while she often played female characters, her male character exists as a defence mechanism against sexual harassment: "I was tired of creepy guys hitting on my female characters. It's utterly ridiculous, very annoying, and not the reason why I play the game" (Hussain and Griffiths, 2008:39). Another participant had a similar response, claiming that not letting other players know that she was female meant that they treated her very differently, allowing her to see "into their strange man universe" (Hussain and Griffiths, 2008:117). A final response to gendered harassment in online game environments is to simply 'withdraw' from the game (Fox and Tang, 2016). These coping mechanisms reinforce a gender imbalance and contributes to a self-perpetuating cycle in which games are developed by men who have predominantly played games developed for a male audience (Fox and Tang, 2013, Yee, 2014, Braithwaite, 2013).

The undercurrent of mistrust and latent misogyny does, at times, grow into a wave of vitriol meant to challenge the intrusion of women into the 'manosphere' of video game communities (Gotell, 2016, Chess, 2015). A recent example of this is the GamerGate controversy (Mortensen, 2016, Milan, 2015). From a nasty accusation of infidelity on the part of a female game developer by an ex-boyfriend, GamerGate grew to include community-wide mudslinging and alleged rape and death threats on the part of both pro- and anti-GamerGate activists (Mortensen, 2016, Chess, 2015). The controversy spilled across multiple platforms including Twitter, 4chan, and Reddit. It included a game which simulated punching feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian repeatedly in the face, and even a clumsy photo manipulation intended to frame anti-GamerGate journalist Veerender Jubbal as a terrorist responsible for the 2015 Paris bombings.

[4] "Tits or GTFO [Get The Fuck Out]" being a standard refrain.

2.7 Conclusion

Evaluating the body of literature presented here has brought forward several questions which I address in this thesis. By highlighting the gap in the literature between individual reasons and implications for toxic behaviour and the broader cultural reasons for inequality and conflict online, it is possible to see the a questioning space between socially present online communities and the individuals engaging in anti-social behaviour within them – behaviour that is deviant but still part of and still a constructive aspect of these communities, just as the individual may be deviant from but still part of that online community. Certain aspects of toxic behaviour appear to constitute what Bourdieu terms 'symbolic violence' (Lovell, 2004) – practices of subjugation meant to impose a subordinate position on an 'inferior' – in their manifest aims to exclude and terrorize women encroaching on 'masculine' spaces such as Internet communities and video games. However, not all 'toxic' behaviours appear to have this function.

As such I put forward a series of questioning points drawn directly from the literature:

1. Research into online communities has shown that they possess persistent identities built out of, but discrete from, their members. User practice collectively contributes to the group as it understands itself, to its 'native' identity. But what *structural* role does an ostensibly *destructive* practice like toxic behaviour have on the community?
2. Toxic behaviour can have a destructive effect as in Herring et al. (2002)'s account, but can it be constructive?
3. This also raises questions of expression – how does toxic behaviour vary in its manifestation in different virtual environments?
4. Violence and harassment follow lines of power. As such, how is toxic behaviour raced, classed, or gendered in a given environment, and does it differ from its normal expression?

These questions help to form a narrative, gathered around a single theme. The primary question is therefore of the social role of toxic behaviour in online game environments:

What is the social function of toxic behaviour in League of Legends?

By this I do not intend a teleological framing – I am not suggesting that anti-social practices are performed with an end-goal in mind beyond their immediate consequences of infuriation or gratification. Rather I intend a structuralist cast to the question, arguing that social meta-structures are expressed and created by micro-scale group interactions. I accept the understanding that individual behaviours may affect group identity and function, particularly if these behaviours are performed by a number of different individuals on different occasions. With toxic practices as an example of this, it should be feasible to identify and analyse their social effect beyond the immediate. This would discern their potential constructive and destructive

effects, as well as noting their possible differences in form across platforms, and ways in which they are otherwise gendered, raced, and classed.

In the following chapter I describe the development of a method for answering this question, taking into account all I have learned about studying online communities from the literature. I reflexively describe process of carrying out this method. I also introduce Bourdieu's Practice Theory as a theoretical framework for analysis, and explain why it is a particularly useful model of society when looking at communities on the Web.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I outline the methodology underpinning this thesis. It describes the research site, evaluates appropriate methods in the context of the research question, and describes the methods undertaken. It also describes the theoretical framework used to analyse data.

I begin the chapter with a brief description of the research site. The aim of this is to situate the game within a video game historiography so that other scholars may more comfortably set it within their own knowledge frameworks. The use scenario which forms part of this description is provided for similar reasons, and also so that readers will be able to more-easily follow game-specific comments in later chapters.

The central question guiding this research is:

What is the social function of toxic behaviour in League of Legends?

Designing a project which has the capability to effectively answer this question - while bearing in mind the implications of the literature - is a challenging part of the research process. Ethical considerations, practicality, and rigour must all be taken into account. However as virtual-worlds research is quite new, there is no strictly prescribed methodology. Instead, I took into consideration methods of practice and analysis which have proven successful for a number of other researchers.

Of these, it was virtual ethnography which I decided to be most useful and appropriate. As well as being an apt research method for exploration of a research site, it additionally affords a great degree of flexible insight as the researcher becomes accustomed to the environment. In the context of the research question it allowed me to observe toxic practices in person and even to some extent experience how they make other players feel and react. It afforded me the opportunity to reflexively learn and come to understand the research site as part of the methodological process. The practical method of ethnography is outlined in this chapter, and the outcomes are discussed in the following chapters. The data generated from this process is also illustrated with observational analysis of the research site in subsequent chapters.

Following the ethnography, I describe the theoretical framework to be used in analysing the ethnographic data. While it is unusual to place the theoretical framework between descriptions of the ethnographic and interviewing methods, this was done as a reflection of the iterative process of data collection and analysis,

during which research methods developed from exploratory (ethnography) to thematically specialised (interviewing). This framework is based on Bourdieu's theory of practice, and is informed by the conceptual model he sets out in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1995), *Distinction* (1984a), and *Practical Reason* (2001b), among others. This mode of analysis is well-suited to ethnography as it affords macro-level insight into individual (micro-level) practices. Its suitability for virtual ethnography is described.

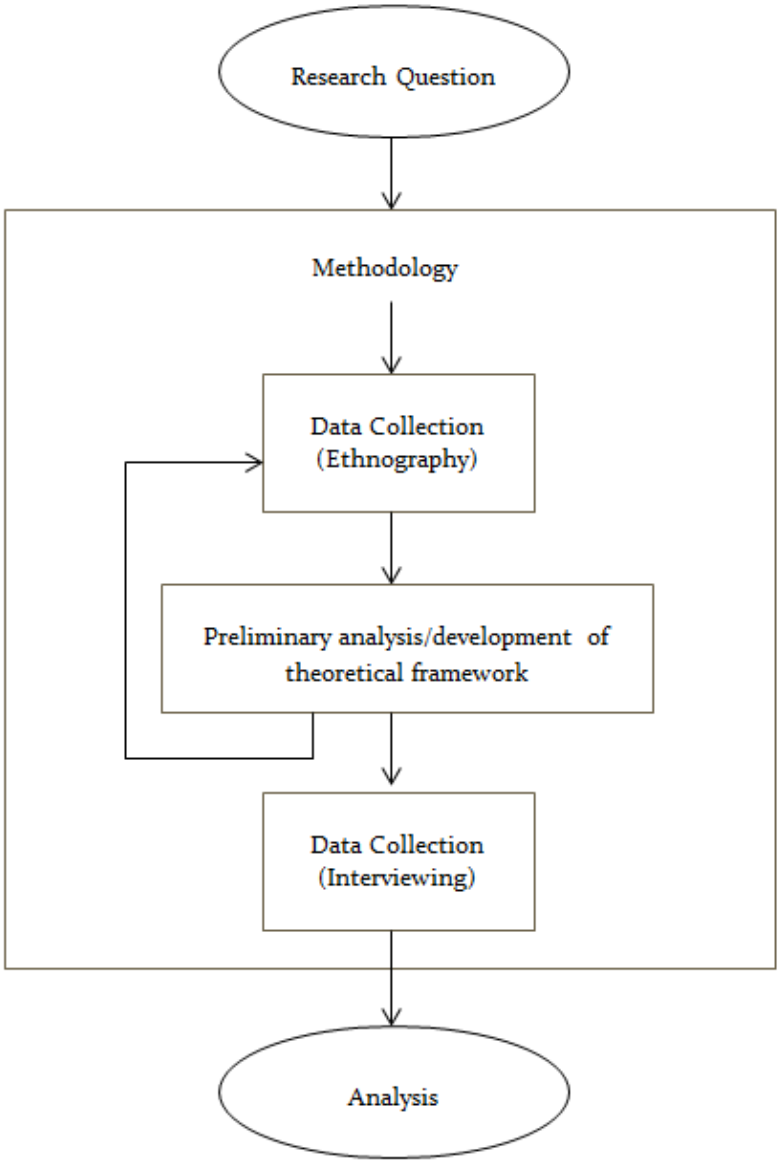

Figure 3.1. Simplified diagram showing the iterative process of methodology.

In the final section of this chapter I outline the method of semi-structured interviewing which took place as the last mode of data collection. The aim of this was to test hypotheses and themes generated from analysis of the ethnographic data. It meant that the broad data from the ethnography could be refined to more

specifically target areas salient to the framework and the question. The questions reflect what has been learned about the field in the ethnography, and how that information has been critically analysed through the theoretical framework.

3.2 The Research site: League of Legends

The Massively-Multiplayer Online game chosen as a field for this study is *League of Legends* (also known as *'League'* or 'LoL') published by Riot Games, an originally independent company acquired by Chinese technology giant Tencent Holdings in 2015. Its genealogy lies within both the fantasy and strategy game genres, although it is most accurately described as a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) or a Real-Time Strategy Game (RTSG). These are games characterised by player v. player combat in a team setting, often with a strategic 'metagame' in play which elevates the game beyond simple combat. In 2002, Blizzard Entertainment (creators of other popular Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs) such as *World of Warcraft* (2004) and *Starcraft* (1998)) released the highly popular Real-Time Strategy Game *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* and, in 2003, its expansion, *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne*. These games were set in a high-fantasy universe populated by factions of beings such as elves and orcs at constant war with one another. As well as allowing for 'campaign' and 'multiplayer' modes of play, *Warcraft III* also included the opportunity for players to modify ('mod') and create mapped areas ('maps') in which to play (Cieniawa, 2002) . Using powerful player-controlled 'heroes' and weaker AI-controlled fighting units, the aim of the game was to control the majority of the map by occupying territories or key resources.

In 2003, a member of the *Warcraft III* community known only by his alias 'Eul' created a new map imitating one from the RTSG *Starcraft* called 'Aeon of Strife'. He named it 'Defence of the Ancients' and it involved a slightly different mechanic from most other *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* 'mods' (Carless, 2009). It was played in two teams of five, with the aim being to capture the enemy team's base (the titular 'ancients' in need of defending). When 'Eul' failed to update the map following the release of *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne* another 'modder' named Steve Feak (alias: Guinsoo) recreated and updated it with the name 'Defence of the Ancients: Allstars' (later simply 'Defence of the Ancients' or DOTA). As well as improving its replayability by adding further heroes and features, Feak's mod was also popularised in the community by first having its own chat channel on Battle.net (Blizzard's community and product website), then by having its own community site run by Steve Mescon (alias: Pendragon) (Feak, 2009). According to Mescon, this helped to create a cohesive group of DOTA players, discrete from those who identified predominantly as *Warcraft III* players (Carless, 2009).

Following the release of map version 6.01 in 2005, Feak handed control of the mod over to a reclusive developer known only as 'Icefrog', who continued to work on the game until 2009, when it was finally released as a stand-alone MOBA under the name *Dota 2*, published by Valve Corporation. In the meantime

Feak and Mescon partnered with Brandon Beck (alias: Ryze) and Marc Merrill (alias: Tryndamere) to form the independent game development company *Riot Games* in 2006. Their aim was create a fully-fleshed legacy to DOTA; one which would incorporate their work on the original mod but run on its own engine. The resultant product, *League of Legends,* was released in 2009 (Nguyen, 2009b).

League was initially chosen for this study due to its immense popularity and rich community presence. When Riot Games last published official numbers in 2014, *League of Legends* had 32 million active monthly players (also called 'summoners') worldwide. By the end of 2016 a representative of Riot Games unofficially stated that that number had reached 100 million (Kollar, 2016), solidifying its place as the most popular online game in the world. Fans and players actively engage with *League* across many streams of online media, such as apps, 'let's play[5]' videos, competitive tournaments, fan art, and live video streams. Additionally it is built around a single-instance gameplay style which allows for continuous informed consent from players to be observed as they play.

In terms of hours played per month, *League* is among the most-played video games in the world. However of its players, over 90% identified as male and 85% were aged between 16 and 30 when last questioned. (Lyons, 2012). The *League* community is known for its toxicity, manifesting in in-game verbal abuse, harassment, 'rage quitting' (in which a player leaves a match prematurely), and 'trolling' in the form of e.g. intentionally giving kills to the enemy team – behaviours which Riot Games works endlessly to curb and prevent (Skiffington, 2014, LeJacq, 2015, Lin, 2015). It is this behaviour which is of particular interest in this study, as its proliferation in this particular virtual environment is persistent and poorly-understood on a social level.

League of Legends is a client-based graphical online game that requires a PC or Mac and a consistent Internet connection to use. Play takes place in teams, on virtual battlegrounds populated by fantasy monsters. Its complexity means that *League* does not lend itself well to text description – a full manual covering the majority of use case outcomes would be thesis-length in itself, and is beyond the scope of this document. However I attach in Appendix B a use-case scenario of play, illustrated with in-game screen captures, to provide clarity when using game-specific language. For the same purpose I also include a glossary of terms in Appendix A. Below are two simplified flow diagrams of the play process, intended as a more light-weight introduction.

[5] A popular form of video log in which an individual plays and comments on a game.

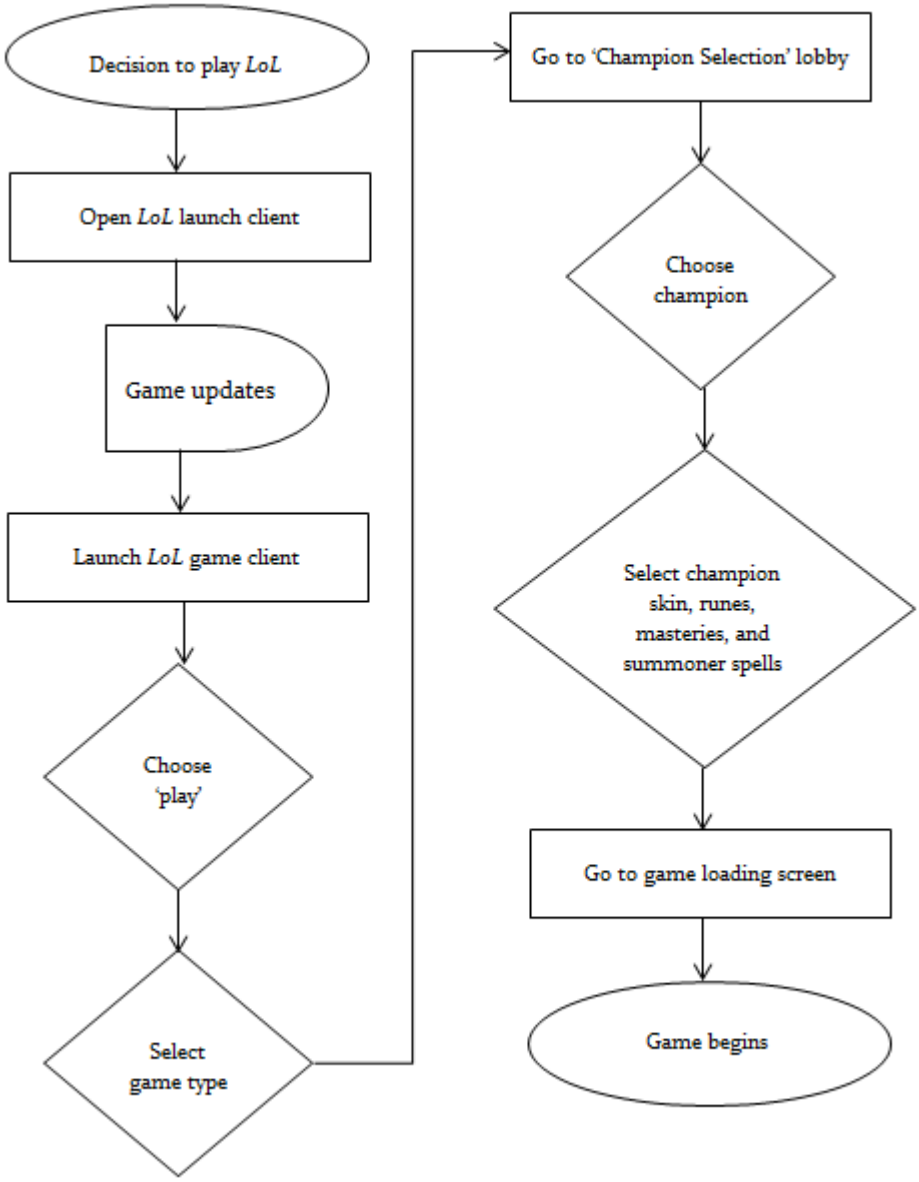

Figure 3.2. *League of Legends* pre-play process

Figure 3.2 shows the stages a typical player goes through before each game. When choosing a champion they may choose from however many they own, all of which have unique characteristics. Unlike in many video games, champion appearances etc. are not freely customisable. However, players can to some extent customise a champion's appearance and skills by using purchased or earned skins, runes and masteries.

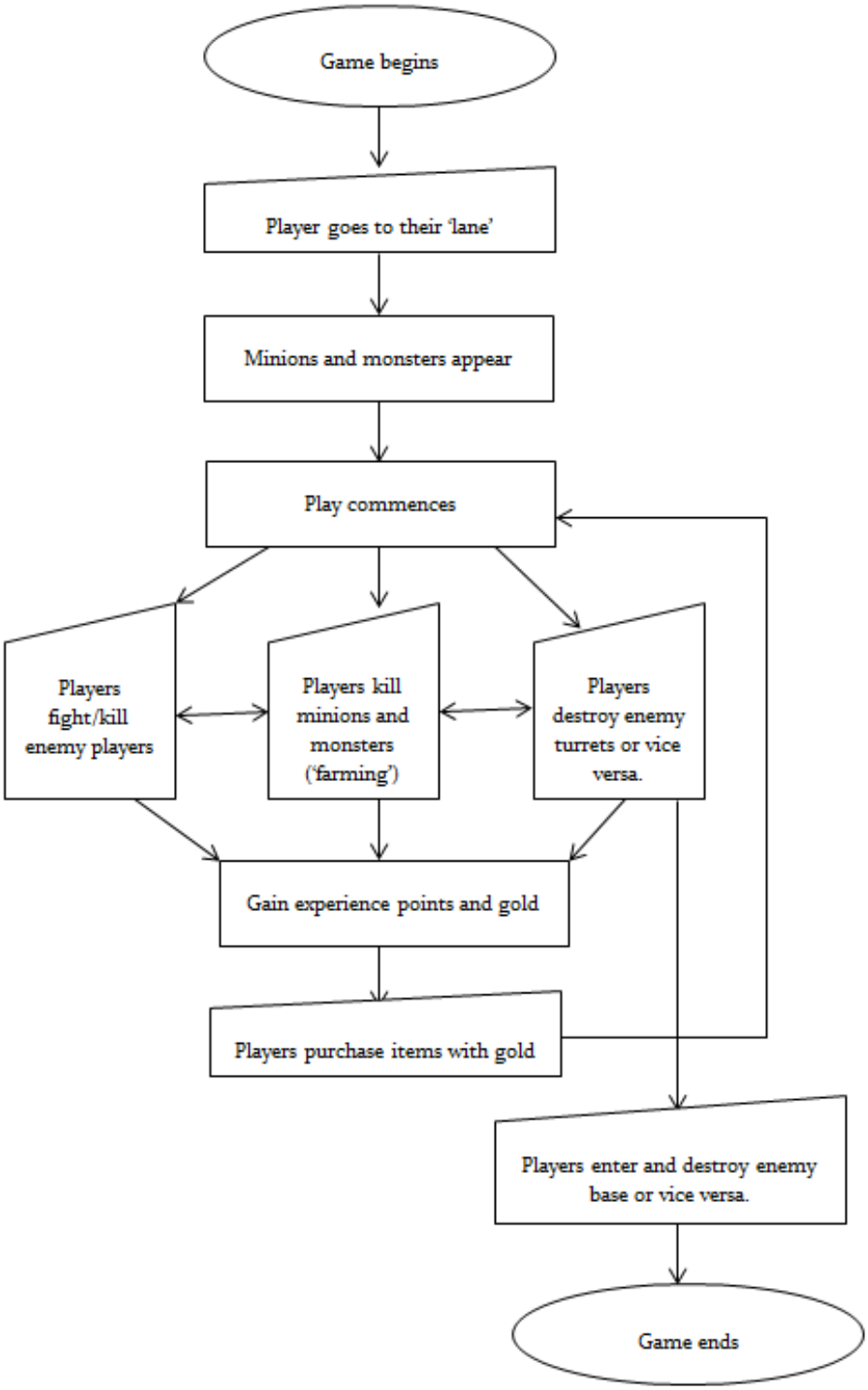

Figure 3.3. *League of Legends* gameplay process

Figure 3.3 indicates the process of play once the game begins. The object of the game is to destroy the enemy's base (their 'nexus') using a champion's skills as part of a team. Some champions are better than others at performing particular tasks such as dealing or healing damage. A skilled team works together in synergy to achieve their objectives. There are no 'draw' outcomes to a game of *League of Legends* – one team must lose for the other to win.

3.3 Designing an Appropriate Research Method

As this research cuts across disciplines and fields of research, I decided that a mixed-methods approach would be most useful. A flexible approach allows for adaptation to themes emerging from the data, and an iterative approach to solving research challenges as they arise. Nonetheless the decision to use predominantly qualitative methods was made fairly early, in an effort to promote a nuanced exploration of the subject and to maintain participants' subjectivity. Quantitative methods in the form of statistical evaluation at the interpretative stages were found to be useful as illustrations in discussions of predominant themes, demographic spread, etc. However quantitative research methods in terms of sampling the participant base were not used, as they are best suited for large scale, superficial sampling meant to determine population trends. Their contribution in approaching the research question would have therefore have been minimal at best and actively detrimental at worst. When such studies are conducted in an emergent area, substantively trivial results can be statistically significant and therefore thought to be valuable due to underlying biases (Yee, 2014:109).

Yee (2014) illustrates this effect using his own data from the Daedalus Project, a large-scale study of World of Warcraft players, as an example. When studying motivations for playing online games there appeared a statistically significant variation in men's and women's preferences, a variance initially interpreted as an example of 'gender difference' in gameplay styles (Yee, 2014:110). A major factor neglected in the analysis was that age played a much greater role in determining difference in motivation and, as female players were on average six years older than males, the difference caused by gender between the 'average male player' and the 'average female player' was greatly exaggerated. This is not the only time that an expected 'difference' caused by gender has led to the misinterpretation of data. According to Yee (2014), there exists among *World of Warcraft* players the pervasive idea that male and female players prefer different in-game roles. Namely that men prefer aggressive damage-dealing roles while women would prefer to simply aid other players in a supportive or healing role. At first glance, some data appeared support this, as female characters predominantly take on the responsibility of healing other player characters (Yee, 2014). This data does not, however, take into account the phenomenon of avatar gender-swapping, masking the fact that many female *characters* are played by men, and dramatically skewing what is in fact a very even preference for the supporting, healing role among players of either gender (Yee, 2014).

Another major problem with quantitative methods, particularly in exploratory research such as this, is that they lack the flexibility to adapt to unforeseen participant responses, or worse, lack even the flexibility to allow a participant to give unexpected responses. Furthermore, if they generate results which disprove or diverge from hypotheses, they lack the richness needed to indicate an alternative explanation. An example of this is in Lehdonvirta et al. (2011), in which a well-researched and –executed methodology gave results supporting certain hypothesized behaviours undertaken by game players, while contravening their expected reasons for doing so. This led to what I would argue to be an unsatisfying conclusion that did not fulfil their research aims.

These three examples draw attention to the importance of understanding the nature of bias as a possible threat even in data which appears objective, as well as the need for reflective, flexible data collection at the methodological stage. In order to fully explore an emergent area, it is vital that the researcher allows for and in fact builds from the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participant, particularly in nascent or interdisciplinary fields such as this. The participant should be allowed to be the expert in the field of their own subjective experience and, as such, should have their voice heard. It is not the role of the researcher to build structures in which participant responses are placed, but to take what is observed and learned in the field and derive theory and knowledge from it (Saukko, 2003, Richardson, 1995).

With these challenges in mind I chose ethnography as a primary method, with semi-structured interviewing as a secondary method. My intention was to consciously engage in learning about the community from the community, and to let the people who are part of it tell their stories. Rather than attempting to sublimate the role of the researcher-as-person, ethnography allows the researcher to honestly reflect on their role in the narrative, and in this way take into account their own biases and effect on the environment. Observations, stories, and vignettes can then be gathered and re-told to a readership, thus placing evidence and critical analysis side by side.

With this community focus in mind, there was also the potential for other, observation-based forms of research. As stated previously, Fans and players actively engage with *League* across many streams of online media, 'let's play' and commentary videos, competitive tournaments, and live video streams. However, there were several points making these methods unfeasible for this research.

Firstly, I had practical concerns. At the time of data collection, it was not possible to see team chat while watching game replays through the game client. This would have meant gaining an incomplete picture of the play experience. In addition, I felt that there were ethical issues surrounding this possible mode of data collection. In practical terms, gathering individual informed consent from players to post-hoc analyse a game they had played would have been extremely complicated. While watching and analysing 'let's play'-style videos on YouTube would have been a reasonable way to use this media, it did not seem ethical for me to use the performance and chat of players in the videos without their knowledge. Additionally, streamers and live-

casters who broadcast or publicize their play on e.g. YouTube and Twitch offer curated performance for a particular audience. This makes their videos quite different from candid play videos, and in my view an inauthentic source of data for this kind of research.

An ethnographic approach to this research could have been undertaken in both the real and virtual world, or simply online. A dual-approach ethnography would not have required a large number of participants, but it would require large amount of time and access to them. It would focus on the lived and materially-embodied aspects of gameplay, as well as its social aspects. The advantage of this method is a holistic insight into the experience of gaming, but it is also highly invasive for the participant as the researcher documented their offline and online lives and behaviours. It would also have relied heavily on a very small number of participants' experiences, without a guarantee of wider applicability or commonality between them and other players. This would make it difficult to identify the themes of experience which are important to players.

For these reasons I chose virtual ethnography as the first stage of methodology. It affords a great deal of insight, especially into unexplored environments, and allows the researcher to gather data as they adapt to the environment. In the context of the research question it would allow me observe toxic practices in person and even to some extent experience how they make other players feel and react. While virtual ethnography is far newer than classical ethnography, it shares many traits and challenges with its established counterpart, as well as bringing new difficulties and opportunities to light.

3.3.1 Virtual Ethnography: Challenges and Affordances

As it would prove to be for Carter, who conducted her own virtual ethnography in 2005, a challenge for Kendall (2002) was based on the requirements of ethical study practise, which necessitated research being openly declared as being undertaken, so that informed consent may be obtained. Unfortunately, maintaining openness proved difficult as without a physical presence or appearance participants could not know without actively being informed when their conversations were being recorded or when notes were being taken (Kendall, 2002:236). Kendall attempted to resolve this in two ways, firstly by maintaining a textual character description which outlined her role as researcher, and secondly by periodically reminding interactants that their conversations were being logged, particularly during sensitive discussions, and occasionally bringing the conversation topic round to her research. While only the latter of these methods worked particularly well, this was a consequence of the particular community in which she was engaged (character descriptions were largely ignored), and could have been more viable in other virtual environments. In *League of Legends*, for example, it is reasonably easy to request consent before a match begins, and as each match usually lasts less than an hour, researchers can comfortably assume that participants will remain aware that they are being studied.

Even the nature of Kendall's research proved to a point of contention for some of the participants who, while respecting positivist scientific methods as members of a technologically forward-thinking, Web-savvy subculture, nonetheless possessed a negative view toward social science research, with survey research apparently earning their deepest suspicion (Kendall, 2002). This, along with Kendall's status as a woman conducting research on gender and in particular masculinity, created a power imbalance between her and participants (2002:244). This is not an unexpected or new problem, but rather a re-staging of the problem of status and context which must be taken into account in all research, particularly qualitative research dealing in human behaviour. It is additionally an issue which was prominent in my mind when assessing the potential risks of conducting a virtual ethnography. Women conducting research, and especially feminist research, on the Internet are rarely welcomed in online communities. As such I decided early that I would not reveal my gender in typed communications with other players, only revealing it if directly challenged.

According to Seymour (2001:155), many social scientists consider in-person communications to be most productive as the immediacy of such interactions facilitates dialogue and encourages the construction of data both on the part of the researcher and the participant, narrowing the distance between them created by status and social role. This assumption can be seen in Carter's work in that she made sure to meet participants offline after talking to them online (Carter, 2005). In theory, this sharing and mutual commitment is more equal, both promoting openness and an ability to engage with the research on the part of the participant, and reaffirming the ethical commitments of the researcher to an 'authentic' reproduction of the participants' views (Seymour, 2001: 155). Virtual ethnography and other methods of online data collection, on the other hand, renegotiate physical presence by, to some extent, removing the body. However research has indicated that people do tend to conform to their offline identity when online. People, by and large, are who they say they are (Carter, 2005), as much as their avatar bodies might differ from those of their real lives.

Another issue is that of the research setting. All researchers versed in qualitative methods are aware of the challenge posed by potential power imbalances in their contact with participants. Factors such as relative socio-economic status, education, race, etc. affect the context in which knowledge is to be constructed between researcher and participant. Additionally Seymour (2001) highlights the physical setting of the research to be undertaken as an affecting factor in itself. For instance, he points out that the majority of interviews conducted with female subjects take place in their homes. This is far from a neutral setting, being a highly personal environment in which class, wealth, and a host of further factors are expressed. Not only is the balance of power affected, but also the interpretive stage of analysis during which meaning is attributed to data.

A virtual ethnography challenges the notion of a research setting by, on the one hand, removing the props of real-world socio-economic status and distancing the physical body. This can create a more neutral,

egalitarian space - a boon for both participants and researchers. On the other hand it's possible that virtual worlds are no more neutral than real-world settings, having instead their own context and politics, and therefore significant effects on how participants negotiate themselves and their identities. Gatson and Zweerink (2004) by comparison claim that online ethnographic research is inherently multi-sited no matter the position of the researcher, as this is the nature of both online communities and personal internet use. In a sense, these worlds are the natural habitat and home of the avatar, with the player's psyche inhabiting and puppeteering these virtual bodies as an outside force. It is therefore the role of the ethnographer in a virtual world to not simply collect data from the fringes of an online community, but to observe and analyse the graphical world in which participants are immersed.

In approaching this kind of research, Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) took the large-scale approach, discussing the role of Massively-Multiplayer Online Games (MMOS) as emergent 'third spaces' (leisure spaces demarcated for social and civic engagement as a form of social capital which, according to Putnam (1995), are a declining part of American life). They modelled a theoretical framework for understanding the social forms and functions of these games based on conclusions drawn from two previous research projects, which meant carrying out a comparative analysis of theories on what compromised a 'third space' and research done in these virtual worlds (in this case World of Warcraft).

I have been influenced by their work, among that of others, to look at a game as a cultural object, both architectured and negotiable, and having an effect on players who engage with it. It is for these reasons that I include a use-case scenario describing the research site at the beginning of this chapter, alongside observational analysis drawn from a media studies background in chapters four through six.

My methodology as I have conducted it does not fully constitute a 'true' ethnography as it does not include prolonged and intimate connection with a small target community. It is instead more strategic, with ethnographic methods acting as scoping tools to gain preliminary data and comprehension of a large and diverse online community. These observations are then analysed and refined through a secondary stage of data collection and analysis. Intimacy is disrupted by adopting a more 'marginal' position.

I also chose semi-structured interviewing alongside other methods in order to ethically gain the insight of participants in a more strategic way than is possible through participant observation. Had this been the main source of data collection, these interviews would need to be lengthy and repeated over a period of time in order to generate sufficiently rich and thick data. Therefore it was decided that alternatively, semi-structured interviewing could be undertaken as a secondary method to ethnography with an emphasis on participant observation. The primary result of this is a fuller, more nuanced understanding of how players interact in different situations, and the ways in which they perceive and negotiate virtual world interactions. This method also allows for exploratory data collection at the ethnographic stage, and a level of reflexivity at the interview stage which would not be possible from interviews alone.

3.4 Ethnographic Method

The first part of this study to involve participants was a virtual field ethnography, adapting methods developed by researchers such as Williams et al. (2009), Kendall (2002) and Carter (2005). For three months I spent approximately one hour a day, four days a week, and at varying times of day immersed in the *League of Legends* environment. This time has been spent both in and out of game instances; playing, making field notes, and forming social ties. The length of time was an approximation based on an average expectation, as a game instances can last from 15 to 75 minutes, with 20 to 40 minutes being the most common. I conducted this research at varying times of day and week in order to negate the effects of temporality on gameplay and sociability which had not been planned for. Real-world ethnographers working in restricted spaces such as hospitals have noticed that repeating periods of observation only at certain times meant potentially phenomenologically interesting data points were missed (Pope, 2013). This is reflected in virtual ethnographies such as that of Kendall (2002), who remarked that different times of day were associated with differing levels of activity and sociability in an online forum. These variations are not of observational interest in this study, but should be accounted for.

League of Legends is played on a number of servers around the world. Players may choose their server when making an account, but most choose geographically local ones to improve response times. Once chosen, players cannot use the same account across many servers. I chose to play on the EU-West server, which covers the majority of Europe. While many players spoke English, I did not record the games of those who did not as that would have violated the codes of informed consent.

This study was approved by the Ethics Research Governance Online (ERGO[6]) board at the University of Southampton to run for up to one year, although this was an upper-end estimation. It was not possible to accurately predict when the appropriate amount of data would have been collected, but it was estimated to require a minimum of three months. This was to allow for game instances in which little communication was undertaken, and to allow for flexibility in forming acquaintanceships and adopting the argots and behaviours of the community.

Game instances were recorded using the programme FRAPS, as it records full games in the form of video screen captures as they are played. This is, however, a very large programme which requires a much greater amount of processing power than *League of Legends* itself, as I found to my detriment during research. It was, however, the most robust programme available as those designed to capture game data and render it into video were extremely buggy and unreliable. From these recordings I transcribed textual data and applied relevant commentary.

[6] Study ID: 12967

The instance-based rather than continual-play style of *League of Legends* meant that consent to record in-game chat could be asked of other players before each battle. As required by the ERGO board, players were made aware of my role as researcher at all stages of contact. This was done by posting a disclaimer message at the beginning of the game. By necessity this message was quite long, and required the use of a Macro script. It informed participants that they were able to contact me for further information regarding my research either through the game client or via email, and a participant information sheet was made available online. If players did not explicitly give their consent then I did not record the game. However out of respect for the community I would still stay and play with my team, and learn what I could. *League of Legends* does not offer the capability for players to leave a game and be replaced, so leaving a game would have been not only rude but against the explicit code of play ('The Summoner's Code').

A further consideration which played a large part in my practical ethnography was maintaining my own safety. While I would suffer little to no physical risk in the field, I ran the risk of garnering negative attention of the type sometimes used by online groups to harass those whom they feel 'deserve' it. While this would no doubt have contributed fascinating and valuable data, the danger it would have posed to my own mental health was not worth the risk. So, despite wanting to maintain as open and informed a relationship with participants as possible, I placed certain 'sensible[7]' safety barriers. These included using a third-party email address and not disclosing personal information including my name, age, location, or gender in-game. I still feel that these steps were reasonable, but obscuring my gender was in particular a barrier to some experiences that later became central themes in my thesis (see chapters 5 and 6).

I took field notes during and after game instances, describing the experiences of play and cross-coding them to the relevant game data. The aim of these field notes was twofold; firstly to provide context to references made in chat (a 'well done' for example, might be congratulatory following a kill, or sarcastic following a death (as in Figure 3.4), secondly to maintain a level of reflexivity and reflection as a researcher (as in Figure 3.5). While this project was not designed to be an auto-ethnography, the experiences of a researcher in a field should be logged in order to take their subjectivity into account, and to log any mistakes, successes, and unusual observations for future reference.

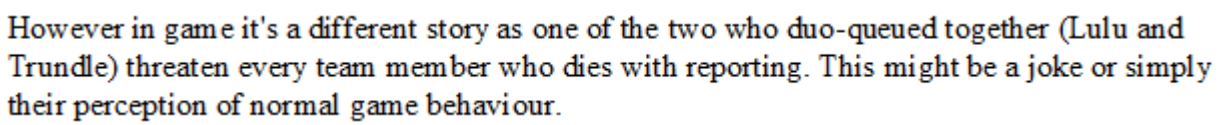
However in game it's a different story as one of the two who duo-queued together (Lulu and Trundle) threaten every team member who dies with reporting. This might be a joke or simply their perception of normal game behaviour.

Figure 3.4. Field notes from March 2015

[7] The term used by the ethics board reviewing my method. A full transcript of the application and accompanying comments are reproduced in the appendices.

Lag makes everything feel awkward, clumsy, and disconnected. Like having a numb arm or anaesthetic after a doctor's appointment.

Figure 3.5 Field notes from April 2015

In terms of field relations my approach was therefore very open. I intended to occupy the 'marginal native' observation position described by Freilich (1970) in Hammersley and Atkinson (2007). This meant adopting immersive behaviours within the environment while remaining a level of distance from other players. Making my role as researcher clear set me apart from typical players, but the effect of this, whether positive or negative, is not yet fully known. Results showed a create deal of variation in attitude – while some players were enthusiastic at the prospect of being part of a research study, others suggested reporting me for negative behaviour 'just for fun'. The intention was that it would give me space to question seemingly unconscious or contextually normative actions. The immersive aspect of playing the game for up to an hour each day rather than using textual data previously stored by Riot Games was intended to make me as a researcher aware of the community's behaviour and speech norms as an insider. This allowed for reflexive, developing ethnography as these patterns were learned alongside gameplay, and was intended to keep my marginal position as researcher from becoming too much that of the educated but awkward outsider in attempting to communicate with and understand the perspectives of players at later stages in this study and during analysis.

Communicating with other players outside of game instances was also to form part of this stage of research. Social ties in online video games are formed out of both necessity (playing with other, known, players is more likely to result in a win) and sociability (Lin, 2015). While I had the opportunity to record conversations with other players outside of game instances, my intention was to approach these players at the interviewing stage of this research as potential participants. Loose, 'friendly' social ties are also useful in accessing more people in the game community for the same purpose. Establishing these social ties is another opportunity afforded by undertaking this research in the form of ethnography.

League of Legends offers several types of player-versus-player battle. It is possible, for example, to play against an enemy team of AI-controlled champions (`bots') for practice, or to play as a team of three against three. Groups of friends can join the queue in teams of two or three, and there is even a choice of maps available. This study was be undertaken using the most popular play style: five versus five, on the classic `Defence of the Ancients'-style map. This was in order to remove the risk of my own varying skill on different maps and in differently-sized teams affecting the data.

The practical process of data collection was as follows: After joining the queue to play a game on the Western European server and choosing the type of game to be played, nine other players from the same server would eventually join (the time this takes depends on how busy the server is). At this point all ten players would be taken to a character selection screen, which was the first player communication opportunity. At this point I

declared my intention to record the game instance along with my reasons for doing so and a link to an online Participant Information Sheet, and offered the opportunity to opt out. If any objections were made I immediately ceased recording. If players were non-English-speaking or under the age of 18 I would again have ceased recording. Once characters had been chosen and the game instance commenced, I would again declare my intention to record and offer the opportunity to opt out.

Within a game instance communication between players is purely textual and is logged by League of Legends' parent company Riot Games as part of their ongoing research into player behaviour and, according to their privacy policy, constitutes public information. As such recording the game instances and specifically the conversation logs did not represent a violation of expected in-game privacy. Additionally, researchers such as Fox et al. (2013), Eysenback & Till (2001) and Hewson (2003) would argue that this kind of data collection without explicit consent does not present an ethical challenge as it takes place in a `public space'. However, as stated by the British Sociological Association (BSA) guidelines online research should be approached with consent, anonymity and confidentiality playing a key role (BSA, 2002). As such I took all possible steps toward gaining consent, maintaining openness and anonymity, and safeguarding confidentiality. Original game data apart from chat logs and information identifying the game instance, for example, was not kept. This identifying information was be securely stored so that in the event of a player later wishing to rescind their consent, the data pertaining to them can be easily found. This identifying data was not included in analyses or write-up.

My own mode of ethnography generated a good deal of rich data in the form of chat logs contextualised with field notes, and occasional vignettes or more developed reflections. After playing for three months I had around 100 distinct records. Some were little more than field note scraps detailing the reason for a disconnect or unrecorded game, while others were logs of long (>50 minute) games full of chatter and inter-team smack talk. Given that I had a good deal of material with which to begin analysis it was decided that I end the ethnographic phase after three months, with the caveat that I return to the field if I felt that the data didn't offer enough scope to move forwards. This turned out not to be the case, but it did mean that much of my experience in playing *League* takes place in the 'early game'; when a 'summoner''s main objective is to gain levels rather than to increase their competitive ranking.

I stored and wrote data up in an NVivo repository for ease of analysis and visualisation. However rather than only coding the chat logs and field notes according to emergent themes, I wanted to approach analysis in a rather more strategic way. This was in order to gain an understanding of the structural social framework at play and better engage with the research question. As such I engaged in analysis through a theoretical framework based on Bourdieusian Practice Theory. I developed some preliminary insights from this analysis, but felt that as part of my dedication to knowledge co-construction it would be helpful to more fully develop these insights with input from *League of Legends* 'natives'. For this reason my interview questions engage

more directly with not only my ethnographic data, but also with the theoretical framework in terms of thematic coding. Therefore I describe this framework in the following section, before outlining the interview schedule, as a reflection of the iterative process of methodology and analysis.

3.5 Theoretical Framework

When using Bourdieusian theory to look at society we can begin with one underlying assumption: that the self *is* the social. Bourdieu wrote that "the socialized body (which one calls the individual or person) does not stand in opposition to society, it is one of its forms of existence" (Bourdieu, quoted in Swartz, 1997:101). In this interpretation there is no duality of self and society; we are social to our core (Skeggs, 2004a). This echoes research suggesting that we ignore the distinction between being 'online' and 'offline' and instead approach social life in online spaces in the same way that we approach material-world society. Personal practices are social, and socialised practices (Bourdieu, 1984b). The conceptual frameworks which structure society as described by Bourdieu such as field, habitus, and capital not only give structure to our everyday practises, but are also formed from them. Society's frameworks are unconsciously but observably enacted by its agents on both a personal (micro) and societal (macro) scale.

Therefore I have hypothesized that these conceptual structures should be visible in virtual worlds as they are in material-world societies. The game world is not discrete from the material world, but is deeply embedded in it (Consalvo, 2009). It is simultaneously a microcosm of society, in which the same structures both form and are formed by habituated action. The behaviours within the game world may *look* different or transgressive, but that is only because because they are being expressed through a different medium but *viewed* through the lens of typical society. The same framework nevertheless underpins their logic.

Here I present an overview of literature which supports and expands on this hypothesis, suggesting ways in which Bourdieu's model may offer particular insight into online game worlds. It includes research undertaken within a Bourdieusian framework, or game-world phenomena which can be read in a novel way by applying a Bourdieusian interpretive model. While Bourdieu's key concepts are deeply inter-dependent, I have tried to arrange the sections of this review in a way which best represents their contribution to the observation of game worlds while simultaneously building a structured narrative. Firstly, the habitus and field followed by interpretations of capital. Then class, distinction, and symbolic violence, and finally gender in game worlds as a class construct.

3.5.1 Habitus and Field

The habitus can be read in two ways in the context of a given online game. As synthetic worlds video games are coded (both literally and metaphorically) by a creator. Since they are created within a particular habitus,

and habitus is not only a structure but a practice, it is expressed *through* the architecture of a game and the rules it imposes on players. This promotes "the unconscious internalization of the rules that govern the production of these works." (Bourdieu, 1984b:15). This creates, and manifests as, all the same practices observable in the material world: *doxa*, habituated action, and dispositions.

Virtual worlds are also spaces in which the material-world habitus of the player can be expressed through and by their actions and speech. However, this is not a one-way practice. Especially given the game-habitus described in the previous paragraph. It is instead reflexive and constituted through social play. Through play, gamers must 'decipher', or make meaning from the game world and learn to internalise its way of coding. In this way the player comes to adopt and practise the social and cultural rules of the game world.

Bourdieu conceptualised the social world to be made up of fields. These are structured spaces comprising culture and society (Bourdieu, cited in Swartz, 1997:119), inhabited by groups of human agents with a shared habitus. Their internal structures and hierarchies are largely negotiated by their own development, and allow the field to approach autonomy from external environs. Fields may further be divided into subfields. Each subfield, while following the overall logic of its field, also had its own internal logics, rules and regularities" which could make it quite singular and challenging to understand and take part in (Thomson, 2014: 70). In our fractal metaphor, these are the infinite parts of a whole which nonetheless remain embedded and enmeshed as part of it, repeating the same structural logic.

Agents within the field internalise its rules and practices so that they feel 'natural' within the parameters of the field *doxa*. The *doxa* "misrecognizes the logics of practice at work in the field, so that even when confronted with the field's social (re)productive purposes, agents are able to explain it away" (Thomson, 2014: 68). Fields are sites of resistance and domination, interpersonal struggle and conflict (Swartz, 1997:121). Although this constant struggle allows the field to grow and change, fields rarely have transformative or revolutionary power more broadly, functioning rather as 'arenas' for conflict (Swartz, 1997: 123).

A given online video game does not necessarily constitute a field. However with the advent of the 'gamer' identity or subculture (see, for example, Griffiths et al. (2003), Kowert et al. (2012), Shaw (2011)) it is reasonable to describe 'gaming' as a collective subfield within the field of leisure or even of sport, given video games' rules of play, fans and star players, and problems with chauvinism. I argue that a given online game *can* be interpreted as a subfield within the 'gaming' field, given parameters such as those discussed in chapter four. I am not proposing a superficial checklist of 'what makes a field', but a consideration of, for example, my chosen research site *League of Legends*.

This game is played by approximately 12 million people every day, across 145 countries (2012 figures[8]). Additionally, it has a thriving community congregating on Websites such as reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends (a forum with 682,000 subscribers), and tuning in to watch its competitive matches (the 2012 world championship had 8 million live viewers) (Cox, 2012). Even when only observing English-speaking players, as I did in my project, normative, game-specific habituated practices were visible. Repeating memes and subtextual rules were common, as well as practices which seemed perfectly natural to players despite their aberrance from real-world norms. I therefore propose that some online games including *League of Legends* can be read as fields, by the logic that they create bounded but extensive social spaces in which people engage for up to several hours per day, in which conflict takes place. This conflict is born out of an uneven distribution of capital within the field, negotiated in the context of a shared and understood (if not recognised) habitus.

3.5.2 Capital

Capital is a structural concept as well as symbolic value. Bourdieu (1986:242) claims that "the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world." There are many forms of capital and they continue to emerge and re-emerge in different social environments, occasionally needing re-negotiation into more manageable conceptual constraints. The three most fundamental according to Bourdieu are economic, social, and cultural (Bourdieu, 1986).

In an industrial society economic capital is bounded and sited in factories, commodities, and workers. However as the market evolves into a global phenomenon, capitalism adapts and capital becomes more fluid and mobile (Bauman, 2013). Virtual capital in the form of company stocks, which can build a fortune for all they are symbolic parts of a whole, is a straightforward example of this. However it manifests in other forms as well. Virtual objects and goods in game worlds are often tradeable and worth in-game money. Their trade value can fluctuate due to the same factors that affect real-world markets such as scarcity, need, and the labour power that goes into its production. Game currency has its own economic potential both in the virtual and real worlds and, as in the real world, is based on initial human capital invested over time (Dodson, 2006). It typically takes many hours spent in-game to earn large amounts of currency or 'valuable' items (a practice known as 'farming' or 'grinding') or, depending on the financial model on which the game is based, real-world money can be traded for them.

Although online gaming is ostensibly a leisure activity, the more monotonous and time-consuming tasks which are nonetheless integral to the game can be outsourced to unskilled labourers for low wages. China has

[8] Riot Games does not often publically release its data, including player numbers. The last major release of demographic data was in 2012.

stood out in the early 21st century as the largest currency-farming labour force in the world (Barboza, December 2005, Heeks, 2009). This is an illustration of the embeddedness of game worlds. Not only do they exhibit their own internal commercial systems, but also allow trade with the material world. Malaby (2006:145) supports this claim, stating that economies are not only real and observable in virtual worlds but large and actively growing, with "their existence as a site for the generation of market capital is becoming not just true but commonplace".

Bourdieu is keen to emphasize the importance of allowing for various forms of capital beyond the purely economic in order to best understand the "structure and functioning of the social world" (Bourdieu, 1986: 242). Social capital, too, has been readdressed in the context of virtuality, and found to be effectively reconstituted. Portes (1998:9) distinguishes three basic functions of social capital, applicable in a variety of contexts: Firstly as a source of social control; secondly as a source of family support; and finally as a source of benefits through extrafamilial networks. Working from this idea of a social capital effecting change through social networks, authors such as Prell (2006) focus on social capital as influential capital in a network. By combining social science research with mathematical graph theory methods, it is argued that social networks can be effectively modelled, and that "a number of important formal methods of social network analysis can be discerned" (Scott, 1988). While I would argue that this is actually a very narrow interpretation of social capital as it discards subjective narratives, many researchers across several fields have focussed on this method of modelling social capital to evaluate its role in virtual social networks. This research has predominantly utilised social networking sites as they are both straightforward in terms of data collection and offer explicit networks based on interpersonal relationships, but has also taken place in MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* (Williams, 2006a, etc, Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, Carter, 2005, Chen, 2008, etc.) and other virtual worlds (Blanchard and Horan, 1998, Huvila et al., 2010). Similarly, authors such as Zhong (2011), Lehdonvirta (2010) and Steinfield et al. (2008) have explored the relationship between online and offline social capital, predominantly finding that online social networks acted as extensions of existing offline ones. This further indicates that there is no radical distinction between real and virtual-world life, and that the former is also not necessarily more meaningful or influential than the latter. Instead, relationships formed through online ties have bridging and connective power in a social network.

Cultural capital, according to (Bourdieu, 1986), exists in three forms. The first, the embodied state, takes time to cultivate and become internalised by the individual and as such cannot be instantaneously exchanged freely or for economic capital, though it can be unconsciously learned. As such it takes on a form of symbolic power manifested as authority. The second, cultural capital in the objectified state, can conversely be traded for, as it is embodied in material objects. For example a highly sought-after *objet d'art* is valued both in terms of economic capital and symbolic power. Finally, the institutionalized state "institutes cultural capital by collective magic"(Bourdieu, 1986). Expressed through qualification by an independent, authoritative body onto an agent, it is a form of cultural capital that imbues an agent with a degree of authority and yet remains

relatively autonomous from its bearer by its own value. Medals of achievement, badges of honour, ranks and titles all fall into this category of cultural capital.

While most scholarship on the subject is preoccupied by notions of economic and social capital in virtual worlds, Malaby (2006:146) proposes the consideration of cultural capital in this context. He claims that it may act as a means of bringing together current research, completing the picture of virtual worlds as structural microcosms of society. As a concept it goes some way to describe behaviours of expertise, rank, and reputation undertaken by participants in these worlds, especially in the context of the field, and is flexible enough that it can potentially be applied to the resources "that participants develop and acquire in the form of competencies and credentials and that they also invest in valued cultural objects or artefacts" (Malaby, 2006). This may differ according to the type of synthetic environment being discussed, depending on which goals and achievements are framed as particularly desirable. Certainly it seems no stretch to assume that expertise can be demarcated in any game with a 'levelling' mechanic, purely by whether the player is low- or high-level (Malaby, 2006), but there are other factors which may come into play.

In *World of Warcraft*, for example, rare achievements such as exploring the game world in its entirety or finding particularly rare treasure will bestow a title on the player. One of these titles is a reward for catching a fish only available in a single game-world pond, with a drop rate of 0.1%. This means that a prospective in-game angler would need to be willing to invest countless hours on simply casting a line, waiting, and reeling in digital fish. Even worse, the game-pond is in hostile territory, so the angler must occasionally quit their fishing to battle enemies as they spawn every few minutes. These titles are not tradeable, and have no in-game value beyond their rarity and cultural significance. As such they can be read as a practice of institutionalised cultural capital. This illustration can be contrasted with *League of Legends*, in which players enter tournaments to be ranked against each other. Their standing (a complicated score based on ratios of not only wins to losses but ratios of kills to deaths) indicated by 'medallions' and ranks ranging from bronze through to platinum, diamond, and challenger. At any one time on any one server there can only be two hundred players in the challenger tier, representing 0.0002% of the global player population[9]. Every year the ranks are reset to mark the beginning of a new season. Climbing ranks takes time, skill, and concentrated effort (Consalvo et al., 2010, Paul, 2009). The reward for such an investment goes beyond a ranking number and a virtual gew-gaw, rather it is in the conference of authority and the acknowledgement of skill above that of other players.

Other conceptualisations of capital have included gender and technical capital, both of which are particularly prominent in virtual worlds research. Researchers like Kirkpatrick (2010) and Brock et al. (2010) have

[9] That is, the 200 challenger-tier players *per server* represent 0.0002% of the global player popular across *all servers*. This is not an ideal metric for comparison, but it is currently not possible to know exactly how many players use each server.

explored the relationship between feminism and technical capital, while others such Lehdonvirta et al. (2011) and Yee (2014) have considered the potential for trading based on gender capital in games.

3.5.3 Class, Distinction, and Symbolic Violence

Internally, fields also impose forms of struggle upon actors (Swartz, 1997: 125) as their hierarchies are formed of dominant and subordinate positions determined by types and amounts of capital (Swartz, 1997:123). Bourdieu mapped several fields, including the field of power (see for example Distinction (2010) and Practical Reason (2001b)), showing the relative position of agents within the field and their relative capital value. This creates the fundamental framework for the social stratification known as 'class.' Agents, however, understand these positions as due to characteristics read as personal attributes. This unrecognised competition for capital and legitimation create and maintain "the conditions for the 'misrecognition' of power relations and thereby contribute to the maintenance of the social order" (Swartz, 1997:126).

The practice of "social differentiation" (Bourdieu, 2001b: 32) is what Bourdieu calls 'distinction'. This is the practice which demarcates relational class position within a field. It is the manifestation of capital embodied and expressed by agents. While there is a growing body of research on capital in video games and virtual environments, far less work has been done on the possibility of distinction existing in some form. Nonetheless, as microcosms of society, it must be that distinguishing behaviours can be observed. Bourdieu would seem to agree, claiming as he did in 1980 that while it might be most prominent in art, "there is no area of practice in which the intention of purifying, refining and sublimating facile impulses and primary needs cannot assert itself, or in which the stylization of life, i.e., the primacy of form over function, does not produce the same effects" (2010:176). In-game experience is tallied by levels, and highly experienced, elite players scorn clumsy 'newbies' or 'noobs'. In this they make displays of cultural capital, indicating that further distinguishing practices may be found.

As an example of "the stylization of life" which emphasises distinguishing style over functional substance, Bourdieu points to language which, in the offline world, is malleable to dialect, accent and slang vocabulary. Distinction is practised by manipulating language, and in allowing class as well as regional dialects to form. For an example one might consider Shaw's 'Pygmalion', the premise of which is turning a cockney flower-seller into a refined lady largely by changing her elocution. Satirical humour is offered in the transformation of one kind of unintelligible slang to another. It seems likely, therefore, that game worlds, too, have their own idiosyncrasies of language as a barrier to 'belonging' in the community. Indeed, some preliminary work has already been done on Internet argots such as 'lol speak' and 'leet speak' (e.g. Driscoll, 2002, Blashki and Nichol, 2005), and game-specific language (Chen, 2010) implying that an observational study of any virtual world for the purposes of this study should include language analysis.

Symbolic violence is the cousin of distinction. It is the uni-directional exercise of power by someone in a higher position of authority and power within the field upon an agent subordinate to them. It is the expression of symbolic power created by relative class. Crucially, it must be recognised by its object. In online games such as *League of Legends*, players habitually take part in practices of distinction peculiar to their field *doxa*, however symbolic violence is also visible in instances where players wish to assert their authority and relational superiority.

However, I hypothesize that this symbolic violence is more highly-charged and unstable than in the material world as it is often not recognised by its object. A player might refuse to accept their position within the field as it conflicts with their understanding of themselves as either a player in the field of *League of Legends,* or as an agent within the field of power. Most players observed in my study are white, male, and university-educated. Their position in the field of power is one of relative authority, and finding themselves as objects of symbolic violence is abrasive in the extreme. Not so the experience of women and marginalised groups, who often find real-world discriminatory practices reflected in online spaces.

3.5.4 Gender, Class, and Game Worlds

Goffman, cited in Seymour (2001:155) maintained the centrality of the physical body in social interactions and development. To him, the body occupies a mediating stance in negotiating identity between self and self-representation, personal and social, as well as participating in the practice that make up routines and behaviours (Goffman, 1990). While Bourdieu felt, very differently, that "the body is in the social world but the social world is within the body"(Bourdieu, 1984a:152) – positioning the body and society as co-constructed and reflexive - Goffman nonetheless understood the importance of bodily practice. The body is 'encumbered' by its physicality, mired in convention and labouring through "bodily appearance and personal acts: dress, bearing, movement and position" (Goffman, in Seymour, 2001:155-156).

Among the most 'cumbersome' of these practices is almost certainly gender. Its practice is heavily internalised and performed through the body. Skeggs (2004:21) wrote that the lived body is "made up of meanings and values, gestures, postures, physical bearing, speech and language". Bourdieu knew that gendered agents "embody and carry with them the volumes and compositions of different capitals" (Skeggs, 2004a:21). Sexual and gender identity are highly influential in the creation of personal identity and habitus. In most material-world cultures *doxa* places women in an inferior relational gender position within the field of power. Thus gender struggle is a class struggle, expressed through bodily practices linked to gender expression.

In the early 90s it seemed as if the Web might offer a realisation of an asexual utopia (Wajcman, 2007) free from embodied practices, and was embraced by many gender scholars. Rellstab (2007:765) pointed to the

opportunities afforded by the 'radical disarticulation' of online gender from biological sex. Fernandez (cited in Nakamura, 2012) Gimenez (2000:83) and Martey (2010:1218) described Internet communities as, in principal, blind to differences like race, class, and gender; instead creating a more equal, anonymous playing field.

However, virtual worlds are socially constructed as masculine and sometimes misogynistic spaces in which females are underrepresented, stereotyped, and erased (Christofides et al., 2009, Spender, 1995, Green and Adam, 1998). This illustrates that removal of the body does not remove the internalised effects of class power and habitus. Online games are no exception to this, as a cycle is perpetuated in which games are developed by men who have predominantly played games developed for a male audience (Fox and Tang, 2013).

The male point of view is therefore "entrenched and largely unquestioned [in online video games]. The fetishistic aspects of these male fantasies have become largely invisible to male gamers" (Yee, 2014, p.104), but are noticed and criticized by female game-players, for whom sexualised female avatars act as a constant reminder of their not-belonging and their subordinate position within both the field of power and the field of gaming. Femininity is kept at a distance through practices of objectification or the harassment and even abuse of women in these spaces (Fox et al., 2013, Fox and Tang, 2013, Kendall, 2000, Kendall, 2002, Martey, 2010, etc.). This contributes to what Bourdieu might call the 'formative conditions' of a habitus, affecting what its social agents "judge as 'reasonable' or 'unreasonable' (Swartz, 1997: 103). Eventually these behaviours are seen as normal and even expected, and are examples of the uni-directional and habitual nature of symbolic violence.

These power structures have been observed in practice by virtual ethnographers such as Williams (2006a), Chen (2010), Carter (2005) and Kendall (2002), and can be seen in *League of Legends* by observation of player demographics (over 90% of players are male), and by the game's representation of female characters.

3.6 Preliminary Analysis Methods

Applying the theoretical framework to the field data which resulted from my ethnography required a multi-step process and a reasonably strategic approach in order to avoid entanglement in a wealth of fascinating but potentially distracting or confusing minutiae. For this reason I used NVivo 11 software as both a central data repository and an analysis tool. By undertaking two-stage training in the use of this programme at the University of Southampton, and making use of available aides like the Analytic Planning Worksheet developed by Silver and Woolf (2015), I developed a reasonable proficiency with it.

The first stage was to 'write' data taken from games into the programme. This I mostly did manually, transcribing text logs from game-capture videos into NVivo as primary ('internal') sources. I did the same with field notes, transcribing them from hand-written notes taken after (and sometimes during!) play, and

linking them to their associated game instances. As I went through the text, I began to note ('code') themes ('nodes') and occurrences which seemed particularly important, salient, or prevalent. This included occurrences which appeared to tally with, illustrate, or conflict with existing literature. This method resulted in lots of small, more digestible snippets of data.

Field notes, while an important source of information, were coded less often and to a lesser extent than chat logs. This is because in my study field notes acted in part as mark-up of the dominant data stream (the chat). Scribbled field notes described whether a 'gg' was meant politely or sarcastically, or reminded me later to take note of a certain player's language or actions. They kept track of who won, and who had played on each team in case participants later got in contact to revoke their participation. However, where field notes were reflexive or experiential, they were coded like chat logs. Longer, more self-reflective and narrative notes were kept as possible material for illustrative vignettes or to aid reflexivity in analysis (Fieldnote sample 3 is an example of this). Sample field notes are offered in Appendix E, although naturally with identifying player information removed. They are perhaps longer than was typical, however they typify the sort of information I used them to record.

At this point in the analysis process, a more advanced user (or one with different aims) may have found it helpful to continue meticulously breaking down game on a number of levels. For example, I had previously created a taxonomy of characters in *League of Legends*, defining them by gender, body type, history, etc. It would have been possible to link every in-game occurrence of or reference to a character to this taxonomy to discover the rates at which, for example, Leona 'The Radiant Dawn' was played at different levels. It would also have been possible to discover 'time of day' trends in how players communicated and played.

But while this kind of analysis is helpful and useful, it was not in keeping with my aims. My intention in highlighting especially typical, unusual, or affecting in-game interactions was to take these behaviours as expressions of (and contributors to) underlying social structures. This is why after breaking down my data, I began to more strategically curate the pieces according to *analytic* rather than purely *emergent* themes.

3.7 Semi Structured Interviews

Section 3.5 has hinted at ways in which ethnographic data can be read into the theoretical framework. However during the practice of analysis I found that the much of the textual data was too broad and practice-focussed to be clearly and unambiguously situated in the framework. It was decided that direct participant input was needed in order to gain greater and more specialised insight, and remove any ambiguities. The interview questions were therefore designed to give further context to the ethnographic data through the lens of the theoretical framework.

While there are no hard and fast rules for conducting research intended to integrate with Bourdieusian theory, Swartz (1997:142) outlines several principles to keep in mind when undertaking such a method:

1. Research must relate the particular field of practices to the broader field of power
2. Research should identify the structure of objective relations between the opposing positions occupied by individuals or groups as they compete for intellectual or artistic legitimation. What are the forms of economic and cultural capital that are specific to the field under investigation? How are they distributed relative to other forms of capital? This means identifying the dominant and subordinate positions for all the participants in the field.
3. Research must analyze the class habitus brought by agents to their respective positions and the social trajectory they pursue within the field of struggle.

These points mainly describe ways to relate primary research to Bourdieu's conceptual frameworks without discarding participants' views, thus maintaining both micro (subjective, personal) and macro (objective, social) perspectives. I have been maintaining these principles while designing and conducting research by continuously considering the networks and structures of power which influence research results, by bearing in mind the oppositional relationships of actors in the research site when observing and analysing practises, and by looking at forms of capital as a result of these power structures and practises. This approach is based on the close observation of individual or group behaviours, but it is not the only way of putting Bourdieusian principles into practice.

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The following interview questions were intended to allow individual expressions of subjective experiences, while still mapping these responses to the theoretical framework in order to answer the research question. They reflect my dedication to ‘truthfulness’ in how I approach participant data, but do not shy away from treating participants as active, knowledgeable experts in their own experience.

As this methodology is iterative and informed by previous stages, many of the questions are informed by parlances and practices learned and observed during the ethnography. As such they touch on terms not previously discussed, but which are clarified in the following chapters and in the glossary.

3.7.1 Interview Questions

A full interview schedule is available in Appendix C, explicating the full list of interview questions which were followed to a greater or lesser extent depending on the input of the participant. However the questions and conversation topics were gathered according to the following themes.

Introductory Questions

These questions are intended as ice-breakers and gather general information which may have proven useful in identifying, for example, 'serious' v. 'casual' players based on the number of hours played per week, or 'expert' v. 'noob' players based on how long they have been playing.

Social Capital

Previous scholarship has suggested that social networks extend into and develop from online game communities. These questions identify participants' engagement with the wider community and help to indicate their position within it.

Field & Habitus

These questions are intended to identify field-specific practices as noticed by those within it. It was of course possible that they would not recognise any particular behaviours as unusual or unique, due to their appearance as 'natural' consequences of online society.

Disruption

Disruption is a central aspect of Bourdieusian practice theory. It is through disruption of social norms that they are either strengthened or changed. Disruptive practices in the form of toxic behaviour are the crux of this thesis, making this section of questions pivotal.

Cultural Capital & Distinction

This section of questions is in some ways twinned with the questions on social capital. Agents in a field situate themselves (or are situated) in a matrix of social and cultural capital. However cultural capital is 'displayed' through practices. These questions intend to identify and clarify these practices of display.

Gender

As the literature reviewed in chapter two showed, gender relations in online spaces are complex and prone to inequalities. *League of Legends,* with its huge demographic imbalance, is no exception to this rule. As such

questions pertaining to gender politics as experienced by the players were crucial to gaining a greater understanding of the power networks affecting the field.

3.7.2 The Interview Process

Each interview was expected to last between twenty and forty-five minutes, and took place through Skype video calling. This was an ideal method for interviewing the participants of this project for a number of reasons. Firstly, it removed some of the politics of research space and place that I outlined earlier in this chapter. Most participants were Web-savvy and quite comfortable using telecommunications software. They could stay in their own homes without allowing a stranger into their physical space and even, if they chose, refrain from showing their faces.

Secondly, it allowed for flexibility both on my part and theirs'. Interviews could be scheduled around work and family commitments, and even time differences. While I did not have permission to interview participants from the United States, I was free to interview participants from the EU as long as they spoke English. This meant that I had the opportunity to engage with interviewees in not only the UK but also the Netherlands and Eastern Europe. One participant talked with me while occasionally balancing a child on her knee, and one 'heavy user' even played a game of *League of Legends* while being interviewed. I also interviewed ex-players as their experience was still relevant to the game environment as it was during my research period.

My shortest interview lasted 10 minutes, and the longest continued for just over an hour before I called a halt. Most participants were eager to talk about their favourite (or ex-favourite) game, and the biggest challenge was guiding them back towards the interview topics when they were waxing lyrical about the minutiae of gameplay. I continued to take the stance of a 'marginal observer' during the interviews as I did during field observation – engaging with quite specified language and topics when necessary but encouraging participants to explain concepts to me in their own words.

I was prepared for some difficulty in finding interview participants, and had a plan of escalation for catching the attention of potential interviewees. Fortunately, however, as many ethnographic researchers before me have discovered (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), finding a 'gatekeeper' was a key part of the interview process. The gatekeeper is a key point in a social network, one who can make introductions that facilitate relations between researcher and community. 'My' gatekeeper, interested in the research topic and an extremely skilled *League* player, had access to a social network that had grown out of playing the game. She encouraged a number of friends and acquaintances to contact me, with the result that I conducted 14 interviews in all.

3.8 Concluding Comments

While this methodology has outlined the processes of data collection undertaken for this research project, I have also attempted to use it as a space to justify methodological choices. The format of this chapter is unusual as it places the theoretical framework between descriptions of the ethnographic and interviewing methods. This was done as a reflection of the iterative process of data collection and analysis, during which research methods develop from exploratory (ethnography) to thematically specialised (interviewing).

What this methodology doesn't wholly communicate, however, was that the experience of conducting a virtual ethnography itself was challenging in a number of ways. For example, taking field notes was not always easy given the fast-paced nature of each *League of Legends* game, and I often didn't want to pause lest my champion be killed and I disappoint my team mates[10]. In the analysis chapters I have therefore tried to be as reflexive and honest about these experiences as possible in order to eliminate or at least identify potential biases. This more personal narrative style also helps to communicate the *Dasein* of play in *LoL,* engaging with the experiential aspects of social play and better engaging with the research question.

Another challenge was in analysis of the interview data. The qualitative style produced rich but 'noisy' interview data. The same methods that helped to promote free and open conversation with the participants also meant that they freely discoursed on quite irrelevant topics and needed to be brought back to the questions. Nonetheless this style of participant engagement produced a good deal of illustration and helped to support a number of themes which emerged during the ethnography. It is therefore my hope that future research can build from this rich thematic data to construct questionnaires and surveys that are appropriate for the unique aspects of the field.

[10] The 'respawn time' between a champion being killed and re-summoned offered some time for note-taking.

Chapter 4: Understanding *League of Legends* through a Theory of Practice

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I analyse data gathered in ethnography and semi structured interviews and read it into the theoretical framework. It is in some ways an extension of the theoretical framework outlined in the methodology but much more specified. In it I translate my ethnographic findings into a more formal context, recounting the ontological being-there of field research through an analytic lens. This provides the structure for both my own narrative and the description of the site, explicating *League of Legends* as a social field in a Bourdieusian sense and pointing to analytical themes revealed by critical analysis.

I find some difficulty in isolating themes in this way, as concepts like *field* and *habitus* are interlinked in both theory and practice, not hierarchical. Nonetheless I have structured this chapter in this way as a reflection of the structure of my theoretical framework, with the intention of sketching as full a picture as possible of the environment while still maintaining clarity. Stylistically, this intention of representational rather than interpretative description manifests as a highly narrative mode of writing. This is not especially unusual for longer works relying on ethnography such as books[11] and theses (e.g. Chen, 2010), and it is hoped that this will create a holistic picture and sense of immersion for the reader.

While I do not intend a move toward auto-ethnography, I strive to offer a narrative that maintains the reflexivity and honesty which underpinned my methodology, as both an ethical and an epistemological concern. Truth in personable research like this is reached through concurrent knowledge-making between the participants and the researcher. It is this knowledge that informs the researcher's more critical understanding. This approach is, furthermore, true to Bourdieu's framing of the personal as political and helps to more effectively convey the experience of play in *League of Legends*.

Ultimately I find Bourdieu's framework to be a suitable model for understanding culture and society as it is expressed in *League of Legends,* thanks in part to the explicitly stratified social hierarchy it contains. Through

[11] See, for example, Haraway's startling *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulhucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), which proposes a radical inter-species anthropology by making use of vignettes and storytelling.

the application of the model I discover the forms of capital which denote rank and authority in-game, and themes of inequality and conflict, which will direct the narrative of the following chapters, emerge.

Where quotations are used they are verbatim where possible, but have occasionally been edited for clarity. Identifying information has been obscured, and participant names have been reduced to (unrelated) initials. Where full names appear alongside snippets of chatter, they indicate the champion played by the speaker during the game where the chat occurred.

4.2 Field

4.2.1 Entering the Field

Like many ethnographers entering a field for the first time as a researcher, I was nervous on the day that my study was due to begin. Unlike many, however, I was not far from home or struggling to make myself clear in a second language, I was sitting at my usual desk in my office with a cup of instant coffee. Nonetheless, I was nervous. I felt, like other ethnographers, that despite all the preparation and reading I'd done, that I wasn't ready. Whether they travel to remote locations or learn the local words to football chants, ethnographers must step into and immerse themselves in a field. My step was from the material world into an online world. Both are 'real' in terms of how they are experienced, but nonetheless unique and different.

Entering a research site is an exciting but tense disruption from normal life and perceptions, and as a less-experienced researcher I was not only stepping into the field presented by *League of Legends* but also, for the first time, the academic field of ethnography. I was worried that players would respond badly to me as a (white, middle-class, female) researcher, that I wouldn't be accepted, that the data I did collect would be banal or otherwise inadequate. I had played *League of Legends* before in a casual setting and had, as such, a familiarity with acceptable social mores. But I was still anxious of making outsider mistakes that would be picked up on and blamed for poor play.

I had both read of and experienced the realities of toxic behaviour in *League of Legends.* Online harassment is not only common but can have very real and negative effects on mental health (Duggan et al., 2014) and can take particularly gendered forms (Ballard and Welch, 2015, Biber et al., 2002, Pittaro, 2007). Like many women online I had therefore taken steps to protect my identity (Rubin and Camm, 2013, Martey, 2010).I chose a deliberately gender-neutral 'summoner' name and was using an anonymous email as the first point of contact with interview participants. While this was a reasonable safety precaution (the ethics committee approving my research praised this sensible risk assessment), I nonetheless felt that these steps would to some extent shield me from true immersion, from experiencing the game environment as a (female) player.

The knowledge that I was not playing to win, and that I could leave the game environment if it became too intense, did little to alleviate my fear, but I focussed on embracing my role as an ethnographer occupying a marginal, observational position. This game society deserved to be written, and I was determined to do so. I took a deep breath, and clicked 'play'.

4.2.2 A Field Approach to *League of Legends*

In terms of hours spent in-game, *League of Legends* is the most-played video game in the world (Lyons, 2012, Kollar, 2016). Its trans-platform influence is hinted at from the moment a player logs into the game client. The client user interface functions as a miniature browser, linking to dynamic content which proudly boasts not only recent patch notes or content updates, but video interviews with star players, high-quality 'cinematics', and advertisements for champions available to buy at a discount. On the Web there is an active official community forum for each server, an extensive unofficial wiki, and a number of sites dedicated to helping players increase their skill. On YouTube, a simple content search for 'League of Legends' yields nearly 5,000,000 results, and on the popular game-streaming site Twitch.tv *League* streams dominate by a large margin. The news-sharing website Reddit, too, boasts a *League of Legends* forum with 825,600 members at the time of writing, along with a number of sub-fora dedicated to cosplay, fan art, and strategy. There are even websites dedicated exclusively to pornography featuring *League of Legends* champions.

A video game does not necessarily constitute what is commonly considered a 'field' within Bourdieusian sociology. How they should be approached is a matter under debate (Bourdieu himself had little to say on the subject, unsurprisingly), however with the advent of the 'gamer' identity or subculture (see, for example, Griffiths et al. (2003), Kowert et al. (2012), Shaw (2011)) it would seem reasonable and easy to describe 'gaming' in the terms of a subfield. But this would then raise further questions of where to situate this field or subfield – where 'gaming' can be comfortably approached with the rules and vocabularies already at hand. Perhaps it could sit within the field of leisure or even of sport, given video games' rules of play, e-sport fans and star players, and problems with toxic masculinity. Yet video games also constitute low-brow art within the field of cultural production as much as films do, but as comedian Dara O'Briain (2010) quipped, "You cannot be bad at watching a movie [or] listening to an album. But you can be bad at playing a video game, and the video game will punish you. … No other art form does this." Situating different genres would also prove highly problematic. Where would educational or highly narrative games sit, and what about those games which are little more than virtual environments for socialising that have been posited as the digital iteration of so-called 'third places' (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, Wimmer, 2014)?

Approaching video games and gaming with top-down notions of fields as culturally striated spheres is not effective in game studies because they are, in many ways, quite unique. Their variation as products and their embeddedness within the very different lives of individuals has no parallel. I have instead chosen to

circumvent these questions by simply approaching *League of Legends* as if it were a field in its own right, with the caveat that its history and society are influenced by a range of cultural modes. It is reproduced across heterogeneous cultural contexts, indicating a consistent extra-global field. This assertion is not intended to negate literature which places online spaces and games in particular field positions, but to allow these approaches to inform my position flexibly. While I have no intention of constructing a superficial checklist of 'what makes a field', I do argue that games like *League of Legends* can and should be approached in this way as the structural insight offered by this approach is invaluable.

Fields, as Bourdieu defines them, are structured conceptual spaces within culture and society, based on relational modes of reasoning. Their internal structures and hierarchies are largely modelled by their own development, and allow the field to become autonomous (to some extent) from external environs, even as they develop from them. This autonomy allows a field to develop its own *doxa* – unspoken rules and modes of action which may reinforce or challenge those of predominant hegemony. Fields are sites of power struggle negotiated through resistance and domination (Swartz, 1997:121). However, while they do reproduce themselves they rarely have transformative or revolutionary power more broadly, functioning rather as 'arenas' for conflict (which Bourdieu considers to be "the fundamental dynamic of all social life" as agents struggle for power and forms of capital) (Swartz, 1997: 123).

Internally, fields also impose forms of struggle upon actors (Swartz, 1997: 125) as their hierarchies are formed of dominant and subordinate positions determined by types and amounts of capital (Swartz, 1997:123). This competition for capital and legitimation create and maintain "the conditions for the 'misrecognition' of power relations and thereby contribute to the maintenance of the social order" (Swartz, 1997:126). This effectively means that actors in a field are largely not aware of the structural underpinnings of their social world and instead misrecognise the arbitrary rewards and social statuses placed therein as forms of power in and of themselves, rather than as symbols (Swartz, 1997: 126).

I therefore argue that the global audience and community constructed around *League of Legends* constitutes an arena for conflict in a way which fits this definition of a field. Inside the multi-sited network people struggle for legitimation in the form of capital and organise hierarchically. Within the game this organisation is given symbolic logic by level and tiered rank, and is influenced externally by socio-economic factors (of the 12 million daily *League* players, 90% are male and 85% are aged between 16 and 35 (Lyons, 2012)).

Additionally, all problems of access and digital inequality are manifest in the *League of Legends* community. While not a particularly advanced or graphically heavy game, *League* does work best with a fairly quick computer and a rapid Internet connection, thus excluding large proportions of the global population. A slow response from a player due to time delay between their computer and the game servers can be catastrophic in a team game where milliseconds can mean the difference between life and death. My own field notes describe how a bad delay (lag) of 600 milliseconds meant that I could see the time delay between clicking an

ability and it activating, and that this experience was not only frustrating but debilitating and uncomfortable as the expected flow of action and reaction was broken.

Players are even mocked for playing on 'toasters' [toaster ovens] if they have inadequate hardware. Frequent disconnection is also frustrating for team mates who are left to play at a disadvantage. To some extent exclusion from the community is therefore part of the game architecture, dependent on wealth in technical capital, however the problem is exacerbated by decisions on the part of Riot Games. Some servers are known to be less capable than others, particularly in Europe, as was explained to me by an interviewee. Despite its growing technology market, there is also no server in Africa despite regular requests for one, exacerbating lag times for anyone playing from the continent.

Further, cultural capital in the form of authority is given to those more highly-placed in the field hierarchy, and is closely tied with experience in the minds of the players. Poor players are described as 'noobs', while proficient players are 'god-tier' - a metaphor which highlights the hierarchy and 'ascension' that comes with rank.

In the following excerpt from in-game chat, a player on the opposing team (playing as the champion Aatrox) is accusing a Riven-player on the friendly team of being a noob. He challenges her[12] to prove herself by fighting him one-on-one, rather than with a team. This would have little or no effect on the game – it is a personal challenge on the part of the enemy Aatrox hoping to prove himself the superior player and therefore deserving of higher authority within the field.

Tristana:	why [am I having this] fucking lag
[All-chat] Enemy Aatrox:	NOOB 2V1 !!!
[All-chat] Riven:	no
[All-chat] Riven:	you come
[All-chat] Enemy Aatrox:	COME 1V1 OR YOU NOOB?? [Come to my lane and have a one-on-one fight against me, or are you a noob?]

This kind of likeness between *League of Legends* as a field and more established fields such as law, art, or gastronomy is what Bourdieu termed 'homology', and it allows field-specific phenomena to be approached with a consistent logic (Hanks, 2005). Fields are self-similar in the distributions of their hierarchies and positions of relative power, although individual field practices may be unique. This is to some extent why I feel highly confident in applying Bourdieusian framework logics to *League of Legends* as a social space.

[12] Note that this refers to the genders of the champions, not necessarily the players. It is common in *League of Legends* to refer to players by the gender of their champion unless the gender of the player is known. This is explored further in chapter six.

Apart from these qualifying factors, approaching *League* as a field also offers a number of affordances. It allows us to approach behaviour in the game and its top-down architecture as products of and producers of habitus, and the forms of in-game capital as having autonomous power within the field. It also means that we can see the social arena represented by *League of Legends* as containing unique logic and narrative yet embedded within the field of power. Social and cultural capital flows into and out of it, contributing to the same reification as is seen in the material world. The things players do in the game environment can be read in terms of field *doxa* (unspoken and spoken rules) and habituated practice. Successfully reading it in this context may additionally help to indicate the wider applicability of practice theory in analysing other online video games as lived and constructed social spaces. The following section describes some of the practices present in *League of Legends* which are unique in their expression but that can be recognised in form in all fields.

4.3 Habitus

In the context of online video games the online game space itself, as it is made and experienced and recreated by players, constitutes habitus. This does not refer solely to the game environment as a synthesized space, but to the habituated rituals and practices which take place inside it and which create it. As synthetic worlds video games are coded (both literally and metaphorically) by a creator. Since they are created within a particular habitus and, as Bourdieu (1984b) explained, habitus is not only a structure but a practice, it is expressed *through* the architecture of a game and the rules it imposes on players.

This is not necessarily a conscious decision on the part of a development team – it is unlikely that at any point in *League of Legends'* design process that a software developer consciously chose to manifest their habitus through the product – but all "technical and ritual activities" (Bourdieu, 2001a:42) are the expressions of (objective) underlying social structures through personal (subjective) agency. This promotes "the unconscious internalization of the rules that govern the production of these works." (Bourdieu, 1984b:15).

This creates and manifests as the same practices observable in the material world as the habitus of the creator, while also inventing a game habitus accepted as 'the rules of the game' even when they are not so explicitly named. Through play, gamers 'decipher', or make meaning from the game world and learn to internalise its coding, just as Bourdieu's art critic learns what makes art valuable (Bourdieu, 1984b). The player 'understands' this habitus as the game architecture in cues such as play aims and the Graphical User Interface (GUI), but it is also present in the expectations of play – that a player will strive to win and to improve their standing within the game in return for what are superficially quite arbitrary rewards.

I further argue that virtual worlds are also spaces in which the material-world habitus of the player can be expressed through and by their actions and speech. However, this is not a one-way practice, especially given

the game-habitus described in the previous paragraph. It is instead reflexive and constituted through social play. Through play, gamers must 'decipher', or make meaning from the game world and learn to internalise its way of coding (see also section 5.4.1). Just as human agents in the field of power believe understanding of social rules to come with experience, players understood this process as coming with experience, as in the following interview extract:

> K[1]: people are um expected to be able to live without some of the, the nicer things and politeness that we would expect if you were playing a board game for example. But um, it, I imagine that as someone who was never like sort of super hard-core into it? I expect as well there's a rich vocabulary of terms and expressions that uh form a part of the social rules of the game? But I mean while I understand some of those there's probably a much richer vocabulary of those out there that I don't.

In this way the player comes to adopt and practise the social and cultural rules of the game world while also making them. Figure 4.1 illustrates the mutual constitution of these concepts. Given interaction with the field of League of Legends over time, habitus will be expressed through and be created by the player's practice.

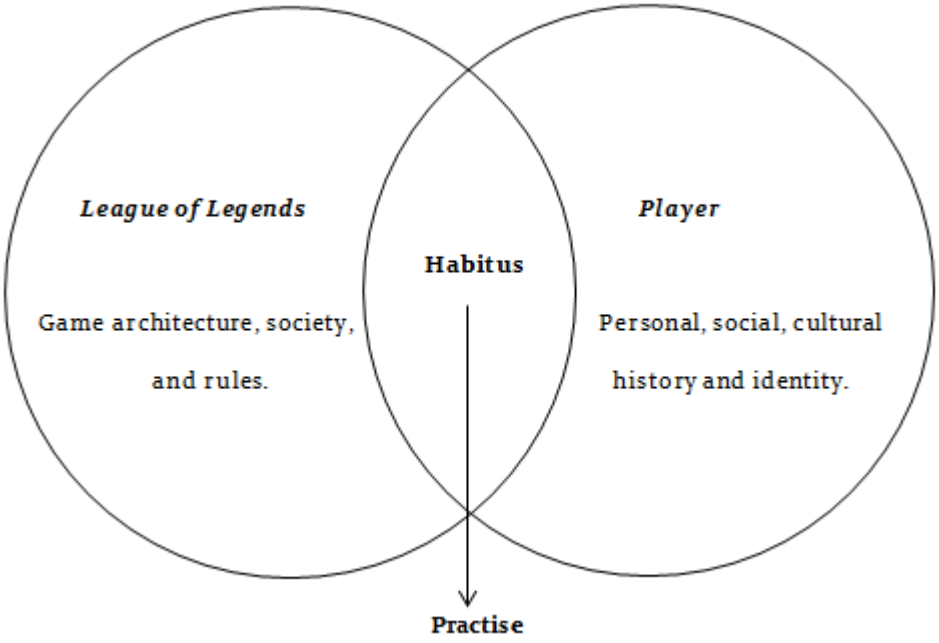

Figure 4,1. Diagram showing the overlapping spheres of player influence and identity.

Virtual spaces like *League* are spaces in which the material-world habitus of the player can be expressed through and by their actions and speech. However, this is not an immediate or unmediated practice. It is instead reflexive and constituted through social play and engagement with the community at large. In this way the player comes to adopt and practise the social and cultural rules of the game world. Although gamers

will differ widely in whom they play with according to local servers, they will all internalise and come to understand the rules coded by the game architecture. They will, without conscious action, come to share experiences with other players around the world. This can be observed in online fora where videos of unusual or exciting *League* 'plays' are shared. It is not uncommon for videos recorded by Korean players to be shared on the English-speaking forum reddit/r/leagueoflegends. The spoken language of the video is unimportant as the environment is familiar enough for it to be understood.

These habituated knowledges are accepted as essential and natural within the community. They are not just understandings of 'how to play the game' in basic terms such as knowing the aim of play, but are examples of players making sense of their environment and reconstructing it through action. While this can be seen in all social spaces, in *League of Legends* it is particularly noticeable by analysing the 'metagame' and in-game terminology and parlance.

4.3.1 Metagame

The *League of Legends* 'metagame' describes the theoretically most efficient and successful strategies to consistently win games. This means choosing champions which synergise well in a team (and/or which are difficult to play against) and then purchasing in-game items which maximise certain attributes over others (a 'build'). It's developed over time, changing with every new game update or champion release. During field research the role of the 'meta' as an expression of habitus was visible in everything from the widespread understanding of the role of a particular champion in a team to the knowledge of popular and famous professional players and their strategies.

In the current 'meta' certain champions played in certain roles and with certain 'builds' (skill and item combinations) are favoured over others. Teams usually consist of a ranged marksman (AD carry), a supporting ('supp') healer or 'tank' (a well-armoured champion intended to soak up enemy damage), a ranged damage-dealing mage or assassin, and at least one more 'tank' or 'bruiser' (a champion balancing damage-dealing and 'tank' attributes). Some degree of flexibility is certainly possible as the 'meta' continuously evolves when new champions are released, older champions are 'buffed' (improved) or 'nerfed' (handicapped), or the gameplay is otherwise changed. Major tournaments can also affect the 'meta', as players are influenced by professional strategies.

D: After the last LCS [professional tournament] everyone was playing tank.

However, deviation from the norm can be met with accusations of being a 'noob' or a 'troll' (see chapter 5). In my field research I played a very low-level account, both out of the need for a 'summoner' account not tied to

my material-world identity[13], and in order to experience afresh the process of levelling. Despite this, it was apparent that players very quickly learned what was considered a basically viable team composition and which champions were supposed to be played in which lane.

This also posed a problem for newbie players as unless they have purchased additional champions with Riot Points (in-client currency purchased for local currency), they only have access to a few champions, and are very rarely comfortable playing a variety of roles.

Sivir: sry im not the beste botlane gamer

Sivir: i play always top or mid

They might nonetheless find themselves pushed to take up a role they aren't prepared for as the team 'needs' a 'support' or a 'jungler'.[14] It would almost certainly be more effective for each member of the team to play champions with which they were comfortable at low levels, but the 'meta' as a paradigm overrode this to the extent that arguments often broke out in the champion selection lobby as to who would go in which lane and in which role. Rather than being decided by meritocracy, this was almost always decided by who 'called' a lane first. Disputes could usually be resolved by copy-pasting the order in which a lane had been called in the lobby chat, but occasionally phrases like 'mid or afk[15]' popped up from particularly aggressive players, indicating that unless they were given the lane and role they wanted, they would leave the game as a 4v5 (more or less ensuring a loss).

4.3.2 Terminology and Parlance

Language choices, according to Bourdieu, are deeply structural actions, taking place at the juncture between habitus and socio-linguistic norms (Myles, 1999). They are homologous across fields in that they serve a number of formative and functional purposes. Illocutionary acts are types of practice and can be used to indicate authority and in-group legitimation, or to commit violence (Hanks, 2005). This practice is manifested in terminology, parlance, argot, and slang which serve to construct group identity and cement in-group relations.

Terminology has evolved quickly in *League of Legends* and is surprisingly extensive. Much of it stems from the RPGs and RTSes of its genealogy, such as the description of champions or items as 'OP' ['over-powered', meaning too strong for a balanced game] and chat shorthands such as 'inc gank' ['incoming gank'] to warn of

[13] See chapter 3.4
[14] This observation refers specifically to the 'Blind Pick' game mode which was normal at the time of fieldwork. Since the ethnography was undertaken a 'dynamic queue' has been instigated which allows players to choose their role before queueing, in order to be matched with a complimentary team.
[15] 'Mid lane or Away From Keyboard'

an incoming surprise attack. Other parlance has come about in concurrence with other games (unsurprising given that most 'hardcore' gamers do not play only one game, and are actively engaged in gaming culture (Shaw, 2011, Williams et al., 2008)) and Internet pop culture.

This can include ephemeral references to viral Internet 'memes' (such as 'Damn, Daniel' as a compliment) along with more durable terms such as 'going HAM', meaning to engage heavily (a reference to the popular Kanye West and Jay Z song 'H.A.M.'), or 'rekt' (wrecked) to imply an overwhelming win or loss. These terms can be found in any number of gaming communities and serve as a reminder of the constant flow of information between fields.

The following brief exchange between a friendly-team Vayne and enemy-team Ryze took place just after Ryze had killed Vayne in one-on-one combat. Vayne praises Ryze on his performance, a compliment he accepts through mock-gloating. Without context, however, the text is obscure and even incomprehensible.

Vayne:	smoke weed everday [every day]
[All-chat] Enemy Ryze:	hueuehuehueh xd
Vayne:	so damage

A 'native' player recognises Vayne's reference to the 1999 Dr Dre and Snoop Dogg song 'The Next Episode' – or at least recognises the meme of applying the chorus line to fitting situations such as the one above. They would also recognise 'huehuehue' as an MMO-specific expression of laughter, and 'xd' as a mis-typed laughter emoticon. Even 'so damage' refers to a phase in Internet pop culture of applying 'so' before a noun to mean 'a lot of'. But of course, this vocabulary is learned. It is both consciously and unconsciously appropriated and then re-practised – not 'native' at all.

There is in addition a good deal of parlance unique to MOBAs generally and *League of Legends* specifically. Some of these have evolved out of need for speed in chat-writing such as 'ss' as shorthand for 'missing', 'push' to mean advance, or 'sivir no f' to mean that the champion Sivir has expended her 'flash' ability and will therefore be vulnerable for the next three minutes. Some are in-jokes approaching meme status in their ubiquity and function as cultural touchstones. For example, a recurrent bug or server-side lag issues might prompt an outcry of 'Rito pls' – a corruption of early pleas to the game developers which often began with 'Riot, please …'.

A number of terms describe a game-specific tactic. 'Split pushing,' for example, means to advance on two sides of the game map, forcing the enemy team to also split their defence. Other terms might refer to professional play styles. 'Doing an XPeke' refers to the professional player XPeke, whose signature move is to attack an enemy base while they are distracted (also called 'backdooring'). The phrase originates from the

2013 *League of Legends* world championship, when XPeke's performance of his signature move won his team 'Fnatic' the game.

Conversely, out-group status through illocutionary acts is, according to Bourdieu, rejected by acts of indirect censorship and euphemism (Hanks, 2005). While there is no manifest authority in *League of Legends* prescribing what should and should not be said in chat beyond the blanket sanction of hate-speech, slurs, and swear words, players nonetheless recognise and reject 'outgroup' speech. An example from an in-game conversation is shown below. The exchange took place just after I had posted the pre-game ethics message to the game chat and a player, here referred to as Nidalee, was asking questions about the study:

Nidalee:	whatre [what are] you trying to prove
Nidalee:	how angry lol [League of Legends] players are?
Researcher:	nah, just how they communicate
Ezreal:	Pls [Please] stop acting like a psy[chologist] or whatever its cringy [sic]

This is an immediate and clear manifestation of symbolic power as described by Bourdieu (1991), which is (not necessarily consciously) enacted by subjects in a field upon those of lower class status to act in accordance with field *doxa* and habitus. The Ezreal player was reprimanding me for speaking like a researcher in a context where it was inappropriate, i.e. in the game environment. Similarly, a respondent during interview described how, when as a new player toxic behaviour on the part of other players would upset her. At first she would attempt to reason with the player harassing her, attempting to provoke an empathic response. This not only proved ineffective but set her outside of the norm, so that she quickly learned to modify her responses.

These practices and types of terminology and speech practice within the English-speaking player community are clear examples of the kind of consistent habituated actions which are both products of society and expressions of underlying social frameworks. The specificity of speech shows the embeddedness of the player base within game culture and wider society. The theoretical framework suggests that identical practices, if not identical utterances, would be found in Korean or Chinese *League* play communities, and indeed in all online game societies.

Habitus is not only a meta-structural concept describing group identity, it is also a practice that is done and made by agents in a field. Individuals make and play games like *League of Legends* within their own habitus, but they also decipher and adapt to the social codes within the game. It is this shared, habituated understanding that creates a cohesive social space in which practical aspects like the metagame and parlance begin to appear natural and essential. In this way habitus gives meaning to artificial but nonetheless important aspects of a social game. In *League of Legends* this means that the largely arbitrary in-game

rewards become weighted with social implication, and as such I argue they can be approached as forms of capital.

4.4 Capital

Like Bourdieu's field, capital is a process by which society is expressed as well as a meta-theoretical concept. As Bourdieu (1986:242) would have it; "the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world." There are many forms of capital and they continue to emerge and re-emerge in different social environments, occasionally needing re-negotiation into more manageable conceptual constraints. The three most fundamental are economic, social, and cultural (Bourdieu, 1986), which Malaby (2010) argues are all nonetheless based on the application of human capital over time. All three are distinctive and visible when looking at *League of Legends* as a field.

4.4.1 Economic capital

4.4.1.1 Virtual Value

In an industrial society, economic or market capital is bounded and sited in factories, commodities, and workers. However as the market inevitably grows into a global phenomenon, capitalism adapts (Bauman, 2013). Transient, 'liquid' capital in the form of company stocks is a straightforward example of this, but so are the virtual objects in game worlds which have in-game exchange value based on the same premises of real-world markets. Game currencies and objects have their own economic potential both in the virtual *and* real worlds and, as in the real world, are based on initial human capital invested over time (Dodson, 2006). Malaby (2006:145) describes these virtual economies as not only real and observable in virtual worlds, but large and actively growing; "their existence as a site for the generation of market capital … becoming not just true but commonplace". This illustrates the embeddedness of game culture within the greater fields of power and economy. Not only do they exhibit their own internal commercial systems, but also allow trade with the material world.

Virtual objects and goods in game worlds are often tradeable and worth in-game currency. Their trade value can fluctuate due to the same factors that affect real-world markets such as scarcity, need, and the labour power that goes into its production (Malaby, 2006, Malone, 2009). Game currency has its own economic potential both in the virtual and material worlds. In many games it typically takes many hours spent in-game to earn large amounts of currency or 'valuable' items (a process known as 'farming' or 'grinding') or, depending on the financial model on which the game is based, real-world money can be traded for them. Although online gaming is ostensibly a leisure activity, the more monotonous and time-consuming tasks

which are nonetheless integral to the game can be outsourced to unskilled labourers for low wages. At the time of writing, for example, China is the largest currency-farming labour force in the world (Heeks, 2009, Barboza, December 2005, Vincent, May 2011).

In any given field, economic capital therefore has this potential to be traded for cultural capital and symbolic power. *League of Legends* is no exception to this, as players trade high in-game levels for cash. Although this is against the terms of service stipulated by Riot Games, a perfunctory Web search reveals dozens of websites offering high-ranking player accounts in exchange for cash, or services which offer to level your account for you (a similarly prohibited practise known as 'ELO boosting', 'boosting', or 'power levelling'). In 2015 professional *League* player Yu 'XiaoWeiXiao' Xian was suspended from his team for engaging in the practice, having received $1300 USD in exchange for boosting another player's account to Master tier (the highest rank available) (Matulef, 2015). This kind of trade does not in any way make the paying player better at the game. The rank is valuable only as a status symbol, and an ephemeral one at that, as the ranking will degrade over time. Briefly, however, it incurs a level of authority and social power.

Another way for players to earn money through play is with professional play, either alone or in teams. Players enter tournaments both online and in physical arenas to be ranked against each other, with prizes entering the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Outstanding players and teams can also win sponsorship deals from corporations, allowing them to earn a steady living while they train.

Some players may also 'live stream' their play over the Internet through services like Twitch.tv, garnering fan donations and sponsorship. This 'e-sport' sector is currently undergoing massive growth as crowds flock to championships and tournaments. While brick-and-mortar stadiums are certainly popular venues for these tournaments, spectatorship is not limited to physical presence or terrestrial media. Instead crowds can gather in their millions through streaming services such as YouTube and Twitch.tv (Cox, 2012).

4.4.1.2 The Micro-transactional Model

While ostensibly free to play, *League of Legends* utilises a micro-transactional model of monetization to great effect, making $1.6 billion in revenue in 2015. Downloading and playing the game costs nothing at all. With the initial download a player has access to all the same game modes as any other player, as well as access to 10 champions which are free to play for one week, after which the rotation changes and a different 10 are made available. In-game currency takes two forms; experience points (LP) and riot points (RP). LP is earned by playing the game, while RP are bought for real-world money.

Some game content, such as champions, may be bought for either LP or RP. In theory, if someone played the game for long enough, they could eventually collect all the champions for free – or at least only at the cost of the labour they dedicated to the game. Other items can only be bought for LP, such as the 'runes' which

become intrinsic to effectively 'building' a champion in games after level 30. Many items can only be bought for RP, and often they are not cheap. 'Rune pages' for example, which are necessary to play well or effectively after level 30, cost 590 RP each (around €4). Most items which are sold for RP, however, are purely cosmetic alterations to existing content.

'Skins', for example, vary champions' base designs. They use the existing model as a template and map different graphics to them, so that the original playstyle of the champion is not lost or modified. Skins can be as basic as simple re-colourings of the original design ('chroma' packs, costing as little as €4), or as complicated as altering the visual spell-casting effects and even the voice acting ('legendary' skins, costing up to €20). Often skin designs are particularly attractive or thoughtfully-made in order to be as enticing as possible. Some are released in batches with a central theme in mind such as the Commando line (modern-warfare style redressings with a focus on "sunglasses and machismo"), and the Pentakill line (named after the in-game reward for killing five opposing players, this line re-imagines five champions as members of a heavy metal band). Others are released as fan service, meant to be particularly amusing, silly, or inspired by fan designs.

Despite being completely cosmetic, skins are marketed strongly by *Riot*, with new releases publicised and promoted across all platforms available to them. This marketing is extremely effective, as although people know that they are essentially "pointless", they buy them for a number of reasons. For one thing, skins are the only way to customise a favourite champion in *League of Legends*. Unlike many popular video games which allow avatar customisation from skin colour to nose breadth, *League* allows no player-side modification of champion designs at all. As such, players wishing to add some personal flair to their 'main' (most-played champion), must pay for this ability. Some do so out of a sense of gratitude or attachment, as a "sort of reward" (according to an interviewee) to the champion for their service. Players may choose skins which align more with their personal sense of aesthetics than their 'vanilla' versions, or which are just plain 'cool'.

For example one respondent described his enjoyment of modern-gothic style and aesthetics, and how this was satisfyingly fulfilled in the design of 'Ghost Bride Morgana'. Already a fairly dramatic champion, Morgana is a purple-skinned, winged, angelic being-cum-demon. This reskin turned her blue, dressed her in white tatters, and included hellish chains spawning from the ground. This aligns more closely with conceptions of character appearances as decorative accoutrements and status symbols (see e.g. Blinka, 2008), but is a striking difference to theory grounded in MMORPG research such as that of Bessière et al. (2007), Ducheneaut et al. (2009), and Salazar (2009) which suggest game avatars may act as extensions of identity. Certainly these expensive and self-chosen skins manifest self-presentation in the digital medium, but they do not appear to be intimate manifestations of self and self-*re*presentation. Indeed, some participants made it clear that they viewed champions as mere "collections of mechanics" to be manipulated rather than virtual manifestations of identity.

Skins also make excellent gifts. During interview one respondent was keen to make clear that his large collection of skins was because of a mutual gifting system shared among his friends, which served to forge ties of teamwork and friendship. Riot Games, realising the potential of gift-giving, has recently implemented a system by which players can send random discounted skins as gifts to other players after a game, as an added incentive to be friendly and sportsmanlike or as a form of thanks. This echoes fieldwork done by Bourdieu on the symbolic value of gift exchanges in communities (Bourdieu, 2001b) and indicates the transactional power of commodities with economic value, as they can be exchanged for social capital.

4.4.2 Social Capital

That online video games in general and *League of Legends* in particular are deeply embedded within society, rather than isolated 'magic circles', is made clear when observing the flow of social capital into and out of the game. It has previously been observed by researchers such as Carter (2005) and Kendall (2002), who discussed at length the practices of online friendship in their virtual ethnographies, that social networks are not limited or divided by online-offline difference (Lehdonvirta, 2010, Consalvo, 2009). Many participants, they found, widened "their webs of personal relationships to include cyberspace" (Carter, 2005:155), but without forming a discrete circle of online friends. Rather, Carter found that online friendships often became embedded in participants' offline lives, with real-world meetings between participants who had met online not uncommon.

Similarly, authors such as Zhong (2011), Lehdonvirta (2010) and Steinfield et al. (2008) have explored the relationship between online and offline social capital, predominantly finding that online social networks acted as extensions of existing offline ones. Virtual environments perform the same social function as offline 'third spaces' – publically-agreed spheres for socialising (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, Williams, 2006b, Poor and Skoric, 2014, Williams, 2006a). This indicates that there is no radical separation of real and virtual-world society, and that the former is also not necessarily more meaningful or influential than the latter. Instead, relationships formed through online ties have bridging and connective power in a social network.

I found this to very much be the case in *League of Legends*. Supporting research by Ratan et al. (2015), who found that many of their respondents were brought into *LoL* by friends or partners, many of my participants described the role of *League* in forming and maintaining friendships. Friends and partners were the overwhelmingly predominant 'leads' into play, with players then "bringing in" more friends and later partners. Conversely, interview participants who had previously played to a greater or lesser extent with friends drifted away from the game when their friends did. Even those participants who considered

themselves to play 'seriously' (indicating either that they were highly ranked or invested a great deal of time into play – up to 50 hours per week in one case[16]) found time to play with friends and enjoyed doing so.

This flow of social capital travels in both directions, as some participants described not only making acquaintances and bonding with team-mates in *League,* but meeting some of their closest friends through the game. These relationships took place predominantly online but could also extend quite comfortably into the real world, despite challenges of location and language.

> L: So [friends] introduced me [to League of Legends], and sort of explained what on earth was going on. Like we sort of… it was two of my housemates, who I played with quite regularly, and then we met a bunch of people through there […] So there's um one guy who lives in Finland who I've never met? But is like a reasonably good friend now, a couple of them went to go and visit him in Finland as a result.

This behaviour is both normal and predictable when approaching *League* as a social environment, as it has been documented in a number of other virtual ethnographies such as that of Carter (2005) and Kendall (2002). The flow of capital between 'bounded' fields is a major aspect within the theory of practice, as allows structure to be expressed and observed at all scales. However it does highlight inconsistency in players' understanding of their community. When discussing toxic behaviour, several indicated that they believed the perceived 'anonymity' of the game environment to be both the cause and medium of toxicity. In this they echo both popular media and a body of research into online disinhibition (see, for example Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012)'s excellent review and critique of this literature). Yet these same players would talk about the networks of friends with whom they played and, furthermore, about those friends who engaged in toxic behaviour.

> A[1]: um… I want to ask what you define as a troll because […] if someone goes out their way to try and be aggressive or offensive against a friend of mine it may be that we intentionally that we as a group hunt that player and ruin their game. So the behaviour is then [trolling] but only as a reaction.

The fact is that most people maintain a persistent online identity – logical given modern digital ubiquity and the embeddedness of the virtual into the everyday – and not doing so is even considered transgressive (Bergstrom, 2011, Bargh et al., 2002) . Those players engaging in toxic behaviours in *League of Legends* do not necessarily do so as a conscious digression from behavioural norms and habituated practice. Instead it is, within their habituated experience at the time, a 'natural' or otherwise reasonable action.

[16] In the words of this participant, "I play before college [high school], and after college. Sometimes I play during college… and of course at weekends."

4.4.3 Cultural Capital

Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu (1986), exists in three forms; embodied, objectified, and institutionalised. The first, the embodied state, takes time to cultivate and become internalised by the individual and as such cannot be instantaneously exchanged freely or for economic capital, though it can be unconsciously learned. As such it takes on a form of symbolic power manifested as authority. The second, cultural capital in the objectified state, can be traded for, as it is embodied in material objects. For example a highly sought-after *objet d'art* is valued both in terms of economic capital and symbolic power.

Finally, the institutionalised state "institutes cultural capital by collective magic"(Bourdieu, 1986). Expressed through qualification by an independent, authoritative body onto an agent, it is a form of cultural capital that imbues an agent with a degree of authority and yet remains relatively autonomous from its bearer by its own value. Medals of achievement, badges of honour, ranks and titles all fall into this category of cultural capital in the material world.

In *League of Legends* cultural capital can be seen in all three states. I have already discussed the role played by champion skins in *League*'s economy, touching on their link to status and adornment. In this, rare and expensive champion skins are bought and displayed and as such represent a type of objectified cultural capital.

Embodied cultural capital is intrinsic to class hierarchy in the *League of Legends* community. It is represented by player skill which is internalised, cultivated, and deferred to as a form of authority. Players invest their time and labour with the expectation that their skill will gradually increase and their level and rank will concurrently improve (Consalvo et al., 2010). According to Consalvo et al. (2010: 398), this commitment is dependent on the player's belief in a fair, ideal system present in game worlds where hard work will be proportionally compensated: "Our willingness to engage with the tedium and grind demonstrates our continued hope that our work does matter, that we will ultimately climb to the top rung of the ladder."

K²: I remember levelling up, it took a very long time. And I remember being frustrated…

However game skill is embodied by the player, and is to some extent independent of rank and level. Players recognise other players' skill regardless of rank or level – actioned in a practice known as 'smurfing.' When smurfing, skilled players play on low-ranked or low-levelled accounts. This may be for a number of reasons, but it quite commonly is in order to play with lower-ranked friends: The *League of Legends* matching algorithm averages players' ranks and levels and matches them against a team of similar skill. This means that one highly-skilled player can very much skew the level of the opposing team to be higher than low-level players could be comfortable playing against. Nonetheless the single highly-skilled team-mate can often

'carry' their team to victory, and are easily spotted by distinctive, habituated behaviours which betray their relative status.

> P[1]: I've got a friend of mine who's high diamond ELO he's really really good I mean he's in a team, he's doing brilliantly. He tried to carry me out of silver at one point cuz I'd been stuck in silver ...

Two such behaviours mentioned explicitly by interview participants included 'warding' and 'inSec-ing'. 'Warding' means buying and placing a 'ward' – a virtual lamp which illuminates a small surrounding area in *League of Legends* games, and is invisible to the enemy team. Often utilised by 'support' players, they can be placed on common paths and in choke points so that the position of enemy players can be known and more offensive or defensive play can take place accordingly. Until 2014, all such wards cost in-game gold and represented a significant investment[17]. Awareness of their strategic value and willingness to make this investment thus indicated skill.

'InSec-ing', like 'doing an XPeke' (see terminology), is a reference to a professional player. This player is known for playing Lee Sin, the blind martial arts master champion. Although Lee Sin is predominantly a close-range (melee) champion, he has at his disposal a number of gap-closing abilities such as the long-range 'Sonic Wave', which marks enemy champions allowing him to dash to them. InSec's signature move when playing Lee Sin is to place an item called a 'ward' amongst enemy champions, dash to it, then to powerfully kick a weak opponent into his own team (who are hopefully nearby to take advantage of the situation). Finally Lee Sin dashes out of the fray and back to his own team. If this sounds complicated, know that performing the move is just as much so. It requires excellent timing and a great deal of skill. It is this rarefication which demands the conference of authority from other players, and which represents embodied cultural capital.

> P[2]: I've got a smurf account because um my boyfriend's quite low level, he's only level 23 [of 30] bless him, and if I played on my normal account he tends to get quite high-level players and he doesn't really do well. So I've got a level 10 account, and uh at one point I think a friend of mine, really wanted to play a certain champion and they got picked away from him and I was like 'well dyou want me to dodge?' and if you dodge you get a time penalty? and I said well i'll dodge and i can go on my smurf account and we'll get some low-level people, we'll just have a laugh. And then we got a couple of people who were like [level] 15 or something, but they were far, far too good. Like they were pulling off difficult plays like Lee [Sin], there's one champion who it's all skillshots? and they were consistently hitting these skillshots I'm like I'm sorry no level 15 player would do that.

In my ethnography it became clear that players even create account names knowingly similar to those of professional players, with the knowledge that while they are unlikely to be mistaken for that player their

[17] As of 2016, initial 'warding totems' are free, recharging items. Other warding items such as 'sight stones', 'vision wards' and 'stealth wards' still cost gold, however.

homage will be understood by the community as a touchstone (unfortunately it is not possible to give examples due to privacy concerns).

Finally, my findings indicate that the ranks of play themselves represent a form of institutionalised cultural capital. Many players engage in the perpetual competition for ranks which legitimate their skill by independent evaluation. Their standing is a complicated score based on ratios of wins to losses over time in special ranked matches, and is indicated by graphical 'medallions,' which become increasingly ornate the higher the rank. Ranks begin at Bronze, representing 32.9% of ranked players (many players do not engage in ranked play at all). 38% of ranked players are in Silver tier, through to 19.6% in Gold, 7.6% in Platinum, 1.9% in Diamond, and less than 1% in Master and Challenger tiers. At any one time on any one server there can only be two hundred players in the challenger tier, representing 0.002% of the global player population. Every year the ranks are reset to mark the beginning of a new season.

Climbing ranks takes time and concentrated effort, but is one of the most important in-game achievements for many players. This is not simply a quest for virtual gew-gaws, but for legitimation within a field. It is for this reason that high-ranking and fully-levelled accounts are illegally bought and sold, as while this will in no way impart a high level of skill to the buyer it will buy them the relevant authority (for a time, at least). The buyer purchases the account as a symbol of authority and value within the community.

Figure 4.2 sketches the relative positions within the field ascribed to its agents by their social and cultural capital in a matrix adapted from Bourdieu's own illustrations in *Distinction* (2010) (figure 4.3). Professional players enjoy both high social and cultural capital, and have a great deal of influence in the field. Other Challenger-tier players may be exceptionally highly-skilled but be relatively unknown within the social network as they have very few peers. Smurf account players may be reasonably skilled and part of a close social network, as well as being accepted by the community at large, but lack institutionalised authority. Beginner players, account buyers, and hackers all inhabit comparatively low positions within the field, to the extent that their positionality is equated with a kind of cultural poverty. This illustrates a field hierarchy which I read as a remediation of a hierarchical class system – one which I posit would be manifest in many, if not most, online video games in some form. This is an example of the homology of fields – the self-sameness by which power and capital ascribe hierarchy.

Although I was prepared to identify instances of trading based on female gender capital, I found little indication of this, and even found evidence to the contrary. Researchers such as Martey et al. (2014), Yee (2014), and Lehdonvirta (Lehdonvirta et al., 2011) have all suggested the existence of male pro-social behaviour in cases where they perceived other players to be female. That is, that male players will treat female players better *because* they are female, with the perception that the trade takes place in order to obtain female company or favour. This phenomenon has not been previously looked for or examined in MOBAs like *League of Legends*, however, and my interviews with female players indicated that they were more

likely to be excluded or denigrated based on their gender than bribed for their attention. I was not ideally placed to observe either pro- or antisocial gendered behaviour during field research as I had consciously chosen to obscure my gender by using a gender-neutral name, but observed no indication of it either way in game chat.

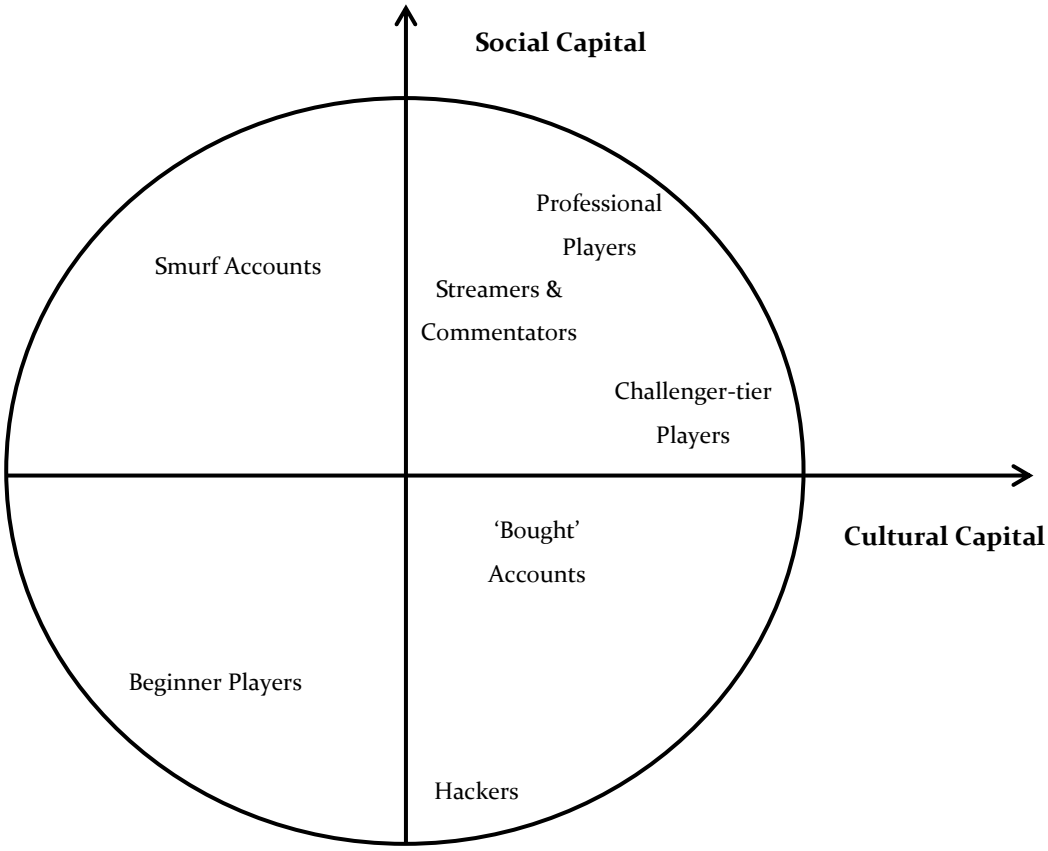

Figure 4.2: Social and cultural capital matrix in *League of Legends*

Of course absence of evidence is not, as they say, evidence of absence. Game communication is predominantly textual, not voice-based, so unless a player has a particularly female name or is using voice chat it is not possible to know their gender. During the interviews I undertook to find out from my participants whether they had had any experience of this kind of gender capital trading. While some echoed Lehdonvirta et al. (2011) in noting that they had either experienced or observed this phenomenon in MMORPGs, only one of my participants had experience of it in *League of Legends*. A particularly serious and highly-ranked player herself, she described her single experience of being treated more favourably for being a woman:

> Z: I know I got about, what, I got five skins from one person because they were trying to, you know… I dunno, entice me? For nudes or whatever bullshit they had … keep trying it's never gonna work. But I don't mind the free skins.

However, most participants described particularly harsh treatment from other players if their or another player's femaleness was identified, as it was perceived as a "weakness". This is a theme I return to in greater detail in chapter six.

P[2]: Cuz at the end of the day we're gonna get discriminated against because we're women I mean that happens if you're a man in a woman's sport or a woman in a man's sport you'll just get discriminated against anyway.

4.5 Class and Symbolic Violence

Internally, fields impose forms of struggle upon actors (Swartz, 1997: 125) as their hierarchies are formed of dominant and subordinate positions determined by types and amounts of capital (Swartz, 1997:123). Bourdieu mapped several fields showing the relative position of agents within the field and their relative capital value. Figure 4.2, for example, shows this model applied to the field of French gastronomy. This creates the fundamental framework for the social stratification known as 'class.'

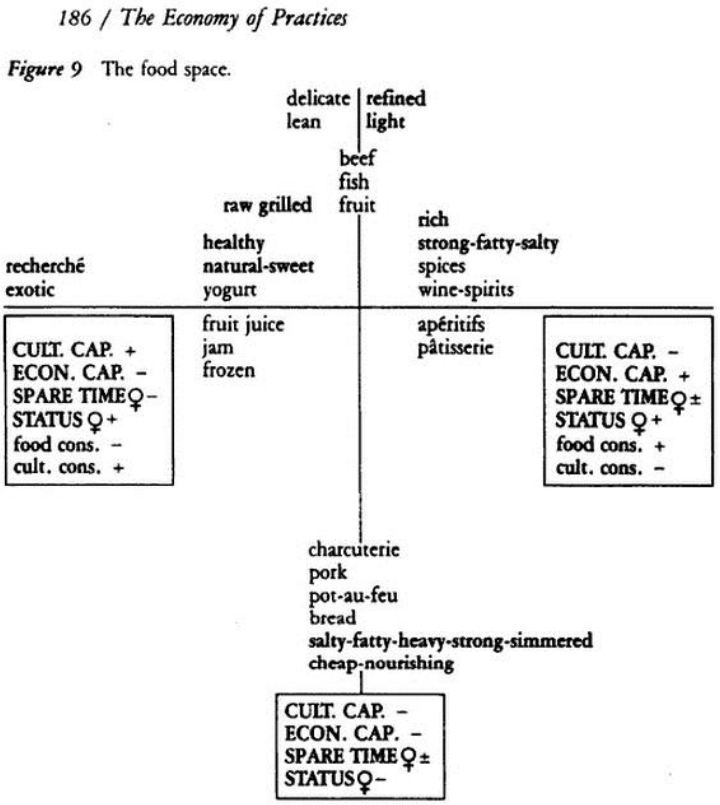

Figure 4.3 The Food Space (Bourdieu, 2010: 182).

Agents, however, understand these positions as due to characteristics read as personal attributes. This unrecognised competition for capital and legitimation create and maintain "the conditions for the 'misrecognition' of power relations and thereby contribute to the maintenance of the social order" (Swartz, 1997:126). While it is extremely difficult to model classing behaviours in MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*, it is much more feasible in *League of Legends*. This is because MMORPGs allow for various different modes of 'expertise'. Their open-world ('sandbox') gameplay allow players to choose whether they want to focus on exploring, trading, combat, or socialisation - the game will reward them no matter which they choose (Billieux et al., 2013, Ducheneaut et al., 2006, Ducheneaut et al., 2009, Yee, 2007, Chen, 2008, Chen, 2010). In *League of Legends*, by contrast, expertise is essentially binary. It is explicitly shown by level and rank and is gained and lost by winning and losing games (Donaldson, 2015).

During fieldwork I noted a great deal of argument in chat over what constitutes a 'good' champion, and that it had little to do with how well the player was doing in a given game.

Wukong:	report you graves
Graves:	yeah report me
Graves:	idc [I don't care]
Graves:	you are a kid =)
Riven:	GRAVES=MADE IN CHINA

'Katarina', a delicate ('squishy') but very powerful assassin was regularly described as a 'noob champ', as playing her is supposedly both easy and over-powered (OP) in low-level games. Often these accusations came from an enemy team member following a killing streak by someone playing the champion Katerina. The player's skill was dismissed with 'Kata noob champ'. This statement is an appeal to the shared understanding of a class hierarchy within the field: By playing a 'noob champ' the Katarina player is, apparently, showing themselves to lack taste, refinement, skill, and other hallmarks of *la distinction*. They are instead accused of having opted for an easy win with an easy-to-play champion. Denigrating another player in this way - by equating them with low field position and lack of capital and taste - can therefore be read as a form of symbolic violence.

Distinction, to Bourdieu, is the practice which demarcates relational class position within a field; the manifestation of capital embodied and expressed by agents. Symbolic violence is the cousin of distinction. It is the uni-directional exercise of power by someone in a higher position of authority within a field upon an agent subordinate to them. It is the expression of symbolic power created by relative class. For example in fieldwork, when a player sarcastically wrote in chat 'nice split push' it had a twofold intent. The first was to show that they were aware of the strategy the other player had been attempting (the 'split push'), indicating

their knowledge of *League*'s metagame. The second was to put down the other player with a reminder that their execution of the strategy had failed due to their own lack of expertise. This was, taken discretely, an absolutely needless statement. Its function was purely one of manifesting their authority.

Crucially, symbolic violence must be recognised by its object. In online games such as *League of Legends*, players habitually take part in practices of distinction peculiar to their field norms, however symbolic violence is also visible in instances where players wish to assert their authority and relational superiority. I argue that this symbolic violence in *League* is more highly-charged and unstable than in the material world as it is often not recognised by its object, and is essentially binary in outcome. *For one team to win, the other must lose.*

A player might refuse to accept their position within the field as it conflicts with their understanding of themselves as either a player in the field of *League of Legends,* or as an agent within the wider field of power manifested in society. Most players observed in the ethnography will have been white, male, and university-educated as a result of sheer demography, and finding themselves as objects of symbolic violence and possessors of inferior field position is abrasive in the extreme. The frustration of losing is, I believe, one of the greatest contributions to toxicity in player behaviour because it goes against the 'promise' that investment of time and effort will be rewarded, and instead forces the losing players into an inferior field position.

> P²: I have raged a little bit. My partner does kind of make fun of me, for it. ... Anger and frustration. Especially when you've been working really hard towards something and like you've been putting in the effort and then someone comes along at the end and goes 'yeah bye killsteal' with like one auto-attack and you've just done a whole combo or whatever.

This frustration is then recognised as normal and natural within the field habitus. In this the players who accept 'raging' behaviour as a normal consequence of play are very near the truth. They understand that the amount of time invested into a game instance and into playing *League* in general is 'unfairly' rewarded in the conference of cultural capital in the form of ranks and levels, when the attainment of this individual capital is so very much dependent on the skill of other players.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I demonstrated the applicability of Bourdieu's model of practice theory when it is remediated through online games. *League of Legends* is an especially clear model for a number of reasons, in particular its sociability and hierarchical systems of capital and authority. This application shows the flexibility of Bourdieu's model, which has previously been used in part by other researchers studying online games. In

addition to being an apt conceptual model for structuring the ethnographic data, this framework also allows a great deal of insights into actions and behaviours.

However, the application of this model as a mode of ethnographic analysis didn't work quite as expected. Some areas were left ambiguous during ethnography (and were later clarified with interview data) and some phenomena that may have been expected from reviewing the contributing literature were absent. For example, during ethnography there was no evidence of gender capital-based trade or pro-social behaviour.

Nonetheless the framework functioned extremely well, especially in its mapping of field positions based on power and various forms of capital. This allowed novel insight into the kind of conflict and struggle that takes place in online games from a sociological, rather than psychological, standpoint. In *League of Legends*, as this chapter showed, authority and cultural capital are more explicitly hierarchical and architectured than can easily be mapped in the material world. This produces behavioural phenomena that might similarly be unexpected or anti-social in the material world, but which make sense to the human agents performing them in this social field.

Conflict is present in *League of Legends* as it is in all fields. But in this field, conflict is essentially binary: one team wins and another team loses. This creates lateral conflict as actors struggle to negotiate their field position. Their investment of time and labour is unfairly rewarded, and their placement is tied to that of the rest of their team, who may be strangers. This, too, creates frustration and conflict in the form of toxic behaviour.

The following chapter discusses toxic behaviour as a practice within *League of Legends* which appears transgressive and anti-social to those unfamiliar with the field, but which may seem normal or even 'natural' to participants. I position this kind of behaviour within the theoretical framework described in this chapter, and offer insights into its form and function.

Chapter 5: Toxic Behaviour: Context and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I continue the discussion of power inequality and struggle in social spheres like online games introduced in the previous chapter. I discuss the proliferation and manifestations of toxic behaviour in *League of Legends* in the context of the primary research question. That is, how it is positioned as a socio-structural phenomenon. I achieve this by analysing the practice through the lens of the theoretical framework, using examples from ethnography and semi-structured interviewing.

I begin with a brief review of the literature on toxic behaviour (discussed in greater detail in chapter two), and how it is addressed in *League of Legends*. I then offer a three-category typology of toxic behaviour as it appears in *League,* informed by participant experience but grounded in data analysis: 'flaming', 'trolling', and 'raging'. I illustrate this typology with examples from ethnography and the interviews, and discuss the differentiation and potential overlap of these categories. The remediation of capital, class, and habitus is a recurring theme in this chapter, as new practices in digital environments reconstitute established social norms.

I also consider the social role of these different types of toxic behaviour, using the model of practice theory outlined in the methodology and applied to the field in chapter four, to situate these types within a structural model. I argue that different forms of toxic behaviour are expressions of different structural causes, and have different social results. 'Flaming' is a form of violent lateral conflict in the field and is a form of symbolic violence. The hierarchical and hegemonic implications of this are discussed in greater detail in chapter 6. 'Trolling' parodies and disrupts the *doxa*, conversely strengthening what is perceived as a social norm by transgressing it. It can also be a 'legitimate' form of play or revenge action. Finally, 'raging' is framed as a normalised in-group vocalisation of frustration.

5.2 Types of Toxicity

There exists a great deal of debate on what constitutes and causes 'toxic' behaviour. In academic discourse it is often discussed in terms of 'trolling', 'flaming', or 'cyberbullying', as I discussed in the literature review (Ballard and Welch, 2015, Kwak et al., 2015), though other definitions such as 'cyber harassment'(Cote, 2015, Pittaro, 2007), 'griefing' (Bakioglu, 2009) and 'e-bile'(Jane, 2012, Jane, 2015) also proliferate, as well as the

catch-all term 'flame trolling'. It is almost always approached as a problem to be solved. It has also been argued to be something 'essential' to the Web and somehow *caused* by the online experience (Jane, 2015, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012, Herring et al., 2002).

In the body of research into *League of Legends* toxicity is considered an antisocial and problematic, though all-too-common, practice (Lin, 2015), and takes a number of forms which manifest in various, sometimes overlapping, ways. However, I question not only the simplistic approach to toxic behaviour as straightforwardly antisocial, but also conceptions of what constitutes toxic behaviour in-game. Certainly, one of the simplest ways to determine what constitutes 'toxic' behaviour in this game is to look at the 'report' function of the interface, which offers categories of problematic and bannable behaviour to players following a game instance. These are:

> *Harassment: Offensive Language* (general offensive language not directed at another player)
> *Harassment: Verbal Abuse* (offensive or threatening language directed at another player)
> *Griefing: Assisting Enemy Team* (through the use of the all-chat function, for example)
> *Unskilled Player* (poor or sub-par play)
> *Refuse to Communicate with Team* (ignoring advice and direction)
> *Leaving the Game/AFK* (leaving the game early, creating an unequal match)
> *Inappropriate Name* (offensive, defamatory or infringing)
> *Spamming* (filling the chat with text or links for commercial or other reasons)

Once a player has been reported three times, a transcript of the game chat is sent to the 'Tribunal' for judgment by other players.[18] However, this function constitutes a part of a top-down user interface architecture. It predetermines bad behaviour 'types' in a way which may be at odds with what players consider toxic or antisocial. These definitions are, in addition, extremely general. They do not describe behaviour which is specific to the *League of Legends* game and, indeed, could be describing misconduct guidelines for any number of online games. While looking at reported game instances has been a useful methodology on the part of Kou and Nardi (2013, 2014) their studies do not consider the problematic categorisation of the reporting function itself. In this chapter I seek to more deeply discuss the behaviours that members of the community themselves consider problematic and what they can tell us about the community they take place in.

Informed by the variety of toxic behaviour practice 'types' present in academic discourse as well as my own original research, I have therefore identified three varieties that take place in *League of Legends*. These may prove at odds with, or even contradictory to, other academic definitions, as they have emerged organically

[18] It is worth noting that the tribunal has been in maintenance mode (i.e. offline) as part of a 'temporary upgrade' for nearly two years by the summer of 2016. Currently a system of intentionally rapid punishment through chat restrictions and banning is in place, but its mechanism has not been made clear by Riot Games.

from the data and are therefore somewhat specific to this game. To some extent they are defined by participants, who actively differentiated forms of toxic behaviour at their own volition, volunteering their own interpretations of what constitutes toxic behaviour and why it manifests. A similar approach was undertaken by Seo and Kim (2015), whose definitions also vary somewhat from my own.

Participants are experts in their own experience and in the game environment, however they are likely to be inexpert or unreliable in empirical research and cannot therefore be solely relied on when creating meaningful academic definitions. As a researcher tasked with staying true to their experience but also with conducting sociographic analysis, I have worked to balance these two concerns. I have grouped and refined participant conceptualisations of 'flaming', 'trolling', and 'raging', and mapped them to the theoretical framework. This gives unique insight into the socialised motivation behind toxic behaviours, reconceptualising them as structural social issues. This is not intended to detract from the previous and wide body of research into negative online behaviour, but hopes to offer a different, more formally structural perspective.

Approaching toxic behaviour as a structured, structuring practice integrated into habitus, rather than purely as an aberrant or anti-social behaviour, may appear contentious. That I conceive of this behaviour as socially expressive and even predictable may be confused with claiming that it is essential or inevitable. This is far from the case. In the material world, violent and criminal acts are rarely approached by sociologists as autonomous acts removed from their social contexts, and nor should they be. But accepting that antisocial action is created within (and, to some extent, by) a social environment does not preclude condemnation of that action.

There are many ways in which a given structural problem can be addressed, from top-down architectural change to iterative action-based research to community-led initiatives. This approach also does not negate the free will, responsibility, or agency of those committing socially transgressive acts. The practice theory model attributes a great deal of flexibility to the habitus, and retains the agency of individuals. Mindful, conscious, autonomous action on the part of an agent within the field is neither unexpected nor uncommon. However researchers looking particularly at the prevalence of toxic behaviour in *League* have indicated that people committing toxic acts within the game are not necessarily consciously doing so (Kwak et al., 2015). Nor do they necessarily do so habitually or maliciously.[19]

Nonetheless, toxic behaviour is a common-enough problem in *League* that the community is known for its toxicity across gaming culture and media. This may partly be due to exposure – each game involves ten players, and it only requires one of those ten to fill the chat box with vitriol for nine other players to have

[19] Indeed, the system by which anti-social behaviour in-game is punished requires 3 separate 'reports' of a player before action is taken, in part due to the assumption that having a 'bad day' or 'bad game' could 'naturally' result in bad behaviour.

been exposed to toxicity. This feeds into what Bourdieu terms the *Verstehen* or self-understanding of the game society as it proliferates. This is an aspect of the iterative, reflexive construction of habitus. Bourdieu wrote in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1995: 79), that

> "in each of us, in varying proportions, there is part of yesterday's man; it is yesterday's man who inevitably predominates in us, since the present amounts to little compared with the long past in the course of which we were formed and from which we result. Yet we do not sense this man of the past, because he is inveterate in us; he makes up the unconscious part of ourselves."

Exposure to behaviour is not necessarily consciously remembered or emulated but it comes to inform the practice of players. It is in this way that the toxic behaviour prevalent in *League* has come to permeate its field habitus, and as such has informed the 'cultural' knowledge of the players. This proliferation of a type of practice and its penetration into the field *Verstehen* as a form of knowledge gives it structural rather than purely antisocial or disruptive quality.

In this chapter I approach flaming, trolling, and raging as different things that exist for different reasons. There is, however, overlap in how they manifest and how they are termed in games studies literature. Lin and Sun (2005) suffered a similar problem in studying Taiwanese MMORPG players, in which the term 'white-eyed' as describing toxic players could imply a number of antisocial play behaviours. This is a problem of classification, and one that is beyond the scope of a study specified to one game (such as this one), however to maintain clarity I have created demarcations derived from chat analysis and participant interview, and informed by ethnography.

In chat foul language, expletives, capital letters (meant to indicate shouting as part of what some researchers term 'hyper expressive' or 'emotional' language) and certain vocabularies are common. A reasonably common epithet, the bigram 'fuckin noobs'(Kwak and Blackburn, 2014), for example, could be read into any one of the three categories. Meaning is highly contextual, and is characterised not only by what is said but why it is being said (Jane, 2015: 68) and how it is received (Fichman and Sanfilippo, 2014). An expletive-ridden utterance such as this may certainly be a disinhibited expression of rage or a form of verbal abuse hurled at another player. It may be a disparaging comment to team mates regarding the opposing team. However it could also be intended as a humorous appeal to in-group vocabulary, self-reflexively mocking common parlance. *League of Legends* players, after all, are not oblivious to the poor reputation of their community, as much as they may not be fully aware of their contribution to it. Some participants, who had been told that they were being observed for doctoral research but not the research field, often assumed that I was looking particularly at 'bad' social behaviour, and reacted with humour:

Gangplank: excuse me mr phad student

…

Gangplank:	me privacy feels violationed[20]
Nidalee:	psych student?
…	
Gangplank:	im not psycho me swares
Rek'Sai:	just record me i want to become famous
Gangplank:	pls no im not illegal immigrant just forget passport

As other virtual ethnographers such as Kendall (2008) have noted, picking apart the strands of meaning, context, and intention is highly complex. Several strands of conversation can occur simultaneously, between different participants talking across each other. Analysing chat transcripts can therefore be a difficult and arduous task, which in this case has been made easier by immersive learning of linguistic norms and community argots during ethnography. Certain contextual cues help to indicate intention – these may not necessarily be clear from the chat content itself, but were clear enough during gameplay to merit remark in the field notes. Knowing the intra-group norms of *League* players, I have been careful in how I have marked up chat transcripts for analysis, contextualising it with participant descriptions of what constitutes 'acceptable' versus 'aberrant' behaviour. It is from this analysis, and from the self-defined differences between categories described by participants during interview, that I have come to the following syntheses.

5.3 Flaming

I offer 'flaming' as the first category of toxic behaviour as it is, in many ways, the most straightforwardly easy to identify. While other terms used for online hostility may refer vaguely to several overlapping categories, 'flaming' is the only term whose definition solely involves heated online communications involving invective, insults, and other forms of verbal harassment or abuse (Jane, 2015). Bae (2016: 300) further defines it as "hostile, aggressive, and inflammatory online remarks" while Johnson et al. (2009: 660) prefer the more euphemistic "antinormative hostile communication of emotion". 'Toxic disinhibition' is a common link across definitions – describing a loss of control or lack of restraint in the expression of strong emotions, in particular anger (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012).

As many of these terms do, it goes by many names across disciplines, varying in degree of jargon. Jane (2012, 2015), as a feminist researcher calling attention to the venomous misogyny present in a great deal of online communication, terms it 'e-bile'. In games studies it is sometimes referred to as 'griefing' – described by Blackburn and Kwak (2014) as cyberbullying in online gaming.

[20] When, for the sake of ethical concerns, I volunteered to end the recording if the participant wished it, they clarified that they were, indeed, joking.

It is common across all means of computer-mediated communication, spawning discussion as to whether it is a product of the technology itself, of its users alone, or a by-product of some aspect of the medium such as anonymity or the loss of eye contact between participants (Bae, 2016, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012, Jane, 2015). Kwak and Blackburn (2014: 2) even claim that "computer-mediated-communication (CMC), without presence of face-to-face communication, *naturally* leads to hostility and aggressiveness" (my italics). Despite being common, it is not usually considered desirable or pleasant for most Web users. A study on YouTube flaming suggested that the majority of users perceive flaming as "annoying" and "[deviating from] an honest way of expressing disagreement" (Cho and Kwon, 2015: 363).

The experience of flaming has the potential for psychological harm, as it is essentially written abuse which can only be escaped with difficulty:

Researcher: Have you experienced harassment in game?

P[1]: Oh yeah! I also play with um, i've got two friends of mine who are gay? and they get, i mean they don't get harassed in real life but as soon as they get on League, doesn't matter if they're gay or not but they get called faggot, you know, and then they say 'i'm actually gay that's quite unkind' and they just... omygod that's the worst thing to say it just escalates ten-fold.

Researcher: Oh that's awful.

P[1]: You get called noobs, you get stuff said about your mother for example like 'I'm gonna do all these horrible things to your mothers' and it's like 'Oh god, calm down. It's a computer game you should not be reacting this sort of level.'

Apart from its potential for harm, flaming is also commonly described as 'tiring'. Blackburn and Kwak (2014) write that "the stress caused by harassment and other forms of toxic behaviour can cause players to become fatigued," a claim supported by my own research.

Researcher: How does it make you feel, having [toxic] behaviour directed at you?

K: So the best adjective I can use is... tired. ... It can be quite stressful [...] when you first join these games and you are quite new, being told that you're doing it wrong adds to that stress. But then once you've played it for a while you sort of settle in with it and realise it's just people being people. And then after a time it just becomes tiresome. It becomes a sort of negative haze to the game, and particularly if you're playing games to relax or chill out with after a stressful day of work it, it is pretty much the thing that sort of drove me away from the game in the end.

In this way toxicity permeates group conceptions of what is normal and acceptable behaviour. If it is prevalent enough in a game community it can prompt players to give up the game to escape the experience. Solving the problem of flaming is therefore of obvious interest to the industry (Kwak and Blackburn, 2014).

However top-down interventions hoping to rectify these problems do not always work and making someone's identity clear does not usually put an end to flaming (Cho and Kwon, 2015: 370).

League of Legends is no stranger to flaming behaviours among its players (Lin, 2015), to the extent that it is a growing site for research into this kind of behaviour (e.g. Kwak and Blackburn, 2014, Kwak et al., 2015, Ballard and Welch, 2015, Kou and Nardi, 2013, 2014). The community itself is very aware of the problem:

> A[2]: The um, kind of culture that sits around League of Legends and like I say it's well known for its uh, social element and the aggressive or abusive behaviour of some of the players.

Within the game, flaming looks much as it does across digital media, albeit with some specifications. Kwak and Blackburn (2014) conducted a study observing the linguistic components of flaming in *League of Legends* in North America. They recorded the most common uni- and bi-grams among toxic players as reproduced in figure 5.1.

Uni-Gram	Bi-Gram
Retards	Fucking retard
Nigger	Report noob
Garbage	Fking noob
Uninstall	Fucking useless
Piece	Fuck team
Pathetic	Report fucking
Fucking	Stupid noob
Fukin	Pussy ass
Nooob	Play bots
Bots	Play fucking

Figure 5.1. Top 10 discriminative uni- and bi-grams in North American *League of Legends* servers according to Kwak and Blackburn (2014).

Like all language, flaming is culture-specific, so Kwak and Blackburn's observations cannot be used as an exact representation of all flaming across the whole *League of Legends* playerbase. For instance, the racial ephithet 'nigger' was never noted as occurring during ethnography. However European players appeared to have their own additional, although less explicitly violent, slur – calling another player 'kid' as a term of denigration:

> Nidalee: its ionly [only] the reality, ur [you're] a stupid boy
>
> Warwick: omfg [oh my fucking god]
>
> Warwick: reported

Warwick: for flame

Nidalee: ok :)

Nidalee: stupid boy

Warwick: kid

[All Chat] Draven: report ww [Warwick]

Nidalee: stupid kid

However, there is enough commonality across their data and mine to find common themes in *League of Legends* flaming terminology, at least among English-speakers, and to illustrate the offensive and volatile nature of flaming chat:

Ryze: FUCKING RETARDED TEEMO [a champion] PLANT SHROOMS [poisonous bombs which appear as mushrooms] YOU NOOB

Ryze: SOOOOO RETARDED

5.3.1 Flaming as Symbolic Violence

Flaming is intended to shock, hurt, and otherwise denigrate its subject. It is in effect abuse and in this is effectively an act of violence. Those inflicting it disparage their victims in gendered, sexualised, and racist terms such as 'faggot,' 'nigger,' 'noob,' and 'kid'. This reveals what they consider to be objectionable characteristics. The content of abusive language (and therefore flaming), is indicative of power structures within the social group in which it is enacted. As such, flaming is the virtual practice of what in Bourdieu's theory of practice is termed 'symbolic violence.'

Symbolic violence is the uni-directional exercise of power by someone in a higher position of authority within a field upon an agent subordinate to them. It is the expression of symbolic power created by relative class. Symbolic violence is practised in instances where social agents wish to assert their authority and relational superiority. Crucially, it must be recognised by its object in order to be meaningful. Flaming in *League of Legends* adheres to this definition very comfortably. It is an act of aggression on the part of a player wishing to show their difference from a less-skilled player, who acts to reprimand them for their lack of skill and exert their dominance over them.

The experience of flaming in this context is certainly extremely unpleasant. As a very mediocre *League of Legends* player I was exposed to my fair share of flaming during the ethnography. It was almost always a

stressful experience, invoking feeling of anxiety, frustration, and helplessness. In the excerpt below, I was playing the champion 'Morgana'.

[All-Chat] Kalista:	MORGANA REPORT
Kalista:	GG
[All-Chat] Kalista:	MORGBANA REPORT
Kalista :	MORGANA
Kalista:	DEF [Defend]
Kalista:	DEF
Kalista:	DEFFANCE [Defence]
Kalista:	MOTHER FUCK MORGANA

The Kalista player in this excerpt uses the All-Chat function to implore all players in the game to report me, presumably for poor play. She intersperses this with exhortations for me to 'defend' the allied base against the opposing team, as well as a 'GG' ['good game'] meant to imply that the game is already over (and that the allied team has lost). While most interview participants discussed learning to cope with, or otherwise become accustomed to violent language in-game, several discussed the negative repercussions of being exposed to it – especially after I confided my own feelings of fear and insecurity that it prompted:

> L: But yeah sometimes when people like, blame you for the state that the game is going that sort of sucks because it makes me feel like I don't wanna play the next game because what if i make four other people lose that game?

I believe that symbolic violence in *League* is more unstable than in the material world as it is often not recognised by its object. As such the uni-directional exercise of power is disrupted, and flaming behaviour can act as a trigger for conflict and a form of active conflict in itself as agents within the field attempt to negotiate and re-negotiate their positions.

Flaming is violent and combative, and can be seen in this framework as a form of class violence. In *League of Legends'* binary mode of conflict resolution, a win means progress and a superior hierarchical position, while a loss means the opposite. Flaming is a form of symbolic violence that takes place not only hierarchically (from superior to inferior) but laterally. Team members use flaming to subjugate their team-mates in the field, asserting their superiority as players through violence and attempting to separate themselves from the 'failure' and inferiority of their team. In chapter 4 I mentioned a case of a Katarina player on the winning team being flamed for choosing a 'noob champ'. However this 'punch upwards' is comparatively rare, as

flaming is usually intra-team. The win/loss binary is accepted as natural, and is hierarchically conflated with superiority/inferiority. Intra-team flaming is instead a lateral conflict – a fight to be 'the best of a bad bunch' in a system which allows no gradients of winning and losing.

5.4 Trolling

In 'classic' Internet terms, trolling translates to online forum users laying 'bait' with a discussion topic intended to engender engagement from a target community. The discussion would then rapidly devolve into heated argument and insult-flinging, to the amusement of the 'troll'. This kind of trolling, aiming to provoke another person, still takes place in online spaces like *League of Legends:*

> A^2: People will use language intentionally to get a reaction, more often than I'd like to admit people are using terms like 'cancer' to describe another player

However the original etymology of the word has been lost by many who use it. 'Trolls' are instead referred to as "living under a bridge" as monsters in fairy tales (Coles and West, 2016). The term has developed in the last decade to have many "different, inconsistent and sometimes conflicting meanings (Coles and West, 2016). It has come to incorporate almost any online behaviour meant to spur anger or frustration and carried out 'for the lulz'. It can be hateful and illegal or gentle and humorously creative.

Far from being exclusive to online gaming, trolling has been documented as occurring in all kinds of online spaces, from social media to Wikipedia (Coles and West, 2016), and even in the offline world (see literature review). Those who engage in it do so for a number of different reasons, whether due to boredom or personality disorders (Coles and West, 2016). No matter the motivation, it is a surprisingly personal and often unique form of counter-cultural expression, and is in some ways a much more creative, expressive form of 'bad' behaviour than raging or flaming.

Unlike these latter practices trolling is a conscious form of disruption to social order and a subversion of social norms. For this reason, the form it takes in *League of Legends* has the potential to speak loudly on what constitutes morality and social conformity in the game. Its prevalence makes the psychological motivation for trolling less interesting in this research, and beyond its scope. It is the forms of practice which constitute trolling in *League* that have the potential to tell us about in-game society by their very difference from other forms of online trolling and from normal, pro-social behaviour.

5.4.1 Trolling the *Doxa*

Disruptive behaviours are perceived as disruptive because they challenge and transgress unspoken, but powerful, social rules. These rules are what Bourdieu calls field *doxa*. *Doxa* describes what is acceptable and

appropriate within a field: There exists in all society a sphere of the unsayable and undoable. This is largely constituted of the impossible and improbable – nonsense and physical impossibility. However there also exists that which is conceivable but simply 'not done' because of a shared cultural socialisation which declares what is normative to an extent that it appears quite natural.

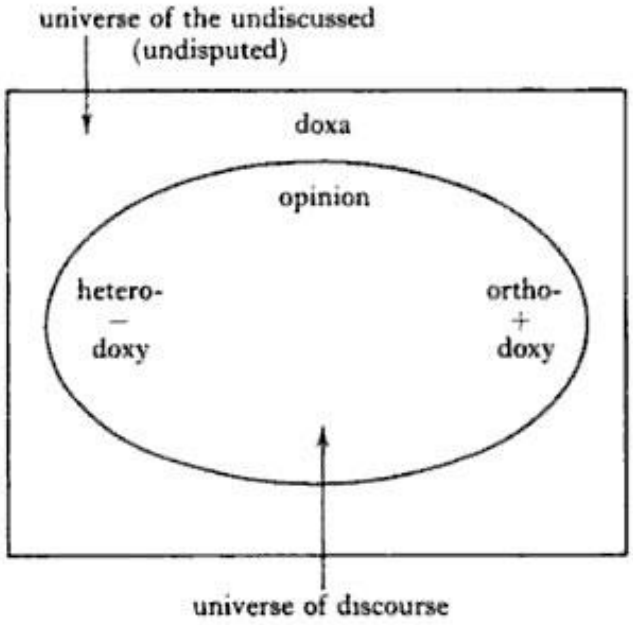

Figure 5.2. Diagram showing the construction of *doxa* (Bourdieu, 2010)

The *doxa* is silent (Bourdieu, 1991: 131), maintained through discourse but not named or appealed to as authoritative:

> "the sphere of what is politically utterable in the … field, on the one hand, and, on the other, everything that remains beyond discussion (in the field) , that is, beyond the reach of discourse and which, relegated to the state of *doxa*, is accepted tacitly without discussion or examination by the very people who confront one another at the level of declared political choices." (Bourdieu, 1991: 132)

In the context of *League of Legends*, this equates in part to the unspoken but established goal of winning a given player v. player battle. It is an unnamed, but known and unquestioned, aim of the game (Donaldson, 2016). Utilizing the most effective meta-game is the unspoken means of achieving that goal, and it is formalised and learned as a behaviour by new players as much as table manners are by children. How best to achieve the goal and which means to use in achieving it are the named, spoken-of, uttered topic in chat discussions. Players may 'confront one another' in strong and even inflammatory terms with a nonetheless shared assumption that they have a common goal.

Players simply would not engage in discussions of the best way to play without the shared imagining of the ultimate goal. Ignoring this unspoken orthodox is a transgression of the field norms (the *doxa*), and constitutes trolling behaviour. Subversion of a rule implies and, in turn, defines that rule by its very act of defiance.

These points may seem facile or banal ('of course trolling is against the normal rules!') but the point is that within this game-world rule-breaking and social disruption occur in a very particular way. This behaviour is identifiable even though it looks quite different from how it might take place in other games and spaces.

Cheating, for example, is a form of explicit rule-breaking in all games and in many other fields. It is not, however, in *League of Legends* necessarily a disruption of *doxa* and is not even offered as a category for reporting by the game interface. Cheating through the means of hacking or power-levelling very much maintains the field *doxa* as it assumes normal field homology which attributes authority to cultural capital. Players who cheat know they are breaking the rules but they are doing so in the hope of attaining power and authority as it is recognised within the field habitus. Their mis-recognition of what gives status within the game community is a classic aspect of capital-based social systems (Swartz, 1997: 126):

> One important consequence of the competitive logic of fields and their *doxa* is that they help create the conditions for the "misrecognition" of power relations and thereby contribute to the maintenance of the social order. Actors misrecognize the arbitrary character of their social worlds when they take for granted the definition of rewards and of ways of obtaining them as given fields.

Trolling, on the other hand, seeks to challenge a normative narrative in which winning the game is expected. A troll cannot be argued with or appealed to based on reason or civility. Successful trolls recognise the social norms and the 'shared unconsciousness' which they are subverting. Their subversive practice is based on a *knowing* inversion or transgression in the same way that comedy or comic observation is. Trolling is a global phenomenon that takes place to a greater or lesser extent on all *League of Legends* servers, so finding an underlying psychological 'cause' for it on an individual level is near impossible. But while trolls' reasons for engaging in this practice may be diverse, the socio-cultural function remains consistent as long as the community continues to understand itself as a cohesive whole (see chapter four).

5.4.2 Identifying the Troll in *League of Legends*

Coles and West (2016) identify a key feature of trolling as 'recognisability'. It is so 'recognisable' that some researchers have even sought to codify it in terms of computational linguistics (Mojica, 2017). Trolling behaviour is easily identified by a community due to its subversion of established norms, but is difficult to put a name and exact specification to. Indeed, it is not even offered as a category for reporting an offending player. In this it is rather like pornography – famously difficult to define but "I know it when I see it" (Justic

Potter Stewart, 1964. Cited in Lattman, 2007). However, this recognisability also creates mis-recognition. Behavioural practice which unconsciously or accidentally transgresses the *doxa* can look very like, and even indistinguishable from, that which consciously and actively does the same. *Doxa* is, after all, a direct result of habitus and field *Verstehen,* and those outside of it may not internalise or conform to it. In this way they unintentionally identify themselves as out-group members. It is in a similar vein to what Coles and West (2016) identify as 'kudos trolling', in which off-topic or otherwise disruptive conversation topics in online fora appear not out of malicious intent but out of a lack of knowledge of what is acceptable. This is a manifest lack of cultural capital, unfamiliarity with the field, and non-integration of the habitus.

In *League of Legends* this appears in cases where unskilled and beginner players are attacked for what may look like intentionally bad play. It is the low-level player 'diving' into the midst of the enemy team in the hope of being a hero – and dying instantaneously. It is a player unfamiliar with the meta-game trying to play obviously unviable strategies like placing Ashe in the jungle or using Rek'Sai as an AD Carry. Of course, this leads to confusion. Playing badly on purpose looks very much like playing poorly due to a lack of skill – the difference lying in the intent of the player:

Graves [to Riven]:	go afk[21] you're bad
Riven:	no i trolling
Graves:	yeah because you're bad
Graves:	you always play like that i guess

While trolling may certainly take the form of purposefully bad play, it can be exhibited in a number of ways. Leaving the game, or threatening to leave the game, was noted as being fairly common during ethnographic study. The upshot of this is to leave the team at a disadvantage, outnumbered 4 to 5 against the opposing team. A more aggressive version of this is to intentionally 'feed' kills to the opposing team by dying repeatedly – easily achieved by simply running down the centre of the map. Another method is to spam the chat channels with meaningless phrases and utterances, or to repeatedly 'ping' the map, creating an irritating high-pitched ringing audible to all team-mates.

Kalista:	deffance [defence]
Kalista:	def
Kalista:	def

[21] Leave the game. This is a particularly harsh denunciation as if Riven followed Graves' advice and left the game, it would leave the team at a 4 v. 5 disadvantage. Graves, perfectly aware of this, is indicating that Riven is such a liability to the team that it would be better to lack a fifth player entirely.

Kalista: def

Kalista: def

Kalista: def

Riven: stfu [shut the fuck up]

Kalista: def

Kalista: def

Kalista: def

Kalista: def

alista: def

Riven: rly idiot [really, idiot?]

Kalista: def

Kalista: def

More proficient trolls may bind their champion's 'laugh' emote to an easily-pressed keyboard button and spam that – a guaranteed way to irritate opposing team members even if they have cross-team chat turned off. They may also 'camp' a lane – ruining one opposing player's game as they are caught and killed again and again. Ruining a team-mate's game is a little easier, and can be achieved in a number of ways. Although it's impossible to attack team-mates in-game, there are plenty of ways to deny them in-game experience and gold. For example, by following them around the map, 'stealing' any gold they were hoping to earn by landing the killing blow on opponents and enemy minions. Trolling 'well' is, in some ways, a skill in itself[22]. Trolling may even look like flaming, but be quite different in its function and recognised as such by players:

A[3]: Sometimes it's just so obviously and hilariously over the top that it sort of goes all the way back round and start finding it funny and it's like 'oh this guy is just being a complete troll' or whatever.

5.4.3 Creative Trolling

During an interview a participant described often being called out as a troll for his champion choices (also known as 'picks'). For him, playing somewhat off-meta champions in unexpected ways was one of the joys of the game. It was more creative and experimental, he said, than simply choosing what the current accepted 'meta' dictated was best. He even believed it to be a moderately successful strategy, as opposing players often

[22] '*Trolling is a art'* – Internet proverb.

didn't know how to optimise against such an unusual champion 'build' and play-style. To other team-mates, however, this looked very much like troll behaviour as it went against normal practice.

Researcher:	Have you ever raged or trolled anyone in-game?
L:	[Pause]... So i had to think about that because i sometimes play fairly off-meta champs. But I maintain i'm not trolling, i'm genuinely trying to play my best at all times.
Researcher:	So, would you say that can be a form of trolling, playing completely off-meta or inappropriate roles?
L:	Um... So, a lot of people seem to think so. But I would disagree. Like, as long as you're not doing something that obviously can't work like, I dunno, building full AD on somebody that doesn't have AD scaling. Like, even if it's sort of, like, a bit of a weird pick, as long as you're trying your best then sure. Maybe don't try it in a ranked game first, try it in normal [unranked game mode] first, but yeah.

This participant's experience echoes that of highly-ranked and (in)famous *League* player and streamer known as 'DruidDroid', who developed a play strategy (termed 'proxy Singed') which went against all conventional understanding of the most effective way to play the game and yet, quite often, proved effective. It disregarded survival and instead focussed entirely on 'farming' enemy non-player-character 'minions' (aka 'creeps') in order to gain gold and distract the enemy team. This created constant pressure on the enemy team's defences, and allowed DruidDroid's team to maintain the upper hand at the cost of his champion being killed again and again. It exploited weaknesses in the game's strategic setup and could be used to great effect, but looked very much to team-mates unfamiliar with the strategy as if DruidDroid were simply 'feeding' kills and gold to the enemy team. He was regularly reported and even banned from the game for assisting the enemy team.

This kind of experimental, playful 'trolling' not only feeds into the idea of 'creative' trolling by challenging in-game norms, but is to some extent an architectured part of the game itself. Riot is not keen to set the meta-game in stone, and uses slightly different vocabulary in describing champion roles than that of the community. To some extent, experimenting with off-meta champions and builds is the only 'explorative' way to play *League* – a mode of play particularly important to many gamers of all genres according to some video game researchers (see, for example, Yee, 2006, Ducheneaut et al., 2006).

At its zenith this kind of 'creative' trolling in *League of Legends* is intended to amuse and infuriate in equal measure, similar to what Bakioglu (2009) refers to as 'griefing play' in Second Life. It is also comparatively quite rare. I saw no instance of it during ethnography, but concede that this may be a function of playing a low-level account. After all, Bourdieu's theory of distinction tells us that individuals inhabiting a lower social

class are more apt to rigidly obey class rules meant to establish themselves as upwardly-mobile. In the same way, where low-level players are still acclimatising to the social rules of their environment they may be less likely to openly flout them from a fear of seeming out of place. The high-status, highly-ranked player has no such anxiety. With this in mind I offer as illustration an account of a Platinum-ranked (top 8% of ranked players) player, taken from a *League of Legends* community page[23]:

> i was in champ [champion] select and someone said, "i cant see...only baron[24] can grant me vision"...so when his turn came up he picked lee sin [the blind monk and kung-fu master champion]..i was like ooh its just a joke...he was the jungler [roaming support] in this game
>
> when the game started things turned weird quick, he wouldnt buy a trinket [a type of 'ward', used to grant vision of the enemy team's position] saying "vision is useless to those who cant see"...he would go to lanes and stand between us and the enemy and keep spamming "whos there, i hear something"...he didnt gank [attack] ANYONE and if the enemy hit him he would just run away shouting "who is this"...he kept farming [killing non-player characters for gold] the entire time non stop...he had more cs ['creep score' or 'farm'] than anyone since he took cs from all lanes
>
> he only built dmg [damage]...and was 0-0-0 [no kills, deaths, or kill assists]for 25 mins...then we went to do baron...when we finished he said "i see everything clearly now, i know what i must do" and he went APE SHIT on enemy team...he became a moving god

This example is an excellent manifestation of 'creative' trolling. It subverts the *doxa* and mocks the 'serious' metagame by parodying it, in a way which would amuse and irritate team-mates in equal measure. It had the potential to ruin the game, but would be difficult to categorise as a reportable offence. That the player doing this was highly skilled is clear from the final sentence ("he became a moving god"), lending credence to the idea that this kind of trolling is the pursuit of the *League of Legends* 'elite', for whom the game has become a comfortable playground.

Perhaps unexpectedly, this aligns most closely in a practice theory framework with the concept of 'distinction'. Distinction is the cousin of symbolic violence, however its function is to perform power and capital without the subjugation necessitated in the practice of symbolic violence. It is the action of refining, stylising and formalising behaviours in order to display social and cultural capital. It refers primarily to cultural consumption, however Bourdieu (2010:176) points out the flexibility of the concept:

> "While it is clear that art offers it the greatest scope, there is no area of practice in which the intention of purifying, refining and sublimating facile impulses and primary needs cannot assert itself, or in which the

[23] Archived at: https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/1unb6p/i_just_played_with_the_most_dedicated_lee_sin/ (Accessed 18.10.2016)

[24] Baron Nashor, a high-level non-player monster who grants temporary 'buffs' (improvements) to all members of the team that kills it

> stylization of life, i.e., the primacy of form over function, which leads to the denial of function, does not produce the same effects."

In the social space that is constituted by a *League of Legends* game instance, beginner players display the 'facile impulses' which, in their lack of skill, translate in this social system to those which in the material world are "socially identified as vulgar because they are easy and common"(Bourdieu, 2010: 176). These actions, bespeaking a dearth of capital are smoothed over and refined by the learned manners instilled by the *doxa* and the paradigm of the metagame. Thus they join *League of Legends'* own *bourgeoisie* – the large proportion of mediocre players with aspirations of greatness.

At the upper end of the status hierarchy are those who, in the material world, would be recognised as the privileged few. Rich in cultural and social capital, they can afford to become bored by the rather limited scope for creativity offered by *League of Legends*. They know and understand the rules of the game, and are comfortable and skilled enough that they can experiment with convention and play with expectations. They recognise and maintain the *doxa*, but have transformative power and authority granted to few in the field.

5.4.4 Reactive Trolling

While I position 'creative' trolling as expressive, I freely admit that this is not always the case. Trolling is not always intended to be light-hearted or humorous, and may instead be reactionary and destructive. This I term 'reactive' trolling, as it is often prompted by some slight, real or perceived. It intersects with what, in other research is called the 'revenge' troll (Fichman and Sanfilippo, 2010).

> A[1]: I've seen trolling behaviour all the time. It's a little bit different now, it used to be worse about a year or so ago. Trolling used to be a really big issue with people not, if they didn't get the lane they wanted to play in or they didn't get the character they wanted to play with, then they would intentionally ruin the game for everyone and that was a really common problem.

Note that I say 'prompted', not 'caused'. The decision to behave poorly lies with the psychology of the individual, and during play I have seen some few instances of tremendous patience alongside many cases of individuals reacting poorly to very minor provocation. Nonetheless the perception of trolling being 'caused' when players "didn't get the lane they wanted to play in" and so on, lead me to term this 'reactive' trolling. It is a reaction to provocation and to frustration, and is even a kind of revenge against other players, ruining their experience because the troll feels it to be justified retribution.

One instance of this kind of behaviour during ethnography was so memorable that I took extensive field notes, with the aim of accurately recounting the event as a narrative:

> As we set out onto the battlefield the team is in good spirits. I have 'summoned' a fallen angel-like being named Morgana to fight with on this occasion. With her on my team is a werewolf, a clawed alien monster summoned from the void, a fuzzy primordial mammal with a boomerang, and a bow-wielding ice queen. It is the ice queen, Ashe, whom I as Morgana will be predominantly fighting with and trying to protect in the bottom lane. Ashe suggests that we play safely, and in return I reassure her that I play 'like a big baby'.
>
> 'Nice,' quips Ashe, 'I love babys [sic].'
>
> In the next ten minutes the team's good humour slowly sours as our death count increases. Ashe is killed again and again, but that isn't atypical. As an inexperienced player she does not appreciated the comparatively large amounts of damage dealt in the early game by our lane opponents, and she is not mechanically skilled enough to 'kite' them by maintaining her distance while still taking advantage of the difference in range.
>
> At one point a team mate (playing the clawed monster Kha'Zix) leaps into an attack against our lane opponents, clearly hoping to right the wrongs committed by me and Ashe and earn himself the related gold and glory. He is predictably killed, and flies into a subsequent rage. 'I'm done!' he types in all-chat, 'Report my team mates and good bye!'
>
> He does not, in fact, leave the game. He continues to play 'for fun' while spamming the chat channels with abuse. Ashe, seemingly unfazed by the vitriol, comments to me that this game will give me some 'good data'. I wonder out loud if this is an understandable reaction, as after all no one really likes losing. Kha'Zix is unconvinced. It is not the losing that he minds, it's the kids, flamers, and noob feeders.

To some extent, I could understand and empathise with Kha'Zix's frustration. Although cool detachment may be the idealised position for a researcher to inhabit, in some situations they are swept up in the drama of the research site. In some ways this is inevitable – socialisation is no less active when its effects and practices are known. As I played League and became involved in its community I began to experience something of what participants experienced. Frustration, anger, and disappointment at loss (in addition to brief joy in victory); a certain helpless, clumsy, rage at ineffectual play on the part of team-mates or even toward myself. From the perspective of the Kha'Zix, his time was being wasted and his game ruined by other, bad players. His investment of time and energy was not being fairly rewarded due to the actions of team-mates whom he had not chosen. As such his reaction, to purposely play poorly or to leave the game, was justified in his view. That Ashe and I were playing poorly due to lack of skill, rather than out of malevolent intent, did not matter to him as the outcome was the same.

The 'reactive' troll can overlap greatly with the flamer, verbally abusing team-mates even as he or she intentionally contributes to losing the game. This in turn can frustrate other players to the extent that they, too, decide to leave the game rather than be subjected to the unpleasant experience. This act of self-preservation exacerbates the disadvantage and is in itself a form of reactive trolling, as described by Kwak et

al. (2015): "Griefers make other players annoyed and feel fatigued. Sometimes victims even leave the game, exhibiting toxic behaviour themselves to escape beratement" (Blackburn and Kwak, 2014: 3).

A variant of this self-preserving 'reactive' troll is the counter-troll (named the 'vigilante' by Coles and West (2016)). The counter-troll engages with another troll, whether 'creative' or 'reactive', with the intention of correcting their bad behaviour.

> A[1]: if someone goes out their way to try and be aggressive or offensive against a friend of mine it may be that we intentionally that we as a group hunt that player and ruin their game. So the behaviour is then [trolling] but only as a reaction.

This may or may not have the desired effect, and may instead devolve into a 'flame war' of hurled insults. It also actively subverts the expectation that toxic behaviour is a result of anonymity. These players engage in trolling consciously, as a group known individually to its members (although still anonymous to the antagonist).

The ultimate upshot of this is further exposure to toxic behaviour on the part of other players, iteratively contributing to an environment in which it is seen as normal and acceptable. This is the productive effect of toxic behaviour, enacted as a personal, subjective action but having a cumulative structural effect. The *doxa,* the realm of what is unspoken and acceptable, subtly changes. Inexperienced players 'learn' that this behaviour is a normal, 'natural' part of the game's habitus.

5.5 Raging

To a casual observer, 'raging' may be indistinguishable from flaming and, indeed, they possess overlapping qualities; strings of expletives written entirely in capital letters, addressed to either the friendly or opposing team. To players, however, deeply embedded in the field and having internalised the game habitus, the two are categorically different in how they are perceived. The following is an example of 'raging' taken directly from the chat transcript of a game:

[All Chat] Enemy Aatrox:	OMG 2V1 ENCORE UNE FOIS PTN DE NOOB DE MERDE !!!!!![25]
Tristana:	omg i have so fucking lag
[All Chat] Riven:	stop raging we don't have a jungler
[All Chat] Veigar:	haha to [too] easy

[25] Approximate translation: Oh my God, 2 v. 1 again! Shitty noob whore!

This example actually contains two instances of raging. The first is from the enemy team's Aatrox, who is extremely annoyed by the fact that he is in a lane against two opponents instead of one. This happens occasionally in low-level games, in which two players may play in the 'top' lane rather than one playing in the top lane and one playing in the 'jungle'. While 'jungling' is important, it is a particularly difficult role to learn in lower levels as it requires particular 'runes' and 'masteries' tied to a summoner account, which many players do not accrue before they reach maximum level. This is what Riven is referring to when she petitions Aatrox to 'stop raging' after he has again died in the outnumbered lane. Veigar has no interest in placating Aatrox, instead goading him. Meanwhile Tristana is also low-key 'raging' as she is suffering lag spikes which cause a delay between action and server response.

Aatrox's comments are broadly directed at his lane opponents, while Tristana's are more akin to a general lament. Both express frustration at situations beyond their control, in which their time and effort are being unfairly rewarded. This is read by the community as raging. Neither Riven nor Veigar are, as such, suffering the kind of verbal abuse that characterises flaming. But neither could Aatrox's language be considered positive or normal outside of the context of the game world. To many *League* players, however, this kind of outburst is unexceptional and even 'natural'. During interviews, participants differentiated between 'unacceptable' flaming and 'understandable' raging – the latter seen as a natural response to frustration.

This supports Herring et al.'s 2002 statement that acrimonious comments, "while clearly problematic, are nonetheless widespread and often tolerated, due in part to the pervasiveness on the Internet of civil libertarian values that consider abusive speech a manifestation of individual freedom of expression" (quoted in Cho and Kwon, 2015: 363). Explicit language is thus not seen as problematic in and of itself, even when it confirms and reinforces hegemonic power structures, remediating them into an online context.

While 'flaming' explicitly abuses another player, 'raging' is more of a directionless scream into the ether, expressing impotent anger at the perceived unfairness of play. These players want their cohorts to understand that they have been put at an unfair disadvantage; that their poor resultant play is not their fault. Unlike narrative video games and even MMORPGs requiring a certain amount of 'grinding' such as *World of Warcraft*, MMOBAs offer no guarantee of a predictable reward for a certain amount of work. Consalvo et al. (2010) describe this phenomenon in an article comparing the performance of 'hard work' and reward across various media. In accordance with practice theory, players mis-recognise the relationship between input and reward as linear, and therefore feel frustration, stress, and helplessness when their perceived efforts do not pay off:

> The struggle in which knowledge of the social world is at stake would be pointless if each agent could find, within himself, the source of an infallible knowledge of the truth of his condition and his position in the social space, and it would be equally pointless if the same agents could not recognize themselves in different discourses and classifications (according to class, ethnicity, religion, sex, etc..). [...] But the effects of this

> struggle would be totally unpredictable if there were no limit to allodoxia, to errors in perception and above all in expression , and if the propensity to recognize oneself in the different discourses and classifications offered were equally probable among all agents, whatever their position in the social space (and hence their dispositions) , and whatever the structure of that space, the form of the distributions and the nature of the divisions according to which it is actually organized. (Bourdieu, 1991: 132)

Despite players viewing 'raging' as more acceptable than flaming or even trolling, it is nonetheless a toxic behaviour as it contributes to the iterative cycle of exposure to toxic behaviour. As it is seen as less harmful than other forms of toxic behaviour, those engaging in it may fail to identify their behaviour as problematic. This claim is supported by Kwak and Blackburn (2014), who state that "subjective perception of toxic playing makes toxic players themselves sometimes fail to recognise their behaviour as toxic."

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have offered a novel typology for toxic behaviour types. I have disputed the assumption that toxic behaviour is necessarily anti-social and have instead positioned it as a structural practice which makes sense and even seems 'natural' within the field habitus, even when it has negative effects on agents within the field. I offer three categories of toxic behaviour which may overlap in their presentation but which have different intents and social functions. They are flaming, trolling, and raging.

Flaming is, I have posited, possibly the most 'visible' and identifiable form of online toxic behaviour. Flaming is ultimately a violent act, bearing much in common with what other researchers have termed 'e-bile', cyber-bullying, or 'toxic disinhibition'. In *League of Legends* it takes the form of invectives or expletives directed at other players through the chat function. I argue that it is a form of structural symbolic violence as a result of field conflict; the perceived 'unfair' reward of cultural capital in a hierarchical field creates lateral conflict as actors attempt to assert their authority.

Trolling, as it manifests in *LoL,* has departed from its historical intention of drawing community members into fruitless, heated debate. Nonetheless it helps to explicitly shape what is normative for in-game society by opposing it. Bourdieu's *doxa* describes the unspoken normative, expressed in *League* as united agreement in a team's intentions and modes of achieving goals. Trolling is a transgression; an anti-normative practice meant to disturb the *status quo.* I have argued that it is expressed in different ways which are all nonetheless recognisable to other agents in the field and which also perform this same social function.

Raging is not an intentional practice in *League of Legends* – players do not join a game with the intention of raging. It is instead an outlet for frustration (bordering on a tantrum) at loss of control. Players believe in a fair exchange of capital in the game universe, that they will receive a 'fair' reward for their input. Raging is a result of this exchange being thwarted through what they perceive as influence outside of their control.

While it appears to be seen less negatively by the community than trolling and especially flaming, it nevertheless adds to the predominance of toxic language and behaviour in *LoL*, contributing to an environment where this is seen as normal, natural, and inescapable.

This chapter describes the social construction and effect of toxic behaviour. While this behaviour is 'negative' or anti-social, it is not necessarily destructive, instead contributing to how a community understands and expresses itself. However it is often violent, in a Bourdieusian sense, as it is enacted along hierarchical lines drawn by shares in capital. Given the expectation that hegemonies are recreated in online spaces, toxic behaviour therefore has the capacity to be raced and classed outside of and apart from the ways in which it is normally expressed. This is explored in terms of gender and hegemony in the following chapter.

Chapter 6: Gendered Toxicity

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters I described the ways in which toxic behaviours manifest in *League of Legends*, and proposed ways in which they are performative outcomes of social structures. I have sought to 'write' the community honestly and fairly, taking a neutral position as to the ethics of anti-social behaviour. It has been my position that language and actions which are transgressive in the material world are not necessarily so in online games. However, I have amassed evidence to suggest that most forms of toxic behaviour have long-term negative effects on the game community and its players. In this chapter I intend to follow the lines of power expressed by flaming and trolling language to look more closely at toxic behaviour in *LoL* and its relationship to gender.

This chapter discusses the ways in which toxicity in *League of Legends* can take uniquely gendered forms, different from standard forms of conflict. By this I mean that in-game toxic, violent language such as flaming, which I have framed as a form of symbolic violence in the previous chapter, discretely demonstrates narratives of power and sexist hegemony present in the field. While I am aware that racist language is a prevalent problem on other *League of Legends* servers as demonstrated by Kwak and Blackburn (2014), it did not manifest in my own research, which was conducted on the European servers and included only European interview participants and as such is not addressed here. Instead I focus on class conflict as it manifests through gender conflict.

In this chapter I argue that the game environment facilitates problematic attitudes towards gender in both the constructed game world as an artificial object, and in the play practices of its participants, resulting in gendered toxic behaviour. This chapter will put forward the evidence to support this claim, argue toward what I believe are contributing factors, and discuss the potential structural causes and outcomes of this issue.

While my evidence toward gendered toxicity is grounded in my own research and, as in previous chapters, drawn from participant interaction, this chapter does depart somewhat from the previous structure. A key point in my argument is that systemic sexism is expressed through the game environment as it is a cultural object produced in a social environment.

As such it would be remiss of me not to discuss the environment as a graphical medium infused with cultural meaning. In this I use a feminist media studies approach to critically analyse representations of femininity in *League of Legends,* continuing the discussion of power narratives that has been a central theme in this thesis.

Please note that at the time of analysis there were 44 female champions in *League of Legends,* and 130 playable champions overall. This has since changed as new characters are periodically added to the game.

6.2 Gender Trouble

League of Legends is not the most problematically sexist game currently being widely played. There is none of the violently repressive misogyny of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015)[26] or narrative built around seducing a female non-player character (NPC) as there is in *God of War* (2005). Nonetheless it has problems, evidenced by a player demographic that is 90% male and by almost unanimous agreement on the part of my interview participants that women who play *League* receive unfair treatment. This despite only three of the fourteen people I interviewed being female.

> A[1] (male): It's not fair on them [women] like, like I don't get, I've seen that kind of abuse [flaming] in the past and I've never seen that kind of abuse towards me when I'm playing a video game and it's solely because like the difference in gender and the fact that for some weird reason some people don't understand why girls would play games. [...] That's just, it is just a common thing and I personally for me I find it disgusting that there's a different view on females, on girls playing games compared to that of boys playing games. Personally I don't see why there should be a difference, both can play games so why should it be any different for one than the other?

This problem was seen as prevalent across the Web and game communities, including *LoL's* many online platforms for community engagement:

> L (male): It's very much like how they're seen in another video game communities which is a sort of "no girls on the Internet", 'girls can't play video games' sort of thing.

> K (female): Uh, I think that female players in computer games to some extent get a disproportionately high amount of the, the abuse? Um, this is, you know, in something like League of Legends because the abuse is a bit higher than average anyway, it's further exaggerated. Funnily enough, uh, that is something, that is a perception based more on my reading of forums and other parts of the community than necessarily the experiences of people I know. Although the other female players I know definitely did get uh, plenty of abuse, it was um, it... yeah I dunno it was probably only a bit more than necessarily I got rather than sort of uh, as much as it seemed to be elsewhere.

[26] The lead female character's name of which is literally 'Quiet'.

It is worth noting that I did not personally experience gendered toxic behaviour during ethnography; neither directed at me nor at other players in a form which I could witness. However, the sentiment that female players were treated poorly by the community (and female champions sexualised), which was common among interview participants, is not without wider provenance. From public forum posts debating the gender identity of female professional players[27] to charts describing the breasts-to-buttock ratio of all female champions (Figure 6.1), becoming exposed to *League*'s problem with women (through secondary if not primary data sources) proved to be inevitable.

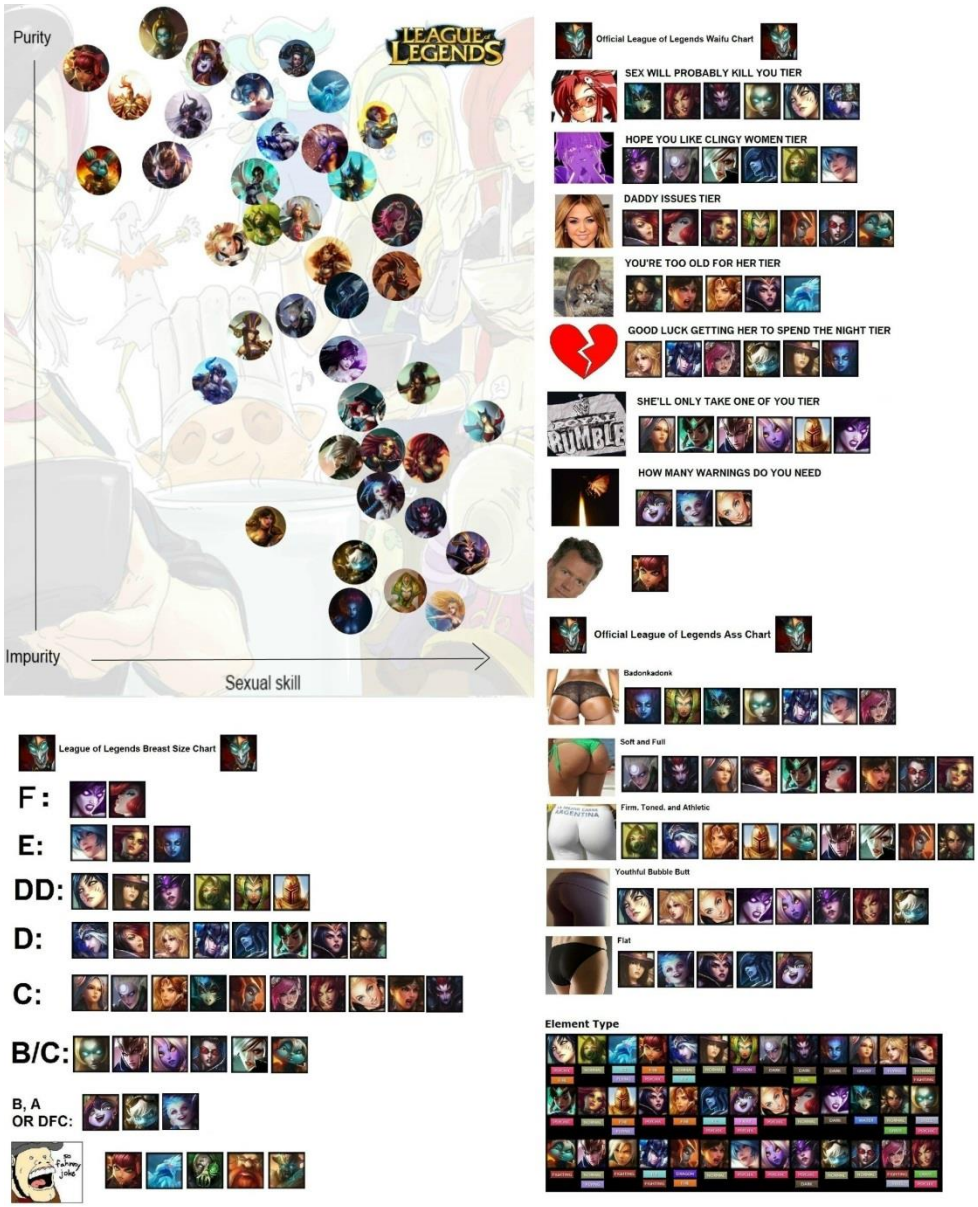

Figure 6.1: An (in)famous 'Waifu Chart'. Author Unknown.

[27] 'Is Remi from Renegades a man?'At https://boards.euw.leagueoflegends.com/en/c/esports-en/EMErZUHR-is-remi-from-renegades-a-man (Accessed 09/10/2017)

There are a number of possible reasons for this disparity in my experience and others'. Firstly, there is the issue of anonymity. Unintentionally or not, the safety barriers I had put in place instigated a distance between myself and other players, when developing more complex social ties in an online community requires sharing at least some personal information (Carter, 2005). In the absence of other information, I took the shape of an amorphous, definitely male, 'researcher' in the minds of players.

In interview, by contrast, many of these barriers and assumptions were immediately broken. My gender and ethnicity were immediately revealed, hugely affecting the environmental and interpersonal dynamic between me and my particpants. It's possible that other women felt more comfortable talking to me about their experiences than they would have a male researcher. It's possible that the way I framed my questions, and conducted them as an identifiable person outside of the game environment, helped to put participants into a more self-reflective mindset than they experience in play.

It may even be a facet of the game community itself – in the months of play during which I conducted my ethnography, I reached only the unexceptional heights of level 24 (of 30). In contrast, most of my interviewees had played for years. All had reached level 30 and while not all took regular part in ranked play, they certainly had a great deal more expertise than I. As such it's possible that gendered toxic behaviour is more prevalent among higher levels and ranks. It isn't possible to draw firm conclusions from the data at hand as to the disparity in experiences between me and the interviewees, but it was enough for me that this was a major topic worthy of discussion *for them*.

In contrast to the prevailing feelings that female players were treated poorly, interviews with participants revealed their own subconscious biases regarding women in the community. Despite all interviewees describing the most recognisable acts of gendered symbolic violence (such as verbal abuse and flaming) as being committed by *other* players (never themselves), they do not reflect on their own lack of action against these acts. This passivity fosters acceptance and normalisation of these behaviours within the habitus.

> A[2] (male): I've watched numerous videos regarding like, the way that girls are perceived, in video games, in all different kinds of places. Um, in League of Legends they're... like generally you wouldn't know if someone was a girl on League of Legends unless they specifically told you. I don't know many. I've known ... about four in all my time of playing league. Two of which I've lost contact with, over time. Um, notably that's partly because girls just don't.... well, video games as a medium has never really been attractive to girls anyway, we see less girls playing games. And when you do meet them you never know they are girls because they, naturally they would hide that kind of information early on, there's no reason... well, simply because naturally as we all know girls sometimes get a lot of abuse on the internet and it's shown it... and I can perfectly understand why girls would want to hide from that.

A², above, touches on some of the major themes of exclusion and subjugation, combining some insightful clarity with generalised assumptions. He assumes that video games as a medium have never been attractive to women (although in 2015 women made up 44% of the video game audience (ESA, 2015)), however he then points out that women hide their gender online, as has been indicated in previous research (Martey, 2010, Cote, 2015). This means that even if he had come across more female players, he might not have known, as gender is not typically revealed during *League of Legends* play.

In this A² contradicts his own previous assertion that "both [men and women] can play games so why should it be any different for one than the other?" His unconscious self-contradiction recalls the terms of 'misrecognition' described by Bourdieu – those assumptions of 'natural' phenomena that are in truth peculiarities of a given field and habitus. In this case, the 'abuse' of women and girls online becomes a 'natural' phenomenon, and women's self-erasure as a defence mechanism against it becomes a reasonable outcome.

The experience for these women is rather different. Savvy female players who obscure their gender identity sacrifice expressing part of their identity in order to become part of a social group. It is not an easy or careless sacrifice to make, and the constant mis-gendering they experience reminds them of their otherness and intrusion into a social group in which they are seen as foreign (if they are considered at all):

The understanding that many female players obscured their gender identity was common among participants, who were largely aware that this was a male-dominated community, and that women were to some extent outsiders.

> Lux: DONT BE LITTLE BITCHES

According to my participants, the assumed gender of other players is always male unless they have an especially feminine name.

> K (female): I learned not to identify myself as a woman cuz I know that it's just not worth it. I would like to be seen as a woman on the Internet, just like you know guys with long hair do not like being called a woman on the street. And maybe you know I don't like being called 'bro' or 'dude'. But um, I guess the problem is that it's a choice between being seen as a woman and also being seen as this whiny person who wants to treated like a princess, and then the other option is yeah, not being treated as a woman but being treated as someone who's cool and nice!

Certainly this was my experience - having erased gender indicators from my online presence as a researcher, so as not to appear any more of an 'outsider' than absolutely necessary as a researcher. This was also a safety

precaution praised by the ethics board reviewing my proposed methodology. As a woman conducting online research I could, after all, be in danger of receiving targeted harassment as others[28] had.

Female players recognised their status as objects of symbolic violence. K, above, describes the conundrum of erasing her gender in order to be seen as 'someone who's cool and nice' rather than 'whiny'. Often, however, they recognised this position as a 'natural' inevitability, rather than a practice:

> Z (female): You get a lot of, you know, **the usual** [my emphasis]. When people find out [that you're a girl] they can be a bit… some of them turn to creeps.

Crucially, these women also recognised their position and, to some extent, accepted it. This is not to say that they were necessarily pleased about it, but that they had "adapted" to it, as Bourdieu (2010: 387) might put it. Habitus as a process makes 'normal' what would in other fields be aberrant, and contributes to the silent but powerful *allodoxia*:

> P² (female): Cuz at the end of the day we're gonna get discriminated against because we're women I mean that happens if you're a man in a woman's sport or a woman in a man's sport you'll just get discriminated against anyway.

In my time immersed in the world of *LoL*, female players were not denigrated as much as erased. Being 'other', they did not exist. This is not the same as imagining a post-body world in which gender itself does not exist. Players refer to other players by their *character* gender, but still assume that the *player* is male. Having chosen a consciously gender-neutral summoner name I was referred to with various male forms of address such as 'dude' and 'him' as a researcher, but by my character's name and gender as a player.

> Riven: lets report him [referring to me as a researcher]
>
> Riven: just 4 fun

Social inequalities do not manifest spontaneously, but are nurtured and grown. The sexism and gender disparity of *League* was not born with the game's publication. It was a pre-existing condition of the video game community, one which takes a specific (but not unusual) aspect in *League of Legends*.

> Here, as elsewhere, the relationship between reality and representations is established through the dispositions which are the internalized form of the probabilities associated with a given position. (Bourdieu, 2010: 410)

However while the action of gender-based symbolic violence is undertaken by members of the community, it is hosted by a number of architectures and pre-existing conditions that *were* born with *League*'s publication.

[28] Such as, for example, journalist Caroline Criado-Perez and video game critic Anita Sarkeesian.

Agents in a field created the game as a cultural object, to be read in certain ways. While this was not necessarily conscious or intentional, it nonetheless has powerful, notable effects. In the following section I describe the cultural preconditions for systemic gender violence.

6.3 Systemic Sexism

Gender disparity in technology use is not a new problem, however it is remediated in new ways as technological systems advance and become more and more culturally entrenched. Gender-based exclusion and subjugation in technology-centric fields like gaming is a systemic problem that is the result of masculine hegemony in the broader field of power. Technology has been approached as gendered in and of itself, and its use and design have been framed as performative aspects of gender expression (Kelan, 2007, Bray, 2007, Wajcman, 2007). In the West, technology has historically been primarily coded as masculine (Bray, 2007, Wajcman, 1991).

Wajcman (1991) believes that this is grounded in two ideals of manhood - that of the practical, tough `alpha male' for whom adaptation is second nature, and that of the intellectual adept, the male face of invention and science. Given the understanding that technical developments do not happen in isolation but in a social setting, they will as such be coded with the power structures (including gendered power structures) that exist within that setting. This results in `gender scripts' contained in technologies (Kelan, 2007:360) as, according to Asiedu (Asiedu, 2011:1187), technology simply is not designed with women's use in mind. Some feminist theory reinforces this reading, viewing technological systems as imbued with the gender power struggles they were created within, according to Wajcman (2007). She writes that "socialist feminist frameworks … saw masculinity as embedded in the machinery itself, highlighting the role of technology as a key source of male power. This is a step away from Bourdieu's interactionism, which emphasizes a co-constructionism. However, this codified power can be considered as what he called the 'formative conditions' of a habitus.

The gendered use of technologies is bound with this coding, as people negotiate their positions in relation to technology as part of gender expression (Kelan, 2007). According to Kelan (2007), there is some indication that women tend to downplay their own technical competence in relation to ICT education and work since they perceive overt display of technical competence as `unfeminine'. Men and women may also negotiate their use of technologies in different, gendered, ways even where they show the same levels of interest in and use of the same artifacts. In video gaming this is demonstrated in a number of ways, for example in the fact that women very rarely 'troll' or 'flame' men (Turton-Turner, 2013, Spender, 1995). It is also evident when women purposely obscure their gender identities for a number of reasons, including to avoid harassment (Huh and Williams, 2010, Hussain and Griffiths, 2008), as was the case in my own ethnographic methodology. One participant described having her choice of champion mocked because it was, apparently, a stereotypically female choice:

P²(female): If you play for example Teemo everyone's like 'omygod you're a girl and you're playing teemo how cliche!' and it's like no he's actually quite a fun champion.

This systemic approach could be criticised for exhibiting a certain degree of determinism, in which technology is made and then `inflicted' on users and consumers. In reality, technological artifacts are socially constructed and reconstructed during and long after their initial manufacture (Winner, 2000, Bray, 2007, Nooney, 2013). Certainly this is the case for *League of Legends*, as far from being a 'completed' product released in 2009 and then never touched again it has been reworked, patched, and updated regularly (often with input from its very vocal community). This effect is reciprocal, as technologies like games become enmeshed in their users' everyday lives (Boellstorff, 2006, Ellison et al., 2007, Green and Adam, 1998, Oldmeadow and Kowert, 2014).

However, I argue that the unequally gendered society in which technologies like video games are conceived is the same one into which they are birthed. While adaptation of technologies for the subversion of hegemony is certainly possible, it is equally likely that they will remediate and rearticulate existing hegemonies (Nakamura, 2017). It is unarguable that the user demographic of *League of Legends* is profoundly unequal, as males comprise over 90% of the player base.

When I look at game worlds I see a clear rearticulation of hegemonic power systems. Salen and Zimmerman (2005) and Carter (2005) are amongst those who argue that games can be seen as reflections or extensions of ideological systems, and indeed if we accept that there is no 'magic circle' separating the online world from the material world (as is argued by Consalvo (2016) and as should be evident from the unbounded flow of social capital between virtual and real-world communities), then this is not an unreasonable statement

Currently virtual worlds are socially constructed as masculine and sometimes misogynistic spaces in which female players are underrepresented, stereotyped, and erased (Christofides et al., 2009, Spender, 1995, Green and Adam, 1998). Some choose to obscure their gender rather than face denigration (Fox & Tang, 2013)(Beyer, 2012, Consalvo, 2012, Lysloff, 2003). Even forms of play become gendered, as certain characters or character roles become associated with femininity (van Reijmersdal et al., 2013, Yee, 2014, Ratan et al., 2015). This reinforces a gender imbalance and contributes to a self-perpetuating cycle in which games are developed by men who have predominantly played games developed for a male audience (Fox and Tang, 2013, Yee, 2014).

6.4 Gendered Imagery in *League of Legends*

In this section I utilise approaches from feminist media studies to critically discuss the representation of female champions in *League of Legends*. I have previously discussed the problems of applying critical approaches from feminist media studies to video games, namely that it is inappropriate for interactive

storylines which transfer agency to the player. However in this instance I refer purely to the visual extra-narrative representation of female champions, in keeping with the original application of feminist media studies.

The intention of this section is to explicate the ways in which systemic sexism is architecturally implemented in *League of* Legends, contributing to an unequal and problematic social environment. I illustrate my observations with excerpts from interviews and ethnography. A modified version of this section has also appeared in publication, as Rimington, E. and Blount, T: 'Lore v. Power: Narrative Communication of Power and Gender in *League of Legends*' in *Extended Proceedings from Hypertext and Social Media* (ACM: Halifax, 2016).

In order to gain a more complete idea of the gendered trends in representation in *League of Legends* I created a small champion spreadsheet, which could sort both male and female champions by body traits. These traits included body type (such as whether they were slim, muscular, or overweight), whether the champion had wings, whether they were human-animal hybrids, etc. This wasn't intended to be an exact breakdown as the sample size was small and the mode of analysis subjective, but it did reveal some obvious dominant trends. It was immediately clear, for instance, that male champions outnumber female champions nearly 2:1, with 86 champions being male at the time of writing and only 44 being female. It was additionally clear that the female body in *League of Legends* is homogenously slim (95%), large-breasted (81%) and pale-skinned (64%). This is in contrast to only 16% of male champions being identifiably 'slim' or 'thin'. This is, however, not quite a fair comparison. The ideal image of woman in fantasy is very different from that of man, as I previously discussed in the literature review. It is worth noting, therefore, that while only two (5% of) female champions could be described as 'muscular', forty-three (50% of) male champions could be characterised as muscular or even hyper-muscular.

With the ideal male body in fantasy and video games being "hyper-masculine" (Martins et al., 2011) it might therefore be surprising that only half of male champions in *League of Legends* could be described as ruggedly mesomorphic. This is because there exists in the world of *League* (a fantasy world known as 'Runeterra') a great deal of variation in possible body types. Champions need not be human or even humanoid in their design. Some champions can only be described as 'monsters' – animals or animal-like champions that bear few to no human characteristics. These include insectoid aliens, an armoured bear, and elemental titans formed of rocks and trees. The vast majority (78%) of these monsters are male. Female human-animal hybrids are not, on the whole, monstrous. Instead, their animal influence tends to begin at the waist and extend downwards (so that it does not detract from their beauty, sensuality, or breasts), or be metamorphic - hybrid female champions are often able to transform from beautiful woman to animal with the use of a spell.

E (male): The first uh female champions specifically were very like, noticeably meant to be attractive-looking characters. Uh, whereas a lot of male champions were notably uh actually seen more

> as monsters or very brutal-looking characters. A good example would be Renekton. He's a monster and he's... but he's a male character whereas someone like Ahri is like clearly meant to be a very attractive character.

Both Ahri and Renekton, referred to in this excerpt, are spirits made flesh. Renekton, as an ancient humanoid monster, is effectively an armoured crocodile on hind legs. On the other hand Ahri, as a nine-tailed fox spirit, is fully humanoid apart from a number of fluffy tails and whisker-like markings on her face. She blows kisses in order to lure enemies toward her.

There are even middle-aged and old male champions, while even those female champions who are aged in their hundreds appear no older than thirty. An additional champion body type is one I describe as 'wraith'. This implies that although the champion is humanoid and gendered through their voice acting, the champion has either no material body to speak of or is so highly stylised that describing it in terms of musculature is meaningless. These champions need not be gendered, as their graphical representation is effectively a-gender. The fact that they are nonetheless mostly described as male is a reminder of masculine normativity which frames maleness as the standard against which Otherness is judged.

The proportions for human-formed and humanoid women are overwhelmingly Barbie doll-like, with the exception of Jinx and Kalista, two of the most recently-released champions whose breasts fit their thin, muscular body types. Facial features conform to Western ideals of beauty and defensive armour is sorely lacking. While there are 3 plate armour-wearing female champions, two of them nonetheless leave their faces uncovered and wear chest plates moulded to give the appearance of breasts. This renders the breastplate not only poorly-engineered for defence but actively dangerous to wear, providing as it does a pressure point directly over the diaphragm. Rather than providing protection, female clothing is designed to titillate and cunningly reveal areas of naked flesh, with close attention paid to all possible areas of the breast apart from the nipple and areola. The torso, legs, buttocks and face also draw the eye with cut-out panels and sleek, tight fabric.

> B (male): It's quite hard to find a female champion that is fully dressed.

While male champions are, on the whole more sensibly-attired for battle than their female counterparts, there are male champions who are depicted with nude torsos and arms to show off their strength and power. This is always demonstrating a level of musculature and vascularity ranging from the barely-achievable to the outright fantastic. These are the body types of comic book and action film heroes, the hyper-masculine body display that connotes phallocentric power, not sexual objectification. They are fantasy for a male audience. That this is an effective, and simultaneously exclusionary, tactic is reflected in the demographic spread of *LoL* players. As stated previously, 90% of the player-base is male. This means that it is more likely that a female champion is being played by a male than a female player. Female champions are constructed to be played in this way – to be an entertaining object for the male gaze in their aesthetic.

It is unquestioned and unchallenged despite the fantasy setting, reminding us of the embeddedness of the *LoL* field and that practice is conducted in a habitus. The objectification of the female body is so ingrained that it seems 'natural.' The assumption is that the male gaze must be satisfied by the female form when it appears on a screen. The *League of Legends* champion body *can* vary widely in appearance because it is set in a fantasy environment. There are blademasters, magicians tainted by chaos magic, burrowing aliens, dragons, and bouncing green goo. But even with the possibility of presentation so wide and free, adult female champions are almost all humanoid. Their human female-ness makes them by default decorative, attractive, and aesthetic.

> P[1] (male): I do play a couple of male champions but I just think with, again with the whole comic-book art thing I think females are just more aesthetically pleasing and just nicer to look at.

This forced, unnatural pandering to eroticism that is nonetheless seen as necessary when designing female champions is highlighted by champions like Elise and Nami. Elise is the high priestess of a spider-god cult. She can transform herself from a human into an enormous black spider and, at all times, has four extra legs growing out of her back. Nonetheless in her human form she is depicted wearing vertiginous spiked heels, tight leggings, and a plunging black bodysuit which exposes her breasts, waist and back. She is an example of the 'predatory' female who, in the animal, will lure its mate only to kill them after coitus. This trope of monstrous female sexuality is repeated exhaustively in Western media, and is here taken to an absurdist level wherein even a literal human spider is necessarily alluring because it is female. When male bodies transform into insects it is termed 'body horror' (see, for example, 'The Fly' by Langelaan (1957) or 'The Metamorphosis' by Kafka (1915)), but the metamorphosing female body remains sexually objectified.

Nami's lore explains that she is the last of an amphibious race of spiritual mer-people. She appears on the battlefield naked but for a helm and a skirt of armour on her hips, yet has large breasts and ample cleavage. Thus it is implied that her biological fish-hybrid body has naturally grown a push-together bra for her mammalian yet nipple-less breasts.

Shoe-horning erotic appeal into fish- and spider-characters simply because they are female emphasizes the absolute constructedness of sexuality and the association between what is conceived as being female, and what is conceived as being erotic. In the following section I put this construction into the context of practice theory, and explain it structural outcomes.

6.5 The Gaze as Symbolic Violence

It is difficult to contextualise how bizarre the characterisation of female champions is, partly because it conforms so strongly to cultural paradigms of beauty. It's not even necessary to play video games to be exposed to this priming effect, as it is equally prominent in video game art and advertisement (Near, 2013).

The cultural norm for the mediated female body on a screen is objectified, and sexualised. This is the standard construction of the female body in video games (Lahti, 2003, de Vries and Peter, 2013, Fox *et al.*, 2013), and *League of Legends* is by no means the worst offender. However, the situation of the female body within the game environment is a significant area of study because of what it can tell us about the function of gender in the game's society. Despite the 'fantasy' setting, the objectified female sexuality is unquestioned and unchallenged. Disempowering the female body is continuous, and doing so supercedes narrative and game-design concerns. This has the potential to impact gender relations and position of gender among players. By maintaining the focus of the female body as erotic, it subjugates the possessors of female bodies.

Bourdieu understood gender as a practice of difference and differentiation between men and women, structured through hierarchy and characterised by binary oppositions (Skeggs, 2004a). In *League of Legends* the female character's body is marked by symbols of femaleness that mark it as 'other' from the masculine 'normal', and is further characterised as an erotic gaze-object:

> Women … exist first through and for the gaze of others, that is, as welcoming, attractive and available objects. […] Continuously under the gaze of others, women are condemned constantly to experience the discrepancy between the real body to which they endlessly strive (Bourdieu, 2001a: 66).

Thus the pre-conditions of habitus are created; through an environment which privileges femininity as symbol over femaleness as condition. Human agents read and interpret structural symbolism as 'natural' and essential, making dispositions (habitus) "inseparable from the structures (habitudines) that produce and reproduce them (Bourdieu 2001a: 66)." This ascribed positioning in the game field is a form of non-physical violence, as hierarchical classing is in the material field of power. It is a small, persistent subjugation, recognised in many ways by women in the field as unfair yet still mis-recognised as 'natural.'

This framing could again be accused of a kind of determinism, ironically robbing women of their agency. However I argue that taking this position is not to say that women are powerless to change the hierarchy of the field through struggle. The systemic, structural misogyny I describe as present in *League of Legends* in section 6.3 is present across the Web (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2015), and yet women and marginalised people continue to fight for their voice in online and other spaces (Baer, 2015). Nonetheless it adds an additional dimension to the same conflict that all actors in the field face, making female players' self-erasure and coping mechanisms quite reasonable responses.

6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have indicated that gendered toxicity in *League of Legends* manifests in flaming and other toxic behaviour towards women as punishment for their very femaleness. This results in structural inequality based on unequal field position, manifested through a vast demographic disparity and the erasure of female

players' gender as a self-imposed defence mechanism. This is a means of symbolic violence with the effect of excluding women from an online, ascribed masculine, space, one which has been culturally constructed in a number of different strata.

I have described the historic construction of this social context, and how systemic sexism is remediated through the game environment. In this I adapted approaches from feminist media studies in order to discuss the pertinence of sexually objectified female characters to this problem. I posit that the problem is exacerbated by aspects of the game's graphical design which frames female characters as sex objects first and narrative objects second.

In structural terms this means that when toxic behaviour takes on a particularly gendered aspect as it does in *League of Legends*, a form of symbolic violence is taking place (as it is through practices like flaming). Capital in the form of power is asserted over female players, attempting to force them into an inferior field position. The preconditions for this violence are contributed to by the gendered imagery present in the graphical construction of the game world. Female characters are presented as visual erotica, reminding players that video games like this one are created, consciously or unconsciously, by and for men.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Results

What is the social function of toxic behaviour in *League of Legends*? In short, it is productive toward the making and re-making of *doxa*, field and habitus. That doesn't mean that it's necessarily 'good' or 'creative' but that it has a productive (I hesitate to use the word 'constructive' as it can also be destructive) effect. It pushes against boundaries and in doing so shapes what's perceived as 'normal' or 'natural' in a social space. It can also be a form of symbolic violence that highlights the role of rank and capital based on hierarchy of the system.

This thesis has focussed on the intersection between the self and society in online spaces. As human agents in the field we are our socialisation and vice versa. Within this conceptualisation, my research asks what the social outcome of toxic behaviour is in a particular online space. The literature review shaped how I approached this topic, bringing forward four questions that contributed to the primary research question. In this thesis I have contributed answers to all of these questions:

Q1. Research into online communities has shown that they possess persistent identities built out of, but discrete from, their members (e.g. Aroles, 2015, Bernstein et al., 2011). User practice collectively contributes to the group as it understands itself, to its 'native' identity. But what *structural* role does an ostensibly *destructive* practice like toxic behaviour have on the community?

A1. Anti-social and toxic behaviours can have a destructive effect on online communities (Herring et al., 2002). In *League of Legends* it can be exhausting and drive players from the game. However, trolling practices can help to identify what constitutes normative behaviour by consciously opposing it or mocking it, strengthening the unspoken *doxa*. On the other hand, the prevalence of unpunished toxicity in *League* in the form of flaming and raging contribute exposure to these practices, building a *habitus* in which toxic behaviours become *habitudines*.

Q2. Toxic behaviour can have a destructive effect as in Herring et al. (2002)'s account, but can it be constructive?

A2. Yes. Toxic behaviour, as a social practice, has a productive social effect. It contributes to how a community understands itself and actively contributes to what is seen as, and then becomes, 'normal' or 'natural' behaviour. In *League of Legends* this means that forms of speech and action become commonplace and then part of in-group identity. Flaming as a form of symbolic violence also reinforces the field's social hierarchy, reflective of its rank hierarchy.

Q3. This also raises questions of expression – how does toxic behaviour vary in its manifestation in different virtual environments?

A3. In *League of Legends*, toxicity is often expressed through in-game chat. In this it shares its mode of expression with a great deal of online toxic behaviour (see e.g. Jane, 2012, Hutchens et al., 2014). However some modes of trolling are unique to the community, such as kill-stealing and subverting the intentions of the metagame.

Q4. Violence and harassment follow lines of power. As such, how is toxic behaviour raced, classed, or gendered in a given environment, and does it differ from its normal expression?

A4. Flaming in *League of Legends* can be read as a form of symbolic violence, exercised along hierarchical lines and reflecting the explicit hierarchy of in-game rank. In the United States this is particularly expressed along racial lines (Kwak and Blackburn, 2014). This was less prevalent on the EU servers which I used for my field research, however massive gender disparity is global problem in *League of Legends*. My research suggests that while female characters in-game are sexualised, female players are erased and denigrated in ways that male players are not.

7.2 Chapter Summary

The first chapter of this thesis was an evaluation of a body of literature salient to this research. In it I synthesised established knowledge on virtual communities, digital inequality, and video game sociology. I also indicated the importance of this kind of interdisciplinary study to academic research. Furthermore, in this chapter I highlighted the gap in the literature between individual reasons and implications for toxic behaviour, and the broader social reasons for and consequences of conflict in online games. I discovered that the literature tended to focus on the individual causes for anti-social behaviour online, such as anger or psychological triggers, and then look at the negative effects of this behaviour. Instead, I wanted to identify the wider *structural* social function of toxic practices – how their content was formed and how their use was influenced by the online society in which they are performed.

From the literature review I isolated certain themes in order to develop an effective methodology. In the methodology chapter I outlined the processes of data collection undertaken for this doctoral project, but also

used it as a space to justify methodological choices and frame the research site (the online game *League of Legends*) in a way which would familiarise it to unacquainted readers through a use scenario. The format of this chapter is unusual as it places the theoretical framework between descriptions of the ethnographic and interviewing methods, however this was done as a reflection of the iterative process of data collection and analysis, during which research methods developed from exploratory (ethnography) to thematically specialised (interviewing).

In chapter four I demonstrated the applicability of Bourdieu's model of practice theory when it is remediated for online games. This allowed novel insight into the kind of conflict and struggle that takes place in online games from a sociological, rather than psychological, standpoint. In *League of Legends*, as this chapter showed, authority and cultural capital are more explicitly hierarchical and architectured than can easily be mapped in the material world. This produces behavioural phenomena that might similarly be unexpected or anti-social in the material world, but which make sense to the human agents performing them in this social field.

Chapter five takes toxic behaviour as an example of this kind of phenomenon and argues for a more nuanced, specified approach to it. I had found that terms like trolling, flaming, anti-social behaviour, e-bile, and others were being used interchangeably in the context of toxic behaviour. From my own reading and empirical research I was sure that behaviour was too nuanced to be broadly grouped in this way, and resolved to create more meaningful delineation which, while specified to my own research site, could offer more accurate description of online social practices more generally. I offer a three-category typology of toxic behaviour informed by participant experience and grounded in data analysis; 'flaming', 'trolling' and 'raging'. I illustrated this typology with examples from ethnography and the interviews and considered the structural role of these different types of toxic behaviour.

In chapter 6 I narrowed the scope of toxic behaviour analysis still further, looking specifically as how toxicity is gendered in *League of Legends*, and how this is both a social action and a part of the game architecture. In this chapter I described the ways that in-game toxic behaviours may manifest in particularly gendered ways. This includes harassment and exclusion based on gender, and the erasure of female players as they feel the need to hide their gender. I have discussed the systemic basis for this, and how this social context of systemic sexism is remediated through the game environment. In this I adapted approaches from feminist media studies in order to discuss the pertinence of sexually objectified female characters to this problem.

7.3 Future Work

This thesis offers several areas for expansion, not only in the implications of my results but also in terms of research practice.

Methodologically, the approach used for ethnography was fruitful but offers scope for much broader empirical research. For instance it would be extremely helpful in expounding the themes of this thesis to play and record the experience of playing , for example, at higher in-game levels, in ranked games, in teams, or as a woman with a gender-indicative summoner name. It would also be worthwhile to see how these experiences varied across nationalities and languages, in order to see where the online community's central identity lies (and where it doesn't). A fuller, longitudinal ethnography that takes into account the insights provided in this thesis would help to create a detailed and highly nuanced picture of in-game society.

In this thesis I have tried to approach toxic behaviour as more than just a problem to be solved. However it *is* in many cases a problem. It is a form of violence and exclusion, and like all forms of social violence, would require internal activism in order to be resolved (Postill, 2016, Baer, 2015). As such, further research in this field would benefit from forms of Participatory Activist Research in order to both understand and help the community. Themes of raced and gendered symbolic violence would also benefit from being expanded through a committed effort to make heard the voices of players who are often erased or made to feel unwelcome.

The application of a classic sociological model (practice theory) to a new digital medium has also, as a side effect, proven the flexibility of the model. I would encourage the use of this model in looking at other online game societies, particularly in those where success is a binary outcome, rank is explicit, and the player community engages across multiple platforms. This might include games like *DOTA2*, *Hearthstone*, *Smite*, *Rocket League* and *Overwatch*. *Overwatch*, an MMO by Blizzard Entertainment, has in particular taken several quite unique steps to prevent toxic behaviour through game architecture.

This doesn't exclude Bourdieu's model from applicability in other non-gaming online spaces. Reddit, for example, is a popular content-sharing Web site with a strong internal community understanding (Bergstrom, 2011). While smaller sub-communities of like-minded individuals can congregate around their own interests, the larger narrative of content is dominated by power users, who have amassed a great deal of 'karma' (Reddit points) and who hold a good deal of influence and authority.

I also believe that Bourdieu's model of practice theory would allow a great deal of novel insight into social economics when applied to online games. Modes of capital and how they are presented in online spaces is crucial to understanding virtual interaction and conflict: In online games with a 'freemium' business model like *League of Legends*, leisure, consumption, and capital become enmeshed. As economies are created out of

them, play becomes labour and player rank becomes social power. Play becomes distanced, or even outsourced, or conversely players are drawn together over wide areas. I question what shape capital will take in an economy based, at its core, on leisure and consumption.

7.4 Limitations

The most immediate limitation of this thesis is that I conducted the ethnography through an intentional process of gender obfuscation. Gender-neutral summoner names are perfectly common in *League of Legends*, and the primary reason for this choice was as a safety precaution. Nonetheless it means that I was forced to rely on second-hand accounts of 'appearing' openly female in the game space, rather than first-hand ethnographic data. This limited my exploration of the subject in chapter 6 to some extent.

This project is also limited in that it studies only European, English-speaking *League of Legends* players. Although my research suggests that a central and trans-national habitus exists, it has not been possible to conclusively prove this. A larger, collaborative study across continents and languages would solve this problem, but would be highly ambitious.

One further limit is my ethnographic contact with all stages of *League of Legends* play. I have previously discussed the wide range in levels of expertise on the part of my interview participants, including some extremely highly-ranked players. My own experience, even after several months of ethnography, was paltry by comparison. Of course, even if the ethnography had lasted years there is no guarantee that I would have had the necessary skill and facility to climb high in the competitive scene. Nonetheless this did mean that I could offer the same degree of reflection and insight on the experiences of advanced players as on more casual or lower-level particpants.

7.5 Implications

While my own analysis of toxic behaviour in *League of Legends* is highly structural, it nonetheless offers a great deal of practical insight into how and why toxic behaviour occurs in online spaces. As such it has implications in the developing fields of cyber crime and criminology, contributing the social context for behaviour which is accepted as 'normal' or 'natural' in online situations but which is deviant or even illegal according to material-world law.

This research may therefore also have policy implications for the online games industry, which (certainly in the case of Riot Games) has struggled to resolve its issues with in-game antisocial behaviour. I have tried to show that the architecture of a game is not created in isolation, but as a social product that is interpreted and internalised by the player. As such, design choices should be made with conscious awareness that they may

have effects beyond those intended, which artists and developers need to be aware of. While I do not wish to curtail the freedom and experimentation offered by virtual environments, there are nonetheless ethical steps that can and should be taken by game designers and publishers in order to promote the happiness and health of their players.

Appendix A Glossary of Terms

ADC: Attack Damage Carry. Some **champions** in *League of Legends* rely more on **spells** and abilities to deal damage or help their team (see **AP**), while others rely on their base **auto-attack** damage. AD carries fall into the latter category and are, additionally, **ranged** champions. Their base attack damage can be increased by purchasing weapons in-game. The suffix '**carry**' implies that once they have sufficient **gold** through either **CS** or kills, they can 'carry' their team to victory.

AFK: An established acronym for Away From Keyboard, used in many virtual environments including chat rooms to indicate that a user would be unable to respond for a time. In *League of Legends* it refers to a player who abandons a game, distinct from a player who disconnects (**DC**) from a game.

AP: Ability Power. While AD **champions** (see '**ADC**') use their base attack damage as their primary source of damage, AP **champions** use **spells** and abilities to deal damage to the opposing team or to help their own team. Most spells and abilities cost **mana**.

Assassin: A type of **champion** characterised by sudden, surprise attacks meant to catch an enemy unawares and kill them before they have time to react. Assassins can be **AP** or AD (see '**ADC**') reliant.

Auto-attack: All champions in *League of Legends* have an auto-attack. It is the basic attack made by a champion when an enemy **champion** or **minion** is targeted by the player. Auto-attack damage is higher for some champions (see **ADC**) than others.

Base: Both teams in *League of Legends* have a base. The two bases are placed on opposite ends of the map, behind each team's **nexus.** Returning to base will heal a **champion** and allow them to purchase weapons and armour in exchange for **gold**. After death, a **champion** will **respawn** at the base with full health and **mana**.

Boost: Also known as '**ELO** boosting'. A boosted player hires a more skilled player to level their account or increase their **ELO** rank for them.

Bot: Diminutive of 'robot'. A term for the AI-controlled champions which players may choose to play against rather than playing against human opponents. Bots are much easier to play against, but players earn less **IP** and **XP** for these games.

Bruiser: A **tanky** champion that also deals a fair amount of damage. This is distinct from a true **tank** in that true **tanks** protect their team as well as being difficult to kill.

Buff: As a verb: To improve.

As a noun: An improvement.

Buffs may be permanent changes to a **champion** on the part of Riot Games, intended to make them easier or more effective to play. Buffs may also be temporary in-game improvements granted to **champions** for killing neutral **monsters**.

Build: A **champion** '**build**' tailors them for a specific in-game role using **weapons, runes** and **masteries**. Some **builds** work better on certain **champions** than others, and discovering the most effective way to **build** a **champion** is part of the **meta.**

Carry: As a verb: To lead a team to victory by showing exceptional skill or by earning a great deal of **gold**.
As a noun: A **carry** is a **champion** or player who 'carryies' their team to victory. AD carries (see **ADC**) are always called **carries** regardless of whether they are, indeed, carrying their team.

Champion: A character in *League of Legends.* At the time of writing this thesis there were 130 to choose from. Champions can be purchased for **RP** or **IP** and are persistently bound to a player's **summoner** account. Different champions can be chosen for each game, and can be customised with **skins**. Champions are levelled from level 1 up to a maximum level of 18 in every game.

Client: The *League of Legends* user interface. The client acts as a medium between the player and the game servers.

Cooldown: The time it takes for a **champion** ability or **spell** to refresh. Broadly, more powerful abilities have longer **cooldowns**

CS: Creep Score. Landing a killing blow (a 'last hit') on an enemy **minion** or neutral **monster** in a game grants **gold** and increases a champion's CS. As this is fairly tricky to do consistently or well, a good 'creep score' is often seen as the mark of a good player.

DC: DisConnect. While having a player disconnect from a game is certainly unhelpful and even irritating, it is viewed much more benevolently than purposefully 'going **AFK**' as it is usually accidental and due to server or Internet issues.

ELO: ELO (more properly 'Elo') is a ranking system used in competitive games like chess to indicate players' relative skill. Higher Elo indicates a higher ranking. It was used to rank players in *League of Legends* until the introduction of the medal ranking system. It is still in use but is hidden from players.

Farm: As a verb: Killing enemy **minions** in a lane or neutral **monsters** in the jungle grants **gold** and is referred to as 'farming'.

As a noun: The number of **minions** a player has killed (see also **CS**).

Feed: Verb meaning to 'give away' kills to the opposing team. A player who is 'feeding' is one whose **champion** is dying repeatedly, thus 'feeding' **gold** to the enemy team.

Game instance: *League of Legends* is instance-based rather than continuous. This means that players must queue to be placed in a game with other players, rather than playing in a persistent world. A game in *League of Legends* usually lasts between 15 and 45 minutes.

Gamer: Someone who plays games, especially video games. As well as a consumer tag, the term 'gamer' has come to imply belonging to a subcultural identity.

Gaming: Playing games, especially video games.

Gank: A surprise attack on a **lane** in *League of Legends*, usually carried out by a **jungler**.

GG: Good Game. A common, polite statement at the very end of a game, but with sarcastic, defeatist, or even trolling overtones when used at other times.

Gold: Income earned by a player in a *League of Legends* game for killing **minions, monsters**, **turrets,** and enemy **champions**. It can be exchanged for in-game items such as weapons and armour. These items, along with **gold**, are *not persistent* and are *not* bound to a player's **summoner** account. **Gold** is distinct from **IP, XP,** and **RP.**

Inhibitor: Each team in *League of Legends* has three **inhibitors**. Each **inhibitor** is protected by a **turret**. When the protecting **turret** is destroyed by an opposing team, they may then destroy the inhibitor. This grants **gold** to their entire team and allows super

minions to spawn. Inhibitors slowly regenerate health after they are destroyed, and will eventually respawn.

IP: Influence Points. For all intents and purposes **IP** works as experience points in *League of Legends*. However in *League of Legends* **XP** is not granted after a player reaches level 30, while **IP** is. It is awarded to a player after every game (more for winning, less for losing) and can be used to purchase **champions**.

Jungler: A **jungler** is a role in *League of Legends*. **Junglers** roam the map territory between **lanes** killing neutral **monsters** for **gold** and **buffs** and **ganking lanes** to help their team-mates get kills. **Junglers** can be AD (see **ADC**) or **AP** dependent.

Kite: **Ranged champions** such as **ADC**s and **mages** are often **squishy**. A skilled player can use their **range** to keep them out of reach of **melee** and **bruiser champions** while dealing damaging. Moving while attacking in this way is called **kiting**.

Lane: The **Summoner's Rift** map in *League of Legends* is divided into three main lanes; top, middle (mid) and bottom (bot). In the current **meta,** it is most common for one player per team to **farm** in top lane, one player per team to **farm** in the middle lane, one **jungler** per team to **farm** in the jungle and **gank**, one **ADC** per team to farm in the bottom lane, and one **support** per team to stay in the bottom **lane** with the **ADC** and help them without taking any **farm** themselves. Players can **push** lanes to take **turrets**.

Lol: Acronym for 'Laugh Out Loud', commonly used in online chat to denote that something is either amusing or not to be taken seriously. The term 'lulz', as in to something 'for the lulz', stems from this acronym.

Mage: **Mages** are **ranged**, **AP**-reliant champions. They are usually **squishy** and rely on **mana** to use their abilities and **spells**.

Mana: **Mana** is a resource in *League of Legends* used by most **champions** to cast **spells** and use abilities. Some **champions**, however, use different resources. **Mana** can be regenerated more quickly by returning to **base** or by purchasing certain items in-game using **gold**.

Masteries: Masteries, along with **runes**, apply persistent **buffs** to **champion stats**. The kind of **masteries** a player chooses to apply to a **champion** contributes to their **build** and helps to tailor them to a specific in-game role, whether that be **support, tank,** etc.

Meme: A term originally coined by Richard Dawkins, in the context of this thesis it refers to popular jokes, items of text, images, etc. spread by Web users.

Meta: Meta-game. The meta-game in *League of Legends* is the paradigmatically perfect strategy for most effective and consistently-winning gameplay.

Melee: Close-range. **Melee champions** fight other champions and minions at close range.

Minions: Minions are **NPC**s that spawn from each team's **nexus**. **Minions** spawn in three groups of six or seven every 30 seconds and, on spawning, march in single file down every **lane**. They will attack enemy **champions** and **minions** but will not attack neutral **monsters**. Landing a killing blow (a 'last hit') on a **minion** grants **gold** (see: **CS**). If a player destroys an enemy **inhibitor** then their own **nexus** will start spawning super **minions**. Super **minions** are more powerful and difficult to kill, but are also worth more **gold**.

MMORPG: Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. A genre of video game characterised by open-world sandbox-style play in a virtual environment populated with large numbers of other players.

MOBA: Multiplayer Online Battle Arena. A genre of video game in which players battle against each other, either solo or in teams, in online arenas.

Monsters: In *League of Legends* **monsters** are large neutral **NPC**s that live in the jungle area of the **Summoner's Rift** map. Killing them grants **gold** and sometimes a **buff.** See also **jungler**.

Nerf: **Nerfing** is the act of reworking a **champion** in *League of Legends* to make them less powerful. It is usually done if a using a champion gives a more than 50% chance of winning, and is considered over-powered or unbalanced.

Nexus: On the **Summoner's Rift** map in *League of Legends,* each team has a **nexus** located near their **base** and protected by two **turrets**. The aim of the game is to destroy the opposing team's **nexus.** A game ends when a **nexus** is destroyed. A **nexus** can only be destroyed when the two **turrets** protecting it have been destroyed, at least one **inhibitor** has been destroyed, and all the **turrets** in at least one **lane** have been destroyed.

Noob: Short for 'newbie,' this is a pejorative term used to denigrate players of inferior skill.

NPC: Non-Player Character. In *League of Legends* this refers to the **minions**, neutral **monsters**, and shopkeepers that populate the various arenas.

Push: Player **champions** can '**push**' down lanes by killing **minions** and **turrets**. This is a necessary step towards destroying the enemy **nexus** but leaves players vulnerable to **ganks**.

Ranged: Distanced. Ranged **champions** can **auto-attack** and use **spells** from further away than **melee** champions.

Rank: *League of Legends* players may choose to play competitively in order to be ranked against other players. The ranks are, in ascending order, Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Master, and Challenger. There are, at any time, only 200 Challenger-level players on a server, representing 0.0002% of the player base.

Report: In *League of Legends* it is possible to **report** players to a tribunal after a match. It is intended as a punishment for toxic players but is sometimes used as a threat toward unskilled players.

Respawn: Death in *League of Legends* is not permanent. Champions **respawn** after death in their **base**. The amount of time spent dead increases with the duration of a game.

Rework: **Champions** considered to be over-powered, unviable, or otherwise too unbalanced to be played effectively are often **reworked** by Riot Games. This process may include a complete overhaul of a champion's lore and abilities, or only minor **nerfs** and **buffs.**

RTSG: Real-Time Strategy Game.

RP: Riot Points. Riot Points are the main currency used in *League of Legends*. One Riot Point costs about €0.007, and they are sold in bundles of €2.50, €5, €10, €20, €35, and €50. Riot Points can be used to purchase champions, skins, **rune** pages, and gifts.

Runes: Runes are in-client items purchasable with **IP** or **RP**. They apply persistent **buffs** to **champions** in-game.

Skill-shot: Some abilities and **spells** in *League of Legends* can be cast by clicking on a target and then pressing the appropriate key. However others must be aimed using the mouse. These are termed '**skill shots**' because of their comparative difficulty.

Skins: **Skins** are the only customisation possible in *League of Legends*. Once a **champion** has been bought, it is possible to buy additional **skins** for them. These effectively re-dress the **champion**. Basic 'Chroma' skins are comparatively cheap (€4) re-colourings of **champions**. More expensive 'Legendary' skins (up to €20) include different voice-acting, **spell** appearance and design.

Spells: The terms 'abilities' and '**spells**' are used interchangeably in *League of Legends*. **Spells** usually cost **mana** and are cast by mouse-clicking and pressing the Q, W, E, or R keys. **Spells** can deal damage to enemy **champions** or help allied **champions**. See also **Summoner Spells.**

Squishy: Delicate, fragile, easily-killed.

Stats: Statistics. Every **champion** is better-suited to particular roles, such as **ADC**, **mage**, or **tank.** The amounts of health, **AP**, resistance to magic, etc. that a **champion** has are termed their **stats**. **Stats** can be **buffed** using **runes** and **weapons**.

Summoner: The term used in *League of Legends* for players. Originally, game lore positioned players as sorcerers who 'summoned' **champions** to the Fields of Justice (the *League of Legends* arenas) and puppeteered them through battles. This has since been rolled back but some **champions** still address their players as '**summoner.**'

Summoner Spells: In addition to the **champion spells** mapped to the Q, W, E and R keys, players may also choose two additional **Summoner Spells**, usually activated by pressing the D or F keys. These spells cost no **mana** but have long **cooldowns**.

Summoner's Rift: The most popular map in *League of Legends*. In this game mode, players fight in teams of five to destroy the enemy **nexus**.

Support: A **support** is a role in *League of Legends* intended to aid other players in **farming** and scoring kills for **gold**, rather than to achieve these goals themselves. **Support** champions are usually **AP** dependent and often have shielding, healing, and **buffing spells** to aid their allies, or stunning, slowing, and otherwise damaging **spells** to attack their opponents.

Tank: **Tanky champions** have a relatively large amount of health, armour, or resistance to magic, making them difficult for an opponent to kill. They usually do not deal as much damage as **mages** and **ADC**s, but act as **bruisers** or **support**.

Turrets: **Turrets** are buildings in *League of Legends*. Each team has eleven **turrets** placed in **lanes** and protecting their **nexus**. They must be destroyed in order to win the game, but will deal damage to enemies who get too close. They will prioritise dealing damage to **minions** unless an allied **champion** takes damage from a nearby enemy **champion**, in which case they will attack the enemy **champion**.

Virtual Environment: An online game world. In some digital ethnographies the term 'virtual environment' is reserved only for **MMORPG** and other sandbox games in which the graphical environment is intended to be immersive and life-like. However in this thesis it is used interchangeable with terms like 'online space' and 'game world.'

Wards: When playing a game of *League of Legends* it is not possible to see all of an arena at once. Instead much it is obscured by a 'fog of war', which can be revealed by allied **champions**, **minions,** some **spells**, and **turrets**. **Wards** can also be purchased in exchange for in-game **gold**. These are items that can be placed in order to give vision of a small surrounding area. This is especially important when **pushing** a **lane,** as **junglers** may use this as an opportunity to **gank**. Wards expire after a certain time period.

Weapons: Every champion comes with a weapon, whether it's a bow and arrow, a spellbook or a lamp-post. However, players should also buy weapons and armour for their **champion** in-game in exchange for **gold**. Weapons and armour provide **buffs** to **champion stats**. Somewhat confusingly, **champions** never equip these weapons or armour, they are simply considered to have had the **buffs** applied to them once the items have been bought. The kind of **weapons** a player buys for their champion is termed their **build**.

XP: Experience Points. Apart from levelling a **champion** from levels 1 to a maximum of 18 in each game instance, players also level their **summoner** accounts. Playing games grants **XP** and increases the level of a **summoner** account up to a maximum level of 30. As players gain **XP** they also gain **summoner spells** and **masteries**.

Appendix B Gameplay Scenario

Case: Play a game of *League of Legends*

Primary Actor: A 'summoner'

Scope: The *League of Legends* client

Brief: A *League of Legends* player joins the game queue. They are matched with other players and choose a champion. A game commences and is played.

Preconditions: The *League of Legends* client is already downloaded and installed, and the summoner account has been levelled to at least level 10.

Postconditions: The game results in a win or a loss, the summoner account receives experience points in the form of 'IP' which may be traded for in-game good such as champions (playable characters) and 'runes' (bought to 'buff' (improve) champions). If the summoner level is below level 30, summoner (level) experience (XP).

Basic Flow:

1. A player opens the *League of Legends* launch client (figure 1). This triggers an automatic download of the latest patches. From here they may read the latest patch notes, game news, or launch the game client. This client also shows the status of the *League* servers. The player then launches the game.

2. The player is greeted with a log-in box on a background of splash art which changes regularly depending on recent game innovations (figure 2). Their options are to log in, sign up, recover lost/forgotten details, read the terms of use, disable the log in music, and to disable the menu animations. The player enters their username and their password to log in.

3. The *League of Legends* client (figure 3) offers players the opportunity to read news links, watch games, chat with friends, or play a game. The left-hand menu column can be navigated in order to shop for champions and other items. At the top of the screen is the 'Play' icon, and next to it is a miniature summoner profile showing their summoner name (distinct from their account name) level, experience, IP, and RP. The summoner clicks the 'play' option.

4. After clicking 'Play', a summoner has the option of what kind of game they'd like to play from a series of menus. In this case they choose a classic PvP mode, on the Summoners Rift map, using the Blind Pick game type (see Figure 4).

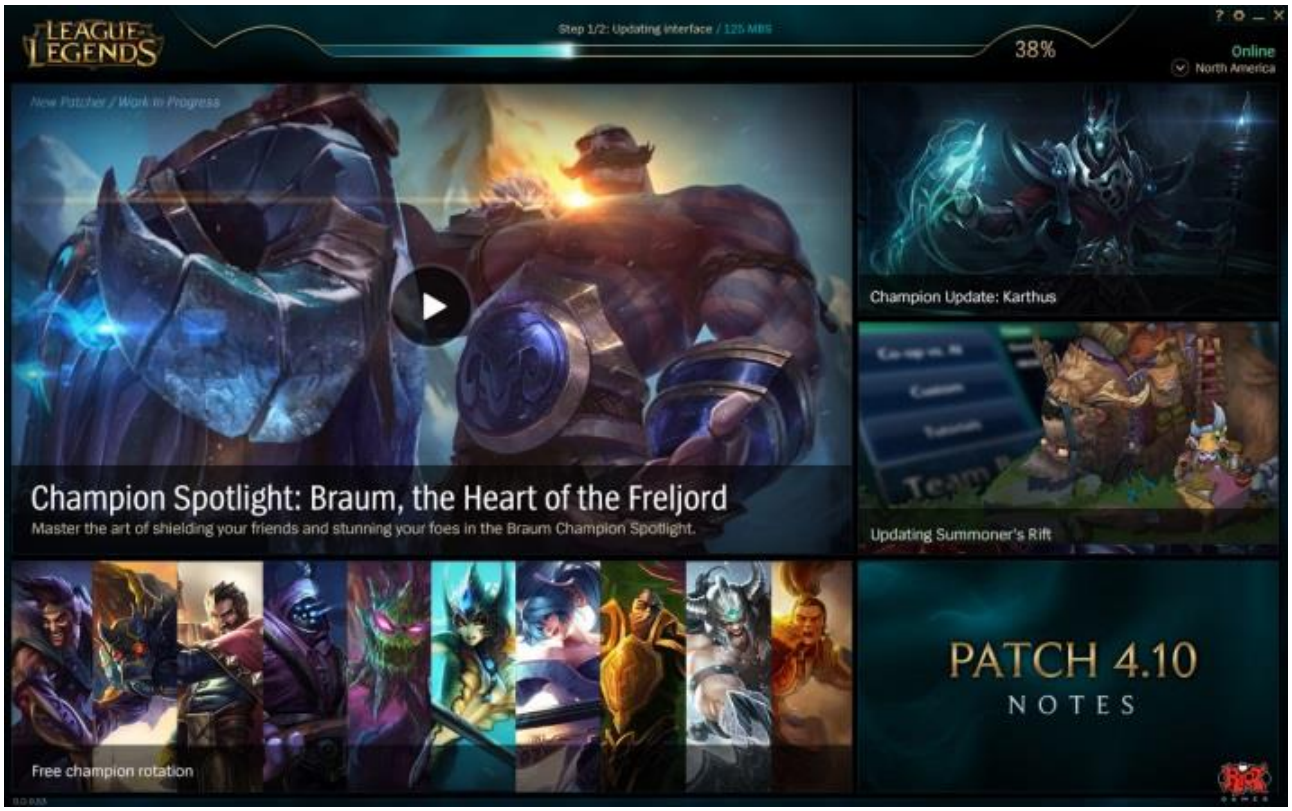

Figure 1: The League of Legends launch client. Note the glowing blue bar indicating that the game is currently updating. Once this has completed, the bar will turn into a large brown, 'Launch' button. The content is dominated by the release of a new champion, Braum, while notes on other updates are in the right-hand column.

5. After selecting the kind of game they would like to play, summoners are returned to the client home screen, while a timer at the top of the screen shows how long they have been in the matchmaking queue and how long they can expect to wait. Once a full team match has been found the player is notified, and may accept or reject the team (a timed decision meant to keep AFK players from being placed in teams).

6. Having accepted a team match, players are taken to the 'champion select' screen (see figure 5). Here they may choose which champion they would like to play. There are currently 124 champions in *LoL*, but they must be purchased using IP or RP. There is also a weekly rotation of free-to-play champions. Summoners may choose any champion from their pool or the free-to-play rotation, as long as it has

not been chosen already by anyone on their team. At this point they may also chat with their team-mates to discuss in-game roles and champion selections.

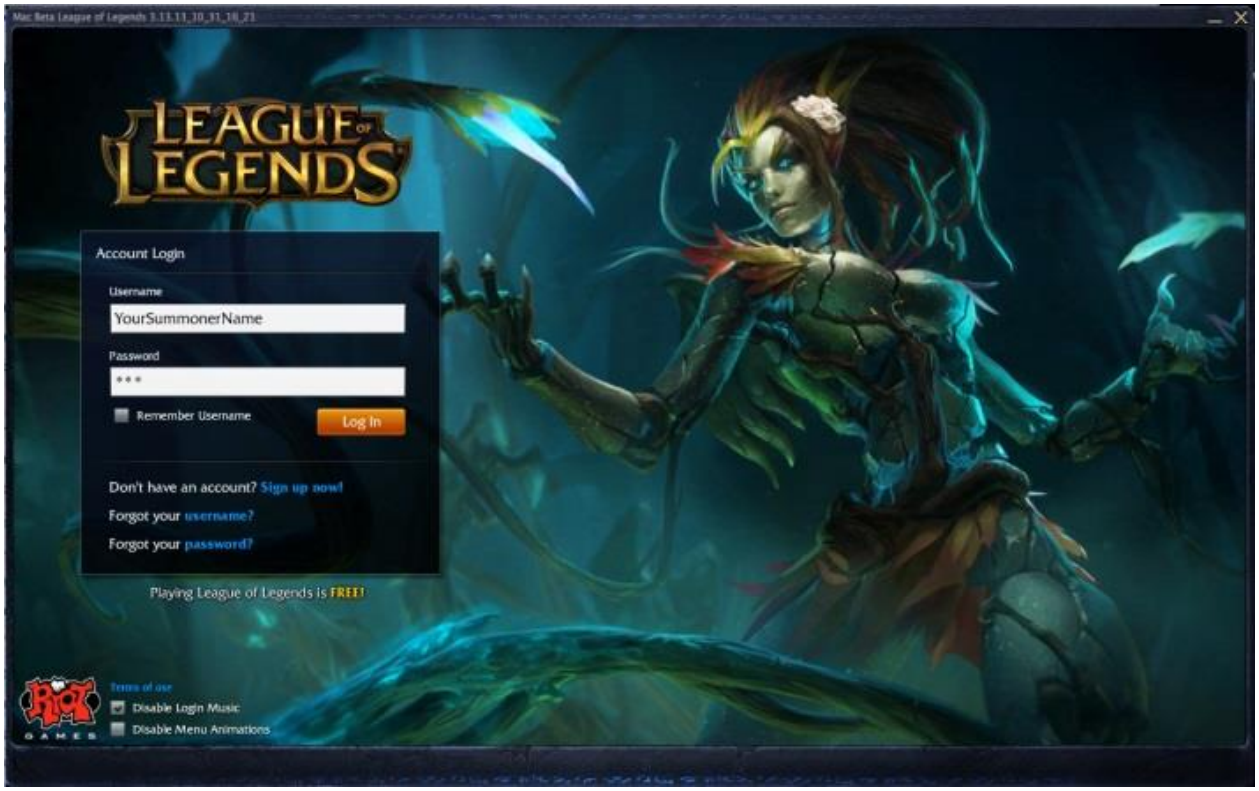

Figure 2: The *League of Legends* log-in client screen.

7. Once a champion has been chosen, a player chooses the runes and masteries they would like to apply to the champion in the game. They may also choose two additional spells which may be used in-game in addition to the champion's unique abilities.

8. Champion select is timed. When the timer runs out, the game begins. If a player has not selected a champion then all players are returned to the matchmaking queue.

9. If all champions have been chosen, the game commences loading (see figure 6). This screen shows which champions will be in the game, their summoners, their summoner spells, and their loading progress. If they are ranked players or have received community awards (for friendliness, teamwork, etc.), then they will have a border demarcating their achievement around their champion tile. A player's own 'ping' (the time in milliseconds that is being taken for their computer to communicate with the server) will also be show to themselves. Very high ping can indicate bandwidth or hardware problems which will make the game 'lag'.

10. Once the game begins, champions are 'summoned' to the base (figure 7). Here players shop for starting items from the shop keeper NPC. These items will last for an entire game unless sold, but will not persist past this time. Bought items and champion statistics are shown in the lower-left corner. Champions begin each game at level one, and may gain or improve a spell with each level. They all have three abilities, plus one 'ultimate' ability available at level 6, plus the two free 'summoner' spells. Most abilities consume energy or 'mana'. They also have a finite amount of health, shown in the 'health bar'. If a champion runs low on mana or health they should be returned to the base, where their health and mana will regenerate. If they completely run out of health they die and respawn in the base after a certain amount of time. This length of time increases the longer the game goes on. Allied team-mates are shown on the left-hand side of the screen. When their icons are lit with green, their ultimate abilities are ready to be used. When they flash red, they are at low health. In the bottom right hand corner of the screen is a mini-map which shows the position of allied champions and enemies (if they are visible). In the upper-right-hand corner, the current score can be seen, along with the game timer.

Figure 3: The game client. Note the dominant feature's 'Buy A Skin' call to action. Given a finite roster of champions, skins are a way to add some personal flair to those champions that a summoner owns (see also Chapter 4).

In the lower-left-hand corner is their champion icon and their current item inventory (6 item slots, plus a trinket). Above this is the team chat window (not visible in figure 7). Chat is more or less completely unmoderated, however players may choose to have expletives censored.

Figure 4: Choosing a game type.

11. A player chooses a lane (indicated by arrows in figure 7). There are three lanes, plus a jungle. A team of five is usually divided so that there is one player in the top lane, one in the middle, one in the jungle, and two in the bottom lane. Mid laners are usually mages or ranged ability-based champions. Bottom laners usually comprise a ranged damage-dealer, and their support. The aim of the game is to push down lanes (defended by enemy champions and turrets) to take the enemy base ('nexus').

12. Minions and monsters spawn. Minions are AI units which deal small amounts of damage. Killing them grants small amounts of gold and experience ('creep score' or 'CS'). At lower levels they provide protection against turrets and enemy champions. Monsters populate the jungle and are more difficult to kill, but offer a little more gold and some will 'buff' their slayer for a certain amount of time. Enemy champions offer the most gold but are the most difficult to kill.

13. To use their champion's abilities, a player uses the keyboard and mouse. Skills are mapped to the Q, W, E, R, F, and D keys. They can also be activated by clicking their icons with the mouse. Items are mapped to number keys. The 'Shift', 'Alt' and 'Ctrl' keys modify abilities. Right-clicking will target an enemy

champion, minion, or turret. Right-clicking an area on the map will cause the champion to run towards it.

Figure 5: Choosing a champion. Picking a champion is as easy as clicking on their portrait and then clicking 'Lock In'. However in order for a champion to be available it must be either part of the week's free rotation or owned by the player. Note also the 'Runes & Masteries' and 'Spells' segments. These are not bound to a champion, but are chosen by the player before a match.

8. Early game. Also known as the 'laning phase', this stage characterised by an emphasis on players trying to increase their own CS and level their champions to level 6 without dying or letting their lane opponent overtake them.

9. 'Mid' game is usually marked when one or more lane turrets are taken down (see figure 3.8). The change in pressure and map control that this causes forces teams to start grouping together to try for objectives, or simply for defence. If teams are highly unbalanced in terms of skill, the game may end during the midgame.

10. During the late game champions have reached or are close to their maximum level (18). Gold from kills and CS has been traded for stats-improving items with the aim of maximising their usefulness in

their chosen in-game role. At this stage map objectives (turrets, inhibitors, the nexus) become the most important team aim.

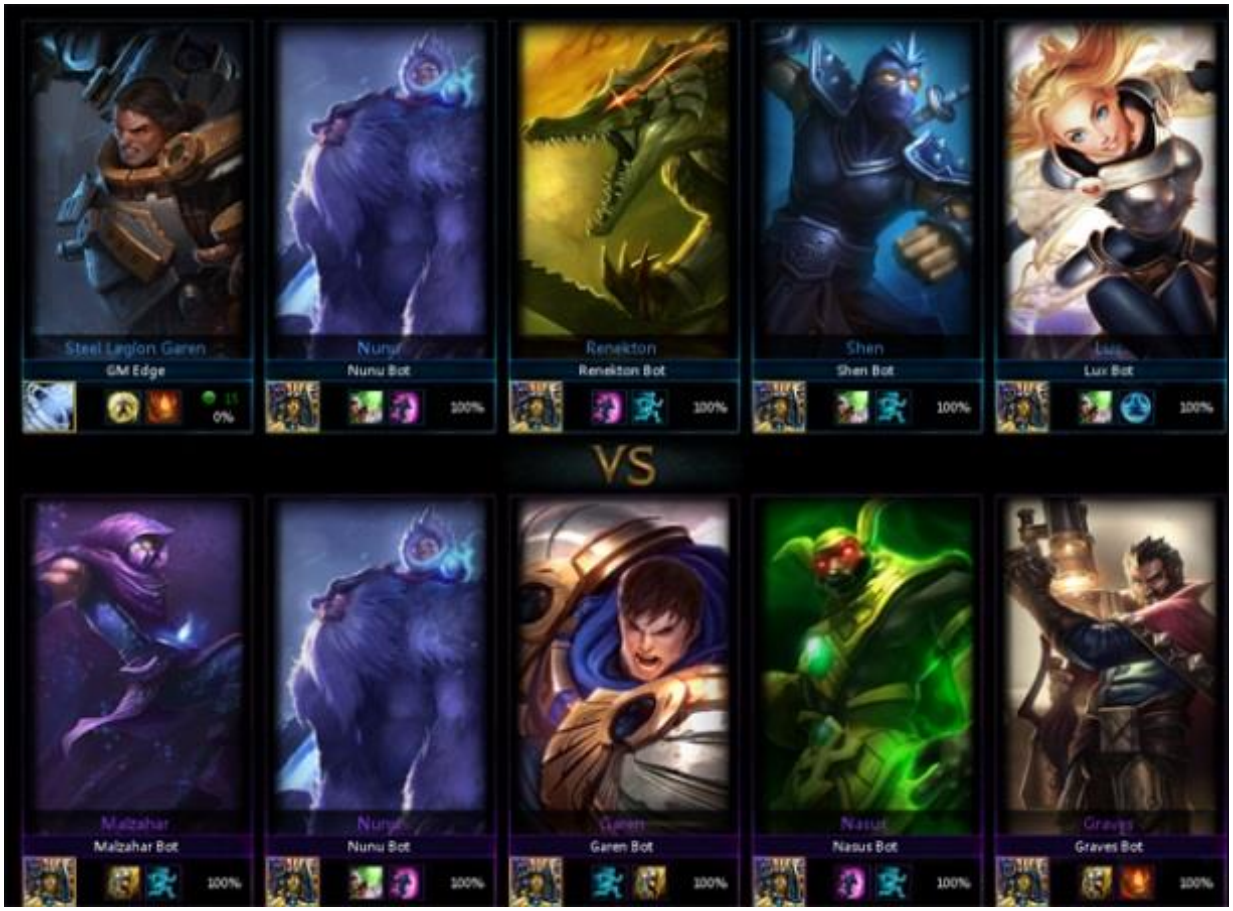

Figure 6: Game loading screen. If a player has a rank of silver or better, their champion portrait will have an embellished border. If they have been given medals for good behaviour then these medals will also appear.

11. The game ends when either team surrenders, or when either team's nexus is destroyed. At this point the game freezes and cuts to a sequence of a nexus exploding. At this stage either a victory or defeat message appears and the game is over.

Extensions:

1. A) A player may choose to change which server they play on from this client. Summoner accounts are *not* persistent across servers.
2. A) If players choose to recover lost/forgotten information, sign up, or read the terms of service, they will be taken to an external Website.
3. A) If a player chooses to click on any of the news links they will be taken to an external Website. B) Within this client a player can use the menu in the lower right-hand corner to view their

friends list, including which friends are online. By clicking a friend's summoner name they can chat using the internal chat client, or invite them to a game.

C) Opting to watch another game with take the player to 'Spectator mode', in which they may view a game currently in progress with a three minute delay to prevent cheating. Using spectator mode they may view team stats and watch the game as a whole or from any player's perspective.
D) Clicking icons in the miniature summoner profile will bring up the full summoner profile. Here players can view their past game stats and build rune and mastery trees.

Figure 7: The base. The small figures with green bars above their heads are the champions. A small bearded non-player character offers weapons and armour for sale. Green arrows indicate the three lane directions.

4. A) Other game modes allow play against computer-generated bots as practice, alone or in groups.
   B) After level 30 players may join 'ranked' matches in which their rank as a player is determined. Ranks are determined by an internal, hidden 'ELO ' number. Once that number is high enough, players engage in key battles which determine whether their rank increases, decreases, or stays the same. Ranks are as follows, in ascending order of skill and rarity: Bronze 5, 4, 3, 2, 1; Silver 5, 4, 3, 2, 1; Gold 5, 4, 3 ,2, 1; Platinum 5, 4, 3, 2, 1; Diamond 5, 4, 3, 2, 1; Challenger 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

Challenger-ranked player numbers are limited per server and represent the top 0.01% of players.
C) Players may choose whether they wish to be placed in a matchmaking (solo) queue, or invite their friends to a game

Figure 8: A screenshot of typical mid- to late-game play. The champion Annie is attacking the opponents' turret with help from allied minions.

7. A) 'Runes' can be bought only with IP, and affect champions' base stats such as health, armour, mana regeneration, etc.
B) 'Masteries' are earned per level. They are combined into hierarchical trees which suit different champions' specialisations. Broadly these are ranged damage ('AD carry'), melee damage ('bruiser'), spell-caster ('mage'), support, tank.
C) There are currently 13 summoner spells in the game. They cost no mana but have relatively long periods between when they can be cast ('cooldowns').

10. A) In the upper-left-hand corner of the minimap is an exclamation point button. Pressing it will allow a player to 'ping' a warning to team-mates.

12. A) If a player kills a 'buffed' enemy, the 'buff' transfers to their own champion.

13. A) Abilities and spells can be remapped in the options menu, accessed by pressing the 'Esc' key. From this menu they may also change the audio and visual settings.

14-16. A) Champions can leave the game at any time through the options menu or simply by closing the game. However, they will not be able to start another game while the one they left is in progress, and they may be penalised for leaving.

14. A) While champions mostly try to score the killing blow on minions in their own lanes in order to earn as much money and experience as possible, 'jungler' champions roam the jungle, killing monsters and 'ganking' (attacking) enemy champions in lanes.

15. A) After 20 minutes a team may surrender. This is done by a vote which must pass by a ratio of 4:1 or higher in favour to be successful.

B) Mid-game objectives include killing enemy champions, taking map objectives (i.e. turrets), and killing the dragon (a large AI monster which 'buffs' the team that kills it).

16. A) 'Baron Nashor' may also become a team objective. Like the dragon, this is an epic monster which requires multiple team members to kill and which gives a temporary 'buff' to the killing team.

Appendix C Interview Schedule

Introductory Questions

1. How old are you
2. What gender do you identify as?
3. How long have you been playing League?
4. How many hours per day/per week do you play?
5. What do you like best about it?

Social Capital

6. How did you get into playing it?
7. Do you know many people who play it?
8. Do you play with friends?
9. Have you made any friends by playing it?

Field & Habitus

10. Do you feel like it's a community?
11. Do you feel like there are certain things people say or do only in League?
12. Do you think it has its own social rules?
13. How do players compare to people in the material world or players in other games?
14. Do you think there's anything that makes League of Legends unique compared to other MMOs?

Disruption

15. What has been your experience of playing League in terms of playing with strangers?

16. (Optional)What do you think of other League players?

17. (Optional)What do you think of the League community as a whole?

18. Have you ever had any experience of harassment, trolling, or raging in-game?

    (If yes) How did that make you feel?

    Why do you think people behave that way?

19. Have you ever raged or trolled anyone in-game?

    Why?

20. Part of my thesis is that the reason people get so frustrated in League of Legends, or so addicted to it, is because their status in-game is so different from their status in real life. Do you think that's reasonable?

Cultural Capital & Distinction

21. What level are you in League?

22. How do you feel about the experience of levelling in-game?

23. (Optional: If they answered 'maximum' to Q12) Do you play ranked?

24. (Optional: If they answered 'yes' to Q18) What do you think about playing ranked in comparison to normal?

    Do you like one more than the other?

    Why/why not?

25. What do you think are some important in-game achievements?

26. (Optional)What about badges of honour or rankings?

27. Can you tell when someone's a smurf player? How?

28. Do you think anything other than kill numbers can tell you how experienced a player is?

29. Do you watch professional play or commentary videos?

    Why(not)?

30. (Optional: If they answered 'yes' to Q20) Do you try to emulate their strategies?

    Why (not)?

Gender

31. Which is your favourite champion to play?

    Why is that?

32. Which is your favourite champion aesthetically?

    Why do you think that is?

33. What do you think about how gender is presented in League of Legends?

    Do you think this is positive or negative?

34. How do you feel women are seen in the League of Legends community?

35. While I was playing League for my ethnography, I was always assumed to be male. Can you think why that might be?

Appendix D

Research Proposal for the Ethics and Research Governance Board

SSEGM ETHICS SUB-COMMITTEE APPLICATION FORM

1. Name(s): Elzabi Rimington

2. Current Position: PhD student

3. Contact Details:

Division/School FSHS: School of Sociology, Social Policy, and Criminology

Email emr2g08@soton.ac.uk

Phone 07525429416

4. Is your study being conducted as part of an education qualification?

Yes ☒

5. If Yes, please give the name of your supervisor

Pauline Leonard, Mark Weal

6. Title of your project:

Ethnography and Interviews with *League of Legends* Players

7. Briefly describe the rationale, study aims and the relevant research questions of your study

Research question: To what extent can the social structures which govern the offline world be observed through the experiences and practices of Massively-Multiplayer Online Game (MMO) players?

Rationale: As a Web Science student, my underlying interest is in how people behave online. The aim of this study is to explore the ways in which, and the extent to which, people recreate the social structures and systems of inequality of the offline world through their own behaviours in the virtual world. I have chosen Massively-Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) as a specific area of study because a) they require social play and behaviour as part of their architecture and b) I hypothesize that their users (game players) share a group

identity (habitus) which will be evidenced through their behaviours and which will recreate the real-world social behaviours from which social structures are built.

I have specifically chosen the game *League of Legends* published by parent company *Riot Games* for this study as it has a strong community and fan base which will contribute to the creation of a group identity. The game requires teamwork and has an in-game textual chat log which can be recorded. Additionally, socialisation among players is very common. Unlike many MMOs which have continuous, immersive-world play, this one is made up of short, separate player-versus-player game instances in the form of 5v.5 battles. This means that consent can be asked of other players before each battle instance.

Study Aims:
To find evidence of the recreation of social structures through in-game behaviours. This will be particularly prevalent in game chat through in-jokes and parlance, which have the effect of affirming group identity and highlighting difference (which may be based on game skill level, but also race, class, and gender). I wish to relate these behaviours to the players' experiences of using an online game and an in-game avatar, as my research takes the perspective that the social and the personal are inextricable.

8. Describe the design of your study

This study will be in two parts:

1. A virtual ethnography (up to 6 months) with participant observation. This follows previous work on virtual ethnographies by researchers such as Williams (2007), Kendall (2002), Carter (2005) and Yee (2013). I will spend one to two hours every day, at varying times of day, playing the MMO *League of Legends* (published by *Riot Games*). I will record games using the programmes FRAPS and LOLReplay, from which I will strip textual data and apply relevant commentary. I will take detailed fieldnotes describing the experience of play. I intend to immerse myself in the community aspect of the game as much as possible. This will mean communicating with other players when appropriate, and possibly forming social ties within the game.

   The practical process of data collection will be as follows: I will log into the *League of Legends* client interface using a persistent pseudonym (a 'summoner name' or username). From here I will be able to join a queue to play in a battle instance (a game). Once nine other players from the same server (Western Europe) have joined the queue, we will be taken to a character selection screen, which will be the first player communication opportunity. At this point I will give an opening message in which will be stated my intention to record the game instance, my reasons for doing so, and offer the opportunity to opt out at any time including after the game. I will also provide a link to an online participant information sheet (PIS). If any objections are made I will immediately cease recording. If players are non-English-speaking I will cease recording. I will request that any players under the age

of 18 make themselves known. If they do, I will again immediately cease recording. Once characters have been chosen and the game instance commences, I will once again declare my intention to record and offer the opportunity to opt out along with a PIS. A typical game lasts from 15 to 75 minutes, and once it is over the client once again redirects players to a lobby in which chat is enabled. At this point I will again restate my opening message and allow players another opportunity to opt out.

Within a game instance communication between players is purely textual and is logged by *League of Legends'* parent company *Riot Games* as part of their ongoing research into player behaviour. Additionally the *Riot Games* privacy policy (available at http://na.leagueoflegends.com/en/legal/privacy) states in articles IIIA that in-game chat logs constitute public information. Additionally, all *League of Legends* games are publically viewable while they are being played, As such my recording of the game instances and specifically the conversation logs does not represent a violation of expected in-game privacy. Once a game is over I will immediately strip the chat logs and add my own field notes as commentary. The original data will be destroyed, apart from the date and time of the game instance, and the players' usernames. This is so that if a player contacts me at a later date wishing to remove themselves from the study, I will be able to identify data pertaining to them and destroy it. As many people keep the same usernames across many Web platforms, these usernames will be confidentially kept, and will not be used in any consequent publications.

2. A series of semi-structured interviews with *League of Legends* players. These interviews will be conducted via Skype or Google Hangouts towards the end of my ethnography, and will discuss the experience of play. Within the *League of Legends* client interface (as distinct from the game instances) conversation and interaction with other players is enabled. This is so that acquaintances and friendships can be made, and alliances formed. Following several months of ethnography, I expect to have made several in-game contacts through play and conversation, in the same way that contacts would be made in real-world ethnography. While casual conversations using the *League of Legends* client outside of the game instance chat logs outlined in Q8(1) will NOT be recorded, I will explain my role of researcher to these contacts in order to maintain clarity and openness. It is these contacts whom I will approach as potential participants for interviews.

   Using the *League of Legends* client interface, I will contact potential participants outside of game instances. At this point I will outline my request for participation and give links to an online PIS and an online consent form. These will be separate Web forms and will offer check boxes in place of signatures to show that participants have read and understood the information given to them, and that they are aged over eighteen and not based in the US or Canada. If participants give their consent, I will contact them to arrange a convenient time for the interview to take place.

   The interview itself will be structured around [x] core questions, outlined in the attached 'Participant Questions' sheet. The interview will not take more than an hour, and is structured to take around half an hour. Following the interview the recorded call will be transcribed and the original data deleted. Any identifying information will be removed or anonymised. The following personal information will be retained: age, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity.

9. Who are the research participants?

The participants for the first part of the study will be players of the MMO *League of Legends,* randomly selected for games by the client. They will be anonymous, but are likely to be adult males aged between 18 and 25 according to data collected by *Riot Games*, living in Western Europe. However, with the exception of minors, players' identifying information including their age, gender, location, etc will not be requested and if given will be removed in accordance with *Riot Games*' Chat Rules (http://leagueoflegends.wikia.com/wiki/League_of_Legends_Wiki:Special:Chat).
The participants for the second part of the study will be contacts made during the ethnographic stage of research as outlined in Q8(2). They will be English-speaking adults based in Western Europe.

10. If you are going to analyse secondary data, from where are you obtaining it?

N/A

11. If you are collecting primary data, how will you identify and approach the participants to recruit them to your study?

Please upload a copy of the information sheet if you are using one – or if you are not using one please explain why.

Participants for the first part of the study will be random players selected by the *League of Legends* server. Participants for the second part of the study will be contacts made through in-game (recorded) and in-client (unrecorded) conversation and participation. They will be aware of my role as researcher through all our interactions. Some months into part 1 of the study I will approach them requesting their participation in the second part of the study, which will take the form of an interview undertaken via an online video call. At this point they will be given links to an online PIS and an online consent form (as outlined in Q8(2)).

12. Will participants be taking part in your study without their knowledge and consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people)? If yes, please explain why this is necessary.

No, however it is possible in part 1 of the study that players may not see messages requesting that they opt out if they do not want to take part in the study. In order to minimise chances of this happening, the message informing them that games will be recorded and requesting that they opt out if they would not like to participate will be given twice, as described in Q8 and Q13. Additionally, foreign language chat and that of minors will not be recorded.

13. If you answered 'no' to question 12, how will you obtain the consent of participants?

Please upload a copy of the consent form if you are using one – or if you are not using one please explain why.

For part 1 of the study I will not be using a consent form. In this environment it is highly impractical to issue a consent form (as stated in the ERGO guidelines for online research). Furthermore, as stated in Q8, I would not be recording any data that participants would normally expect to be private, only that which is already regularly recorded and stored by *Riot Games* and which, according to their privacy policy, is public information. Researchers such as Fox *et al*. (2005), Eysenback and Till (2001) and Hewson (2003) would argue that this kind of data collection without explicit consent does not present an ethical challenge as it takes place in a public space (game instances are publically viewable and textual chat logs are kept by *Riot Games*). However, as stated by the British Sociological Association (BSA) guidelines, online research should be approached with consent, anonymity and confidentiality playing a key role (BSA, 2002). As such I will take the following steps toward gaining consent, and maintaining openness, anonymity and confidentiality:

1. As described in Q8, I will be informing *League of Legends* of my intention to record each game instance twice, once during character selection and once when the game commences. At this point I will give players the opportunity to opt out and have none of the game data collected (at which point recording will cease), and will also request that any player under the age of 18 make themselves known (in which case, again, recording will cease). Data will not be collected from non-English-speakers. The information message will contain a link to an online Participant Information Sheet (PIS).
2. I will also state the purpose of the recording, and give players the opportunity to contact me with any further questions. If they contact me, they will again receive a link to the full online PIS. If they contact me after a game requesting that the game data not be used, it will be destroyed.

The exact message content will be as follows:

'Hi. I am a UK PhD student and will be recording the chat log from this game as part of my research into social behaviour in online games. All data will be completely anonymous and kept private. If you would not like the chat to be logged or are under the age of 18 please let me know at any time. For more information contact me or visit http://leagueresearch.wordpress.com/2014/10/13/participant-information/ for more information!'

For part 2 of the study I will issue a consent form along with a PIS at the time of approaching potential participants.

14. Is there any reason to believe participants may not be able to give full informed consent? If yes, what steps do you propose to take to safeguard their interests?

Yes. As I will not be using consent forms in part 1 of the study, only linking to an online PIS twice before each game, participants may not know exactly how data taken from game instances will be used (apart from as a part of PhD research) unless they ask me. However, the following steps will be taken to safeguard their interests:

1. All data taken from the instances will be completely anonymised, including changing player pseudonyms in case they use persistent usernames across the Web. The only way to identify game instance data will be from the recording date and time.
2. The data will also be kept securely and confidentially.
3. Should any player request information regarding the data or my research from me, they will receive again receive a link to the online PIS, as well as the opportunity to contact me with any further questions.
4. If after a game or having read the participant information sheet a participant requests that their recorded chat logs be deleted, the data will be destroyed.

There is no danger of a lack of full informed consent in part 2 of the study.

15. If participants are under the responsibility or care of others (such as parents/carers, teachers or medical staff) what plans do you have to obtain permission to approach the participants to take part in the study?

N/A

16. Describe what participation in your study will involve for study participants. Please attach copies of any questionnaires and/or interview schedules and/or observation topic list to be used

This study will require no effort or behaviour that is different from what is normal for participants in part 1 of the study. It will record part of their established behaviour while undertaking a publicly-visible leisure activity which they have freely chosen.

In part 2 of the study participation will involve reading the PIS and filling out an online consent form. After this, a date and time at their convenience will be arranged for the interview to take place. The interview will take place via video calling, which will require that the participant has the necessary software, as well as a microphone, auditory equipment, and preferably a webcam.
The interview itself will be structured around [x] core questions, outlined in the attached 'Participant Questions' sheet. The interview will not take more than an hour, and is structured to take around half an hour. Following the interview the recorded call will be transcribed and the original data deleted. Any identifying information will be removed or anonymised. The following personal information will be retained: age, identifying gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity.

17. How will you make it clear to participants that they may withdraw consent to participate at any point during the research without penalty?

The information message given twice before each game and outlined in Q13 openly states that participants may withdraw their consent at any time. Further information will be available using the online PIS which will be linked in the opening message. The PIS will also state that consent can be withdrawn at any time.

18. Detail any possible distress, discomfort, inconvenience or other adverse effects the participants may experience, including after the study, and you will deal with this.

None.

19. How will you maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality in collecting, analysing and writing up your data?

Participants' real names will not be recorded in either part of the study and any personal identification information that is given will immediately be deleted. As many people use persistent usernames across the Web through which their identities may be discovered, their in-game usernames will also be changed during writing to ensure complete anonymity. Conversation logs from part 1 of the study will not be publically accessible from my research nor reproduced in full and it will not, therefore, be possible to trace them back to participants using text searches.

Once interviews from part 2 of the study have been transcribed and annotated, the original video and sound data will be deleted in order to maintain anonymity.

20. How will you store your data securely during and after the study?

The University of Southampton has a Research Data Management Policy, including for data retention. The Policy can be consulted at http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionIV/research-data-management.html

Data will be kept on a password-protected hard disk drive separate from my PC, and stored in a locked drawer.

21. Describe any plans you have for feeding back the findings of the study to participants.

I do not plan to feed back findings from part 1 this study as standard. This is because I plan to maintain anonymity of participants and keep only their usernames as identifying data. However, my information will be available to all participants. The opportunity to have the study results fed back to them will be made clear

on the online participant information sheet. This will not require any identifying information, only an email address to which I can send a copy of the findings.

Participants in part 2 of the study will be given the option to have the results of the study emailed to them, as well as having the opportunity to discuss these findings with me via video call at a later date if they would like further information.

22. What are the main ethical issues raised by your research and how do you intend to manage these?

The main ethical issue raised by this research project is that of full, informed consent during the first part of the study. However I will mitigate these concerns by:

1. Providing a link to an online PIS as standard.
2. Offering the opportunity to opt out at any point in a game instance, or after it.
3. Anonymising all data including usernames and conversation logs.
4. Only retaining textual chat logs and personal commentary as data from game instances, which constitute public information according to *Riot Games* and which will be kept securely and confidentially.

23. Please outline any other information you feel may be relevant to this submission.

The online participant information sheet for part one of the study is visible at: http://leagueresearch.wordpress.com/

The online participant information sheet and consent form for part two will be available at: http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/1893189/Consent-Form

I have chosen to use opt-out consent for part 1 of this study rather than opt-in consent for the following reasons:

1. The game instances from which I will be recording data, including the conversation logs, are publically viewable, and therefore recordable, while they are being played. Although the text data is not generally publically accessible when a game is finished, it is stored by *Riot Games* as part of their ongoing research into player behaviour and constitutes public information according to their privacy policy (available at http://na.leagueoflegends.com/en/legal/privacy). As such my recording of the data does not represent a deviation from the normal privacy expectations of *League of Legends* players, particularly as it will be fully anonymised.
2. Potential participants are likely to be completely ambivalent about both my research and my recording of the conversational data. It is unlikely that many, let alone all nine, game participants would bother to opt in when given the opportunity, not because they felt that the recording presented a challenge to their interests but because they simply did not care. As each game can last up to 75 minutes, this would represent a large time investment for me without any useable resultant data. The only players who would *not* be ambivalent towards my research and data collection would

be those who were strongly against it. These players are much more likely to contact me requesting that data involving them *not* be collected than those who have no interest either way. For this reason opt-out consent is the most mutually beneficial option: it is more likely to result in useable data for my research, and those players who have strong privacy concerns will have their interests protected.

3. Data derived in this way will, in my opinion as a researcher, be the most honestly representative of the *League of Legends* community. The large amount of data it will generate will allow me to show both diversity and major trends.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET 1

Study Title: Ethnography and Interviews with League of Legends Players (Part 1: Ethnography)

This information sheet is also available at http://leagueresearch.wordpress.com

Researcher: E. Rimington **Ethics number**: 12967

What is the research about?

This study forms part of my PhD research into how people behave in online environments. In particular, I'm interested in how we recreate social rules when we play games. By playing *League of Legends,* writing about my experiences and recording chat logs from games I'll be creating a digital ethnography as part 1 of my study. From this I'll analyse the data to see what kind of social structures and rules are expressed by people in online games. Later on I will interview other players as part 2 of my study.

Why have I been chosen?

The selection process is completely random – I simply play *League of Legends* and record the chat logs from each game.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will not have to do anything out of your ordinary routine. I record the game chat as *Riot Games* does (according to part 3A of their privacy policy, these chat logs constitute public information) then strip out any identifying or personal information apart from your summoner name, leaving only the raw data which I can then analyse. Your involvement can be limited to just playing one game but if you're interested in what I'm doing then let me know and I can send you follow-up information about how the study and my research are going.

Are there any benefits in my taking part?

None of any monetary value, unfortunately. However every bit of data is hugely helpful to my research, so I thank you.

Are there any risks involved?

There are no risks to participants.

Will my participation be confidential?

The Data Protection Act and Research Governance policy are very strict on this so you have nothing to worry about. Both confidentiality and anonymity are assured. Any and all identifying information will be immediately removed from the data. The only identifying data I will keep will be your summoner name. This is so that if you contact me at a later date I'll be able to remove any game data in which you were involved. Summoner names will not appear in any final write-ups. For added security, even the stripped data will be kept on a separate, protected hard drive and locked in a drawer.

What happens if I change my mind?

You are absolutely welcome and within your rights to contact me at any time asking that I remove data I collected while in a game with you. If you give me your summoner name I will immediately delete the related game data.

Why should I tell you if I'm under eighteen?

I'm not cleared to study minors!

What happens if something goes wrong?

If you have a concern or complaint, please get in touch with me through the League of Legends client or by email (leagueresearch@outlook.com) and I will give you the contact details of the chair of the Ethics Committee or the Head of Research Governance. The only reason their information is not publicly available on this site is because I'm wary of people trolling (giving out personal details on the internet is never a great idea).

Where can I get more information?

You can contact me through the *League of Legends* client or email me at leagueresearch@outlook.com. I will be happy to answer any questions or concerns.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET 2

Study Title: Ethnography and Interviews with League of Legends Players (Part 2: Interviews)

This information sheet is also available at http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/1893189/Consent-Form

Researcher: E. Rimington **Ethics number**: 12967

What is the research about?

This study forms part of my PhD research into how people behave in online environments. In particular, I'm interested in how we recreate social rules when we play games, and how we experience these social structures. By playing *League of Legends*, writing about my experiences and recording chat logs from games I've created a digital ethnography as part 1 of my study. From this I'll analyse the data to see what kind of social structures and rules are expressed by people in online games.

At this stage, part 2 of my study, I would like to interview other *League* players to get a fuller picture of the experience of play.

Why have I been chosen?

You've been selected because you're a *League of Legends* player whom I've come to know through playing the game. I'd like to set up an interview with you, consisting of up to 21 questions and lasting about half an hour.

What will happen to me if I agree to take part?

The first thing that will happen is that I will ask you to fill out a consent form confirming that you're willing for me to interview you and use the resulting data for my work. After that we'll set up a convenient time for the interview to take place. The interview will be via Skype or whichever video chat client you prefer, and will take up to an hour but is formulated to take around half an hour.

Are there any benefits in my taking part?

None of any monetary value, unfortunately. However every bit of data is hugely helpful to my research, so I thank you.

Are there any risks involved?

There are no risks to participants.

Will my participation be confidential?

The Data Protection Act and Research Governance policy are very strict on this so you have nothing to worry about. Both confidentiality and anonymity are assured. Any and all identifying information will be

immediately removed from the data. The only identifying data I will keep will be your summoner name. This is so that if you contact me at a later date I'll be able to find and remove data pertaining to you. Summoner names will not appear in any final write-ups. For added security, even the anonymous data will be kept on a separate, protected hard drive and locked in a drawer.

What happens if I change my mind?

You are absolutely welcome and within your rights to contact me at any time asking that I remove data I collected from an interview with you, right up until I submit my data analysis and write-up for assessment as part of my thesis.

Why should I tell you if I'm under eighteen?

I'm not cleared to study minors!

What happens if something goes wrong?

If you have a concern or complaint, you can email the Research Governance/Ethics committee at the University of Southampton directly at rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk.

Where can I get more information?

You can contact me through the *League of Legends* client or email me at leagueresearch@outlook.com. I will be happy to answer any questions or concerns.

CONSENT FORM

N.B. The final version of this form will be online. For this reason tick boxes are used instead of initials and signatures. The online consent form is available at http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/1893189/Consent-Form

League of Legends username ('summoner name') .....

Please tick the box(es) if you agree with the statement(s):

I have read and understood the information sheet (V1, dated 12.11.2014) and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study. ☐

I agree to take part in this research project and agree for my data to be recorded and ☐

I understand that my responses will be anonymised in reports of the research ☐

I understand my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without ☐

Data Protection

I understand that information collected about me during my participation in this study will be stored on a password protected computer and that this information will only be used for the purpose of this study. ☐

EXAMINER COMMENTS

1.I must admit that I was sceptical at first when I read the proposal, but you have thoroughly answered every question I might have had. This is a model ethics proposal for this type of research! All the best with your research!

2.This is a very interesting, original and well-constructed proposal. I was particularly happy with the way the researcher addressed the challenge of informed consent (and opt-in or out) in questions 8, 12, 13 and 23. The comment about trolling on the PIS part 1 also seems very sensible.

Appendix E Example Field Notes

1. 2015 – 02 – 02

10:10am
It's the first day of official study and I'm very nervous. Not about playing the game itself but about the reactions of other players towards me as a researcher. I echo other ethnographers in feeling that no matter how much reading you do, you never quite feel prepared to actually go out and do the ethnography. I guess that makes sense as not only is the study itself meant to be novel but the experience is new as well.
My trepidation regarding other players is similar to that of real-world ethnographers entering the field for the first time - worries about acceptance into the group/community/subculture, worries about inadequate or banal/irrelevant data. I'm very aware that ethnographers often make outsider mistakes, and I'll already be on the backdoor with my status as researcher. The pressure to succeed as a researcher compounds the in-game pressure to win.
I have played League before. I played it for a year some time ago. The game has changed a lot since then but the basic mechanics remain the same. The upside of this is that less time needs to be spent becoming accustomed to the basic game mechanics, which would potentially disrupt observation. The downside is that familiarity breeds acceptance rather than objectivity - it will be a challenge to estrange or defamiliarise myself with aspects I remember or am accustomed to.

10:37am
We encounter our first teething problem. The chat client doesn't allow text the length of the full disclaimer. It must be pasted and sent in two parts. I will have to find some way of keeping the two parts of text on the clipboard, perhaps using a macro. In the mean time I have given the disclaimer message only during champion select, and only my team's chat will be recorded.

11:04am
28 minutes in and I'm 0/5/1. I feel terrible but no one is flaming or becoming frustrated.

11:36
59 minutes in. This is an unusually long game. One of our team mates quit some time back, making the already-difficult game much more complicated. I have managed to stop embarrassing myself by keeping to the back and apologising profusely when I die (currently 11 deaths). I think that this is very unusual though, as other players do not seem to offering apologies when they die for silly reasons. They also do not seem to offer congratulations on a kill or evasion. Talk is brief and perfunctory - e.g. 'group mid' (group together in the middle lane in order to push down the enemy towers toward their base).

The opposing team does not appear to be taking neutral objections like dragon or baron, which keeps us in the game with two inhibitors down. After Ashe quit there have been regular appeals to surrender but they have been declined. The opposing Teemo 'trolled' by spamming his irritating laugh in order to bait the friendly team into attacking him or stepping on his poisonous mushrooms (shrooms). Eventually the friendly team got wise to this and mostly purchased the sweeping lens trinket in order to find and remove the mushrooms.

The game ended at 65 minutes. Talking to a team mate afterwards he explained why this was a waste of time despite the ultimate win and the experience points (IP) awarded for every minute played beyond 20 minutes. At low level you get more IP playing lots of short games rather than one long one. The 'pride' or winning a

such a low-level game isn't worth the delay in levelling and the time commitment that it takes. Effectively the win is secondary to levelling, because winning at low level, against weak or unskilled opponents, is meaningless or at least not something to feel proud of. More IP means faster levelling and IP to later spend on the runes which hugely increase power after level 20.

Teemo trolled by spamming /laugh in order to annoy and bait into his mushrooms (shrooms). He placed many around our base so that it was necessary to buy sweeping lens as a trinket.

Reflection:
I could not in any way be described as a good or even decent player but my previous experience comes through in two ways in this account. Firstly in the use of champion rather than summoner names. While summoner names are displayed above champions, it makes more sense in the long term to learn the names of all 100+ champions for reference. I remember when I first started playing that I would refer to players by their summoner names and was very confused when they were referred to as champion names. The fact that other players are also using champion names implies that they're either smurfing or have previous experience (like me). This is also implied by both Teemo's strategic placement of mushrooms and my team's awareness of the sweeping lens' ability to make them visible.

2. 2015 – 02 – 09

In some ways last week was a disaster. My disclaimer is still a problem to be fixed as I can currently only effectively give the message to my own team mates. FRAPs is extremely temperamental and occasionally locks the camera, overloads my computer's RAM, or simply doesn't work. Unfortunately LOLReplay is very buggy at the moment since the latest season patch and seems to be incompatible with the current version of League.

On the other hand, I've got some interesting preliminary data. Seeing some of the things I was expecting, maybe? At least there is something here to make an ethnography out of.

I really need a coding system for pre-games and Games

Key is going to be G or PG
Then the date 09-02-2015
the the time in 24 hour format 0002

Last week I had someone refuse recording.

So i made the perhaps odd decision to play today's game in the very very early morning. Just past midnight-early. Mostly just to get it out of the way because I knew Monday would be very busy.
Someone commented that my use of a disclaimer would mean that I wouldn't get any 'real' responses. When I replied that it was necessary for ethics reasons they replied 'typical ethics'

In most previous games people seemed to have some idea of the meta-game - ie the need for an AD carry, a tank, possibly a jungler even though jungling is near-impossible at low levels, a support, a mage, a bruiser, etc. and where these roles should go. In this game I chose Teemo with the expectation of 'going top'. When Sivir and Katarina headed that way I ended up going mid. This is not ideal as mid is where mages go, and I had no magic resist. Luckily Teemo is ranged which helps.

I'm noticing that a lot of people are playing the free champions. I started with the expectation of experimenting with the free rotation but this turned out to be extremely difficult. I bought a couple of champions I'm comfortable with and am using them to fill in roles that are needed.

Another definite indicator of skill or smurfing is in CS. CS is harder at low levels and new players don't recognise its importance, instead mostly looking to capture objectives and get kills to gain gold. More experienced players are easy to spot by their unusually high CS.

The early game is largely silent. I die to Orianna which is unsurprising as she has heavy burst and Teemo works better as a poking or assassin-type champion - good at sneak attacks and running away.

09:13 Jinx admits to smurfing after the opposing team compliments her ultimate 'JINX DAT ULTI'
The also ask what her main rank is (Gold 1). While not spectacular in terms of rank it does place her in the top 5% of players.
Vayne is unimpressed: 'pff lol'

I was worried that playing very low level in this study would affect the level of play I saw and stop me from being able to see that 'different' behaviours of highly skilled players but this hasn't proven to be the case at all so far thanks to the amount of smurfing that goes on.

15 minutes
When I make a particularly stupid move the smurfing Jinx is supportive and reminds me that it happens to everyone sometimes.

The Katarina, regularly getting double kills and skill shots is almost certainly a smurf as well. The Sivir who is underlevelled and causing very little damage is almost certainly not.
The enemy vayne is doing some kiting but not exceptionally skillfully.

17 minutes
Proper name for mushrooms is 'noxious trap'

18 minutes
I get my first kill.

19 minutes
the enemy team is doing very well considering they're a player down.

20 minutes
Allied Katarina informs me that Teemo is retarded. I'm not sure if she means I am or the champion is. Probably the champion as he is well-known to be annoying to play against, easy to play, and useless at high levels due to his squishiness. Either way I inform her that Teemo is in fact super-cool.

22 minutes
The enemy Vayne is definitely a smurf. Her CS and kiting skill mark her out. She receives a triple kill.

23 minutes
Lee Sin admits he is also smurfing. He and allied Jinx discuss how annoying smurfing is because without runes and masteries they feel weak. Jinx also admits that she's playing particularly poorly in this game. I didn't notice this exchange at the time or I would have asked why they did it.

25 minutes
Allied Katarina: coachroach (???)
26 minutes

While we engage in a dragon fight, Vayne takes our inhibitor and then makes it down to the fight in time to score another triple kill.

27 minutes
Jinx asks Vayne's rank but she declines to answer, giving just a <3 in all chat

29 minutes
Enemy Lee Sin proudly claims to have 'insec'd' someone. Insec is (I believe) a famous League player.

31 minutes
My mushrooms are starting to net assists on kills. I lay them on key map points for vision and as a deterrent to enemies.

34 minutes
Vaynbe scores another triple but walks into my now-powerful mushrooms, nearly dying to them and leaving her and Orianna vulnerable to allied Katarina. Double kill.

In the end it's a win, thanks largely to Katarina and Jinx. If it had been 5v5 it probably would have been a loss.

3. 2015 – 02 – 20

11:40

When posting my prelim message I got the following response:
'let's report him'
'just for fun'

I've been noticing how isolated the experience of this game is, despite the competitive and team-working elements. Maybe isolating is the wrong word, self-centred might be more right, or tunnel-vision. The camera's natural mode is with you in the centre and the world revolving around you. You can't zoom out far enough to get much of a wide bird's-eye perspective so you have to rely on the map a lot. On the other hand it's incredibly easy to get tunnel-vision during a fight and forget to look at your own health bar (I say 'your own', I mean 'your champion's').
It's easy to miss exciting plays and fights because your attention is so much on yourself. To some extent this is comforting. I'm self-conscious in teamwork and find myself apologising a lot for deaths. However as long as you're not actually 'feeding' or scoring triple kills other players don't usually notice what you're doing. Of course, the accusation of 'feeding' breaks this comfortable isolation completely, as do threats of reporting or other insults.

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