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PRACTICING WORK, PERFECTING PLAY: *LEAGUE OF LEGENDS* AND THE SENTI-  
MENTAL EDUCATION OF E-SPORTS

by

NEAL HINNANT

Under the Direction of Ted Friedman

ABSTRACT

A growing force in the culture of digital games fandom, e-sports represents the professionalization of digital games play. This thesis examines *League of Legends*, a prominent game in e-sports, to understand the relationship between e-sports and the ideology of neoliberal economics. Using Clifford Geertz's descriptions of sentimental education as a model, the author argues that *League of Legends* and other e-sports texts create an environment where neoliberal economic values can be practiced and explored in a meaningful space. The game as text, the culture of e-sports fandom, and the e-sports broadcasting industry are all examined to reveal the ways that e-sports fosters a space to both practice neoliberal values and potentially question them through the conflicting values of Web culture. Understanding the ways e-sports texts and e-sports culture explore ideological values allows for the potential to create more recursive e-sports texts that question this ideology in the future.

INDEX WORDS: League of Legends, Neoliberalism, E-sports, Sentimental education, Digital games

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MENTAL EDUCATION OF E-SPORTS

by

NEAL HINNANT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013

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2013

PRACTICING WORK, PERFECTING PLAY: *LEAGUE OF LEGENDS* AND THE SENTI-  
MENTAL EDUCATION OF E-SPORTS

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## **DEDICATION**

For my aunt Melanie, who has always encouraged me to keep thinking, keep dreaming,  
and to never give up.

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## INTRODUCTION

If you had been visiting New York City on the last Saturday of June 1981 and wandered near the Citigroup Center you would have come across a daunting sight: a lengthy line of children and parents all in attendance for a shot at *Space Invaders* glory. This was the scene at Atari's New York regional *Space Invaders* tournament, one of the first major video game tournaments in America. The 1980 series of contests drew over 10,000 competitors to tournaments across the country, an event that many argue helped place the nascent entertainment medium of video games into the cultural spotlight, and this year was no different.<sup>1</sup> An article in the *New York Times*, titled "4,000 Line Up to Join Battle Against Electronic Invader," describes a crowd of almost 4,000 participants lined up to take their shot at the weekend's high score. Opening with a description of the impact of *Space Invaders* on foreign markets (specifically the increased demand of 100-yen coins in Japan), the article continually emphasizes the fringe nature of both the contestants and the games they play. The title fails to specify whether the "electronic invader" is the alien menace of the game or the game itself. The contestants are characterized as mostly children; only a few adults are mentioned playing, and this is primarily with their children at home. The game itself is described in few terms other than "addictive." The eventual winner of the day, 14-year old Frank Tetro, vows to never play the game again after the grueling amount of practice needed to qualify for the finals and a shot at the grand prize. The spoils? A \$2000 *Asteroids* table game.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Players Guide To Electronic Science Fiction Games," *Electronic Games Magazine*, March 1982, 36-37.  
[http://www.archive.org/stream/electronic-games-magazine-1982-03/Electronic\\_Games\\_Issue\\_02\\_Vol\\_01\\_02\\_1982\\_Mar#page/n35/mode/1up](http://www.archive.org/stream/electronic-games-magazine-1982-03/Electronic_Games_Issue_02_Vol_01_02_1982_Mar#page/n35/mode/1up).

<sup>2</sup> Dudley Clendinen, "4,000 Line Up to Join Battle Against Electronic Invader," *New York Times*, 30 June 1981.

Fast forward 31 years to October 2012 and you find a vastly different take on a similar kind of activity. October 4-6 saw Los Angeles host the season two world championships of online game *League of Legends*. Sixty players comprising twelve teams from around the world competed for the coveted championship title. While sixty players is a far cry from the 4,000 playing *Space Invaders* in New York, the contest was watched by over 8,000 spectators at USC's Galen Center and a total of 8.2 million unique viewers over the span of the event.<sup>3</sup> Instead of a tournament comprised mostly of middle school children who practiced furiously on weekends, the participating teams were made up of college-age players who devoted most of their time to perfecting their skills at the game. They did so for a reason: the \$2,000 *Asteroids* table of 1981 had been replaced by a \$2,000,000 prize pool, with the winning team receiving half of the purse. Instead of reporting on determined youngsters and bleary-eyed parents, media outlets focused on the prowess and determination of the contestants. Rather than the dismissals of "never again" from players in 1981, both players and journalists alike mused on the bright future of the sport.

The 2012 *League of Legends* World Championships represent another step in the gradual legitimization and professionalization of organized game competitions, now commonly referred to as "e-sports." This label designates a wide range of concepts and institutions including game texts designed specifically to facilitate professional-level play; an industry of individual tournaments, league circuits, and sponsorship deals; and a culture of both players and spectators. Tens of millions of players play e-sports games on a regular basis each month. Major tournaments host competition brackets for dozens of different titles and offer prize pools ranging from free mer-

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<sup>3</sup> Tracy Lien, "League of Legends final attracts 8.2 million viewers, Season two Championships most-watched eSports event of all time," *Polygon*, October 23, 2012.  
<http://www.polygon.com/2012/10/23/3542424/league-of-legends-final-attracts-8-2-million-viewers-season-2>.

chandise to thousands and potentially millions of dollars. E-sports has received attention from major sports outlets like ESPN, and recently the United States government began issuing athletic visas to international players participating in U.S. tournaments.<sup>4</sup>

This project focuses on the ideological ramifications of what many consider to be the sport of and for the digital age. The expansion of e-sports is closely tied to the overall growth of digital games as an industry and an entertainment medium – the majority of games do, after all, focus on competition and “winning” in various ways. However, the rapid growth of e-sports is also a product of a cultural ethos centered on an ever-shifting idea of how network culture integrates into and reshapes the way society is structured. The same technology that rapidly expanded the scope of our communications potential is the driving force behind e-sports' growth. Most e-sports texts owe their breakout success and even their very existence to the Web and Internet technologies that have changed the speed and scope of our conversations. Like other media (or new developments in media forms that existed before the era of convergence) that share similarities to the Web, e-sports texts and culture are an important space of negotiation where larger cultural conversations play out.

These negotiations take place through the “sentimental education” of e-sports texts and the culture that surrounds them. The term, originally the title of a novel by Gustave Flaubert, was appropriated by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures*. He uses the phrase to describe the way a society spreads its cultural values affectively through sport and other cultural pastimes. His first major use of the term comes from his work studying the culture of cockfighting in Bali:

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Blake, “US issues ‘athlete’ visas to *League of Legends* players,” *BBC Newsbeat*, July 15, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/23321595>.

What the cockfight says it says in a vocabulary of sentiment – the thrill of risk, the despair of loss, the pleasure of triumph. Yet what it says is not merely that risk is exciting, loss depressing, or triumph gratifying, banal tautologies of affect, but that it is of these emotions, thus examples, that society is built and individuals put together. Attending cockfights and participating in them is, for the Balinese, a kind of sentimental education. What he learns there is what his culture's ethos and his private sensibility (or, anyway, certain aspects of them) look like when spelled out externally in a collective text; that the two are near enough alike to be articulated in such a text; and – the disquieting part – that the text in which this revelation is accomplished consists of a chicken hacking another mindlessly to bits.<sup>5</sup>

Through the cockfight, Geertz argues, the Balinese people learn what it means to be Balinese. Much like the cockfights of Bali, I argue that e-sports texts, the industry that supports them, and the subculture that surrounds them function as a new kind of sentimental education for digital culture and an economy in the digital era. These texts, aimed primarily at young adults, are framed by a neoliberal ideology that expresses itself in various ways throughout the whole of e-sports. To engage in the culture and texts of e-sports is to engage with the ideas of how older concepts of neoliberal thought with their emphasis on privatization and individualism collide with the emergent culture of a networked world and the idea of an open-access Web. By looking at *League of Legends*, arguably the largest single e-sports game currently featured in major tournaments, I examine how the ideology of neoliberalism undergirds e-sports texts and how it is complicated by opposing ideas of digital culture within the same text and its paratexts.

My use of the term “neoliberalism” is based primarily on David Harvey's definition in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Harvey describes the concept as “a theory of economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneuri-

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<sup>5</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, Basic Books Inc., 1973), 449.

al freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”<sup>6</sup> For Harvey, neoliberalism is primarily an economic force, one that integrates politics in order to ensure its survival and growth. The tenets of neoliberalism have, as Harvey chronicles in his work, been largely institutionalized as a result of political and economic shifts in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This continual shift towards a neoliberal state and economy has its price, however. As neoliberalism strives to “bring all human action into the domain of the market” it invariably excludes those who cannot contribute to a culture governed by markets and contractual relations.<sup>7</sup> Harvey, channeling Marx, argues that this poses a threat to true freedom as “those left outside the market system – a vast reservoir of apparently disposable people bereft of social protections and supportive social structures” can expect only “poverty, hunger, disease, and despair.”<sup>8</sup> Neoliberalism doesn't promise true freedom, only freedom to those who can afford to contribute to the market.

My focus is on how neoliberal labor practices are reinforced through *League of Legends* and e-sports as a whole and how those labor practices incorporate Digitization while being contested by conflicting ideals of digital culture. E-sports creates a privatized industry of competitions where the games themselves are owned, and the values of private control and individualism of the labor force are prevalent through the texts, industry, and culture of e-sports. This makes e-sports culture and e-sports texts prime spaces for exploring and understanding neoliberal ideology through the language of sentimental education. These spaces also act as host to opposing ideological forces; through e-sports, ideas of an open Web that support collective engagement and open access butt heads with the neoliberal concepts they contest. At stake is the potential for

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<sup>6</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 185.

change in a world increasingly driven by neoliberal market forces. Understanding this negotiation of ideologies within e-sports represents a step towards understanding the larger ideological debates taking place within digital culture.

### **Understanding E-Sports and *League of Legends***

E-sports can be broadly defined as the professionalization of competitive digital gaming. A useful starting point to understanding the phenomenon, this definition speaks to the core element of e-sports culture: players can, if they possess sufficient skill at a particular digital game, utilize their high-level play as their primary means of income. While the term is widely accepted when describing professional game competitions, there is little in the way of a codified definition of the term. This is primarily due to the fact that “e-sports” often carries different definitions for different situations and different people. It is for this reason that I believe spending some time developing a firm understanding of how this project employs the term is relevant and beneficial.

Like more traditional field sports and other competitive sports leagues, the term acts as an umbrella that covers a number of elements beyond the game itself. Consider the term “baseball” and its use by players, fans, and commentators. It refers to the game itself, of course, but “baseball” is also used to describe the hierarchy of professional leagues that make up the system of competitive play, the culture of fandom and spectatorship centered around the game, the industry of league operation and team promotion, and a lengthy history of professional-level play. To say a player or coach is “one of the best in baseball” is to chart their place in a wide network of interdependent entities.

The term “e-sports” operates in a similar manner. This can be a problematic situation; many popular discourses on the subject use the term without stopping to clarify exactly what e-sports *is*. This project focuses on three major areas of interest often described by the term e-sports and

examines each one in detail. When I use the term “e-sports” I am referring to one or, more often, all of three elements:

- The texts themselves. This includes a wide variety of games in a number of genres. Any digital game text could theoretically be par for the competitive course, but some games tend to emerge as favorites more than others. Among these are real-time strategy games (*StarCraft II* is by far the most popular competitive title in this genre); first-person shooters (the current *Call of Duty* title and *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* are popular titles); multiplayer online battle arenas, also known as MOBAs, or action real-time strategy games (this genre is dominated by two titles: *Dota 2* and *League of Legends*); sports games (*FIFA*, *Madden*, *NCAA Football*, etc.); and fighting games (*Super Street Fighter IV*, *Marvel vs. Capcom 3*).<sup>9</sup> Chapter One focuses on e-sports at the textual level.
- The culture of amateur play, fandom, and spectatorship. This includes producing and discussing new strategies and plans to improve play, playing the games at a non-professional level, and the culture of team fandom and spectatorship. Chapter Two looks at the culture of e-sports, particularly guide writing.
- The industry of organizing professional-level play. This includes organizations that hold tournaments and promote the growth of the sport, like Major League Gaming and the Electronic Sports League, as well as companies that produce high-quality equipment and team or tournament sponsors. Also included in this category is the production of live content both at a tournament event and broadcast to spectators online. Chapter Three focuses on the industry of e-sports, particularly tournament structure and broadcasting.

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<sup>9</sup> While I include fighting games as a popular e-sports genre, the culture of competitive play around these titles often distances itself from the term.



One of the best general overviews of all three elements of e-sports can be found in T.L. Taylor's book *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*. Acting as a sort of touchstone for this project, Taylor provides an ethnographic analysis of all of the mentioned components of e-sports as well as useful information on the lives of professional players. Beyond the general utility of this resource, Taylor is also quick to point out how “within the realm of rules and the actual negotiation of play we witness in e-sports how the artifact of the game is subject to complex social processes that mediate its competitive use.”<sup>10</sup> Throughout her analysis, Taylor pays careful attention to the fluidity of many elements of e-sports. Because of its relatively young age,<sup>11</sup> e-sports is still a contested arena, with many different forces negotiating its overall cultural impact. This project is in many ways about this negotiation. While the neoliberal ideology of e-sports is already well established, it is not absolute. Opposing ideologies of what e-sports should be and what it should represent are present throughout the realm of its influence.

Taylor's study of e-sports culture is incredibly useful in understanding the world of e-sports. However, it functions primarily as a general overview of e-sports. Taylor emphasizes many of the important issues of e-sports (the negotiation of work as play, problematic gender dynamics, etc.), but does not make any particularly strong ideological claims about them. This project helps add additional depth to the analysis presented by Taylor. Through it, I look at the ideological un-

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<sup>10</sup> T.L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 239.

<sup>11</sup> While e-sports has in some way been present since the meteoric rise in popularity of digital games in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it did not truly come into its own until the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century when networked gaming vastly expanded the potential for player competition and practice.

derpinnings of many of the points of negotiation she highlights and explore how they are practiced and sometimes resisted through e-sports.<sup>12</sup>

In order to study the sentimental education of e-sports in depth, I have chosen one text in particular to focus my analysis: the multiplayer online battle arena title *League of Legends*, released by Riot Games in 2009. Also described as an action real-time strategy game, *League of Legends* is the most popular title to be based off the influential *DotA* (Defense of the Ancients) mod for *Warcraft III*. The game is played by two teams of five players working together to destroy an opponent's base, called a nexus. This nexus is guarded by a number of defensive structures that must be eliminated before it can be destroyed. The game's camera and movement are similar to other real-time strategy titles. However, unlike an RTS like *StarCraft II*, each player only controls one character. This character, one of over 100 playable “champions,” escorts waves of shock troops towards the enemy nexus while simultaneously working to thwart the efforts of the opposition. The game presents an excellent candidate for a greater analysis of e-sports for several reasons. One of these is the sheer scope of *League of Legends*' share of the e-sports scene. A report published by DFC Intelligence in early 2013 places the title as one of the two most played games in the western world.<sup>13</sup> While the findings of the study have been challenged, the challengers argue that *League of Legends* is played more, not less, than the study concludes. The 2012 *League of Legends* world championships drew sell-out crowds to the Galen Center in Los Angeles and broke the records for most online viewers of an e-sports tournament, most concurrent viewers, and largest tournament prize pool (two million dollars, with one million awarded to

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor maintains an excellent overview of other e-sports literature on her own website that further expands on various elements of e-sports. It can be found at <http://ltaylor.com/teaching/e-sports-and-pro-gaming-literature/>.

<sup>13</sup> Mike Williams, “Dota 2 passes League of Legends as most played PC game in the West [Updated],” *gamesindustry International*, April 10, 2013. <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2013-04-10-dota-2-passes-league-of-legends-as-most-played-pc-game>.

the grand champion team). An infographic published by Riot Games after the conclusion of the 2012 championships asserts that *League of Legends* sees 12 million average players daily and 32 million active players monthly.<sup>14</sup> In short, *League of Legends* is a noteworthy research subject simply because it is the biggest and most influential e-sports title to date.

Riot's infographic also includes another important set of statistics. According to the provided data, 85% of players fall within the 16-30 age range and 60% are enrolled in or have completed some college education. This data could be exaggerated, of course, but stretching this truth only serves to prove the point. If the data given by Riot is legitimate, then *League of Legends* presents an important space for engaging the ideology of neoliberal labor. If it is deliberately exaggerated – it is a marketing tool, after all – then it indicates a strong desire to emphasize the importance of this demographic to both the developer and its potential investors. A game that is played so heavily by this demographic – college-age adults (mostly men, according to the infographic) who are preparing to enter the work force – offers a perfect space in which the ideology of labor can be explored and potentially contested by the group that will soon be engaging in the economic environment shaped by neoliberalism. The result is a game with immense pull both in the e-sports scene and with the demographic most concerned with exploring the ideological claims of neoliberal labor.

### **Practicing Work, Perfecting Play**

The growth of the development and expansion of network technologies in the last 20-25 years spurred an undeniably fundamental shift in the scope and importance of digital technologies in our lives. They have enabled new media forms and reshaped old ones, expanded the

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<sup>14</sup> “The Major League [of Legends]: League of Legends' Global Reach,” *Riot Games*, [http://majorleagueoflegends.s3.amazonaws.com/lol\\_infographic.png](http://majorleagueoflegends.s3.amazonaws.com/lol_infographic.png).

breadth of our communications, and impacted an innumerable number of economic, political, and cultural systems. This has, understandably, brought about a shift in economic practices that incorporate digital networking technology. The ramifications of these shifts are far reaching, and the new forms of labor practices they create can be seen in many areas of life. One of these is digital games, an entertainment medium that has arguably been affected by the network age more than any other. Understanding how and why these texts explore the ideas of this new labor means understanding how digital technologies are reshaping the economy, labor, and the scope of both in one's life.

Manuel Castells provides an overview of the growth of the networked economy and its implications in his foundational work *The Rise of the Networked Society*. In it, Castells presents a detailed overview of the shift to a new economic model centered around computerized information and global networks. Castells describes this new economy as being structured around three main components. “I call it informational, global, and networked to identify its fundamental distinctive features and to emphasize their intertwining.”<sup>15</sup> The new economy's dependence on “knowledge-based information” in order to spur productivity marks its informational nature. This transmission of information, as well as a diffusion of production and labor across the planet, inspires the global nature of the new economy. This globalization requires constant communication between elements of the same production chain as well as between competitors and other companies, defining it as networked. These three pillars of the new economy are driven by the technology of Digitization, and they radically impact every level of production as well as culture. Castells recognizes the importance of systems outside the economic sphere to this new economy, arguing that “the cultural-institutional attributes of the whole social system must be included in

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<sup>15</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000), 77.

the diffusion and implementation of the new technological paradigm.”<sup>16</sup> This inclusion of culture into the reworking of the economy through informational technologies manifests in e-sports, and it can be seen within the systems at work in *League of Legends* and its professional-level play.

Like the new economy itself, *League of Legends* (and other e-sports texts) is informational, global, and networked. The systems of mechanics in *league of Legends* are heavily focused on knowledge-based information, and understanding the different informational flows of the game is a key component to achieving victory. The game's tens of millions of players are active across the planet, and its professional play recognizes the game's global nature. This global existence also demands serious attention to its networked capacity. E-sports games like *League of Legends* are reliant on networks; the Web and its ability to facilitate play between parties across towns, countries, and continents is primarily responsible for the explosive growth of e-sports in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Without a robust network infrastructure, *League of Legends* could not maintain the prominent position it holds in the e-sports community. This intimate relationship to the aspects of Castells' new economy makes *League of Legends* a perfect opportunity for players to explore the ideological foundations necessary to promote the shift to an informational economy and to prepare the next generation of laborers for the economic environment it creates.

Some of the consequences of this transition to the informational economy on the individual laborer are further explored by Mark Deuze. In “Liquid Life, Work, and Media,” the opening chapter to his book *Media Work*, Deuze describes the disappearing distinction between the work and home spaces. Where a rift existed between the efforts of the laborer in the workplace and the leisure activities pursued outside of work during the Industrial Age, the arrival of the Information Age and the informational economy has closed this gap. Digital technology now allows for many

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<sup>16</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 100.

workers to bring their work home with them in an unprecedented way, allowing for an off-the-clock continuation of the work environment. Compounding this development are the neoliberal impulses of deregulation and individualization. The redefinition of employment as a far more temporary engagement places greater emphasis on the individual worker to go beyond expectations, creating a strong impulse to continue working long after leaving the office. “Not only do these developments emphasize the centrality of work to a contemporary understanding of life,” Deuze writes, “it also reminds us of how, following [Ulrich] Beck, the risks involved with survival in today's society are redistributed away from the state and the economy towards the individual.”<sup>17</sup> As a result of the informational economy and neoliberal developments, work time and leisure time are no longer entirely separate entities.

This complicating of the work space and the home space goes both ways. Just as Deuze's liquid life sees work intruding on the home and leisure, the activities of play also intrude on the work space. The same digital networking technologies that brought about the merging of the work and home spaces also collapse the boundaries between productive activity at work and consumer activities. Deuze explains how “the paradox of more time spent simultaneously at productive and consumptive activities can be resolved taking into consideration how both spheres of activity have converged in the contemporary mediapolis,” created a melding of both work and play.<sup>18</sup> With so many YouTube clips, sports highlights, and web series available through the same computing devices used to complete the day's workload, the activity of media consumption continues even while at work. This is the crux of Deuze's “liquid life:” the boundaries between work, home, and play have become ever-shifting and nebulous.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Deuze, *Media Work* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Deuze, *Media Work*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> While Deuze makes great use of the term “liquid life” he did not create it. This concept originates from Zygmunt

Throughout *Raising the Stakes*, Taylor repeats one of the great points of negotiation she focuses on in her book: the many ways e-sports redefines the difference between work and play. E-sports take what are, for many, media texts activated for leisure and transform them into a means of employment. Games are no longer “just for fun;” they represent the principal source of income for a select few professional players. E-sports have, in keeping with Deuze, created a subcultural liquid life that blurs the lines between entertainment and job advancement. This new blending of work and play also creates an industry that is, in many ways, founded on the neoliberal principles of the new economy. This places e-sports in an interesting position, acting as both a product of the liquid life and informational economy described by Deuze and Castells as well as an ideological gateway to prepare young adults entering the workplace for the rigors of this new economy.

Understanding why studying e-sports in this context is so worthwhile is best understood by answering a separate but related question: what differentiates e-sports from other traditional major sports, like baseball or football, and their professional leagues? In fact, the industry and culture of e-sports have much in common with other traditional sports models. Much of this is deliberate; designing the aesthetics of e-sports broadcasts and tournament formatting to mimic well-established norms of sports broadcasting and organization is an important act of legitimation for e-sports. Watching a *League of Legends* tournament is becoming increasingly similar to watching College Gameday on ESPN. The parallels go beyond broadcasting aesthetics and tournament structure, however. *League of Legends* and e-sports in general are situated in a much broader sociological framework of modern sports, and each of these sports can be examined in terms of the social and economic climates in which they rose to prominence.

Allen Guttman's *From Ritual to Record* looks at these connections in detail. Using a model drawn primarily from the work of sociologist Max Weber but also in relation to Marxist and Neo-Marxist critiques of sports, Guttman explores how we can see “in the microcosm (modern sports) the characteristics of the macrocosm (modern society).”<sup>20</sup> Guttman describes how modern sports relate to society and why certain sports were popularized in relation to the culture they originated from. Baseball, for example, rose to prominence as a practice that hearkened back to pastoralism. As more and more people moved out of the country and its fields and into the city and its factories during the Industrial Revolution, the green and open grassy field of the baseball diamond became a sort of pastoral oasis in the heart of cramped urban conditions. Football's popularity began a significant upward trend in the 1960s, a climb that Guttman explores in relation to the military conflicts of the era. Football's focus on aggression, shifting lines of conflict, and the drive to wrest territory from the opposition are similar to impulses of war, and the line markers are compared to the markers on a war room map. “What war no longer accomplishes,” Guttman explains, “football does.”<sup>21</sup> While the various modern sports share many characteristics Guttman describes, they differ in the connections they share with the culture that embraced them.

Seen in this context, e-sports can be understood as a sport that embodies the digital culture of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The rising popularity of e-sports can be partially attributed to its connection to the growing impact of digital technologies in our lives. While the other major sports have embraced digital media in various ways, the fact that e-sports are so closely associated with digital technologies means that they are afforded easier logistical access to digital communications channels. This affordance positions e-sports as a sport activity that speaks directly to the cultural zeitgeist. Neoliberalism and the digital are part of the basic foundations of e-sports, mak-

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<sup>20</sup> Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 80.

<sup>21</sup> Guttman, *From Ritual to Record*, 124.



ing e-sports excellent spaces to explore these neoliberal values. For instance, where the collective bargaining powers of players' unions in other sports are well established, there are no similar unions for e-sports players. This lack of collective bargaining and preference to individualism is a notable element of neoliberal economics, and the values of neoliberalism pervade e-sports in similar ways throughout the texts, culture, and industry of e-sports. Examples like this one point to the links between e-sports and neoliberalism, and these parallels make e-sports a sport that embodies the neoliberal values present in culture the same way other sports embodied the values of previous eras.

### **Reading Between the Lines**

Geertz's concept of sentimental education provides a useful starting point in understanding the ways ideology can be reinforced through a game text, especially ones with a substantial sub-culture and industry unique to them. Looking into the work of scholars whose primary focus is on game studies reveals a number of additional sources that bolster the potential for games to deliver a sentimental education and provide their own methods to better understand the presence of neoliberalism and its complications in e-sports texts. I will be focusing on two of those here: the idea of “gamer theory” proposed by McKenzie Wark in his book of the same name, and “procedural rhetoric,” a concept described by Ian Bogost in several works including his book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*.

Published as both an online document and in print, *Gamer Theory* presents an argument for looking at games a reflection of a world made over by games. One of the primary assertions of the text, Wark argues that when looking outside games one will only find a world that is a game itself. Wark terms this reality-as-game “gamespace.” Through the expansion of digital technolo-

gies and the “military entertainment complex” the world has evolved into one that wishes to be a game but cannot. Wark describes the ideals of gamespace and its real consequences:

The real world appears as a video arcadia divided into many and varied games. Work is a rat race. Politics is a horse race. The economy is a casino. [...] Games are no longer a pastime, outside or alongside of life. They are now the very form of life, and death, and time, itself. These games are no joke. When the screen flashes the legend game over, you are either dead, or defeated, or at best out of quarters.<sup>22</sup>

Gamespace is “the world as it appears to the gamer: a matrix of endlessly varying games [...] all reducible to the same principles, all producing the same kind of subject who belongs to this gamespace in the same way — as a gamer to a game.”<sup>23</sup> In a game, players all begin on a level playing field, working their way up through the ranks to achieve the most “points” by the end. Of course, unlike games, gamespace cannot produce the level playing field to which it aspires. Instead, argues Wark, gamespace is a shadow of the games it aspires to be, a carnival fun house reflection of the texts it emulates. To Wark, this means that the ultimate means of cultural subversion are in the hands of the gamers. If gamespace seeks to rework reality as a game, then understanding games and their inner workings gives us the tools to undermine the efforts of gamespace. This is gamer theory in a nutshell: the idea that games reflect the ideals of gamespace and that, by understanding the ideology of games, the process can be subverted.

It is no coincidence that e-sports and its texts have risen to such popularity in the age of big data. Like the many systems of customization and strategy at work in *League of Legends*, the digital world of Gamespace seeks to reduce its parts to a quantifiable series of digits. A game like *League of Legends*, with its emphasis on statistics and efficiency, represents an excellent space for exploring the ideological norms of a digitally-driven economic culture. When ap-

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<sup>22</sup> McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2007), 006.

<sup>23</sup> Wark, *Gamer Theory*, 015.

proached from Wark's gamer theory, this view of *League of Legends* makes this link clear, and it offers a useful tool to understanding these connections between *League of Legends* and the Gamespace that desires to replicate its success.

This also means, like Wark's gamer theory, that understanding the ideological workings of *League of Legends* will give scholars and players the tools needed to subvert this ideology. By looking at the sentimental education of e-sports through the lens of gamer theory, we can more clearly spot not only the ways that the neoliberal ethos is present in the text but also how it is being challenged within the culture and even the text itself. Doing so illuminates both a dialogue within the culture of e-sports and one within Gamespace as a whole, one that challenges the ideals Gamespace strives to achieve. While the hyper-competitive nature of the text itself makes resistive practices more difficult, moments of such resistant practices can be found in the game's many paratexts. Chapter Two explores how some of these resistive practices operate within the collective intelligence project of *League of Legends* fandom, and additional resistive paratexts are explored in the conclusion.

Wark's gamer theory is primarily concerned with the importance of games as touchstones for understanding and resisting gamespace. In "The Rhetoric of Video Games," Ian Bogost addresses similar issues, but utilizes a different approach. Rather than focus on the statements games make about culture, Bogost proposes a theoretical framework for understanding how games make those statements. This framework is what Bogost calls "procedural rhetoric."

Procedural rhetoric is the idea that rule systems can be persuasive. While attention is often given to the ways narrative functions as a rhetorical agent in games, Bogost argues that the mechanics of the game can also act rhetorically. By looking at the way that a game's rules engineer its "possibility space" and how the rules influence a player's navigation through that space,

we can observe a mode of rhetoric all its own. The possibility space is “the myriad configurations the player might construct to see the ways the processes inscribed in the system work.”<sup>24</sup> This is an area defined by rules. In any given game, only certain actions are possible, and the limitations on what a player can and cannot do are placed by the rule systems that govern the game's behavior. Playing a game means exploring the area within these boundaries. Procedural rhetoric appears through this act of exploration. It operates “not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models.”<sup>25</sup>

Bogost introduces his chapter with an example of procedural rhetoric in *Animal Crossing*. He describes the process of his son understanding the system of lending and mortgage brokering in the game. *Animal Crossing* is a game of collecting furniture and decorating homes, but the size of a player's home must grow to further accommodate their increasing wealth. This means taking out yet another loan, limiting the amount a player can spend on purchasing more items. The game, according to Bogost, is “also a game about long-term debt. It is a game about the repetition of mundane work necessary to support contemporary material property ideals. It is a game about the bittersweet consequences of acquiring goods and keeping up with the Joneses. [...] In its model, the game simplifies the real world in order to draw attention to relevant aspects of that world.”<sup>26</sup> The cycle of debt relief and consumer culture becomes a means of exploring the tenets of consumer culture; this is procedural rhetoric hard at work.

Procedural rhetoric's focus on the rule systems that define and govern a game text make it an excellent theoretical tool for the analysis of an e-sports game like *League of Legends*. The

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<sup>24</sup> Ian Bogost, “The Rhetoric of Video Games,” in *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, ed. Katie Salen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 122.

<sup>25</sup> Bogost, “The Rhetoric of Video Games,” 125.

<sup>26</sup> Bogost, “The Rhetoric of Video Games,” 119.

hyper-competitive nature of high-level competitive play leaves little room for the narrative elements included in most games. Instead, professional players focus on the rules and mechanics of the game and work to utilize them in order to yield the greatest strategic benefit. *League of Legends*, like most games, contains its own narrative exposition and world, one couched in the familiar tropes of many fantasy games. However, this has little ultimate bearing on the competitive nature of the title.

This is why Bogost's procedural rhetoric is such a useful device for understanding *League of Legends*. Procedural rhetoric shifts the act of meaning making into the realm of ludology and mechanics rather than narratology and story. Competitive *League of Legends* works in a similar manner. While there are many players who engage with the text's lore and characters (evidenced by the large amount of fan creations that are shared through various channels), those who are concerned with competitive success focus solely on the mechanics of the game. In order to properly understand the ideological foundations of a text like *League of Legends* – one that emphasizes rules and not narrative content – we must employ a theoretical framework that also places its chief focus on the rules of a game. Procedural rhetoric fills that position. Understanding the processes at work in a typical *League of Legends* game, especially the ones that govern player income and character advancement, is integral in understanding the impact of neoliberalism on the text and its culture.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> This does not, however, account for the narrative created through playing a given match. The process of narrativizing play, especially professional play, is a noteworthy element of e-sports and will be discussed in Chapter 3.

## Chapter Outline

Geertz's original project on the sentimental education of the Balinese cockfight focuses on far more than the text itself; it also analyzes the many cultural practices that surround the fights. The process on betting on fights, raising cocks, challenging other families or other communities, and the pageantry associated with the actual fight are all considered in describing the sentimental education of the sport. I employ a similar approach in my efforts to explore the ideological underpinnings of *League of Legends* and e-sports, focusing on the three primary areas of interest described earlier. Each forms an important part of *League of Legends* play and the culture of spectatorship that promotes it, and these elements also reinforce and challenge the neoliberal ideology of the text in different ways.

Chapter One focuses on the game text itself, offering a close reading of *League of Legends*. The game is deliberately designed to promote a substantial amount of emergent gameplay, and it includes many different systems of customization to allow players ample room to develop new strategies and tactics. These systems, while somewhat complex, are important in understanding how the text operates ideologically, so this chapter explores the main ideas of the game in detail. I will also utilize this moment to examine how the individual components work to perpetuate the ideology of neoliberal labor in the digital era. At its heart, *League of Legends* is a game of maximizing financial income (in this case a generic “gold” currency) while stymieing the opponent's own opportunity to do so. This idea encompasses almost every area of optimizing one's strategy; the choice of a team's character composition, item selection, and general tactics are all developed with the goal of generating a significant gold advantage, leading to a power imbalance between the two teams. This emphasis on optimizing efficiency, especially in relation to income, is especially noteworthy given the predominant number of regular players preparing to enter the job

market. The game also promotes a balance between individual achievement and group dynamism through its general strategy and its matchmaking system. Only two of the five players on a team typically work as a group for the majority of the match, placing a substantial emphasis on individual work ethic. This is further reinforced through the game's matchmaking, allowing players to competitively rank themselves in matchmaking queues designed for one or two people (as opposed to playing with a predetermined team). Here, individual players are potentially discovered by prominent teams and brought up to the semi-professional or professional level.

Chapter Two examines a key element of the fan culture that surrounds *League of Legends*: the discourse of strategy and the posting of player-created instructional material. In order to better understand and employ the complex systems at work in *League of Legends*, many players consult guides for various game characters written by other players. These guides are often critiqued through crowd sourcing efforts by the player community. Such efforts represent an important component in developing a player's presence within the semi-professional community of *League of legends* play.

Another major pillar in the discourse of *League of Legends* strategy is the number of guides that are written by the professional players themselves. These guides often receive more prominent spots on hosting web sites and are generally considered the go-to source for acquiring information about the game. In an industry where most players often function as their own agents and geopolitical team loyalties are far more diffuse, professional players must adopt a neoliberal sense of self-promotion by writing guides and streaming practice sessions online.

This practice is particularly noteworthy because of the ways it highlights the tensions between neoliberalism and ideas of a moral economy within digital culture. Players are compelled to post guides and create spaces for amateur education not just for self-promotion but because

there is an expectation within the community that they will do so. As players who once benefited from the same systems in order to reach professional status, the community expresses an expectation that professional players will help them potentially do the same. Drawing on the concepts of moral economy and the open-source movement, I will examine the ways that the culture of guide writing and streaming brings the contention between neoliberalism and traditional concepts of the open Web to the forefront. Many aspects of e-sports are an ideological battleground, and the tug-of-war between the gift economy ethos of the open Web and the “walled gardens” of the Internet is most apparent in the negotiations between players and professionals over strategy guides and video streaming.

Chapter Three will focus on the presentation of *League of Legends* as a spectator sport, contrasting its neoliberal ethos with the more traditionally corporate structure of other sports leagues. The chapter will examine the *League of Legends* Championship series, Riot's own professional tournament league.<sup>28</sup> In a system similar to the British soccer practice of relegation, the LCS selects its professional team roster based on a meritocracy, placing the lowest ranking teams in a tournament with semi-professional teams to decide the final four spots in the eight-team North American circuit. This process, along with the practice of “shoutcasting” matches, is interrogated in relation to the ideology of neoliberalism and how it is present in the sport's spectator presentation. This presentation draws on the aspects of *League of Legends*'s sentimental education examined in the previous chapters and focuses on how these aspects are then magnified for the viewer through tournament structure and commentary. By examining a professional *League of Legends* tournament broadcast – the 2013 World Championships – we see how the discourse

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<sup>28</sup> The LCS operates primarily in North America and Europe. Riot cooperates with established e-sports broadcasters in South Korea, China, and other Asian markets in deciding the participants for the world championships.



of experts and analysts frame the neoliberal values practiced in the game to reinforce their importance.

## WHAT'S IN A GAME?

Whenever I read Geertz's "Deep Play," I am always struck by the level of intricacy he uses to describe the processes of the cockfight. Geertz presents detailed descriptions and accounts of all the many elements of a cockfight long before the phrase "sentimental education" makes an appearance in the text. The types of cocks and their preparation, the rules and flow of a fight, the system of betting used at cockfighting events, and more are thoroughly explained in what amounts to the majority of the essay. I always finish the essay feeling like I've just read "everything you ever wanted to know about cockfighting but were too afraid to ask."

Why does Geertz spend so much time describing the many facets of the cockfight in his essay? He likely could have compacted his overview of the Balinese cockfight to make time for an expanded analysis of its consequences. This attention to detail is, in part, due to the style of "thick description" he popularized and explained in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, the same book that contains his essay on the Balinese cockfight. The lengthy description of cockfighting culture also sets up an important point Geertz makes in "Deep Play:" every aspect of the cockfight somehow imparts the sentimental education of Balinese culture, so every aspect of the sport should receive ample attention. This is particularly true for the lengthy description Geertz gives of the systems of betting that accompany a cockfight. The complex system of side bets may seem to be a practice that deserves only a brief mention as part of a larger general description of the atmosphere of a fight, but Geertz utilizes this thick description to explore a connection between the side bets, the center bet between the two competitors, and the ways that one's status within the community becomes a currency wagered in the ring alongside one's livelihood. As the bets grow larger and the fight more evenly matched, the cockfight becomes less about gambling and more about a fighter's status. This transformation lies at the heart of the cockfight's importance:

What makes Balinese cockfighting deep is thus not money in itself, but what, the more of it that is involved the more so, money causes to happen: the migration of the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cockfight. [...] [T]he cockfight is – or more exactly, deliberately is made to be – a simulation of the social matrix, the involved system of cross-cutting, overlapping, highly corporate groups – villages, kingroups, irrigation societies, temple congregations, "castes" – in which its devotees live. And as prestige, the necessity to affirm it, defend it, celebrate it, justify it, and just plain bask in it (but not, given the strongly ascriptive character of Balinese stratification, to seek it), is perhaps the central driving force in the society, so also – ambulant penises, blood sacrifices, and monetary exchanges aside – is it of the cockfight.<sup>29</sup>

Geertz uses his thick description of the Balinese cockfight to make clear this transition, and without that level of depth his ultimate claims about the sentimental education imparted through the cockfight would be far less persuasive. In order to truly understand how the system of values taught through the cockfighting work, we have to come to a thorough understanding of the cockfight in all its permutations.

Geertz's essay and his ultimate takeaways act as a theoretical model for this project. In the same way that the cockfight allow for an exploration of the values of Balinese culture through an education of sentiment, I believe that *League of Legends* and other e-sports texts create a similar space to experiment with the values of neoliberal labor. In order to properly explore the sentimental education of *League of Legends*, we must, like Geertz's "Deep Play," examine the many aspects of the text in detail. The games that most often become the centerpieces of e-sports competitions feature many different systems of rules and mechanics that influence their play. For many, this creates much of the appeal of "e-sports games." Their many elements allow for a greater amount of emergent gameplay and strategic development by the game's players.

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<sup>29</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 436.

This also means that most popular e-sports games have many different parts that must be understood in order to properly follow and appreciate high-level professional play.

This chapter focuses solely on *League of Legends* as a text, and it does so to accomplish a number of interdependent goals. By looking closely at the many components that make up the game, I hope to impart a better understanding of the order that makes up what at first glance appears to be a whirlwind of on-screen chaos. *League of Legends* is a difficult game to watch for those unfamiliar with its play, and a working knowledge of the game is incredibly beneficial in understanding how the culture of spectatorship and fandom surrounding the text operate. Highlighting how the elements of *League of Legends* function and how they influence each other and the game's ultimate outcome also paints a bigger picture of sentimental education imparted at the textual level. The game's emphasis on individual performance, statistical knowledge, efficient play, and effective wealth acquisition align with many of the ideological tenets of economic neoliberalism. To excel at *League of Legends* often means incorporating a set of neoliberal values into one's style of play. These values can also be seen at work in the "new economy" forged by neoliberal labor and Digitization. Many parallels exist between the skills needed to succeed at *League of Legends* and those required by the new economy workplace. Examining Manuel Castells' typology of typical workers in the new economy and their associated skills makes clear several parallels between what it takes to win in *League of Legends* and what it takes to work in the new economy. *League of Legends* has a sizable amount of mechanical complexity, but carefully studying it reveals an important piece of e-sports' sentimental education puzzle.

## The Spice of Life

*League of Legends* is generally categorized generically as an Action RTS (Real-Time Strategy) or a MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena), a genre distinction created by Riot Games to describe *League of Legends* and similar titles. While the game maintains many elements of the RTS genre from which it originates (progression in uninterrupted time as opposed to a turn-based system, an isometric camera angle, a “point-and-click” movement control scheme, etc.), it differs in that, unlike RTS titles like *StarCraft* or *Age of Empires* where players command large numbers of military units, each player controls only one character. These characters, dubbed “champions” in the game's narrative flavor, each possess different abilities and stats that set them apart from each other. The selection of champions available is quite vast. As of this writing, there are 115 champions available to play, and the 116<sup>th</sup> playable champion has been announced. Champion concepts are pulled from a variety of sources, but most of them embody characters from myths, legends, fantasy media, comics, and genre texts around the world. Examples include Gangplank, a pirate; Janna, a sorceress who commands the weather; Ahri, an anthropomorphized nine-tailed fox; and Galio, an animated gargoyle.

Selecting which champion to play in a match extends beyond personal preference. Each champion excels at certain types of actions within a game, and one's choice of champion is a major factor in deciding what role a player will fulfill for his or her team (more on this later). Combinations of champions can also exhibit various levels of strategic synergy. The abilities of one champion may work particularly well in concert with the abilities of another, so choosing champions that work well together becomes an important part of putting together a team's match roster. This is further complicated by the “picks and bans” stage of ranked and professional play. In this pre-match event, each team alternates drafting champions for their team. Only one player in

the match can play a specific champion in a given game (both teams couldn't use Galio, for example), and selection is further hindered by the selection of six champions (three chosen by each team) who are prohibited from being used by either side. This format makes the process of champion selection an important element of the match, acting as both an early point of strategic deliberation and an opportunity to deny the opposition beneficial synergy through champion bans.

While each champion brings their own unique set of abilities to a match, the number of play customization options does not end after picks and bans. Players earn gold, a generic form of currency, over the course of the game, and that gold can be used to purchase items that grant characters increased stats, like more health or boosts to the damage of their attacks. These items often also add additional abilities to a champion such as brief invulnerability or a way to remove hindering effects from a champion. These items can substantially affect how a champion behaves in play, and the “item build” developed by a player becomes a key part of one's own strategy.

Where item purchases allow players to customize and specialize their selected champions in a given match (the items and the gold used to buy them apply only to the game in which they were acquired), runes and masteries give players the opportunity to affect their champions' stats and abilities in a more permanent way. The increase gained from these two systems, one adding flat stat increases (runes) and one provided stats as well as additional benefits (masteries) are chosen before a match begins and, unlike items, cannot be adjusted during a match. These two systems, combined with the in-game upgrades from items, allow for a great deal of flexibility in how an individual champion can perform. When coupled with the volume of champions available for selection, the game presents an enormous amount of variability in how it can be played.

This variability exists for a number of reasons. *League of Legends* does not have an initial purchase price, so Riot's primary means of making the game profitable come from selling the ability to acquire new champions instantaneously (as opposed to unlocking them through play) and selling “skins” that alter the appearance of champions. A larger pool of champions to play means that Riot can maximize the number of champion and skin unlocks it sells. The amount of options a player has access to both in terms of champions to play and ways to customize their build also keeps the game fresh for players, encouraging them to continue to play (and, for Riot, hopefully to purchase more). Players value this customization for its potential in generating new gameplay strategies and builds. By presenting players with a larger pool of potential build options, there is more room for individuals to develop new ways to excel at the game. This has proven to be a major driving force in many successful e-sports games. The shelf life of a game's time at the top of the e-sports food chain often depends on how long players can continue to find room for innovation in their strategy.

Succeeding at *League of Legends* is highly dependent on the ability of a player to effectively sift through the different systems of the game and select the champion, item build, rune set, and mastery page that will most benefit their current situation. Accomplishing this feat means understanding how a champion fits into a particular team lineup and how the various options available can increase that champion's power both in terms of performing his or her task effectively and stymieing the opposition's ability to do so. Players must be familiar with as many champions as possible in order to properly plan an optimal strategy and to anticipate the tactics of opposing players. Knowing the ability sets of each champion is not enough; players must also be able to deduce which champions can “counter” each other by nullifying the advantages of an opponent and how to exploit such advantages through itemization and play. The mental capacity

to understand how all the pieces fit together and to utilize that information rapidly during a match is one of the most celebrated skills in *League of Legends*, and a player's champion knowledge is often one of the deciding factors of a matchup. Skilled players are lauded for their ability to play a wide variety of champions, keeping their opponents guessing as to what their overall strategy might be.

David Harvey describes how the growth of neoliberalism “requires technologies of information creation and capacities to accumulate, store, transfer, analyse [*sic*], and use massive databases to guide decisions in the global marketplace.”<sup>30</sup> As markets become increasingly global and technologies further increase the rate and distance we can exchange information effectively, the speed of market transactions can further increase. Labor is immaterialized so that it can better span continents. This “time-space compression” created by globalization means that market exchanges once deemed unfeasible because of their geographic hindrances now become commonplace. This increase in speed generates continuously growing amounts of information that must be effectively processed in order to be used effectively, and the demands on the rapidity of this processing expand as the factor of space-time compression increases, further reducing the isolation of global markets. The informational society Castells describes arises from this transformation.

In a neoliberal market climate such as this, the ability to quickly process information becomes highly desirable, and a game like *League of Legends* mirrors this desire. The very space-time compression that creates increasingly globalized markets also drives the popularity of e-sports texts like *League of Legends*. Using the Internet, players can compete with each other across great distances, minimizing the need for travel in order to practice against a wide variety

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<sup>30</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 3.



of opponents. It is no surprise then that a sport built on the rapid exchange of information also holds it as one of its most prized attributes in players. *League of Legends*, like the neoliberal global marketplace, celebrates players' capacity to understand and effectively utilize large amounts of information quickly. The same practices that bring about victory on the Fields of Justice are needed to further expand the global reach of markets. This is sentimental education at work; the thrill of winning brought about by learning to employ the large amounts of strategic information in *League of Legends* creates a space where neoliberal values are celebrated in the text.

This celebration of processing large amounts of game information in order to create a noticeable strategic advantage is not unique to e-sports. Games, especially digital games, have a long history of players working hard to “min-max” their characters and play styles.<sup>31</sup> This min-maxing outlook in many games enthusiasts is one of the reasons texts like *League of Legends* become popular e-sports titles. Where, in other games, a large database of knowledge and careful implementation of that knowledge may give a player an advantage on a relatively small scale *League of Legends* offers players an opportunity (or the idea of an opportunity) to showcase this skill on a global scale and for substantial prizes. This scale is described in relation to cock-fighting by Geertz as a matches “depth.” He explains how cockfights where the cocks involved are less evenly matched feature a smaller wager between the owners, and the amount of status

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<sup>31</sup> “Min-maxing” is a term used to describe a drive by some players to create characters or gameplay with optimal effectiveness. Joris Dormans defines the practice as “players making choices with the sole purpose of creating the most powerful and effective character as possible.” An excellent example can be found in the *Pokémon* games, the flagships of Nintendo's tremendously popular multimedia franchise. A player can play the game using whatever team of pokémon and moves he or she chooses and still be able to complete the game. Some players, however, divest an enormous amount of time understanding the mechanics of *Pokémon* to create the most effective teams possible. An example of this kind of behavior in *Pokémon* can be found at <http://serebii.net/games/ivs.shtml>.

See Joris Dormans, “On the Role of the Die: A brief ludologic study of pen-and-paper roleplaying games and their rules,” *Game Studies* 19, no. 1 (2006), <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/dormans>.

that is gained or lost through the fight is less substantial as a result. By contrast, matches with evenly matched cocks can feature sizable wagers between the two parties. Because the amount of status and prestige associated with these matches is so much greater, they are the center of attention at a cockfight, and thus the chief place where sentimental education is experienced. Geertz uses the idea of depth to describe this. A deep match will feature more evenly matched cocks, a larger bet, higher stakes, more importance, and will act as a greater expression of Balinese values. While other games also feature similar efforts to maximize a character's efficiency, the amount of money and prestige on the line in a professional *League of Legends* match makes these contests deeper in terms of the values they explore. *League of Legends* places players who can navigate the many systems of its mechanics on an ever-growing pedestal, and that further emphasizes the importance of these skills to its population of fans. In the same way that the deep cockfights Geertz describes carry more weight in terms of the values they celebrate, the scale of *League of Legends* and e-sports makes practices like these – ones that are conducive to a neoliberal global market, more compelling to players.

### **Life on the Rift**

Once players have selected their champions and made any final modifications to their starting item builds that might be necessary, a match can begin in earnest. The game transitions from the pick and ban interface into Summoner's Rift, the map and game mode that dominates *League of Legends* play.<sup>32</sup> The map forms a rough square mirrored diagonally. In two opposite corners of Summoner's Rift are the bases for each team. The centerpiece of each base, a large crystal known as a nexus, is the ultimate game objective; destroying the enemy team's nexus brings victory to

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<sup>32</sup> There are two other officially supported game modes in *League of Legends* that present variations on the game's core mechanics, but Summoner's Rift is the only format used in professional competitions.

the glorious conquerors. Safeguarding each nexus is a network of defensive towers that deal substantial damage to players and other defensive structures. Players must fight their way across the map, escorting shock troops known as minions to assist them in clearing a path to the opposing nexus. These minions follow a predetermined course to the enemy team's base, forming three pathways known as lanes. There are three lanes in Summoner's Rift: one that follows the upper edge of the map, one that follows the lower edge, and a lane that cuts through the middle of the play area. The majority of gameplay consists of aiding waves of minions as they work their way up the map lanes while thwarting the opponent's attempts to do the same.<sup>33</sup>

Typical team strategy at the outset of the game (known as the laning phase of a match) involves dividing the team in a way that ensures maximum coverage of the map while also maximizing the amount of resources each player can obtain. Players assume five different team roles and corresponding map positions: top, a player who fights to control the map's upper lane; mid, who escorts minions in the middle lane; the AD (short for attack damage) carry, a player using a champion who deals large amounts of damage at the cost of survivability, watches the lower map lane; the support, who assists the AD carry to improve their general life expectancy; and a jungler, a player who spends most of his or her time in the “jungle” space between lanes and launching surprise attacks (known as “ganks”) against opponents. These roles are delegated through a combination of team deliberation and champion selection. Once minions begin to work their way across the map (approximately 1 minute, forty seconds into the match), players move to their designated lanes and begin “farming” enemy minions. Whenever a player (as opposed to a minion or other computer-controlled entity) lands the killing blow on an enemy minion, he or she receives a reward of gold for the kill. Much of the laning phase focuses on this mechanic;

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<sup>33</sup> A map of Summoner's Rift can be found here: <http://i.imgur.com/wfinZHp.jpg>.

players endeavor to kill as many enemy minions as possible, earning gold to purchase additional items in the process.

This mechanic and the game strategies that are built around it forms an important element of the *League of Legends* value system. Minions aren't the only way a player can earn additional gold; killing players, destroying towers, and clearing the jungle of various “neutral” (labeled as such because, unlike minions, they are not associated with either team) monsters all yield some amount of gold. Virtually every meaningful action in a game of *League of Legends* can be quantified into capital. Harvey describes how neoliberalism demands that “if markets do not exist [...] then they must be created, by state action if necessary,”<sup>34</sup> and the translation of meaningful action in *League of Legends* into gold mirrors that demand. The gold economy of a *League of Legends* game makes every action into a market force. Playing a *League of Legends* match becomes an entrepreneurial cycle. Wiping out waves of enemy minions, killing members of the opponent's team, and destroying towers yields additional gold. That gold can be used to outfit a champion with more powerful items, boosting his or her ability to outperform the opposition. This newly-created power imbalance leads to more victories, more items, and, if all goes according to plan, eventually victory. The acquisition of capital becomes the driving force behind martial success in Summoner's Rift.

A telling indication of this focus on capital can be found in the game's spectator client. A necessary component for an e-sports title, the spectator client allows players to watch other games in progress (or in replay) and is also used to broadcast professional competition events to viewers. The scoreboard at the top of a spectator's screen lists three different values: how many defensive structures a team has destroyed, how many times a team has killed an opposing player,

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<sup>34</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2.

and how much gold each team has earned.<sup>35</sup> While kills, arguably the flashiest element of a match, are most prominently displayed the gold count is often used as a strong indicator of which team is in the lead. Maintaining a 2,000 or 3,000 gold advantage indicates that a team is pulling ahead, while gold differences approaching 8,000 or 10,000 gold are telling signs that one team has established a clear dominance over the other. Commentators often describe the extent to which one team is leading another using this metric, and teams staging comebacks are often described as trying to minimize the gold advantage the winning team currently holds. The dragon, a neutral monster worth a substantial amount of gold, is often a hotly contested objective on the map and the sight of many large skirmishes (known as “teamfights”) between players. Players being picked off or towers being destroyed may be much flashier symbols of success in a game, but financial success is the true driving force behind most *League of Legends* victories.

Much of the overall strategy of *League of Legends*, especially during the laning phase, revolves around a team's ability to make as much money as possible, and a large portion of this standard strategy involves a focus on maximizing individual efforts, akin to the “[liberation of] individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills” Harvey describes as a central tenet of neoliberal economic policy.<sup>36</sup> Three of the five team members (top, mid, and jungler) fight in their lanes (or, in the case of a team's jungler, the jungle) alone for most of the early game. The bottom lane, while occupied by two players (AD carry and support) is focused on funneling money to one person (the carry). It is up to the individual to earn his or her keep in Summoner's Rift. While some objectives, namely slaying the dragon or destroying an enemy tower, give gold to the entire

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<sup>35</sup> An example of the spectator client and scoreboard can be found at:

[http://images1.wikia.nocookie.net/\\_\\_cb20130905114339/leagueoflegends/images/9/9b/Standard\\_Full.jpg](http://images1.wikia.nocookie.net/__cb20130905114339/leagueoflegends/images/9/9b/Standard_Full.jpg).

<sup>36</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2.

team, most of the gold earned cannot be transferred to other players. The in-game economic success of a player must be secured on his or her own.

There are exceptions to this policy. Most notably, the carry and the support maintain a relationship where the support allows most of the gold earned in his or her lane (namely through champion and minion kills) to be taken by the carry. Similarly, one of the jungler's primary responsibilities is to "gank" lanes, ambushing the opposing team and creating an unanticipated advantage. During these events, the jungler will often attempt to allow the carry or player fighting in lane to land the final blow and secure the lion's share of gold in order to ensure a more rapid increase in income for those players. While these two may not be earning as much gold themselves, they are working to ensure that the team's income is sent where it is needed most. Champions chosen for support or jungle roles can often perform the respective tasks reasonably well without large amounts of gold to spend on items, so they push gold to champions that receive the greater benefit. This still places high expectations of individual performance on the two players; instead of securing wealth for themselves, they are expected to help those at the top ascend even higher. Like a neoliberal work environment, teamwork is still an important (just not as important as individualism) element in *League of Legends*. Communication between players is paramount to success, and being able to plan movements between lanes in order to catch an opponent off guard can decide a match. This is especially true in the later stages of the game, where players often engage in five-on-five "teamfights." The importance of teamwork in teamfights and elsewhere is juxtaposed against the emphasis on individualism in many areas of the game. This has actually become a sizable issue within the community, especially in games where players are assembled into a team randomly and their success or failure could determine whether or not they rise to the next level in the game's ranking system. This has led to a large amount of negativity,

verbal abuse, and criticism of other players (in what is described as a “toxic” community), and causes a number of issues within *League of Legends* fandom and play culture. Riot has recently launched a campaign titled “Teamwork OP” (short for “overpowered”) in an attempt to mitigate the problems this tension between individualism and teamwork often causes.<sup>37</sup>

The reason for positioning players in lanes this way is to acquire gold for the team's champions in the most efficient way possible. Splitting the primary damage dealing players into individual lanes ensures that each will be able to increase the amount of gold entering their coffers. It is an exercise in maximizing profits; players earn more money when they aren't taking it from each other. Obstacles that impede this process (including the opposition) are removed as quickly as possible. Even junglers, who don't fight in a designated lane, are concerned primarily with an efficient laning phase. One of their chief sources of additional gold, the neutral monsters scattered in “camps” throughout the forested areas of the map, must be killed as quickly as possible to allow a jungler time to set up and execute proper ambushes against the other team. A particular player's “jungle clear time” is an important statistic, and one that is brandished as a badge of honor. The best junglers are the ones who can quickly earn their keep and then assist the team by stopping opponents from doing the same.

The discourse surrounding professional play often echoes these values. A player's ability to earn gold is often compared head-to-head against his laning opponent and is used as a metric for understanding who is outperforming the other. The spectator client presents both a creep score (how many minions a player has killed) and individual gold counts (rather than the lump sum displayed on the primary scoreboard at the top of the screen) for each player, giving spectators a quick and easy method of sizing up the performance of players during the laning phase. Players

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<sup>37</sup> An example of the Teamwork OP campaign can be found here: <http://na.leagueoflegends.com/en/news/game-updates/player-behavior/does-teamwork-win-more-games>.

are praised for their ability to land killing blows on minions repeatedly, and commentators often fawn over a player's particularly high minion kill count. These counts are expected to be earned individually, and players are derided when they cannot hold their own in a lane. On occasions when a player (usually in the top or mid lane) is being pressed to the point where he or she cannot reliably earn gold the jungler will spend a large portion of his or her time assisting them and forcing his or her lane opponent to back off. This is often described in demeaning terms, and commentators are quick to point out when a jungler is forced to “babysit” another player's lane. The player profiles on Riot's official web page for its professional circuit track, among other things, a player's average gold earned per minute and the total amount of gold earned over the course of the season.<sup>38</sup> A popular tactic in current professional play, known as “split pushing,” involves one player (usually the top laner) separating from the rest of the group during the later stages of a match and escorting minions alone. This ability to hold one's ground, usually against more than one player if things go awry, is highly prized in both champions that can make this strategy plausible and players who can execute it.

All of these mechanics (itemization, rune and mastery choices, laning tactics, gold acquisition) create a system of procedural rhetoric that echoes the neoliberal economic ideal. Embracing these ideals within the game is usually the best path to achieving victory in Summoner's Rift. Rising through the ranks of *League of Legends* competition means learning to properly practice a set of skills that are aligned with the tenets of neoliberalism and highly desired in a neoliberal market. The desire to hone these skills is further reinforced through the affective motivation of victory and the heavy-heartedness of defeat. The game's position as a burgeoning professional sport and the discourse of analysts and fans instill the importance of these values. Winning at

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<sup>38</sup> See <http://na.lolesports.com/season3/split2/players/reginald> for an example.



*League of Legends* is about being able to effectively utilize large amounts of information to accrue capital more effectively than a rival, and it is about doing so in a space where almost everything can be understood as financial gain and loss.<sup>39</sup> Winning at *League of Legends* means winning in a simulacrum neoliberal workplace.

How the values reinforced through successful *League of Legends* play translate to the neoliberal workplace can be understood by examining the types of labor present in this economy and how the skills required are paralleled in the text. Manuel Castells describes what he calls the “informational work process,” a system that outlines the types of labor present in the informational economy.<sup>40</sup> He outlines a set of typologies of labor practices in the informational economy based on value making, networking, and decision making. The workers outlined by Castells do not represent a perfect system. Rather, they act as “a synthetic representation of what seems to be emerging as the main task-performing positions in the informational work process, according to empirical studies on the transformation of work and organizations under the impact of information technologies.”<sup>41</sup> The types of skills necessary to fulfill these “task-performing positions,” especially the higher-level positions, are ones that are praised through successful *League of Legends* play. Skills like “strategic decision-making and planning,” performed by the “commanders,” are practiced by most members of the team, especially during the laning phase. “Management of the relationships between [the other task-performing positions], taking into consideration the means available to the organization achieve the stated goals,” a task carried out by the “inte-

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<sup>39</sup> The major exception to this is the fact that, while much of a *League of Legends* game is driven by the desire to earn gold, the game’s victory condition does not require income. Destroying the opponents’ nexus, the ultimate goal of any single game, is not directly linked to the income of a team. This still has neoliberal implications, however. In the same way that gold acquisition is an important step in destroying the enemy nexus, pure capital is just a motivator and ingredient in securing additional power and prestige in a neoliberal economy. While both place prevalence on capital, the ultimate goal of an individual or group is still a larger desire to maintain power and dominance.

<sup>40</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 258.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid 260.

grators,” is reminiscent of the communication between individual players in order to form a more cohesive unit when executing teamfights or other large-scale strategies. “Operators” are responsible for the “execution of tasks under their own initiative and understanding,” and these activities are similarly important during the highly individualized laning phase. Even some of the lower-level worker positions Castells outlines have parallels in the *League of Legends* skill set. The “execution of ancillary, preprogrammed tasks that have not been, or cannot be, automated,” performed by the “operated,” is similar to the repetitive, manual, and ultimately necessary task of farming minion kills to earn gold. The values practiced through *League of Legends* play celebrate the general tenets of neoliberalism, but they also reflect more specific elements of labor in an informational economy.<sup>42</sup>

These skills and their associated worker types are mostly management positions. *League of Legends* doesn’t just create a space where players can explore and practice general neoliberal values: it allows them to explore those values that are practiced by the upper echelons of a neoliberal economy. This emphasis on management is seen throughout the game, but it is especially apparent when examining the interactions players have with the computer-controlled minions that rush the lanes. The minions – who are literally “cannon fodder” that soak up damage from towers and shield players from the high damage they deal – act in the capacity of the “switched-off workers” Castells describes. These workers are separated from the networking activities of an industry in the informational economy and are instead “tied to their own specific tasks, defined by non-interactive, one-way instructions.”<sup>43</sup> Unlike the higher-ranking networkers or networked workers, these laborers only receive instructions and implement them with little additional information. Minions act in a similar fashion, performing their singular task (proceed up the lane

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<sup>42</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 259.

<sup>43</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 260.

while attacking enemies) without ever responding to or questioning the player. While the player cannot control minions directly, they can and do practice controlling their behavior. Increasing or decreasing the rate at which a player kills enemy minions can shift the battle lines between the two opposing minion groups in his or her favor, and sometimes players may even sacrifice their own minions in order to gain a positional advantage. Players must learn to effectively manage and exploit their NPC underlings in order to achieve success. These parallels between Catsells' worker types and the skills practiced in *League of Legends* point towards the ways values practiced during *League of Legends* play can eventually be implemented. Through successful management of both the game's mental load and their own resources players practice values that prove to be useful in both the neoliberal workplace and the Fields of Justice.

### **Mind Over Muscle**

So, how are many of the elements described any different from more "traditional" large-scale professional sports like basketball, baseball, football, hockey, or soccer? The two are similar in many different ways. Both e-sports and traditional field sports often place heavy emphasis on individuals and their performance; singling out particular players can create a more personal dynamic through personal stories and comparing two similar players on opposing sides gives color commentators a way to compare the two teams and more effectively narrativize the course of events. Both place emphasis on positional strategy over the course of a match. The decision to separate players into personal lanes in *League of Legends* bears much resemblance to the plethora of plays and player placements found in each of the sports listed, especially when you consider the variations on the standard laning layout used to eke out an early advantage. While *League of Legends* places heavy emphasis on individualism and individual performance, the game also encourages teamwork and team cohesion, particularly in the later stages of the game where

teamfights are more prone to occur. Even the production elements of professional broadcasts for LCS events are modeled after traditional sports broadcasting, a subject that will be examined in Chapter Three.

While there are some core similarities between traditional sports and e-sports, there are notable aspects of *League of Legends* that differentiate the e-sport text from traditional field sports and serve as a window into how *League of Legends* and other e-sports titles allow for the practice of neoliberal values so effectively. The key to these differences is what could be considered the lifeblood of a digital online game like *League of Legends*: information. I have already discussed how the mechanics of *League of Legends* encourage a neoliberal spirit of rapid information processing, but understanding how the same mechanics and an emphasis on the primacy of large amounts of data also illuminates the different types of skills a game like *League of Legends* values in comparison to a traditional field sport. Unlike field sports, which place a significant emphasis on physical acumen and athletic ability, *League of Legends* and other e-sports texts place significant emphasis on mental skills like memorization and the ability to think through large amounts of variables to find an optimal solution. This emphasis on mental abilities is due in part because of the design challenges of creating a game to be played as competitive sport without much of the physicality of field sports, but it is also the product of the neoliberal immaterialization of labor. This labor immaterialization lies at the heart of the e-sports text's emphasis on mental processing, and *League of Legends* shows us how e-sports texts allow for its practice and demonstrate its usefulness in a neoliberal economic environment.

One of the most important aspects of any game that exhibits a lasting impact is emergence. This element of game design seeks to generate many different game possibilities from a relatively simple rule set. A game with highly emergent properties can have an immense amount of val-

ue for players because it allows for the evolution of varying strategies and patterns that can extend the game's enjoyment for a prolonged period of time. “This is the key to emergence in games,” Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman explain in *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, “complex possibilities are the result of a simple set of rules.”<sup>44</sup> For Salen and Zimmerman, games are systems of rules that define the possibilities and goals of a particular game. These systems can exhibit emergent properties, and it is this emergence that gives many games their lasting appeal.

Most games that have become professional sports did so because they exhibited enough emergence to warrant their playing for years. Games like basketball have drawn players and fans alike because of the many strategic possibilities the rules create. However, there is an additional layer of emergence that goes beyond the rules of the game. Because a game like basketball involves a large amount of physical effort, the athletic skills required to play well create additional emergence. All the styles and techniques of passing, shooting, dribbling, and other physical demands placed on a basketball player create additional systems within the game that can generate emergent properties. The different ways a player can learn to shoot the ball are just as important in generating emergence as the strategic possibilities the rules create.

In a game like *League of Legends*, one that is primarily digital in nature and does not involve much physical activity, the emergent possibilities from physical input are relatively limited. They still exist, of course; a player's hand-eye coordination and their ability to rapidly execute game commands is an important skill in professional play. However, the physical skills necessary to excel at *League of Legends* are minimal when compared to the physical demands of a game like basketball. Basketball's physicality creates emergence through athletic effort that

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<sup>44</sup> Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 2004), 159.

*League of Legends* must create through systemic complexity. That means creating additional systems players must explore and master mentally in order to generate additional emergent characteristics. Systems like champion variability, items, runes, and masteries add additional layers of rules to the games, and these create the potential for more emergence within the text. Less emphasis is placed on the physical rigors of play and more on the mental capacity of players and their ability to understand the many systems at work. What *League of Legends* lacks in athletic emergence because of its digital nature it makes up by increasing the amount of emergence that can come from strategy and other mental tasks. Athletic prowess is replaced with mental acumen.

This immaterialization of emergence in e-sports coincides with the immaterialization of labor neoliberal economics encourages. As digital technology increases the scope and decreases the transaction time of global markets, work shifts from an economy of goods to an economy of information and services. Advances in automated labor free up the human laborer for other tasks, many of them revolving around information technologies. The amount of employees whose jobs revolve around physically demanding tasks continues to diminish, and most now work in jobs that are contingent upon mental labor. As technology further enhances our ability to reach across the globe in decreasing amounts of time, the potential workload is only going to increase along with the capabilities of technology. A game like *League of Legends*, one that celebrates and rewards the ability to handle this mental load, lets players practice and hone these skills in an alternate environment.

All of the parallels between the mechanics of *League of Legends* and neoliberal economics create an environment where players can practice exercising neoliberal values and be rewarded for proper execution of those values. *League of Legends* explores the neoliberal emphasis on

immaterial labor through its reliance on time-space compression and its focus on mental skills. The products of this exploration – the importance of mental quickness, the ability to understand and process large amounts of information, an emphasis on individual performance and responsibility, and the importance of financial success underlying all other endeavors – are reinforced through, like the cockfight, “the thrill of risk, the despair of loss, the pleasure of triumph.”<sup>45</sup> The proper understanding of *League of Legends* mechanics and, by extension, neoliberal values, is rewarded through the exaltation of teammates in chat or over a headset at the least and thousands of fans in a packed stadium. Through this practice of neoliberal labor, players learn to win, and through winning, they learn to love the practices that got them there.

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<sup>45</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 449.

## LEARNING TO PLAY THE VOYBOY WAY

One of the many facets of e-sports that makes it such a fascinating area of study is the rapid growth e-sports has been in since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. While e-sports can trace its development back to the early days of gaming in the form of local competitions in bars, arcades, and players' homes, the early 2000s mark the point when e-sports began to emerge as a professionalized industry. Many of the popular e-sports leagues, like Major League Gaming, began in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The rise in the capability and accessibility of digital networking technologies allowed for competitions on a global scale, propelling large-scale game competitions to new heights in terms of scope and paving the way for competitive digital games play to become a profession in its own right. Creating the industrial framework to support e-sports as a profession and business enterprise means that tournament organizers, game developers, and professional players have to work to foster a system of competition, spectatorship, broadcasting, and compensation that is profitable for all three groups. Without the allure of income for players through prize purses and sponsorships, league organizers through advertising agreements and event attendance, and game designers through product sales and, in the case of *League of Legends*, back-end micro transactions, there would be no impetus to develop gaming as a professional sport. For many, this has meant looking to other professional sports leagues as a model for how to organize and monetize game competitions. Much of the production values and spectatorship of e-sports is designed to resemble other professional sports broadcasts and events. The benefit of this resemblance is twofold, creating both a model of business expansion to follow and a professional appearance that helps to legitimate e-sports as a true sports profession.

However, this industrial shift towards a model of production and broadcasting that resembles other large sports organizations must also contend with the digital nature of e-sports and



a game like *League of Legends*. The modern e-sports scene arose from the growth of Digitization, and the former is closely tied to the latter as a result. The discourses of “walled gardens” created by apps and content providers versus a web fueled by open access and the freedom of information that are the source of many digital media debates can also be found in e-sports discourse. These two conflicting, but not mutually exclusive, visions of what the Internet should be – a network that guides users to content that is controlled by its owners controlled through the use of apps, programs, and paywalls versus a network that makes information and content more openly available to all its users – have been the driving forces behind much of the development of the Internet, and the necessity of networked play to facilitate global competition in e-sports titles makes the tug of war between the two an important one for e-sports developers, players, and fans. E-sports culture comes from the greater culture of digital games play, a fandom that has worked to crowdsource various material for games and make that material freely available for years. The result is an amalgam of open web ethics and broadcast strategies designed to maximize profitability, and the two do not always mix together well.

This is most clearly visible in the culture of creating helpful guides and videos covering various aspects of *League of Legends* play for other players to utilize. The amount of knowledge needed to excel at *League of Legends* is immense, and players help mitigate this burden by creating explanations of mechanics and blueprints of champion play styles in various forms. However, this process is not just performed by fans; the guide material most celebrated often comes from the professional players most *League of Legends* fans seek to emulate and, for the dedicated, surpass. This chapter examines this culture of guide writing, especially the professionally-written guides, to understand two important aspects of e-sports culture. Like the text itself, the culture of guide writing also underscores several neoliberal values, giving players the space to

explore and practice the individualism, self-promotion, and liquid life a neoliberal economy requires. Guide writing culture also reveals the tension between these neoliberal values and the culture of the open web. The act of writing guides and producing tutorial videos becomes a tug of war between trade secrets and open access, as professional players contend with the community expectation that they will reveal the secrets of their success while also maintaining a competitive edge. By looking at two of the most prominent *League of Legends* guide sites and the video streaming activities of Joedat “Voyboy” Esfahani, we can get a better picture of the way *League of Legends* fan culture negotiates between the impulses of neoliberal privatization and the openness of web culture.

### **Sites of Strategy**

Chapter One describes the large number of customization systems at work in *League of Legends*, and the systemic complexity created by the interactions of those systems is one of the game's most attractive features for players. The range of options available means that players have a wide berth in creating their own personal strategies and styles of play for the game. This systemic complexity also means that the game requires a sizable time investment and learning curve in order to play it effectively. While this ensures a lengthy amount of interesting play time – especially when combined with the evolving challenge that competing against other players provides – it also means that learning to play *League of Legends* in a relatively skilled manner requires an intellectual command of all the mechanics that can affect one's own champion and his or her capabilities, the abilities of a player's teammates to provide assistance, and the strength of the opposing team to overcome advances. E-sports games like *League of Legends* are jokingly describes as creating a skill “cliff” rather than a curving rate of difficulty, and for many this provides much of their appeal.

However, while the game's difficulty may be appealing to professional players, it can quickly become overwhelming for amateur players or those new to the game. The game's 115 playable champions, 147 performance-enhancing items available in each game, and the number of different ways a player can customize his or her rune and mastery pages create an overwhelming amount of options for players to navigate. Combine this with the necessity of understanding *League of Legends'* general strategy and you have an immense amount of information that must be understood to achieve a competent level of play. The solution comes in the form of an emerging participatory culture of strategic think tanks and introductions to the game's various mechanics and important features. Foreseeing the need for a community such as this, Riot provides online forum spaces for player collaboration on their official website, and many players use these features to think through the game's complexity. However, players also create and consult third-party web sites that offer more formal and permanent guides to playing each champion, descriptions of the game's mechanics and how to utilize them effectively, and their own forum environments where players can post and discuss new ideas. Many such fan sites exist, but the ones that receive the most attention are often the ones that bring the most star appeal to the table. Not only do some of the guide sites provide the opportunity for a player to contribute his or her own guide for a champion, but they also feature guides contributed by players that have already staked their claim within the professional *League of Legends* scene.

Two of these sites are SoloMid.net (<http://www.solomid.net/>) and LoLPro (<http://www.LoLPro.com/>), two of the most dominant current *League of Legends* knowledge sites. Each boasts many hundreds of guides for the champions available in the game as well as articles that break down the game's mechanics and some video guides that provide an audiovisual method of explaining how *League of Legends* is played. A typical guide breaks down all of the

aforementioned systems in detail, covering reasons for selecting a particular champion, outlining the champion's in-game abilities, describing item choices, explaining various optimal options for rune and mastery selection, and offering an explanation of tactics unique to that particular champion as well as how to most effectively employ them in a match. Some even go as far as providing additional video tutorials and "laning match-ups" that outline the other potential opponents one might face in their given position on the play area, the strengths and weaknesses a champion possesses in the match-up, and how to best counter the opposition's advances. Learning the basics of a new champion becomes as simple as visiting one of the guide sites, opening up a favorite guide, and following the basic instructions for the given character.

While any given player can, theoretically, post a guide explaining how they build a certain champion, both websites utilize a hierarchical system to filter out more the more useful guides from the sea of potential offerings. SoloMid.net employs an Ebert-esque thumbs-up/thumbs-down system of approval to elevate well received guides to the forefront of results pages, allowing the community to decide which guides are the most effective. The best-ranked guides are labeled as "approved" and made substantially more noticeable in the site's guide listings. LoLPro lacks a community-driven system of consensus such as this, instead choosing to limit the volume of provided guides by placing restrictions on who may contribute to the build listings. LoLPro only offers writing space to players who can provide evidence of well-developed skill in *League of Legends* play, asking that potential guide authors send in their ELO (a skill ranking system used primarily in chess that has been retrofitted by Riot for use in *League of Legends* matchmaking) ratings for previous seasons of competitive play as well as their current competitive bracket. While anyone can view the site and comment on guides and forums, only players who have reached the upper echelons of competitive play are capable of actually contributing to the site's

most noticeable knowledge base. Similarly, SoloMid.net gives special attention to its “featured” guides: guides contributed by members of the player base that, like LoLPro, can provide evidence of a competitive pedigree.

This system of granting preferential exposure to players who have performed well in the past indicates both a trend towards a hierarchy of professionalization and a demand from the community to see guide content written or recorded by the top tiers of the *League of Legends* food chain. More than that, the existence of a site like LoLPro that only hosts guides by professional or semi-professional players points towards an expectation from the community that these players are both willing and able to contribute to the guide-writing process.<sup>46</sup> This is a relatively unique element of e-sports that separates it from more traditional sport cultures. Sport activities have, of course, long benefited from the collaboration of their fans and the occasional input of professional talent, but most professionalized sports do not maintain the same level of expectation that professional players will have a desire and duty to contribute knowledge-building content to the fan community. This is due in large part to the digital nature of e-sports; a competitive sport rooted in an interactive medium like the Internet undoubtedly leads to a wholly different relationship to participatory culture.

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<sup>46</sup> A clarification of terminology is warranted here. By “professional” I mean players who literally “make a living” through competitive play, mainly through income earned in tournaments, sponsorship deals, and revenue shares from some video hosting services. Semi-professional is the term I use to describe individuals who, while not members of professional teams, are ranked highly enough that they would likely be considered candidates for spots on the established teams. Most of the featured guides on SoloMid.net and all the guides on LoLPro are written by professional or semi-professional players. I use the terms “amateur” and “spectator” to describe those who fall below the skill thresholds established by the sites in question. These members of the community make up the bulk of the *League of Legends* player base and mainly play the game as a form of recreation.

## The Gift of the Guide

The practice of guide writing for *League of Legends* has its roots within fannish practices that span back decades, and understanding how the culture of collaboration found so often in fandom groups influences this practice is key to exploring the moral economy of e-sports fandom that creates the expectation of guide material written by professional and semi-professional players. After all, the bulk of forum posters and amateur guide writers (and, presumably, the professionals as well) are fans themselves, so fan practices play heavily into how the *League of Legends* community structures itself. Henry Jenkins has long charted the collaborative efforts of fans. *Textual Poachers* describes the practice of “tape sharing” – exchanging recordings of favorite shows with other fans in order to bolster both collections – as an important practice within television fan communities both for perpetuating the fandom (through increased exposure to the source material) and creating additional bonds of friendship and camaraderie within the community of fans.<sup>47</sup> More recent projects like *Star Wars Uncut*, a project where fans of the *Star Wars* universe re-recorded short scenes from the first film that were then assembled into a complete version of the film, perpetuate the idea of fan collaboration as well as point towards how digital media have influenced its development. Jenkins himself elaborates on this evolution in *Convergence Culture*, using the example of *Survivor* fans pooling their information and scouring various sources to identify the next contestant eliminated from the show before the next episode aired.<sup>48</sup> This is similar to the processes at work on SoloMid.net and LoLPro; fans collaborate to discover new optimal ways to play champions in *League of Legends* by adding information to

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<sup>47</sup> Jenkins, Henry, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1992).

<sup>48</sup> Jenkins, Henry, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006).

the community and building on each other's successes. Game fandoms in general, and *League of Legends* in particular, stem directly from these practices.

What makes the fan practice of guide-writing interesting is the expectations it places upon professional *League of Legends* players. While the practice as a general concept is not contingent upon professional participation (the *League of Legends* official forums certainly aren't going anywhere), leading sites like SoloMid.net and LoLPro rely heavily on traffic brought in by players viewing guides written by professional or semi-professional players. LoLPro is particularly notable in this respect, as it exists entirely as a vehicle for the dissemination of guide content provided by high-skill players. This reliance on and expectation of professional guides is indicative of another important element of participatory culture at work in the e-sports community through the formation of what Jenkins et al call a moral economy.

Jenkins, along with co-authors Sam Ford and Joshua Green, argues in *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* that systems built upon participant-contributed content rely heavily on an underlying "moral economy."<sup>49</sup> Drawing on E.P. Thompson, the authors argue that in a moral economy, "all parties involved are behaving in a morally appropriate fashion. In many cases, the moral economy holds in check the aggressive pursuit of short-term self-interest in favor of decisions that preserve long-term social relations among participants."<sup>50</sup> Here, demands of appropriate subcultural behavior come from both the bottom up and the top down. In the case of guide-writing, the moral economy of e-sports is, in many ways, supported by a currency of fandom. Amateur players ask and expect professional players to contribute material that will assist them in their own rise to semi-professional and professional sta-

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<sup>49</sup> Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013), 52.

<sup>50</sup> Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, 63.

tus, a position that many *League of Legends* amateurs hope to achieve themselves. In exchange, amateur players contribute their own fandom and help further the development of the industry. While it may seem like a gift from on high, the act of writing guides has important implications in the fandom's moral economy. Jenkins et al. notes that “in the informal gift economy [...] the failure to share material is socially damaging.”<sup>51</sup> The development of e-sports is intimately tied to its fandom; like any professional sports organization, an e-sports league will fail without spectators to support it. Those spectators are generated primarily through interest in the game and a desire to improve one's play performance. T.L. Taylor notes in *Raising the Stakes* that most e-sports texts are notoriously difficult to watch without some sort of prior play experience. The asymmetrical information so crucial to many digital games and the lack of a centralized focal point of action make watching *League of Legends* difficult; there is no ball, puck, or shuttlecock to guide a spectator's attention. Knowing when and where to look requires at least a basic knowledge of the flow of a typical *League of Legends* match, and learning that flow involves tackling the mountain of other considerations mentioned previously. Without help up the *League of Legends* skill cliff, the number of spectators at professional tournament events may drop off, hampering the development of the competitive scene and, by extension, the pay days of professional players.

### **The Reputation Situation**

Of course, the moral economy in question is more complex than an exchange of knowledge for spectatorship. More than a general effort to keep the competitive environment of *League of Legends* thriving, providing skill-building content allows both players and teams to develop their own personal brands within the industry and the community of fandom. The digital

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51 Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, 63.



nature of e-sports means that teams face marketing challenges that traditional sports clubs with allegiances to specific geographic locations. In contrast to a baseball team that represents a city, for example, most *League of Legends* teams are identified based on their global geopolitical region. Using the third season of ranked *League of Legends* competition as an example, the professional “*League of Legends* Champion Series” (LCS) organized by Riot features weekly competitive league competitions covering North America, Europe, and Asia. Competition is almost entirely intraleague, meaning that national identities have little influence in helping spectators determine which teams to cheer on. Cheering for your city's home baseball team is easy, but how do you decide which of the eight teams to support when they are all “North American?”

Part of that answer comes from the moral economy of the e-sports community. Writing guides and creating tutorial videos is an important tool in a professional player's arsenal for increasing spectator loyalty for both his own brand and the larger brand of his affiliated team. James Bennett, in his study of *Digg.com* creator Kevin Rose, notes that “Kevin Rose's celebrity status in particular [has] as much to do with his role in online participatory culture as it is to do with fronting an online TV show.”<sup>52</sup> For professional gamers, involvement within their respective e-sports community is an important element in solidifying their celebrity status within that community. Guide authorship is very much an act of collective intelligence, and Pierre Levy argues that one of the main goals of a collective intelligence project is “mutual recognition and enrichment of individuals.”<sup>53</sup> Recognition is the chief guiding factor that encourages players (especially semi-professional ones, for reasons that will be expounded upon later) to contribute their knowledge to the project. In fact, LoLPro lists “recognition” first in their list of reasons to con-

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<sup>52</sup> Bennett, James, "Architectures of Participation: Fame, Television, and Web 2.0," in *Television as Digital Media*, ed. James Bennett and Niki Strange (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 333-334.

<sup>53</sup> Lévy, Pierre, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*, trans. Robert Bononno (New York and London: Plenum Trade, 1997), 13.

tribute a guide to their site. When looking for a team to cheer on, finding a familiar name on the roster list – one that's also tied to your favorite build guide for a champion of choice – can be a sizable factor in backing that player and his team.

This kind of branding is especially important when considering another medium of community knowledge contribution: online video streaming. Through the use of screen-capturing software and sites like Twitch TV (<http://www.twitch.tv/>), players can provide a real-time view of their play sessions that can be made publicly accessible. Borrowing from the title of the aforementioned site, streaming allows players to incorporate classical broadcast strategies into their contributions and branding, essentially operating their own digital television network. Online streaming allows spectators to connect names to faces (which are typically visible via an on-screen inset during streamed play), while they get explanations of play and game decisions as they unfold. Many of the most renowned professional players are known for their streamed content, and sites like SoloMid and LoLPro often feature links to top streamers.

However, the concept of the moral economy falls a bit short in completely explaining how the relationship between guide authors and e-sports fan communities. This mainly due to the fact that conflict lies at the heart of the community interactions concerning the *League of Legends* knowledge base. Because each player has the same potential to make it into the professional *League of Legends* scene, the dynamic of competition undergirds most interactions within the knowledge base. Every player involved in creating and critiquing guides is both collaborator and rival, and this relationship changes the dynamic of the information that is shared. This tension between the desire to contribute knowledge and learn from others while maintaining a competitive edge often redefines the culture of guide writing in ways that are not entirely aligned with the spirit of the moral economy Jenkins et al. describe. One of the clearest examples of this

breakdown occasionally occurs during games. Chapter One discusses how the hypercompetitive nature of an e-sports game like *League of Legends* and the impulse to reach the top of the rankings often creates tension between players. Because the game's principal ranked matchmaking system is based on playing either alone or with one other known teammate, players are matched with random players in games that have real consequences on their ascent or descent in the game's ladder system. When a randomly matched player underperforms, it can affect the rating of all the players on a team. This can lead to intense verbal abuse and other problems. Rather than assist poorly-performing players in improving their play, many deride the underperforming team member for their incompetence. Here the collective intelligence project heralded by the moral economy ideal breaks down; the consequences of failure create a situation in which individual success supersedes group improvement.

These same issues arise within the knowledge-sharing paratexts of *League of Legends*, but the hostility found within individual games is replaced with other tensions. Writing or critiquing a guide doesn't carry the same immediate weight of success or failure as a ranked match, so contributors tend to be more constructive. However, the fact that many of the players writing guides or creating videos are also competing with each other for professional status means that the amount of knowledge shared between fans and professionals is not as complete as the moral economy model assumes. Fans and professionals alike are encouraged to contribute to the collective intelligence of the *League of Legends* community, but they also have ample reason to withhold information as well. In order to properly understand how this element fits into the moral economy puzzle, we must consider the relationship between professionals/guide creators and fans as an exchange of subcultural capital. Subcultural capital is one of the primary incentives for writing guides and contributing to the community collective intelligence. Professional players

and others interested in accruing subcultural capital within the community demonstrate their knowledge by contributing guides, and this earns them increased reputation and prestige with fans. Demonstrating a mastery of *League of Legends* by helping others grants players with increased presence within the community, and that brand development allows them to further their professional ambitions. However, these contributions must be reined in to ensure that they can maintain a substantial amount of subcultural capital. If a professional player reveals all of their best strategies to fans, then they lose both the tools that help them maintain a competitive edge by surprising the competition and some of the capacity to impress fans with new and unexpected plays. Creating an elevated subcultural status position in the *League of Legends* community means showing other players the way to achieve success, but it also means saving a few tricks of the trade for yourself.

This dynamic between contributing to the moral economy of *League of Legends* while also withholding information to ensure one's own subcultural capital highlights the tug-of-war between the collectivist ideals at work in the culture of open access and the more neoliberal values of privatization and individualism found in the "walled garden" concept of the Internet. The question of "how much help is too much?" becomes the focus of the ideological negotiations found in *League of Legends* paratexts. Players are encouraged to further the group by sharing what they know, but the neoliberal values of *League of Legends* also encourage them to hold back. Professional players walk this line on a regular basis, and examining their contributions (or lack thereof) to the moral economy helps illustrate this.

These tutorial guides, videos, and live streams, like many other elements of the e-sports industry and e-sports culture, are not unique to e-sports alone. Many other traditional sports have realized the value of digital technologies and social media outlets, and they have developed their

own platforms and content to relay similar information. Sports professionals share tricks of the athletic trade in videos and interviews, stars communicate with fans using social media, and fans discuss games and strategies on forums and message boards in order to both understand the sport in question better and to improve their own play. While these commonalities exist between e-sports and traditional sports culture, e-sports often have easier access to these kinds of online activities due to their digital nature. Because e-sports games like *League of Legends* are themselves products of Digitization, they are afforded a logistical advantage in fostering interactivity among fans and between fans and professionals.

A short YouTube video produced by Riot for the 2013 *League of Legends* world championships highlights some of the advantages this affordance creates. The video, titled “LoL and NFL,” is a series of interviews with professional *League of Legends* players and analysts and Chris Kluwe, an NFL punter.<sup>54</sup> While the video contains mostly interviews with Kluwe and *League of Legends* professionals discussing their love for both games, it contains several instances where the digital nativity of e-sports separates them from traditional sports in the kinds of online paratexts they can help create. Two quotes, both from Christopher “MonteCristo” Mykles, are particularly noteworthy. During a discussion of online video streaming, MonteCristo compares e-sports and the NFL, explaining how *League of Legends*' digitality gives it an advantage in the type of content it can provide. “If Peyton Manning could throw footballs during practice and constantly talk to people live on television or live on the internet about how he was throwing footballs he probably would,” he explains. “I think that's a unique advantage that e-

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<sup>54</sup> “LoL and NFL,” YouTube video, 3:24, posted by “LoLChampSeries,” October 5, 2013, <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=GO2URqoUBnU>.

sports has.”<sup>55</sup> While the desire to demonstrate play techniques and discuss strategies with fans live during practice is present in both sports, a fact MonteCristo recognizes, he highlights how the physical logistics of football make this task much more difficult. Peyton Manning would certainly be capable of practicing his technique while discussing it live with fans, but the technical logistics and athletic demands of such an activity would be difficult to overcome. Because *League of Legends* players do not move around a field during play and are already connected to the internet, it is much easier to maintain live video and audio connections. Additionally, the equipment of professional play and modern computers lessens the logistical burden of preparing cameras and microphones to record a play session. Computer webcams record player reactions while screen capture programs upload footage of play to streaming sites, and the headsets used for communication during a game already have a microphone attached. Where Peyton Manning would have to be fitted with a microphone to record his advice, a device that could inhibit his play, *League of Legends* players simply utilize the equipment they use normally for competition. Professional-quality e-sports video streaming does take time and effort, but the affordances provided by the digital technologies of e-sports play makes productions like these much more feasible.

MonteCristo also comments on the physical demands of traditional sports in contrast to e-sports, a factor discussed earlier in Chapter One. “Obviously the physical demands of pro gaming are much lower and I’m sure people would play football 15 [or] 16 hours a day if they could,” he says, describing the practice schedules of many e-sports professionals, “but it’s just not physically possible.”<sup>56</sup> The differences in stamina use between the two sports means that e-sports professional players can practice their play for longer periods of time. Because of the lo-

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<sup>55</sup> “LoL and NFL.”

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

gistical advantages described earlier, this means they can produce content like live video streams at a greater rate. This has an important impact on the perceived relationship between professional players and their fans. E-sports stars are seen more often in environments outside the tournament arena (most play sessions are streamed from home), creating a greater feeling of familiarity that helps bolster their brands and reputations.

Streaming and guide posting can also serve as methods for semi-professional players to make the final step onto the professional scene. While professional team affiliations are noted (and often preferred) on SoloMid and LoLPro, both sites only require that a player reach a certain level in the game's ranking system. This means that aspiring professionals can, through contribution to guide sites, generate enough attention within the community to attract an interested professional organization. Contributing to sites like SoloMid and LoLPro is often key in reaching the top or keeping one's own name within the discourse.

### **Community Spaces**

Perhaps the most notable element of the moral economy between amateur and professional players is the way professionals often define the spaces where community interaction takes place. Both SoloMid and LoLPro are linked to professional *League of Legends* teams (TSM Snapdragon and Curse, respectively). More than recognition at the level of individual guides or streams, these teams also provide the spaces where the intelligence-gathering conversations can take place. Individual guides are similar, as each contains a comments section where players discuss their feeling about the provided information and debate suggestions to improve its overall effectiveness. Video streaming sites like Twitch TV provide a chat feature for viewers, creating both a simultaneous first and second screen experience in the same space. This means that while

a professional player walks spectators through a typical match, they can critique his play decisions within a separate but linked space.

Of course, the player streaming is usually focused on performing well, so they rarely engage with viewers during a match. Even between games interaction with the audience is limited to answering a small number of questions taken quickly from the stream of messages. This means that most of the responses are left in the hands of other viewers rather than attended by the player hosting the video stream. Many guides operate in a similar fashion (though the authors of guides on LoLPro seem to respond to comments more often than their SoloMid counterparts); the professional player posts the guide and allows the community to debate its merit without any real intervention from the original author.

What this means is that, rather than participate in the discourse of strategy directly, professional players instead shape where competitive play is discussed and what that discussion will focus on. They provide both the space to talk about *League of Legends* in a beneficial way as well as provide a specific topic for fans to discuss. The result is an oddly detached relationship to the community; both sides see themselves as active and important members of the moral economy, but they rarely meet directly through the act of guide authorship. It also means that professional players and teams can utilize community discourse as another way to promote their brand, creating communities of fans that share information and discuss the game under their banner. Just as users of sites like Reddit (or one of its particular subsections) are identified by their affiliation to the website, fans often refer to the discourse or acumen of the “SoloMid community” or the fan discourses of a particular professional player's Twitch TV stream. Maintaining the spaces for fan discourse allows players and teams to build their reputation and presence in fan discourse, even when the player or team is not the focus of a particular discussion.



### **Come for the Stream, Stay for the Work Ethics**

Understanding the dynamics of the moral economy of *League of Legends* guide writing, video production, and streaming is key because this interaction between amateur players/fans and professionals illuminates important ways that neoliberal economic values are reflected and reinforced within e-sports culture, especially those that concern neoliberal labor. If the game *League of Legends* creates a space where players can practice and explore the skills that are valued in a neoliberal economy fueled by the rapid transfer of information and what it takes to be a productive laborer in this economy, then the culture of guide writing, video making, and streaming explores the type of work ethic valued by neoliberalism. More than a relationship used by both sides to further their *League of Legends* careers, the moral economy of *League of Legends* guide writing culture also illustrates the reliance on self-promotion and willingness to blur the lines between work, home, and play that a neoliberal economic environment deems necessary.

Harvey describes how the rise of neoliberalism has “entailed much 'creative destruction', not only for prior institutional frameworks [...] but also of divisions of labor, social relations, welfare provisions, [and] ways of life and thought,”<sup>57</sup> and the moral economy of guide writing explores many aspects of this destruction. One of the most prominent of these is the shift from an emphasis on collective bargaining and the idea of long-term, stable employment through a single corporate entity that will care for its workers. Instead, employees must see themselves as individuals who must look out for their own interests. Mark Deuze explains in *Media Work* how an employee in a neoliberal economic environment must re imagine his or her situation:

“The worker of today must become an enterprise of her own: perfectly adept at managing herself, unlearning old skills while reflexively adapting to new demands, preferring individual independence and autonomy over

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<sup>57</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 3.

the relative stability of a lifelong workstyle based on the collective bargaining power of a specific group, sector, or union of workers.”<sup>58</sup>

This new working environment, one that favors short-term employment contracts rather than long-term commitments to employees that can last their entire working lives, demands a new work ethic from workers. An employee must actively work to promote themselves in the workplace or work environment in order to maintain their positions for as long as possible. This also creates an air of competition between employees. Everyone knows he or she is both on his or her own and replaceable, so each person must strive to outperform the other. “Work” becomes more than just competently performing the tasks dictated by the position; it also means building one's own brand and fighting to stay on top.

The concept of workplace promotion and brand management is one that is clearly visible in the way the culture of *League of Legends* guide production operates, especially concerning professional players and their own efforts to write guides and stream. Many professional *League of Legends* teams, particularly those in North America where e-sports have not gained the traction seen in other markets like South Korea or China, don't employ dedicated managers, so players often must act as their own managers and talent agents in addition to maintaining their play skills. For e-sports professionals, writing guides and streaming play helps to kill two birds with one stone. Streaming practice sessions allows a player to hone his or her skills while simultaneously providing the tutorial content fans want and the needed brand building the player needs.

The professional *League of Legends* player embodies the employee Deuze describes in many ways. The individualism, branding, and efforts to promote that brand are at the heart of much of a player's contributions to the *League of Legends* knowledge pool. With dozens of play-

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<sup>58</sup> Deuze, *Media Work*, 10.

ers in the game's "Challenger Tier" – essentially the minor leagues of *League of Legends* – displaying skill levels worthy of a spot on a professional team, pro players must maintain a strong image in order to bolster their own positions on a team. It's neoliberal worker individualism and promotion in full force and publicly visible.

Professional *League of Legends* players also demonstrate another notable element of the neoliberal work ethos: the dissolution of the lines between work, home, and play. The advancement of digital technology and neoliberal economic values has created an environment where an employee must continue his or her work activities long after he or she has left work for the day. This is due partially to the new burdens of self-promotion placed upon them; the additional time brand development and promotion requires means that employees must work longer to handle all of their work responsibilities, even if that additional work is not compensated monetarily. Even Harvey, in the quote given earlier, explains that changes in lifestyle are part of the "creative destruction" of neoliberalism, and this shift is one of the products of those changes. This is a trend fueled largely by advances in computing technology, making work far easier to bring home (or, with smartphones, wherever you go) than in decades past. Leisure activity mingles with work through the same channels; the devices used for workplace productivity are also an important source of audiovisual entertainment. The neoliberal work environment and Digitization have created "an immediate life where work and play are one and the same, [one where] life is completely contingent with the fickle and unpredictable nature of the contemporary global economy for which risks no one but themselves is expected to take personal responsibility."<sup>59</sup>

Watching professional *League of Legends* players stream gives you an idea of how this plays out and how omnipresent this mixture, of home, work, and play is in e-sports. Unlike field

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<sup>59</sup> Deuze, *Media Work*, 10.

sports where most professional players report to dedicated training and practice facilities away from their homes, *League of Legends* players spend the majority of their practice time in the same places they sleep and eat. The digital nature of a game like *League of Legends* means that players can practice anywhere and at any time, so they often do so at home and for much longer periods. Watching pro players stream games underscores this fact; often the scenery behind them is a living room or bedroom area. Not only do players spend most of their time practicing in the home environment, but the home space itself is also dedicated to *League of Legends* play. Most professional teams live together in communal “gaming houses,” facilitating team cohesion and making long group practice sessions more feasible. Professional players must incorporate the additional element of playing side by side in tournaments, so living together helps them practice in a similar manner without much transportation or scheduling. For them, the areas of work life and home life are almost indistinguishable. While this is rarely the primary focus of player streaming, it always (literally) exists in the background.

The acts of guide posting and play streaming create an example that players strive to emulate. It capitalizes on the impulse that often brings players to these texts in the first place: the desire to better one's own *League of Legends* play. If these players do eventually reach the professional level, they will find themselves compelled to contribute in order to build their image as pros and cement their place in the *League of Legends* professional hierarchy, continuing the cycle and paving the way for the next wave of professional players to do the same. This image management builds on the idea of what it means to be a *League of Legends* professional, and that means building on what it means to be a laborer in a neoliberal economy.

## Voyboy University

It's clear that many forces are at work in the guide writing culture of *League of Legends*, especially when the activity of professional players is added to the mix. The contributions of these professional players are also excellent entry points into getting a clearer picture of how this moral economy often functions. In order to bring everything into focus, I would like to look at a single *League of Legends* pro player, using his acts of guide authorship and streaming to better illustrate how the moral economy of guide writing functions and how it presents an image of neoliberal work ethics and lifestyle. That player is Joedat “Voyboy” Esfahani, the top lane player for North American team Curse.

Voyboy is an excellent player to examine because he has demonstrated his understanding of exactly how contributing to the *League of Legends* can build on a player's image. Aside from his well-respected skills in his top lane play, Voyboy has utilized champion guides and live streaming to develop his own personal brand and make him one of the more recognizable players in the North American circuit. The 2013 world championships helped demonstrate this. Voyboy was brought in as a guest analyst during the semifinal matches to help break down the strategic choices of teams during the picks and ban stages of games. While the choice to include Voyboy in this process was based partly on his knowledge of the game, it also points to the amount of “star power” he brings to a *League of Legends* event. Many fans both in North America and internationally know Voyboy, and much of that is due to his willingness to participate in the knowledge-sharing community.

Voyboy's guide articles can be found on LoLPro almost exclusively, an effort to both build his image through contribution while also drawing traffic to the site operated by Curse, the organization affiliated with his team. The site links to roster and player information for Curse, as

well as the other e-sports teams that play different games under the same banner. This makes the guides Voyboy writes for the site doubly effective in creating brand recognition; they augment the attention to both himself and his team.

Reading through the guides also illustrates how these players often create spaces for interaction rather than interact with the community on a more direct level. While Voyboy has several guides on the site, he rarely, if ever, responds to user questions or criticism in the comments sections of the guide. Site administrators may respond in lieu of the author, but Voyboy's contributions to the conversation exist solely through the guide itself. Instead, the guide acts as a place for players to discuss the champion in question and debate Voyboy's advice for how to play them. While he may not involve himself in the conversation directly, by steering discussion of a particular champion to a guide he penned Voyboy ensures that he will always be part of the discussion. And traffic is drawn to his work; most of his guides show noticeably higher page views than comparable guides by other highly-ranked players.<sup>60</sup> This separation from the comments of players on Voyboy's guides illustrates the reality of professional contributions to the *League of Legends* knowledge base. Despite the appearance of a two-way discussion between fans and professionals, the flow of information is still mostly a broadcast from the few to the many, preserving a status hierarchy with professional players at the top. Many paratexts professionals create help to disguise this separation, especially video streaming.

While Voyboy's guide writing may be useful in understanding the relationships at work and how they model neoliberal values, his live streaming activities are what he is known for and are even stronger examples of the moral economy at work. One of the most prominent North

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<sup>60</sup> One of Voyboy's guides, this one for the champion Jax, can be found here:  
<http://www.lolpro.com/guides/jax/129-jax-build-guide-top-lane-by-voyboy>.

American *League of Legends* streamers, Voyboy streams often and without a set schedule, instead relying on social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook to announce when he is playing live. Watching Voyboy stream means paying attention to his fan pages, drawing fans to his work. Voyboy also demonstrates his understanding of the moral economy at work through these activities. In a short video promoting his stream, he explains that he “treats [his] streaming as an opportunity to educate [his] viewers on some of the finer points of *League of Legends*.”<sup>61</sup> Throughout his streaming sessions, he offers commentary on his actions and choices in the game, explaining his motivation for executing plays in a particular manner. A live chat for viewers operates in a similar manner to the comments section in the guide, allowing viewers to discuss Voyboy's choices and other actions occurring in the stream. Voyboy does respond to questions from the live chat, but these responses are relatively sparse and limited to brief moments between games.<sup>62</sup> However, there are moments that reinforce the idea that the separation between player and fan is less pronounced than it is. Voyboy will occasionally play games with fans and regular stream viewers instead of with random players. Fans can “subscribe” to Voyboy's Twitch TV stream, providing him with extra revenue in exchange for exclusive perks. Voyboy will utilize the subscriber only chat room of his Twitch TV channel and select four teammates from his subscribers, and these four will play one or several matches alongside him live on the stream. While this activity is not commonplace, its inclusion highlights the ways that professional players are able to maintain a sense of closeness with their fan bases. An NFL fan may not have much chance to play catch with Peyton Manning, but Voyboy fans can have the opportunity to play with their favorite star by asserting their fandom monetarily.

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<sup>61</sup> Joedat Esfahani, “I’m Curse Voyboy, Come Check Out My Stream!,” YouTube video, 1:16, posted by “LoLVoyboy,” March 20, 2013, <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=31SKcegQATE>.

<sup>62</sup> Examples (sadly without the chat) can be found at Voyboy's Twitch TV page: <http://www.twitch.tv/voyboy>.

Voyboy's streaming also illustrates his efforts to contribute to the community's collective intelligence while also maintaining his subcultural capital. While Voyboy does stream a large amount of his practice sessions, there are moments when he purposely stops streaming to practice strategies and techniques he doesn't want his fans to see. This mostly occurs when Curse is scheduled to play online scrimmage matches against other professional teams. Instead of treating his fans to additional matches outside the weekly broadcasts, Voyboy terminates his streams so that both teams can practice privately. Similarly, while Voyboy outlines many strategies and builds in his guides and on his stream, he undoubtedly maintains a list of champion builds that are reserved exclusively for his use. His contributions to fans and the community knowledge base extends far enough to maintain his reputation and brand, but it is incomplete enough that he can maintain a professional edge.

A screen-mounted camera shows Voyboy's face during his matches, and it also demonstrates the blend of work and home life that professional players navigate. Voyboy streams from the large living room area of the Curse gaming house, and parts of the house are visible in the background. Other team members occasionally walk by in the background busy with other tasks, a reminder that the space is both home and office.

Voyboy's contributions to guide sites and interaction with fans through his stream are evidence to both the implicit agreement these guide texts bring with them and the ways he and other professional players leverage that agreement to obtain greater exposure within the fan community. His participation in the world championships coverage is just one example of how this exposure can pay off. Voyboy has developed his own brand through interaction with the community and contributions to building their skills, and in the process, he sets a precedent for others to follow both within the culture of *League of Legends* play and in other aspects of life, one that rein-



forces neoliberal values of individual efforts to promote oneself and an injection of work into many aspects of life.

The world of *League of Legends* guide contribution creates a complex moral economy, one that appears to operate as a sort of perpetual motion device. On one end, amateur players look to professional players to assist them in garnering a better understanding of a game that is purposefully complex. Professional teams and individuals respond by creating spaces for discourse like fan sites, guides, and web streams, and filling them with information that the community can then parse through with relatively little input from the original author. The result is a spectator base that is both more educated (and, hopefully, more interested in watching) in the finer points of play and will likely recognize some more familiar names and faces when the next week of LCS play begins. Additionally, visitors to SoloMid or LoLPro will now recognize many more familiar names on the TSM Snapdragon or Curse roster lists, inspiring them to follow and support the players that supported their desire to improve their own play. What emerges from this cycle is a stronger fan base that is more eager to both play *League of Legends* and watch its competitive content as well as professional organizations that benefit both from the increased publicity and potentially higher stakes that come from an increase in popularity. The relationship between fans and professional players is an interactive one, but not in the typical conception of the phrase. While instances exist where players and fans do come together in dialogue and on the Fields of Justice, most of the “interaction” between the two groups is illusory. Instead, their relationship is a one based on an understood symbiosis designed to keep alive the very text that draws both groups to each other. Through the moral economy of e-sports everyone watches, everyone plays, everyone posts, and everyone wins.



## LIGHTS, CAMERA, E-SPORTS

Chapter One discusses Geertz's idea of deep play in the cockfighting world: that matches with larger wagers at stake were “deeper” in that they also carried a greater burden of status and thus were more impactful in terms of sentimental education. The same holds true for e-sports. Games like *League of Legends* are important because of the deep play scenarios they create, especially when comparing relatively small tournaments versus the large scale of those hosted by Riot. *League of Legends* and other e-sports titles aren't the only games to reinforce the values of a neoliberal economy. Many other sports and games also incorporate similar values into their rules systems. Much like the MLB's World Series or the NFL's Super Bowl, the world championships of *League of Legends* showcase the sport at its highest level, and that adds additional gravitas to the values expressed through competition. By raising the stakes of competition to the level of professional play, e-sports games create a situation similar to the deep matches at a Balinese cockfight. The *League of Legends* world championships gain extra depth thanks to not only the subcultural capital organized competition grants to its best and brightest, but also the heights of large-scale spectatorship, broadcasting, and a professional industry.

This chapter explores the sentimental education of e-sports by looking at its most visible and powerful moments: the large-scale tournaments that often define e-sports competition and the production of those events. Specifically, I will be looking at two major portions of the professional *League of Legends* scene: the League Champion Series (LCS) – Riot's professional circuit of weekly matches between professional teams akin to the “major leagues” of *League of Legends* – and the 2013 World Championships held during September and early October in Los Angeles. While there are other notable *League of Legends* tournament events (Major League Gaming runs several tournaments during the year and the Intel Extreme Masters tournament, for example),

these two interconnected tournaments represent the core of the *League of Legends* professional tournament scene. They are, in Geertz's terms, where the deepest *League of Legends* matches occur.

Professional tournament events such as these act as amplifiers that further reinforce the values explored through the game and its paratexts. Here, ideals like the individuality and the primacy of mental faculties and immaterial labor are celebrated through commentary and presentation in the tournament broadcast. The structures of these events add to this amplification. When fans watch the LCS or the World Championships, they are presented with a road map of how one's sentimental education should unfold. The emotions of triumph and loss are not only felt by fans in response to their team's success or failure but are displayed and explained through color commentary. Examining the discourse of these events shows us sentimental education delivered at the highest levels, and the lessons learned from watching professional performances are carried into amateur matches and beyond.

### **Life in the Big Leagues**

The professional *League of Legends* tournaments have undergone some drastic changes in their structure and presentation since they were introduced, and these changes have occurred in a rather short period of time. Riot's first world championship tournament was held in June 2011, presented as an additional event at Dreamhack Summer in Jönköping, Sweden. Its teams were selected from the top of the in-game ranked leaderboards, and eight teams – three from North America, three from Europe, and two from Southeast Asia – eventually qualified for the championship tournament in Sweden. China and South Korea, two major markets for both fans and teams, were not even included in the season one qualifiers. The prize purse for the event totaled \$99,500, a respectable sum for a tournament of its size. This stands in sharp contrast to the

championship events of seasons two and three. Held as independent events in large sports arenas, these championships brought in thousands of spectators in house and millions watching online around the world. Riot advertised a five million dollar prize pool across the entirety of season two, with two million reserved for the championship tournament.

Season three introduced a new structure to the world championships and the selection of the teams that participate in the tournament. Riot has created its own series of competitive leagues, separated by geographic region, that compete for select spots in the world championship bracket. Known as the League Championship Series, or LCS, this competition constitutes the major leagues of *League of Legends* competitive play. Matches between the different teams included in the LCS are broadcast twice weekly, usually on Thursday and Friday nights. Riot has essentially created its own equivalent of the weekly NFL broadcasts. In the same way that football fans watch Sunday and Monday night football, e-sports fans can watch Thursday and Friday night *League of Legends*. The LCS is currently divided into several leagues: one in North America, one in Europe, and several in Asia, namely China and Korea. The Chinese and Korean leagues aren't part of the LCS proper, but are instead independent e-sports league organizations that partner with Riot to determine what teams from these regions will participate in the world championships. The LCS also received attention when Riot announced that the teams participating in the LCS would receive salaries, a notable step towards defining *League of Legends* as a legitimate professional sport.

Riot has invested a substantial amount in expanding the e-sports gravitas of *League of Legends*, and that investment channels into increased market share for the company. Several interviews held before and after the 2013 world championships reveal that Riot has yet to make

any profit from the e-sports events they oversee.<sup>63</sup> Despite the ever-growing number of fans and spectators, Riot has not developed the LCS league system into a model that can earn money in the same way other sports leagues can. However, this is offset by the privatized nature of e-sports games and the LCS in particular. While traditional sports leagues do not usually own the sport they are structured around (the NFL doesn't own the game of football), e-sports titles are licensed intellectual properties owned by the studios that develop them. The privatized nature of the games of e-sports also points to the ways e-sports are more “natively” neoliberal than their field sport counterparts. Unlike games like baseball or football that were created as leisure activities and later became the centerpieces of sports business models, *League of Legends* was designed with the goal of producing monetary gain. It's another example of the neoliberal impulse to create a market wherever possible, one that underscores the potential for games like *League of Legends* to allow for the practice of neoliberal values. Because Riot owns *League of Legends*, any money they invest in expanding their e-sports presence acts as additional marketing for the company's flagship title. For Riot, e-sports is a “reasonable marketing cost.”<sup>64</sup> As Riot draws in more fans through its weekly professional broadcasts and large-scale tournaments, those fans will hopefully feel compelled to sign up for *League of Legends* themselves, adding to the number of potential sales through champion unlocks and available skins. Managing the LCS also means that Riot can essentially control its own e-sports destiny by maintaining control over how the game is presented. This gives Riot additional tools to manage their product and ensure its e-sports in the years to come. The success that Riot continues to enjoy indicates that the model will prove to be a noteworthy one in the continual evolution of e-sports.

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<sup>63</sup> Jeffery Grubb, “*League of Legends* Championship Series isn't profitable – and Riot doesn't care,” *Gamesbeat*, August 23, 2013, <http://venturebeat.com/2013/08/23/riots-league-of-legends-championship-series-isnt-profitable-and-it-doesnt-care/>.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

## Climbing the Ladder, Staying on Top

Many elements of Riot's e-sports productions are geared towards legitimating e-sports as a professional sporting career, and the LCS is an extension of this impulse. Many e-sports leagues are centered around major tournament events that occur a few times each year. The time between these events is often somewhat of a dead zone in terms of content. Fans can still watch professional players on their personal live streams, but they often don't have access to matches between professional teams outside the major tournaments. The LCS is a step towards the regular scheduling of traditional sports leagues. Matches between professional teams in the LCS regions take place on a weekly basis, usually 2-3 days per week during the season. Each week showcases 8-12 (or, in a few cases, 20) one-game matches between various teams. The teams selected for the LCS now constitute the professional scene of *League of Legends*. Where previous competitive seasons selected teams from the top of the game's ranked ladders or through a points system indicating tournament success (used in seasons one and two, respectively), the participants of the season three world championships were determined through a playoff series seeded by LCS ranking. For a team to make it to the LCS circuit means that they have officially “gone pro” in the *League of Legends* community, defining what was once a much murkier designation. The LCS consists of eight teams in North America and eight in Europe, totaling 80 players across all sixteen teams.<sup>65</sup> The teams selected for the inaugural LCS season were determined through placement in the season two world championships and a tournament between additional teams that did not secure a spot from their season two seed. However, once in the LCS, teams must fight to keep their places.

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<sup>65</sup> This figure does not include any alternates professional teams may employ, as they are not listed on the team rosters available at [lolesports.com](http://lolesports.com).

The problem that Riot creates by establishing a system like the LCS is that it undermines one of the core motivations for playing e-sports titles like *League of Legends*. On one hand, Riot recognizes the value in establishing some core teams that fans can recognize as professional and build loyalties around specific players and team, giving the game and its professional competitive scene increased longevity. However, successful e-sports titles are also founded in part on a sort of Horatio Alger myth: anyone, regardless of background, can compete at the highest level and become a *League of Legends* professional with enough practice and drive. The power of this fantasy is due in large part to the relationship e-sports games have with immaterial labor: because traditional athleticism is not required to be a top e-sports player, the door is opened for a larger variety of people to compete. While this certainly doesn't cover the wide variety of reasons players are drawn to games like *League of Legends*, their competitive nature and potential to function as a career encourages players to strive to reach the professional level. While the LCS may allow for individual players to be recruited for a team, it prevents groups that have organized their own highly competitive teams from entry into professional tournament events. Additionally, the lack of physical strain on the body means that players can potentially participate for longer periods of time, and most of the professional team rosters do not see significant changes during or between seasons.<sup>66</sup> Given the limited number of players each team lists on their roster at any given time, there are only a handful of potential positions available to fill on professional teams, far too few to appease the dreams of the vast majority of players. Without a pathway to enter into the world of professional play, many players would find little impetus to continue

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<sup>66</sup> There are exceptions, of course. At the end of the 2013 season Team Curse, which struggled through the second half of the season, announced that it would be changing four of its five starting players. Voyboy was the only player to stay on the team. Beyond moments like this, a team may see one member replaced with another, but sweeping changes like the scenario Team Curse presents are relatively rare.



playing *League of Legends* with the same fervor. Riot walks a fine line in organizing the LCS, straddling both of these worlds to ensure the best possible outcomes.

Riot addresses this problem through a system of relegation similar to that used by the English professional football league. The 2013 LCS season was separated into two “splits,” one in the spring and one in the summer. Each split effectively reset the competition standings, giving teams a new start when they resumed play at the beginning of the Summer Split. At the conclusion of each split, the two teams at the bottom of the standings and the fifth and sixth place teams in the split playoffs are threatened with potential relegation. These four professional teams are placed into a promotion tournament along with eight semi-professional teams. These teams are chosen from the “challenger” tier of ranked play, a special tier that only contains a limited number of spots and represents the best performing players that participate in ranked play. At the end of the promotion tournament, the four winning teams are promoted to the LCS team roster. The North American Spring Promotion Tournament saw two teams replaced by semi-professional teams, and the next promotion tournament is scheduled to begin at the end of this year. Riot continues to experiment with this model, and they have already announced that the number of professional teams that are threatened by relegation will be reduced from four to three in the 2014 season.

Riot's use of relegation to solve the issue of team promotion points to an effort to promote a sense of entrepreneurialism in its structure, an important element given the importance of entrepreneurial enterprise in a neoliberal economy. Harvey's basic definition of neoliberalism stresses the philosophy's interest in “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills,” and creating a *League of Legends* team that can potentially make it all the way to the top speaks to that. However, creating a professional league environment means stifling that entrepreneurial

impulse in order to allow for the development of lasting franchises. The incorporation of relegation preserves that entrepreneurial spirit while allowing for enterprising teams to develop as professional mainstays. It's also a nod to one of the advantages e-sports has: rather than be beholden to years of tradition in its tournament formatting, Riot has the flexibility to borrow elements from many different sports to design the LCS, creating an assemblage of elements that can more effectively address neoliberal life. The relegation model and its continual tweaking is a product of that assimilation.

This system of relegation and promotion means that Riot can maintain a core group of teams it can deem “professional” while still leaving ample opportunities for semi-professional players to break into the professional circuit. Fans can still select teams to support that will remain present in the competitive scene for some time while aspiring professionals can work their way through the game's ladder system and still have an opportunity to go pro. Combined with the recently announced Challenger Series of organized matches between semi-professional teams, the relegation system looks to be a useful tool in managing both elements of the tournament system.

The LCS's system of promotion and relegation differs from English football's in its volatility. Where the English Premier League relegates three of its twenty teams at the end of every season, the LCS potentially relegates four of its eight teams twice each season. Maintaining a position on the LCS lineup becomes a highly involved task given the few amount of teams relative to the number of relegation spots and the frequency at which relegation occurs. While the stresses of performance are undoubtedly high for both formats, relegation in the LCS becomes a threat that looms more closely for the majority of the teams.

All of these aspects of the LCS's structure – team selection and persistence, the relegation and promotion format, the potential frequency and scope of relegations – create a highly meritocratic system based around short-term engagements akin to the styles of commerce described by Harvey and Deuze. Like the employees Deuze describes, ones who must become accustomed to short-term engagements contingent upon performance with an organization rather than a long term employment strategy secured through the efforts of collective bargaining, players must operate in a league structure where a team's longevity is in no way guaranteed and additional effort is the only thing that will ensure a lasting place. While teams can potentially remain in the LCS for longer periods of time, they must operate knowing that relegation is always a real possibility. This is especially true for teams that have only recently been promoted to the LCS or have not been part of the professional scene for long; one of the teams promoted for the 2013 Summer Split is already up for relegation. Teams must play with an outlook similar to the employee described by Deuze in Chapter Two. A long-term stay at the top is in no way guaranteed, so teams are motivated to work that much harder in order to avoid relegation and removal from the LCS. This mindset is reflected in the ranked ladders within the game and through the discourse of commentators during LCS matches. Here, the “despair of loss” Geertz describes in “Deep Play” is tied to the all-too-real threat of unemployment. The fact that the LCS represents the highest levels of *League of Legends* play underscores this fact. The LCS presents a scenario where the sentimental education of the game extends beyond text and into the formatting of its professional play.

### **Everything's Bigger at the Top**

While the LCS was developed as a league system to provide more regular professional matches during a season, one of its primary tasks is to set the stage for Riot's largest and most

important event in its e-sports efforts: the *League of Legends* World Championships, often shortened to “Worlds.” This event, now typically scheduled in September or October (the first championship took place in June), has regularly set and broken records for e-sport event attendance, viewership, prize money, and theatrics. It is the crown jewel in Riot's e-sports lineup, and this year's championship tournament displays that. This year's tournament endeavored to be bigger in as many ways as it possibly could. The event spanned several weeks from the middle of September through the first week of October and featured fourteen teams from either LCS regional leagues or major tournament circuits from around the world. The production levels of the online broadcast and event staging had improved, and, one of the biggest pieces of news surrounding the tournament, the best of five final series between Chinese team Royal Club and South Korean team SK Telecom T1 was held in the Staples Center in Los Angeles. No concrete numbers have been reported, but the event drew approximately 13,000 fans to the Staples Center and an estimated 1 million concurrent viewers, even before adding numbers from South Korea and China, two regions with an enormous amount of fans (not to mention the fact that the final was between a South Korean and Chinese team).<sup>67</sup> Much of the enormity of the event, especially the use of the Staples Center, was an effort by Riot to show how much e-sports has progressed in its efforts to be recognized as a legitimate form of professional competition, and this sense of hugeness was prevalent throughout the competition. The tournament featured a dedicated cast of shoutcasters – e-sports color commentators – taken from both the North American and European LCS broadcasts. It also was the debut of the “analyst desk:” a panel of experts consisting of a shoutcaster (this responsibility rotated between the group working at the tournament); a moderator (who was often another shoutcaster); MonteCristo (who was mentioned in Chapter Two), an e-sports jour-

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<sup>67</sup> Sophie Prell, “SK Telecom T1 sweeps League of Legends World Championship,” *Joystiq*, October 5, 2013, <http://www.joystiq.com/2013/10/05/sk-telecom-t1-sweeps-league-of-legends-world-championship/>.

nalist following the South Korean region and the new coach of North American team Counter Logic Gaming; and two professional players: Mitch “Krepo” Voorspoels, the support player for European team Evil geniuses, and Yiliang “Doublelift” Peng, the AD carry for Counter Logic Gaming. The analyst desk provided pre and post-game commentary for each game and series in the tournament separate from the in-game commentary of the shoutcaster crew. Much of the production, including the analyst desk, models other sports broadcasts in its production structure, and is an important legitimation effort designed to make *League of Legends* appear similar to other major sports leagues. The analyst desk is particularly illustrative of this. The five panelists provided commentary very similar in style to what might be seen during an NFL broadcast. They even traded jokes and barbs with each other, including a long-standing gag about the “Korean hype train” that reappeared numerous times over the course of the tournament.<sup>68</sup>

This deliberate sense of scale is also appropriate in considering how professional tournaments such as these fit into the sentimental education of e-sports. The discourse of Worlds and other major e-sports tournaments acts as a framing mechanism for reinforcing values practiced in the text and through fannish practices like watching professional player streams. By listening to the opinions and analysis of *League of Legends* experts, players learn what they should and should not be doing in order to bring their own play to a more professional level, and these practices are reinforced through the sentimental education of victory and loss. Analysts and shoutcasters – e-sports color commentators – celebrate the elements explored in previous chapters through discourse. Values like the importance of mental quickness and acuity versus physical aptitude and the prevalence of the individual are underscored through analyst observations both said and unsaid. The discourse of Worlds shows us how to interpret the sentimental educa-

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<sup>68</sup> “RYL vs SKT – Worlds Final 2013 G1,” YouTube video, 1:13:48, posted by “LoLChampSeries,” October 5, 2013, <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=CqLJ5vAHVg4>.

tion of *League of Legends*. By emphasizing the sentimental lessons learned through play, it shows players how to succeed and what mindset they need to take from *League of Legends* in order to emerge triumphant.

Chapter One discusses the importance of mental acuity to e-sports like *League of Legends*, focusing on mental quickness and the ability to absorb large amounts of information, rather than the focus on physical aptitude emphasized in traditional sports. While the text may indicate the value of these skills through success on the Fields of Justice, it is through the discourse of professional tournaments that the value of these traits is continually framed through praise by shoutcasters and analysts. A notable example is a discussion of a particular player's champion pool, the term used to describe how many different champions a player is known to be comfortable using. Because of all the information a player must keep in mind when using a specific champion (abilities, combos and strategies used by the champion, synergy with other champions that may be on a player's team, item builds, dealing with various lane matchups, etc), most professional players use only a handful of champions regularly. By sticking to the same group of champions in play, a player can maximize his or her proficiency with that group and have more practice time with each one. However, particularly proficient players are able to learn how to play a much wider variety of champions for their roles. This becomes incredibly important during the selection of champions in the picks and bans phase. Teams will often study their opponents' champion preferences and devise strategies to counter them through their own selection or banning of champions. If a player is known to play a champion with particular skill, there is a high chance that the opposing will either ban the champion from use in a game or select the champion for use on their own team, denying him or her the option to select the champion in question. Worlds was filled with many of these "target bans," and many of them proved pivotal

in deciding the final series. Tabe, the support player and captain of Royal Club, is very well known for his ability to play Annie, a champion often selected as a support. This fact was not lost on SK Telecom T1, who was well aware of this fact, banned Annie in each of the three games played in the final series. This effectively locked Tabe out of one of his best champions. An example of selecting champions using similar logic can be pulled from Worlds as well. One of the biggest talking points heading into the first game of the series was that SK Telecom T1 elected to start on the red side of the field (teams are designated as either red or blue), a move similar to electing to kick the ball rather than receive it at the start of a football game. Their reasoning was guided by champion knowledge. By selecting champions second rather than first SK Telecom T1 ensured that they received the last champion pick. This meant that they could select a champion for Faker, their mid lane player, that was considered a counter to whatever champion Royal Club chose. Doing this meant that Faker needed to know what champions his opponent was likely to play and be able to have a large enough champion pool to counter whatever was chosen. This kind of strategic selection and banning is an important element of professional competitions, so being able to maintain a large roster of champions that can be played proficiently is a celebrated skill.

The amount of game knowledge necessary to play a champion well at the professional level is substantial, and shoutcasters often speak very highly of players who are able to adeptly manage a larger pool of champions. It is one of the biggest mental skills praised by commentators in the discourse of the game, especially during the picks and bans phase. A wide champion pool is seen as both an indicator of the player's capacity to work through greater amounts of information as well as a useful tool in thwarting an opponent's ability to out predict him or her in champion selection. In a pregame interview, Voyboy, the Team Curse top lane player discussed

in Chapter Two, discusses the mid lane matchup between SK Telecom T1's Faker and Royal Club's Wh1t3zZ (pronounced as “Whitez”). While Faker was considered by the majority of analysts and fans to be the better player, Voyboy argued that Wh1t3z would still be able to evenly match him. His reasoning? Wh1t3zZ's large champion pool meant that he could play many champions that counter Faker's choices, so this advantage would compensate for a lack in mechanical skill. Most analysts perform an extensive amount of statistics research and number crunching to determine the likelihood that a particular player will select a given champion. When the analysts are surprised with picks they did not see coming or cannot be certain given the wide variety of champions a player can use well, they reflect that in their descriptions of the player's threat presence during picks and bans. The inverse is also true. Players who are known to only play a select few champions well are often lampooned as being easy to predict and thus much easier to outmaneuver when selecting champions. Many believed that Tabe's reliance on Annie would be his downfall because of the likelihood that the champion would be banned from play, but the analyst Doublelift was quick to jump to his defense, arguing that Tabe's champion familiarity extended beyond the handful of champions expected. Most players are expected to have an excellent working knowledge of the game's mechanics, so players who are able to demonstrate their ability to navigate the mental challenges of *League of Legends* are lauded for their additional talents.

This focus on mental skills over physical ones is also present in what analysts and shoutcasters do not discuss as well. While physical acumen may not play into *League of Legends* as heavily as a game like football or baseball, there are still some important physical aspects to the game. Hand-eye coordination ranks among the highest of these, as players must be able to quickly assess the situation in the game and issue orders to their champion quickly and accurately. A number of e-sports titles, particularly the *StarCraft* series and various fighting games, take



the ability of a player to rapidly manipulate controls – a skill known as “micro,” short for micro-managing – as an important part of the game. Micro describes the ability to precisely coordinate character movements and actions in game, especially when there are many characters to manage (like in *StarCraft II*) or when there is a large amount of chaotic action occurring (like in a *League of Legends* teamfight). Players who can micro well in *League of Legends* are able to expertly dodge attacks and keep their champions alive longer. Additionally, the ability to effectively land manually-targeted champion abilities, known as skill shots, is an important skill to master in order to effectively play *League of Legends*. Much like firing a weapon at a moving target, players must be able to lead their abilities to ensure that they will make contact and damage the opposing players. However, in *League of Legends*, most commentary about professionals does not focus on a player's ability to micro his or her champion or land skill shots. This is still an important skill for a professional to learn; being able to dodge an opponent's ability at just the right moment can sometimes mean the difference between winning a skirmish or an entire match. Despite this, analysts do not typically focus on a player's ability to micro, accepting it as given that most players should have the requisite skill necessary to deftly maneuver within the game if they play at the professional level. It once again comes down to prediction; players are praised and respected by experts for their ability to react quickly to situations because they knew enough to spot the signs of trouble. The previously mentioned Voyboy interview illustrates this. Faker, the SK Telecom T1 mid, had been enormously popular during the tournament due to his quick reaction time and ability to maneuver his champion. However, Voyboy believed that Wh1t3zZ would still provide equal opposition due to his game knowledge and ability to counter Faker with many different champions. Even the most physical aspects of *League of Legends* are related back to mental quickness when analyzed by the shoutcasters' desk.

Because the emphasis is placed on immaterial faculties, like a player's mental acuity, there is a distinct lack of emphasis on an element that is much more important to the discourse of traditional sports: the body. Where fitness, size, height, and weight are all factors that can figure prominently in the discussion of a particular athlete in field sports discourse, these elements are rarely discussed in the discourse of a professional *League of Legends* tournament. In fact, the body types of professional players vary immensely, covering a broad spectrum of heights and weights. Players are never discussed based on their body type or weight because it simply does not factor into a player's ability to perform in the game. While the players' bodies may not be discussed, they are presented visually both between matches as players take their seats or shake hands after a match and on screen during a match in progress. This is useful for a number of reasons. Besides allowing for fans to develop a more personal connection to a particular player or team (it's easier to admire a player when you have a face to match the screen name), the wide variety of body types seen on a professional team underscores the “anyone can make it” attitude that drives many players to invest large amounts of time in the game. Showing players with many different types of bodies rather than one or two general body shapes reinforces the notion that many of the physical barriers that hold some back from participating in field sports are less applicable to a game like *League of Legends*. Because most of the action and skillset is based in mental capabilities rather than physical ones, there is the idea that anyone can participate. In the series between Royal Club and SK Telecom T1, there was never any mention of the players' body shapes or sizes. While most of the SK Telecom T1 players were relatively lean, a few of Royal Club's members were heavysset and would likely be considered overweight by common cultural standards. Despite this, there never emerged a single comment about a player's physique from the analysts.

This is a strong link to the neoliberal immaterialization of labor and the quality it promises. The movement of the workforce away from labor-oriented jobs that rely on physical strength and stamina accelerates with the increasing capability of digital technology and workplace automation. The kinds of tasks required of many workers in the new economy, ones that preference mental skills, are independent of body type, perpetuating the idea that you can climb the corporate ladder no matter who you are as long as you pack the intellectual acumen to do the job. Of the many work responsibilities outlined by Castells and discussed in Chapter One, only one group of laborers, the “operated,” focuses largely on manual labor.<sup>69</sup> All other labor responsibilities involved in generating value for a company rely on mental, not physical, skills like strategic decision-making and product innovation. The discourse of bodies in a *League of Legends* broadcast reinforces this idea. In e-sports, all that “matters” is your ability to play the game, not who you are or what you look like.

This is, of course, completely untrue. Much like the disconnect between the game and gamespace that Wark describes in *Gamer Theory*, not everyone loads into a life with the same amount of resources and only a summoner name (the game's label for a screen name) to set each other apart. The many factors that create imbalance between groups are made irrelevant in *League of Legends*, and these imbalances are largely ignored within the discourse in order to perpetuate this ideal within gamespace. Despite the fact that a digital game necessitates a certain level of wealth (while the game has relatively low system requirements, a player must still be able to cross the digital divide) and the large amounts of time necessary to practice before a player can even come close to earning a living as a professional player, the discourse of *League of Legends* maintains its stance that anyone can rise to the top. *League of Legends*, along with

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<sup>69</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 259.

many other e-sports, also has a number of issues regarding representation in terms of both race and gender. The infographic mentioned in the introduction reports that over 90% of players are male, and there are currently no female professional players in either the North American or European LCS. Additionally, the vast majority of professional players are either white or Asian; other racial groups are represented by only a handful of players. However, due to the immaterial nature of play, these imbalances are rarely mentioned in the game's discourse.

The lack of racial discourse at Worlds can be understood just by looking at the competition's title: Worlds. *League of Legends*, like neoliberal economics, requires globalization in order to reach the massive scale its creators envision. Because e-sports are rooted in immaterial labor and the time-space compression of the Internet, they are often represented a sport that ignores nationalities. Maintaining this global image means ignoring notable racial disparities within the discourse of the sport and creating game elements that appeal to a global audience and reinforce the global nature of the game, often in problematic ways. Besides running gags like the "Korean Hype Train" discussed by the analysts' desk, there was little discussion during Worlds that focused on the racial makeup of the finals. SK Telecom T1 and Royal Club are both teams made up entirely of Asian players, yet this discussion was relatively limited during the broadcast. Doing so would reinforce a commonly-held stereotypical belief within the e-sports community that Asian teams are often "just better" at e-sports, a concept that ties Asian team success and the highly-mental nature of e-sports to the familiar stereotype that Asians are inherently gifted at mathematics. Additionally, South Korea has been considered the most "wired" country in the world for many years. Boasting some of the fastest average internet speeds and largest percentages of high-speed internet access, teams from this nation also have a potential advantage due to

their access to this infrastructure.<sup>70</sup> The lack of teams from other nationalities could also potentially dissuade viewers from North America and Europe from viewing the finals, so these issues were generally overlooked during the broadcast. Instead, the broadcast personalities would often mention how many supporters both teams had within the tournament venues, a nod to the global support for the teams and the game. Global participation and support is inflated through caster commentary, while issues that may problematize the global ideal of e-sports are suppressed.

Another important element in maintaining *League of Legends*' global image is the variety of champions available and the cosmetic skins that be used to customize their appearance. Champion concepts are pulled from a variety of sources, and the variety of champions available reflects the global image *League of Legends* strives to create. However, the racial division of champions is stark. Almost all of the champions in *League of Legends* are white; only one champion can truly be labeled African American (and this champion can be played with a skin that makes him white), and there are no champions that could clearly be identified as Latino or other minority races. Several champions are identifiable as Asian, but this is due primarily to an Orientalized appearance; champions labeled as ninjas, samurai, or champions inspired from Asian myth and folklore are generally the only ones that appear Asian. While many champions draw on the culture and folklore of many culture around the world, a fact that bolsters *League of Legends*' global claims, the racial breakdown of champions both reflects the types of players commonly seen at professional tournaments and the dominant cultures of the most profitable *League of Legends* markets. The cosmetic skins available for a champion further this concept, allowing players to participate in a sort of identity tourism through a *League of Legends* champion.<sup>71</sup> While

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<sup>70</sup> J. C. Herz, "The Bandwidth Capital of the World," *Wired* 10, no. 8 (2002):

[http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/10.08/korea.html?pg=1&topic=&topic\\_set=](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/10.08/korea.html?pg=1&topic=&topic_set=)

<sup>71</sup> Lisa Nakamura, "Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet," *Works and Days*

roleplaying is not a major activity during *League of Legends* play, players can utilize champion races and skins that alter that race to participate using an alternate racial background. For instance, Fizz, an anthropomorphic “fish-man” champion, has the option to be played using skin that makes him appear to be an Inuit hunter. While Fizz may not be white, he allows players the option to present themselves as an Inuit character. Even the term “skin” motions towards the temporary nature of skin identities; these are only coverings that change a champion’s appearance, not their core character. Skins do not have any impact on the game itself, so the choice to play a champion with a raced skin (or any skin) reflects a player’s desire to embody another race or identity during play. Skins allow Riot to provide a “wider” racial representation in the game, keeping with the global nature of the game, while maintaining a core of champions that reflects the primary audience of *League of Legends*, often in problematic ways.

All of these examples from the Worlds finals appear in just thirty minutes of coverage. Given that this first game was one of three in the finals series and one of 63 games played across the span of the entire competition it represents a small portion of the total amount of broadcast time and commentary that took place during the 2013 World Championships. With similar discussions occurring regularly, the types of behavior emphasized through analysis are reinforced repeatedly. This commentary work frames the play mindsets of players who take the lessons they learned from the professional plays and analyst comments back to their own game sessions. There, they can explore the ideas more directly through the text. These are the tools they need to aim for Worlds in 2014, but they also represent an important commentary on neoliberal labor and values that cannot be ignored.

## CONCLUSION

When I dwell upon the evolution and rise of e-sports, there are few words I can think of that properly describe the growth of the industry in the last 10-15 years. E-sports have gone from a series of local events enjoyed by a relative few to an industry all their own with millions of viewers and a truly professional organizational structure. If player counts and viewer numbers continue to stay the way they are, it's likely that e-sports won't be going anywhere any time soon. In many ways, e-sports has become a mainstay in the culture of digital games fandom, and it is one that will likely be around for years to come.

What does change, however, are the games people play. There have been some major pillars of e-sports play that have remained popular for extended periods of time (*StarCraft*, one of the games that helped start the e-sports boom in the early 2000s, continues to be a regular sight in large e-sports competitions in various iterations), but many of the games that are played as popular ones on the e-sports circuits change relatively quickly. New games are released often, and the growing popularity of e-sports makes them an appealing way to market a new title. *League of Legends* has caused a tremendous surge in the popularity of e-sports, but it remains to be seen how long it can hold its place at the top. Other games will likely eclipse its popularity in time, and players will move on to greener and more profitable pastures.

However, the neoliberal values *League of Legends* explores through its play and fandom are not limited to this specific e-sports text. Many other e-sports titles allow players to explore and practice neoliberal values through their different mechanics and culture, and the sentimental education of high-stakes wins and losses continues to be present. While this project does not focus on the many other e-sports titles making the rounds, its arguments can be seen in many of *League of Legends'* competitors.

This poses a problem. E-sports games are themselves products of a neoliberal marketplace, so they are effective spaces in which neoliberal values can be practiced and explored. There are some points of resistance within this system (Chapter Two describes the contention between the open access values of a moral economy with the drive for privatization in neoliberal economics and its impact on player guides and streaming, for example), but most of the neoliberal values explored through e-sports play are so omnipresent that they are difficult to challenge within the text. Given neoliberalism's exclusion of those who cannot contribute to the market, the sentimental education e-sports provides deserves a greater volume of resistive voices.

One of the biggest challenges to providing these resistive voices is the nature of the games themselves. The standard strategies that emerge in a game like *League of Legends* do so because they have emerged from a crucible of trial and error; in a game with so much potentially on the line, only the most effective methods of securing victory become the norm. This makes playing *League of Legends* in a manner that both resists the neoliberal values practiced through play and achieves winning results exceedingly difficult. This does not mean that there are no moments of resistance, however. Players have instead looked to paratexts like fan videos, comics, and artwork to explore critiques to the model the game celebrates through sentiment. Many fan videos posted to YouTube and other video sharing sites showcase the exploits of players who eschew the traditional model in favor of trying strategies that both contort the game's neoliberal practices and occasionally succeed thanks to their bizarre nature. In one example, the YouTube channel “NvMeta” (the “Nv” presumably short for “never”), two players fulfill the traditional AD carry/support pairing in the bottom lane using champions who are not designed to function in this capacity. Ignoring the typical strategy of the game, these players create their own combi-



nations that work mainly because of their diversion from the norm.<sup>72</sup> Other videos take the gold acquisition elements of the game to the extreme, creating teams who, under the battle cry “disregard objectives, acquire currency,” ignore the actual victory conditions of the game to instead earn as much gold as possible and achieve an “economic victory.”<sup>73</sup>

It's hard to imagine an e-sports text that doesn't work within the values of neoliberalism, but it is certainly not impossible. *League of Legends* paratexts, like the ones described above, show that resistive practices can emerge, but e-sports titles will need to allow for resistance of neoliberal values and succeed competitively in order to more effectively challenge the practice. Perhaps soon texts that create an education of sentiment that resists the neoliberal presence in e-sports will make it into the tournament circuits and arena stages. However difficult it may be to design games that appeal to the thrill of competition that draws professional competitors while avoiding the values of a neoliberal economy may be, resistant practices starting at the level of the text will eventually carry over to the paratexts of fandom and broadcasting. E-sports likely isn't going anywhere, but perhaps its sentimental education could be.

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<sup>72</sup> “NvMeta,” *YouTube*, accessed November 12, 2013, <http://www.YouTube.com/user/nvmetagaming/videos>.

<sup>73</sup> “Cash Ashe and the Money Gang ft. Richcrank – Gettin’ Gold,” *YouTube* video, 3:00, posted by “LeagueUniversity,” September 7, 2013, <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=kqmbKkE64NM>.

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