



“We can just say it and we say we know what it means, but then do you really know what it means?”

Understanding experiences, constructions and management of toxic gaming communities: *A League of Legends* case study

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Declaration

I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

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When I was three, I woke one morning and declared "I think I'll do my PhD today, mummy". And (eventually) I did.

This is for Zel, the best girl.

Abstract

This thesis reports a study of the interpretation and management of toxic gaming communities through the case of *League of Legends (LoL)*. The thesis positions games as a form of interactional culture where meanings about belonging, behaviour and language are created, and thereby shape, gaming communities. A critical review of the literature on community, culture and toxicity identifies a knowledge gap in understanding toxicity in online gaming.

As insider research, this study privileges participant voice in using players' accounts to understand how players interpret toxicity, and second, why players continue to play *LoL* when their gaming community is described as 'toxic'. This is explored through a mixed methods research design, beginning with a mixed methods survey with 152 participants from thirty countries. This is followed by seventeen qualitative interviews, with participants located in seven countries. Analysis of descriptive statistics from the quantitative survey is followed by thematic analysis of qualitative survey data and semi-structured interviews.

Players' introductions to *LoL* are found to be primarily through friends, family or partners, and established players become instrumental in supporting new players through toxicity. The nuances of interpreting and understanding toxicity are identified, noting a discrepancy between players and game developers. Interpretation of toxic behaviours is found to be driven by five factors, including offline characteristics, approaches to play, and knowledge. Players' agency in mitigating and managing their gameplay experiences was reported to include use of muting and pre-made teams. Players continued engagement with *LoL* was due to its uniqueness, and its provision of immersive lore, familiarity and social opportunities. An original tool, the *Toxicity Interpretation Framework*, is derived from the study to further understanding of toxicity. The thesis concludes by considering toxicity as a reflection of aspects of our social world, with recommendations for addressing toxicity via player agency.

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Abbreviations

ADC	Attack-Damage Carry
AFK	Away from keyboard
ARAM	All Random All Mid
<i>CoD</i>	<i>Call of Duty</i>
CS	Creep score
<i>CS:GO</i>	<i>Counter Strike: Global Offensive</i>
E3	Electronic Entertainment Expo
FPA	Fair Play Alliance
FPS	First Person Shooter
IGN	In-game name
Int	Intentional feeding / inting
LAN	Local Area Network
LARP	Live Action Role-Play/ing
LCS	League Championship Series
<i>LoL</i>	<i>League of Legends</i>
LP	<i>League Points</i>
MMR	MatchMaking Rating
MMOG	Massively Multiplayer Online Games
MMORPG	Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games
MOBA	Multiplayer Online Battle Arena
MUDs	Multi-User Domains
NUEL	National University Esports League
OP	Overpowered
PvP	Player versus Player

RP	Riot Points
<i>TF2</i>	<i>Team Fortress 2</i>
VOD	Video on demand
WNUEL	Women and Non-Binary National University Esports League
<i>WoW</i>	<i>World of Warcraft</i>

A glossary of terms and definitions is included in Appendix 1 to provide accessibility for non-*League of Legend* players.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

League of Legends: A history of toxicity

1.1 “Swim against the current” – Nami, The Tidecaller

I land my skill-shot perfectly: a double-bubble, immobilising the enemy marksman and support for a few seconds whilst they were both trapped inside the watery prison. As they are released from my Aqua Prison, they begin to attack Draven, my team’s marksman.

“wtf. report nami”

My sense of pride started to wane as my marksman called for my team mates to report me. Draven and Nami were meant to be a strong lane combination: my ability to crowd control – to stop enemies in their tracks - provided clear opportunities for Draven to deal large amounts of damage, stacking his axes with each strike, strengthened by my Tidecaller’s Blessing. Draven is on less than twenty-per cent health when I landed my bubble. I intended Draven to use this opportunity to escape the fight and survive, he stayed in lane and did what Draven does: he attacked. Once released, the enemy continued their attack.

An ally has been slain.

“Sorry. Thought you would get out”, I type as I recall to base to heal, sure that me still being alive is adding to Draven’s frustration.

“u engaged”.

We can agree to disagree on whether my bubble was an engage or not. Disheartened, I continue play, trying to ensure my moves can't be misinterpreted as aggressive.

"u play like a girl. go back to the kitchen", Draven types.

"You didn't want me to engage"

"i'm draven. need to b aggressive".

Now my safe play is seen as inappropriate, an incorrect style for my teammate or their chosen champion. The gendered attack didn't help either. Exactly what does a girl 'play like'? I refocus, seeing Draven initiate an attack against our enemy laners (Why is he doing that?). I send out my Tidal Wave, knocking up the enemies. This could help Draven get some extra damage on the enemy they are still immobilised, but it gives him a chance to escape too. He does... neither. He stops attacking and just stands in the lane. I watch his health bar depleting as Tristana and Braum work as a team to get that extra kill. I try to heal Draven, but it's not enough.

An ally has been slain.

A summoner has disconnected.

Draven has left the game. We are left four versus five. Gameplay goes on for another ten minutes and becomes occupied with the rest of the team being frustrated at Draven for leaving the game. It means less focus on what we *could* do to try and turn the game in our favour.

Defeat, the narrator voice booms.

I report Draven (leaving the game, hate speech). I don't report the rest of the team for what was said in those last ten minutes. They were frustrated but played sportingly until Draven abandoned us. I leave champion select. I don't remember moving my mouse to click *Play* in the top left of my screen.

Play.

Ranked.

I select my roles and click 'Find match'.

"Just one more game"

1.2 "It's not just me": A cycle of toxicity and return to play

The vignette in section 1.1 represents the all-too-common experience that I have faced when playing *League of Legends*¹ over the last twelve years. *LoL* is a free-to-play Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game developed by Riot Games in 2009. The game continues to grow its player base, going from 67 million players per month in 2014, to over 100 million by 2016 (Kollar, 2016). From July 2024, *LoL* had a player base of 132 million active monthly users (Turbosmurfs, 2024). In 2023, over 1.32 billion hours of *LoL* was watched on Twitch, making it the third most watched category on Twitch, after *Grand Theft Auto V* and 'Just Chatting'. Having one of the most active gaming communities on Reddit (Kemp, 2020) demonstrates the popularity of *LoL*, alongside substantial

¹ From here on this thesis refers to *League of Legends* as the abbreviated form, *LoL*, with the exception of where participants referred to *League of Legends* as 'League'. Additionally, there is a supplementary document to this thesis, entitled 'League of Legends: A gameplay guide for reading a thesis' which exists to support non-League players in the reading and understanding of gameplay references made within this thesis.

esports viewership, with 42% of players also watching competitive *LoL*, and 26% of people who watch competitive *LoL* not playing the game at all (Pannekeet, 2019). In 2023, the *LoL* World Championship attracted 6.4 million viewers, a new global viewership record of 23.3% more than the previous record (Hitt, 2023). Developers, Riot Games, have continued expand the *LoL* franchise releasing a number of ‘spin-off’ games. The continued growth and expansion of the *LoL* universe, and accumulation of players, demonstrates the continued impact of *LoL* on the gaming industry and its community.

Despite its popularity, *LoL* has a well-documented problem with toxicity. A selection of headlines from 2012 to 2024 (Box 1.1) reflects the sentiment felt across the community. I first became aware of toxicity in *LoL* through playing the game, and my experience was corroborated in reports and posts on the *LoL* community pages, watching players stream their games on Twitch, and through talking to other *LoL* players.

The League of Legends team of scientists trying to cure 'toxic behaviour' online
(McWhertor, 2012)

League Of Legends' Neverending War On Toxic Behaviour
(Skiffington, 2014)

How League Of Legends Enables Toxicity
(LeJacq, 2015)

League of Legends survey shows toxicity, competitiveness among players
(Soba, 2020)

From Design to Discord: The Path to Toxicity in League of Legends
(Lin, 2023)

Box 1.1 A selection of media headlines about *LoL* and toxicity from 2012 to 2024.

I was introduced to the game in 2012 during my first year of my Undergraduate degree. Watching a housemate playing, I thought the game looked overly complicated, but in time my housemate convinced me to try playing, and I very quickly became hooked. I played with him, and a few of his friends, and over time they taught me the game and overall, I found it fun to play. Some games were frustrating, and occasionally a player would ‘talk shit’. My housemate taught me – for the most part – to not talk back: he advised it was not worth it. However, when I began to play without my friends, my experience of the game was often less enjoyable. I would complain to my housemate, and talk about what happened in the game: Was some of the frustration my fault and caused by me? What was out of my control?

My play improved and I used *LoL* to stay connected with friends during summer holidays and after graduation – even connecting with some family members whom I had not known were *LoL* players. Negative experiences in some games continued, and my frustration and negative experiences were often not related to the gameplay itself but stemmed from the interactions between players during play. Some players would type abuse, blame teammates, and sometimes leave the game making it harder for their team to win (in a five versus five game, if a player leaves, the team is left to play with one less player, as is the case when a player being sent off during a football match).

Somehow, playing *LoL* continued to provide a way for me to connect with others. I began my PhD, part-time, in 2017, initially planning to explore positive experiences around *LoL* – about connectivity and creativity. Shortly after starting my PhD, I joined the University’s gaming society, affectionately known as *SLUGS* (no one knows why). The esports officer introduced me to a group of people, who were all *LoL* players. When I introduced myself, the question came: “So what is your PhD on?”. I answered: “I’m looking at the *LoL* community, and why we play and how we experience the

community”. “Ha! We’re all just toxic, aren’t we?!” one of the guys said, and all the others laughed with him.

That moment now feels extraordinarily significant. In 2020, an ex-professional *LoL* player turned streamer, Voyboy, released a video on YouTube called “The Sad State of League Solo Q”. The video focussed on how one game mode in particular – Ranked – was being ruined by toxicity. The overall sentiment applied to all of *LoL* and resonated strongly with players. Voyboy’s (2020) video coincided with my analysis of my survey data and initiated a pivotal change in my research direction (Chapter 3). The *LoL* community is constructed by its own players as incredibly toxic, yet players sustain their commitment to the game. I recalled the SLUGS member saying “Ha! We’re all just toxic, aren’t we?!” I wondered, why are we still playing? I wanted to understand what it is about *LoL* that keeps players coming back to play again.

I later became interested in how we define toxicity. Discussions of games with friends and members of the gaming society, were peppered with the word ‘toxic’. Everyone seemed to know what ‘toxic’ meant. Or did we? I started to wonder if all *LoL* players understand toxicity similarly. This led me to connecting toxicity with Riot Games’ turbulent history with the term. Since Riot Games developed *LoL*, its history in trying to tackle this ‘toxicity’, has been met with limited success. In 2020 the developers joined the *Fair Play Alliance*, a coalition of games companies and developers seeking to make gaming more inclusive and provide better experiences for players (Burrell, 2020; Fair Play Alliance, 2020b). In 2022, Riot Games joined with developer Ubisoft to establish the *Zero Harm in Comms* project, aiming to develop “gaming structures that foster more rewarding social experiences and avoid harmful interactions” (Riot Games, 2022b). These developments are a step change in Riot’s approach to toxicity. The *Fair Play Alliance* and Riot have now eschewed the term ‘toxicity’, deeming it “an ambiguous term” which “doesn’t help us actually address the problem” (Fair Play Alliance, 2020b). Yet the term was initially central to game developers’ definition of ‘disruptive behaviour’. A

former employee, Riot Lyte, lead Riot's strategy on combatting 'toxicity', focussing on psychology and covert social experiments in-game (Izento, 2021; McWhertor, 2012). Riot Lyte placed the focus on punishment and positive reinforcement which did not necessarily produce desired outcome. The focus quickly turned onto Lyte's private life where he was allegedly manipulative and behaved directly in opposition to his statement that "better humans make better players" (Izento, 2021). Lyte left Riot Games, which continued to consider how to tackle toxicity. Scrutiny increased when the culture at Riot Games was exposed to be dominated by sexism and laddism (D'Anastasio, 2018). Eventually \$100 million was paid in a case concerning discrimination against 1548 former and current female employees in the company (BBC News, 2021; Wood, 2023). This then begs the question, if the company has not demonstrated a good history with appropriate conduct and behaviour, how can it share an understanding of the scope and definition of 'toxicity' within the company and its players?

This history suggests that *LoL* would be a valuable case study in exploring issues of toxicity. Firstly, it would help to examine how players understand what is meant by the term. Secondly, it could help identify how players negotiate toxicity. Thirdly, it might help to explain how issues of community and culture bind players together in spite of their negative experiences. Whilst my own experience was the initial stimulus for this thesis, I have reached a deeper understanding of the complex issues identified through participant players' experiences, and an understanding of the history of toxicity in the company behind the game. Section 1.3 sets out the research questions which underpinned the study reported here.

1.3 Research questions

This study aimed to answer the overarching question, ‘How is toxicity understood and experienced in *League of Legends*, and what are the implications for gaming communities and culture?’. Within this overarching question, it addresses the following sub-questions:

1. How do players begin their journey in entering the *LoL* gaming space and community?
2. What drives player interpretations and understandings of toxicity? How does this speak to understandings produced by Riot?
3. How do players navigate, mitigate and manage exposure to toxicity?
4. What binds players to gaming spaces, communities, and culture despite toxicity?
5. What are the implications of player perceptions and responses to toxicity for games developers, communities, and cultures?

This study contributes to knowledge around toxicity in video games, specifically within *LoL*. There is a limited body of literature on the topic and so the study reported in this thesis seeks to contribute to that literature. This study provides a picture of toxicity in *LoL* through players’ perspectives on the issue. It demonstrates how the culture of the game can engender a form of conflict that is toxic. This culture of behaviours and practices has become normalised to the point where players expect to encounter toxicity in *LoL* and utilise their own agency to minimise their exposure to it. This thesis suggests ways of understanding the complexity of interpreting toxicity, how to address some factors which contribute to toxicity, and provides a springboard for future research and practice in gaming.

This thesis focuses on toxicity within a single specific game; however, the concepts of identity and community are central, being experienced and understood within gaming culture more broadly. Taylor (2006b, p. 57) highlights the merging of game culture with identity and community, breaking down the idea that community exists purely *in-game*: “Any discussion of game life must include a model of the distributed social sphere via groups, practices and knowledge that exist outside of the formal bounds of the game”. This is important to this thesis. Toxicity is a well-known experience within *LoL* life, and this thesis acknowledges and pays attention to those out-of-game elements which influence interpretations and understandings of toxicity. These are acknowledged throughout Chapters 5, 6, and 7, as everything which contributes to understanding this issue is essentially a form of knowledge that is outside “the formal bounds of the game” (Taylor, 2006b, p. 57). Such knowledge is uniquely formed of a combination of players’ collective perspectives. These are an amalgam of individual, idiosyncratic perspectives of behaviours based on player identities, human identities, and players’ specific approaches to gameplay. All of this is situated within the notion that the game is a culture which has of itself produced potential for toxicity. This thesis therefore contributes to a developing picture of what Taylor (2006b, p. 57) has dubbed “the disrupted social sphere” found within gaming. Paul (2018) has suggested that gaming’s focus on the individual has given rise to toxicity and hostility. As such a shift of focus from the individual might help to disrupt the perpetuation of the toxicity which arises from cultures of misogyny, fascism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism. Deeper understanding of individual perspectives on toxicity could help re-focus on the collective ability of community to be more inclusive, thus fostering more consistently friendly environments.

Whilst gameplay is deemed to be toxic, players continue to engage in the game. Presently research studies have not offered an understanding of how players navigate this. Such understanding is important for games developers, who in the context of in-game toxicity may wish to increase player

agency and create further opportunities and game elements that help sustain player engagement in the long term.

1.4 Narrative and structure of the study

This thesis documents a research journey and develops a narrative regarding players' experiences around *LoL* and toxicity. It follows players' accounts of when they were introduced to the game, through to their conceptualisations of toxicity, their experiences and how they manage toxic behaviour, before considering why, despite these experiences, they still play the game.

Chapter Two provides a critical review of the extant literature pertaining to the study. It discusses literature focussing on 'identity' (one of the key influences which shapes players articulation of 'toxicity') and discusses theoretical constructions of the concepts of 'community' and 'culture'. It also considers research on gaming which has applied these theoretical constructions.

Fundamentally, however, Chapter Two provides critical consideration of literature on 'toxicity' and *LoL* itself, clearly identifying a knowledge gap in the study of these two subjects.

Chapter Three explains and justifies the methodology and methods of this study. The study used a mixed methods framework including a mixed methods survey which influenced the shape and direction of the remainder of the study, involving qualitative interviews with seventeen *LoL* players. The reach of the study became global, with the survey attracting 152 participants from thirty countries, and interview participants based in seven different countries. Chapter Three gives a detailed account of the methods, recruitment and analysis. It sets out fundamental principles which shaped the research including my status as an insider researcher and attention to participant voice. Chapter Three also tracks and justifies the change of research objective in response to the data generated in the initial stages of the study.

Chapter Four begins the presentation of data and findings, with a report of the mixed methods survey. It provides an account of the demographics and play patterns of survey respondents, and an exploratory discussion of how *LoL* players view the concept of ‘community’ and specifically the *LoL* community. Findings demonstrated that whilst respondents held normative views in expecting communities to be positive and welcoming, they constructed the *LoL* community to be the stark opposite of this, characterised by toxicity.

Chapter Five onwards report my analysis and findings from qualitative interviews with seventeen *LoL* players and begins the narrative of players’ own journeys with the game and their perspectives on toxicity. Chapter Five explores how players were introduced to the game, their initial experiences of the game alongside the expectations and existing narratives that players were aware of surrounding gameplay and the community.

Chapter Six reports player understandings of the term ‘toxicity’ and considers these in relation to the language used in Riot Games communications. Further, the chapter identifies the idiosyncratic, and nuanced interpretations of toxicity and toxic behaviours held by individual players. Chapter Six also considers factors that players deem influential in producing toxicity in-game, the relationship between toxicity and teamplay, and the normalisation of toxicity through streaming platforms. This results in an understanding of what toxicity *is* for players.

Chapter Seven explores how players seek to manage and manipulate their game experiences. It considers the tools and agency utilised in their attempts to avoid toxicity in order to produce positive interactions with the game. Two key findings here are how players engage with the in-game tools to mute other players, or their decisions to queue with known players to friends in order to mitigate potential exposure to toxicity.

Chapter Eight concludes the player journeys, considering why they continue to play *LoL* , in spite of the prevalence of toxicity. It examines how the factors of familiarity and comfort, spectatorship, sociality and connection, progression and uniqueness to gameplay keep players engaged and interested in playing *LoL*.

Chapter Nine positions the reported study within a wider context, considering the contribution it makes to understanding gaming culture and game developers. This includes a consideration of toxicity as a reflection of issues within our social world. Discussion includes the relationship between *LoL* and the player-base specifically, and how Riot Games might change its approach to better address toxicity. To this end a new tool, *The Toxicity Interpretation Framework*, an outcome of this thesis, is presented and demonstrated.

Chapter 10 concludes the thesis. It summarises the study, outlining key findings and answers to research questions. Further it sets out limitations of the study, future directions for research and policy recommendations.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the research questions and clarified their relevance beyond my own experiences and set out the structure and narrative of this thesis. Chapter 2 provides a critical review of the literature pertaining to the study.

Chapter 2

Literature Review: The field of play

2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically examines the literature on the key themes which have informed this study:

- Culture,
- Community,
- Identity,
- Toxicity within gaming,
- Existing academic literature on *League of Legends*.

The study positions itself within sociological studies, however video game research is still finding its place in the field, with much literature still grounded in the field of psychology, computer science and engineering. This means some literature from other disciplines is explored so as to acknowledge relevant discussions and highlight the need for sociological studies of video games which represent games studies as a multidisciplinary field.

Critically, this literature review positions the study of toxicity in *LoL* within an understanding of games as culture. Games themselves are a cultural form, and therefore integral in shaping norms around behaviour and belonging for the communities that interact with games. How players interact within gaming results in players reinforcing or contesting the norms and expectations set by the culture. Gaming communities can contribute to shaping how players approach a game, and if or how they include or exclude other players. This situates games as integral to our thinking about identity and belonging. After positioning video games as important within society, this literature review presents a narrative exploration of key themes – community, culture, and identity. This

demonstrates the relevance of these theoretical constructs to the study and introduces and critically discusses relevant game-based literature on these themes. The chapter considers literature which has explored concepts of toxicity before concluding with discussion of scholarship around *LoL*. This chapter situates the study within contemporary research in the field and identifies a gap in knowledge for which this thesis seeks to offer new insights.

2.2 Literature search strategy

The *StarPlus University Library* catalogue was used as a primary search tool; cross-searched with the following databases to identify relevant studies: Social Theory; Web of Science Social Sciences Citation Index (1956-); and Social Science Premium Collection. Searches were carried out in October 2018, 2019, and 2024, and were not limited to a time period. Searches were focussed on peer-reviewed publications and conference papers. I did not apply false boundaries by limiting searches to topics because, although being primarily sociological in focus, the newness of the field necessitated openness to studies which originated in other disciplines. Two journals, *Games and Culture* and *Game Studies* have published a number of relevant articles, those journal databases were also searched.

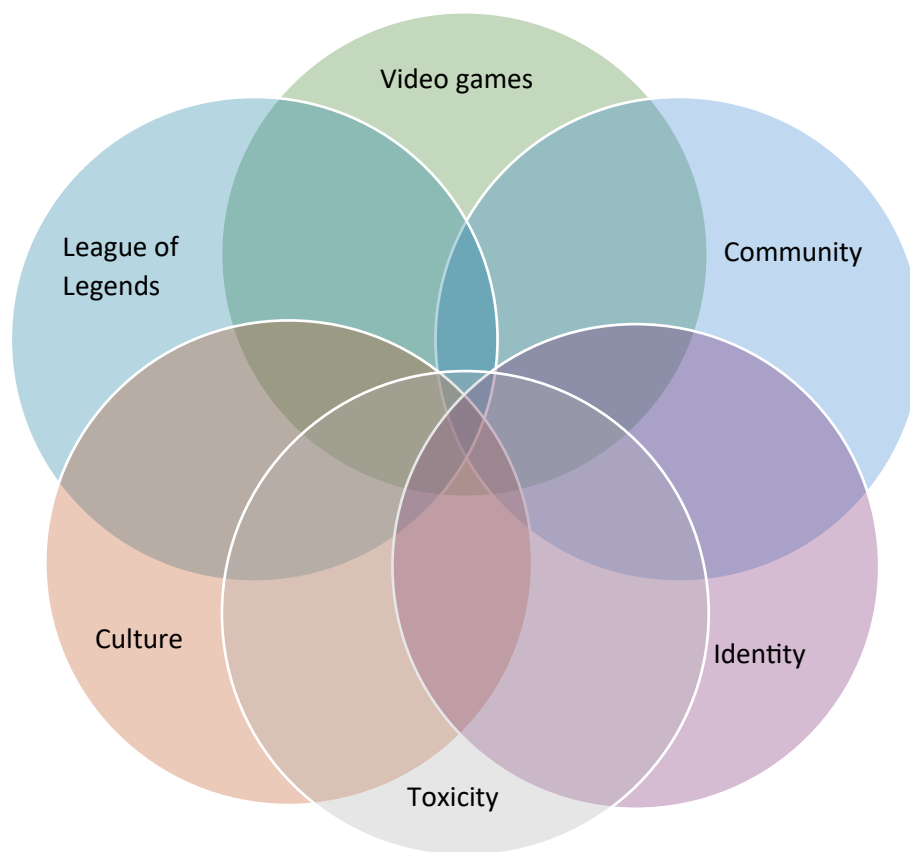


Figure 2.1 Scope and focus of literature search.

The literature review for the study focussed on the five themes most central to the study: video games, identity, culture, community and toxicity with the central intersection being the focus for the study (Figure 2.1). A separate search for 'League of Legends' was carried out. Searches were not limited by study design, and literature in languages other than English was included where translations were available. Further literature was identified by following up references and reference lists in publications which seemed particularly relevant. As additional themes emerged, additional search terms were added, including: 'esports', 'e-sports', 'cosplay', 'conventions' and 'LAN'.

2.3 Video games and society

The presence and power of videogames within society generally is acknowledged. *Tennis for Two* was developed on the oscilloscope in 1958 (Therrien, 2012), and since then video games have become highly developed and form part of the cultural infrastructure of the contemporary world. During the 1970s and 1980s, video games started to find their place as popular pastimes (Crawford, 2012, p. 1). In the early 2000s, this was encouraged by the development of a “new breed of relatively simple games” (Mäyrä, et al., 2017, p. 11) which emerged on social networking platforms such as Myspace and Facebook (for example *Farmville*) and increasingly as mobile games.

The prevalence of games has increased beyond what could have anticipated back in 1958. In 2023, the global games market had an estimated revenue of \$183.9 billion, with 49% of this being accounted for by mobile games specifically, and 22% by PC games (Wijman, 2024). In a study of 73,000 consumers globally, 80% play games, and 85% engage with video games beyond gameplay itself: 64% view gaming-related content, and 35% engage with gaming through other mediums such as podcasts, esports, online discussions and content creation (Newzoo, 2024a, p. 8). Games themselves have gone beyond gameplay – and beyond being a hobby. Aside from games development, professional gameplay has become a career option, with the professional esports industry expected to reach a revenue of £3.4 billion in 2024 (Statista, 2024a) and the game live streaming market being worth £10.73 billion globally (Statista, 2024b).

Despite much popular opinion, video games have been reported to have beneficial impacts on health and wellbeing. The *Power of Play 2023* (Entertainment Software Association, 2023) drew attention to the ability for games to reduce stress, anxiety and feelings of isolation, and help individuals through difficult times in their lives. A review of original studies found that playing active video games improved physical outcomes for patients with a range of illnesses or conditions

including cancer, burn treatment, lupus, Parkinson's, stroke, spinal injuries (Staiano & Flynn, 2014).

Games are increasingly part of our social fabric on numerous levels. As a result, gaming is of interest across multiple sectors as Mäyrä et al. (2017, p. 11) note:

...there are multiple social and discursive contexts and communities that have a stake in how games and play are defined. Gaming communities, fans, casual gamers, designers, scholars as well as academic fandom ('aca-fans'), different parts of the game industry, hobbyists, legislators, educators, and artists all have diverse yet partially overlapping stakes in this discussion.

This complexity highlights how embedded gaming now is within our society, in multiple sectors and interests, marking how "modern gaming is mostly a social form of mainstream media entertainment" (Quandt & Kowert, 2017, p. 11). Whilst there is a debate as to whether video games themselves are a media form (Crawford, 2012, p. 5) they are increasingly entrenched within our daily lives, and as such are positioned as social and cultural objects. As Jones (2008, p. 8) suggested:

They are made by social interactions of various kinds rather than found in the software and hardware objects themselves. The meanings of games are not essential or inherent in their form [...] but are functions of the larger grid of possibilities build by groups of developers, players, reviewers, critics, and fans in particular times and places and through specific acts of gameplay or discourses about games.

Similarly, Hall's (1980) asserts that media texts are discourses shaped by those who produce them.

This casts video game developers, and to some extent gamers, as the shapers of discourse. Thus, games are not just an object, but they hold multiple meanings for those who interact with them.

Video game interactions are a means by which games have an impact on their players, which makes such games an important focus for sociological study. Games are a part of everyday life for many, and the impact is then felt beyond play itself, because "Engagement with the game does not finish when the session ends" (Burn, 2006, p. 88). Crawford (2012) then posits that understanding gameplay as part of our everyday clarifies the broader meaning that games have in our lives and within society.

2.4 Community

If video games are influential in shaping human discourse through players' interactions with others in their community, we need further to understand something of the nature of community. This section first considers *what* community is, and how its conceptualisation has been transformed in modern times as digital technologies have become commonplace. After offering a definition and conceptual development of community, this section considers gaming communities specifically, discussing the conceptualisation of gaming communities before addressing the relationship between game culture and community. It closes with a consideration of literature which has focused on specific sites of community within gaming.

2.4.1 From local areas to online spaces

Often considered a social phenomenon, the notion of community lacks agreed definition and thus, is contested. As Bell and Newby (1974, p. xlv) state:

The concept of community has been the concern of sociologists for more than two hundred years, but even a satisfactory definition of it in sociological terms appears as remote as ever.

Gusfield (1975) identified that, historically, the study of community could be categorised into distinct types; i) geographical, and ii) relational *or* by commonalities. This is in-keeping with Hillery's (1955) content analysis which found three key areas of agreement amongst 94 definitions of community:

- i) a group of people engaging in social interaction,
- ii) a geographic area,
- iii) sharing common ties – relating to lifestyle, kindship, beliefs, culture, work, values, norms, and institutions.

The notion of common ties is most relevant to this thesis and to the study of gaming communities. This is conceptually captured within Cohen's (1998) articulation of community whereby people within a community have a common interest such as a value, or belief. Within each of Hillery's (1955) categories, community is unavoidably paradoxical, as by nature it divides and distinguished people by difference (Anderson, 1983), or brings people together through similarity (Delanty, 2009). Arguably, prior to easier international travel, and information and communication technologies, community was, by and large, limited to geographical spaces, such as a single street, village, town, city, or nation (Tönnies, 1957; Delanty, 2009).

The increased ease of geographical mobility can lead to a view that community has diminished in modern times, especially where community holds connotations of tradition (Delanty, 2009). However, this thesis sees modernity and technology as working together to change the shape of the spaces in which communities develop and operate. This perspective was proposed by Wellman (1979, p. 1207) as *community liberated*, whereby "primary ties" were no longer contained within geo-social structures such as villages or towns, but were instead "dispersed among multiple, sparsely interconnected social networks". Cohen (2001, p.71) developed a focus on community defined – not by locations or structures - but by ideas of belonging and shared identities:

Community exists in the minds of its members, and should not be confused with geographic or sociographic assertions of 'fact'. By extension, the distinctiveness of communities and, thus, the reality of their boundaries, similarly lies in the mind, in the meanings which people attach to them, not in their structural forms. As we have seen, this reality of community is expressed and embellished symbolically. (Cohen, 2001, p. 98)

The idea of symbolic communities (Cohen, 2001) has become increasingly applicable with the development of new digital technologies; mobile phones, the world wide web and social media have led to the possibility of *network societies*. Coined by Jan van Dijk in 1991, the *network society* has been defined as "a social formation with an infrastructure of social media networks enabling its

prime mode of organization at all levels (individual, group/organizational and societal)” (van Dijk, 2006, p. 20). Gidden’s (1991, p. 33) discussions of modernity and social ties suggested that modernity “breaks down the protective framework of the small community and of tradition, replacing these with much larger, impersonal organisations”, however we could counter this argument with studies which consider online anonymity to create more authentic interactions (Bargh, et al., 2002; Poletti, 2011). Indeed, modernity, technology and community impact the sense of identity for individuals and communities: “Electronic communication makes possible what has previously been excluded: namely, active, simultaneous and reciprocal contact between individuals across all frontiers constituted by countries, religions and continents” (Beck, 2000, p. 88). Beck (2000) notes that the concept of the ‘global village’ is not a reality. Technology has facilitated the possibility of global connection, meaning that communities can form through technology which offers access to a community that is no longer limited by physical proximity. This is realised by members of gaming communities who play large online games, but also through individual gamers also use forums and game-based content (shared across various platforms) to connect with other gamers on a global scale.

The notion of *virtual communities* has moved beyond *community liberated* and *networked societies*, acknowledging that communities increasingly operate in online spaces. These cross social, political, cultural and geographical boundaries, to connect people with shared interests. *Virtual communities*, therefore, stem from Cohen’s (1998) view of community, yet just as original ideas of community lacked definition, so too, the meaning of the term ‘virtual community’ has suffered from a lack of consensus (Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

Computer mediated communication (CMC), especially via the internet, is at the core of defining *virtual communities* (Han & Hill, 2006), as is frequent and persistent participation by community members (Wood & Smith, 2001; Smith, 1999; Figallo, 1998). Participation in virtual communities

often refers to text communication, for example via a forum or message board, however it can also include online browsing, ‘lurking’, and being an observer of community pages, with some members of a community preferring not to post or comment (Adjin-Tettey and Garman, 2023; Bronstein, et al., 2016). Similarly, other forms of participation such as community created content (artwork, music, news sites, guides, videos) could usefully be included in an expanded definition of what kinds of communities might be included in the *virtual*. Stone’s (1991) definition of virtual communities provides for flexibility to *meet* and *face*, and allows for various forms of internet mediated community, and varying levels and forms of participation within them:

[virtual communities are] incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both ‘meet’ and ‘face’... [V]irtual communities [are] passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that united people who were physically separated. (Stone, 1991, p. 85)

This definition best relates to the study reported in this thesis, because gamers both *meet* and *face* each other through in-game names (IGN) and avatars, and through their interactions with and observation of online content.

2.4.2 Gaming communities

This section considers various conceptualisations of communities in relation to gaming, focusing on key concepts of third place, fandom and hierarchies. These notions have been chosen as avenues for exploration because of how they situate gaming communities as intrinsically linked with gaming culture. Taylor (2006b, p. 57) has highlighted how game culture has merged with notions of identity and community, stating the need to break down the notion that communities exist purely *in-game*: “Any discussion of game life must include a model of the distributed social sphere via groups, practices and knowledge that exist outside of the formal bounds of the game”. This highlights that communities live lives and perform actions outside of their game space.

Similarly, Crawford (2012, p. 98) has suggested that a range of concepts have been tied to understanding game culture and communities: *subcultures, neo-tribes, fans, knowledge, community, players, Otaku, gamers, scenes and habitus*. Concepts of culture and community are closely connected in symbiotic relationships. Neo-tribes, subcultures, third places and scenes will be explored in section 2.5 on culture, meanwhile the following sections will focus on the operational practices of hierarchies, fandom and participatory culture, being understood as central components in the *action* of community. Communities are associated with activity and thus video games have been used as the basis for various forms of number of community-created – and community observed – content:

...the vibrant productive practices of the vast numbers of videogame fans and players and the extensive 'shadow economy' of player-produced walk-throughs, FAQs, art, narratives and event games...(Newman (2008, p. vii)

The following section focuses on community and acknowledges the range of activities which make up participation in community. Hierarchies, fandom and participatory culture are considered here in relation to how such community-based structures create practices of governance, which arise because of, and further embedded by, gaming culture itself.

2.4.3 Community governance: fandom and hierarchies

Hierarchies, fandom and participatory culture are considered here in relation to how such community-based structures create practices of governance, which arise because of, and are further embedded by, gaming culture itself. An understanding of governance practices that develop amongst fans is necessary to appreciate current thinking about how fan communities shape spaces. Video games, as cultural objects, contribute to the “global village” that McLuhan and Powers (1989)

predicted would result from media and technology. Through the formation of global communities, members of that village – the fans – have cultivated their own, unwritten forms of governance and hierarchy.

Fans are integral to the notion of some communities, with Jenkins (1992, p.23) noting that “fans often draw strength and courage from their ability to identify themselves as members of a group of other fans who shared common interests and confronted common problems”. In his seminal work, *Textual Poachers* (1992), Jenkins argued that fans are positioned within a hierarchy, not only within their own community but within cultural society more broadly:

To speak as a fan is to accept what has been labelled a subordinated position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional authorities. Yet it is also to speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defence of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic. (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23)

Jenkins (1992) addresses the assumptions that culture and community are expected to provide bonds between individuals that are welcoming, respectful, and comforting. However, whilst a sense of homeliness can be found within fan culture, it is not necessarily as freeing as Jenkins initially suggested. Stanfill (2013, p. 117) conjectured that “it has become something of a truism in media studies that fans are now free of the old stereotypes to which they were formerly subject and have been mainstreamed as a model for the new ideal active media consumer”. This speaks to Jenkins’ (2013, p. 77) later work on participatory culture, particularly the suggestions that fans are not “mindless consumers” but “active producers and manipulators of meaning”. In producing *new* media forms – such as fan-created content – Jenkins (2013, p. 23) posited that fans would experience “not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism”, which has then materialised to produce hierarchies within fandom. The “simultaneous acceptance and refusal of stereotypes” (Stanfill, 2013, p. 117) within communities has led to the generation of intra-fan stereotyping, which,

in fans' "determination to separate their own practice from 'extreme' versions indicated that it also impacted their sense of appropriate behaviour for themselves" (Stanfill, 2013, p. 131).

Existing work on hierarchies within fan culture has suggested that there is an "impetus toward one-upmanship and elaborate hierarchies of authenticity which characterize all media fandoms, a competitiveness which coexists uneasily with fandom's espoused paradigm of collective ownership" (Murray, 2004, p. 19). This interplays with work that has explored legitimacy in fan cultures, the most pertinent example to this thesis being discussion around the authenticity or legitimacy of fans. This is often associated with cultural capital within fan communities (Fiske, 1992). There is discussion of fans comparing themselves to both *non-fans* and *also-fans* (Jancovich, 2002) but the *intra-fan* comparison is most pertinent here, especially in relation to gender (Corse & Hartless, 2015; Correa-Chávez, et al., 2023; Yodovich, 2021). On gaming specifically, this is realised through the questioned legitimacy of the 'girl gamer' (Drenten, et al., 2023; Beavis & Charles, 2007), however Scondari (1998, p. 184) has suggested that "age, race, gender, or class" can affect hierarchies within fan culture, especially in terms of participation of commercial goals of companies. This, considered alongside Hall's (1974) work on the relationship between audience and media, demonstrates how background can impact how consumers apply meaning to and interpret media. Within gaming, these hierarchies are closely connected with gaming culture in a holistic sense. Consalvo (2007) reworked Bourdieu's (1973) original concept of cultural capital to discuss *gaming capital*, considering how gaming culture goes beyond *playing* games:

It's being knowledgeable about game releases and secrets, and passing that information on to others. It's having opinions about which game magazines are better and the best sites for walkthroughs on the Internet [...]. That knowledge was a basis for gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007, pp. 18-20)

Consalvo (2007) specifically discusses cheating in games and how this has generated debates around the acceptance of cheating as a practice in gaming and the legitimacy of players who 'cheat'. However, this can be expanded by considering player knowledge around lore and storylines, processes in development of games, and microdetails within gameplay. Therefore, this notion of gaming capital is integral to considering expertise, legitimacy and hierarchies within gaming. Thus, fandom can work through the action of fans and those creating the texts, to exclude fans themselves on the basis of knowledge and skill.

McCluhan's (1964) concept of "the medium is the message" is also integral to understanding culture, community and exclusion. McCluhan (1964) suggested that the medium itself – here, video games – impacts how a message is perceived or how meaning is made by consumers. When applied to games, if the medium itself expresses a lack diversity this could influence how those playing games interpret who *belongs* as a player in those games. In turn, a player might find themselves at odds with the medium itself: if players do not see characters in the game environment which they consider adequately represent themselves, they may regard themselves to be outsiders to the gaming culture and community. Although not specifically in relation to games or game fans, Sandvoss (2005, p. 107) has suggested that:

...the specific meanings constructed by fans move beyond subjective readings reflective of the readers socio-demographic position and become the meanings who point of reference is not to be found within the texts (their object of fandom) but within the reader him or her self. Hence, they are a form of self-projection and reflection.

This means that fans are negotiating their personal identities, alongside the collective message of gaming and messages conveyed by other fans, in order to continue belonging within fan communities. This is complex, and as Hills (2002, p. 34) has suggested, fans engage to formulate

meaning and belonging “both in terms of legitimating one’s own cultural practices against other imagined subjectivities, and also in terms of legitimating one’s own cultural practices against imagined others whose very cultural proximity also threatens the project of distinction”. Hills (2002, p. 46) goes on to suggest that fan-produced culture enables us “to consider any given fan culture not simply as a community but also as a social hierarchy where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status”; all articulated and dependent upon individual identities (gamer identities and identities outside gaming), interactions and interpretations by others.

Thus, the cultural elements of and surrounding games can be utilised by fans to construct hierarchies of belonging within gaming communities. Understanding the unboundaried and unlimited processes with which fans engage with and through, media texts contribute to the context through which toxicity can be revealed and furthers understanding of how toxicity has become associated with and shaped by gaming culture.

2.4.4 *Gaming communities: existing trends in research*

The majority of studies on video game communities have focused on either in-game communities, or communities which involve playing a game. This section provides a summary of the key themes within existing research, highlighting how toxicity has been – so far – omitted from studies focused on community. The discussion explores studies of sites of gaming communities as connected to senses of belonging.

On video game communities, there is increasing interest on the notion of *guilds* as a primary way in which community is realised in gaming spaces (Braithwaite, 2015; Poor & Skoric, 2014; Pearce & Artemesia, 2011; Chen, 2009), with most of this work focused on Massively Multiplayer Online

Roleplaying Games (MMORPG) due to how they often incorporate or encourage clans or guilds as part of their game mechanics. Warmelink and Siitonen's (2011) review of empirical research into player communities in multiplayer online games found the term *guild* to be the joint top key concept of papers, underscoring the focus on MMORPGs, the game genre which usually builds *guilds* into the structure of a game.

The research focus on guilds as a form of community seems to have usurped other genres of games, (including other types of multiplayer games and single player games). Recent studies have considered e-sport, streaming, and LAN events as sites through which video game communities form and evolve. Taylor's (2012) extensive work on e-sports cites a range of roles in as contributing to e-sports community forums, including: commentators, e-sport team websites, professional play and amateur competitions. Communities of spectatorship have evolved around competitive gaming, which include not only those who engaging with competitive play themselves but enjoy the viewing of competitive matches (Drucker, et al., 2003).

An expanding literature on streaming (often specifically though Twitch) is demonstrating streaming sites and streaming as something of a community building activity, and community space. Taylor (2018, p. 41) has noted that live streaming is a place in which:

fandom for a game is embodied in the caster, and as a member of an audience, is transformed into a collective experience [...] joining in a live stream can anchor an individual to a broader group experience.

Such a collective experience is realised through interaction with other viewers via a live chat box, discussing their own comments or casters' commentary on the game, making it a key part of participatory culture for many fans. This is then deepened by research noting that feeling a part of and being actively involved in communities are motivational factors when it comes to players

watching video game streams (Hilvert-Bruce, et al., 2018; Wulf, et al., 2018; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017; Xu, et al., 2021). Streaming has then revolutionised how games are experienced, turning “games designed to be played by single players into a social experience” (Vosmeer, et al., 2016, p. n/p; Consalvo, 2017).

The other key focus for gaming communities in research has been that of Local Area Networks (LANs). Lanning “is a practice where gamers play multiplayer games with and against each other, over a Local Area Network (LAN)” (Swalwell, 2009, p. 117), and whilst this is a more traditional and common definition of LAN, from personal experience multiplayer games which do not provide a LAN connection, such as Wii games, are increasingly being played at LANs, not least at university gaming society LAN events. Ackerman (2012) suggests three categories of LAN play; private LAN, LAN party, and LAN event, each increasing in size, respectively. Sociability has been found to be the most common motive for attending LANs (Jansz & Martens, 2005), with the social nature of LAN play being emphasised by Swalwell (2003), stressing that although it is not necessary for players to talk to each other in person, the presence of people together in a space, contributes to the social experience. The breadth of activities that are undertaken *together* at a LAN have been acknowledged by Taylor and Witowski (2010) and Simon (2007). Both note that whilst there are stereotypical game-based activities, LANs are “positioned within a much larger constellation of pop, youth, and network culture” (Taylor & Witowski, 2010, n/p) and incorporate “other embodied practices normal to human sociability” (Simon, 2007, p. 183), from eating, sleeping, drinking, smoking, and checking social media feeds).

As explored above, whilst work has considered various sites of community, there is a lack of consideration of how and whether communities *around a game* experience toxicity within these sites. There has been consideration specifically surrounding the *World of Tanks* community, exploring how players were treated differently according to their ranks and whether they were

within a group (clan), alongside being more likely to experience discrimination if they were younger, 'neurotic', or less agreeable (Nguyen, et al., 2022). Otherwise, outside of this, research has focused on broader conceptualisations of community, not related to specific games.

2.5 Culture

Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language... mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought. (Williams, 2014, p. 76)

As identified in the Introduction (Chapter 1), *LoL* is a game world with its own terms, language, rituals, and practices (See Appendix 1). These characteristics are understood by *LoL* players, and therefore the game creates its own culture as informed by developers, players, and online game culture more broadly.

This section considers literature which informs the construction of *culture* as a concept, alongside contextualisation of gaming culture in general. It considers what gaming culture entails, and the prevalent notion of gaming culture as 'toxic'. Jenks' (2004, pp. 11-12) categorisation of the origins and approaches to culture is useful here, whereby culture can be seen as;

cognitive - culture as a state of mind aiming for human achievement and/or emancipation;

collective - culture inspires moral and/or intellectual development within society;

descriptive, concrete - culture exists in the arts and knowledge within a society; and

social - culture as a way of life which has become a focus within sociology.

This speaks to Williams' (2013, p.2) observation that "culture is ordinary". Whilst elements of all four categorisations of culture can apply to aspects of gaming culture, it is culture as a social category seems the most applicable to the study of video games and culture. However, we need to turn to video game studies themselves to understand *what* video game culture has been presumed to be and therefore what culture has been created by gaming (see also section 2.5.1). Culture as a way of life connects with Frow and Morris' (2000, p. 326) definition of culture as "a network of embedded practices and representations (texts, images, talk, codes of behaviour, and the narrative structures organizing these) that shapes every aspect of social life".

All humans are products of culture or *cultures*:

Our ideas, our values, our acts, even our emotions, are, like our nervous system itself, cultural products—products manufactured, indeed, out of tendencies, capacities, and dispositions with which we were born, but manufactured nonetheless. (Geertz (1973, p. 50)

That we are manufactured products of our environments – an amalgam of values, practices, morals, understandings – is intrinsic to understanding human ways of being. Whilst we are an amalgam, we still perform differently within settings (Goffman, 1956), and much of this is informed not only by our *audience*, but the cultural contexts we inhabit, and these are the founding pillars of each human being which shape our actions and interactions. Geertz (1973, p. 51) puts forward the case for understanding these pillars and their meanings:

Chartres is made of stone and glass. But it is not just stone and glass; it is a cathedral, and not only a cathedral, but a particular cathedral built at a particular time by certain members of a particular society. To understand what it means, to perceive it for what it is, you need to know rather more than the generic properties of stone and glass and rather more than what is common to all cathedrals.

The uniqueness and evolution of culture, so integral to Geertz's thinking, informs this study which understands games *as* culture. It positions culture as a means of understanding the actions and

behaviours of players. Interpretations of what players do are seen as emerging from (and to an extent informing the evolution of) gaming culture. To better understand gaming as social culture deeper explorations are needed. It is necessary to go beyond surface-level frameworks or generalised assumptions about how players experience a social culture of toxicity.

Geertz's (1973) focus on a *lack* of cohesion within culture is important to keep in mind. Whilst paying attention to behaviour and social action and their meanings which are drawn "from the role they play [...] in an ongoing pattern of life, not from any intrinsic relationships they bear to one another" (Geertz, 1973, p. 17). This suggests that behaviours have a role within a culture. Culture and community are distinct but often complementary concepts, where culture is seen as a set of beliefs and practices, and community often assumed to be a coherent and tightly bonded grouping. However, as this thesis explores, communities themselves can be fractured. Their members reorganise, redefine, resist and transition. Thus, in this study culture is seen as an ongoing and evolving practice.

Sewell (1999) conceptualises two contrasting notions of culture; the theoretical that is distinct from other realms of social life (economy, politics, for example), and the more tangible "bounded world of beliefs and practices" (Sewell, 1999, p. 39), arguing that culture:

...should be understood as a dialectic of system and practice, as a dimension of social life autonomous from other such dimensions both in its logic and in its spatial configuration...
(Sewell, 1999, p. 52)

This argument contests previous anthropological work that had suggested that cultures are "logically consistent, highly integrated, consensual, resistant to change, and clearly bounded" (Sewell, 1999, p. 55) arguing that culture is unstable, constantly transforming and redefined by those within it.

Sewell (1999, p. 57) focused primarily on how culture is created and constructed by the actors within it, suggesting that scholars “must acknowledge such coherences where they exist and set ourselves the task of explaining how they are achieved, sustained, and dissolved”. Ortiz (2019, p. 882) has further articulated to include “how institutions and social actors create cultural coherence through exclusionary practices”. Cultures are interactional. They are created through the precedents set by organizations, structures, and individuals’ interactions within them. Geertz’s (1973, p. 10) suggested that we ought not to ask of cultures “what their ontological status is”, but instead “what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said”.

Considering cultures as interaction, and as practices which allow the embodiment of agency becomes important to think about toxicity as action, practice and impact. Interactivity in games has become synonymous with agency, where attention is drawn to how players are often perceived to be “granted a degree of agency and choice” (Garite, 2003, p.3). However, such agency is acknowledged to be limited often to the control of characters and narratives, without opportunities to “change the game’s structure and design” (Brookey & Booth, 2006, p. 218). Garite (2003, p. 7) suggested that this agency is merely an illusion of control: “The avatar’s actions are determined by the player to the same extent that the player’s actions are themselves determined by the program.” Therefore, video games “enable and condition the player’s agency” (Muriel & Crawford, 2020, p. 151). However, much of this conversation around video games as an interactive culture focuses on the relationship between the player and the gameplay itself. Muriel and Crawford (2020, p. 151) note that “video game culture is generally traversed with this idea that players are responsible for controlling the game, and, moreover, are willing to do so”. They discuss games as being “power fantasies”, drawing attention to how players are “powerful subjects, who are able to control the

outcome of their actions” (Muriel & Crawford, 2020, p. 150). This outcome is often focused on winning or losing, success or failure based around a player’s own decision making (character, storyline, narrative) or skill. From this we can consider player agency as beyond the interaction between player, software or hardware, to how players can utilise agency *within* the game *in response* to other players in multiplayer games. This sees agency as part of power and control. Firstly, toxicity can be seen as a utilisation of player agency, where players engage in actions which impact or control other players. Secondly, players on the receiving or experiencing end of toxicity utilise options within the game spaces to mitigate, moderate and manage their exposure to such toxic articulations of agency. This speaks to Muriel and Crawford’s (2020, p. 153) assertion that “we are dealing nowadays with more complex networks of actors, interactions, and power than before”, and draws on their note that alongside agency and empowerment, there is the experience of disempowerment and dependency.

We ask of culture what is being said, what meanings are made by players, and how culture is enacted by players who acknowledge and take control of their own agency within the culture of the game. This is developed in Chapter 7 which explores how players utilise their agency in as a means to mitigate, manipulate, manage and moderate their experiences of toxicity.

This thesis argues that toxicity has emerged from gaming culture and serves to establish ideas of belonging, dominance of playstyles, and an outlet of frustration, and articulation of power and agency. Toxicity has become a ‘norm’ – an expectation – however interpretations and understandings of this action are variable across community actors.

The concept of *cyberculture* might at first be considered a useful concept in the study of video game communities and culture. Bell (2007, p. 5) defines this as “ways of life in cyberspace, or ways of life

shaped by cyberspace, where cyberspace is a matrix of embedded practices and representations”. Whilst this might make cyberculture seem relevant to video games, Rheingold (2008, p. 174) has suggested that such an application would be flawed as it suggests a distinction between online and offline: “We do everything people do when they get together, but we do it worth words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind”. This revealed a perceived hierarchy between offline and online living, with the online world often constructed as inferior, ingenuine, or lacking *reality*. Coutts (2013, np) argued that the disconnect between online and offline is unreal when it comes to many aspects of life, noting that “the Internet is real life – we simply choose to ignore it”. Whilst there are, of course, distinct happenings online or ways in which people behave in online spaces which are not always replicated offline (see Chapter 6 for an exploration of toxicity). Therefore, utilising entirely separate conceptualisations of online and offline cultures is not necessarily helpful or true to reality.

Acknowledgement and understanding of cyberculture and cyberspace is useful, in the context of the current study they are concepts which detract from how the online and offline inevitably impact each other. Chapter 6 (6.2 and 6.3) explores how individual, offline selves bring ideas, values, morals and backgrounds - in other words, *personality* - to the online space which influence our interactions with the space, ideas and individuals within it. This study therefore aligns strongly with Sewell and Geertz’s articulations of culture.

Emphasising *culture* specifically, the following section explores what is meant by ‘gaming culture’. It considers concepts relevant to gaming culture (subculture and post-subculture); addresses the consequent relationship between gender and gaming culture specifically and examines how considerations of gaming culture extend from online to offline spaces.

2.5.1 Defining gaming culture

The first decade of the 21st century saw a growth in studies focussing on culture and video games, examining multiple themes, including: gender, learning, identity, children, representation, social practice, war and multiplayer game types (Shaw, 2010, p. 403). In this growing field of study, video game culture is often constructed as “separate from mainstream culture, as something new, different, and more importantly definable” (Shaw, 2010, p. 404). However, a definition of video game culture is still needed. Comparatively little research expands on what is meant by *video game culture* which seems to be regarded as a matter of common sense (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 188). A definition for video game culture is in some ways, as hard to define as culture itself.

The quest for definition is complicated by the diversity of gaming culture, and the argument “that we cannot homogenize video games, their players, and their culture” (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, p. 2). This literature review does not aim to do this, nor does the study reported in this thesis. Rather it aims to consider how to conceptualise a broader notion of gaming culture. Video games are played on multiple platforms (PC, Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo consoles, Steam Decks, and VR consoles). An even wider range of game genres is available, and several millions of game titles. Each game generates its own culture. Taylor (2006b, p. 3) observed of *EverQuest* that “players do not play in one world but are scattered amongst duplicate versions of the game that reside on separate servers, now totalling forty-seven, each of which has its own name and often develops its own culture”. This exemplifies the diversity of what game culture can be. If we take account of the “malleable” (Taylor, 2006b, p. 58) nature of culture within individual games, we can see that games impact practices, experiences, expectations and norms amongst players. Fiske (2010, p. 180) stated that popular culture “is made out of, and contains, these quite contradictory social impulses”, gaming culture is no different.

Games are a part of popular culture (McAllister, 2004, p. 10) and therefore popular culture becomes relevant to define gaming culture. Fiske's (2010, p. 144) writing on popular culture captures something of the participatory nature of gaming culture, noting that popular culture "provokes gossip, argument, the play of belief and disbelief, of common sense and scepticism, of official and unofficial knowledges". Within games, this emerges as discussion around games as objects of culture, the duality of power dynamics between developers and players, and fan-created and developer-created knowledge. Yates and Littleton (1999, p. 571) earlier alluded to this idea about interaction and dynamics, considering gaming as happening in "cultural niches" of multiple interactions between gamers, games and culture which suggests that gaming culture lies within and beyond the mainstream. Video games, and other forms of new media, permit "*visible* participatory cultures" (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 14), where all participants - gamers, viewers and players - challenge the dominance of game developers. Subcultural, participatory elements of gaming culture then emerge to form a narrative around gaming culture whereby "the story of a hobbyist, enthusiast-led fan culture of game production and consumption become[ing] a central component of globalized technoculture industries" (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 44).

Muriel and Crawford (2018, p. 17) usefully articulated video game culture as: "... the institutionalization of video game practices, experiences, and meanings in contemporary society, which places video games and video gaming as an important part of our social imaginary". This builds on Crawford's (2012, p. 143) notion that video game culture goes beyond the screen and playing the game, whereby gaming is seen as "a source of memories, dreams, conversations, identities, friendships, artwork, storytelling and so much more". Steinkuehler (2006, p. 97) suggested that video games worked as both "culture and cultural object", something often overlooked but for the token acknowledgement that video games themselves are a medium for consumption.

This thesis adopts Muriel and Crawford's (2018) understanding of video game culture as a working definition because it encompasses the aspects that this study regards as integral to video game communities and wider video game cultures. As a definition it and constructs video gamers and video game communities to as complex and idiosyncratic. Gaming culture is dependent upon individual and collective interpretations, where meanings are generated individually, and in interaction with other players, game developers and the game space itself. Of course, gaming communities are not the same; there are differences in player base, genres, titles, developers, game spaces and how players behave and interact with and within the game. This definition of game culture then allows for gaming culture – and culture within individual games – to be flexibly and malleably defined, as per the “practices, experiences, and meanings” (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, p. 17) which emerge in each game space, alongside more stereotyped practices synonymous with gaming culture. Defining game culture depends considerably upon who is playing, what they are playing and how they play (Shaw, 2010). Further, any discussion of game culture is often *othered*, being considered “something very distinct, as separate from the rest of some constructed mainstream culture” (Shaw, 2010, p. 414). Muriel and Crawford's definition successfully moves away from this separateness, to view game culture as an integral part of social life for many.

Mäyrä (2008, p. 3), however, suggested that games *in* culture is:

a particular model of sense-making for digital games that is aimed to help distinguish the multiple layers and processes of meaning involved in playing and discussing them.

This is pertinent because, whilst games are surrounded by their own culture, and are in themselves cultural artefacts, games are also situated within their own particular cultures. Mäyrä (2008, pp. 25-26) notes that those who play games share language, rituals, artefacts, memorabilia and spaces; indeed “the main ‘symbolic centres’ for members in game subcultures are nevertheless built around games and playing them”. Whilst some of these will be shared across game genres and titles, some

(such as jokes or memes around particular game elements, specific fan created culture based around game titles, or specific language developed for titles) will be more specific to a single game. This situates individual games within *culture*. Thus, there exist 'cultural distinctions' which emerge within game culture. These arise through, for example, labelling and categorising players as 'casual' or 'hardcore', simultaneously generating positionalities of belonging and exclusion, or separation (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 27). What is then key, is an acknowledgment of the interactional nature of how culture is created, recreated and challenged. Games are a form of culture which emit specific characteristics. These include expectations and bias around membership, participation and play. Players also have agency to respond to this by embodying, rejecting or rearticulating the messages communicated by the culture they are part of.

2.5.2 Conceptualising gaming culture

Subcultures, neo-tribes, and scenes have been identified by Crawford (2012, p. 98) as useful concepts the study gaming culture and communities. The notion of community is inherently and unavoidably tied to understandings of culture. Such concepts shape and are shaped by each other in a reciprocal relationship, hence the positioning of this discussion within the current section which provides a critical discussion of subculture, neo-tribes and scenes as ways to understand video game culture and communities.

2.5.2.1 Subculture and post-subculture

Subcultures have been typically considered as groups within a larger culture, where beliefs and interests are not in complete synergy with a mainstream culture. Subcultures can be associated with deviance and a lack of formal leadership structures. Yet members of a subculture are often united by shared identities, values, practices, cultural objects (Haenfler, 2014, pp. 16-17). One such

commonality is *style*, which has been long considered to be a “most salient aspect” of *subculture* (Williams, 2011, p. 14). Style acts as a symbol of resistance and ideological meaning, as well as fashion (Haenfler, 2014). Examining clothing which references comics, games and TV shows, Winkler (2006, p. 147) has suggested that gaming culture is a subculture as “marked by modes of dress, specific linguistic jargon, and a sense of solidarity”. This definition is too narrow to be applied to video game communities as “it only tells part of the story” (Shaw, 2010, p. 410). It is constricted by a focus on a small section of a community which omits the many different display practices of a subculture, and, as Mäyrä (2016, p. 171) notes, a *gamer* “rarely carries in an everyday context such overt signs of his or her affective relationship with a particular game, or of membership in a gaming community”. As it could be suggested that gaming communities may lack a unified and identifiable *style*, an alternative approach to identifying games as subculture was proposed by identifying a number of shared values and practices (Mäyrä, 2008, pp. 25-26):

- shared language - as seen through knowledge communities (as in Jenkins, 2006)
- rituals - often in the form of playing or watching together
- artefacts - memorability, (books, posters, gaming consoles and devices) displayed as symbols of membership within a room or to identify oneself as part of a culture
- shared spaces, (websites, forums, live events, conventions).

My own gaming community experiences include shared values and practices, language, artefacts, memorabilia and spaces. However, two factors are troubling here in terms in viewing games as culture: i) subculture is primarily with youth culture, yet video game community demographics are not limited young people, and ii) video game culture and video game communities are increasingly accessible to anyone and is it increasingly easy for people to become involved in such a *subculture*. Consalvo (2007, p. 3) has suggested that subculture is “too limited to adequately explain the broader world of games and game players that currently exists”. Perhaps, then, post-subculture may be more

applicable to the study of video game communities, at least in relation to the latter point. Post-subculture is based on the notion that consumerism and globalization have made it easier for individuals to engage in specific subcultures. Consumerism and commercialisation have made it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the mainstream and the subculture, and so groups are conceptualised “in terms of a loose collection of moments or events, not a structured subculture” (Roberts, 2015, p. 1101). Further, Bennett (2011, p. 495) suggests that “individualism has surpassed an emphasis on collectivity as a means by which social actors seek out desirable visual images, and construct sociocultural identities, for themselves” and this especially can be seen within video game communities and video game culture. However as games have become more popular with wider and more diverse audiences, Mäyrä (2008, p. 26) has suggested that this phenomena is easily distinguishable from gaming culture and subcultures, and such individuals have been termed “casual gamers”. The concepts of neo-tribes and scenes are frameworks through which post-subcultural theorists have rearticulated culture.

2.5.2.2 Neo-tribes

Crawford and Rutter (2006) note that hackers, game modders, and artists may be “theorized as a loose and contemporary form of sub-cultures” (2006, p. 153), but suggest that the concept of neo-tribes may be better suited to the theorization of gaming communities given the focus on a their formation “as concepts rather than integrated social bodies” (Bayman, 1992, p. 136).

Neo-tribes, therefore, are self-selected social groups made up of people who derive a sense of belonging around shared interest (Hetherington, 2011, p. 1035). With regard to video game communities this fits with a general understanding of modern communities. Video game communities form around enjoyment and passion for a common interest, such as video games in general, or specific games titles. Crawford (2012), especially, sees value in the concept of neo-tribes

as a way of understanding and conceptualising video game communities, valuing the fluid and informal nature of the concept. Such fluidity can include:

...playing a round of Call of Duty with friends online in-between doing homework or discussing tactics for Football Manager during a coffee break at work, before moving on to other duties, identities and, possibly, neo-tribes. (Crawford, 2012, p. 101).

Some resonance can then be seen between the nature of neo-tribes and post-subcultures in that commercialisation and globalisation have made it easier for community groups to be accessible, flexible and transient, according to individual choice. The concept of neo-tribes removes the obligation for characteristics as implied by subcultures (language, practices, values, paraphernalia), yet individuals may find some such characteristics to be important for the expression of their identity and sense of belonging to a particular community. This concept may require more research, especially in terms of how members of communities see themselves.

2.5.2.3 Scenes

The notion of a *scene* could be considered useful to video game communities and has already been coined a term within in e-sports, as in *the e-sports scene*. Law (2016) considers Hodkinson's (2002) example of the goth scene, noting that goths existing within wider society and culture but illustrate their belonging within the scene "in their ordinary lives" through practices of music and clothing. Law (2016, p. 40) then notes that "this scene becomes 'extraordinary' and takes on increased significance at certain times and in certain places". The notion of scene becomes of particular interest when thinking about spaces where video game communities become *extraordinary*; e-sports, conventions, LAN events, gaming cafes. Scene provides recognition of these *extraordinary* moments, whilst acknowledging that an individual may constantly identify as part of a community through style, language, self-identification, artefacts, and activities.

2.5.2.4 Section summary

From my personal experience as a gamer within a variety of video game community contexts, it is difficult to pin-point precisely where video game communities may align in terms of theoretical conceptualisations of community and culture. Whilst the flexibility of neo-tribes may seem appealing, if we prioritised shared language, ritual, spaces and artefacts under the concept of subculture, this may seem most fitting. However, *spaces* as the *places* in which community is operating is significant to the individual gamer and experience:

Space and place, both in-game and out-of-game, help determine what is, and what is not, possible, and shape the very nature of play... Location matters, and location is what helps making video gaming take on extraordinary significance for the video gamer. (Crawford, 2012, p. 108)

Space, through the lens of a *scene*, allows for the flexibility of place. To this can be added the ease of access to communities as enabled by globalisation and commercialisation, and expressions of identity through traditional characteristics of subculture. The question arises as to why the term 'scene' has been applied to e-sports communities specifically (in the gaming vernacular) but not to gaming communities more broadly. The idea of a 'scene', as detailed above, seems most appropriate, however membership, belonging and identity are intensely personal and nuanced, inviting further exploration outside the scope of this study.

2.5.3 Gaming culture and gender

Culture is intrinsically connected to identity (Taylor, 2006a), and it is important to acknowledge the gendered nature of gaming culture. As Schott and Horrell (2000, pp. 36-37) note, "at the heart of academic understanding of computer games and games consoles is the widely held conviction that technology embodies a culture which is expressive of masculinity". This view is no longer only at the

centre of academic understandings but remains at the centre of some gamers' understanding. This was demonstrated by coverage of #GamerGate (Mortensen, 2018; Massanari, 2017) and Sarkeesian's video series, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* (Feminist Frequency, 2013-2017), each of which highlighted the male-centric focus is the creation of video games and in cultures of belonging. Further, Beavis and Charles (2007, p. 697) identified that a male-dominated culture in LAN cafés led to the automatic assumption that women were "not just less competent a gamer, but effectively an imposter". The hegemonically masculine construction of gaming culture has also been exhibited by Riot Games, with current and past employees noting the presence of "bro culture" and a "culture of sexism" (D'Anastasio, 2018, n/p; Hawkins, 2018) in the company, First-hand accounts claimed that "workers who do not come to internalize these norms may be pushed out" (Bergstrom, 2022, p. 835). Thus, in thinking about video game culture it is important to be aware of the current socio-political climate within the games industry which no doubt shapes and impacts players.

Men are considered to have more interest, and more success, in playing video games and in video game culture (Vermeulen, et al., 2016), which explains why few women identify as gamers (Shaw, 2012) and those who do often conceal their identity as a gamer (Brehm, 2013; Taylor, 2008). Vilasís-Pamos and Pires (2022) found that practices categorised as 'female' are silenced whilst those identified as 'male' practices are more accepted and overtly present. This leads to the suggestion that "video games are currently playing a pivotal role in forging unequal gender and social identities" (Vilasís-Pamos & Pires, 2022, p. 1735). This then contributes to notions of belonging within gaming culture, whereby the industry, and many of its players, construct women as not being legitimate members of gaming communities or gaming culture.

Similarly, "a gendered association with gaming might arise if more men than women are seen performing the social role of a gamer" (Paaßen, et al., 2017, p. 427). This could indicate that masculinity is both historically embedded and presently recreated by players themselves. This can be

seen in how “[d]ress-up and fashion have served as an entry-point for women and girls into computer games, dating back to the ‘pink’ game movement of the mid-1990s” (Fron, et al., 2007, p. 3). Taking the example of cosplay, Hjorth (2009, n.p.; Hjorth, 2011) acknowledged that whilst cosplay is an avenue for fans to creatively engage with Japanese popular culture it provides, for female fans specifically, “a space to build strong female relationships in an industry still attempting to address its gender inequalities”. Gendered constructions of culture exist beyond the game space and game play specifically. In many ways, how toxicity emerges within gaming culture draws on how people outside a cis white male identity face exclusion from gaming culture. This is explored further in Section 2.6, but here it is important to acknowledge that culture and identity in gaming are intrinsically bound to, and influenced by, each other.

This section has considered the gendered nature of gaming culture, noting that gaming has become broadly synonymous with masculinity, and therefore gender – to a great extent – informs some attitudes and behaviours within gaming culture. Thus, whilst identity in relation to gender and gaming is explored in section 2.6, the relationship of gender to the construction of gaming culture has been considered here. The literature in this section leads to an inference that gaming culture is *shaped* by the dominant values of the powerful – socially and politically. Therefore, gaming culture might be best viewed in relation to the social shaping approach (Williams & Edge, 1996), meaning that *change* within gaming culture needs to be led by a change in values of those in power. In turn, the culture and message within the game space shapes the community within it. Increasing diversification of *who* gamers are (explored in 2.6), requires new consideration of how a diverse community which is more focused on decreasing toxicity, can be an integral driver of change to the shape of gaming culture as a whole.

2.6 Identity

Whilst various identity theories have been explored in considering gaming and identity, this thesis is focused less on theorising identity, but understanding how identity comes into play in thinking about toxicity. This section opens with a definition of identity as per my own constructivist articulation of the social world. This gives a perspective on how gaming and identity is best understood in the context of this thesis. A consideration of the most pertinent theories of identity to this study follows; in particular ‘gamer’ identity, and why and how identity discrimination matters within gaming culture and communities. This section thereby demonstrates how gender, race, sexuality and (dis)ability matter in gaming culture. The focus in this section is on understanding how identity is used by community, (as informed by culture) to include and exclude players. The main focus of this study is not identity specifically, but some perspective on identity as used in this thesis is needed to appreciate developing understandings and interpretations of toxicity (Chapter 6).

Identity as a concept has troubled sociologists. As Craib (1998, p. 4) writes:

It would perhaps be true to say that whereas conventional sociology has concentrated on sameness, more recent and particularly post-modern sociology has concentrated on difference.

Of identity, Jenkins (2014, p. 6) says, “It is a process – identification – not a ‘thing’; it is not something that one can have, or not, it is something that one does” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 6). Therefore, it is important to consider the interactional nature of identity and how culture, context, experiences and individuals will contribute to the shifting process, especially in thinking about identity in relation to gaming – and the phenomena of toxicity.

Identity encompasses two key categories of information: “(a) structural features like group affiliations, role occupancy, and category memberships, and (b) the character traits that the

individual displays or that others attribute to him or her” (Smith-Lovin, 2001, pp. 413-414). Our roles, group memberships, and affiliations can shift over time, and as we grow, develop and experience the world, inevitably our traits will change, and our self-displays will be adapted by time, space and audience (Goffman, 1959). Equally, we can lose identities over time: “Some of these (especially the last one) could disappear without my experiencing any great loss. I would have lost an identity, not my identity” (Craib, 1998, p. 4). This aligns with the postmodern notion of flexible and multiple identities.

Understandings of motivation and commodification are important in thinking about identity and identification processes. Jenkins noted that “while identification may be connected to motivation and behaviour, the connection is neither straightforward nor predictable” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 7). This deserves attention in relation to gaming, so as not to make generalisations about those who identify as *gamers* or *players* and related behaviours, or motives to identify as such. Similarly, we need to understand motivations *not* to identify with particular labels for reasons of inclusion, diversity and affiliation as they impact individuals’ decisions around if and how they identify as *gamers* or *players*. This is touched up on by Benwell and Stokoe (2006, p. 12), who suggest that identity “is intimately connected to where we are, and that places can be moral sites of power struggle, exclusion and prejudice”.

Studies of gaming and identity could be considered a part of the commodification of identity, where there exist “both creative potential and self-defining possibilities via consumption, but also subjecting identities to the laws of the market” (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 22). Games are cultural objects and *products*, requiring investment in devices to *play* games. Games are variously marketed to appeal to many individual interests including genre, storyline, playstyle, and art style. The processes of identification may be impacted by how games are marketed to appeal to particular identities.

Having briefly explored a broad conceptualisation of identity, the next section (2.6.1) will consider specific identity theories in more detail.

2.6.1 Identity theory

This section considers the theoretical concepts of individual and collective identities as they best relate to this study. Whilst these two distinct categories are presented, I strongly align with Hall's (1996) notion of the perpetual construction and reconstruction of identities, and Turkle's (1984; 1995) notion of the 'decentred' identity – signifying identity as multiple. This positions my reading of identity within a post-modernist framing. This section provides an overview of related theories to illustrate the importance of identity with the contexts of gaming and gaming culture.

Whilst existing literature has sought to use Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analogy to understand self-presentation in relation to avatar usage (Li et al. 2020; Triberti, et al., 2017), the performance of identity is less relevant to this study. Therefore subsequent sections here, will focus first on work by Turkle (1984;1995) who acknowledges how context and culture contribute to identification processes. This is followed by consideration of perspectives on collective identity. As Jenkins has noted, identity is complex, nuanced, and subject to a variety of influences:

So, who we are, or who we are seen to be, can matter enormously. Nor is identification just a matter of the encounters and thresholds of individual lives. Although identification always involves individuals, something else – collectivity and history – may also be at stake. (Jenkins, 2014, p. 4)

Therefore, attention will be paid here to social identity theory and symbolic interactionism, acknowledging the relationship between identity and external structures and their relationship to culture.

2.1.6.1 Decentred and multiple: identities and a technological world

Identity in relation to emerging technological developments has generated great interest, and Turkle's *The Second Self* (1984) and *Life on the Screen* (1995) have been fundamental to thinking about identity within novel technological contexts. As with Goffman (1959) and Butler (1990), Turkle saw identity as continually constructed, but suggests that the identities constructed in online spaces might be different to our offline identities (Turkle, 1984). Whilst pre-internet perspectives considered interactions only in offline environments, Turkle later conceived that digital spaces provided something additional, arguing that "we construct our technologies, and our technologies construct us and our times" (1995, p. 49). Turkle's consideration of the relationship between identity and the internet suggests digital technology "can act as a projection of part of the self, a mirror of the mind" (1984, p. 20) and could be seen as "laboratories for experimenting with one's identity" (1995, p. 9). Turkle positioned the computer as a second self; two decades on digital devices have become integral to daily life (as in line with Haraway's (1991) concept of the cyborg). Digital spaces now allow for flexible, fluid, and multiple identities, as the digital allows for "rapid alternations of identity have become a way of life for people who live in virtual reality" (1995, pp. 199-200).

Much of Turkle's work focused on how online games allowed players to develop their own character (or multiple characters) whereby "they become authors not only of text but of themselves constructing new selves through social interaction" (Turkle, 1995, p. 9), acknowledging the importance of context and culture within which identity is shaped. Of the gendered nature of digital spaces – especially gaming spaces – and the construction of self, Turkle (1995, p. 242) importantly observes:

From my earliest effort to construct an online persona, it occurred to me that being a virtual man might be more comfortable than being a virtual woman.

Gaming culture – and gaming spaces are hegemonically masculine. Where digital spaces enable users to create a self, it can be utilised as a means to *belong* in a space, leaving an offline identity outside of that space. Turkle (1995, p. 243) experimented with playing as a male character, observing that:

As a woman I have a hard time deflecting a request for conversation by asserting my own agenda. As a MUD male, doing so (nicely) seemed more natural; it never struck me as dismissive or rude. Of course, my reaction said as much about the construction of gender in my own mind as it did about the social construction of gender in the MUD.

Turkle's online spaces of the 1990s were male dominated, and gamers of that era are constructed as male, reflects an assumption that gender online reflected identity offline. Turkle's work remains relevant, although indeed it has more recently been noted that female gamers often struggle in contesting this expectation around belonging. Women have been seen to move "towards a fragmentation and reformulation of the female 'otherness' as they struggled to define their identities as gamers within and then outside the terms of dominant, binary conceptions of masculinity and femininity" (Beavis & Charles, 2007, p. 704). Some women adopt stereotypically hegemonically masculine traits to avoid detection as a female gamer, thereby demonstrating an alternative to gender performance in gaming spaces (Kivijarvi & Katila, 2022).

2.6.1.2 Social Identity and the development of conflict

Social identity theory, originating from Tajfel and Turner's (1986) work, suggested that our identity is informed, in part, by the groups to which we belong. How these groups are defined can be broad

and vague, or concrete and specific; based on hobbies, interests, religion or other identity characteristics that we are born with or develop. Tajfel suggested two criteria in defining a “group”:

... the first, that an individual identifies himself (sic.) as belonging to the category; and the second, that this identification is to him (sic.) of some emotional significance” (Tajfel, 1966, p. 78)

According to Tajfel and Turner (1986) identifying with a group can lead to positive concepts of identity for individuals, but identifying as a member of a group can lead to both in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. Although Tajfel and Turner’s work is grounded in social psychology, this can be considered in relation to Jenkins’ (2014) work on social identity, where social identity is achieved through socialisation.

...because identification makes no sense outside of relationships, whether between individuals or groups, there are hierarchies or scales of preference, of ambivalence, of hostility, of competition, of partnership and co-operation, and so on. (Jenkins, 2014, p. 7)

Jenkins (2000) saw identity as a reciprocal process whereby others play a pivotal role in our own identity formation. According to Jenkins (2000, p. 7), we identify internal and external similarities and differences which produces two modes of identification: “*self- or group identification* and the *categorisation* of others” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 8). This means that there are processes whereby collective identities are produced, which then *others* those outside of that collective identity. These processes are similar to Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) work on in-group and out-group difference, where social identification can produce both social cohesion, and ingroup-outgroup discrimination, with discrimination serving as a means to “simply to differentiate themselves” (Turner, 1982, p. 34).

It should be acknowledged that work by Tajfel and Turner is often used to consider the motivations for developing positive social identity, and “accentuates the impact of status and self-esteem on stereotypes, attitudes and prejudice” in developing status within groups (Korostelina, 2007, p. 127).

If we examine alternative consideration of intergroup prejudice, such as realistic conflict theory (Sherif & Sherif, 1953; Sherif 1966; Sherif et al., 1988), we can then consider how social identities act within the context of ingroup interests to produce conflict. Korostelina (2007, p. 128) has summarised the most pertinent elements of realistic conflict theory:

The theory stresses that the realization of ingroup interests depends on the context of intergroup relations and studies the impact of different contexts on the satisfaction of ingroup interests [...] The theory also stresses that prejudices are assumed to occur at the group level rather than at the individual level...Moreover, both theories stress that intergroup prejudices become stronger when the goals and interests of groups are in opposition (Jackson 1993).

Thus, in the context of gaming spaces, considering group identity and conflicting interests between individuals within the group demonstrates how conflict can arise, and how this leads to differentiation and distancing within groups themselves. A game like *LoL* takes place within an already competitive environment; there is a presumed group interest and goal of winning a game. Intergroup hostility can then arise in two distinct ways. First, if a player's skill, rank, knowledge, playstyle or broader gameplay choices are interpreted as not being optimal to the group goal of *winning*, hostility can arise through a perceived sense of opposing interests. On the other hand, if a player in a team has different goals and priorities (such as *trolling* other players), intergroup hostility can arise because these goals oppose the perceived goal of the rest of the team. Thus, we can consider framing toxicity in terms of intergroup conflict based on perceived or real differences in goals. These concepts then have potential to aid understandings around the identity of *gamers*, especially for thinking about hierarchies in gaming communities, where players might distinctly distance themselves from particular *types* of players (based on skill, rank, knowledge, or champion type) or distinguishing between toxic and non-toxic players. This perspective demonstrates grounds for understanding that in high pressure conditions, such as *LoL*, where there are common goals around gameplay, human nature comes into play in identifying in-groups and out-groups based on *winning*. Where players do not relate to others in their game (whether this be through playstyle,

communication preferences, or skill level) this then contributes to a lack of social cohesion.

Consequently, distancing is based on player-type (and how much they contribute towards the common goal), this in itself can fuel toxicity. Toxicity can then be seen to become a part of culture.

The prolonged existence of behaviours such as toxicity or trolling within game spaces fuels an expectation that particular behaviours or approaches to play become synonymous with divergent game goals. This results in prejudice against particular types of play, establishing particular types of players as *toxic* who therefore become established as a form of *outgroup*. This sheds light on experiences of community within *LoL*, and engagement with reporting systems developed by Riot Games, for “conflict with an outgroup tends to result in increased ingroup solidarity with consequent favourable verbal pictures of ingroup members” (Sherif et al., 1988, p. 137). This could explain how within gaming spaces, non-toxic players band together in solidarity to report the toxic behaviours of the outgroup members. This results in non-toxic players “overestim[ing] the performance of members of their own group, and to depreciate the performance by members of the rival outgroup” (Sherif et al., 1988, p. 148). In high pressure, fast paced and competitive environments of games such as *LoL*, where even within groups goals, skills and expectations differ, can we expect that toxicity should not arise, especially when the conditions of transience and anonymity are added? Game environments such as this play into human fundamentals, which potentially increase the opportunities for toxicity more than might some other environments and groups. This offers valuable perspectives on understanding game spaces, human nature, and identities, however a more in-depth understanding then of how toxicity becomes a more subjective individual experience is still needed in order to comprehend and explain the nuance of experiences.

2.6.2 Who are gamers? Gaming identity and stereotypes

Examining how individual identities contribute to perceptions and experiences of toxicity is central to this thesis. This discussion is fundamental because gamer stereotypes are rooted in a historical context of the internet, digital technologies and gaming spaces as being hegemonically masculine. This can therefore shape ideas of belonging and exclusion based on expected identities. Discussions of gamer identity contribute to understanding how toxicity is interpreted and performed (particularly when toxicity takes the form of personal attacks, exclusion and discrimination).

This section begins with a consideration of *who* gamers are (the people) compared to *who are* playing games (their activity). It then moves on to consider how identity can determine belonging within gaming culture, thus shaping diverse experiences of gaming and communities within it.

Whilst this study does not focus specifically on representations of identities within gaming, it is important to be aware of the issues created by and from gaming culture which impact players in deciding who is welcome and who belongs in gaming spaces, this being how toxicity is often articulated. Gamer culture is often defined by who gamers are, it being intrinsic to identity (Shaw, 2010). This section defines, for the purposes of this study, the common stereotype of *who gamers are* before a critical discussion which posits that ‘gamers’ are a very diverse group, and no longer the stereotypical, homogenous group often conjured up in the minds of non-gamers.

The idea of ‘the gamer’ still attracts a perception of an outdated and flawed stereotype of the “isolated, pale skinned teenage boy” (Williams (2005, p. 2). Recent research has suggested that cultural portrayals of online gamers in television shows and news headlines still construct gamers as individuals with many socially constructed negative or problematic traits such as obsessiveness, reclusiveness, loneliness, unkempt, addiction, laziness (Kowert et al., 2012, p. 472). These traits have

been associated with the broader stereotype of “nerd” (Griffiths, 1998), but have become strongly associated with more contemporary constructions of online gamers.

Kowert et al (2012, p. 144) have demonstrated that the average gamer sits outside of stereotyped characteristics and, instead, is in their 30s and are not “more lazy, overweight, or unathletic ... nor are particularly unpopular, socially inept, isolated, or reclusive” in comparison to offline gamers or non-players. As gaming has become more mainstream, the narrow, negatively image of a gamer has been disrupted. An 18-year-long study, (Engelstätter and Ward (2022) identified how the demographic of gamers has changed to more closely resemble wider society, finding that gaming behaviour is increasingly influenced by factors of income, employment, education and ethnicity as opposed to age or gender.

The “lonely gamer” stereotype has also been debunked through studies such as that by Schiano et al. (2014, p. 65), who have noted that *World of Warcraft* players often played with others that they knew offline(friends, family, partners). This challenges the idea that online game play increased loneliness and reclusiveness, and rather, that “playing *World of Warcraft* may serve to enhance, rather than diminish, [Real Life] social interactions”. It has been suggested that particular grouping of players embodying an amplified version of the established stereotype: “These gamers are increasingly playing alone, increasingly playing for long spells, and are increasingly likely to live with their parents” (Engelstätter & Ward, 2022, p. 11). However, such findings demonstrate that the stereotyped gamer identity is no longer accurate, is not universally applicable (stereotypes rarely are), and gamers themselves do not identify with it (Stone, 2021).

The stereotyped gamer identity is misplaced (Griffiths, et al., 2003). Such stereotyping could be attributed to the extremely limited representation of identities through in-game characters. A content analysis of 150 games released in one year, over nine platforms, revealed a dominance of

white, male adults and consequent underrepresentation of women and non-white racial identities (Williams, et al., 2009, p. 815). The gaming industry has continued to create content where white males dominate, thus assuming them to be the target audience (Engelstätter & Ward, 2022; Shaw, 2012; De Grove, et al., 2015). Additionally males dominate professional gaming culture (Paaßen, et al., 2017) with only one per-cent of competitive esports players being women (Girl Gamers, 2020). Gaming is seen as a “male space” (Morgenroth, et al., 2020, p. 557) with female gamers still often facing harassment and challenges to their authenticity or legitimacy as gamers. Thus, stereotypical ideas about *who* gamers are have been influential in perpetuating a culture of exclusion.

In some cases, this conceptualisation leads female players to “disengage from the gaming community, resulting in fewer benefits such as meaningful social ties” (Morgenroth, et al., 2020, p. 557). Therefore, whilst women *are* gamers, they may still find it challenging to feel a sense of belonging within the gaming world due to being ostracised by games as a cultural object.

This section has briefly considered the inaccurate but still prevalent stereotype of gamers as young white men, who lack sociability or motivation. This stereotype has left a legacy which can be seen to contribute to discrimination of various identities in gaming spaces: people who identify, for example as: disabled (Ellis and Kao, 2019), women (Tomkinson, 2023; Poland, 2016; Taylor, 2006b; Bryter, 2023), non-binary and trans (Kosciesza, 2023; Liang, et al., 2023; Thach, 2021), non-white (Goard, 2023; Ortiz, 2019; Paul, 2018; Gray, 2012; Monson, 2012) and/or queer (Ruberg 2018). The detail of such identities lies outside the scope of this study but this aspect of ‘otherness’ is germane to the focus of this study toxicity.

Identity matters in gaming spaces, and that whilst the demographic of gamers is diversifying, responses to such diversification are not wholly positive and this is reflected in responses toward

non-normative gamers. Ultimately, identity and notions of belonging, shape the types of behaviour and language which are utilised as and within toxicity.

2.7 Toxicity

This section addresses ‘toxicity’ the key focus of the research reported in this thesis. Defining toxicity is difficult and whilst this is explored more fully through the lens of data collected for this thesis (Chapter 6), this section considers toxicity, both in terms of academic understandings and the articulations of toxicity by the games industry. It begins with a discussion of the origins of harassment and ‘nuisance’ behaviour on the internet with a consideration of ‘trolling’ (2.7.1), followed by a discussion of trolling as a tool to enforce heteronormative dominance over gaming culture and internet spaces (2.7.2). This is followed with a discussion of the complexity of defining toxicity (2.7.3) and an exploration of toxic practices (2.7.4). Finally, the section closes with consideration of studies of toxicity and gaming culture (2.7.5). Further, relevant scholarship on toxicity specifically in relation to *LoL*, will be critically considered in Section 2.8.

Central to these discussions is the relationship between modernity and society. Beck (1992) suggested that industrialisation and developments in technology brought new kinds of risks to societies, and how they must be managed. Interconnectivity and anonymity in virtual spaces have brought risks of toxicity and discrimination to gaming communities.

2.7.3 Mapping the origins: From trolling to toxicity

The concept of trolling can be used to track the beginnings of a terminology of toxicity. Phillips’ (2015) work has identified the linguistic roots of trolling to be within Norse mythology or piscatory,

first being used within an online context in 1992 where trolling was defined as responses which “fish for flames” (Phillips, 2015, p. 15). Whilst originally this meant a seeking of response or retort, the term has become mainstream, encompassing “online behaviours with even the slightest whiff of mischief, oddity, or antagonism” (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 7). In the mainstream, however, trolling has acquired a “vague linguistic framing” (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 8) which lacks specificity, yet is commonly understood in internet spaces. In practice, the identity and meaning of ‘troll’ is learnt through participation in internet cultures. However, understanding trolling and why it is such an ambiguous term helps us to construct a working definition of the term toxicity which has similar levels of ambiguity.

Much work on trolling has focused on online trolls within a broader context of internet culture, including social media, forums and news platforms (Felmlee, et al., 2020; Massanari, 2017; Poland, 2016; Phillips, 2015). Comparatively little attention has been paid to trolling in online gaming contexts. Whilst it has been suggested that trolls inhabit “anything and everything they can get their hands on” (Phillips, 2015, p. 28), explanations of toxicity tends to only appear in *sociotechnical networks* (Massanari, 2017, p. 333), requiring consideration of technology, social actors, and the interaction between them. This highlights the importance of interaction between technological structures and people in enabling toxicity. Discussion and definitions of trolls and trolling are easily identified within academic literature, yet work on toxicity and toxic behaviours seem to be more limited in their sites of research which seem almost exclusively to be forums, (such as Reddit), or online gaming, (Massanari, 2017; Pulos, 2013; Mantilla, 2013; Blodgett & Salter, 2018). The cross-over between community forum sites and online gaming communities is palpable.

The diversity of behaviours encompassed by the action of trolling provides reason for the difficulty in providing a simple explanation of trolls and trolling. The unifying motivator for trolling has been suggested to be “for the lulz” (Phillips, 2015, p. 28), where the *lulz* can be viewed as a more twisted

and perverse imagining of doing something ‘for a laugh’. Instead, the *lulz* is often “amusement as other people’s distress” (Phillips, 2015, p. 28). Many of the principles of trolling, however, can be applied to toxicity as many trolling behaviours can indeed be considered ‘toxic’. As with trolling, the forms that toxicity and toxic behaviour take are diverse and the motivations multiple. Similarities between toxicity and trolling possibly provide an explanation for why both terms are often used interchangeably within the gamers’ lexicon. However, trolling in gaming implies a distinctly jovial and roguish nature, something often accompanied by “u mad bro?”, or “problem?”, the essence of which is captured by the “trollface” meme (Ramirez, 2008). Phillips and Milner (2017, p. 8) suggest that this “playful or at least performative intent ... tends to minimize the negative effects of the worst kinds of online behaviours”. In comparison, toxicity is often characterised by a distinct lack of playfulness, and is instead synonymous with poison, maliciousness and rage. This is exemplified by Thacker and Griffiths’ (2012, p. 17) work on trolling in online gaming, where they categorised types of trolling as “griefing, sexism/racism, and faking/intentional fallacy”, with trolling being motivated by “amusement, boredom, and revenge”. This perception of toxicity, much like trolling, has become oversimplified. Toxicity encompasses a range of behaviours, which include prankster-like trolling, verbal abuse – often known as flaming (explained by linguistic origins; fishing for flames), and a range of game-specific behaviours which will be explored further in Section 2.7.4.

A disparity then exists in thinking about *who are trolls*, and *who is toxic*. Central to Phillips’ (2015) exploration of the identity and performance of trolling is people identifying as trolls. Phillips noted that a “majority of the trolls who responded identified primarily as Facebook trolls” (2015, p. 33). Arguably, within gaming culture, the *identity* of a troll is less clear cut. Whilst some players undoubtedly exist to disrupt and *troll* in games, it is questionable as to whether these players would identify as trolls. Similarly, given the transient nature of trolling within game genres, not all players troll in every, or even in a majority, of games. For example, in MOBAs, game-play instances are very transient and short-lived. In-game behaviours which can be considered troll-like stem from a

number of motives which are often determined by game circumstances and individual game instances which could be said to ‘turn on the troll’ in particular players.

Understanding and exploring the origins and definitions of trolls and trolling behaviours is important, because from this we can start to understand an evolution of toxicity. However, it is naïve to suggest that the motives, characteristics and patterns of the *Facebook troll*, as explored by Phillips, would transfer directly and unproblematically to trolling within gaming culture. Any discussion of trolling in gaming culture needs to be constructed through discussions with those interacting with trolling, whether this be in curating and performing trolling or experiencing troll behaviours. The question remains as to why toxicity is specifically associated with online gaming and gaming culture, whilst the notion of the troll permeates internet culture far more broadly.

Hardaker (2010, pp. 237-238) proposed a working definition of trolling as a:

user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement.

In applying this to video games, this becomes slightly problematic. The proposal of “pseudo-sincere intentions” is further questionable, given that video game trolls may disrupt a game for their own amusement, despite being within the culture itself. Additionally, the intentions behind trolling in gaming are not always driven by amusement, and in terms of toxicity, toxic behaviours may be disruptive and driven by frustration rather than amusement (Chapter 6). Behaviours and motivations within gaming culture are more diverse, and more complicated than *for the lulz*. This is in part demonstrated by Gregson’s (2007, n/p) statement on grieving, wherein “everyone has the same goal – have fun. Unfortunately, for one group – the griefers – achieving their goal precludes other users from reaching theirs”. Understanding existing definitions of trolling within internet culture can be

helpful in developing and applying these concepts to game studies, but caution is needed before applying such concepts directly without first analysing their appropriateness to gaming culture.

2.7.4 *Trolling as a form of dominance in internet spaces and gaming culture*

As explored in 2.5 and 2.6, gaming spaces are hegemonically masculine and built upon the foundations of heteronormativity. Exhibits of trolling and toxicity within gaming spaces then, can be seen as modes through which to maintain male domination over cultural spaces. Whilst not all moments of trolling or toxicity will be overt nor explicitly planned, as behaviours they are usually imbued with notions of power which draw upon societal divisions and inequalities. As Crawford et al. (2011, p. 13) note “patterns of interaction, structure and hierarchy are not simply created by the game or its mechanisms but also (and *more so*) by the gamer community itself”. This is illustrated by Gray et al. (2017, p. 4), who suggest that “Sexist verbal attacks are often instigated through linguistic profiling whereby talking, female players break the assumption that all gamers are male and thus are labelled deviant and punished for this transgression”. Transgressing the boundaries of what is considered ‘normal’ within cultural spaces, (particularly spaces which are, or are associated with, internet culture), often results in targeted attacks based on how people have transgressed. Maintaining heteronormative dominance is also illustrated through the use of homophobic slurs aimed at any player to denote poor skill level (Shaw, 2009), with 83.4% of respondents to the “Gaymer Survey” having been called “gay” or “queer” in a negative and derogatory way in online gaming scenarios (Arendt, 2007). This behaviour *others* players who do not fit the expected skill threshold to belong in gaming culture and further ostracising the LGBTQ+ community. This demonstrates narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity being constructed within frameworks of heteronormativity (Linderoth & Öhrn, 2014).

Pulos (2013, p. 79) noted that though online gaming worlds are not being framed by particular, regimented ideologies, “ideological constraints have seeped into [their] very existence and frameworks”. This alludes to the ways in which heteronormativity has infiltrated video game spaces to sustain them as male spaces – or, at the very least, where individuals are judged based on heteronormative ideals. Cis white male dominance of internet cultural spaces speaks to the notion of legitimacy and identity in online spaces, and a particular “hegemony of play” (Fron, et al., 2007). Identities which are othered by heteronormativity are tested against heteronormative standards, as demonstrated by the exploration and evidencing of video game culture. Wilchin’s (2004, p. 59) work on discourse and social dialogue, argues that meaning making and production of knowledge determine “what kinds of intelligible statements can be circulated within a given economy of thought”. Where discourse is framed by heteronormative ideologies (due to being generated within heteronormative institutions), use of language and the meanings attributed to terminology is shaped in this image. Ideologies reinforcing unequal power relations are thereby exploited by trolls within games, and by players who ignore the messages generated by and within the games they play. This can lead to “passive acceptance of them as reflecting something true about the world” (Poland, 2016, p. 8).

Examples of such behaviours can be seen in multiple explorations of some video games. An analysis of player chat logs in *LoL*, identified the top ten weighted words within a number of categories. Within ‘taunt’, the most frequently used words by players are “ni***r, fa***t, c**t, mom, f*g, d**k, bi**ch, g*y, mad, a*s” (Neto, et al., 2017, p. 29). This demonstrates the ways that othered identities within gaming culture are used to further alienate players within games, often out of discontent with the skill level of the players at whom such ‘taunts’ are aimed. Insults are not necessarily always personal attacks on players. This is especially true where anonymity allows words and derogatory terms associated with identification categories to be used toward other players without this being grounded in their identity. Pulos (2013, p. 90) draws attention to the role that game developers play

in determining the discourse within games. This showed how Blizzard's dismissal of gender as "unnecessary elements to gameplay" within *World of Warcraft*, contributed to establishing heteronormativity within gaming culture. This has consequently been seen to "encourage the use of pejorative LGBTQ terms as common 'gamer lingo'" (Pulos, 2013, p. 90) and thus perpetuates the continuation of othering with gaming worlds. In contrast, Potts' (2015) examination of Minecraft videos posted on YouTube has suggested that the ways that heterosexual male gamers play with sexuality and sexual innuendo contribute to the development and acceptance of self-policing fan communities. The variation across game titles and genres, is indicative of how developers, players, and fans respond to and act within typically heteronormative constructions of gamer culture.

Discourses within games culture tend to follow heteronormative constructions of society and produce othering. Yet this is not universal, and not all games and areas of gaming culture, feature or attract othering behaviours. Trolling- and toxicity-performed heteronormatively is as idiosyncratic as the individuals who play games, and whilst this should not be overlooked neither should it undermine the presence and real effects of othering through trolling and toxic discourses. As Poland (2016, p. 4) notes:

Attitudes displayed online – whether in the form of Youtube videos, Facebook comments, Twitter replies, Reddit threads, or blog posts – do not occur in a vacuum nor do they exist only in online spaces.

2.7.3 What is 'toxicity'?

The origins of trolling, and trolling as a form of asserting dominance, furthers the question of what *toxicity* is, if it is distinct from trolling. Toxicity becomes a contested, and hard to define term because it is used differently in gaming literature and games themselves. Kowert (2020, p. 4) attempted to distinguish between trolling and toxicity, offering: "While toxicity refers to particular

outcomes of dark participation, trolling refers to the intent of the perpetrator”. This definition, however, becomes tricky when considering the cultural, industrial and player-wide use of ‘toxicity’ to refer to behaviours and language-use. It masks the impacts of such actions and can make it difficult to ascertain the intent behind actions.

Definitions of toxicity are largely shaped by the codes of conduct provided by games developers, alongside input from players. Merton’s definition of *deviant behaviours* can be seen to be relevant in helping to shape a definition of toxicity. Merton (1976, p. 28) described deviant behaviours as those which mark “significant departures from norms socially assigned to various statuses and roles. What constitutes deviant behaviour in any one case is not unequivocally clear for [...] sometimes people differ widely on social norms”. Therefore, codes of conduct which set out the expectations and norms within gaming communities can be used to think about the actions which constitute toxicity. To explore this, I reviewed codes of conduct, reports, disciplinary systems and community guidelines for six games in the top twenty most popular PC games (NewZoo, 2024b) to demonstrate the disparate range of behaviours which can be constructed as toxic (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Toxic practices within *LoL* (Riot Games, 2023b), *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2020), *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2020), *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2020), *DOTA2* (Dota2 Wiki, 2020), and *Counter Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO)* (Valve, 2016; Valve, 2013), as identified within codes of conduct, report forms, forum and blog posts. Green shading represents that behaviour is in the games codes of conduct, disciplinary systems or community standards

	<i>LoL</i>	<i>Minecraft</i>	<i>World of Warcraft</i>	<i>Overwatch</i>	<i>DOTA2</i>	<i>CS:GO</i>
Abusive language						
Cheating						
Ability misuse						
Intentional feeding						
Hate speech						
AFK						
Assisting enemy team						
Disruptive language						
Offensive in-game name						
Spamming						
Harassment						
Promoting illegal activity						
Exploiting/scamming other players						
Throwing						
Griefing						
Falsely reporting players						
Killing/obstructing allied team						
Not playing to win/ignoring game aim						

Table 2.1 demonstrates the diversity in toxic behaviours, however the breadth of behaviours covered falls within the binary of either language or behaviour, with the exception of ‘cheating’ (Consalvo, 2007, p. 150) which has its own category and so is not part of the definition of toxicity used in this thesis. The behaviours mentioned by game developers and players often depends on the game type, and the affordances and possibilities presented within games themselves. Paul (2018, p. 70) has suggested that it is important to think about how “the design of particular games crafts the interaction of player communities within them” and:

[I]t is crucial to look at individual instances in a given game and also at the design choices made in specific games, with an eye to the broad culture around games as a whole. The interactions among design elements of given games and the biases of those making and playing games are at the core of why videogame culture is the worst. (Paul, 2018, pp. 70-71)

Understanding individual acts of toxicity is central to understanding game culture more broadly, because how players interact within games demonstrates ingrained behaviours and accepted norms. It is also key in understanding how toxicity affects players generally and individually, and how this contributes to an understanding of why many games' player-bases remain populated and active despite being notorious for levels of toxicity within their communities. However, we must keep in mind that the complexities of social norms in gaming environments are "contested and emergent, continuously shifting and evolving within different parts of communities, over time, and between environments" (Suzor & Woodford, 2013, p. 3). Whilst community norms and expectations within games are shaped by players, developers, and the evolution of game environments themselves, there is often tension or disagreement between the norms outlined in community guidelines or terms of service and the players themselves (Humphreys, 2012). This further highlights the difficulties in defining toxicity, because differences between games developers and the perspectives of players themselves will always exist.

On defining toxic behaviours within a broader gaming industry context, *The Disruption and Harms in Online Gaming Framework* was developed by the Fair Play Alliance (FPA) (2020a) based around developers' need to provide themselves with a "informed, unified language to understand the efficacy of [their] collaborative efforts" (Fair Play Alliance, 2020a, p. 11). In tackling disruptive and harmful behaviour in games, or "transgressive experiences in gaming" (p. 12), the FPA decided not to use the term *toxicity* "because of the burden of its colloquial use" (p. 13). The Framework offers a consideration of how to start to *tackle* these (toxic) behaviours: understanding the form or behaviours (expression), how it happens, the impact of behaviours, and the overall root cause of

behaviours. This articulation of behaviours goes beyond the previously acknowledged codes of conduct and community guidelines, offering more specific denotation of behaviours.

Aside from the stronger articulation of forms of toxicity, the FPA Framework demonstrates what developers **know** about toxicity. It notes that behaviours can be unintended; aggravating; encompasses antisocial actions; involve the abuse of play or forms of cheating mechanisms; can be harassment, hate, extremism or dangerous speech; or involve inappropriate sharing of information or criminal or predatory behaviour (Fair Play Alliance, 2020a, pp. 18-21). On root causes, the FPA identify game design, behavioural expectations, game tone, power dynamics, mechanisms of identity, game reputation, player wellbeing, anonymity and lack of connection, and social and cultural contexts as contributing factors (Fair Play Alliance, 2020a, pp. 32-37). Importantly, the Fair Play Alliance outlines what developers also **do not know**: where to draw the line on behaviours, what to do outside of game spaces themselves. Whilst this framework identifies a number of themes prevalent in the data of the current study, much data was collected prior the release of the framework. Additionally, whilst Riot are a member of the Fair Play Alliance, the framework does not explore these elements within *LoL* specifically as a game site, nor draw on individual player experiences. Thus, elements of the Framework can be seen to corroborate my findings and the new knowledge generated through this study can be considered in this context.

The following section (2.7.4) critically discusses selected literature to summarise key toxicity practices within the two key categories: linguistic and behavioural.

2.7.4 What are toxic behaviours?

Based on the behaviours identified in Table 2.1, this section will outline subcategories of language-based and behaviour-based toxicity, defining and exemplifying an extensive number of practices (from a range of game instances) which fall under each category. This aims to reach a unified understanding of toxicity across games. Categorisations of toxicity should be applicable across game genres, although the specific actions within each sub-category may not be applicable to all games. In practice, that some toxic behaviours are intentional, but sometimes actions or language are interpreted as toxic whilst this is not intentional. For example, a player repeatedly 'dying' might not be intentional, but could be interpreted as a toxic behaviour of 'feeding' by other players. Foo and Koivisto (2004) noted that there are unintentional forms of "grief play" within MMORPG games, but the interpretations of toxic behaviour (griefing) are made more complex when we acknowledge that practices seen as acceptable in one game are not always acceptable in another, and vice versa.

2.7.4.1 Linguistic toxic practices

Linguistic toxicity is the use of language to cause offence, harass, or inject negative attitudes within games. This may be through in-game chat, or voice chat functions, and includes the use of sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic and ableist language. Four distinct behaviours constitute linguistic toxicity: i) abusive and disruptive language; ii) hate speech; iii) spamming; iv) offensive (IGNS). Although these behaviours are distinct, they are all forms of harassment where language is manipulated to disrupt, offend, or otherwise divert attention away from the game play.

i) 'Flaming': Abusive and disruptive language

Abusive and disruptive language is often referred to within gaming spaces as 'flaming' and is defined as "aggressive, hostile, or profanity-laced interactions" (O'Sullivan & Flanagan, 2003, p. 70). Generally

flaming is viewed as distinct from hate speech, being considered a relatively ‘tame’ form of verbal harassment which is normalised within gaming contexts. This usually occurs when a player attacks the skill level of another player or comments on their choice of champion using words identified as “complaints” and “insults” (Neto and Becker (2018). Flaming is most likely to occur if a team is losing their game, and “one or more players blame others whom they believe have performed worse than could reasonably be expected”, resulting in a back-and-forth of attributing blame (Kou & Nardi, 2013, p. 617). Flaming in *LoL*, is seen as impacting player morale and cooperation, leading to a greater chance of losing a game (Kou & Nardi, 2013, p. 618). O’Sullivan and Flanagin (2003) noted that context is often removed from discussions of flaming, developing the ‘Interactional Norms’ model. In noting that flaming is complex; because “cultural, local, and relational norms co-exist, conflict may differ from one person to another, change over time, and differ from one channel to another” (O’Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003, p. 80). The ‘Interactional Norms’ model works to demonstrate the range of possible interpretations of messages according to sender, receiver, third parties and normative values.

ii) *Hate speech*

Hate speech differs from flaming in that it includes personal verbal attacks on players based on identities and is defined as “content that expresses and encourages intolerance, discrimination or any other negative emotion aimed at any particular object or person it” (Sanghvi, et al., 2024, p. 2). Most commonly, and in its most overt form, this includes the use of sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist language and slurs, often identified as “taunts” (Neto and Becker (2018). Hate speech may also include more covert derogatory language, such as ‘you play like a girl’, or commonly used comments which are rarely viewed as insulting, such as ‘your mom’ jokes which reduce women to sexual objects. Hate speech has become so normalised within gaming spaces, that some players have noted becoming “‘desensitized’ to racist hate speech” (Ortiz, 2019, p. 573).

Whilst game developers are regarded as decision makers, the diversity of expression means that hate-speech systems designed to detect hate-speech, are easily deceived (Gröndahl, et al., 2018), and so often fail to address the problem. The failure of moderation and reporting systems in eradicating hate speech in games puts minority players in a position where they “must continue to listen to hate speech in these environments” and are “forced to stay silent, lest their true identity be revealed and they become the target for in-game and meta-game discrimination and aggression” (Fox & Tan, 2014, p. 318). Hate speech is an example of the lack of separation between game world social norms and the rules of everyday life (Fairfield, 2008) highlighting how Huizinga’s (1949) notion of separate social orders in game worlds may now be contested.

iii) *Spamming*

Spamming refers to “unnecessary data transmission [*encompassing*] the qualities of humour and tedium, often bordering on irritation” (Stivale, 1997, p. 133). In early internet spaces, this was referred to as “generating so much text that its sheer quantity is offensive regardless of its content” (Hess, 2003, p. 29). Within a gaming context, spamming is the repetitive and unnecessary use of phrases, words, emotes (sticker-like emoji reactions) or pings (a combined sound and visual signal used to communicate premade messages to teammates). These forms of communication are rapidly repeated, and though generally regarded as a less serious form of toxicity, they can be frustrating and distracting for players, disrupting games through deflecting attention. However, players can minimise the potential of spanning to disrupt the game by muting such forms of communication from other players within the game. The lack of studies on spamming is a gap in the field of knowledge.

iv) *Offensive in-game names (IGNs)*

Offensive IGNs are a use of offensive language in players’ names which directly includes or alludes to hate speech. Whilst many games do not allow players to create a name which includes particular

terms, players find ways to circumvent this by using alternative spellings, such as numbers in place of some letters, or even having names as phrases; all of which denote hate speech. Whilst offensive IGNs are noted by developers as unacceptable (Table 2.1), there is a lack of research on the topic.

2.7.4.2 Behavioural toxic practices

Behavioural toxicity is more complex than linguistic toxicity in that it encompasses a larger range of behaviours. These are constantly evolving within gaming communities, as players continually seek new ways to disrupt games, antagonise, and ‘troll’ other players. Toxic behaviours are increasingly being employed as a form of *schadenfreude*, and to intentionally ruin players’ Match Making Rating (MMR) causing them to be matched with lower skilled players. This practice is not applicable to all game genres but has been commonly seen in *LoL*.

The concepts of ‘griefing’ and ‘throwing’ are also identified by games developers as toxic behaviours. These are broad categories which encompass many behaviours as there are multiple ways to grief or intentionally throw a game. Throwing a game refers to letting go of a lead position within a game, effectively forfeiting a game which was likely to be won. The ambiguity with ‘throwing’ is that it can be done intentionally (as will be explored below), however poor teamplay or individual (unintentional) misplay can also contribute to the ‘throwing’ of a game. Griefing and throwing are not included as sub-categories below because their use is diverse and ambiguous and such a discussion would not be helpful in the context of this thesis. Many of the individual behaviours discussed below could be part of ‘griefing’ behaviours and may be employed to intentionally ‘throw’ a game.

Behavioural toxicity can be separated into ten distinct behaviours: i) assisting the enemy team; ii) obstructing the allied team; iii) AFKing; iv) smurfing; v) MMR tanking; vi) Off-meta play; vii) stream-based trolling; viii) exploiting and scamming other players; ix) environment/resource control; x)

Corpse camping. Although these behaviours are distinct, they are united by a theme of harassment to disrupt or otherwise divert attention from the purpose of a game. Specific behavioural expressions of toxicity are under researched, aside from Off-Meta play (Paul, 2024; Donaldson, 2017), and as such only brief definitions are included here. A full discussion of these behaviours, drawing on examples from games themselves, can be found in Appendix 2.

- i) Assisting the enemy team: behaviours which assist the enemy team in winning.
- ii) Obstructing the allied team: behaviours which impact a players' own teams' ability to win.
- iii) AFKing: leaving a game prematurely and no longer engaging in play.
- iv) Smurfing: experienced players presenting themselves as inexperienced and competing against lower-level players.
- v) MMR tanking: players intentionally losing games to lower their MMR to match them with lower-skilled players.
- vi) Off-meta play: playing champions in roles which are characterised as sub-optimal.
- vii) Stream-based trolling: targeting streamers for queue manipulation or observing streamer broadcasts to gain in-game advantage.
- viii) Exploiting and scamming other players: stealing loot or exploiting in-game economies to player advantage.
- ix) Environment/resource control: controlling resources in a way which denies them from other players, when they should be available to all.
- x) Corpse camping: when player A kills player B, Player A waits for B to respawn to immediately kill them again.

With many behaviours identified as toxic, the intention is often key, as in smurfing or off-meta play. Behaviours such as feeding may be accidental, and the result of a bad game on the part of an

individual player, however, feeding can result in a negative experience for the rest of their team. But even if the intent is not to disrupt gameplay, it may still be viewed by players who experience such behaviours as toxic. Therefore, in defining toxic behaviours, we must be aware of how players perceive actions and explore how players perceive such behaviours and whether intent plays a role in how they judge particular behaviours.

2.7.4.3 Toxicity: Is it all banter?

It is not uncommon for players to claim ‘it’s just banter’ or ‘trash talk’ to defend their use of toxic language. Beres et al. (2021, p. 1) found that players often do not report toxic behaviour if they “view it as acceptable, typical of games, as banter, or as not their concern”, demonstrating the complex thought processes at work in player decisions to try and address toxicity, and how enculturated and acceptable toxic behaviours and language have become in gaming. Trash talk is commonplace, especially in competitive games such as esports, as it is in many high stakes, competitive sports. There is, however, a line between banter, or trash talk, and toxicity. Genuine banter or trash talk does not disrupt a game and is not intended to cause offence. The labelling of offensive and hurtful comments as ‘just banter’, or innocent and ‘just for a laugh’, affords a legitimacy to everyday occurrences of derogatory behaviour, and reduces the acknowledgement of their impact (Nichols, 2018, p. 74). It is well established that ‘banter’, often associated with lads and laddism, frequently includes elements of hate speech, in particular misogyny (Nichols, 2018; Jackson, et al., 2015; Phipps & Young, 2015). Nichols noted that banter is often viewed as “a traditionally male linguistic insult” (Nichols, 2018, p. 74) This further highlights how much of the language used within video games is constructed in line with hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity, replicating the structures within everyday social worlds. Trash-talk within gaming culture has been

shown to be a “a practice of boundary-making that reproduces racism and sexism” (Ortiz, 2019, p. 881), highlighting the dangers of normalising hate speech as ‘mere’ trash talk or banter.

Linguistic and behavioural toxic practices can impact negatively on the game experience of other players and create significant tension within gaming communities. To pass off linguistic or behavioural toxicity as purely banter or ‘just for laughs’ undermines the significant impact that it can have on gaming experiences. Whilst acts of *schadenfreude* may be entertainment for some, actively performing such acts fails to recognise the wider impact they may have on gaming culture as toxicity increasingly becomes normalised within gaming spaces. Toxicity can result in players leaving gaming spaces or feeling unable to join in the first place for fear of becoming a target of toxicity.

Understanding the diverse and evolving nature of toxicity is thus important. Toxic behaviours can be considered a form of cultural capital, as Ortiz (2019) has suggested is the case for ‘trash talk’. This draws attention to the power dynamics that at play when toxic practices are performed and normalised. Whilst ‘trash talk’ may be a common form of hype within competitive sports and esports, it should not be permitted to transgress into hate speech or become otherwise offensive. Toxic practices reinforce inequality and enable its continuous normalisation within gaming culture.

2.7.5 Gaming culture and toxicity

Game culture is stunted because of a limited, relatively homogenous group of players, designers, games and experiences. (Paul, 2018, p. 141)

The focus of this thesis is toxicity in gaming, however this notion of toxicity cannot be divorced from the space within which it takes place and therefore must be prefaced with an understanding of video game culture. Paul (2018, p. 2) refers to this as the “dark” current state of video gaming culture. Whilst video games have become increasingly mainstream, much of the depth of video gaming

culture goes unconsidered by the average player. The distinction between ‘player’ and ‘gamer’, as suggested by Paul (2018, p. 20) is important here:

...the word player is used when talking about the broad, heterogeneous group of people who play games. Gamer is used to convey a subset of that group, a person whose core identity is often defined around video games and who tends to be deeply invested in contemporary videogame culture.

If we take Paul’s distinction, we could say that gamers shape culture, whilst players may absorb it, or even let the details of gaming culture pass them by. Gaming has thus been constructed (as has much internet culture) as hegemonically masculine (Condis, 2018; Maloney, et al., 2018; Harvey & Fisher, 2015) and maintained as such through the reproduction of gender in gaming spaces (Buyukozturk, 2022). However, Kowert (2020) has gone on to suggest the notion of “dark participation”, which pairs with Paul’s notion of “dark state” of gaming culture. Kowert (2020, p. 2) posits that “dark participation is always deviant in the context of the environment, but what behaviours are considered toxic in one situation might not be considered toxic in another”. This provides space for varied definition of what is toxic across game genres, titles, and modes. Games design and the game industry more broadly have been criticised for failing to diversify their audience by focusing on what will sell rather than diversifying their audience appeal (Potanin, 2010). In neglecting to transform their audience there is a continuous under-representation of women, people of colour, gender diversity and sexualities. A consequent effect of lack of diversity in an audience is a limited diversity of characters or story in games, underrepresentation in recruitment of staff to the video game industry, and the forms gaming culture takes, and vice versa. The development and perpetuation of toxicity within video gaming culture can be linked to the make-up of the gaming community: behaviours are being performed, and precedents set, by a vocal and invested minority which become entrenched, even when audiences diversify. Gray’s (2015, p. 64) exploration of voice in Xbox Live explores this:

Women and people of colour, by failing to conform to the norm of the white male, are in direct opposition to what was intended. Xbox Live, as being a part of the gaming culture, is not exempt from criticism in sustaining a culture of masculinity and whiteness.

Gray (2015) identifies the difficulty of both being 'successful' and accepted within gaming spaces. Players who are identified as not being a white cis man, may often face harassment, abuse and humiliation. In identifying norms within gaming culture, we can begin to understand why gaming culture is stuck as a heteronormative culture. It is important to explore the issues that gaming culture faces which perpetually reproduce non-diverse narratives. Whilst progress is being made, it is best described as small steps, with the lack of acceptance from gamers themselves actively holding back progress in achieving diversity. Breuer et al. (2014) suggest that hostile gaming environments are a result of competition in games, especially in the case of online multiplayer games, they drawing parallels with trash talk in sports; however I suggest that gaming culture has deeper rooted negative and discriminatory issues than trash talk alone. This is then deepened by the notion that "racist, sexist, or otherwise hateful behaviours are no longer considered taboo, but are framed as commonplace or even inevitable" (Munn, 2023, p. 5). Such a consideration therefore focuses on the cultural conditions which produce and accept toxic behaviour, particularly where language-based toxicity is concerned.

2.7.5.1 Trends in gaming and toxicity research

Whilst section 2.7.4 has explored forms of toxicity, it is necessary to explore emerging trends in toxicity as applied to video game research. This section will summarise emerging studies in this area, whilst identifying a gap in the literature surrounding how players interpret and understand toxicity itself.

On the likelihood to engage in toxic behaviour or action, it is interesting to see the suggestion that “toxicity is contagious among players” (Shen, et al., 2020, p. 106343). Focusing on MMO *World of Tanks*, more experienced (and more skilled) players were found to be most likely to engage in toxic behaviours. Such behaviours were likely to spread between team members (Shen et al., 2020) with similar findings in other studies (Cook, 2019; Kowert, 2020). This has been suggested to be the result of a reliance upon collaboration between team members in competitive games such as MMOs (Verheijen, et al., 2019). There are, however, conflicting suggestions around power and the performance of toxicity. Zhu et al. (2022, p. 8) found that players who felt they had greater power or ability to influence winning the game in terms of skill (referred to as “carry power”) were more likely to “showcase more forgiveness” than their less-skilled team-mates. However previous studies (Shores, et al., 2014; Ballard & Welch, 2017; Shen, et al., 2020) noted that players with greater power were more likely to engage in toxic behaviours. It should be said that much of this research is grounded in the field of psychology and not within the social sciences. Whilst not focused on likelihood to engage in toxic practices, Felczak has considered how esports communities and professionals have contributed to “‘a reversed safe space’, which manifests in the efforts to fossilize, normalize and effectively impose various behaviours associated with toxic masculinity upon the community” (Felczak, 2023, p. 412) and embed and normalise disruptive and harmful behaviours as part of community practice.

There is increasing interest in the notion of toxicity detection, with research mostly within the field of computer science. Canossa et al. (2021) found that observation can detect toxic behaviours in-game, making it possible to detect which players are toxic, the severity and type of toxic behaviour, and the punishment ascribed to offending players. Other avenues for toxicity detection include using in-game verbal communication to predict whether players are toxic (Reid, et al., 2022) and models for detecting toxic language in in-game chats (Fesalbon, et al., 2024; Yang, et al., 2023; Jia, et al.,

2022; Ekiciler, et al., 2022; Mörtens, et al., 2015). However, detecting toxicity is challenging, with Murnion et al. (2018) highlighting that Structured Query Language (SQL) classifications have helped to detect overtly toxic language, including racism. However, they note that sentiment analysis identified that the language used in gaming is often very specific and not easily identified as toxic by machine learning techniques (for example language such as “typical lemming train” (Murnion et al., 2018 p. 210), highlighting the idiosyncrasies of toxicity expression in gaming.

Aside from the development of methods to detect toxicity in games and players, how games are designed can be utilised to foster environments which are less susceptible to toxicity. Kordyaka and Kruse (2021, pp. 414-142) have suggested that closing the gap of dissociative anonymity in gaming, having immediate sanctions for toxic behaviours, counteracting solipsistic introjection, and emphasising the impact and restrictions of toxic game-play would be key in developing such an environment. Evaluation of existing in-game reward or recognition systems have also been suggested as a means to disrupt toxic behaviours. Tomkinson and van den Ende (2022, p. 198) have suggested that the combination of incentives and deterrents implemented by Blizzard in *Overwatch* “is particularly effective as a form of discipline because it includes players as part of the process”. This stands in contrast to suggestions by Xiao et al. (2023) who focus on a restorative justice approach which centres the gaming community addressing toxicity collectively. However, the challenges faced by such an approach including diverse senses of community across community members and stakeholders, and an existing punitive mindset being embedded in community members.

Thus, research has mainly focussed on curbing and managing toxicity in games development. This leaves a large gap in research around how players themselves interpret and understand toxicity; a gap this thesis seeks, in part, to address. Whilst research on gender, specifically the experiences of

female gamers, has considered the methods used by women to mitigate exposure to toxicity, there remains a gap on how players in their diversity, utilise their agency to manage their experiences and exposure to toxicity. These are two aspects which this research seeks to address.

2.8 League of Legends

This final section of this literature review addresses the existing literature which explores the game *LoL*, the subject of this research. Since the initial conceptualisation of this research project, and during data collection, *LoL* has become a more popular subject for research with Mora-Cantallops and Sicilia (2018) suggesting that *LoL* is the most researched MOBA game. However very few studies focus on player understandings of toxicity, from a social sciences perspective. The discipline of psychology dominates much of the research in esports and professional play, and around video games, including *LoL*.

The existing fields of research on *LoL* can be classified as player psychology; esports and professional play; gameplay; computer science and gameplay; economics and marketing; champion or character design; gender; science and medicine; streaming; popular culture and toxicity.

This section is divided into two sub-sections. Section 2.8.1 provides a brief summary of the range of literature around *LoL* in general to set out the breadth of foci of *LoL* research. Section 2.8.2 includes studies with a focus on toxicity to locate my focus on toxicity in *LoL* within the broader field of research.

2.8.1 Trends in League of Legends focused research

Video game-based research generally has tended to focus on player psychology possibly due to the prevalence of concerns around video game addiction (von der Heiden, et al., 2019). This is mirrored in *LoL* research into game addiction in *LoL* (Kim et al., 2023; Koga and Laurenti, 2020; Su et al. 2018). There has been a turn towards understanding cognition in esports play and professional players (Ahn & Kim, 2024; Polus et al., 2023; Lopes Angelo et al., 2022; Perieria et al., 2022; Kou & Gui, 2020), with some studies focusing on *LoL* due to its popularity within esports. Main considerations have been: game engagement (Mao, 2021), personality traits and performance (Matuszewski, et al., 2020), player performance and skill (Valls-Serrano et al., 2022; Li et al., 2020), and training in relation to player-performance (Nagorsky & Wiemeyer, 2020). Studies of learning and relationships have illuminated: methods of learning within *LoL* (Kleinman, et al., 2021) and relationships between player motivation, experience and in-game behaviour (Poeller, et al., 2021; Brühlmann, et al., 2020). Other studies have examined: the emotional experience of esports viewers (Cauteruccio & Kou, 2023; Lee, et al., 2014), motivations for viewing play (Ryu, et al., 2023), and esports viewing as a relaxing pastime (Gray, et al., 2018). Although Aeschbach et al. (2023) have explored motivations in blame-placing, this work does not address the concept of toxicity, but blaming players as a factor contributing to toxicity can be seen within the current study (Chapter 6). Some of the above literature considered motivations to play, but do not explore players' initial *LoL* encounters, or the drivers behind continued play as they experience toxicity. These factors are reported in this thesis.

A growing body of work from a wider range of academic disciplines has explored esports and professional play, focusing on teamplay and analytics and the growth of the esports industry. This has been considered through works on team efficiency (Mora-Cantallos & Sicilia, 2019), strategy in professional play (Edmondson, 2021), and individual player contributions to team performance (Mayim, 2021).

Research emerging from computer science perspectives has gone beyond professional play. There is strong interest in team performance and related in-game factors (Chen et al., 2024; Li, 2022; Eaton & Mendonça, 2019; Gerber et al., 2019; Mora-Cantalops & Sicilia, 2018; Sapienza et al., 2018); the usefulness of machine learning (Hitar- García, et al., 2023; Junior & Campelo, 2023; Kim et al., 2021); team cohesion (Macedo & Falcão, 2020; Kou & Gui, 2014); and communication in relation to player performance (Leavitt, et al., 2016). Other themes include the use of *LoL*-specific language and negative behaviour leading to forfeiting games (Lopez, 2022); in-game communication, (Kahn and Williams, 2016) prediction of game outcome (Han & Lee, 2024); champion selection (Karakurt, 2021; Hong et al., 2020), and the impact of ‘carrying’ team members on team performance (Eaton, et al., 2017). Studies of gameplay from a player perspective have considered player mechanics and expertise in relation to success (Donaldson, 2017); player ability and team play (Mora-Cantalops & Sicilia, 2018); and the impact of player experiences on teammates and conflict (Kou and Gui, 2018; Kou et al. 2016).

The rapid growth of the games industry seems to have stimulated interest in the economics and marketing decisions of games and games developers, with studies of sponsorship and purchase choices in *LoL* (de Aquino, et al., 2022), *LoL*’s free-to-play model (Jarrett, 2021); identity and in-game purchases (Kordyaka & Kribersek, 2019); political ideology and consumer game choice (Ho, 2022); *LoL* in esports (Davidovici, 2017); streamer influencers (Alvarado & Arbaiza, 2022) and brand trust on consumption choice (Kim & Kim, 2023).

Games studies have used *LoL* as a case study for exploring gender stereotypes in avatar or champion choice (Robinson, 2024; Ratan et al., 2019) and the gender gap in *LoL* players (Ratan, et al., 2015) which has shed some light on why there are fewer female *LoL* players. Song et al. (2021) have highlighted player perspectives on gender stereotyping and champion design, raising issues around women’s participation strategies. With 168 champions, *LoL* is a useful cultural artefact for exploring

aspects of character or champion design and their impacts. Bell (2017) explored decision making in champion selection and Şengün et al. (2022) investigated how player communication changed depending on champion body type, gender, and in-game role. Finally, the *LoL* anime series on Netflix, *Arcane*, has been the focus of a study of representation of violence, revolution and social change (Parkhomenko, 2022).

2.8.2 League of Legends and toxicity

Over the last four years, academic interest in *LoL* appears to have been heavily driven by a focus on toxicity. As explored in Chapter one, the history of *LoL* and Riot's recent issues around toxicity in the workplace and within its game, has, perhaps unsurprisingly, stimulated research which has sought to utilise *LoL* to explore such in-game behaviour. This final section critically examines existing literature on *LoL* and toxicity, with four key sections: understanding toxicity (2.8.2.1), player responses to toxicity (2.8.2.2), the moderation of toxicity (2.8.2.3), gender and toxicity (2.8.2.4). Finally, the main contributions of apposite literature are summarised to identify gaps in knowledge which this thesis fulfils.

2.8.2.1 Understanding toxicity: Drivers and contributing factors

An emerging body of literature has focussed on understanding the factors which drive and contribute to toxic behaviour in game play, with four comparatively recent studies being conducted between 2016 and 2019. Kokkinakis et al. (2016) considered how player age and IGNs could be used to predict player behaviour, with older players being less likely to engage in negative in-game interactions. Findings suggested that younger players might not be aware of in-game social norms and so experience greater frustration, indicative of cognitive changes in younger players. They further found that players who created "antisocial" IGNs were more critical of and provided less positive feedback to their teammates (Kokkinakis, et al., 2016, p. 610). Similarly, Witzke (2019)

studied in-game factors which might contribute to toxic behaviour, with “team toxicity, first blood, first tower, objectives achieved, objectives lost, team kills, team deaths, individual kills, individual deaths, outcome, and game length” being found to be predictive of toxicity or suppressing toxicity. Player personality has also been considered a factor in the performance or occurrence of toxic behaviours. Lee et al. (2019) studied the moral positioning of players, suggesting that the selection of character type by players goes some way in determining the level of aggression of that player, with aggression being predictive of disruptive behaviours. They suggest that:

high levels of aggression and excessive obsession with victory in competition can instigate disruptive behaviours against the other game participants as the player becomes immersed in the evil identity of the characters in the game. (Lee, et al., 2019, p. 6)

However, Lee et al.’s (2019) notion that the selection of champions that require an aggressive playstyle is indicative of aggression in players might be slightly flawed, because some champion types – such as assassins – *require* aggressive playstyles in order to be successful. However, Lee et al. (2016, p. 6) note that players own aggression, in terms of personality, may be associated with in-game antisocial behaviours is consistent with wider research. Interestingly, however, Şengün et al. (2022) found that champion characteristics impacted player toxicity to some degree, with male champions, assassins, marksmen and fighters being associated with higher levels of player toxicity. This, they attribute to the impact of champion roles on strategy and tactics in gameplay. Bertran and Chamarro (2016) took an alternative approach to understanding player personality in considering the role of passion. They concluded that there is a difference between harmonious and obsessive passion, with harmonious passion helping players avoid negative consequences within *LoL*, but obsessive passion often leading to gameplay being used as “an escape from reality” (Bertran & Chamarro, 2016, p. 32) with players likely to demonstrate abusive tendencies in-game.

The studies of toxicity explored hitherto in this section have been grounded in a psychological discipline. Kordyaka and colleagues (2023) have been a driving force in researching toxicity in *LoL* play, with a focus on player personality. They have suggested that low self-efficacy and high rates of online disinhibition are factors contributing to players being a victim of toxicity (Kordyaka, et al., 2023). Their study of the cycles of toxicity has offered insights into player understandings of toxicity, most importantly, the impact of personality in the spread and perpetuation of toxicity (Kordyaka, et al., 2023). They note the roles involved in toxicity (perpetrator, victim and bystander), noting the potential for these roles to be exchanges, for example a victim to become a perpetrator (Kordyaka, et al., 2023, p. 13). They further identify that toxicity is a highly subjective experience, which can develop through the course of a game, moving from a verbal act to non-verbal behaviour. The finding that in-game toxicity can be very fluid in terms of experience, signals a move away from selecting particular types of players as likely to toxic, and illuminates how toxicity is perpetuated by the “interdependence between all three roles” (Kordyaka, et al., 2023, p. 23). Finally, Kordyaka et al. (2023) have contributed to understanding the complexity of toxicity, first with their finding that the game itself enabled toxicity through the text chat, but decisions to mute the text chat sacrifice in-game communication. They further identify that the game-mode impacted the potential for toxicity, with solo-queue ranked games being more susceptible, and the lack of consequences for toxic behaviour combined with online disinhibition effect create the conditions for toxicity. Motivation for play was found to impact players’ potential to be toxic, and players own personalities were likely to impact their ability to deal with or to create toxicity. Playing with friends was found often to help avoid misunderstandings but also created in-group toxicity through familiarity, and in-game events could trigger toxicity which varied between games. Finally, Kordyaka et al. (2023) found that frustration was a driving factor in developing toxicity.

The study reported in this thesis identified some similar themes and expands on them in greater detail than the Kordyaka et al. (2023) conference paper. My study seeks to understand players’

idiosyncratic interpretations of toxicity, and human and social factors which contribute towards this, within the context of continued loyalty as players of *LoL*. The research design, methods and data collection for my study were completed before this conference paper was presented and therefore did not influence the thesis, rather the study reported by Kordyaka et al (2023) corroborates my findings.

Attouk and Garcia-Bardidia (2021) present a topology of toxic behaviours exhibited in *LoL* play, importantly defining toxicity as “a consequence of the toxic player's frustrations that may be linked to the course of the game or to personal reasons that influence their mood at the start of the game” (n.p.). Their work notes that some behaviours are distinctive to specific game titles and contexts, and the ongoing presence and evolution of toxicity within any given game affected player behaviours and game process. Additionally, they discuss player ambivalence towards toxicity, with participants in their study expressing opposing views. Attouk and Garcia-Bardidia (2021) noted that engaging in toxicity might enhance the gameplay experience for some, whilst undermining experiences for others involved.

Studies exploring *LoL* have drawn on data from *The Tribunal*, a crowdsourced system which helped facilitate decisions made on the punishments given to players who were reported for toxic behaviour for more than a few hundred times. *The Tribunal* system was introduced in 2011 and disabled in 2014. Whilst players can still report players for toxicity, the removal of *The Tribunal*, has made player involvement in governing their own community less transparent: reports are made, but players are not involved in the final decisions surrounding toxic players. Blackburn and Kwak (2014) used *Tribunal* data to predict crowdsourced decisions, noting that as the meta approach to play changes constantly, the ability to predict these decisions is impacted. Further analysis of *Tribunal* reports found a lack of player engagement in reporting toxic behaviours unless other players encouraged or requested such action (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014). Match outcomes impacted *Tribunal*

reporting practices, and the varying understandings around what is considered toxic behaviour were influenced by cultural differences and whether behaviour was *experienced* or being judged by someone who was not involved in that instance of toxicity (Kwak, et al., 2015). Linguistic analysis of *Tribunal* reports has also been to “detect and warn players who turn to be toxic” (Kwak & Blackburn, 2014), but this was not without complication because of a lack of consensus around what language was regarded as toxic and non-toxic.

2.8.2.2 Player responses to toxicity

The second area of interest to researchers is how players respond to toxicity in *LoL*, another area to which my study contributes. Literature reviewed in this Chapter, has considered how the presence of toxicity within *LoL* games has become normalised, whilst positive interactions within the game are sometimes interpreted as sarcasm, and positive comments being deemed as “not representative” or as “a rare minority” (Poeller, et al., 2023, p. 12). Poeller et al. (2023) also noted that participants often utilised muting the chat as a way to avoid toxicity from other players. Their work highlights some players’ apathy towards toxicity that is present amongst some players, whilst simultaneously illustrating that there is, to some degree, an expectation that players will exhibit toxicity.

In the field of sociology, Nexø and Kristiansen (2023) used a situational analysis approach to understand toxicity through in-game events – specifically in-game deaths, theorising this by applying Goffman’s (1959) concepts of interaction order, rituals and facework. Using video data, Nexø and Kristiansen (2023) found that the relationship of in-game deaths to toxicity was highly situational and “whether these events escalate into toxic encounters tend to be highly context sensitive as to the situational and interactional dynamics at play” (Nexø & Kristiansen, 2023, p. 465). Specifically, they presented insights into the misuse of pings as a form of toxicity, considering a type of toxic behaviour which is often overlooked in favour of language-based toxicity.

Finally, from a psychological perspective, Monge and O'Brien (2022) considered the impact of single players' toxicity on team performance. Their study, conducted under controlled, experimental conditions, suggested that individual toxicity "decreased team performance" (Monge & O'Brien, 2022, p. 97). However, they found that individual performance was influenced by motivation to play: players aiming to achieve a win performed better than players whose motivation was grounded in immersion or social interaction. This adds another dimension to consideration of the circumstances under which toxicity might emerge, and the resultant impacts on it; demonstrating why engaging in toxic behaviours might be detrimental to players' game experience.

2.8.2.3 Moderation of and game-based responses to toxicity

The persistent issue of toxicity within games presents games developers with a particularly difficult problem to solve. Developers have taken a variety of approaches to try and address toxicity, with some research starting to evaluate these approaches. Aguerri et al. (2023, p. 437) found that seventy per-cent of game matches observed involved disruptive or toxic behaviours, but only ten per-cent involved "downright harmful behaviour", and twenty-eight per-cent of disruptive players won those games (p. 447). Aguerri et al. (2023, p. 450) highlight that both Riot and the academic community are "not unanimous on clear-cut distinctions between different types of behaviour", an issue addressed previously in this chapter, they further demonstrate that the enforcement and implementation of Riot's own disruptive behaviours policy is difficult, rendering content moderation within the game a nuanced task only *really* achievable by human moderators, (Aguerri et al., 2023, p.452):

automation of in-game moderation ... does not seem to be a viable solution considering the risks that these systems post in the face of complex judgments that could lead to wrong decisions and sanctions against honourable players.

Kou (2021, p. 13), however, considered the punishments imposed by players. They suggested that the most severe punishment for toxic behaviour (a permanent ban from the game resulting in a loss of account and any purchased content) does not “discipline players into well-behaved community members”. Instead, they suggest that such a sanction contributes to the establishment and perpetuation of a toxic player stereotype as “a particular group of players, who are toxic players, create toxic accounts, and commit toxic behaviours” (p. 15). It also invokes a narrative of ‘community clean-up’ and takes a position that banning toxic players will overall reduce toxicity. Kou (2021) reveals that players reported a lack faith in the *LoL* moderation system, and that they felt it was ineffective in reducing toxicity. This lack of faith in Riot’s approach to dealing with toxicity is a sentiment expressed by many participants in my study (Chapter 6). Overall Kou’s (2021) contributions demonstrate that approaches to dealing with toxicity are difficult to articulate, partly because poorly defined behaviours and partially effective systems do not account for all types of toxicity, and that current systems contribute to the stigmatization of banned or toxic players.

A comparison of crowdsourced governance platforms, *LoL ’ Tribunal* and *Weibo’s Community Management Centre*, found that those who contributed felt it important to do so (Kou, et al., 2017). ‘Judges’ on both platforms themselves struggled with the systems in being “human information processors, reviewing cases and voting”, and ultimately ‘Judges’ wanted more agency and creativity to fulfil their roles (Kou, et al., 2017, p. 11). There was also a view that that *The Tribunal* empowered players (Kou & Nardi, 2013). In considering the difference in approaches to ‘human judges’ between Riot and the *LoL* player-judges themselves, players expressed a lack of understanding of *The Tribunal* mechanisms. This resulted in questioning and a lack of trust in the system itself, as well as occasions

where players came to a decision through discussion about what constituted toxic behaviour (Kou & Gui, 2017). In comparison, whilst players felt that automatic systems could not adequately detect toxic behaviours, Riot's announcements about toxicity detection systems supported and reinforced the idea that computer code was able to make accurate decisions (Kou & Gui, 2017). Despite this divergence in belief about the *Tribunal* system it is important to recognise that research using *Tribunal* reports highlighted that "norms and rules govern player behaviour" and interpretation of that behaviour (Kou & Nardi, 2014, p. 1). The removal of the *Tribunal* system has left a gap in research potential to understand player negotiations of toxicity.

2.8.2.4 Toxicity and gender

Interestingly, whilst much game research has focused on gender and discrimination, *LoL* has not been a key focus of such research, despite the prevalence of toxicity and the noted lack of female players. Whilst literature on *LoL* discussed earlier in this chapter, has noted the pressure on female players to perform to particular stereotypes, there has been little focus on toxicity and gendered experiences. Liu's (2020) ethnographic study of in-game text chat found that the stereotypical *LoL* player is expected to be male, and players with identifiably female usernames receive more negative comments from teammates, even when their team is currently winning. Participants within the study reported that they actively used tools provided by the game to manage exposure to toxicity, such as using language filters or use of report functions or threats of using them. However, Liu (2020, p. 244) concluded that "*League's* anti-toxicity policies are effective in promoting a supportive gaming environment" which is at odds with previous research, possibly due to Liu's focus on whether players understand expected behaviour and engage in addressing adverse behaviour. Liu (2020) concluded that gendered differences in the receipt of toxic behaviour were apparent, in part created by gaming environments more broadly being unsupportive of women. The study reported in this thesis does not focus specifically on gender, but it highlights and contributes to understandings of toxicity based around gendered differences, and participant awareness that women experience *LoL* differently to male players.

2.8.3 Section summary and the research gap

This section has set out key areas of research into toxicity and *LoL*. It locates the study reported in this thesis in present literature and identifies several gaps in knowledge. Presently the literature does not tell us about:

- motivations behind initial player take-up of *LoL*, and reasons for continuing to play despite experiences and presence of toxicity;
- how players conceptualise and understand toxicity from a social science perspective, and the relationship between player and industry conceptualisations of toxicity;
- the contributing factors in players' own nuanced, situational, and idiosyncratic interpretations of toxicity;
- how players use their own agency and tools at their disposal to mitigate and manage their own experiences of toxicity.

2.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has presented a critical review of literature that is relevant to understanding concepts within the current study and provides a scoping overview of existing literature in key research areas which shape and inform the current study.

The chapter opened with a consideration of video games and their place within society, before outlining key concepts relevant to understanding games as their own object, culture and identity. Consideration was given to what is meant by *gaming culture*, including how gaming culture shapes notions of belonging and exclusion. This was followed by a discussion of identity, most importantly the notion of *gamer* as an identity. This included the cultural shaping of who does and does not belong within gaming culture and how this influences discrimination based on identity within games and gaming culture, and how *gamer* as an identity is a struggle within itself.

Because the focus of the study reported in this thesis is on a particular community, the evolution of the concept of community was discussed. Particular consideration of the concept of community

within online spaces, discussed hierarchies within fandom, sites of gaming communities, gaming communities and identity, and discrimination within gaming communities.

These themes were then synthesised within the context of toxicity in gaming, to provide a detailed evaluation and critical discussion of what toxicity is and its origins. This led to a review of literature from within games themselves to decipher toxic behaviours in relation to gaming culture.

Finally, existing literature focusing on *LoL* the site of research, was considered to provide a review of trends within research and deeper discussion on literature exploring toxicity in *LoL*. The final section of this chapter has identified key gaps in the study of toxicity in *LoL* research, which this thesis seeks to address.

Whilst gameplay is deemed to be toxic, players continue to engage in *LoL*. Presently research has not offered an understanding of how players navigate the toxicity when they experience it. Such understanding is important for games developers, who in the context of in-game toxicity, may wish to increase player agency and create further opportunities and game elements that attract and sustain player engagement in the long term.

Chapter 3, will set out the methodological approach to the study which investigates toxicity from a sociological standpoint, taking a holistic approach to provide a full-picture perspective around the lifecycle of gameplay and toxicity experiences.

Chapter 3

Methods and Methodology of the study

3.1. Introduction

The critical review of literature in Chapter 2 has set out existing research, and gaps in that research relating to *LoL* and the topic of toxicity. Chapter 3 will now explain and justify the methods and methodology of this study, which has utilised a two-stage process involving a mixed methods survey followed by qualitative interviews. The chapter begins with a statement of the research question and sub questions and my rationale for those questions. This is followed by consideration of insider research as it pertains to the current study. The chapter moves on to give an overview of the research design, research timetable, methods (including any COVID necessitated adaptations), participants, ethical issues, and my approach to data analysis.

3.2 Research questions

This thesis asks, ‘How is toxicity understood and experienced in *League of Legends*, and what are the implications for gaming communities and culture?’. This overarching research question is broken down into five smaller research questions:

1. How do players begin their journey in entering the *League of Legends* gaming space and community?
2. What drives player interpretations and understandings of toxicity? How does this speak to understandings produced by Riot?

3. How do players navigate, mitigate and manage exposure to toxicity?
4. What binds players to gaming spaces, communities, and culture despite toxicity?
5. What are the implications of player perceptions and responses to toxicity for games developers, communities, and cultures?

It is important to note that the research questions set out above emerged out of the first phase of data collection which necessitated a change of emphasis in the study (this is explored and justified in Chapter 4). Initially, the study was planned to identify and examine the types of in-person community and communal spaces experienced by *LoL* players. The survey included exploration of how players describe the community within *LoL*.

In seeking to understand player perspectives on the types of community and communal spaces experienced by *LoL* players through a survey of players (Section 3.4.1. Research Design), it became clear that players themselves understood and constructed the *LoL* community to be *toxic*. This understanding aligns with the mainstream narrative around *LoL* as detailed in Chapter 2. The dominant issue of toxicity led me to reconfigure the remainder of the study and follow the data from the survey, to explore why players continued to engage with *LoL* if they found both game and its community to be so negative. Understanding the continued engagement with *LoL* seemed a vital precursor to exploring opportunities for players to engage more broadly, offline. The research questions set out above emerged out of the first phase of data collection thus necessitating a change of emphasis in the study (this is explored and justified in Chapter 4). Responses to the research questions are set out in the narrative of this thesis, in Chapters 5-9.

Having set out my research questions the next section will present my understanding of this study as a form of insider research.

3.3 Insider research

In some ways this study can be considered insider research because as a gamer and a player of *LoL*, I have been a member of *LoL* community for eleven years. I wanted to foreground player perspectives in this study, including my own insider story which is integral to the study. Early definitions of insider research involving *only* research of a person's own workplace (Merton, 1972) are now considered too narrow. A more contemporary understanding of insider research includes the study of a community or social group undertaken by a member of that group (Naples, 2003). For Chavez (2008, p. 475), insider positionality comprises "the aspects of an insider researcher's self or identity which is aligned or shared with participants". In the current study I navigated shifting identities according to the participants I interviewed. With all participants I shared a group identity of '*LoL* player'. However, depending on how I involved myself within the *LoL* community, I shared similar experiences of tangential places of community, including: participating in cosplay, attending conventions, watching live professional matches, and membership of University esports teams. I navigated shifting identities according to my in-game rank and skill level, favoured champions, gameplay roles, and gendered experiences. Depending on such nuances, sometimes specific, shared experiences were established. Acknowledging this shift in fully or partially sharing identities became integral to ensuring that I centred study participants' own experiences and understandings. I avoided prioritising their experiences which were similar to mine, and I did not assume similarities between my experiences and those of participants. I prioritised a commitment to listening to participants; seeking their definitions, stories, and understandings of their own experiences, being careful to draw out and privilege their voices rather than import my own interpretations onto theirs.

Greene's (2014, p. 1) work on insider research has highlighted the responsibilities of qualitative researchers, noting that these are heightened further for insider researchers:

As qualitative researchers, what stories we are told, how they are relayed to us, and the narratives that we form and share with others are inevitably influenced by our position and experiences as a researcher in relation to our participants.

Greene (2014) provides a valuable discussion on the benefits and drawbacks of insider research.

Arguably, the knowledge that being an insider researcher brings can be invaluable, not least because there are likely to be fewer barriers to overcome in developing rapport and positioning ourselves within research settings or alongside participants. However, insider researchers have the challenge of being able to enter their field as a researcher "without disturbing social settings" (Greene, 2014, p. 3). My status as a *LoL* player provided me with ease of entry to the field of study and access to participants. Further my "linguistic competence" (Naples, 2003, p. 46) in *LoL* unique terminology including my ability to speak and understand gaming language more broadly meant the interviews flowed and a rapport was quickly established between interviewees and I. Additionally, my knowledge of the culture and history surrounding the game, enabled me to develop a sense of empathy and shared experience with my participants. This facilitated my ability to ask meaningful questions, following up on, and deeply interrogate the lived experiences of *LoL* players, helping me to avoid something that insider researchers have been criticised for; in that they "assume too much and so not probe as much as if they were outsiders or ignorant of the situation" (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p. 69). Merriam et al. (2001, p. 411) have suggested that this enables researchers to "project a more truthful, authentic understanding of the culture under study". Greene (2014) argues that insider researchers can facilitate a relationship with participants that is free from judgement, thus resulting in more open and natural interactions, likely to result in deeper sharing of participant experiences. Of course, this might not *always* be the case, and the opposite can occur, however in my experience of this research, being part of the *LoL* community facilitated interviewer-interviewee

rapport. Such rapport is what Roseneil (1993, p. 189) referred to as being “empirically literate” and something which Taylor (2011, p. 6) identifies as “trust between researcher and participants”.

Insider knowledge and access of course bring challenges. Positionality is important whether a researcher is an insider or outsider, and issues relating to this need to be navigated. Hammersley and Gomm (1997) considered ‘bias’ in research, acknowledging that “researchers are sometimes described as biased simply because they have commitments to the field in which research is being carried out”. In the same vein, Chavez (2008, p. 475), warns:

an insider bias may be overly positive or negligent if the knowledge, culture, and experience she/he shares with participants manifests as a rose-coloured observational lens or blindness to the ordinary.

I started my research journey seeking to explore the often-ignored offline opportunities that gaming communities can offer to players, thus moving the gaze away from the more negative portrayals of gaming in the form of addiction, violence, and social isolation. In adapting the research questions in response to initial data collection (Section 3.3), I was committed to following the data, and this decision indicates one way in which I addressed a potential of bias in insider research. Chapter 4 analyses the survey data which led me to shift the research focus from offline opportunities for community to understanding online toxicity. In following the data produced by the stage one survey, this produced a shift which led to what is overall, more of an emphasis on the negative aspects towards the *LoL* community, further demonstrating my commitment to centring participants’ voiced concerns and experiences.

Naples (2003, p. 49) comments on the importance of “recognising the fluidity of outsidersness/insidersness”, and this became key in my interviewing technique. I tried carefully to balance and select insider experiences that I shared with participants to develop trust and openness

with them. Whilst establishing my insider identity with participants, I also ensured that my 'outsider' researcher identity was present by asking interrogative questions, and not assuming shared experiences, definitions, or understandings.

It is in the context of insider research that I have developed an approach to analysis which paid attention to participant voices and used an interpretative approach as I sought to find out personal motivations and beliefs of participants (Section 3.6 Approach to Analysis). Having introduced the overall positionality of the study, the next section sets out the research design.

3.4 Research design

The study followed a multistage mixed methods framework (Fetters, et al., 2013, p. 2137) with two stages of data collection: i) a mixed methods survey and, ii) qualitative interviews. I followed a similar approach to explanatory sequential design frameworks where quantitative data are collected first, to inform subsequent qualitative data collection (Fetters, et al., 2013), and I adapted Fetters' approach in the initial survey to include both quantitative and qualitative questions.

What constitutes mixed methods research is a matter of ongoing debate (Creswell, 2015). Key questions have centred around whether mixed methods research include a mixing of methods or methodologies, (or both), and whether mixing occurs throughout the research, in epistemological and ontological considerations, or is confined to data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2015). Within this study, I have understood and utilised mixed methods as defined by Johnson et al. (2007, p. 123) in that it :

...combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration.

Johnson et al. (2007) provide a continuum of research paradigms and subtypes of research methods, whereby a mixed methods approach can be categorised as a 'pure' mixed methods approach, or quantitative or qualitative dominant. This thesis used largely qualitative approaches, whilst recognising the usefulness of some quantitative demographic data (Johnson, et al., 2007, p. 124)

3.4.1 The mixed methods online survey

The first stage of data collection took the form of an online survey of players of *LoL*, generating quantitative data (age, gender, preferred play and game modes), to understand player demographics, playstyles and community engagement, and qualitative data to explore how players understood concepts of community. The online survey was designed to generate an overview of the ways in which *LoL* players: i) interacted with their *LoL* community online and offline, ii) understood the concept of community, and iii) how they described the *LoL* community. The full survey is provided in Appendix 3.

The survey was designed to gain insights into the initial research objective, to explore the types of community and communal spaces that are experienced by *LoL* players. As Chapter 4 will show, the survey became the driving factor in making a shift to the research question, 'How is toxicity understood and experienced in *League of Legends*, and what are the implications for gaming communities and culture?'.

3.4.1.1 Pilot survey

The survey was designed to explore four key aspects to inform the study:

- gameplay habits of players (years playing, who players play with, game modes played);
- how players interact with *LoL* beyond the game (online and offline);
- how players understand and describe the concept of community;
- how players describe the community within *LoL*

The survey was piloted with five players who I knew, and who would not participate in the main data collection stage. Piloting players completed the survey and provided feedback on the clarity of questions. Overall, feedback was positive, with no need for revision to the phraseology of questions. The survey as designed, became the survey instrument which was used in Stage 1 of data collection.

3.4.1.2 Stage 1 data collection: recruitment

I posted links to the survey on Twitter, Instagram, three SubReddits (two *LoL* specific, one research specific), and the University Gaming Society (SLUGS) Discord and Facebook pages. I also posted the survey link in my *LoL* status, which meant that anyone on my 'friends' list (approximately 60 players) could see it. A *LoL* player, with my agreement, shared the survey link with some of their own Discord communities. I chose platforms which were spaces in which gaming communities operated –Reddit and Discord in particular – and this opened the potential for participants beyond my own networks and, as response showed, potential to attract participants from a range of countries. Table 3.1. shows when and where the survey was posted, with response totals recorded intermittently; running totals of responses were only recorded at the start of a new survey dissemination event.

Table 3.1 Table showing when and where the survey was posted, with response totals.

Date	Place posted/shared	<i>f</i>
21/7/19	Twitter [no hashtags used]	
22/7/19	LoL status message	4
14/10/19	/Leagueconnect [Reddit]	
18/11/19	/LeagueofLegends [Reddit]	
18/11/19	/Samplesize [Reddit]	
18/11/19	SLUGs Discord	
18/11/19	SLUGs Facebook	89
20/11/19	A LoL friend posted the survey in their discord channels]	147
	Facebook - LoL cosplay UK	
	Instagram [personal cosplay story]	
5/12/19		152

3.4.1.3 Sampling and participants

Mixed methods researchers can – and should – develop sampling designs which serve the research context, aims, and questions (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007, p. 297). This means taking into account the purpose for using a combination of methods, alongside considering the process of these methods, that is, whether they are concurrent or sequential. Within this study, methods have been combined in a sequential design, with the mixed methods survey focused on supporting the development of the research so that the second stage stemmed from the first (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007).

On designing appropriate sampling strategies, in mixed method research, Sykes et al. (2017) noted that if the goals of such a study are generalizability and consistency, then sampling should be drawn from the same population. The aim of this research is not generalizability, but the representation of experience which might be recognised by a wider population. The importance of the sample population reflecting the wider population is recognised. Therefore, given the sequential nature of this research design, the population for both the mixed methods survey and qualitative interviews should be similar, so that the first method can appropriately inform the second. The survey was exploratory (Eichhorn, 2021), both as a design and regarding its role within the research design as a whole. Homogenous and convenience sampling strategies were combined, with participants identified based on the shared characteristics (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007) of being *LoL* players, but recruited based on participants' availability and willingness to participate (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007). Thus, the sampling process was purposeful and meaningful in term of research design.

The survey was open for 138 days from July to December 2019, during which 152 participants responded. Participants were asked if they played and watched *LoL*. Two respondents answered no to questions, with one also identifying themselves as a *Defence of the Ancient* (DotA) player. Because the survey focused on the voices and experiences of *LoL* players, these responses were removed from the data set, therefore N=150. Whilst this sample size is relatively small for a survey, it has been suggested that "there are times when it is appropriate to use small samples in quantitative research" (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007, p. 282). Whilst the survey was designed to be mixed, incorporating the use of quantitative and qualitative questions, exploratory research designs are one of those instances where small samples are both characteristic of the design but also acceptable (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007, p. 288). Additionally, the small sample size, in this study generated rich data and did not present a "crisis of generalisation" (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007, p. 298). The focus on 'voice' and player experience in this study did not require a large data set. The question was more around whether the data generated enabled me sufficiently to answer my research questions. I

had very clear in the generation of the survey data set and was clear about what might and might not be claimed from this data. The purpose of this stage of data collection was not to be representative, but to contextualise the general feeling of experience around community and participatory culture in *LoL*. Within my research design more broadly, I was not seeking or claiming to be exhaustive, but rather instructive, providing insights – perhaps for change and for further research.

3.4.1.4 Survey data and analysis

I analysed the survey data using descriptive statistics for demographic data, gameplay preferences and participation in community spaces. Thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) was used to explore how players described the concept of community and the *LoL* community. This is discussed later (Section 3.5.4). Findings from the survey including a reflection on participant demographics, are discussed in Chapter 4. The survey data was analysed before conducting Stage 2 of the data collection process: the interviews. The survey data informed the focus and content of the interview schedule (Appendix 4) and informed my decisions on the focus of the rest of the study.

3.4.2 Stage 2: semi-structured interviews

The second stage of data collection was a series of qualitative interviews with *LoL* players. This resulted in a qualitative dominant mixed methods research design, as demonstrated by Figure 3.1² which sets out the research design in combination with the research timetable.

Following the survey, I carried out seventeen online interviews with participants who identified themselves in the survey as being willing to be interviewed, and other targeted individuals via *LoL*

² The gant chart in Figure 3.1 ends in March 2024 as from this period the focus was primarily on writing up

player groups, primarily through the SLUGS Discord. Whilst seventeen participants is a small sample size, even for some qualitative studies, as Crouch and McKenzie (2006, p. 483) state, “research based on interviews often seeks to penetrate social life beyond appearance and manifest meanings” which requires “the researcher to be immersed in the research field, to establish continuing, fruitful relationships with respondents and through theoretical contemplation to address the research problem in depth”, therefore smaller sample sizes (defined as less than twenty) can help facilitate this depth of data, and closeness to respondents and data itself.

The purpose of the interviews was to explore the main research question: ‘How is toxicity understood and experienced in *League of Legends*, and what are the implications for gaming communities and culture?’. This was guided by the following four sub-research questions:

1. How are players introduced to *League of Legends*, and what initially makes players stay?
2. How do players understand and interpret the notion of *toxicity*, and how does this relate to the game developers’ understanding of such behaviour?
3. How do players navigate toxicity and how/do they mitigate their experiences of toxicity to ensure it does not impact their game experience?
4. Why do players keep returning to *League of Legends* despite experiencing toxicity?

Interviews took place between June 2021 and July 2022 (and so partially included some five months of a period of COVID lockdown around the world), and were conducted online via GoogleMeet, and recorded using the built-in recording software of GoogleMeet, with a backup recording running via a separate laptop. The seventeen interview participants and their interview data comprised thirty-four

hours of recorded data which I then transcribed and returned to participants for checking. In the process of transcribing interviews, I occasionally identified a need to explore some additional details, and therefore I asked participants about these in a written format, when I returned the transcripts to them, by Discord or email.

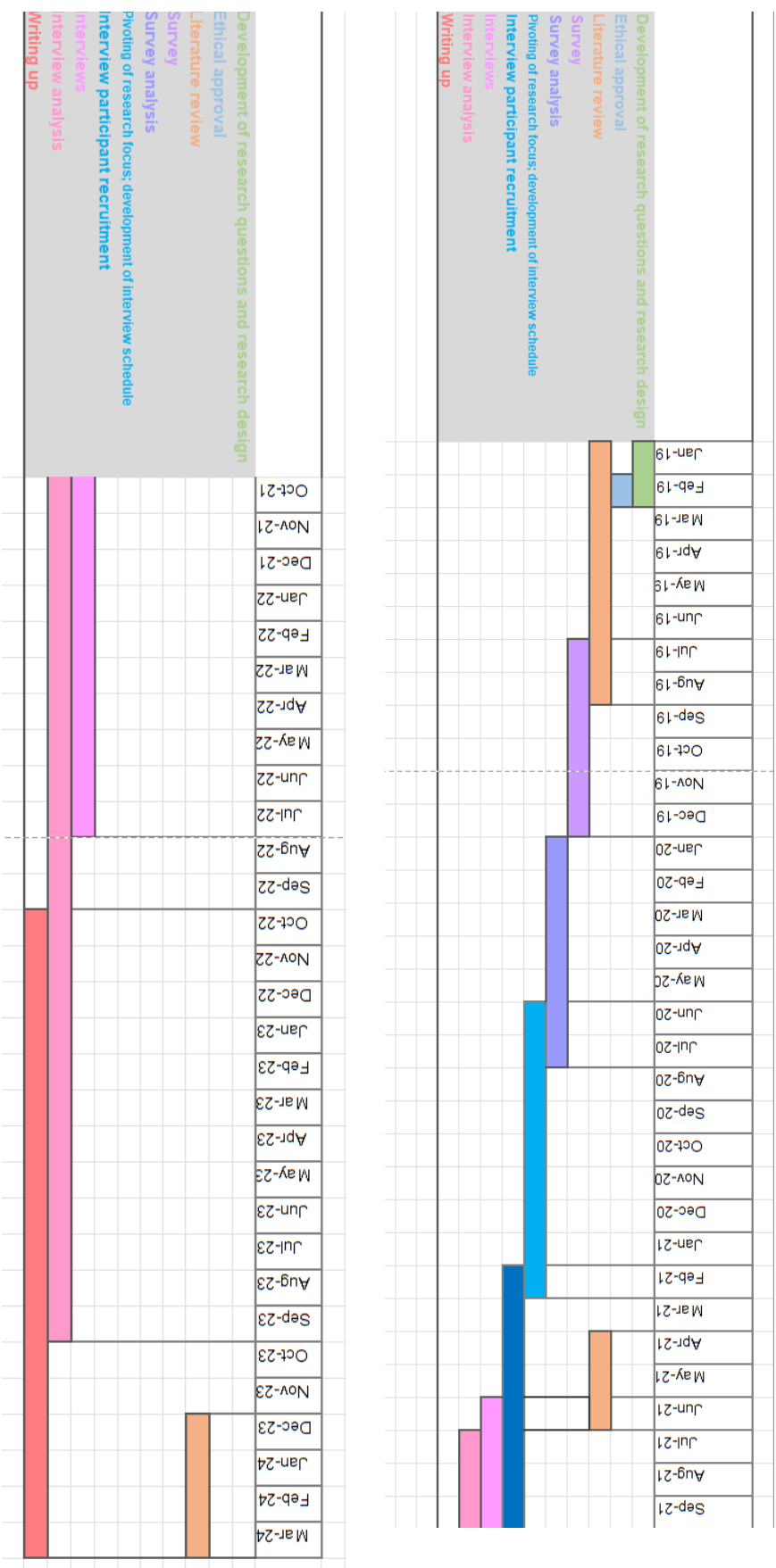


Figure 3.1 Gant chart shows overall research design and timetable.

3.4.2.1 Participant recruitment and demographics

Interview participants were aged between 18 and 38, from seven different countries with five participants identifying as female and twelve as male (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 Table showing pseudonyms, age, gender, location and recruitment method of interview participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Location	Recruited via
Jack	18	Male	Egypt	Survey
DK	19	Male	Ireland	Survey
Kieran	21	Male	UK	Personal social network
WN	21	Male	Australia	Survey
Nella	22	Female	UK	SLUGS membership / WNUEL teammate
Supkey	22	Male	Hong Kong	Survey
Elliot	23	Male	UK	Personal social network
Mei	23	Female	UK	Personal social network
Eva	24	Female	KU	SLUGS membership / WNUEL teammate
Toby	25	Male	UK	Survey
Johnny R	25	Male	Germany	Survey
Ray	26	Male	UK	Survey
Jason	26	Male	UK	Personal social network
Lavender	27	Female	USA	Survey
Rory	27	Male	UK	Personal social network
Amy	28	Female	UK	Survey
Shane	38	Male	USA	Survey

Twelve participants were recruited via the Stage 1 survey, with the remainder through an invitation to participate posted on the *LoL* channel on the SLUGS Discord using a membership-based recruitment strategy (DeCarlo, et al., 2020), and through my own networks. In recruiting participants beyond survey respondents, I aimed to recruit female players, because only two women were recruited through the survey, I was keen to achieve larger representation of women.

3.4.2.2 Stage 2 data collection

The data collection began in 2019 with the online survey and concluded in 2022 with interviews. From the outset, the interviews were planned to be conducted online to reach as many potential participants as possible and achieve access to the *LoL* player base beyond the UK or my own networks. I originally intended to carry out one to one interviews with *LoL* players using a combination of face to face and online interviews. Interviews with participants outside the UK, for example were always intended to be online, but I had hoped to conduct some interviews face to face. COVID restrictions and the necessity of social distancing meant that I conducted all interviews online, and so the mode for all was the same, which could be considered an advantage. All interviews were conducted in English. GoogleMeet was used to conduct all online interviews, with participants being informed that the interview was to be audio recorded and that they did not need to use a camera in the call if they do not wish to³, though I kept my camera on during all interviews to aid in building rapport (Heiselberg, 2022) and establishing some form of relationship with my participants (Weller, 2017).

I conducted all interviews from my own gaming space, where video game – specifically *LoL* – paraphernalia was visible in the background, I chose this environment to provide visual cues of my own membership of the *LoL* community and therefore help facilitate a rapport from the beginning of

³ Eleven out of seventeen participants used their cameras during the interview.

the online interview. I hoped that giving participants a glimpse into my own gaming space, would help them to feel more at ease and contributed to “humanizing” myself, (Flanigan et al. (2022, p. 6) as a *LoL* player, with genuine interest in the game itself and participants’ stories and experiences, thereby displaying a sense of membership legitimacy (Adler & Adler, 1987). Additionally, “supportive interchanges” (Weller, 2017, p. 619) were used at the start of each interview to help the development of rapport. My opening question ‘How did you start playing *League of Legends*?, was designed to develop a familiarity with participants and their early experiences with the game and assist the opening flow of the interview.

Whilst online interviews were the primary form of data collection in this study, during the transcription of interviews, any follow-up questions were noted and sent via email or Discord, depending on the participants’ preferred communication methods. I used the method they preferred for member-checking the interview transcripts (see Section 3.6.4.1). I analysed the interview data using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Initial coding was completed using NVIVO, followed by, more detailed coding, done manually using a “cut and paste” method in Microsoft Word and GoogleSheets (Section 3.6). The next section discusses ethical issues and processes.

3.5 Ethical issues and processes throughout the study

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Sheffield (Appendix 5), and I was careful to ensure the study was conducted with ethical processes and research integrity throughout. This included ensuring safe practice in terms of obtaining informed consent for the survey and interview participants and during the interviews.

3.5.1 Recruitment and impact of COVID

I was mindful of the well-being of participants and myself during COVID, and some rearrangement of interviews to fit with the demands of lockdown life was necessary. The COVID environment may have affected recruitment, in that because all aspects of our lives were being conducted online – requests for yet another online event were not always as welcome as they might have been outside a lockdown situation. However, I do not feel that the quality of the interview data was compromised by being conducted online. I was mindful of the potential effects of this environment for life and work on me as well as my participants, and so pace was important.

3.5.2 Participant identity: impact of research, anonymity and confidentiality

The following section addresses various aspects of participant identity within the research, including managing expectations of participants in relation to the impact of research; research with existing social contacts; anonymity and confidentiality; and data storage.

3.5.2.1 Potential impact of research

I was careful to manage participant expectations, ensuring that participants fully understood that I had no affiliation to the game developers - *Riot Games*. I explained that I intended to disseminate research findings that would ultimately be shared with *Riot Games* but that participant engagement with the study did not ensure any impact on the *LoL* game or any change within the game or industry.

3.5.2.2 Positionality, sensitivity and participants 'known' to me

The Stage One survey did not collect data which made participants personally identifiable, and I only collected names and email addresses for those who clearly stated that they were happy to be contacted to be interviewed during Stage Two of the study. I gave careful consideration to the fact that some interview participants were from my own network or known members of the gaming society I was in at the time. This lessened the need to build rapport with some participants, given some familiarity with them, but I was careful not to make assumptions and followed the same protocol with all interviewees. In insider research, ethnographic researchers can be seen to “exploit the researcher’s background, ‘street credentials’ and ‘subcultural capital’” Taylor (2011, pp. 5-6), especially when looking at youth studies and subcultural studies. My study was not ethnographic, but ongoing, critical self-assessment of my position as both a researcher and player were important in order to ensure that participants felt comfortable. It was also important to the maintenance of trust within the power statuses which can come between researchers and participants (Taylor, 2011). I used the same procedures for providing information and obtaining participant consent, regardless of whether participants were previously known to me or not. This included discussions around the focus and style of the interviews, and reminding participants that the decision to participate was entirely their own, was voluntary and that they could withdraw should they wish to. Interview participants were provided with information sheets (Appendix 6) and consent forms (Appendix 7) via email or Discord. Survey participants were provided with an information sheet on the front page of the online survey on GoogleForms (Appendix 8) and were asked to tick boxes to confirm that they had read the information sheet and consented to take part in the study before they could access the remainder of the survey (Appendix 9). Some researchers (Brewis, 2014; McConnell-Henry, et al., 2010) have commented on the possibility of betrayal when we interview friends or acquaintances, and move previously private knowledge into a public realm, thus is it important to guard against any potential for “betrayal and disloyalty” in dissemination. (Fraser & Puwar, 2008, p. 10)

Given the nature of the study, I did not expect what participants said to be strongly sensitive in nature, and therefore the notion of betrayal or disloyalty was not necessarily applicable. However, some of my participants knew each other, and shared with each other that they were study participants. Therefore, should they later read any disseminated outputs from the thesis, they may well be aware of some of the stories and accounts they spoke about during their individual interviews and any feelings that they shared. When interviewing friends and acquaintances, the power dynamics between me as researcher and those known participants felt less apparent. I anticipated this to be the case, and so in interviewing all participants I tried to create a sense of openness by sharing my own experiences as a *LoL player*, establishing a give-and-take dynamic which established a comfortable sense of the familiar. In centring personal experiences of my participants, sharing some of my own experiences helped to explore topics, find shared and different meaning, and focus on each participants' knowledge as a lived experience. Devotta et al. (2016, p. 669) have suggested that peer-interviewers can create a more personal experience, which may be advantageous, however they warn that it may be more difficult to maintain a neutral stance.

Importantly, whilst a level of personal engagement from me developed rapport, I was careful to ensure that my experiences did not overshadow participants' own experiences so that the interviews yielded deep and meaningful participant data. Sharing my own experiences helped to demonstrate that I appreciated each participant taking time to engage in the study and promoted an openness in sharing feelings and ideas, and centre the participants as experts in the topic, placing myself as a researcher on the same level. I was open about being naïve to particular experiences of *LoL*, such as gameplay at higher levels than I played and responded honestly if interviewees asked about my Rank in the game, or when I asked for clarification if I did not understand something they were discussing. Centring participant knowledge and experience was essential to the integrity of the research and ensured the likelihood of being able to represent participant voices in the research.

All interview data were anonymised by using pseudonyms. Participants were invited to select their own pseudonym, or if they wanted me to assign one to their transcript. In some cases, participants wanted to use their own name, and I honoured this however the mix of pseudonyms and use of real names means real identities are ambiguous and obscure.

3.5.3 Data storage

All data (raw interview data, interview transcripts, survey data, information sheets and consent forms) was stored using GoogleDrive, to which only I had secure access. Transcripts were generated using Google's built-in transcription software before being checked and revised for accuracy. Transcripts were sent to participants for checking via email, with Discord being used for seven participants where this method was a preferred means of communication. Analysis of all data was conducted on a password protected personal computer, to which only I had access. Data is to be destroyed three years after submission, completion of the thesis and subsequent publications.

3.6 Approach to analysis

The following section addresses the approach to analysis taken to both sets of data. It opens with sections addressing two concepts core to the research and as such, important in the analytical process: insider research (3.6.1) and participant voice (3.6.2). This is followed by an introduction to the concept of interpretative thematic analysis which as applied to the process of analysis, (3.6.3). Finally, this section addresses the individual analysis of each data set, for stages one and two (3.6.4).

3.6.1 Analysing research as an ‘insider’

Hellawell (2006, p. 483) has argued that an ability to “stand outside” one’s own writing, is a mark of good research. Both Hellawell (2006) and Eppley (2006) note that this occurs on a continuum, whereby the researcher navigates and changes position – from insider to outsider or anywhere between those binary identities – throughout the research process. From this perspective, there have been times throughout this study where I have had to strategically consider my positionality and my identity in relation to the community being researched, and the data being produced by the research. During the development of the survey, decisions around the distribution of the survey, in the design of interview schedules (Appendix 4) and development of rapport with participants, I found myself more on the ‘insider’ end of the insider-outsider continuum. I was able to utilise my insider knowledge of online community spaces for *LoL* (both in-game and out-of-game experiences pertaining to *LoL*, and specific gaming jargon) which was a valuable asset in reaching and connecting with participants. During the collection of interview data, there were moments where I found myself consciously seeking to achieve an equilibrium, manoeuvring myself to be balanced between researcher and player in order to ensure that my own biases or knowledge pertaining to experiences with *LoL* did not mask the experiences of others, or place my understandings on others’ experiences. During the analysis of data, however, there was an even more intricate process of self-reflection and navigation of identities. Insider knowledge was crucial to ascertaining meaning within the data, but more of an outsider standpoint was essential in ensuring truth value in the development of the narrative within this thesis. This importantly enabled me to remain true to my participants and the experiences they shared, whilst striving to consider the applicability of these lived experiences to players (and potentially gaming communities) more broadly.

I have found myself in the place between insider and outsider Dwyer and Buckle (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60) through much of the analysis process. Identities are not only what we are “positioned by” but are also how we are positioned within ourselves (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Thus, the tension

between our identities is constantly being managed. Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p. 61) suggested that “as researchers, we can only ever occupy the space between insider and outsider”.

In writing and in analysis, I found myself, as did Dwyer and Buckle (2009) using *we*, *us*, *they* and *them*, recognising both individual and more generalisable experiences emerging within the data. Being able to “stand outside” (Hellawell, 2006, p. 483) of the data became valuable to me as an insider, in being able to recognise this. Positioning myself as “other” to the data is preferable to considering this as taking an objectivist stand. The objectivist connection with positivist methodological positions has been critiqued by feminist scholars, for “generalis[ing] human experiences depriving them of individuality and therefore denying the power of diversity” (Kirpitchenko & Voloder, 2014, p. 5), instead valuing “operational distancing” and “othering” in stepping back: “There is othering in the very act of studying, a necessary stepping back or distancing in varying degrees. There can be no interpreting without some degree of othering” (Eppey, 2006, p. np). Thus, acknowledgement of this insider-outsider continuum and my fluctuating position within it is important is considering both the analytical process, and the findings emerging from this.

3.6.2 Participant voice

Tierney stated that “Stories do not await us, hiding in ethnographic caves or on qualitative mountaintops; we create them. Reality is lodged in the stories our speakers tell, and we translate” (Tierney, 1998, p. 67). Whilst Tierney was writing on life histories, the same premise can be applied to considering approaches to presenting and analysing qualitative data. To borrow from Tierney (2010) the specific informs the global, and therefore in the study reported in this thesis, the unique and detailed accounts provided by the player-participants are informed by a more global context: the game, *LoL*, and the discourses and experiences around it. The accounts provided by interview participants are informed by unique identities, where the intersections of gender, age, sexuality, skill,

knowledge and participation are enacted and experienced in unique contexts of the game and surrounding community. Some participant narratives included within this study are incredibly specific, focusing on particular experiences and contexts; their understandings being shaped by their own distinctive life experiences. Being true to participant experiences was integral to my approach to this research, and to presenting highly specific, personal accounts. Acknowledging their position is central to ensuring that participant voices are heard throughout this research. Foley (2002, p. 487) urged that researchers acknowledge their own histories and cultures when reporting research, being prepared to make modest claims through telling stories which “ordinary people will actually find more believable and useful”.

LoL players are *ordinary people*; ordinary people who have been written about in the media, which has made assumptions about them more broadly within a context of gaming culture, (see Markey & Ferguson, 2017). This thesis aims to centre the lived experiences of *LoL* players, their understanding of and relationship to the game, and how they understand and navigate the “toxic” gaming environment. The findings are derived *from them* and include data that would otherwise be considered ‘outliers’, which speaks to the telling of stories of normal people, normal players. Given the small sample size of the interview participants within this study, the telling of their accounts becomes paramount. In this respect given the qualitative focus on “experience that we cannot count” (Toye, 2015, p. 7), words long-attributed to Einstein feel most appropriate: “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted”.

This thesis uses interpretive thematic analysis (Section 3.6.3) with particular attention to participant voice, so even where only one or three participants commented on a theme, their thoughts still ‘count’ as relevant. The aim of this thesis is to give voice to participants; some participants had more to say on a particular topic than others, but quantifying responses is not appropriate or helpful here because the narratives and experiences shared by all participants illuminate the darker corners of the

participants' gaming worlds. I am choosing not to privilege the experiences of the majority. Gaming, gaming worlds, and gamers' experiences, are intrinsically diverse, subjective and nuanced, and therefore ensuring that what might be considered to be outliers in this study are similarly recognised, requires the inclusion of all voices. The stories told by the voices that could be overshadowed in this study, in reality, could hold very real meaning and resonance with others in the wider gaming community.

3.6.3 *Thematic analysis*

This section explores the foundational principles of interpretive thematic analysis which as employed in the analysis of both data sets. It introduces thematic analysis and the principles of rigour applied to it.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse both data sets, alongside descriptive statistics in the survey analysis. As a method, thematic analysis has been extolled for its complete “flexibility in terms of research question, sample size and constitution, data collection method, and approaches to meaning generation” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). With a focus on lived experience, a thematic analytical approach is most suited, given that it “can be used to identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants’ lived experience, views and perspectives, and behaviour and practices; ‘experiential’ research which seeks to understand what participants’ think, feel, and do” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). Braun and Clarke (2006) have argued that it is a method that is particularly useful in generating an approach to understanding the perspectives of participants, whilst also providing the freedom for the researcher to unveil meanings and experiences that were unexpected at the outset of the research process. Utilising this approach in my study has enabled me to understand how *LoL* players think about toxicity, what they feel about approaches to moderating toxic behaviour, and what they do to mitigate and manage their own exposure to in-game toxic

behaviour. It also enabled me to understand how participants feel about the game as an environment, and what keeps them attached to the game, tangentially or in a more embedded and immersive way.

There is “no clear agreement” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) on how thematic analysis is to be ‘done’, however the processes broadly comprise the generation of codes and then subsequent themes. These then “provide a framework for organizing and reporting the researcher’s analytic observations” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). In terms rigour, Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) propose a six-phase process: data familiarisation; initial code generation; search for themes; reviewing of themes; defining and naming of themes; production of findings and discussion. This staged process is used as the framework for the presentation of the analytical process (Section 3.6.4) for each data set. Qualitative research, as opposed to positivist quantitative methods, seeks not validity but instead strives for trustworthiness (Nowell, et al., 2017, p. 1). One of the ways in which this is achieved is through researchers “recording, systemizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to enable the reader to determine whether the process is credible” (Nowell, et al., 2017, p. 2). As Starks and Trinidad (2007, p. 1376) have noted, “[q]ualitative analysis is inherently subjective because the researcher is the instrument for analysis”, therefore clear documentation of the analytical process is necessary in order to ensure the trustworthiness of research findings.

In this study I sought to understand the reality and lived experiences of players, as shaped by the world and gaming environment around them, pertaining to the manifestation of their realities and why responses and understandings of and to toxicity developed as they have. I have used thematic analysis as an iterative process, and more specifically, I utilised The Owen Method (Owen, 1984) . This approach is guided by “recurrence, repetition and forcefulness” (Peterson, 2017, p. 5). Whilst recurrence focuses on repeated meanings across, for example transcripts; repetition focuses on specific phrases or lexis being repeated. However, ‘forcefulness’ “encourages the researcher to look

at the surrounding contextual cues present in the data to determine their intensity or importance (e.g., pauses, tone, inflection, emphases)” (Peterson, 2017, pp. 5-6). In this study, however, I also considered contextual cues more holistically in relation to participants’ individual narratives. I did not privilege ‘repetition’, so as to better acknowledge participant voice, in that expression and experiences from one participant might be insignificant in relation to repetition or recurrence, but could turn out to be important to the formulation of the individual participants’ understandings and meanings of their own story and lived experience of the game.

Whilst using the tools of coding and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) I have worked with in the frames discussed in this section. Thus, my analysis of data has been conducted in the framework of: Insider research, Participant voice, and Interpretative Analysis. The detailed analytical processes for each data set are set out in Section, 3.6.4.

3.6.4 Details of the analytical process

This section addresses the particulars of the analysis process for all data collected in this study. First, the analysis of the mixed methods survey is addressed, which used both descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Second, the analysis of the semi-structured qualitative interviews using thematic analysis through use of both NVIVO and manual coding will be discussed.

3.6.4.1 Analysis of stage one data: Survey analysis

Data clean-up was done manually by finding responses that were clearly identifiable as mock or joke responses or were from demographics outside the parameters of this study. This included, for example, a respondent who said they played a game which was not *LoL*, and a participant who said they did not watch or play with *LoL*. Such responses were removed because they fell outside key requirements for survey participation. Some survey responses to the contained clearly invalid

responses to demographic questions, for example, respondents provided ages of 1337 and 456, genders of 'attack helicopter' and 'Greta Thunberg'. I treated these responses as missing data and retained the qualitative responses from these respondents within the data set. I made this decision because I judged their responses (aside from demographic questions) to be being offered in the spirit of the survey, thus and the main responses from these participants could be used. Following post-data clean up, the survey resulted in 150 respondents.

I analysed the survey data at two levels: descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Descriptive statistics were used in two ways. First, demographic data relating to survey respondents' age, gender, geographic location, play practices and patterns were analysed (Chapter 4; Figures 4.1 to 4.11). Second, descriptive statistics were used to quantify the methods by which respondents identified as ways of interacting with *LoL* community. These are presented in frequency tables (Chapter 4; Tables 4.3 and 4.4) and as a bar chart (Chapter 4; Figure 4.12). This stage of analysis usefully provided a demographic overview of the survey respondents, and a basis for understanding popular play styles and modes of community interaction.

A combination of descriptive statistics and thematic analysis was conducted on open answer questions where respondents were asked to describe the concept of community in three words, and the *LoL* community in three words. I read through the responses initially to become familiar with the data, and the types of responses that had been provided. In doing so, I noticed that there was frequent use of particular words – or variations of words – across participants. Therefore, words were categorised by meaning (usually guided by use of a specific word, repeated frequently across responses). This was initially done manually, writing these down in a notebook, with accompanying notes on what this category would be named (Figures 3.3 to 3.6). This was then transferred into frequency tables (Chapter 4; Figures 4.5 and 4.6). An interpretive analytical discussion around these

themes, with some further thematic analysis (Chapter 4; Table 4.7) breaks down the sub-themes within the theme 'negative traits'.

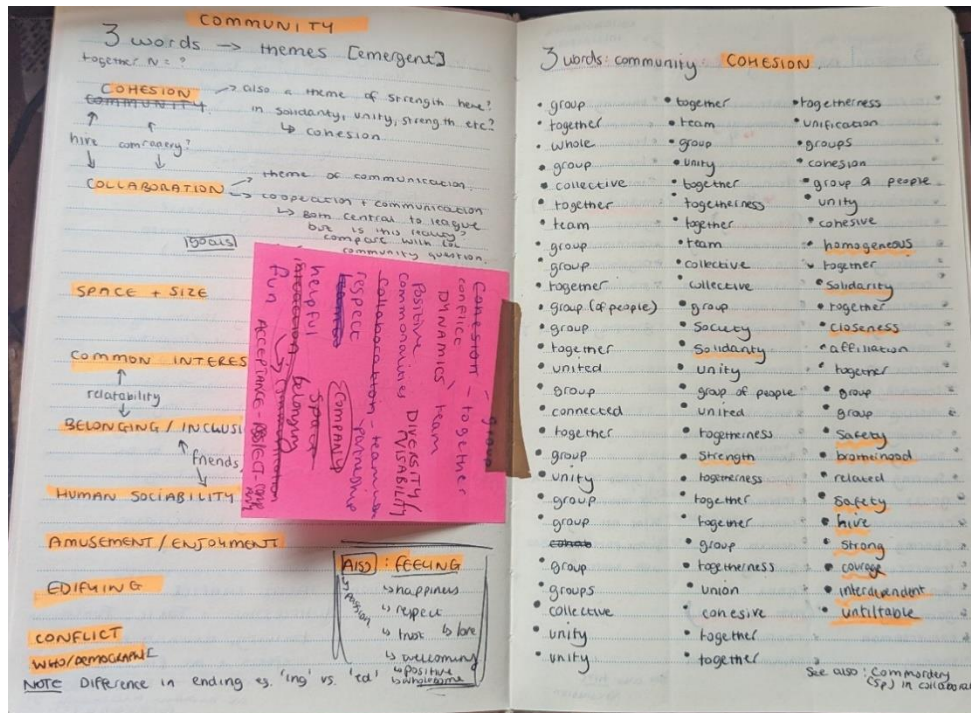


Figure 3.2 Example of manual coding and quantifying process for ‘Which three words would you use to describe community’ question in the survey

I considered whether to stay with the initial conceptualisation of the research, however my decision to pivot the study was made in the light of my commitment to following participant voice and doing justice to the experiences of those who participated in the research.

3.6.4.2 Analysis of stage two: Interview analysis

The interviews in Stage Two of data collection generated thirty-four hours of recorded data from seventeen qualitative interviews, conducted via GoogleMeet, and average length of interviews was two hours. The following section sets out and justifies the process of analysis for this data set.

3.6.4.2.1 Data familiarisation and initial note-taking

Data familiarisation began with the transcription of the seventeen interviews. Whilst a skeleton transcript was generated via the build-in GoogleMeet transcription software, it was essential to me as a researcher, and to the integrity of my data, that I checked the transcripts for accuracy and consistency. GoogleMeet's transcription software does not correctly translate game-specific language, including champion and item names and abbreviations, champion abilities or skills, or game modes. Further it did not accurately record some elements dependant on the speed of speech and accent of participants. Bird (2005, p. 227) has suggested that transcription of data should be considered by researchers as "a key phase of data analysis within interpretive qualitative methodology", and see it as "an *interpretive* act, where meanings are created, rather than simply a mechanical act of putting spoken sounds on paper" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 87-88). I listened to the audio recordings of each interview several times, making amendments to the skeleton transcript where necessary. I listened to each interview in its entirety twice, and relistened to some sections where I felt I needed to spend more time. This was to ensure familiarity with the data, and to double check the transcripts against the audio recording a second time after the first amendments. During this process, I became increasingly close to my data, developing awareness of particular ideas which were of interest or to note which points were either specific to the existing research questions, or

stood out as a new line of enquiry. I used my research journal to note my thoughts on comments appertaining to specific research questions, and to note unrelated comments which could prompt further consideration of new themes. As this stage of analysis was occurring synchronously with the data collection itself, this note-taking practice helped to inform the continued development and evolution of my interview schedule (Appendix 4). Early in the interviewing period, I added some questions including *Why do you think players are toxic?*, *Is toxicity inevitable in a team game?* and *Is it easy to make friends in League of Legends?* after these emerged during an early interview. Whilst transcribing that interview it then felt important to explore these questions more widely with participants. This reflected the value of flexibility found within the thematic analytical method in analysis and data collection (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). I later followed up when checking transcriptions with those interviewed early on in the interviewing stage to ensure that all had the opportunity to respond to these additional questions.

Each transcript was transcribed within a week of the interview taking place and sent to the participants for checking and feedback (Varpio, et al., 2017). This was part of the process of member-checking, where participants were asked to review the transcript to improve the credibility of the data (Elo, et al., 2014) by correcting, deleting, changing or add any further comments as they wished. This process also enabled the correction of errors in individual transcripts where words may have been misheard or mis-transcribed. It also allowed participants to remove any contributions that they were no longer comfortable with, or did not want to be included as data in the final dataset (Thomas, 2017). This, helped to ensure data was unlikely to be misrepresented at the analysis stage (McKim, 2023), something integral to my consideration of participant voice. Thirteen of my participants engaged with this process, and either approved the transcripts unchanged, or provided some modifications to correct inaccuracies in transcription. One respondent asked for a change of pseudonym and additional anonymity. The transcription of data further helped illuminate areas which required greater clarity, explanation, or exploration, thus whilst transcribing I noted and need

for follow-up questions, which I sent to participants when I invited them to review their transcript. Participants responded by email to my follow-up questions, and their written responses were then added to the final transcript before analysis.

3.6.4.2.2 Initial code generation and the search for themes

Data was initially coded into rudimentary categories that I decided were relevant to the pre-existing research questions, and additional codes were added for categories of:

- *Age;*
- *Gaming culture;*
- *Playing with and making friends;*
- *Community outside of the game;*
- *Best and worst aspects/experiences of League of Legends;*
- *Pandemic;*
- *Perception versus reality*
- *Player behaviour;*
- *Skill, level and rank;*
- *Stopping playing*
- *Toxicity – LoL specific, streamers, text-chat and toxicity*

These categories were additional to the research question categories so they could also be viewed as their own thematic entities, should this become a useful way for me to consider the data. This initial process was conducted using NVIVO, and then each category exported into a separate word document (Figure 3.4).

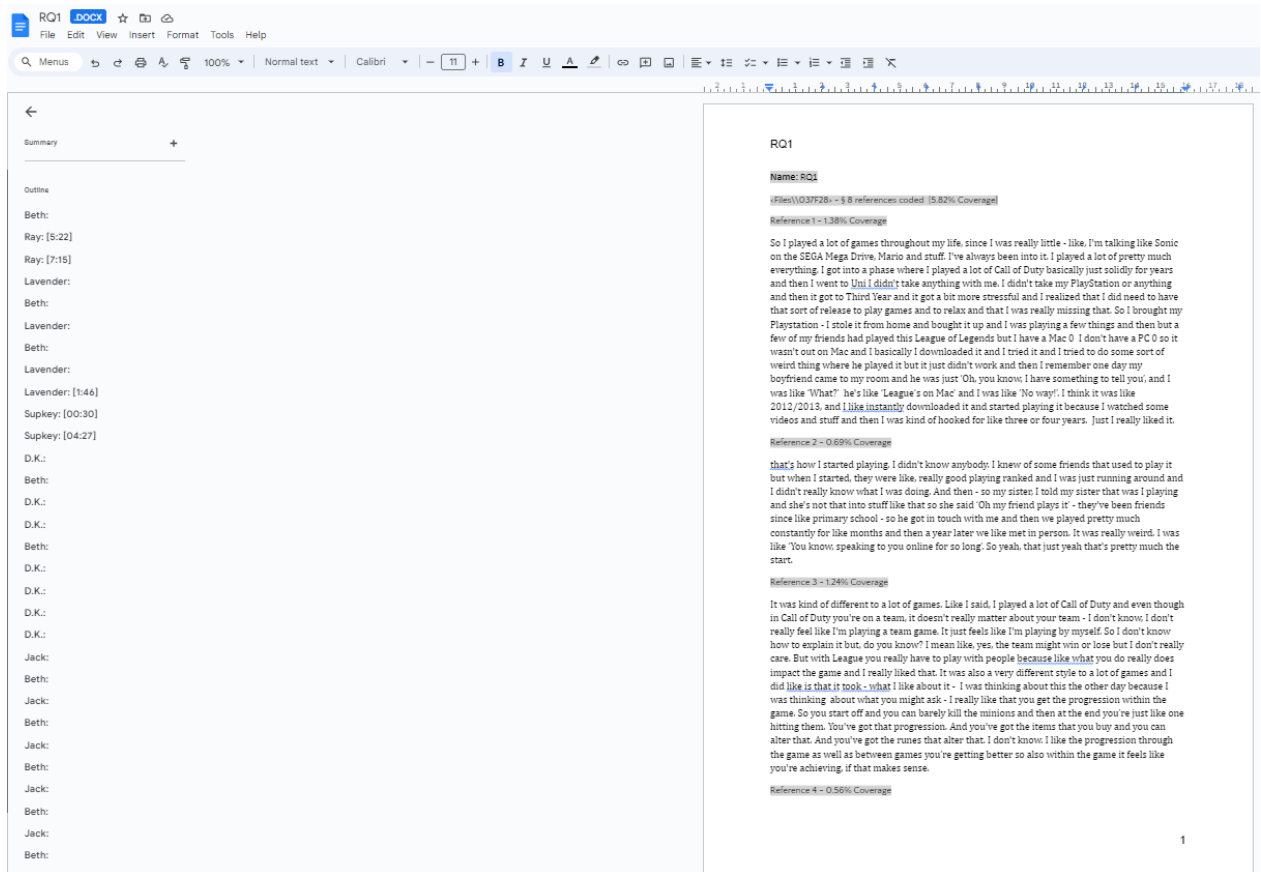


Figure 3.4 The raw NVIVO export of initial categorisation for Research Question 1

Using a combination of my notetaking as part of the transcription process, and the above categories, I moved to a more systematic stage of initial coding. I approached this coding manually through “cut and paste” methods (Basis, 2003, p. 145), organising interview extracts into codes within a GoogleSheets document, keeping any notes or participant information alongside the extract. In searching for and organising codes within themes, I used a GoogleSheet, organised with each code within a particular theme in a column, and the overarching theme itself assigned as a ‘tab’ on the bottom of the document (Figure 3.5). This manual approach helped me to feel more connected to the data, in comparison to using a software such as NVIVO, and helped me to visualise and understand codes grouping together as excerpts were placed alongside each other within the same codes as the process developed.

In the search for themes, having the codes associated with each research question within a word document became helpful, in enabling me to grasp the meanings of the extracts and codes. Grouping the data in this way on a GoogleSheet helped me to visualise and manipulate codes easily until their place within themes felt coherent (Braun & Clarke, 2016) and meaningful. Through the continuous process of familiarisation with the data, in searching for themes, these themes were not so much revealed like 'diamonds' - to borrow Fugards and Pott's (2015) critiqued metaphor – but were rather articulated (forged) through careful and repeated processes of development, where I was “‘tussling with’ the data to develop an analysis that best fits their research question (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p. 741)”. For example, coming to understand that *playstyle/approach to play* and *mindset/approach to the game* both fitted with themes of the *subjectivity of toxicity* and informed *where toxicity comes from* required revisiting some data to decipher the subtle difference between these themes and associated extracts. This resulted in the renaming of codes for *mindset/approach to play* where a focus on, for example, *mentality* was seen as most relevant to *where toxicity come from*.

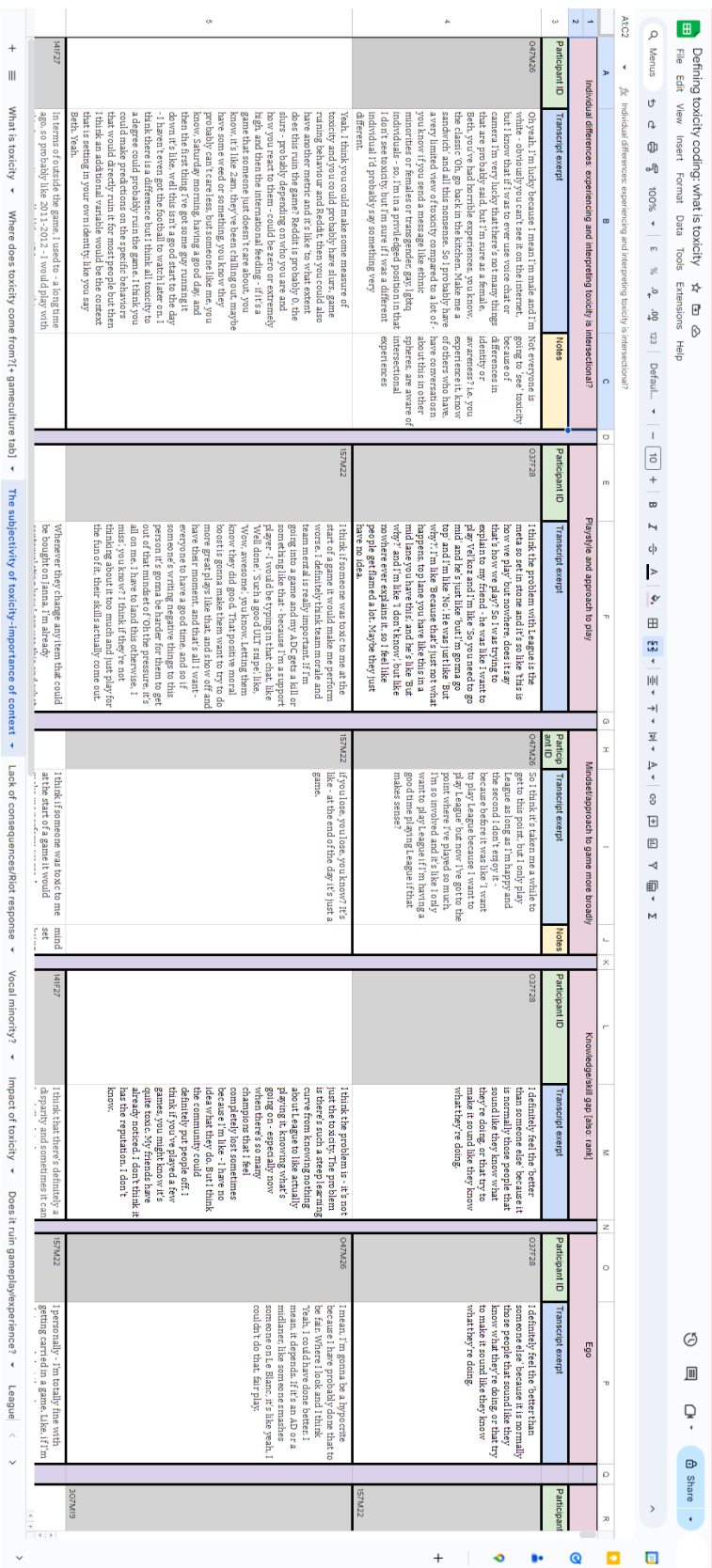


Figure 3.5 Google spreadsheet within the research question of ~ What drives player interpretations and understandings of toxicity?

An example of understanding how themes and codes fit within each other is shown in the thematic map for understanding responses pertaining to the research question, ‘How do players navigate, mitigate and manage exposure to toxicity?’ (Figure 3.6).

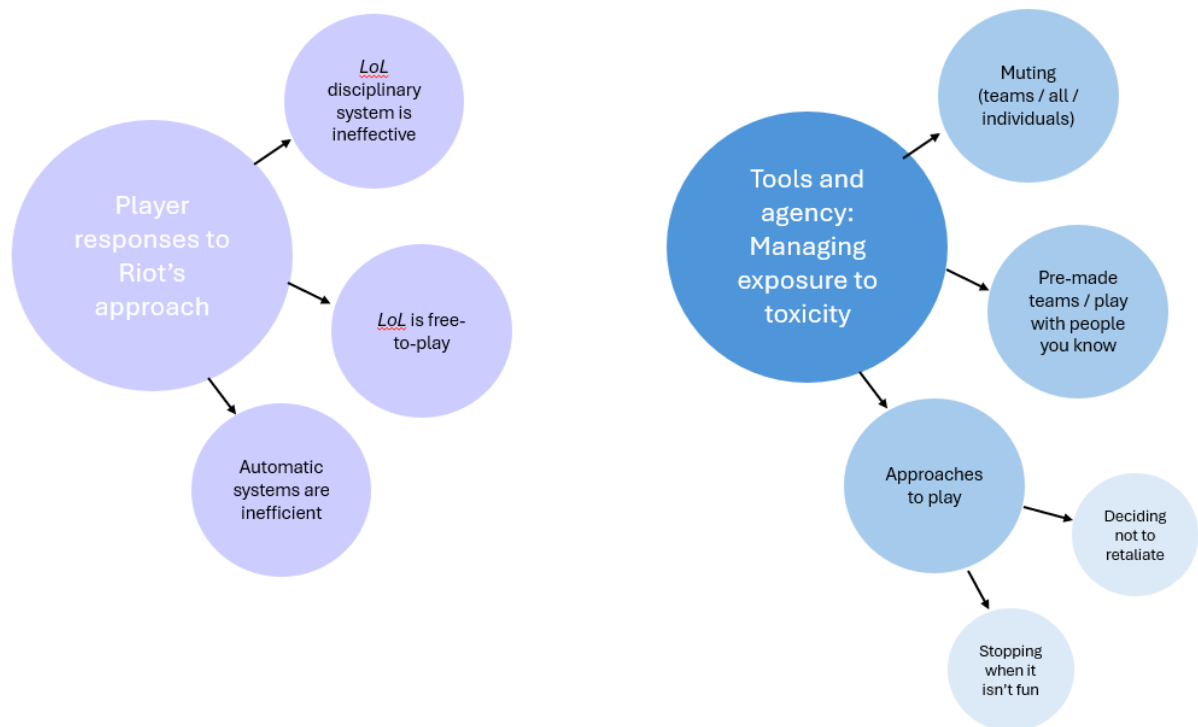


Figure 3.6 Thematic map of understanding the relationship between themes for players feelings towards tools provided by Riot to manage toxicity, and how they are utilised

Using my own discretion as a researcher, I coded at both semantic and latent levels (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 40), where meaning was either explicit or inferred. For example, drawing on the discussion of age and maturity which emerged from the data around *where toxicity comes from*, age was sometimes conflated with maturity both in terms of actual age, and in relation to gamer experience; a player could be under 20 but very experienced with *LoL*, therefore be considered physically immature but mature in game experience. This therefore required a careful reading of the data, to

reach an understanding of the implicit meaning beyond the explicit mention of age or maturity to generate insightful interpretations of such themes.

3.6.4.2.3 Production of findings and discussion

The research questions lent themselves to a coherent and flowing structure for this thesis. It presents the narrative of the study from player initiation, through experiencing and understanding toxicity, management and mitigation of toxicity, and finally what it is about *LoL* that leads to players continued engagement with a game within which they experience toxicity. The findings and discussion explore the derivation of themes and discuss them in detail in Chapters 4 to 9.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a detailed exposition of the research methods, approaches to analysis, and documented the shift in main focus of the study in following the data. Chapter 4 marks the start of the presentation of findings, exploring and documenting the findings from the survey data, and demonstrates the shift in focus.

Chapter 4

Toxic, toxic, toxic: The shifting focus from ‘community’ to ‘toxicity’

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the journey of following the data that determined the shape and focus of the rest of the thesis, reporting the mixed methods survey. It documents the demographics and play patterns of respondents (4.2), how players understand participation and interaction within the *LoL* community (4.3), how players understand the concept of community and construct the *LoL* community specifically (4.4), and the importance of the survey findings in shaping the remainder of the study as a whole (4.5). The survey revealed that players constructed the *LoL* community as overwhelmingly toxic and negative, a stark contrast to the expectations held by players around the normative assumption that community is positive.

4.2 Who we are and how we play: participant demographics and play patterns

The survey resulted in 150 responses after data clean-up, which still contained a small number of invalid or untrue answers to some demographic questions (ages of 1337 and 456, genders of ‘attack helicopter’ and ‘Greta Thunberg’). These were treated as missing data and the remainder of those responses were included with the data set because they appeared to be acceptable as responses to the questions. The following sub-section will provide demographic information of survey respondents: their age, gender and geographical location (4.2.1), followed by a descriptive overview of the respondents’ stated play practices and patterns (4.2.2).

4.2.1 Demographics of survey respondents

This section provides a descriptive summary of the demographics of respondents by age, gender and location, providing some comparative discussion in relation to 2024 data by Samanta (2024) on *LoL* player demographics.

4.2.1.1 Age

Of 150 (N) participants, a majority were between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine (Figure 4.1). The most frequently occurring ages were 18 (n=23) and 21 (n=22) (Figure 4.2). Only four participants were aged between thirty and thirty-nine, with one participant aged between forty and forty-nine. The joke answers provided were 1337 (a numerical spelling of 'leet', derived from 'elite', usually meaning someone who is skilled at games, computer programming or hacking) and 456. The oldest player in the current study was 49.

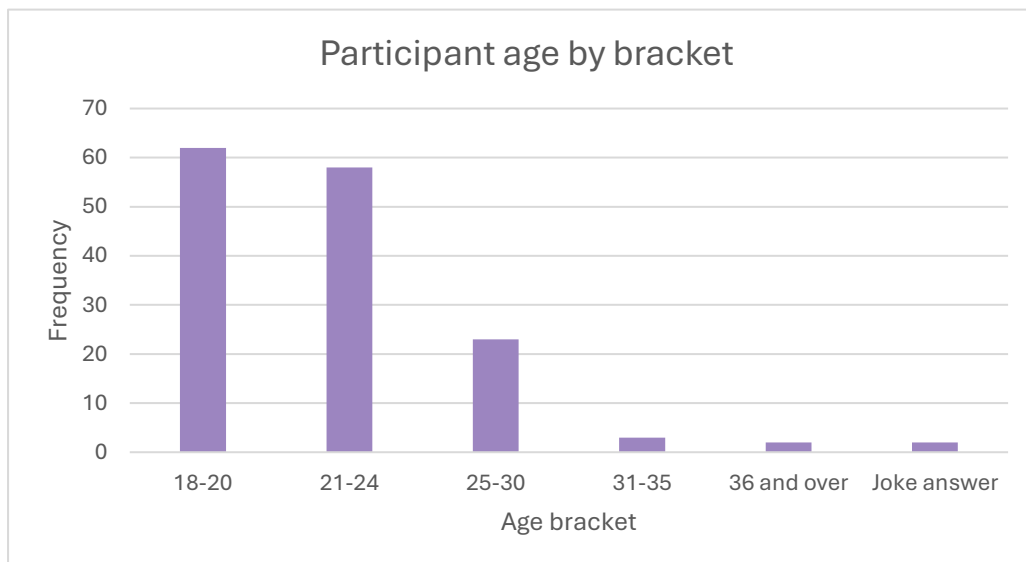


Figure 4.1 Bar chat illustrating respondent age by age bracket

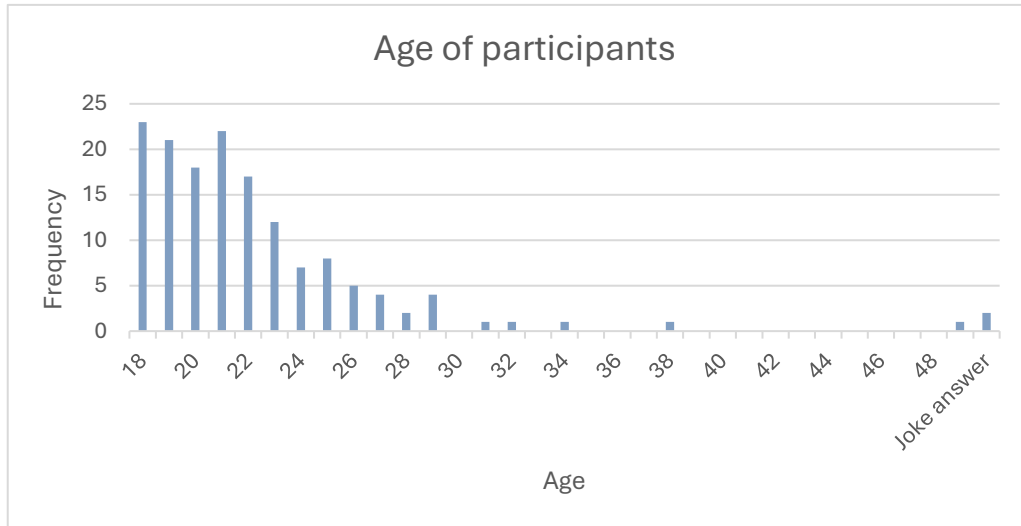


Figure 4.2 Bar chart illustrating distribution of ages of respondents

The demographic spread of participants has some similarities with current *LoL* player ages, particularly around the 21-24 age bracket. Samanta (2024) found 27% of players to be aged between 18-20, 37% aged 21-24, and 22% - aged 25-30. The age ranges of respondents to my survey varies from the Samanta study, (41% aged 18 to 20, 40% aged 21 -24, 15% aged 25-30; see Table 4.1). However, the percentage of players ages 21-24 was very similar.

Table 4.1 A comparison of age demographics Samanta (2024) and respondents to the study reported in this thesis

Age range of players	18-20	21-24	25-30
Samanta (2024)	27%	37%	22%
Present study	41%	40%	15%

4.2.1.2 Gender

In relation to gender, in terms of whole player base, 87% of players identify as male, 12% female and 1% nonbinary (Samanta, 2024). Respondents to this study identified as 86% male, 11% female, and

1% agender (Figure 4.3). This indicated a very strong reflection of the player base of *LoL* more broadly (Table 4.2). Table 4.2 also demonstrates that the game as a whole is male dominated.

Table 4.2 A comparison of gender demographics Samanta (2024) and respondents to the study reported in this thesis.

Stated gender of respondents of players	Male	Female	Nonbinary/agender
Samanta (2024)	87%	12%	1%
Present study	86%	11%	1%

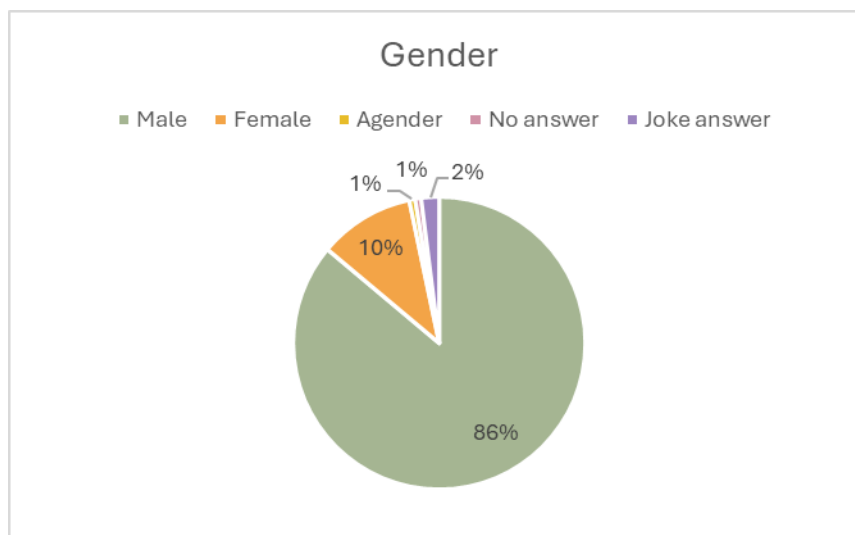


Figure 4.3 illustrates gender identity of respondents

4.2.1.3 Geographic location

The current study achieved a wide reach in terms of the geographic location of respondents as illustrated by the choropleth map in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.5 illustrates that the USA (27%) and United Kingdom (22%) provided the highest number of participants in the current study. This is where data diverges from trends collected by Samanta

(2024), where the United States (32%), Turkey (21%) and Brazil (22%) see the highest player numbers. Due to the opportunistic sampling method of the current study, and the dissemination of the survey being primarily on more Western dominated platforms and websites, this would seem to account for the disparity between data sets in the Samanta study and my own. Therefore, whilst I do not claim that the current study is *representative* of the *LoL* player base demographically, the wide geographical spread does mean that the voices and views of many participants globally are included.

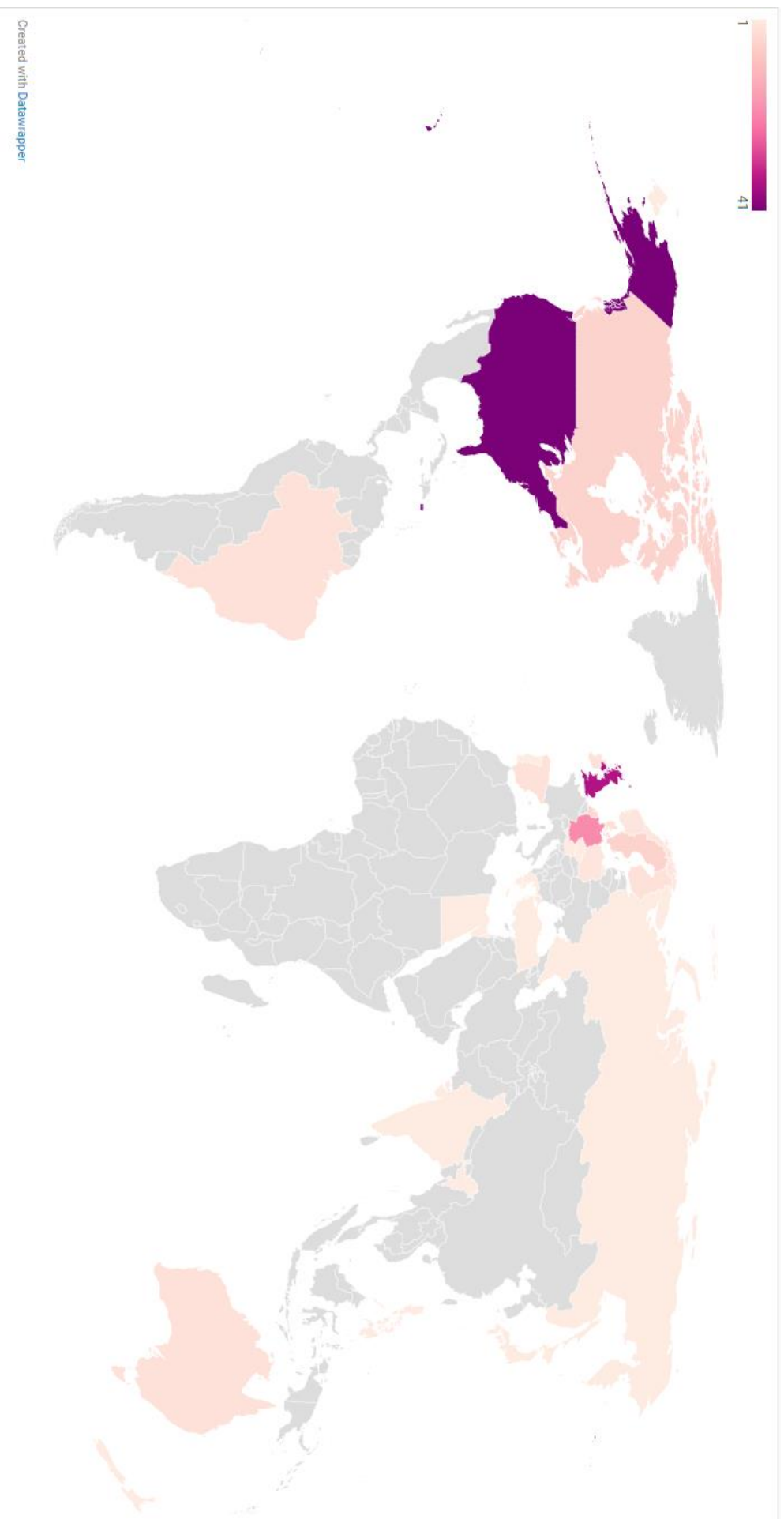


Figure 4.4 A choropleth map demonstrating geographic locations of respondents according to frequency

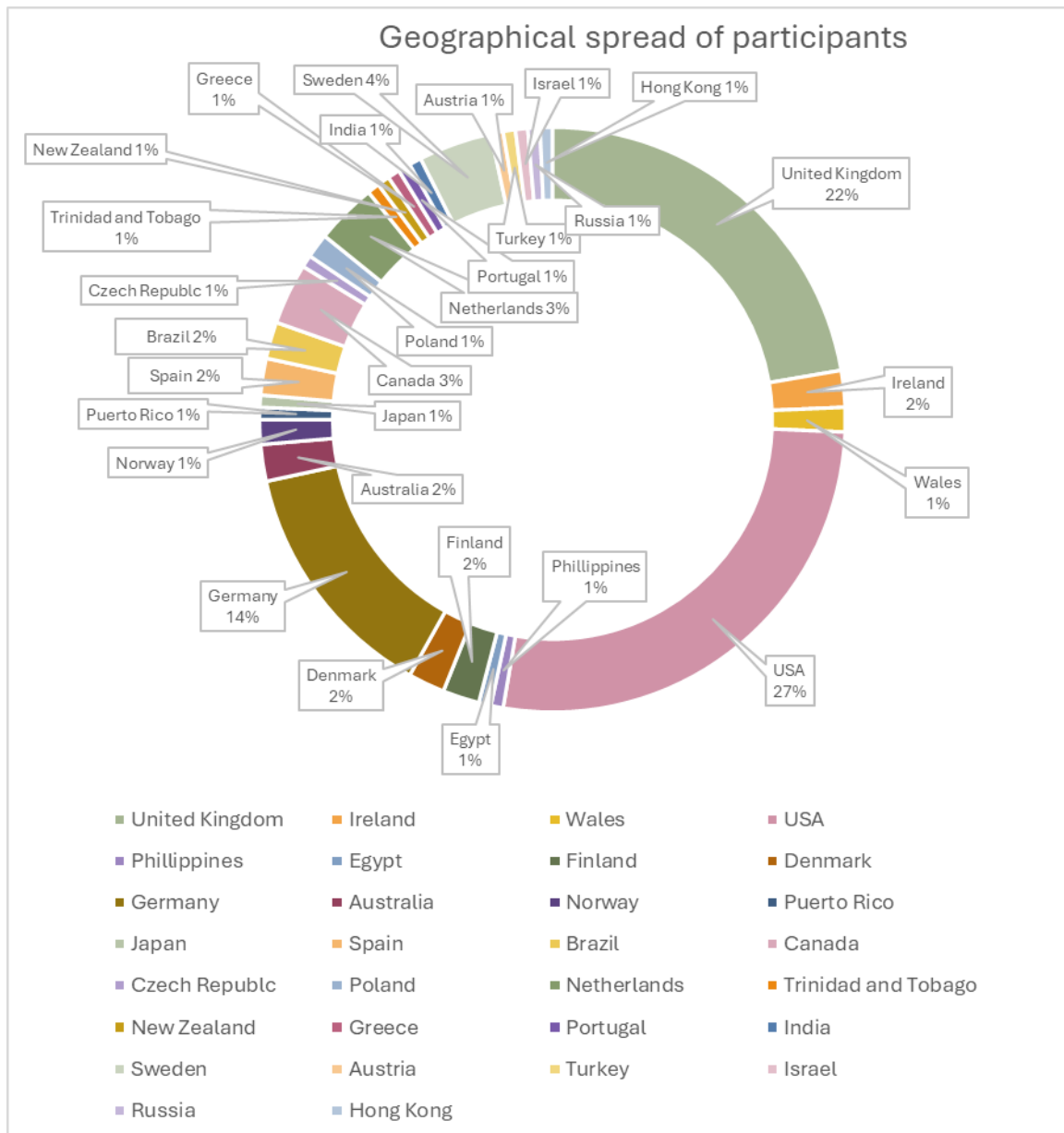


Figure 4.5 Donut chart illustrating the geographical spread of participants, by percentage of participants

4.2.2 Participant play practices

This subsection outlines player practices identified by survey respondents, gauging the experience level (not to be confused with skill level) with *LoL* and the community, how frequently players played or engaged with *LoL*, and the preferred modes of game play.

4.2.2.1 Play experience

Survey respondents indicated a diverse range of play experiences, from how long they have played *LoL*, to the frequency of play and preferred game modes. Figure 4.6 illustrates the number of years that participants had been playing *LoL*. At the time of survey, *LoL* was ten years old, and ten respondents had been playing since release. However, the most frequent answer was seven years. Given that *LoL* was released in 2009, with the first *LoL* esports championship, the *Season One Championship* taking place in 2011, it could be inferred that the popularity of *LoL* was increasing around this time, meaning that the player base grew exponentially. However, some survey respondents had been playing for less than one year; thus, the survey attracted respondents with the widest possible range of playing experience. Interestingly, when it came to how frequently respondents played the game, a majority (53.6%) played *LoL* every day (Figure 4.7). Overall, 91% of respondents reported playing the game weekly, with only 3% of respondents reporting that they played every few months. This suggests that most respondents were quite heavily invested and integrated into the game and its ecosystem. Additionally, 91% of respondents said that they watched *LoL* streams, indicating that a majority of those taking part in the survey had at least one form of engagement with *LoL* beyond gameplay itself.

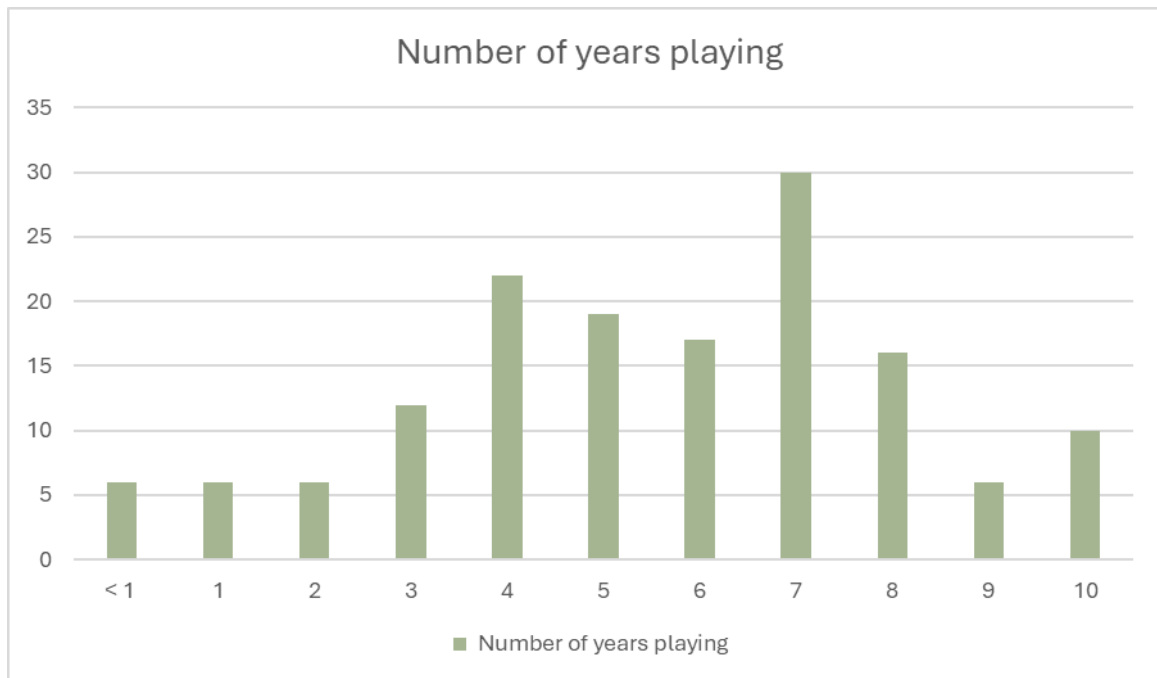


Figure 4.6 Bar chart illustrating the number of years participants had been playing *LoL*

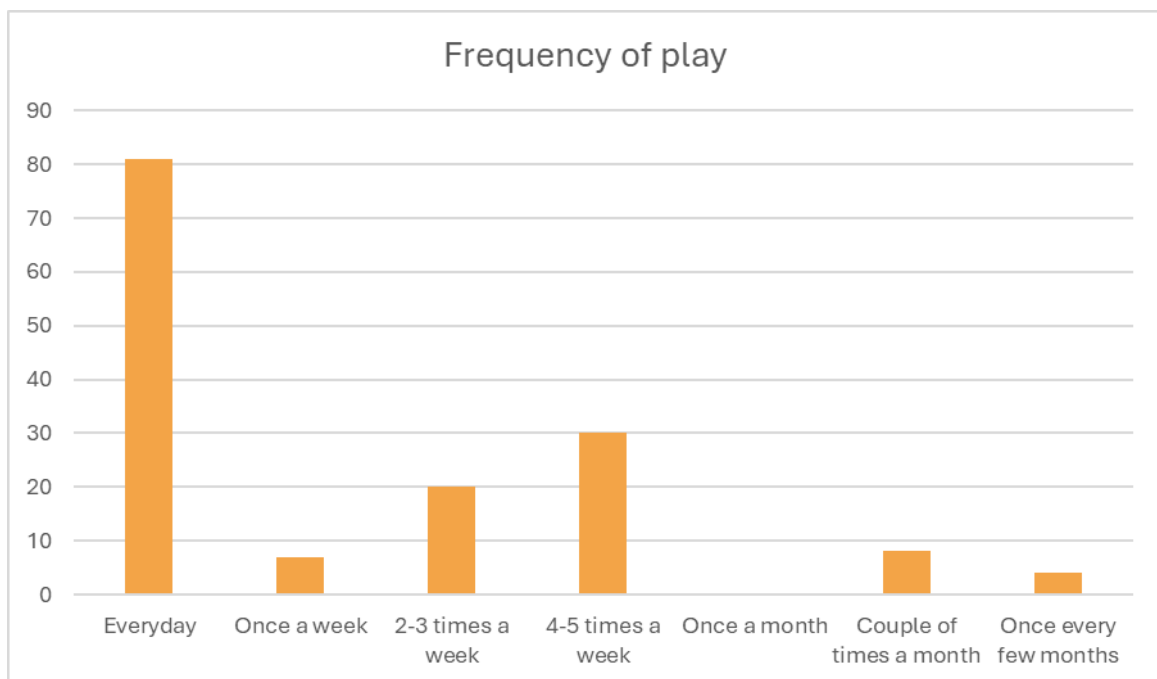


Figure 4.7 Bar chart illustrating how frequently participants play *LoL*

4.2.2.2 Types of gameplay

The survey also generated data on the types of gameplay that respondents were engaged with (Figure 4.8), leading to an understanding of trends in ranked versus casual play, as well as the maps on which respondents chose to play. Respondents were invited to select multiple answers so as to more comprehensively reflect the range of modes and maps played. In the following discussion, the term ‘competitive’ is used to refer to game modes where players’ wins and losses count towards their ‘rank’, whereas ‘casual’ is used to refer to game modes where this is not the case.

The Summoner’s Rift map was the most popular, with 82% of respondents reporting that they play ‘normal’ game modes on Summoner’s Rift (Figure 4.9), and 87% of respondents playing ranked games on the map (Figure 4.10). This makes the Summoner’s Rift map the most popular amongst respondents for both casual and competitive play. The second most popular map was Howling Abyss, which is only available for casual, non-competitive play, with 61% of respondents indicating that they played on this map in the All Random All Mid (ARAM) casual mode, with the Rotating Game Modes also being popular (52% of respondents engaging). The Rotating Game Modes on *LoL* are featured game modes, available for a limited time, which see ‘unique challenges and twists to the permanent game modes’ (League of Legends Wiki, 2024b). The Twisted Treeline map, which has been retired since this survey was conducted, was least popular.

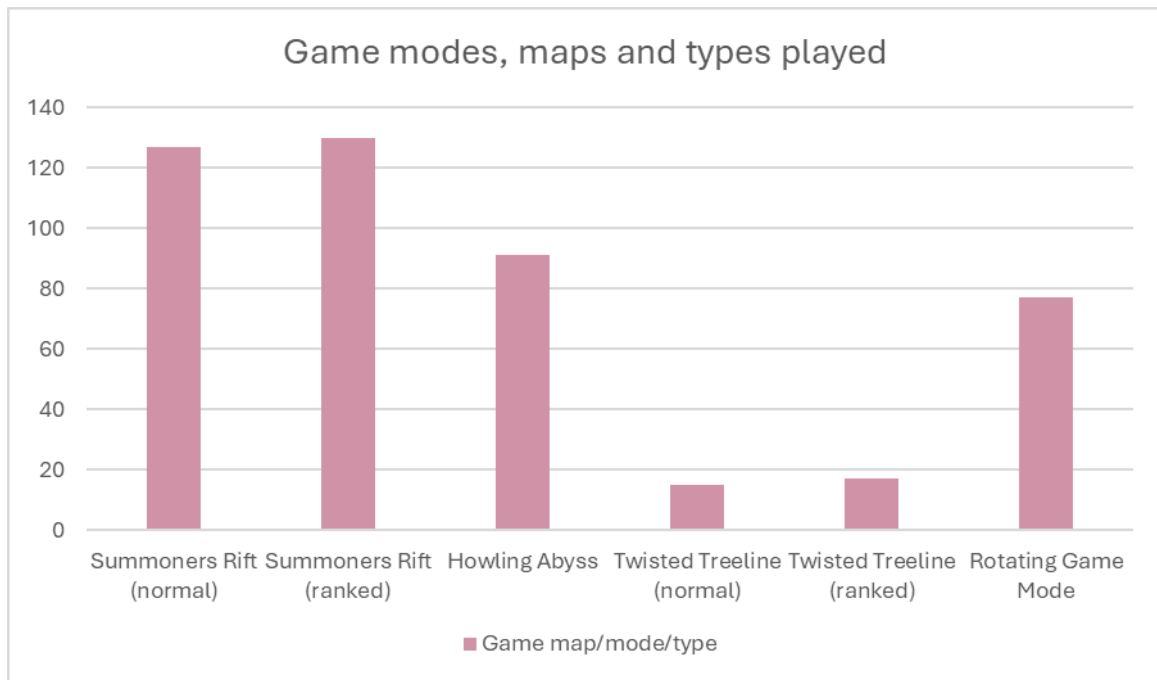


Figure 4.8 Bar chart illustrating the game modes and maps engaged in by survey respondents

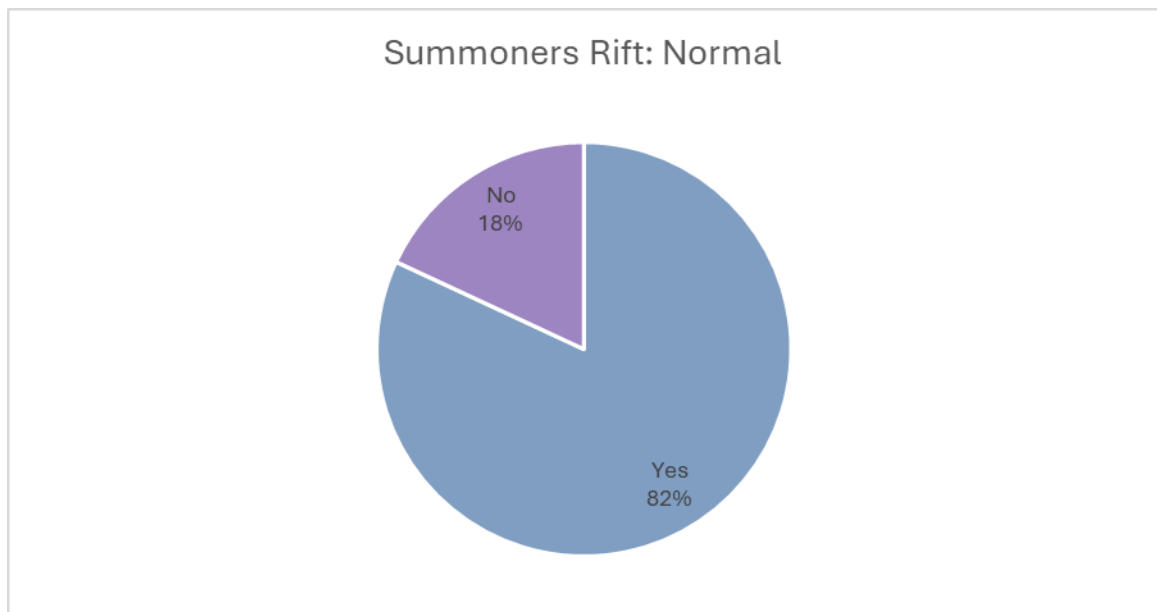


Figure 4.9 Pie Chart showing the percentage of respondents who play normal game mode on the *Summoners Rift* map

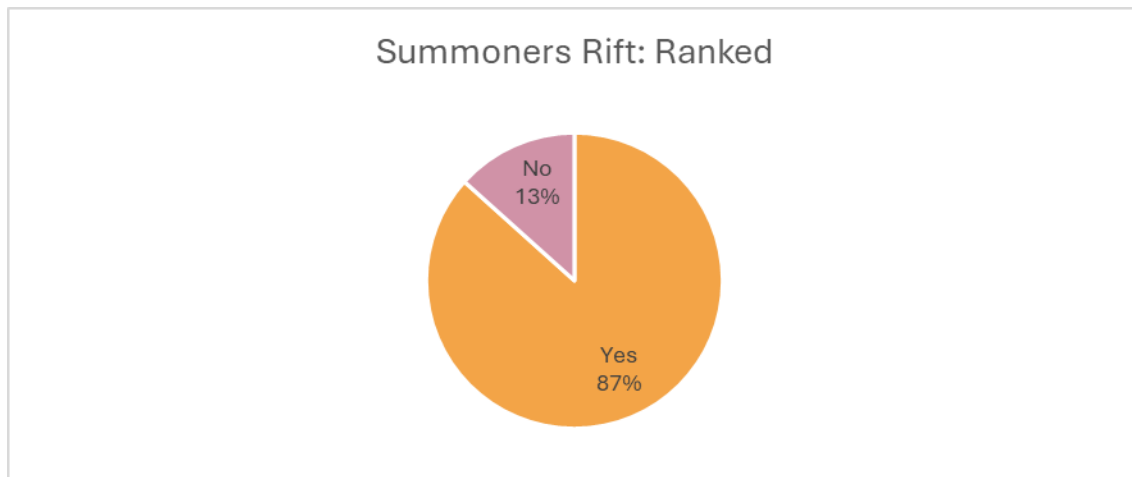


Figure 4.10 Pie Chart showing the percentage of respondents who play ranked game mode on the *Summoners Rift* map

4.2.2.3 Who players play with

Survey participants were invited to select multiple responses to the question ‘Who do you play *LoL* with?’ Figure 4.11 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Only 8.6% (n=13) of respondents reported that they only ever played *LoL* alone, with 34.5% (n=52) reporting that they only ever queued up for a game if people they know are playing with them (friends online or offline, esports teams, family or partners). The remaining participants played in a combination of ‘alone’ or ‘with people they know’.

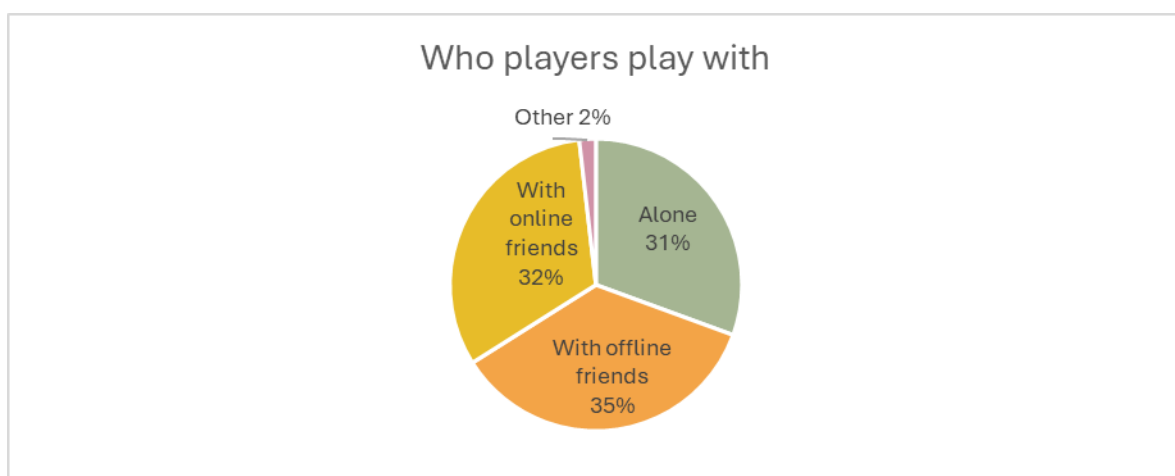


Figure 4.11 Pie Chart showing who players play *LoL* with

4.3 How do players interact with the League of Legends community?

To understand how *LoL* players felt about interacting with the *LoL* community, participants were asked: 'In what ways can players interact with the League of Legends community? Please list as many as you can think of'. One hundred and thirty-seven responded to this question, leaving just 13 respondents who chose not to answer. Answered were coded thematically into categories of interaction with specific platforms, sites, or actions (Table 4.3). The most popular response was related to interacting on forums (browsing, lurking, commenting, or posting), with 70% of respondents identifying these behaviours as a form of interaction; the site Reddit being the most frequently mentioned specific platform 68%. In-game interactions were specified by 45% of respondents, as a way of interacting with the community. Interactions on Discord (34.5%), social media (34%) and engaging with live streams (33%) were also popular. Twenty-five categories of interaction were identified by respondents, with 88% of these being specifically online-based interactions. However, offline interactions (attending offline events such as conventions, watching live matches, engaging with clubs and societies, and going to gaming venues such as bars and cafes), were mentioned by 48% of respondents. This suggests that offline engagement with the game is seen by respondents as a recognised of interacting with the *LoL* community, alongside online formats.

Some open-ended responses ⁴of note resonated with later questions on the construction of community in *LoL* (section 4.4). Two respondents specifically commented on their hesitancy to interact with the *LoL* community:

For me I've always been afraid of interacting with the League community unless it's with people I already know. I'm hesitant to add anyone if they send me a request.

i lurk the subreddit but interact with no one as it's usually an incredibly negative experience

⁴ All extracts from survey data are as written by respondents, using the original language, spelling and grammar of the participants

One further respondent questioned why players *would* interact with the community, writing ‘idk why they would do that’, with another suggesting that interacting with the *LoL* community will have a detrimental impact on the self:

Eventually interacting with the society for so long that you become an empty shell of what you once were and have no hope of reentering normal society ever again.

These comments, whilst not denoting specific activities of participation, suggest that participation in the *LoL* community is not something that all players have the desire to do. However, what also emerged was a gendered response which seemed to construct the game from a more sexist and stereotypical male-game perspective. The three responses below were all from either male respondents or respondents who did not provide detail of gender:

*Healsluts is where I meet all my princesses (male, 22)
orbiting, e-girls, betas, Nutz Deez (Attack Helicopter, 1337)
dating, egirl hunting innit? (Greta Thunberg, 21)*

These responses could be classed as examples of ‘trolling’ and considered alongside the hesitancy to engage in the *LoL* community (or negative construction of it), these responses are both ironic and illustrative of such thinking. These comments demonstrate sexist attitudes towards female *LoL* players - and female gamers more broadly - aligning with the hegemonic construction of gaming culture (Condis, 2018; Maloney, et al., 2018; Harvey & Fisher, 2015). They further suggest that women fit into the community in specific ways: as healers (Song, et al., 2021; Ratan, et al., 2015), potential partners, and as having an ‘egirl’ aesthetic’ (Hjorth, 2009; Hjorth, 2011; Fron et al., 2007). This could then be seen to suggest that gaming culture is producing values and understandings around who belongs within gaming more broadly, suggesting a hierarchy within this fan community (Hills, 2002). Contrastingly, the following very positive response shows a different experience of the

League community:

I've made a lot of online friends which i liked really much so i thought why not transfer it to real life so i visited them and it was always a lot of fun; 2. a lot more people play this game than you think, so i often meet people in real life who actually play this game and you can get in contact with them easily (it's a good conversation topic) (male, 21)

The two above responses demonstrate the positive experiences which can emerge from engaging with the *LoL* community more broadly, further explored through participant interviews (Chapter 9).

Table 4.3 Table showing the interaction categories identified by participants as ways to participate in the *LoL* community and times mentioned. Frequency of specific platforms, sites or actions within each category are provided where these were detailed by participants.

Interaction category	<i>f</i>	Specific Examples	<i>f</i>
Forums	106	Reddit	93
		League official forum	32
		9gag	1
		4chan	1
In-game	68	Playing the game	16
		In-game chat/messages	31
		Clubs	7
		Voice chat	7
		Emotes	6
		Pings	6
		Adding people in-game	2
		Clash	2
		In-game events	2
		Flaming/inting	2
Discord	52		
Social media	51	Twitter	21
		Facebook	11
		Instagram	7
		Pinterest	1
		Tumblr	1
Live streams	49	Twitch	31
		Stream chats	10
		Streaming	2
In-real life (IRL) events	43	Conventions	18
		Worlds/Live games	11
		College clubs/clubs/societies	6
		Talking to players	5
		Viewing parties	5
		LAN	2
		Local events	2
		Riot events	2
Youtube	37	Chat/comments section	4
		Cosplay	1
		Gameplays	1
		Guides	1
		Music	1
Content creation (Viewing or making)	14	Cosplay	10
		Fan art	8
		Fan videos	3
		Music	2
Watching esports/tournaments	13	Engaging in the chat	1
		Voting in AllStars	1
	7	Local	2
		NUEL	2

Taking part in tournaments/being part of a team		Online	1
Buying merch	4	Game	1
		Team	1
Gaming venues	4	Gaming bars	3
		Internet Cafes	2
Websites	4	Challengermode.com/pracc.com (for tournaments/scrims)	1
		Esports sites	1
		Fan wiki	1
		Gaming news sites	1
		Surrender@20	1
Official website	3	Watching VODs	2
Riot Surveys	3		
TeamSpeak	3		
Friends	2	Visiting friends made online in-person	1
LoL mobile app	2		
Buying Riot Points	1		
Communities	1		
Giveaways	1		
Out of game	1		
Steam Looking For Game (LGF) groups	1		
Submitting art for Riot Points	1		
Support	1		

Participants were asked to choose from a list of categories (listed in Box 4.1) of ways in which they interacted with and engaged with the League of Legends community.

- In-game [via the client through voice chat]
- Official Riot forums
- Third party forums e.g. edit, Neoseeker, Esports team forums
- Gaming news websites e.g. Daily Dot, Surrender@20
- Youtube
- Esports [watching online]
- Esports [attending live matches]
- Tournaments [participating]
- Tournaments [viewing]
- Streaming
- Watching streams
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Twitter
- Attending conventions
- Purchasing of official merchandise
- Purchasing of fan-produced merchandise
- Fan art [making]
- Fan art [viewing]
- Cosplay [making/wearing]
- Cosplay [viewing]

Box 4.1 The categories of interaction that respondents could choose from

The responses to this question are illustrated in Table 4.4 and Figure 4.12, which show that forums, live streams and in-game interactions were most popular, in line with players own suggestions of how players can interact with *LoL*. Interestingly, listening to *LoL* related music was very popular, with 69% of respondents engaging in this way. More players said that they engaged with fan art (42%) than identified fan art as a form of interaction (5.3%). This perhaps suggests that much of fan interaction in online spaces is passive consumption that is not usually considered to be a form of interaction with/in *LoL*. Five out of the 34 categories (listed in Box 4.1 above) specified offline interactions (LAN parties, University Societies, visiting gaming bars, attending conventions, esports [attending live matched]). Whilst LAN parties were identified by respondents as being the most popular of these, with 22% of respondents reporting that they have attended such events, these offline activities overall ranked lower than most forms of participation. This could be for a number of reasons which are not answerable by this study, including location, financial means, and the

opportunity to attend live esports matches or gaming bars/cafes, and the prevalence of gaming conventions in particular areas of the world.

Table 4.4 Table showing how respondents do participate in the *LoL* community

Participation type	<i>f</i>
In-game [via the client through text chat]	132
Youtube	123
Third party forums e.g. edit, Neoseeker, Esports team forums	111
Esports [watching online]	110
Watching streams	104
Music [listening]	101
Gameplay videos e.g. highlights, montages, spotlights [viewing]	86
Gameplay guides [videos, viewing]	82
Gameplay guides [text-based, viewing]	72
Fan art [viewing]	63
Tournaments [viewing]	59
Cosplay [viewing]	57
In-game [via the client through voice chat]	55
Twitter	54
Purchasing of official merchandise	46
Gaming news websites e.g. Daily Dot, Surrender@20	43
LAN parties	34
Tournaments [participating]	33
University Societies	33
Esports [attending live matches]	30
Streaming	27
Facebook	27
Instagram	27
Official Riot forums	26
Visiting gaming bars [and internet cafes]	21 [+1 internet café]
Attending conventions	19
Purchasing of fan-produced merchandise	18
Gameplay guides [text-based, making]	13
Gameplay videos e.g. highlights, montages, spotlights [making]	13
NUEL [including NSE]	12 [+1 NSE]
Fan art [making]	11
Cosplay [making/wearing]	9
Gameplay guides [videos, making]	9
Music [creating]	3
Other	
hunting for egirls innit? like my girlfriend nika from czech republic	1
Non-client voice chat	1



Figure 4.12 Bar chat showing how respondents participate in the *LoL* community

4.4 Constructions of community: concept and practice

To understand participants' expectations of 'community' and experience of the *LoL* community, they were asked to describe each of these in three words. This section presents those responses.

4.4.1 Constructing 'community'

Ten key themes emerged in the analysis of how respondents (N=150) described the concept of community (Table 4.5). The most frequently occurring themes were those of cohesion (n=82), positive forms of sociability (n=59), collaborative interaction (n=52), and amusement or enjoyment

(n=33). Other notions of common interest included: education, belonging, and the idea of communities being big or inhabiting particular spaces. In thinking about 'who' communities are, responses included 'people' and 'family'.

Table 4.5 Frequency table showing the emergent themes across responses to three words to describe community

Themes in describing community	<i>f</i>
Cohesion	82
Positive sociability	59
Collaborative Interaction	52
Amusement/Enjoyment	33
Common interest	30
Space and size	19
Who	18
Edifying/edification	16
Belonging	15
Conflict	5

As explored in the literature review (Chapter 2), there is a lack of agreement across sociological studies of clear definition of 'community'. The broad categories developed by Hillery (1955) include a group of people engaging in social interaction, a geographic area, or sharing common ties, and no doubt need to be updated to take account of subsequent practices of community. The notion of 'sharing common ties' coincides with Cohen's (1998) notion of community being where people have something in common. The survey respondents' constructions of community indicate that, whilst limited attention is paid to space and size, two distinct ideas emerged: that of community being large and taking up space (comments included: *expansive, online, big, many people, large, quantity, many, full*) and that where community as conceptualised as smaller and more local (such as: *pockets, college, local, church, niche, small*), respondents also offered some interesting comments about connection in relation to space including "a place where you know everyone" and "a place where

people gather and discuss whatever they want to discuss at least when we talking about the community revolving around a game or film, rather than a place where you live". The distinction in this last comment is interesting, relating to the themes of common interests and interaction as well as the notion that humans interact with things they have a common interest in (rather than living location and living spaces). This is perhaps unsurprising given the online focus of the thesis where 'space' is not a 'place' but an interactive environment free of geographical location and proximity.

Particularly noteworthy, is the collective respondent view which construed communities as a positive experience, offering words suggesting community cohesiveness (n=82). Most frequently occurring words were 'group' (n=20) and 'togetherness' (n=20), and 'unity' (n=8). Positive sociability and collaborative interaction are examples of Hillery's (1955) concept of people engaging in social interaction, reiterating a positive construction of community (though I acknowledge that Hillery's category was developed with proximity of personal engagement in mind). Collaborative interaction (n=52) also included references to communication (n=9), interaction (n=9) and sharing (n=8). A particularly interesting comment was "a group of people involved in the scene; not only participate also just watch". This captures the diversity of activity and of participation within communities whether active or passive. The word 'hive', mentioned once, can be interpreted to mean cohesion and collaboration, as it conveys a sense of busyness and non-stop activity of a group. In addition to mentioning ways of participating, respondents also suggested terms such as 'cooperation' (n=5) and 'teamwork' (n=5). These terms communicate a sense of collaboration and a feeling that people are working together or engaging as a united front, which in turn starts to uncover ideas about support and support which communities can offer. Taken together, these notions bring us to of the issue of belonging (n=15), where 'inclusion' (n=4) and 'diversity' (n=4) are identified as important facets of community and where there is a sense of acceptance, safety and a togetherness based around share interests, ideas, and values. These understandings of community speak to the ideas of belonging and shared identities posited by Cohen (2001).

Positive sociability (n=59) saw significant mention of 'friends' or 'friendship' (n=23), as well as desirable social traits such as 'love' (n=3), 'wholesome' (n=3) and 'kindness' (n=3). Central here is that communities have a welcoming atmosphere, which goes hand in hand with notions of belonging. That participants referenced enjoyment (n=33) as a key factor in community demonstrates a desirability to be part of a community, with 'common interests' (n=30), where people can find 'like-minded' (n=5) people with 'shared interests' (n=11).

Communities are constructed by participants in this survey as welcoming, spaces, which foster a sense of belonging within a supportive, fun atmosphere. The responses convey togetherness and unity around particular subjects. Mention of conflict (n=5) was limited, and words used by respondents in relation to conflict, seemed to denote difference or difficulties between communities rather than within. Overall, participants produced a positive attribution to the concept of community and might well be a 'rose tinted' view of communities, very much constructed of ideals, for all communities face internal conflicts.

4.4.2 Constructing the League of Legends community

Twenty-two key themes emerged in the analysis of how respondents described the *LoL* community (Table 4.6), and many were in direct contrast to how their responses suggested that community more generally, was constructed. The most frequently occurring themes were those of game-ruining behaviour (n=84), negative traits, terms and insults (n=59), enjoyment (n=38), game-based language (n=29), size and space (n=22), dedication or commitment (n=21), conflict (n=19), competition (n=18) and positive sociability (n=18). Significantly, the *LoL* community was constructed by participants as overwhelming negative, it being described as having negative attributes, engaging in game-ruining

behaviours and conflict, including moments of discrimination. Positive aspects included *LoL* being an enjoyable, sociable community, with elements of collaboration and support.

Table 4.6 Frequency table showing the emergent themes across responses to three words to describe the *LoL* community

Themes in describing <i>LoL</i> Community	<i>f</i>
Game-ruining behaviour	85
Negative traits/terms/insults	59
Enjoyment/amusement	38
Game-based language	29
Size and space	22
Dedication/commitment	21
Conflict	19
Competition	18
Positive sociability	18
Creative	11
Edifying	10
Selfish/egotistical	10
Collaboration	8
Belonging/inclusion	7
Discriminatory behaviours	6
Extraverted	6
Cohesion	5
Common/shared interest	4
Juxtaposing	3
Strategy	3
Who/demographic	3
Exclusivity	2

Table 4.6 shows that Game-ruining behaviour was the most prevalent theme, with 83 references to toxicity, and one participant using all three words available to write ‘toxic toxic toxic’. The remaining behaviour listed in this category was ‘inters’ (referring to intentionally feeding). Fifty-five percent of respondents constructed the community as ‘toxic’, which begs the question: Why do we return to play *LoL* if the community is so toxic? This question needs to be considered alongside the negative traits, terms and insults ascribed to the community by survey respondents. References to negative

traits or terms occurred 59 times, however the phrases used were extraordinarily diverse with 50 different terms used. This prompted further analysis, to sub-code the phrases into themes of: disease and infection; age; dirt; cognitive ability and mental health⁵ (Table 4.7). This analysis then constructs the *LoL* community as undesirable, being poisoned (diseased, infectious), made up of immature or unskilled individuals, and unattractive due to the association with ‘dirt’. The theme of conflict (n=19), whilst diversely defined, further contributed to constructing the community negatively, with reference to ‘flaming’ (n=5), anger (n=3) and other terms relating to aggression and violence (n=6) or division (n=5). These traits and behaviours could be then seen to be part of the “dark participation” from which Kowert (2020, p. 4) suggests toxicity emerges.

Where game-based language was used, the phrases similarly had off-putting and sometimes offensive connotations. Words and phrases including ‘salty’, ‘/muteall’, ‘babyrage’, ‘low elo’, and ‘clowns’ together to posit the image of negatively charged individuals.

Table 4.7 Frequency table showing the sub-themes present within the negative traits, terms and insults theme describing the *LoL* community.

Disease/infection (n=5)	Age (n=6)	Dirt (n=5)	Mental health (n=6)	Cognitive ability (n=5)
cancer	childish	dogshit	bipolar	idiots
aids	childish	garbage	mental health	degenerated
anthrax	immature	shit	crazy	stupid
VX	preteens	shit	insanity	retarded
aids	babies	shitfest	addicted	dumb
	children		addicting	

⁵ Mental health issues should not stigmatise those who live with them, nor the discussion of them. Therefore, it is important to recognise here (but not condone) that within gaming culture some gamers utilise terminology relating to mental health in an offensive manner to apply negative connotations to individuals. This behaviour is apparent in some responses.

However, in stark juxtaposition, the *LoL* community is also, constructed as a place for enjoyment and amusement (n=38). This is, in one sense, logical given that video games are intended to be a voluntarily undertaken pastime or hobby. However, it is perplexing when, alongside this, the community and space is seen to be as poisonous and negative. Twenty-three references were made to the community being 'fun' or 'funny', alongside mention of 'laughter' (n=2), 'humour' (n=2) and it being 'engaging' (n=4) and 'memeworthy' (n=2). Whilst 'memeworthy' might not always be interpreted positively, it engenders entertainment and a sense of shared understanding; a form of in-joke. Eighteen references were made to the community being competitive, a characteristic of the game that many players enjoy, perhaps contributing to players' enjoyment of the *LoL* community (Chapter 9) and can be considered alongside references to community members being dedicated. Eleven participants used 'passionate' or 'passion', alongside 'dedicated' (n=4) and diligent (n=1), contributing a sense of the *LoL* community being an entertaining space, with competitive players who are committed to the common interest. If a community in general is seen as supportive, educational and helpful collective (see Table 4.6, 'edifying', n=10), with the elements of positive sociability (n=18) a very different image is painted of the people and community around *LoL*. However very diverse language was used in relation to positive social elements, with 'friends' (n=4) and 'wholesome' (n=3) being the most frequent.

There is little mention of collaboration (n= 8) or cohesion (n=5) within the *LoL* community, yet 'selfishness' (n=10) and 'discriminatory behaviour' (n=6) occur more frequently. This stands in contrast to the analysis of survey respondents' reported construction of 'community' more generally (section 4.4.1) and suggests that there is a culture that has been generated around expected and normalised behaviours which are so embedded within the culture that they are replicated and recognised by the community.

4.4.3 Making sense of conflicting constructions

The analyses presented above (4.4.1 and 4.4.2) on how players understand and construct the concept of community in general, and the *LoL* community specifically, produce conflicting images of community: one an ideal, and one reality that could be said to be far from this idyllic image. Similarities in terms of description of size suggested that communities are characteristically large (generated around a shared interest or value), and alongside synergy in the potential for positive social aspects, however the *LoL* community is overall constructed as the antithesis to what respondents reported their idea of what a community should be. Whilst the survey analysis showed some positive attributes, the frequency of these attributes being posited onto the *LoL* community is much lower than when ascribed to the archetype of community in general. In terms of the atmosphere or ambiance, the *LoL* community is constructed to be unwelcoming and poisonous, but at the same time, as a space for fun and competition, whereas the notion of community in general is seen as a perpetually supportive, welcoming and a collaborative collective.

The survey findings reported in this chapter ultimately shaped the focus of the next stage of my research, marking a turning point in the development of my study.

4.5 Conclusion: A shift to unpacking the paradox. Why do we return to toxic spaces?

This chapter has presented and reflected upon the findings of a survey of League of Legends players, which focussed on player engagement with the game, the playing community, and their understandings of the nature and meaning of community. It began with a presentation of respondent demographics, including details of gameplay preferences. This was followed by a description of how

players understand opportunities to engage with the community around *LoL*. The chapter has concluded with an analysis of how respondents understand the concept of community, and how they see the *LoL* community.

The most palpable finding was how toxic the survey respondents considered the League of Legends community to be. Reflecting on these findings, I decided to champion participant voices and prioritise the development of an understanding of why players remain invested in a game whose community is constructed – by members of that community – as a negative space.

The remainder of this thesis will focus on unpacking this paradox to understand how participants further understand toxicity, and why *LoL* players return to play in spaces they describe as toxic. It explores how players are initiated into *LoL* (Chapter 5), what constitutes ‘toxic’ behaviour and how players understand toxicity (Chapter 6), how players then navigate this toxic in-game landscape to ensure their gameplay experiences are enjoyable (Chapter 7), and why players continue to play despite the toxicity that they perceive to run through the game (Chapters 8).

Chapter 5

Welcome to *Summoner's Rift*: Players' early experiences of *League of Legends*

5.1 Introduction

This is the first of five chapters which analyse the findings from my interview data. This chapter explores the experiences of *LoL* players when they were first introduced to the game, narratives they remember around *LoL* and its players, and the initial 'pull' of *LoL* that captured players early interest playing the game. It first considers how the seventeen participants were introduced to *LoL* and experienced toxicity in their initial introduction to *LoL* (5.1-5.3). This is followed by an exploration of the contradictory narratives around *LoL*, gameplay and the community (5.4). It is important to understand players' initial experiences and their introductions to the game to see how this has contributed to their continued involvement in the game despite their experiences of toxicity (Chapters 7 and 8). In concluding, this chapter will demonstrate how even in early interactions with *LoL*, players become aware of a particular type of "dark participation" (Kowert, 2020, p. 2) in the culture of *LoL*, and how this then shapes behavioural practices early on. Notably, players are usually introduced to the game by friends, family or partners, and these relationships become integral to participants overcoming toxicity, and continuing to play in those early experiences.

5. 2 "Your Legend Starts Here": Entering the world of *League of Legends*

The following section explores how participants were introduced to *LoL*. It considers how friends are integral to players' early introductions to the game, before finally exploring what the 'hook' was for players that kept them committed to the game in those early stages of playing.

5.2.1 The journey to Summoners Rift: Discovering the game

For a majority of participants, how players found out about and then continued to play *LoL* was notably similar: sixteen out of seventeen participants discovered *LoL* via word of mouth through family, friends or partners. This was also my own personal experience, discovering *LoL* through a flatmate in university accommodation in my first Undergraduate year. Going against the grain, however, DK recalled that he “[j]ust found it. Downloaded and played it”, however went on to note that he subsequently found out that other friends were playing the game and they went on to play together. DK, however, noted that his experiences of coming across the game and downloading it without the influence of others was not an experience that he felt was common across *LoL* players more broadly: “I’ve always only found people who were like, ‘Oh, I’m playing League because a friend told me to and now I like it”.

Finding out about *LoL* via friends, family and partners, and playing as a result of this, is reflected in the remaining participants’ accounts of beginning play. Four participants (Ray, Supkey, Jack and Nella) found out via their brothers, whilst Lavender discovered *LoL* through her then girlfriend – now wife, and Eva discovered *LoL* through her boyfriend. A majority of participants (ten) discovered and started playing through friends; Shane, a game developer, noting that he discovered the game through both friends and industry. This suggests that despite the prevalence of *LoL*, a supportive introduction to the game is important.

5.2.2 “We’re all in this together”: Friends are integral to early stages of gameplay

Multiple participants commented play *LoL* early-on with people they knew was important – and in some cases integral – to their continued involvement in the game. Ray noted that having someone teach him and talk him through the game was really important and helped him find the game to be

more “interesting” in comparison to completing the tutorial provided by Riot. Similarly, Kieran said that playing *LoL* with friends was integral to both learning and staying with the game, noting “[It’s] something I definitely wouldn’t have done on my own”. He cited the knowledge and skill-based learning curve that game with the game being frustrating and confusing: “so I waited to play it with my friends.”

However, this was not the case for Jack. Although he discovered *LoL* through his brother, he said “It’s been like four years now or something and I played with him probably five games”. Yet, Jack still noted the importance of friends or familiar people helping others through the early stages of learning the game:

If [Riot] just matched new players with new players consistently it would be much easier. It’s like people who enter the game usually enter because of a friend so they’ve got that friend kind of pushing them through the initial hurdle to have a reason to stay.

Jack highlights the learning curve involved in learning new games and acknowledges that support in learning a new game is important and usually provided by people we know as opposed to game developers or the game itself. Part of the “pushing through” that Jack mentions is not just learning the game and developing the skill set needed, but is about emotionally and mentally resilience in the face of critiquing or mockery from other players. Elliot notes that he played with his brother and his brother friends, and the more he played, the more he noticed people talking about his play. Elliot discussed that when other players would critique his play, his brother would “try and laugh it off” with him:

My brother definitely gave me the reassurance to just look past it and just keep playing the best you can, which for me made it much more enjoyable because I was just happy to be playing with him and playing a game which I thought was fun.

Elliot went on to note that he continues to prefer playing multiplayer games with people who have “camaraderie” within their gameplay ethos. However, Rory had a contrasting experience. Rory – who no longer plays *LoL* (expressing quite a distaste for it), instead now plays the mobile version *Wild Rift*. Whilst friends introduced him to *LoL*, noted that they “had to repeatedly wear [him] down because you don’t play one game of *League* and then love it. You have to play about 30 hours of *League*”. Rory recalled quite a perplexing introduction to the game where he would hear friends Corey and Jason talking about *LoL* at the pub, saying “although they would be annoyed, they were still talking positively”:

If you saw what they were saying written down, you'd be like 'Why on earth are they ever recommending this game to people - they obviously don't like it' but there is a sort of High School Musical 'We're all in this together' sort of thing.

For Rory, whilst friends wanted him to play with them and were eager to help coax him through the stages of learning game, it was unclear to him as to why it was such a good game to get involved with given the negativity and frustration associated with play, which is at odds with the experience of other participants within this study.

5.2.3 What was the hook for new players?

Several reasons were cited as to why players’ interest in *LoL* was sustained early on. A majority of players talked positively about their initial attraction to the game. Eight distinct categories were identified, although it should be noted that most participants identified one or more of these elements as being important to them initially:

- i. Achievement and tracking own improvement (5);
- ii. Competitiveness (5);

- iii. A sense of uniqueness (5);
- iv. Character design and visuals (5);
- v. Relationship development (3)
- vi. Controlling your own game experience (1);
- vii. Teamwork (1);
- viii. A distraction tool (1);

These 'hooks' are explored below, however the last three categories (vi, vii, viii; each identified by one participant) are explored as relevant within categories i-v. Additionally, notes on barriers to play and the importance of timing are included in order to ensure that the nuance of how players are introduced to, and continued to play, *LoL* is presented.

i. Achievement and tracking own improvement

Participants noted the importance of being able to track their own skill development and progress within the game and across each game instance. Amy liked the progression within each game instance, but also being able to track her own improvement across gameplay as a whole:

I like the progression through the game as well as between games - you're getting better so also within the game. It feels like you're achieving.

This sense of 'achievement' and improvement was echoed by other participants - Shane, Jack and Lavender - but Toby added that he valued being able to share his accomplishments and skill development with friends when they were online: "when they came on I was like, 'Look, I've been practicing, I've been playing', And that was nice to see as well".

ii. Competitiveness

Closely tied to the notion of progression and accomplishment is that of how competitive the game was. Nella, Supkey, Shane, Toby and WN all commented that the competitive element was something which was appealing to them early on in their experience of playing *LoL*. Self-described as “quite competitive guy anyway”, Toby played *Warhammer* however this always required another person. *LoL*’s matching system it meant that *LoL* provided an outlet for that competitive edge when he was not able to play *Warhammer*:

I was just playing League and I was completely average at it. I took it quite seriously for a silver player. Sometimes too seriously [...] I just like playing competitive games, and it was one that was quite easy to get into.

Both Nella and Supkey expressed excitement around discovering the ranking system, and how this appealed to their competitive side. Nella noted that whilst visuals were the first pull for her, the competitive element to *LoL* contributed to her continued play, saying “my competitive side came out when I started playing Ranked”. The Ranked mode had a similar effect on Supkey: “I’m definitely a very competitive person and as soon as I found out there was this Ranked ladder, as soon as I got to Level 30, I jumped straight into Ranked.”

Players are not able to play within the Ranked system until they reach Level 30 which requires playing, on average, 250 unranked games, or 150 hours of gameplay with the use of ‘Experience Boosts’ (which increase the amount of Experience Points (XP) earned in each game) (Spezzy, 2022). This is made clear early on to participants, and whilst the setup of the game – team versus team – is inherently competitive, the ability to track your individual progress via a ranked system, and see your ability or skill level in comparison to others was appealing enough to Nella, Shane and Supkey that they continued to play the game until they could engage in this mode of play.

iii. A sense of uniqueness

Participants reported that they found *LoL* to be “different” from other games they have played. WN and Eva described it as “different”, Kieran said it was “unique”, and Jason saw it as “a break from everything else that I played”. Quite what this sense of difference or uniqueness looked like, however, differed between players. For some, especially Kieran, WN, and Jason, the game genre was different as MOBAs were not something they had played before. *Call of Duty (CoD)* was mentioned by Jason, Amy and Lavender as a game they had played prior to *LoL*, with the FPS style of game being vastly different to *LoL*’s MOBA approach.

For Eva, what was uniquely different about *LoL* was the diverse directions in which each game instance could go, a feature not available in other games. Eva noted that with other games, there is little differential between repeated play, however *LoL* presents something new each time:

[W]hat is there – like 200 champions? There’s different roles and there’s so many different things you can do ... Even if you play a competitive game and everyone just takes the same champions.

This more precisely captures the differences that *LoL* holds. The diversity of champions and roles is one thing, but the way in which champions are utilised or played differs between players themselves. This can also be seen in the mention of ‘Runes’ by Amy and Kieran, who acknowledged that this is key in determining how a champion will be played and contributes to the wide possibilities of play between games. Eva alludes to the huge numbers of variables present in each game instance which alter the state, path, and possibilities of play. This sense of infinite possibility is captured by Kieran who commented “I kept coming back for more because it was obviously a new, fresh experience”. Lavender shared a similar sentiment, seeing *LoL* as something that she could “try again and again”, including possibilities of skill improvement, alongside being able to control your own experience in the game via playstyle and champion and role choices. Lavender compared this to the very linear and

limited approach of games such as *CoD*. Amy made a similar comparison to *CoD*, however she discussed the multiplayer aspect of *CoD* and how, whilst you are in a team, it does not feel like teamplay is an important element to gameplay. Amy instead found teamplay as integral to *LoL*, which she liked: “With *League* you really have to play with people because what you do really does impact the game and I really liked that”. This alludes to the game design itself being comprehensive, with each element feeling intentional and meaningful, unlike with some other games.

iv. Character design and visuals

Eva (above) mentioned the range of champions available, and the range of playable champions and their visual design was something that a number of players enjoyed. As of January 2024, there are 168 unique champions to choose from in *LoL* (Heath, 2024). Being able to choose the character felt important to Amy as “in the games I played before, you just play a character. You don’t get to pick who you play”. Amy identified this as something different about *LoL* and what it offered, and a feature which was deemed attractive. Amy mentioned *CoD* and *Pokémon* as games where “until quite recently you always played as a man”. Whilst Amy was clear that being able to play as a woman was not “important”, she said “it’s nice to have that choice and that variety in the game than just playing a male soldier or a male character”.

Eva also mentioned the importance of champion choice, tying this to the type of roles that can be played. A trope exists within gaming that most women play supporting champions or roles (Robinson, 2023; Song et al., 2021; Ratan et al., 2015), and Eva said that this was also her experience when playing in the Women’s National University Esports League (WNUEL):

I learned to play with my boyfriend and he was ADC and I was support so maybe also how most people learn to play, so therefore they’re all learning support? [...] Maybe it’s because all the

supports are cute and I wouldn't really want to play any top laners because they're all butt ugly.

It has been noted that alongside the gendered nature of roles and champions there is a belief that women play support (Bergstrom, et al., 2012) based on the (incorrect) assumption that it is a less-skilled role and due to many support characters being female (Robinson, 2023). However here Eva attributes this not only to learning alongside her boyfriend who played ADC (now Marksman) – a role which works closely alongside the support role, but also to champion design. Eva noted a gendered nature in champion choice, something seen as integral to her gameplay choices and therefore whether she engaged in play at all, stating:

If they release a cute little bunny: I'm playing that. I don't care what role it is [...] If they release a champion and it's some ugly little armoured thing - no.

Interestingly, it has been noted that almost all support champions are female (Song, et al., 2021, p. 2651), and whether this is a sexist choice in games design remains to be seen. However, Nella expressed a similar sentiment in terms of her attraction to the game, after seeing her brother play.

I think through Google, I just found these very cute images of League of Legends - which turned out were Miss Fortune and Ashe - and I was like 'Oh they're nice - let's see what this is'.

Nella was still drawn to female champions, but less so to the support role, with Miss Fortune and Ashe being Marksmen. The visual design of the character was an initial attraction for Nella, Supkey, and Jack, however Nella's choice of champion did not remain tied to 'cute' or 'female' characters, and throughout her time with *LoL* she has also played male champions. However, this illustrates that the visual design and variety of champions available can be appealing to players upon their initial introduction to and early experiences of the game.

v. Relationship development

For three participants, *LoL* provided an opportunity to bond and develop relationships with people they cared about via an interactive activity. Lavender was introduced to *LoL* through her girlfriend at the time. They met via Tumblr, with Lavender living in the UK and her partner living in America. Lavender started playing *LoL* with her partner. She said that they started to play so they could do something on the Skype calls that was more interactive than watching a film, saying:

You get to know a person a little more as well, because if she lost her shit at the first sign of anything going wrong, I would be like 'Wow, okay. Doesn't handle problems very well. Gonna write that down'. [laughs]

Lavender enjoyed how playing with her girlfriend enabled them both to engage in an activity and develop their relationship despite the physical distance between them and helped them to learn more about each other as people. Eva had a similar experience and held similar feelings about *LoL* as an interactive activity when in a long-distance relationship. Eva's boyfriend taught her to play in 2014 as she wanted to play more video games, then saying "I kept on playing it because I wanted to play something with him, so that's probably why I have kept playing it for so long". For Eva, as with Lavender, it was a way to do something together despite physical distance, stating "It's definitely a good way to do something with my boyfriend because he lives in Portugal and I'm over here in the UK so it's nice that we've got something we can do together".

The experiences of these two players illustrate how *LoL* has acted as a mode of connectivity for two women and their partners, and a way to be together, apart. Supkey, on the other hand, was introduced to *LoL* by his younger brother during his final year of secondary school exams and delayed getting into the game in order to focus on his studies. Supkey notes "I was super excited to try it out because I really love playing with my brother". Similar to Lavender and Eva's experiences, for Supkey *LoL* was an important activity to spend time with someone he cared about. The importance of

friendship and relationship development in not only initiating play but continuing play can be seen to support discussions of gaming culture going beyond the screen, where gaming is also connected to notions of friendship (Crawford, 2012, p. 142), but is also supportive in deconstructing the lonely gamer stereotype. Within Schiano et al.'s (2014, p. 65) work on *World of Warcraft*, players were found to frequently play with those they knew offline which was found to enhance play and enhance sociability.

5.2.4 Note: Barriers to play

Whilst only three participants mentioned barriers to play, it is important to note that some players had been made aware of *LoL* they were able to engage in playing the game for themselves – or have an ideal initial experience - due to barriers to play. Amy and Toby both noted that initially they were unable to play *LoL* with the friends that introduced them to it because the laptops or PCs they had at the time were below the specification needed to run the game. Toby said that his “rubbish laptop” meant that it took ten minutes to load into each game, and yet despite this he continued playing (and eventually bought “a proper PC”). In Amy’s case, she was a Mac user, and the *LoL* client was initially unavailable on the Mac OS. As of 2019, Amy had been playing *LoL* for seven years, placing her introduction to the game around 2012, just before Riot introduced the Mac client for *LoL* in 2013 (Cocke, 2013). When her boyfriend told her the Mac client had been released, Amy said she instantly downloaded it and “was kind of hooked for like three or four years”. Supkey, also started on a Mac laptop and did not have a mouse meaning that he learnt to play using a trackpad only which makes gameplay incredibly difficult. Yet, he stuck with the game. This encompasses ideas around access according to software and hardware, an element which contributes to a lack of diversity within gamers, as discussed by Paul (2018, p. 8). That players were introduced to *LoL* and either waited to be able to play, or persisted with it in more adverse play circumstances, demonstrates something unique about *LoL*. This adds further dimension to understanding the sense of ‘uniqueness’ that *LoL* holds for players.

5.3. The importance of timing and circumstance

One player, Shane, provided a detailed and insightful account into his start with *LoL*. Shane was teaching game design at a college when he fully dived into *LoL*. After what he described as “multiple starts”, he recalled the point in time where he became very invested in *LoL*, leading to sustained play. Shane mentioned how the concepts of rank and socialisation were important and went hand-in-hand with each other: he sponsored the *LoL* Team for the college he worked at and took them to tournaments where he met other players who he then played with. He also identified skill expression and progression as important elements which kept him playing. However, during this time he had recently separated from his wife and, in his own words, was experiencing depression:

... a lot of things were happening in my life and I just kind of dove into it when I went home because I was used to being around my kids [...] and it became the thing I just threw myself into. I think it was a good distraction and I started playing it.

Therefore, whilst Shane acknowledges game-based factors as being important to him, what was central to his commitment to the game were environmental, out-of-game factors: timing and circumstance. He summarised this as: “It was the social and experiential thing - the things that were happening to me - plus this ability to measure my progress, that helped me stay”.

This illustrates that, for some people, circumstance can be a large factor in whether someone sticks with a game or not. Supkey mentioned his addictive personality and therefore waited until after his exams were finished before he started play, again highlighting these external factors being of importance. For Toby, his environment provided him with a good opportunity to engage with the game. He noted that in his first year of University, whilst a lot of his friends would go on nights out, this was not really his scene. Therefore, he often stayed up until the early hours playing games and looking after housemates when they returned home, reasonably inebriated. Toby recounted:

I was just playing Steam games by myself on this rubbish laptop [...] One of my mates asked me to come play League with him, so I did. [...] I was rubbish for about six months, some would say I still am, and I enjoyed it. It was a good outlet for me.

For Toby, like Shane and Supkey, it was a combination of timing and circumstance which helped him stick continue playing *LoL*. Whilst all players noted additional elements being important to their continued play – competitiveness, visuals, progression – this highlights that external factors are also key.

5.4 “Everyone tells you to not play League but then at the same time they are really wanting you to play League”: Contradictory narratives surrounding play and toxicity

As Chapter 4 has shown, *LoL* is often considered to have a reputation of being a ‘toxic’ gaming space, both in-game and within the community more broadly, although the extent to which this reputation is hyperbole is debatable (as explored in Chapter 6). Given the skewed negative narrative of the gaming community around *LoL*, it is then important to understand players’ awareness of this narrative, and whether they personally felt its impact in their early experiences of playing or influenced their understanding of the game.

Players shared their awareness of toxicity as they first began to play, and in some cases provided anecdotes of warnings they shared with people who they were introducing to *LoL*. Rory’s introduction to the game by friends was somewhat perplexing and yet resonated with conversations he witnessed about *LoL* more broadly. He noted the paradoxical conversations he witnessed:

Everyone that you talk to about League goes ‘Oh do you play League?’ and if people say no then they go ‘Oh well good - don’t. But maybe you should come play League with me’. Everyone

tells you to not play League but then at the same time they are really wanting you to play League, and [I am] one of those cases.

This demonstrated the conflict embodied by many players: they enjoy the game and want to play with others but warn against the potentially negative repercussions of play. Amy introduced some friends to *LoL*, saying that she “warned them” of the possibility that they would experience toxicity in the game:

I was like ‘Right, we’re gonna play, but just to let you know - people will tell you to die’ [...] My friend was like, ‘I’m gonna mess with them’ - he was like ‘No one can take a joke?’, and I’m like, ‘No, no one’s gonna joke with you’.

Amy’s account demonstrates the extreme end of the types of toxic attitude and language use that players can experience. Whilst her friends thought they would be able to banter with other players, Amy was clear in outlining that such a strategy would be unlikely to work. Despite this, Amy said that neither her warning – nor her friends early experiences of toxicity – put them off playing. Rory recounted that his friends were very aware of the possibility that other players’ toxic behaviours would possibly put him off playing. This, coupled with Rory’s initial reluctance to play the game, accounts for how his friends initially tried to control Rory’s first experiences with *LoL*: “We mostly played against bots for the start of it because when we tried to play actual games people were quite horrible and they didn’t want me to be put off by the other horrible people”.

Conversely, DK has previously told other people who asked him that they should not play *LoL* but did not cite the community as the reason as to why.

It’s not about the community. I think unless you have free time, you’re not gonna enjoy League because there’s so much to it that it has to be your main game and if it’s not, then you’re not gonna enjoy it.

DK said that when he has spoken to new players, they have said that they were not initially aware of anything negative about the *LoL* community. Whilst some players proactively try to protect new players from negative behaviours, other players are unaware of the reputation that *LoL* holds. DK's comment about there being "too much" to *LoL* for people to play the game more casually, alludes to why commitment to the game is important for continued play. Low skill and minimal knowledge are seen as triggers for toxic behaviour (Chapter 6), due to players being judged on a range of nuanced elements surrounding play, as seen in other game titles such as *World of Warcraft* (Paul, 2018, p. 112). Players therefore need to commit time to the game to generate this knowledge and skill, explaining DK suggestion that without a committed approach, players will be unable to enjoy *LoL*.

Understanding early experiences or knowledge surrounding the *LoL* community and gameplay contribute to understanding this linear path of player retention as it can be seen to impact players' personal and individualised understandings of the game, the game environment, player behaviours and player expectations, and the development of ways to navigate what can be considered negative gaming environments.

5.5 Conclusion

Understanding what keeps people eticed *in* a percievably toxic online multiplayer game must be prefaced by understanding how people first became involved and 'hooked' on playing a game from the start. Player retention can be considered as a more linear path, and one which builds on, and responds to, how players develop their initial interest in the game. When we then add 'obstacles' or 'disruption' to this – in the form of toxicity – it is important to understand what comes before this disruption, because this can be seen as an important influence in understanding why players work to overcome or mitigate negative experiences so as to to continue to enjoy the game.

It is important to realise here is that a majority of participants were aware of – or experienced – toxicity in *LoL* early on, and some even make others who are new to the game aware of this from the outset. This toxicity is performed through acts of “dark participation” (Kowert, 2020, p. 2), and players being aware of this early on in their interactions therefore suggests that there is a very embedded sense of toxicity within the culture and community surrounding the game, speaking to Frow and Morris’ (2000, p. 316) conceptualisation of culture as “a network of embedded practices and representations” which shape societal interaction. The ideas of warning new players or needing the connection of friendship to coax players through initial game instances and potential toxicity demonstrates how toxicity has had a powerful influence over players interactions.

This chapter has explored how players of *LoL* became aware of the game, and what sparked their initial commitment to play. It has illustrated that whilst some players will have a shared common feeling around the game, there is diversity within umbrella categories; for example, whilst character design and visuals are important to some, the nuance of how players really understand and experience these feelings differs greatly between them. It has shown that there is often no one thing that leads players to a more committed involvement with the game: it is a combination of factors within and beyond the game itself. This individualisation around experience and gameplay endures into how players develop understandings and interpretations of toxicity, which will be explored next, in Chapter Six.

Chapter 6

Contentious concepts: Terminology and idiosyncrasies in player understandings of ‘toxicity’

6. 1 Introduction

We can just say it and we know what it means, but then do you really know what it means? Because your definition of toxic is different to mine. It's interesting.

- Elliott

The survey identified that 61 per-cent of participants described the *LoL* community as ‘toxic’, reflecting the reputation that *LoL* has gained for being so. The term ‘toxicity’ lacks clarity or precision in meaning, especially in academic literature, as explored in Chapter 2. There is thus a need for academics and game developers to be more precise in their use of the term. However, I suggest that the concept of toxicity remains useful as a starting point for working towards an understanding of how current problems within *LoL* - or the gaming community more broadly - might be addressed. It also serves as a useful term for positioning how toxicity arises as a form of power and agency. The now prolific and sometimes indiscriminate use of the term ‘toxicity’ undermines and conceals the impact of toxic behaviours grouped under the banner of ‘toxicity’, risking the invisibility of socially destructive behaviours by not explicitly naming them. Greater specificity about what toxic behaviours *are* helps to identify actions which are often ‘thrown away’ as being toxic, and which have more insidious roots in racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism.

With this in mind, this chapter will explore the diversity and idiosyncrasies associated with use of the term ‘toxicity’ amongst *LoL* players. Section 6.2 discusses how participants describe ‘toxicity’ and the behaviours they assign under the umbrella of ‘toxic behaviour’. It considers whether this aligns with

Riot's new guidelines around 'Game Ruining Behaviours'. Section 6.3 considers what contributes to and produces toxicity and toxic behaviours in *LoL* specifically. This is then followed by consideration of teamplay and toxicity (6.4). The chapter closes by outlining the contributions that understanding and deciphering the word 'toxic' has made to understanding and addressing toxic gaming culture, explaining how they add to subsequent discussions on why we, as players, continue to play *LoL* despite notable toxicity. Understanding how toxicity is understood, constructed and experienced (Chapter 6) is integral to understanding how participants then work to avoid particular behaviours, manipulating their game environment where possible (Chapter 7), and important in developing an understanding of what game developers, and game culture more broadly, can do to address toxicity (Chapter 9).

6. 2 Toxicity: Contentious concepts and idiosyncrasies. Exploring what players deem to be toxic behaviour

This section will explore the issue of toxicity and how there exists discrepancies between developers and players surrounding whether behaviours as 'game ruining', and whether particular behaviours as more disruptive than others. Kou and Gui's (2017) work on governance in *LoL* explores the attitudes around governance, and thereby toxicity, by both Riot and *LoL* players. They demonstrate that "the value and interest of users and companies do not always align", and that this discrepancy and tension between parties "renders governance a thorny issue, as it concerns not only the efficiency of containing toxicity, but also player culture and player community" (Kou & Gui, 2017, p. 2063). Player humanity illustrates the importance of understanding toxicity within the context of gaming culture, as they feed into each other cyclically, producing and reproducing in response to each other.

This section will provide a brief overview of what Riot has called ‘game ruining behaviour’, considering whether participants feel that ‘game ruining behaviour’ is synonymous with ‘toxic’, speaking to the tension that Kou and Gui identify (2017). Secondly, it will explore the factors which impact how participants interpret particular behaviours, which contribute to identifying behaviours as toxic – or game ruining – or not. This draws upon what makes players *human*, and not bots, exploring approaches to game play, skill, knowledge, personally identifying characteristics, world views, and playstyle. This speaks to how some decisions may be informed by attitudes which are established within gaming culture more broadly.

This chapter and the remainder of this thesis aims to illustrate how toxicity can be seen as a useful term and tool to help us understand gaming culture and toxicity in a more meaningful way, as opposed to reducing ‘toxicity’ to not only being accepted as the ‘norm’ within gaming culture but understanding it only in its most colloquial of definitions.

6.2.1 Game ruining or toxic? Are they the same thing?

The following section draws on discussions around toxicity, game ruining behaviour, and participant data to develop discussion around whether understandings of toxicity are the same between developers and players. It considers this in relation to how such behaviours are articulated within the games’ own policy.

6.2.1.1 Riot’s approach to ‘toxicity’ – or ‘game ruining behaviour’

In June 2020, Riot Games made the move towards discussing what they termed ‘game ruining behaviour’, with the coining of this phrase marking a recognition that such behaviours existed and signalling a commitment to tackling these in-game issues (Riot Games, 2020a). It is surely not a

coincidence that this renewed pledge to tackle negative in-game behaviours came only a month after VoyBoy (2020) spoke out on YouTube about the difficult state of the game and player behaviours. Riot defined ‘game ruining behaviour’ as:

This is about players deliberately ruining the game for others, making it very difficult or impossible for their team to win.

It’s not about people who are genuinely trying and having a bad game or series of games even. Sometimes someone gets absolutely crushed in lane and dies over and over again. That’s very different to a player deciding the game’s over and then spending their time trolling others instead of trying to win.

[...] It happens at all levels of play, though tends to be more common with players who’ve been playing for a while and generally understand how to avoid getting banned by our existing AFK and obvious inting detection.

Streamers often get targeted for this sort of trolling due to their higher profile. It’s not an issue unique to streamers, though. (Riot Games, 2020a)

Within this Riot specify hard-to-detect behaviours (intentionally dying whilst trying to appear as though they are trying to win, stealing CS, avoiding team fights, not committing to objectives), alongside AFKing and inting. Riot do not use the term ‘toxic’ to describe these behaviours which often come under the umbrella concept of ‘toxicity’, but instead refer to them as ‘game-ruining’. This includes – as Riot (2020) reference further in their *Dev Blog* post on the topic – disruptive player behaviour in champion select, such as poor decisions or ‘troll’ decisions in choosing a champion to play. What should also be considered alongside this is Riot’s Code of Conduct for *LoL*, which is fronted by the notion of ‘Community Values’ where Riot asks players to ‘Commit to Competition’ (Riot Games, 2023b):

We believe that fairness means games are free from cheating, misuse of game systems, and all forms of harassment and behavior that prevent any player from playing their best.

Most interesting here is the focus on three key areas: cheating, misuse of game systems, and harassment. Yet, it could be argued that harassment also contributes to the ruining of games, whether players are then able to play their best in spite of this or not? It could be argued that such ambiguity could blur the distinction between ‘Code of Conduct’ and ‘game ruining behaviour’.

In their study of *EVE Online*, Suzor and Woodford (2013) identify that community norms and accepted behaviours are constantly shifting and evolving, thus making it tricky to navigate the notion of governance. Riot (2023a) speak to this, stating that:

Showing up to win doesn't mean restricting yourself to playing what's meta. Trying something new is a valid way to play—as long as you're still supporting your team and making an effort to win. Keep in mind this extends to your teammates: Even if you disagree with their playstyle, give them a chance and focus on winning as a team.

This suggests that Riot are, in theory, supportive of players developing new ways to play and enabling players to make the game their own in relation to play style. This thesis suggests that there are a number of difficulties when it comes to realising this flexibility in practice, especially for players (considered in Section 6.2).

Riot (2023a) produced a list of “Do’s and Don’ts” for players, organised into four key ‘Behaviour Expectation’ categories, which can be summarised as follows:

- i) Compete to win: This has a focus on team play, in spite of the game conditions. It comprises of: only entering games when committed and intending to win; to not ‘give up’ on teammates or intentionally put the game in jeopardy, and to not tell other players how they should be playing or to assign blame for in-game actions and consequences.

- ii) Respect your teammates: Players are asked to be respectful of ‘individual differences and experiences’, drawing attention to the global player-base that League has. Players are told to focus communication on the game itself. Players are asked to not make jokes about individuals, to refrain from using threats and abusive or hateful language, noting that no one should have to “toughen up’ to tolerate language”.
- iii) Protect yourself and your team: Here Riot reminds players to make use of in-game systems to keep the community as a safe space (including the mute function, language filters, and the report system) and to not retaliate if other players are abusive.
- iv) Be your own last line of defence: This focuses on internet and account safety, referencing strong passwords, account sharing, or the disclosure of personal information.

The Code of Conduct is lengthy and Riot produce a bullet-pointed list of “Behaviors the Community Rejects” (Riot Games, 2023b):

Comms Abuse: *Offensive language, hateful speech, sexual harassment*

Cheating: *Third party exploits, hacks, bug abuse, account sharing, account boosting*

Offensive or Inappropriate Names: *Player names, account names, group names*

Intent to Lose - Leaving the Game/AFK: *Disconnecting, AFKing, idling, refusing to play*

Intent to Lose - In Game Behaviors: *Intentional feeding, in-game harassment, sabotage*

Threats: *Out-of-game physical harm, emotional abuse, doxxing, bullying*

This list of behaviours speaks to the harmful behaviours as identified by the FPA (2020, pp. 18-21) in their Disruption and Harms in Online Gaming Framework. It is interesting that the same extensive list of behaviours does not appear within the definition of game ruining behaviours. As arguably many of these behaviours clearly are ‘game ruining behaviours’, we can ask why this distinction exists.

6.2.1.2 What behaviours do players define as ‘toxic’?

Before we can consider whether toxicity and game ruining behaviours are considered similar, we need to understand which specific behaviours players deem to be ‘toxic’. Table 6.1 illustrates the behaviours participants mentioned that they would define as toxic, and the number of participants who mentioned said behaviour.

Table 6.1 Behaviours categorised by players ‘toxic’ and frequency mentioned

Behaviour	Number of participants mentioning behaviour
Verbal aggression in chat <i>Including: abusive, racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, flaming, use of slurs, raging, rankism, champ-ism, talking back in chat, putting others down, non-constructive chat, insults, bullying, flaming, flame in champ select re: champion choice, win rate, match history</i>	17 <i>Note: Jack said that others considering flaming in-game toxic, however he does not because it does not affect him negatively.</i>
Inting <i>Including: soft inting, feeding, running it down</i>	13
Purposefully sabotaging the game <i>Including: not using abilities to contribute to team fights before dying, stealing CS or buffs to impact other team mates negatively, win trading, refusing to co-operate with the team, intentionally loosing</i>	6
Excessive/spam/passive aggressive pings	5
Holding games hostage <i>Including: exerting control over others, not surrendering</i>	5
Trolling <i>Including: troll picks, not knowing how to play champ selected, randomly ulting, bad builds/itemization, perma-split, griefing</i>	5
Negative attitude towards the game <i>Including: ‘unwinnable’, ‘you’re ruining the game’, giving up on the game, not trying</i>	4
AFKing	3
Playing badly <i>Including: poor decisions</i>	1

The behaviours listed in Table 6.1 fit neatly into Riot’s ‘Behaviours the Community Rejects’ categories as follows, again reflecting the values within the FPA’s (2020, pp. 18-21) Disruption and Harms in Online Gaming Framework:

Table 6.2 Behaviours categorised by players ‘toxic’ compared with the categories of ‘Behaviours the Community Rejects’ as developed by *Riot Games* (2023b).

Riot Category	Participant defined behaviours
Comms Abuse <i>Offensive language, hateful speech, sexual harassment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Excessive/spam/passive aggressive pings ○ Verbal aggression in chat
Intent to Lose - Leaving the Game/AFK <i>Disconnecting, AFKing, idling, refusing to play</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Inting ○ Holding games hostage ○ Purposeful sabotage
Intent to Lose – In Game Behaviours <i>Intentional feeding, in-game harassment, sabotage</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Inting ○ Verbal aggression in chat ○ Purposeful sabotage ○ Trolling ○ Playing badly
Threats <i>Out-of-game physical harm, emotional abuse, doxing, bullying</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Verbal aggression in chat

Behaviours relating to ‘Cheating’ or ‘Offensive or inappropriate names’ were not mentioned by participants, and there is some overlap between behaviours and Riot’s categories (Table 6.2). For example, verbal aggression in chat, can also be categorised as ‘Threats’ and ‘Intent to Lose behaviours’, which fall under both ‘Leaving the game’ and ‘In Game Behaviours’. Behaviours which Riot define as ‘game ruining’ include intentional sabotage – which are often more difficult to detect - including the stealing of jungle camps or minions (CS) or not contributing or avoiding team fights, AFKing, inting, and trolling, and these have all been identified by participants as ‘toxic’ behaviours and contributing to toxicity in games.

6.2.1.3 Do players and game developers think the same?

Many of the behaviours identified by players in this study fall within the realms of Riot’s (2023) ‘Behaviours the Community Rejects’ and therefore could also be identified as game ruining under

Riot's definition of this. However, there is some debate between players as to whether 'toxicity' and 'game ruining behaviour' are the same or interchangeable as concepts. All participants in this study reported that at the very least there are similarities between 'toxicity' and 'game ruining behaviour', with three (Supkey, Nella and Eva) all stating that the two terms are interchangeable. Eva commented: "I feel like if it was toxic that would be game ruining, and if it was game ruining, it would be toxic, so I feel like they're kind of the same thing".

For Shane, toxicity and game ruining behaviour were different concepts, however both were about exerting control and dominance, with particular players using any means necessary to try and control the game. Not dissimilar was WN's assessment that toxicity is "protecting your own ego at the cost of hurting other people". WN regarded themes of dominance, ego, and personal impact as aspects of the same group of behaviours. Toby assimilated this with the notion of power, drawing upon how a lack of an inclusive community results in personal attacks being used as method of exerting power and control:

I do believe lack of inclusivity creates toxicity. [...] but I feel that if toxicity wasn't about some part of diversity, like gender and ethnic background, it would just be about something else. The people being toxic are doing this because they are not happy with themselves, they'll latch on anything they think gives them power.

Whilst previous research has suggested that a lack of diversity within gaming produces "symbolic annihilation" which can lead to exclusionary discourses (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Shaw, 2012), Toby almost suggests that even if the *LoL* community was more inclusive, toxicity would emerge in some form suggesting an inevitability to the behaviour. In then thinking about the role of behaviour within culture (Geertz, 1973) it could be suggested that the role of such toxic practices is there to determine belonging, though a lot of data would be needed to support and explore this. However, six participants were sensitive to context, considering how some behaviours will impact on some players more than others based on personal identity or personal approach to the game (see 6.2.2.1,

6.2.2.2). For these participants, such behaviours could be more impactful depending on timing or game context. Ray explained that this notion of context is what set 'toxicity' apart from 'game ruining behaviour', stating:

I think you could make predictions on the specific behaviours that would directly ruin it for most people but then I think an additional variable would be the context that is set in your own identity.

Lavender expanded on this, as she felt that "that people have different ideas of what toxic". She discussed how discussion of toxicity often revolved around inting and flaming, yet "the reality of what they are recalling might be that somebody had a bad game". This demonstrates the complexity of determining what may or may not be toxic, and diverse interpretations of the same instance. However, Lavender's own articulation of toxicity moved away from play itself. She focused her definition on verbal abuse, saying "When I say toxic I would mean there's so much racism, sexism, homophobia, or personal attacks". She Lavender expanded on the notion of "own identity" raised by Ray:

I think that makes it difficult to use [toxicity] as a defining term for anything because toxicity is what affects you in the game. A lot of people don't care about those things or happily contribute towards all the discriminatory behaviour in League - but they might be like 'Oh, my support didn't heal. That's so toxic'.

In part what Lavender alludes to is the prolific use of the term 'toxicity' which seems to dilute the original strength of the term. The overuse of the term, for Lavender, increasingly obscures what are social issues existing in a microcosm in the gaming world. Further, Kieran and Elliot both noted the normalisation of toxicity within the game. Kieran said it was "part of the *League* experience", whilst Elliott drew attention to the two possibilities that such a normalisation of toxicity can have on the game. He said:

I think it could go either way about helping people to rationalise it and saying it's just them being toxic so I'm not gonna take it personally, but it's also people saying it's toxic so if you are bringing that aspect to it, it's okay to be toxic.

This consideration of normalisation can be seen as part of the social dialogue of *LoL*, which contributed to the production of a knowledge and “economy of thought” (2004, p. 59) within the *LoL* ecosystem. Whilst Lavender specifically mentioned personal and targeted discriminatory behaviours as being something contextual which is simultaneously game ruining and toxic, Amy, Elliot and Toby all spoke to both the *interpretation* and *intention* of behaviours as being very individual experiences. Amy noted that the intention behind the action or behaviour was important in distinguishing between toxic and game ruining.

I think going AFK or intentionally feeding is different to somebody personally being aggressive in the chat. If somebody starts doing that... well, I don't really care. It doesn't really bother me because I can brush it off, but I can see how it can upset people [...] but it's not the same as being verbally aggressive to somebody.

Similarly, Elliott felt that “there is overlap, but they are definitely separate” but again focused on intention. He suggested that a ‘game ruining’ behaviour is play-focused and defined by the performance of actions which are *intended* to contribute to losing a game, however toxicity is “less about the game and it's more about being mean to somebody and trying to bring somebody else down”.

Both Elliott and Amy highlight that the intention behind a behaviour can contribute to determining whether behaviours might be categorised as game ruining or toxic, however – as discussed above – determining this intention is highly personal. This highlights how toxicity is a “significant [departure] from norms” (Merton, 1976, p. 28), but that these norms may differ between individuals (Merton, 1976) and be developed according to specific communities, individuals, times and spaces (Suzor &

Woodford, 2013, p. 3). This poses a problem for games developers in addressing toxicity as an issue.

Toby acknowledged this stating:

I'd rather have someone in my bot lane calling me gigashit who's actually playing really well than someone who is telling me I'm playing great and then just throwing it. But I appreciate that it's not the same for everybody because everyone deals with things in different ways but at the same time.

Much like Amy noting that such behaviour might not “bother” her, to Ray stating “I don’t get upset when people flame me [...] I couldn’t care less”, this highlights that there is not only subjectivity in interpretation, but differing preferences which are being constructed and reconstructed simultaneously by players in the game space. There is also the question as to whether intention *might not* matter at all. Instead, perhaps, it is about how information is received and interpreted by the individual, not the perpetrator, alongside general social codes of conduct and ethics – although these may widely differ. On the other hand, how it is received may not be the central issue, but rather abusive or behaviour that lacks in-games person-ship could be considered game ruining or toxic regardless of how it is received.

This in combination demonstrates the complexities of understandings of toxicity, and how difficult it can be to define and regulate such behaviours. What appears to be common, however, is that the distinction between ‘game ruining’ and ‘toxic’ is found in how actions impact individuals. Toxicity is associated more clearly with a personal, negative, and emotional impact or outcome on the individual to whom it is directed. Comparatively, the impact of behaviour which is game ruining seems to exist in a more localised way within the confines of the game space. Of course, individual frustration post-game may still exist. This is encapsulated by Kieran’s comment that “any behaviour which negatively impacts oneself or another player (specifically in the realm of gaming) is toxic”, and Johnny’s comment that “When someone tells me ‘Please die, kill yourself’, something like that -

that's a personal and I take it seriously". Jack noted a difference between 'toxicity' and 'game ruining' by the impact it has, stating that, for him, "toxicity doesn't really come from words because I don't get affected by that. It's just gameplay". The discussions here note how the online impacts the offline and vice versa: for Kieran and Johnny, online comments can impact the offline self negatively, whereas for Jack his offline self does not allow in-game to affect him. Whilst Fairfield has noted that "The border between the virtual and real worlds is porous" (Fairfield, 2008, p. 434), these instances highlight the idiosyncrasies in how this is realised.

The data suggests that participants generally weigh 'toxic' as something tangibly worse in terms of impact than 'game ruining behaviour', due to the stronger emphasis on the personal and emotional impact on individuals. However, Ray started to make this connection between the psychological impact on individuals, but then seemed to backtrack and posed toxicity instead as "trivial":

When I think toxic, it doesn't ruin the game. [...] It's trivial negative behaviour I think, a lot of the time. I don't think the consequences of toxicity are ever shown to the degree that it should be. I think toxic is almost like, it's bad but it's not that bad so we don't care.

This again speaks to a normalisation of toxic behaviour. Participants clearly highlight that behaviours in the game are *bad* and can impact enjoyment. Yet the way the term 'toxicity' is used and employed in such liberal ways normalises what can be socially and personally damaging behaviours. This speaks not only to how discourse normalises behaviours (Wilchins, 2004, p. 59) but how in not showing the true impact that toxicity has, this leads us to creating a disconnect between online and offline where we ignore this impact, aligning with Coutts' (2013, n.p.) notion that we "simply choose to ignore" that online is still real life.

Whilst most participants spoke about the context and idiosyncrasies of how toxicity can impact people, WN instead spoke about this in relation to game ruining behaviour:

Game ruining is very subjective - you can have your game ruined by a lot of things and out of 1000 people you could be the only person that could have your game ruined by that [...] so it's super specific to how you like to play the game. Whereas toxicity I'd say is generally the things that everybody would find toxic like the people who flame you in all chat - most people would agree that's toxicity.

This demonstrates discrepancy between understandings and conceptualisations of how all individuals think about 'toxicity' and 'game ruining behaviour', and when – or if – distinctions are drawn between them. Prior to embarking on this research, I believed that there would be a consensus around what behaviours are deemed as toxic or impactful. However, participants in this study have strongly indicated that these are very much subjective terms. This was revealed in WN's comment, "I can have my game ruined by people not doing rotations that maybe somebody else just doesn't think of. It's not that they're being toxic, it's not that they're not trying". These diverse and opposing views amongst players have been found also within Attouch and Carcia-Bardidia's (2021) work on toxicity in *LoL*. When toxicity is such a strong word, it seems reasonable to assume the existence of a general and consensual understanding of what toxicity means. However, it seems that we need to think more about how such 'toxicity' is *received* and the disproportionate and varied impacts that being on the receiving end of toxic behaviours has on different individuals.

This exploration makes clear that the area of toxicity is a messy one for games developers, players and academics interested in gaming communities and cultures. Whilst games developers such as Riot have taken a hard line, preferring to use the term 'game ruining behaviours' to address negative game experiences, players, note the blurriness on this topic. Riot's categories of 'game ruining behaviour' are weighted towards the 'technical', whereas players have highlighted the importance of the emotional and personal effects of behaviour. This thesis, therefore, is leading to a suggestion

that ‘toxicity’ encompasses a whole range of behaviours and requires a more nuanced, individualistic discussion around exactly what behaviours are, whilst ‘game ruining’ refers to more specific technical aspects of behaviour, primarily bound by game play. This is then more reflecting of what gaming culture *actually is*, and how it is realised by players. If gaming culture is a set of malleable and flexible “practices, experiences, and meanings” (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, p. 17), there is a need to more formally recognise the flexibility of how behaviours are performed and interpreted, and how these varied interpretations can result in intergroup conflict. The following section aims to explore the nuance needed around discussing and understanding toxicity, as driven by player experiences.

6.2.2 Players are human, not bots: The importance of context and individuality when interpreting ‘toxic’ behaviours

The unique perspectives of each player do not only contribute to the foggy process of distinguishing between ‘toxicity’ and ‘game ruining’ as concepts, but also the broader responses to and interpretations of such behaviours as they are received by players. This section will explore the nuances of interpreting ‘toxicity’, when this can encompass both technical and more personal, lived experiences of behaviours. This discussion aims to contribute towards the argument that greater clarity is needed from academics, game developers and the industry more broadly when calling for change to provide solutions to such issues within *LoL* and gaming culture more broadly. An understanding of the issues, and ways to address them within community and gaming culture behaviours, must begin by understanding how these issues are being interpreted.

In speaking to player participants in this study, it became evident that context was important in relation to whether behaviours are interpreted as toxic. This expands on the above discussion and moves beyond the distinction between ‘toxic’ and ‘game ruining’ to consider how individual and

personal contexts, alongside the transient and non-replicable game contexts all contribute to understanding behaviours as – or not– toxic. Five key areas were identified as influential in how individual players may make decisions and interpretations around behaviours that could be deemed toxic:

- i. Offline personal characteristics
- ii. Playstyle and approach to play
- iii. Mindset
- iv. Knowledge (including skill, rank) and ego
- v. Who you play with

The next section will explore each of these areas and propose that several factors determine how each individual behaviour is interpreted separately by players. It seems that such interpretation will be ever evolving and changing within each game instance, highlighting the complexity of addressing toxicity within games. Whilst games developers can provide guidelines and codes of conduct, it is how behaviours are interpreted by players which determines player perception of - and satisfaction with - how toxicity is 'addressed'. Because it relies so heavily on individual response, there lies a question as to how games developers 'tackle' a situation so diverse and lacking in player agreement.

6.2.2.1 Offline personal characteristics

Oh yeah, I'm lucky because I mean I'm male and I'm white - obviously you can't see it on the internet, but I know that if I was to ever use voice chat or camera I'm very lucky that there's not many things that are probably said, but I'm sure as a female, Beth, you've had horrible experiences [...] the classic 'Oh, go back in the kitchen. Make me a sandwich' and all this nonsense, so I probably have a very limited view of toxicity compared to a lot of – [...] I'm in a privileged position in that I don't see toxicity, but I'm sure if I was a different individual I'd probably say something very different.

- Ray

Section 6.2.1 illustrates that how individuals are affected by behaviours can contribute to how behaviours are identified to be 'toxic' or 'game ruining'. However, going beyond this is understanding and acknowledging how personal and identifying characteristics contribute to this, or how players receive and are impacted by particular behaviours. This is especially the case when players use chat-based communication to be aggressive towards other players. As Ray identified in the extract shared above, he felt somewhat sheltered from receiving - and to some extent noticing - toxicity based on his self-acknowledged identity conforming to the stereotyped gamer: that of a white, cis man. Ray acknowledged that gaming is articulated as a form of social capital for some men (Lehman, 2018). His perspective suggests that certain personal characteristics not only contribute to being personally affected by some negative language in-game, but also whether or not individual players are exposed to such behaviours at all. We can connect the example given by Ray – “Oh, go back in the kitchen. Make me a sandwich” – to discussions of cybersexism and “gender-driven trash-talking” (Vergel, et al., 2024, p. 1204). That Ray acknowledged this as a form of toxicity is important, as it could be suggested that identity, world view and awareness would potentially impact whether such comments are even classed as toxic, cybersexism, or gender-driven trash-talk.

Ray was not the only participant who identified gender as impactful. Lavender discussed playing *LoL* and meeting teammates on TeamSpeak, a voice-over-internet communication platform, recalling that being identifiable as female would result in her being on the receiving end of misogynist and sexist verbal abuse:

[Y]ou're dealing with a lot of sexism. Less so the anonymous, slur kind of stuff but - there was some of that - and there was a lot of like sexism if you're a girl. There were just a lot of excuses made for people who would behave like that, so you'd experience a lot of that social racism, sexism.

Something important to note here is that Lavender not only acknowledges that some experiences of toxicity are gender-driven, but some behaviours are normalised within the context of gaming communities in that she notes discriminatory behaviours were ‘social’. This places behaviours within a category of occurring only in particular groups, engaged with by individuals because of the company they are in when outside of these circumstances they would not individually engage in such behaviours, much like the concept of social smoking. This suggests that these behaviours are a part of accepted gaming culture, potentially being excused by groups of gamers as banter.

Eva, who has played in the Women’s National University Esports League (WNUEL), noted that whilst the WNUEL is intended to be a safe place for female and non-binary players to play without the risk of harassment that they often face in wider gaming circles (Kuss, et al., 2022; Bryter, 2021, pp.20-2; Bryter, 2020, pp. 15-17; McLean & Griffiths, 2019; Omar, et al., 2018; Cote, 2017; Assunção, 2016), sexist attitudes and behaviours are prevalent in these so-called ‘safe spaces’. Eva recounts how one player on her team was bullied by other teams and suggested that this female player must be cheating because she was performing well:

People were just having a go at our poor Jungler. She ended up quitting because people were just having a go at her, saying she scripted, she's got men on her account: she was just trying her best, having fun, minding her own business and people had a proper go her and she literally ended up leaving. I don't blame her because I probably would have done the same thing. It was not nice.

What is especially interesting in Eva’s account is that female players were harassing another female player in the way that often *male* players are seen and expected to. Whilst there has been academic consideration of how women are perceived to belong and fit in gaming culture, this has previously focused on how men police gaming spaces (Song, et al., 2021; Morgenroth, et al., 2020; Taylor, 2006b), and therefore it is interesting to see how such behaviours are also being performed *by* women, *to* other women. That the female player in question left the team supports previous

research that often women will leave online gaming spaces in order to escape harassment (Cote, 2017; Bryter, 2020; Bryter, 2018), but again that this is prompted by behaviour from other women is new. Eva recounted two additional occasions where this happened: one where a female teammate tried to get other team members to be replaced by male players, and another where a female player was accused of having a man play on her account despite evidence to the contrary:

[...] there were videos of her speaking, you can hear her [...] it's clearly her playing and not a man but putting that accusation out there it's like people are making that accusation because the assumption is women can't play so it means it must be man that is doing this.

Here Eva recounts how women are assumed to be unable to play, stating “There’s definitely a negative impression – even amongst women – of how good women are at the game”. This highlights how gaming environments are hostile towards women based on gendered boundaries around who can and cannot be skilled in gaming (Linderöth & Öhrn, 2014; Marcotte, 2016; Paaßen, et al., 2017; Drenten, et al., 2023). Eva had witnessed this kind of behaviour but had no personal experience of it, however she was acutely aware of how gender is used as a method of attack and is a form of toxicity that would impact some individuals but not others. In the case of Eva’s experiences, women might be hyper aware of the possibility of experiencing more toxicity as Ray had also noted. How gender shapes experiences of toxicity demonstrates how masculinity is embedded within gaming culture (Paaßen, et al., 2017), and recreated by gamers themselves, which then drives the establishment of some individuals not belonging within that space which acts as fuel for conflict. Hills (2002, p. 34) has noted that in formulating belonging, fans will engage in “legitimizing one’s own cultural practices against other imagined subjectivities”. We can then see this being realised through the male presence in gaming spaces being legitimised by behaviours acting to exclude women based on norms of belonging. Toxicity might then be validated based on ingroup values based around belonging.

Whilst the above has discussed personal identities that exist outside of the game, Toby draws attention to how *LoL* becomes a part of a person's individual identity, at least for some players:

I feel like it's very easy to take it personally though when League is important to you. It's not just a game when it is a core part of your identity. If this is what you do when you get home, you're your IGN and you're playing Twisted Fate in midlane or something [...] and then when someone attacks that, it feels like a personal attack because it's so much of what you are.

The idea that the game becomes an important part of players' identities, making attacks around play, skill and belonging feel particularly poignant, appeals to the phenomena of the human experience. In a similar vein, personal attacks based around offline personal experiences and circumstances were seen to violate a moral code in a way that insults based around game play were not. Mei noted this, saying:

If you insult someone because he's a bad player or she doesn't know how to play this game - that's fine because you insult that person in the way he plays or she plays. But if you tell the person 'I hope you got cancer', 'I hope you die' - that's not normal. I think if you are mad at somebody, you should place it on the way they play and not on their life [...] because you don't know what's happened with that person.

Whether a player will or will not interpret language as toxic or not can be highly dependent on circumstance. As a player myself, I have seen the insults that Mei recounts in my own games and felt particularly upset by them because of the experiences that I have held in my own life around those close to me. Behind a keyboard, and behind an IGN, it is easy for players to forget that ultimately the champions they are seeing in-game are being controlled by individuals with lives which exist beyond the game, and that therefore some language use might negatively impact some players more than others. Much of what players within this study seem to suggest is in the vein of 'toxicity is in the interpretation of the receiver', however surely some of the ways in which language and experiences are utilised – around discrimination and threats to life – should be considered toxic regardless of whether the receiver deems them as such, or not. It feels apt to conclude with Ray's remark:

I wish that you could just say 'It doesn't matter what this idiot said', but it does.[...] But it's like the racism after every football game now [...] They say these things without even considering the context or the difficulties. They lack the empathy to understand this.

Here Ray almost suggests that there are acceptable ways of being toxic that universally will have less impact on individuals, but some of the more targeted and specific ways in which toxicity is communicated lack consideration, or human empathy. This might be then attributed to how anonymity is seen to contribute to poor behaviour in online spaces (Guo & Caine, 2021; Nitschinsk & Tobin, 2022). Ray and Lavender, however, both mentioned discriminatory behaviours which specifically refer to hate speech: racism, sexism, and homophobia. These behaviours can be seen to be informed by established norms within gaming culture about *belonging*. If gaming culture is constructed as hegemonically white, cis, and masculine (Engelstätter & Ward, 2022; Shaw, 2012; De Grove, et al., 2015; Gray, 2015), then processes of social identification may be utilised to inform discriminatory practices based on construction of an out-group (Turner, 1982) who do not *belong* in gaming spaces. In considering offline personal characteristics, it could be suggested that this is a transgression which is informed not only by gaming communities and cultures, but by offline norms and values, further demonstrating the lack of separation between game worlds and offline worlds in the interpretation of toxicity (Fairfield, 2008).

6.2.2.2 Playstyle and approach to play

[E]veryone has a very individual, unique perspective of how to play League... Obviously, there is a general sense of how to play the game[...] But obviously how you do that is very different

- Kieran

One of the key themes that emerged amongst participants was how players have very individual playstyles and approaches to gameplay overall. Within gaming, the term 'meta' is used to refer to

what is considered 'standard' within the game, and specifically in relation to *LoL* this can refer to the roles in which particular champions best perform, the particular items which champions should build, and even champions which work well together as a team. What is considered meta is also often synonymous with 'optimal' (Paul, 2024, p. 3) in that players play what is currently meta – the type of playstyle which carries the highest chances of winning. This being said, playing something that is meta is still only useful or effective if players are able to play, say, a particular champion or role in the first place. The meta is determined by both players, game analysts, and the developers themselves as they tweak and balance the game overtime through 'Patches' to the game: small, regular, updates which change small mechanical or visual elements of the game.

Three participants, Supkey, Johnny and Jack, identified themselves either as off-meta players or as enjoying playing, at times, off-meta champions or builds. Johnny identified himself as an off-meta player, which as "very rare, sadly", and noted that there are key issues within the community around interpreting and understanding off-meta play but felt that what should distinguish off-meta from toxicity is intention:

I like trying new things and weird stuff, but the majority of feedback I get from that is 'Oh, you're trolling, you're feeding, you're not trying'. But there's a difference between going full troll builds or actually trying off-meta - making something weird work. But the community doesn't get that.

For Johnny, he notes that even as an off-meta player, determining what is off-meta and what is trolling can be "hard to tell" due to it mostly being around "the intention of your play", which only the player themselves truly knows. Whilst he notes that the community does not seem to understand - broadly speaking – that off-meta approaches can work, it is important to remember that Riot's own community guidelines are supposedly supportive of this: "Showing up to win doesn't

mean restricting yourself to playing what's meta. Trying something new is a valid way to play” (Riot, 2023a). However, for Johnny, the community does not respect or acknowledge more diverse ways to play. Kieran spoke to this a little, saying “unless you're really thinking about ‘Oh, maybe this guy had a legitimate plan. Maybe he's doing this for legitimate reasons. Maybe he's not the idiot I thought he was - or she was”.

The difficulty that players have with distinguishing sincere off-meta play versus trolling was noted by Supkey. Both Supkey and WN shared anecdotes about responding to patches within the game by considering how in-game changes will work best with their main champions – something referred to as ‘theory crafting’. Interestingly, however, Supkey notes that whilst he is a fan of off-meta play, he only values it when it is thoroughly considered and within particular contexts:

Whenever they change any item that could be bought on Janna, I'm already contemplating how I can use this and what it would be best with it... I think if it's a well thought out, off the meta build then it's fine but if I'm seeing like a Silver player [...] and they're going to go into it without the full understanding of what they're doing, it can be a little bit difficult.

This speaks to the misinterpretation of playstyles that Johnny notes above, and constructs off-meta, theorycrafted play as a well-considered and difficult to perform playstyle as to perform off-meta builds, champions or roles well, you need to have certain foundational knowledge and skills. Supkey added that for any new approach to a champion, he will test it out for at least twenty games, saying “I'm very thorough in my examination of seeing how many wins and losses and how much shielding I've done [...] I'll be very meticulous.” Theorycrafting and off-meta play goes against the conventional norms of play, and thus disrupts “behavioural etiquette” which has been noted to be “met by rejection from allied players” (Donaldson, 2017, p. 441), as Johnny and Jack both experienced. That builds need to be tested by off-meta players will inherently disrupt conventional norms, despite seeking to ensure that this is a legitimate, well-intentioned form of play. Jack noted that whilst he

tests things out in games, when carefully thought-out builds do not work out, his gameplay is seen as ‘trolling’:

I ended up failing terribly in that game. My team wasn't happy so that's like a prime example from my case where I was trying, but I probably did play a part in somebody else's game being ruined and it was the case of me playing off-meta intentionally.

Jack’s account demonstrates that even with skill and careful consideration, the playstyle can be interpreted as toxic or as ‘not trying’ or ‘intending to lose’ purely through something not working out as intended or hoped. Shane noted the difficulty that exists in there not being a blanket statement about how off-meta picks can be seen as ‘troll’ or ‘toxic’, providing an example from one of his own games, where a player used an off-meta champion in the Support role when he was playing ADC:

You can make the argument that [...] as long as he's warding and doing some of the expected macro play type things that's not really trolling [...] I do think it kind of ruins my laning phase a little bit because there's no lane pressure and things like that - but that one to me is like on the fence.

Shane added that “it's not like there's this definitive statement you can make about what's toxic, especially in regard to off-meta picks”. This then starts to illuminate the complexities and nuance required in order to understand and interpret off-meta forms of play, and what their impact really is on the game: for some, still performing the key actions – such as warding mentioned above – is enough, but for others, this would still be deemed as toxic and potentially not playing to win. Amy, whilst not an off-meta player herself, identified that as the meta is communicated via players and developers, and is constantly evolving, making it difficult for new or existing players to navigate. She commented that “the meta so set in stone and it's so like ‘this is how we play’ but nowhere does it say that's how we play”. This comes down to a consideration of knowledge, skill or rank (see 6.2.2.4). Players who do not engage with or entertain the notion of off-meta play may easily and quickly interpret something which is off-meta as being a *troll pick* or form of toxicity. Players may

also intentionally pick something considered to be *bad* within the current meta. Whilst occasionally this may be the case, it does mean that some serious off-meta players who engage with theorycrafting in a passionate way will experience toxicity being aimed at them through misunderstanding. This can provide a duality of how playstyle approaches can impact how - or if - in-game behaviours are considered toxic because ultimately playstyle is incredibly personal. Whilst such playstyles are not breaking any game rules or codes of conduct, it goes against the community constructed notions of acceptable play (Paul, 2024, p. 31), often then contributing to a more hostile game environment. If, as Amy suggests, ways of playing are “so set in stone”, despite Riot’s rhetoric suggesting otherwise, this constructs very distinct groups of players: the ingroup who perform expected and normalised methods of play, and an outgroup who plays off-meta. This outgroup is then devalued in status, being stereotyped as not constructively contributing to the group goal of victory, and therefore such players do not develop a positive social identity within their own team due to existing prejudices (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Korostelina, 2007). Thus, as per conflict theory, ingroup interests are perceived to be at odds with off-meta players performances, resulting in toxicity being levelled against these players.

6.2.2.3 Mindset

Five participants spoke to the idea of ‘mental’, which explores players’ individual approaches to the games in terms of mindset. This encompassed how enjoyment was gained from the game, and how emotion and mindset can move from one game instance into another and thereby influence how a player treats others within the game. Elliot noted overflow from one game instance into another, producing a negative mindset from the start:

I'll queue up with strangers and straight off the bat they will be instantly demanding, rude [...] it'll start to go down that route of slurs and being really annoying. I feel like they

probably had some really bad games or some really bad experiences and [...] they still want to play but they're so fed up they just want to do what they want to do.

This speaks to a form of holding the game hostage and seeking mirror a previous experience onto other players so they know how they feel. As Elliot put it “‘I’m not having fun, so you can’t have fun’”. He also noted that sometimes this can happen even when playing with friends, saying “they’ll say ‘I’ve had really bad games’ ... and they’ll bring that same energy to the next”, noting how the experience transfers from one game to the next based on attitude. Other participants acknowledged that this is sometimes a pattern for themselves or has been in the past. Ray mentioned that whilst it took time, he has reached a point with *LoL* where he only plays – or will continue playing – because he is having a good time, as opposed to “[playing] *League* because I want to play *League*”, stopping playing as soon as he stops having fun. DK spoke similarly, noting that sometimes players might become confused around their reason to play which would affect mindset:

There's like tons of people with so much passion for this game, you know? It can also, turn out for the worst [...] They'll play even though they're not enjoying it [...] It's like passion and then there's addiction.

DK went on to suggest that parts of the community cannot tell if they love the game or are addicted, and that it is these players who tend to be most toxic. Whilst Ray would stop playing once he stopped having fun, DK said that he would take intentional breaks every year – usually a three-month break – because “it keeps you in a health state of mind for *League*”. This is something that Toby also acknowledged, saying he often noticed that he would play better if he had taken a break from *LoL*, saying that after a two-week break, “I come back to it with a fresh mind rather than being stuck in a rut of what I have to do”.

In their work on gaming gradual intervention systems, which prompt players to cease their gaming session for the day, Zhou et al (2021) found that contextual factors were highly important, namely game performance – or luck – where players were likely to ignore the intervention messages when they were on a win streak, and more likely comply with the messages if they were losing. One participant in Zhou et al.'s (2021, p. 3:21) study stated “...if I am having back luck, I will think about having a rest. Maybe my luck will improve after I come back”. The same player also noted that only after such intervention prompts would they realise that they were experiencing mental or physical fatigue (Zhou, et al., 2021, p. 3:22) and that therefore they should take a break. Zhou et al. (2021, p. 3:21) state that:

[S]uccess motivates gamers to win more, and loss motivates gamers to win back losses. Thus, sometimes back luck also leads to excessive use.

It could therefore be suggested that players such as Ray, DK and Toby taking breaks from the game entirely to ensure that they maintain a good mental relationship with the game reduces their chances of developing bad habits in relation to play and toxicity. However, much self-awareness and self-control is required to develop such a relationship.

For Ray, DK, Elliott, Toby and Supkey, enjoyment of the game should not be tied to winning and a large part of this is mindset-based. Supkey said, “If you lose, you lose, you know? At the end of the day, it's just a game”. Toby recalled a friend having an alternative approach, basing much of their enjoyment around winning games:

Your expectation for enjoying the game shouldn't be - I say this to my mate all the time - I'm just like 'How can you enjoy playing? Ever. Because you're not guaranteed a win ever'.

This suggests that if the sole and driving reason to play is to *win*, this can ultimately produce poor playing habits. Given the nature of *keeping playing until you win*, not taking breaks, and potentially becoming increasingly frustrated, can lead to poorer play and more losses. This was noted by DK, however he associated this with addiction, not enjoyment, suggesting that being held back by losses and continuing in cycles of poor play can result in toxicity brewing. As Jack put it, “It’s just any narrative where you put yourself as the person that will 1v5, but your teammates are holding you back that’s very appealing for humans”. There is emerging literature around the dangers of conflating addiction with passion around video game play (Zsila, et al., 2023; Deleuze, et al., 2018), suggesting a need to “avoid conflating healthy passion with pathological behaviour” (Deleuze, et al., 2018, p. 114). The findings from my study suggest that cycles of play dominated by losses, and thus the continuation of play to seek value and enjoyment from winning, is not a feature of addiction but of passion to win and frustration resulting from loss streaks is a contributing factor to why individuals might become or be toxic. One champion in *LoL*, Evelynnn, has a voice line - “*Hate and love are just two words for passion*” (League of Legends Wiki, 2024a) - encompasses how polarised emotions in *LoL* are often derived from passion for the game.

Individual mindset, however, will also impact the whole team. Supkey noted that he frequently tries to build up team morale with positive reinforcement to teammates via the chat, with statements such as “Well done”, “Such a good ULT snipe”, on the premise that:

That positive moral boost is gonna make them want to try to do more great plays like that and show off and have their moment, and that’s all I want - everyone to have a good time.

Much of what can be gained from these participants is that some players feel that individuals can play too much *LoL* in one go, and this can have several effects:

- Players lose focus on what enjoyment around the game is;
- A focus on winning can produce negativity towards the game and other players;
- Skill and mindset can stagnate and create negative experiences;
- Negativity from teammates can lead to pressure and poor play, rather than improved play.

This speaks to issues of teamplay and toxicity (section 6.4). Whilst *LoL* is a team game, so much of the game is impacted by individuals themselves, the decisions they make and how they treat others in the game, yet very often individuals themselves do not necessarily realise how their own approach and mindset might also negatively impact their own game.

6.2.2.4 Knowledge (including skill, rank) and ego

As of August 2024, *LoL* had 168 unique champions (Heath, 2024), with multiple new champions added to the roster each year. Each champion has at least five unique abilities, with some having double this. Within the game itself, there are over 150 items (Clement & Bielawski, 2022) and numerous rune combinations which add abilities and/or buffs to champions in the game. With each patch, the stats of champions, items or runes may change, as well as other aspects of the game relating to maps, minions, buffs and monsters. Therefore, a considerable amount of knowledge is needed to be able to play the game at a proficient level. This factor was mentioned by a number of players considering whether behaviours might be interpreted as toxic. This speaks, in part, to some participants views about approach to play and the meta. Amy spoke of how this learning curve and knowledge level contributed to, and were foundational to, toxicity:

The problem is there's such a steep learning curve from knowing nothing about League to actually playing it: knowing what's going on, [...] But I think the community could definitely put people off. I think if you've played a few games, you might know it's quite toxic.

Here Amy was discussing how when some players deem others unknowledgeable, this can contribute to players being targeted by toxic language or treatment in the chat. Players' lack of knowledge is not always out of ignorance but can be because players are new to the game and lack experience. Lavender acknowledged this, drawing attention to how existing players might be levelling up alternate accounts, and therefore come to the game with both prior knowledge and skill. She said, "You do hear often that people get flamed during tutorial games because [other] people are just trying to level up new accounts". This disparity in knowledge and skill, however, becomes more complicated when we consider alongside how people having different game approaches and knowledge. As Jack said:

[P]eople expect the game to be played a certain way, with the same skill level for all champions. Basically, you expect every teammate you have is try-hardening on their best champion and they're just doing their best.

The reality of *LoL* is that not everyone will be playing on their 'best' or 'main' champion all the time, nor playing the champion in exactly the same way as another player would. This sometimes leads to an increased sense of ego or a perception that players would perform better than their teammates when playing in the same role or playing the same champion, demonstrating that discrimination in games is also tied to in-game characteristics such as skill and rank (Nguyen, et al., 2022). Both Amy and Ray commented on this notion of superiority amongst players, with Ray noting that he has probably done that himself, saying "I'm gonna be a hypocrite because I have probably done that to be fair. Where I look and I think 'Yeah, I could have done better'". Supkey likened this sense of ego to wanting to be "the main protagonist":

[T]hey want to be in the shining sunlight, making sure that everyone knows that they caused this victory and it costs them the game because they'll just give up if they're losing early game. So that's not very cute.

Shane similarly noted that he felt “there’s a lot of Dunning-Kruger effects where people over-evaluate how important they are or how good they are in the game”. This sentiment was shared by Lavender who suggested that some players will think:

‘I’m right and I did everything right and now I can just treat you like a sub-human now because I think you’re wrong’. They believe they are the ones that are going to carry and they’re unwilling to throw aside that ego.

The idea of a player being at a higher skill level and with that, having a heightened sense of ego, might increase the possibility of toxic behaviour. This is corroborated by a range of existing studies (Shores, et al., 2014; Ballard & Welch, 2017; Shen, et al., 2020). This can similarly increase the chances of players of a lower skill or knowledge level being on the receiving end of toxicity. Susceptibility of lower-level players to negative experiences is increased, purely because of their entry point to the game. Jack mentioned how, when it comes to rank, ego and superiority are especially prevalent, saying:

[E]verybody is trying to prove their rank, they’re competing between themselves and their teammates, and their teammates can hold them back. It’s not a team thing [...] each person is for himself - and you’re looking at the others as competitors.

Here, Jack introduces the element of inherent competitiveness which comes with *LoL*, evidencing how performance becomes entangled with ego and perspective. Many players will perceive this as their teammates holding them back. Whilst this may sometimes be the case, it will not always be so. For Supkey, this was something that inhibits players own improvement and further contributes to a

toxic environment for many players:

Look only to your own gameplay: what can you do? [...] You can only affect your own gameplay; you can't change anyone else's. So, if you improve as a whole, you should win more out of the 50/50.

Johnny also explored this, stating that “You can see the bad plays of other players more than your own ones because you don't understand all your mistakes”. Supkey and Johnny are noting the ease at which it is easy to focus on the play of others and how this impacts a players’ own progression. This could be connected with the idea behind having individual playstyles and understandings of the game, leading to easier blame-placing when other players do not fit in with the approach, priorities or style of others. This suggests a sense of ego is found within players which helps shape their interpretation of behaviours. WN suggested that toxicity is directly linked to this notion of ego, commenting that toxicity is often “Somebody trying to protect their ego at the cost of somebody else’s. You’re trying to convince yourself that it wasn't your fault”. This illustrates the view that unique approaches or high levels of knowledge can increase the possibility of players experiencing toxicity or harassment in-game. Combining this with the fact that *LoL* is fast-paced, toxicity can emerge when players are not playing in synergy with other members of their team. Toby and Jack provided examples of this.

[W]hen we're talking about context, when you've got the support player telling me that I'm a terrible jungler or what have you - they don't understand the reasoning behind my decisions or why I've done this and not done this. They don't understand the context.

- Toby

I played with [...] a Shen OTP [one trick pony] in high ELO. I was so far down in the lane my only way to win the game was stay in a bush, wait for the next wave, kill it so they don't have wave at the Nexus and then that worked for a bit [...]. And so that's kind of trolling, but it's my only option. So kind of a grey line there.

- Jack

Toby and Jack's experiences both highlight individual knowledge, skill, and context, speaking back to Kieran's suggestion also, that unless you actively *think* about the intentions or knowledge of other players, they can be seen to be playing poorly. Toby draws attention to the fact that many players will main a particular role and therefore have a different knowledgebase of that role in comparison to other players. This means that interpretations of behaviour will be influenced by the type and level of knowledge a player brings to the game. Similarly, Jack illustrates that for some players, where they have particular knowledge of their opponent, their gameplay against this might be seen as 'trolling' despite it providing their best chance of winning. Jack noted that similar behaviours can be seen to flow into third-party sites, such as Reddit, saying whilst most posts are positive:

[Y]ou get one post talking about, 'I think this champion is too strong' or you go to the comments and it's just all over the place, mostly because the players don't know enough so they have very different opinions just because of their level of experience with that champion.

- Jack

Knowledge and interpretation of the game-state provides different contexts within which to interpret in-game behaviours and actions, thus providing the fuel for toxicity, alongside increasing the difficulty in detecting and monitoring this. Kieran noted that toxicity can be reactionary, rooted in both knowledge and ego. Kieran had not personally experienced anger at *LoL* out of nowhere, remarking that any anger comes about because "usually someone has done something that's not according to someone's unique plan and therefore breeds frustration". We can see from participants' comments that the combination of ego and knowledge, alongside the wider contextual factors already discussed, all contribute to an increased chance of interpreting behaviours as toxic. It has been noted that hierarchies develop within fan culture as shaped by fans, and whilst Hills (2002, p. 46) has suggested that fans compete over "fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and

status”, hierarchy pertaining to knowledge and status might be relevant here. Players attribute judgement to players based on the skill they express (Paul, 2018, p. 112), however if we combine this with status, knowledge, and ego, we can see that players will combine this knowledge and sense of self to pass judgement on other players, developing a hierarchical structure which can in turn produce an excuse for toxicity.

6.2.2.5 Who you play with

Three participants identified that who you are playing with – on your team or on the enemy team – influences how behaviours might be interpreted and the game mode that is being played. Shane noted that in going into a Ranked game, he has:

[t]he expectation that everyone else is playing in good faith, that they are trying to also win the game as much as I am [...] and when someone starts doing things that I didn't consent to, that is outside of that good faith, desire to win in a game - now that's toxicity to me.

For Shane, the context of entering a game is indicative of all players consenting to play their best and work together as a team until the end, regardless of the result, where ‘troll’ behaviour would be deemed toxic. However, Shane then goes on to discuss playing games with friends, and how opting to play off-meta or ‘troll’ team compositions is deemed acceptable and consenting behaviour:

If I have five friends [...] where we all want to play hook champs and we know we're gonna lose but we all together chose to have that fun: that's not toxic [...] everyone is kind of opting in and having fun.

Playing all ‘hook’ champions would be considered ‘troll’ or ‘off-meta’ without context, and therefore deemed toxic. However, when friends come together to do this, and consent to this gameplay together, the meaning and interpretation of the behaviour changes. Toby shared a similar anecdote,

noting his favourite “chill” way to play *LoL* is as a premade five-person team:

We played a five-man stack and we had the enemy team invade the jungle, 5v5, so I just put in the all chat ‘get the sweat buckets lads, it’s coming’ [...] I went mid at Level 2, killed someone I immediately put in the chat ‘I need a second sweat bucket for me now’ or something like that [...] It’s literally just you with your mates just having a laugh. No one’s getting flamed. If anything, it’s just light-hearted smack talk because they’re trying to tilt you.

Therefore, the context of who you play with can shape how behaviours are understood, making context incredibly important. Sharing banter which is harmless - not derogatory or malicious - with those who have ‘opted in’, can result in a positive game experience, however under different circumstances this could be interpreted differently. Supkey referred to this as “the unwritten terms and agreements”:

I see someone that’s not trying, that just gives up - they’re definitely going to get a report from me because I don’t like stuff like that in my game [...] [Y]ou’ve signed up, you click ready and the unwritten terms and agreements of that ‘Ready’ was that you were going to stick through this to the end, win or lose and you’re causing it to be a definite loss even though it’s not fully over yet.

The central theme here is consent: everyone in the game is opting in, and in clicking ‘Ready’ you are committed to play it out alongside whoever you are in that game instance with. In that consent process, the dynamics of the game will shape the behavioural norms which are then consented to. DK summarised this succinctly saying that “if you do it with some friend, it’s always banter [...] you’re just doing it on your own, then it is technically intentionally griefing and you’re technically ruining the game on purpose”. This idea of ‘opting in’ can also be considered more broadly within thinking about gaming and behaviour. When opting into a team game, it can be expected that those playing are going to try their best and be on the same page in terms of their goal, whether this be for ‘banter’ or for winning. However, DK’s comment demonstrates how the context of who is playing is

highly important in determining how players behave and how those behaviours are interpreted in relation to toxicity.

6.2.2.6 Section summary

Whilst previous research has suggested that “players have different personality characteristics that hurt or make other players mad” (Kordyaka, et al., 2023, p. 91), my research helps understand how players’ own capacities contribute to the perception and interpretation of behaviour by those witnessing behaviours. This section has considered the importance of such context in terms of:

- which player behaviour is performed (game mode, as a group of players for ‘bants’),
- the intention behind player behaviour (theory crafting, trying something new in ranked, OTP),
- player knowledge and skill gaps, playstyle, approach and mindset, and personal characteristics and factors,
- who the game instance involves.

These factors have been discussed, revealing the idiosyncrasies and diverse considerations that are integral in understanding how players construct and respond to toxicity or behaviours which can be perceived as toxic.

6.3 What contributes to and produces toxicity in *League of Legends*?

Participant interviews uncovered how they individually interpret toxic behaviours, revealing that players have a multiplicity of views on what *contributes to* and *produces* such toxicity. It is important to note at this point that four of the participants interviewed purposefully drew attention to their belief that – in their experience - toxicity is likely to come from a vocal minority, and it is this very vocal minority that has contributed to generating the reputation that *LoL* has for being ‘toxic’.

Within this, the notion of ‘meme’ was mentioned by both Ray and Lavender.

I don't like to use the word meme but it is – this meme that League is toxic, and everything is just toxic, it exists to be toxic but it's not.

- Ray

I think that once something becomes a meme – like League is toxic, its fans are toxic, its players are toxic – it divorces it from its context so it becomes almost meaningless [...]

- Lavender

Whilst Ray and Lavender acknowledged this idea of a ‘meme’, they had separate interpretations of this. Ray felt that it is just that: a meme. He said, ‘It’s just navigating it’, suggesting that whilst *LoL* is often represented and described as toxic, “if you go past that, then you actually realize there’s all this sick and interesting, amazing stuff that is really cool”. Conversely, Lavender felt that whilst *LoL* is popularly constructed as toxic, it is not different to other games:

it's not going to be that different to Overwatch where you can communicate with other players. It's team-based and time sensitive – like a sense of urgency – and all those factors that bubble up into everyone being cruel to each other.

On memes, Phillips draws on the work of Jenkins to argue that “online content ... is always one hotlink away from becoming unmoored from its original context” (Jenkins, 2009 as referred to in Phillips, 2015, p.119). This speaks to what Ray and Lavender both acknowledge around the mainstream discourse that *LoL* has found itself within. Mainstream understandings of *LoL* and its relationship with toxicity, as Phillips would say, “devoid of all but the most basic context” (Phillips, 2015, p. 145). Phillips (2015, p. 145) writes:

people aren't investing as much time or energy in content creation and community formation because these days no one needs to [...] because content is untethered to specific communities and is instead free-floating and devoid of all but the most basic context.

This ‘free-floating’ nature of discourse online now is seen amongst gaming communities and therefore understanding the construction and interpretation of toxicity requires – as Ray suggests – players to push past the narrative and early in-game experiences to see the *reality* of *LoL* and the true extent of toxicity. This makes the case for researchers and games developers to delve deeper than surface level, commonplace understandings of what toxicity is often deemed to be. Ray and Lavender’s discussions again suggest that the use – and meme of - ‘toxic’, obscures the meaning and impact of language and normalises antisocial behaviours in gaming contexts. Whilst Phillip’s writes on trolls and trolling, her notion of anonymity allowing for trolls to “dismiss the emotional context of a given story” (Phillips, 2015, p. 29) can be applied to *LoL* and toxicity. When the notion of toxicity becomes a meme, it is easy for those creating or receiving toxicity to “dismiss the emotional context” – the roots and origins of abuse – to either downplay meaning or impact, or provide excuses for perpetrators of toxic behaviour. This feels especially applicable when considering toxicity in the form of threats, ill wishes, insults and aggression, and discriminatory language, as it does not account for how identity is being manipulated and drawn upon to cause harm.

Additionally, Ray suggested that negative information is what is most remembered, thus contributing further to the strong reputation *LoL* has for toxicity, mentioning lawsuits, the Riot games studio and employees: [I]t's perceived as very negative and the information it's always showing is generally negative [...] and you have to get past that. Ray went on to refer to toxicity in *LoL* as "almost like a continuum", suggesting that as a new player there is little toxicity, but the more you play "it's like 'toxic toxic toxic' and then you hit a point where it's like 'This is the most toxic place on earth'". However, Ray again called upon the notion of 'pushing past' this, and that once you have fully immersed yourself in *LoL* and its culture – you think "It's still toxic but what is toxic and what isn't is very specific in the context". This suggests that players will encounter toxicity at some point in their journey (as verified by Chapter 4 and discussions through this chapter), but in order to be able to navigate it, understand it, and not focus on it, players need to develop a type of gaming capital (as per Consalvo, 2007) specific to *LoL* own culture and community.

It is relatively well established within psychology that experiences which produce strong emotional reactions have an increased likelihood of becoming a memory, and that these are given more weight by individuals than good ones (Baumeister, et al., 2001). Elliot alluded to this, saying "I think it's one of those things where you only remember stuff if it has such a big impact on you". Drawing on these psychological findings is helpful in contextualising the recall of toxicity within players. This notion of holding onto negative experiences was also mentioned by Elliot, where he compared this to the offline context of driving:

I won't remember that drive where it was really nice and nothing really happened but I'll definitely remember that time when somebody gave me the finger or something and I didn't do anything wrong. [...] I'm not gonna remember the guy who said 'Hey it was really fun playing with you' but I remember the guy who said 'Go die' or 'Go uninstall'. [...] I'm going to remember that a lot more because it's that strong negative feeling.

Here, Elliot is noting that being praised and having an enjoyable game experience is outweighed by how palpable the negative experiences are. This starts to shed light on why *LoL* being toxic has

become a meme and has become the primary focus of how *LoL* and its community is described. WN also mentioned a similar concept but highlighted that it is not only that players *remember* the negative experiences more strongly, but also only comment on these instances in the chat, saying “when something is done poorly or something is messed up then they’ll definitely say something”. He suggested that this was common with gamers more generally and that attributed this to “with the culture that we currently have, it’s normalized to let [good things] go and focus on only saying something when something’s gone wrong”.

Neissier and Harsch (1992) found that not all details of negative experiences will be retained, with Williams et al. (2022, p. 870) positing that “people typically attend more to negative information than positive and weight losses more than gains”. These concepts might account for the strong association that toxicity has within *LoL*. Carstensen states that “Memories are fallible ... Long-term memories are nearly always wrong” (Caren, 2018, p. n/a). With participants noting that players will often only comment on the negative in games, and recall the negative experiences, it can be seen how perhaps toxicity is not as prevalent within *LoL* as popular discourse would lead anyone to believe, although this does not mean that toxicity should not be dealt with, nor does it discount the harm that can come from the toxicity that does exist within game instances. However, it does account for how widely *felt* and *perceived* toxicity is across the community more broadly, despite – as Riot have noted – “only 5% of players are consistently disruptive” (Riot Games, 2022a).

Johnny noted that when a game is not going to plan, players should ideally be encouraging or constructive in the chat, instead of blaming or putting others down. This connects with Supkey’s method of giving a “positive moral boost”, going above and beyond to positively support others via the chat. When *LoL* being toxic becomes a meme, this could be construed as a reality for many players and non-players (those who are familiar with the game through such a meme, but do not play – or have been put off playing by the meme itself). On this note, Toby said “I don’t think *League*

is necessarily as bad as people make out”. He went on to discuss how toxicity might be performed by a minority, but becomes a widely felt experience for many, saying:

It normally is just one person who does it, and maybe a couple of people respond [...] and suddenly the entire chat is filled with awfulness, and you're just sat there as one of those seven other people who are just like 'What's going on here?' – and that's your experience

He went on to suggest that there are few people who “are actually inherently toxic”, but there are then people who are “potentially toxic”. Toby identified himself as one of these players four years ago, suggesting that such players might not be seeking to be toxic, but “it just needs one catalyst to set it off”. Toby’s interpretation of a vocal minority also accounts for people being ‘dragged into’ the cycle of toxicity. Where one player is actively being toxic within a game, it can be met with a response by others, this will be further explored in the following section (6.3.1).

6.3.1 Creating context and conditions for toxicity to thrive

This section delves deep into the interview data to explore what, within *LoL*, promotes or generates the conditions for toxicity. Importantly, it should be remembered that toxicity is not exclusive to *LoL*, and can be found in other game title and genres.

Six key areas were identified from the interviews as generating the conditions and contexts for toxicity to thrive within *LoL*. These areas were:

- i. Passion for the game
- ii. Age and maturity
- iii. A lack of consequences
- iv. Perspective: Knowledge, skill gap and ego

- v. Influencers, streamers and third-party spaces
- vi. Game technicalities

This section will discuss each of these areas showing how, singularly and in concert, they create toxicity and game ruining behaviours conducive in *LoL*.

6.3.1.1 Passion, frustration, and competition

Six participants identified that a passion for the game is one of the key drivers of toxicity within *LoL*. Passion intertwined with frustration and competition, becoming inseparable, with each trait feeding and fuelling the others.

Ray put this very simply saying “I think people care a lot”. This sentiment was shared by four other participants who spoke about how toxicity originates within the game. DK noted that there are “tons of people with so much passion for this game”, and own recognition of this led him to acknowledge his leniency towards others who displayed toxic behaviours in-game. He suggested this was because “they care about it, you know?”.

Winning depends upon competing for resources (Sherif & Sherif, 1953; Sherif 1966; Sherif et al., 1988), where victory bring Experience points. Thus, when one players’ performance seems counter to achieving victory, toxicity and conflict can occur and frustration can brew. As Jason noted, of players: “They can never be in the wrong and it's always the team's fault”. Whilst DK almost excuses toxicity in the name of passion, or “obsessive passion” (Bertran & Chamarro, 2016, p. 32), Supkey disagreed, saying toxicity is “not a great way to show” such passion. WN suggested that being passionate about the game is the “actual root” cause of toxicity, suggesting that it is players who

really *care* about winning who are usually toxic: “You don’t usually act toxic in a game that you don’t really care about”.

This demonstrates a potentially perplexing connection between passion and conflict, as in Ray and Toby’s articulation of deriving enjoyment from winning. Mei touched on this, suggesting that “As soon as you stop caring about the rank or caring about what level you are, I think you have more fun”. Thus, divergent interpretations of fun and success contribute to the development of toxicity. Complications are exacerbated when players have different approaches to play, and different types of knowledge (such as in off-meta play). This creates a complex network of ingroup – outgroup relationships which can result in further conflict (Sherif & Sherif, 1953; Sherif 1966; Sherif et al., 1988).

Amy, Lavender, Jack, Toby, Johnny, Kieran, Jason, and Rory all saw frustration as a root cause of toxicity, whether directed at other players, or their own game play. Fox et al. (2018) found that *Team Fortress 2* players would be frustrated by lack of team play, and Kordyaka et al. (2023) noted that frustration was a cause of toxicity in *LoL*. Such frustration, however, can emerge from the passion associated with the desire to win. Toby, Lavender, Kieran, and Jason discussed frustration in relation to blame, and how easy it is to blame other players; Lavender used the term “scapegoats”. Toby linked this to the user interface (UI) of the game which removes the context of gameplay and decision making through a third-person view meaning “people just use the scoreboard to flame you”. That the UI naturally enables a stronger focus on the play of others but inherently removes the context of play, explains how players can defend their own play and use others as “scapegoats”. Rory expanded, saying it is easy for players to “Captain Hindsight on the other end” when additional context is removed. Kieran positioned blame-placing as a “defence mechanism, especially in the case where it genuinely is your fault”; for him this “breeds what is toxic” within the community. Lavender,

Eva and Kieran reiterated WN's sentiment that "no one's toxic because people are doing well, are they?", again connecting frustration with passion.

Of course, frustration at a failure to succeed is not specific to *LoL* alone and, as Rory noted, "Games are frustrating because games are a challenge and in every challenge [...] to not do well is frustrating." Blame-placing is seen as players attempting to subvert the narrative of what is happening, especially where they are at fault and seek to shift blame away from themselves. This can also be articulated as a means of regaining control and enjoyment. Toby recalled that he would "call people 'messes'" because he felt the game was lost, and DK admitted to having "soft inted" out of frustration. Eva, Amy and Jack all suggested that such behaviours occur in the face of potential game loss, with Amy suggesting that players need to "vent in some way", or, as Jack put it, "get their emotions out there". This adds to the argument that toxicity develops out of game circumstances: passion, frustration at player, and to regain control. However, being frustrated at play is, in the eyes of Riot Games (2022a) and Supkey, not an excuse for toxicity. This reflects Attouck and Garcia-Bardid's (2021) findings that player frustration arising from how the game develops can trigger toxicity; something which my participant Johnny referred to as "acts of revenge play". Attempts to control game outcomes or experiences in the vein of 'If I can't have fun, no one else can either' could be seen as an enactment of agency. Where players cannot change the structure of the game or how others play, they utilise what is available to direct an outcome, thereby impacting the experience for other players. This positions players as "powerful subjects, who are able to control the outcome of their actions" (Muriel & Crawford, 2020, p. 150).

This is further complicated by the connection between passion, frustration and competition. Nella suggested that players are toxic "because they want to win", thus frustration out of potentially *not winning* – and *caring* about that – combine to produce three factors which generate the perfect

circumstances for conflict. Keiran noted that “Riot have made it hard for people to 1 v 9 to carry games”. The frustration of having to rely on others to win, combined with the desire to win, creates conditions for players to become hostile to their teammates. Ray considered that *LoL* is like any form of competition or sport; “[You] can't have a competitive game without frustration”. Yet DK suggested that competitive-driven toxicity was a “blurry line” where such negativity was not necessarily toxic. Shane felt that toxicity is not inevitably born out of competition saying, “I just think that there's more to it than that - whether that becomes the big thing or not as bad”. Shane discussed how developers play a pivotal role in terms of the decisions they make in building a game, and in relation to the community and culture that is created around the game. Existing research has suggested that competitive gaming environments can result in hostility (Breuer, et al., 2014) and that the team-reliance can contribute to toxicity (Verheijen, et al., 2019). Shane (a game developer himself) sheds light on the complexity of toxicity as a complex amalgam of contexts, factors, and personal traits. “Intergroup hostility” (Korostelina, 2007, p. 128) is shaped by group interests, and competition over resources (in this circumstance winning), and by individuals' own concepts of the conditions for success within their own game, and individual personalities themselves.

6.3.1.2 Age and maturity

Five participants identified age and maturity as being important in creating an environment where toxicity brews and thrives. This was characterised by discussions of age and associated maturity, or maturity in relation to game experience, acknowledging how attitudes mature as play time is accrued. Kokkinakis et al. (2016) suggested that younger players were more likely to engage in harmful in-game behaviours, possibly out of a lack of awareness of in-game social norms and cognitive challenges in navigating in-game frustration. The following findings provide greater insight into this suggestion.

Kieran suggested that younger players might find toxicity entertaining due lacking maturity, suggesting that for younger players “It's a gold mine of giggles and hilarity and it's just a wonderful experience to vex someone to the point of them responding to you”. Ray also spoke to this, suggesting that a younger player base might easily replicate behaviours of toxic streamers (for example Tyler1, RatIRL) out of admiration. Ray suggested that young players might think “this guy sits in his room all day plays video games, and gets a girlfriend or boyfriend or whatever partner they want and gets loads of money doing it”. This impressionability of young players is something that Sukpey reflected on. He said that he was “impressionable” when he started playing at age 16, and would reproduce behaviours he saw in games. If other players disrespected him in game, he would return this when the opportunity arose, explaining “it was like my revenge”. Looking back, Supkey said this was “childish” and “maybe your age definitely has something to do with it”. This suggests that not only age, but game maturity is important. The more a player experiences the game and the behaviours of players, the more players develop an understanding of how behaviours shape game experiences, and the relationship between behaviours and winning. Kieran also acknowledged this, saying “I think it does take experience rather than age” and that “it takes time to realize that you just need to breathe and chill out when you play this game” rather than responding in a reactive, revenge-focused manner. These comments highlight the complex interaction between age, maturity, and game experience, which entwine to produce a unique experience for each individual.

Like Supkey and Kieran, Toby and WN both mentioned how they personally had matured in their approach to the game over time. Toby said that, after having eleven chat restrictions for flaming (noted as an outlet for frustration (Kou & Nardi, 2013)), he has “developed different strategies” where he no longer engaged in “fighting back or by just shutting down” in the face of toxicity. Equally, WN said that over time he has “become more equipped with dealing with [toxicity], not that

it doesn't happen as much". This linked with the notion that retaliating out of frustration demonstrates the interconnectedness of these dynamics. It further suggests that maturity in relation to exposure of the game changes how players understand toxicity, in a sense normalising it as a part of the game experience.

6.3.1.3 A lack of consequences

The lack of consequences for toxic behaviour has been noted in existing *LoL* research to contribute to its prevalence (Kordyaka, et al., 2023, p. 13). Shane suggested that "how the developers build tools around [toxicity]" contribute to whether developers help toxicity "breed or let it fester". This can be interpreted, then, as Riot not appropriately building game architecture and tools within *LoL* to reduce toxicity. Three features were identified in relation to this: poor language filters, that *LoL* is free to play, and that existing repercussions for toxicity lack impact.

The built-in language filter in *LoL* identifies the use of slurs in the in-game chat, hiding them from players; chat restrictions⁶ are then usually applied to players who use such language. Amy, Jason, and Elliot mentioned the ineffectiveness of the language filter. Amy noted how "It's so easy to get around the filter", and Jason commented that if players "don't type anything or they just type absolute nonsense, then they're not gonna get picked up and they're not going to get banned". This highlights the issue that the chat filter alone is neither effective nor sufficient, with players evolving ways to subvert the chat filter by omitting or replacing letters in particular words or getting creative with insults. Elliot identified a key problem for developers, questioning how much can be expected of chat filters: "I don't know if it's even possible to have the perfect filtering and monitoring".

⁶ Chat restrictions can either limit the number of messages a player can send in subsequent games or remove players ability to use the chat function at all, for a determined number of games.

Participants commented on the free-to-play model, with Amy noting that “Because you can play for free, if your account gets banned [...] you can just delete it and just open a new account”. Ray connected this with Riot’s financial model, saying that it might not be in Riot’s interest to address this because it would “destroy the financial model because they can’t get new players”. Ray noted that in-game microtransactions (focused on the purchase skins and other cosmetic alterations) might act as a deterrent to toxicity, saying “I’m not a toxic person in general, but I never would anyway because I’ve spent so much money on this game I never want to lose that account”. However not all players make financial transactions in-game, or value their accounts in this way, and therefore might not dissuade all toxic players.

Sanctions, such as account bans, are not felt by participants to be sufficiently effective in deterring toxicity. Other sanctions for toxic behaviour include *in-game timers* (where after going AFK, players must join queues for games waiting between 5 minutes and an hour to be able to queue for a new game, depending on the recent number of AFK instances); *low priority queues* (being placed at the back of queues for games, increasing the amount of time it takes for players to be matched with other players for a game) and *chat bans and restrictions*. Supkey criticised how some such sanctions lack meaningful impact because players can make new accounts or in the case of low priority queues, “some of them like just watch a YouTube video or an anime or whatever and they don’t care”. This lack of impact results in a lack of faith in Riot’s approach. As Jack said: “They’re not doing enough - people don’t feel threatened, they’re not going to get banned at all”.

Riot has developed a reliance on automated and algorithmic toxicity detection. For Lavender the responsibility of ‘dealing’ with toxicity is shifted to players, with players themselves being asked to

report behaviours at the start or end of games⁷: “You’ve just got to mute and try and remember to report them at the end. It almost feels like a chore - just like domestic work you have to do”. The fact that much responsibility is *on players* to do this means a lot of voluntary effort for what feels like very little reward. Riot could be criticised for not doing enough as developers to care for its community by implying that if players want better experiences, they must act for themselves from within. A lack of trust in Riot’s own systems may offer further insight into why players do not generally utilise reporting in *LoL* (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014).

6.3.1.4 Perspective: Ego, Knowledge, and skill gap

Johnny commented on “The competitive nature of humans and the team reliance and the sheer amount of knowledge you have to have to actually be good at this game”. This acknowledged that frustration and competition combine with real and perceived knowledge and skills gaps to generate extremely incredibly diverse and nuanced player perspectives. Lavender related this to how players are almost “playing in our own, very specific little worlds” within a team game, acknowledging that players notice different plays and their impacts. This speaks to the issue of player perspectives more broadly, and how these will contribute to the emergency of toxicity.

In the main, players focus on their own play and location on the map (see UI in 6.3.1.1). Players are not always aware of other players’ skill cool-downs, for example. Ray commented on to this, saying “I think there's probably times where it looks simple, but they really didn't have a choice and they died”. He remarked that he had probably flamed others for this, adding “I’m not going to act like I’m

⁷ Players can report offensive names, negative or offensive language in Champion Select or players not playing the role they are assigned during Champion Select, before gameplay begins. These, and other behaviours, can be reported at the end of games in the Post-game Lobby.

a saint". The ease with which players can be criticised due to a partial picture is apparent, as in Lavender's analogy of "specific little worlds".

Taking participants perspectives as a whole, it is possible to understand how it might be difficult for players to recognise their own mistakes and, as Supkey suggested, "look for other peoples"". Thus, having and applying game knowledge in real-time is important for players to avoid becoming a victim of toxicity, lest they be judged by players who feel they know more than them. Skill and knowledge both contribute to the meritocracy (Paul, 2018) found within video games and thus contribute further to exclusion and hostility in gaming spaces.

6.3.1.5 Influencers, streamers and third-party spaces

Earlier discussions around age and acknowledged the potential for influential members of the *LoL* community (such as streamers) who engage in toxic behaviours to contribute to the normalisation of toxicity in the game. This can be through posting or producing content on third party sites such as Twitch, YouTube or Reddit. Mei referenced Tyler1, saying that "he brought toxicity and now people - little kids - are like 'Oh he's toxic, I should do that too'". Acknowledging the role of people in generating toxicity is somewhat obvious, yet it underscores the dynamic relationship between people and the game. In saying "people brought toxicity to League instead of *League* itself" Mei highlights a belief that toxicity is not built into *LoL*, echoing Shane's earlier sentiment.

Other participants referred to the influence of streamers, with Ray saying that TF Blade "Runs it down, toxic, uses racial hate or whatever and I'm just like, 'Yeah just ban him'". Ray introduced the fact that clips from popular streamers' livestreams often end up on such site as Reddit and circulate

through the community. This can then potentially normalise toxic behaviours or reinforce the lack of real repercussions for toxicity.

Toby mentioned the streamers TobiasFate, Caedrel and Nemesis who, whilst he did not feel their behaviour was toxic, referred to instances where they “bite back” possibly licensing other players to act in a similarly defensive way. Where clips are taken out of context, or seconds from a multi-hour-long stream are posted on the internet, an interaction can be blown out of proportion or misread entirely. This alone could contribute to a skewed perception of *LoL* as a game and community being toxic.

6.3.1.6 Game technicalities

Updates are issued to *LoL* through ‘patches’, where maps, modes, champions, visual effects, skins, items, and other gameplay elements are added or altered, and damage ratios for champions and items are adjusted. These updates, known as ‘balance changes’ aim to keep the game in an enjoyable state and have been noted by participants to keep them returning to the game (Chapter 8). However, sometimes these changes, especially those affecting how powerful champions or items are, can be seen to create the context for toxicity, as noted by Johnny, Toby, and Jack. Johnny, referred to “Riot’s poor decision making, the poor balance choices” contributing to an environment for toxicity; especially poignant given Johnny’s identity as an off-meta player which makes him more likely to be accused of being toxic if other players mistake his playstyle for trolling. Jack referred to posts on Reddit which discuss balance changes, noting how frustration towards Riot’s decisions spill over into these forums. He acknowledged that posts are usually positive, but commented that some foster toxicity “because the players don’t know enough so they have very different opinions”. Here Jack combines game knowledge and perspectives (6.4.1.4) with Riot’s decision making, demonstrating how some players limited knowledge and ability to contextualise decisions can create

the perfect environment for toxicity to brew. Toby shared a similar perspective to Jack, commenting that when players complain about such balance changes, they never “ever learn anything just blaming something else for something you can’t control” and such lack of control over the game state means “people get frustrated”. Toby reports that (being ranked in Diamond in 2015) his game knowledge has enabled him to understand game context. Toby’s position in his journey with *LoL* enabled him to separate Riot’s balance and technical decisions from his own gameplay and that of others. Participants are clear that this context for toxicity is created by Riot, combined with other contextual factors, which together result in players who disagree with changes feeling betrayed.

6.4 Teamplay and toxicity

Something of notable irony is how much other players become frustrated with one another, to the point where toxicity has become a meme, as aforementioned, resulting in some players engaging in behaviours which are detrimental to game progression, game experience, and the overall aspect of *teamplay*. Amy, though, did feel like toxicity was not something unique to *LoL*, but to team games suggesting that “when you’re stuck in a game with people [...] and it’s so reliant on teamwork, that people get frustrated”. Arguably, this could be associated with control being taken away from players with them being forced to rely on others, a sentiment also shared by Jack:

In any competitive game where your teammates can hold you back from gaining LP, or whatever the ranked system they’re using is. [...] The fact that it’s a team game and other players can hold you back - it makes you toxic.

Here the notion of *value* also becomes important, and this speaks back to where and how players derive enjoyment from within the game. If players are valuing the ranked system, or winning more generally, and this is where players will locate a sense pleasure in their playing of *LoL*. Therefore,

when players feel hindered by their teammates this will naturally provide the fuel and environment for toxicity to thrive. This suggests that intergroup conflict – toxicity – can be realised as one individuals’ behaviour being at odds with the rest of the team. With mention of the ranked system specifically, it has been noted that the ranked environment is more susceptible to toxicity (Kordyaka, et al., 2023, p. 13), and this could then correlate to the value derived from it. Here, the ranked system in itself produces competition which can be interpreted through conflict theory (Sherif & Sherif, 1953; Sherif 1966; Sherif et al., 1988), with resources – appearing in a number of ways: the conditions for winning (gold, towers, the Nexus), but also the ultimate outcome of a game in the form of League Points which move players up the Ranked ladder. This is further complicated by how League Points are also removed for lost games. For Lavender, the game being “team-based and time sensitive” was something that, in combination, contributed to this environment.

Interestingly, Jason seemed of the mind that this frustration comes with the territory of any game where you are randomly matched with teammates:

[Y]ou are expecting five completely random people to just get on with each other from the first second until the 40th minute [...] just completely working and gelling together which is not - it's not gonna happen.

This again speaks to thinking about not just diversity of play, but of players themselves. Whilst some participants did focus on teamplay and how there will be conflict arising out of frustration, Kieran and Jack drew attention to that whilst *LoL* is designed as a team game, players’ own focus feels very individual. Jack noted that in Ranked SoloQ, “everybody is trying to prove their rank, they’re competing between themselves and their teammates [...] It’s not a team thing”. To add to this, Kieran stated that “[A]lthough it’s a team-based game, I think it’s very individual [...] but ultimately your own individual performance and your own individual decision making is extremely impactful to

the game". Jack and Kieran both highlight how much influence individuals within the game have, despite the team-based design and despite it being hard for one player to *win* the game singlehandedly. It suggests more so that there is an individual mentality in the game, as opposed to a team one, and that this is what can produce the sense of conflict. Nella echoed this with "if one member is just not doing fine, they can actually tank the whole team, which is so frustrating". Participants have highlighted that there is a binary model of skill, where players need not only individual skill but to be able to articulate this within a team "in order to maximize their effectiveness as both an individual player and a team member" (Donaldson, 2017, p. 437). But where a player lacks one or both of these, they can single-handedly change the course of the game. It should be noted that Riot did address the ability for one player to carry a whole team to victory, as Kieran noted earlier, with Jason commenting:

[Riot] obviously thought that wasn't too fun for everyone that's playing - just having one person that's carrying the game and they're the one that can decide it - so they changed it, which is better for a team game, but it introduces a heck of a lot more frustration for everyone because they have to work as a team which doesn't always work well.

What is clear is that *LoL* is a hard game to provide balance in, or for players to be balanced in themselves when the game is designed in such a way to as have to rely on your team but also perform well yourself. This surely has similarities not just with other team-based video games, but beyond the virtual and into offline activities such as team sports, making the case for video games not being *that* different from more traditional modes of play. Maybe the difference is grounded in familiarity and comradery in a physical space, compared with anonymity and transience in the virtual space. There is little chance for players to develop rapport with each other, and the only information available to them are statistics on performance available via third party sites or Riot's own match history searches, which reduces players to statistical data based on win-loss ratios. To add to this, in randomly matched games, players may not come into contact with those in their game again. With

offline sports, often this transient nature of *team* is replaced with a more permanent and reoccurring group of people, who due to the face-to-face nature of offline, traditional sports, are hard to reduce to performance-based statistics as automatically teammates are views as *identifiable humans*, rather than anonymous, transient players behind an IGN and a champion, which is simultaneously being played by other players in other game instances.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented an analysis of interviews with seventeen participants to establish that the term ‘toxic’ has both shared and diverse meanings, and whilst there is what can be viewed as a shared understanding of the term, there are idiosyncrasies around what is considered ‘toxic’ by *LoL* players. Despite criticism, ‘toxic’ is a well-established part of both gaming and wider public lexicon. However, that the term ‘toxic’ holds both exo- and esoteric meanings make its use controversial and problematic. The exoteric meaning of the term ‘toxic’ – that of a broadly negative experience – is so broad that it renders observers and researcher’s incapable of accurately representing experiences of individuals and individual game titles or communities. The esoteric meaning of the term ‘toxic’ is then often considered to be on too small a scale to usefully address issues within the production of toxic spaces in gaming culture more broadly. This speaks to Parsons’ (1991, p. 5) work on “symbolic systems which can mediate communication”, and how these might be the part of culture and of cultural behaviours. Toxicity has become symbolic of gaming culture, whether producing it or expecting to receive it, however how it is interpreted might not be considered a ‘norm’ due to the complexities of identity which contribute to understanding and meaning making.

Given this, I propose three actions to tackle the problem:

- i. In discussing and addressing toxicity in gaming and gaming spaces, game developers and academics must be clear and more precise in identifying what behaviours and attitudes are being described by the term 'toxic' within specific contexts.
- ii. Individual experiences of players are needed to understand how they fit into broader categories of 'toxicity' within both gaming culture and society. This would help to identify the *opposites* of these experiences so as to consider how effective change to address issues within games and gaming culture can be enacted.
- iii. Players require more opportunities to exercise their own agency, especially of toxicity itself can be seen as a utilisation of agency also. Players need to be given a way to combat this. Given the diversity of playstyles and approaches to play, and the range of factors which can contribute towards toxic interactions and behaviours, if there is greater opportunity for players to 'opt in' to games with certain playstyles, approaches, or knowledge foundations, this could alleviate some of the conditions contributing to toxicity.

Such a change in focus would help to establish not only meaning to individual experiences in gaming, but the use of the term 'toxic' as a tool to understand what is happening, and the roots of 'toxic' issues in gaming culture. It could be considered that toxicity can be viewed as a useful concept, as through naming behaviours for precisely what they are enables us to address them with more precision and acknowledgement. Because Riot does not necessarily use the same terminology as its playing community in its guidelines, it possibly allows for wider interpretation or divergence around what is considered 'against community guidelines' versus 'viewed as toxic by the community'. Arguably, as outlined in this chapter, these are the same. Failure to embrace the terminology of the

community within which the problem resides makes it complicated to address or understand the core problem.

Within this chapter, the nuanced understandings of toxicity have been presented, exploring the wide range of factors which contribute to the interpretations of toxicity alongside discussions around what contributes to the occurrence of toxicity. This means that there are a range of complex and ever-evolving social identity processes at play, shaped around knowledge, skill, approach to play, and identity which shape individual perceptions around ingroups and outgroups. This results in the potential for *anyone* to be subjected to toxicity if they are deemed to be in opposition to any one player's own values, approach and goal. We could then suggest that toxicity becomes validated and normalised based on ingroup values, aims, goals which are perceived to be threatened by outgroup members.

Having developed an understanding of how players understand, construct and interpret toxicity, and the factors which influence this, Chapter 7 will now explore how participants use various tools and strategies to mitigate their exposure to toxicity and toxic behaviour during *LoL* gameplay, in order to produce a more positive gameplay experience.

Chapter 7

Managing, mitigating, manipulating and moderating experiences in

League of Legends

7.1 Introduction

Thus far, this thesis has explored how the participants interviewed for this study were introduced to and initially experienced *LoL*. It has examined definitions and characteristics of toxicity and sought to uncover some idiosyncrasies in how players determine what they deem to be toxic behaviours. It is clear that participants deemed toxicity to be a very real issue and regarded it to be prevalent within the game. This chapter explores how players reported using both the affordances of the game and their own approach to play to attempt to minimise toxicity and ensure positive gaming experiences. It focuses primarily on how players sought to use their agency to limit their exposure to toxicity through their management, manipulation, and moderation of their experiences within *LoL*. This can then be conceptualised as players seeking to create “cultural coherence through exclusionary practices” (Ortiz, 2019, p. 882), through seeking to find ways to exclude - or minimise the presence of - toxic players from their own game instances. Much as toxicity can be seen as a utilisation of agency, this chapter demonstrates how whilst players are restricted in terms of the options available to them by the game system, players actively engage with these to shape their gaming experiences in the face of toxicity. To utilise the language of Muriel and Crawford (2020, p. 153), players engage with practices such as muting or playing with friends as means of “empowerment”, in order to disrupt the “disempowerment” brought on by toxic players.

It is important to understand why players feel the need to take matters into their own hands to control their experience. Therefore, this chapter opens with an exploration of participant responses to Riot’s approach to toxicity in *LoL*. It sets out why players felt the need to use their own agency to

facilitate positive game experiences (7.2). Following this, the chapter will explore the three reported key approaches to player-control of experiences: /muteall (7.3.1), 'Premade?' (7.3.2), and approaches to play (7.3.3). That players expressed the need to utilise a variety of methods demonstrates the prevalence and impact of toxicity on their gaming experience and highlights the importance of such personal agency. This chapter demonstrates participants' views that being able to manipulate the game circumstances contributed to their continued immersion within and commitment to the world of *LoL*.

7.2 Player responses to Riot's approach to toxicity in *League of Legends*

Eight players commented on how dissatisfied they were with Riot's approach to and handling of toxicity in the game. They noted how, in their opinion, the actions that Riot have been taking have not impacted on the health of the game or player experiences. Players comments can be categorised into the following three themes:

1. The *LoL* Disciplinary System is ineffective;
2. The game is free to play;
3. Automatic systems are not sufficient or suitably efficient.

The remainder of this section will explore these three themes in order to contextualise the reasoning behind how players engage utilise their own agency through engaging with the available game-based tools, and adapting their approach to play, in a move to try and establish better game experiences for themselves and potentially other players, depending on the action taken.

7.2.1 The League of Legends Disciplinary System is ineffective

Riot's practical approach to dealing with toxicity is through the report and ban system, referred to as the *LoL Disciplinary System* (Riot Games, 2023c). Riot Games (2023c) describe this system as follows:

The automated Disciplinary System is League's first line of defense against player disruption, trolling, and bad behaviors. Once a Player Report is submitted, the Disciplinary System will analyze and act to issue the offending Player an appropriate punishment in the form of a Penalty Notification describing the offense [...] The player who reported the offense will sometimes receive an Instant Feedback Report letting them know their report has resulted in a punishment.

This Disciplinary System can result in a number of different actions – or punishments - as follows (Riot Games, 2023c): Chat restrictions; Low priority queue assignment; Renaming requirement; Queue lockout (different from a temporary ban, queue lockouts apply only to specific queues); Honor and Hextech crafting restrictions; Temporary ban; Permanent ban

This Disciplinary System, whilst automated, requires the manual labour of players to help detect toxicity and deliver “punishments”, therefore placing the onus and responsibility on players to create a better, more positive, and more consistently friendly community. This speaks, to some extent, to notions of neoliberalism where “individuals, or at most particular groups or communities, are to be held responsible for their own situation without considering any structural conditioning that might be affecting them” (Muriel & Crawford, 2020, p. 152). However, when participants spoke about Riot's approach to toxicity – where the ban and report system is “the first line of defense” (Riot Games, 2023) – players expressed deep dissatisfaction. Eva said that at the very least “They definitely need to redo the report system”. Whilst at one time the Disciplinary System only allowed players to report behaviour *after* a game instance had ended, Riot have now introduced the facility to report player behaviour *before* a game begins if the behaviour occurs during the Champion Selection phase, or

during the game instance itself (Riot Games, 2023c), with reports during a game also automatically muting the reported player for the player issuing the report.

Player discussions of the Disciplinary System identified two key issues:

- a. The Disciplinary System does not produce change or act as a deterrent to toxicity;
- b. Players do not feel the Disciplinary System is impactful or meaningful.

The sentiment that the Disciplinary System does not act as a deterrent was communicated by Lavender, who stated the system would “maybe [introduce] harsher punishments, but getting your account banned is pretty much as far as they can go”, and, as mentioned in Chapter 6, it is very easy for participants to create a new account. Jason noted that Riot have, over the years, adjusted the report system – an integral component of their Disciplinary System – however their attempts have not been sufficient to produce the desired impact on the community, saying “but often it's not very good. It doesn't really do anything”.

What is particularly interesting, however, is that players need to feel that the system has an impact but this is something that is currently lacking. However, Shane recalled that previously the system had felt meaningful, noting how it has changed over time:

Riot used to tell you when someone got banned because of a report? [...] I have never reported someone for toxicity in chat and gotten a report. Ever. [...] So they're either not banning those people or not telling you - and so this goes back to the like 'who are they punishing here?', right?

Shane continued to comment that the onus placed on players to help develop and create a good community lacks motivation if Riot do not reinforce that commitment to generating a more positive community via messaging:

The players who want to have a good community don't feel reinforced that Riot is supporting them and they may very well be, but their messaging - or lack of messaging - doesn't reinforce that. I think people would report even more if it felt like they felt like it was meaningful - if I got a report back now.

Eva offered shared the same view. She noted that she actively engaged in reporting people, stating “I always try to remember to report someone if they’ve been flaming”, before adding “you know it gives you that little ‘Your feedback has been - some action has been taken’ - I really very rarely get that box so I do wonder like what's going on”. Eva held a similar theory to Shane in terms of the impact of their reports: “clearly nothing's happening to these people and they're just carrying on doing this every game”.

Both Shane and Eva note that not receiving feedback that their reports are being acted on has left them questioning what the point of that process is. Integral here is *feeling* supported. Whilst the system might work and could well be reducing toxicity, as Riot have claimed that only five per-cent of players are “consistently disruptive” (Riot Games, 2022a), this is not necessarily reflected in how players experience these systems and could be contributing to a lack of faith in both Riot Games and its systems. For Jason, this situation almost generated a sense of apathy towards how toxicity is being dealt with by Riot and the tools and systems being provided to players. He said, “You just kind of drop him a nice report and then you just carry on to the next game”. Muriel and Crawford (2020, p. 152) note that “Videogames therefore require the player to take control of what they have in front of them”. The above discussion suggests that players *are* doing this, however their active participation – as promoted by Riot – seems to indicate that this goes either unrecognised, or at the very least feels as such. If these players feel unsupported in their endeavours to create a better community or feel their actions do not contribute to any real change, it may seem that there is little reason for them to use the tools Riot provides. A lack of impact through the systems provided seems to be a motivating factor for players to identify other ways to help limit their exposure to toxicity.

7.2.2 The game is free-to-play

LoL is built upon a free-to-play model, in which Riot generates income from players through microtransactions, the purchasing of merchandise, and tickets to watch esports events. This has led some players to identify Riot's financial model as contributory to the unsatisfactory handling of toxicity: it costs nothing for toxic or banned players to create a new account, therefore banning is not necessarily effective. Much as Ray noted that he would not risk engaging in toxic behaviour "because I've spent so much money on this game I never want to lose that account", Amy suggested that account bans lack impact "unless you've got an account with loads of skins that you put loads of money in". She suggested that a lack of required investment in the game, due to the free-to-play model, means that there are so many ways to subvert account bans that they become ineffective. Amy refers to the microtransactions that generate a large amount of income from players. Microtransactions enable players to purchase aesthetic modifications to the game, primarily through what are called 'skins' which change the look of champions and wards within the game. Such microtransactions and aesthetic changes are entirely optional, meaning it is not a requirement for players to engage with in the game. Players do not need to purchase the game or an account in order to play, and all that is needed is one email address per account. Ray mentioned his feeling that if Riot made it more difficult for players to make accounts this might act as a deterrent to toxicity, but he followed this up stating "but then it sort of it destroys the financial model because they can't get new players".

Awareness of Riot's financial model and the impact this has on player recruitment could be said to contribute further towards a sense of player apathy around engaging with developer-provided systems to combat toxicity. This is seen where Amy considered whether, from Riot's perspective "there's no point banning people because they'll just come back', right?". This connects with the view of the Disciplinary System as ineffective and seemingly doing little to combat toxicity, offering further

reason for players to consider what personal agency they have in managing their individual experiences, rather than expecting the experiences of whole community to be corporately managed.

7.2.3 Automatic systems are not sufficient or suitably efficient

For the most part, Riot's own tools and methods to tackle toxic behaviour rely on automatic detection systems and ratios, but only once players have engaged with reporting other players to enter them into the system. As previously mentioned, some participants hold the view that toxic behaviours are not so easily detected by automatic systems and therefore AI and computer driven checks do not prevent toxicity from falling through the cracks and therefore being unidentified and unpunished by the Riot systems. The complexity of this was noted by Toby who suggested that none of the algorithms used in this process "are accurate and there's a reason for that – it's because the context really matters". Continued toxic behaviour, therefore, is largely due to a lack of investment in human power and agency to deal with toxicity manually on a case-by-case basis. One instance of this was identified by Supkey who commented on seeing people "not trying", adding that they are then "causing it to be a definite loss even though it's not fully over yet". He linked this to the unwritten terms of clicking 'Ready'. Breaking the commitment to play is then not always as identifiable as the use of hateful language in the text chat, and therefore not as easily detected by automatic systems. However, Jason also commented on that lack of reliability of automatic systems to pick up the use of hate speech in that text chat, saying:

It's normally if they say something really bad, that's when they get a ban but if they don't type anything or they just type absolute nonsense, then they're not gonna get picked up and they're not going to get banned.

Jason's comment speaks to the automatic text detection systems being inefficient, and Rory expanded. It is worth noting here that Rory and Jason are friends and have played together, and the following anecdote from Rory is something they engaged in together:

Where people say hateful stuff you can kind of bait them into saying even more hateful things until they eventually say something which breaks the community guidelines, which you can then report and then they get a chat ban [...] So that was also a good pastime with me and my friends - just trying to get people to say - because it would start off small [...] Because [Riot are] gonna be filtering through so many chat logs and they've got to be quick with it - we wanted them to say specific slurs that once they've said it then they'll get banned because that's the automatic system.

This anecdote highlights not only the insufficient nature of automatic detection systems, but players using their own knowledge of the systems developed by Riot in what is almost an act of taking “justice” into their own hands. This can be articulated as player agency being utilised as a means to bring to Riot's attention players who do not conform to expectations around behaviour, and baiting out overt expressions of toxicity helps distinguish these players as the outgroup (Turner, 1982). It could also be seen as a more liberal approach in that it is a way of “exploring new modes to articulate power relations, and imagining an agency that helps transform reality in other ways” (Muriel & Crawford, 2020, p. 154), where players take what is available to them – both knowledge and tools – and reimagine these to produce a better outcome. Jason and Rory act in the interests of the ingroup – those who respect Riot's articulations of player behaviour (Riot Games 2023a; Riot Games 2023b) however they still create conflict in doing so. It should also be acknowledged, then, that such behaviour could also be seen as ‘baiting’ and be considered a toxic behaviour in itself, inadvertently contributing to the continuation of toxicity.

7.2.4 Section summary

This section has considered why players engage in behaviours which help manage and mitigate their exposure to toxic behaviours in *LoL*. The central theme is that participants feel the actions made available by Riot to directly ‘target’ toxic players have little impact overall on the levels of toxicity present in game and do little to deter a player from being toxic or stop them playing. Participants reported that the option to report players, leading to potential bans for repeat offenders of toxic behaviour, does not feel impactful to those responsible for reporting players. The lack of impact this has then might feel greater given the onus that is placed on non-toxic players to help better the community via systems such as reports. Whilst IP bans are rare and account bans (both temporary and permanent) are more common, the impact that these measures have on game environment is minimal. This is not to suggest that IP bans *are* the way forward either, but rather to highlight participants’ views that account bans offer little to no reduction in toxicity due to them having minimal impact on toxic players. Because they experience ineffectiveness with use of Riot-provided tools, and subsequent dissatisfaction, players turn to alternative ways of taking control of the landscape within which they play. These will be explored further in section, 7.3.

7.3 Tools and agency: methods to manage exposure to toxicity

This section explores three means by which players control their own experiences: /muteall (7.3.1), ‘Premade?’ (7.3.2), and approaches to play (7.3.3). These demonstrate how players can utilise their own agency to control their exposure or response to toxicity, as they engage with in-game tools and options, and modifying their approaches to play.

7.3.1 /muteall

Muting other players is a key tool which players use to mitigate their exposure to toxicity. Muting has been studied in the context of female games avoiding harassment (Bryter, 2023; Bryter, 2020; McLean & Griffiths, 2019; Bryter, 2018; Fox & Tang, 2017; Lukianov, 2014) however less evidenced is the broader use across players to avoid toxicity. Players can mute allied or enemy players. This typically refers to muting the text chat but can also include pings and emotes. The player doing the muting does not see any of the chat posted by muted players, or all players if they type '/muteall'.

Eight participants spoke positively about muting the chat, noting the potential to reduce exposure to toxic behaviour, thus improving gameplay experiences. Jack noted that muting can prevent players' own gameplay deteriorating, saying that "If I feel like I'm playing badly and what they're saying is true, then I just mute them. [...] I know that I'll feel worse if they flame me". Johnny echoed this, saying "I'm not untilltable so I get influenced by it", however he noted that if one player is flaming he can "mentally blend him or her out" but if multiple players are engaged in flaming he used /muteall.

Jack and Johnny used muting to facilitate their concentration on their own game, especially if they were conscious that they were not playing optimally. The mute function was also used to avoid being caught up in toxicity and "sucked into those pointless arguments" (WN). WN said that when he first started playing he would get involved in arguments in the chat, but as a more experienced player he mutes a player as soon as they seem toxic. For Lavender was a way to avoid potential detrimental in-game impact. She would mute players in champion select if they evidenced negative behaviour to avoid it later in the game. Lavender also muted to "get away from 'toxic behaviour'" including "racist, sexist, transphobic, homophobic jokes/remarks". Thus, participants used muting reactively and proactively to control their experience.

Shane noted how his muting was often focused on the enemy team: “[T]here’s literally no interaction I need to have with them. None. What could positively happen from that, right? [...] They would try to tilt me or somebody on my team”. Shane illuminates the potential to disrupt players across the game space: his own team, the enemy team, and the player themselves. These uses position muting the chat as a means of controlling player experience; Kieran stated, “It does no one any favours to receive a comment saying something that’s negatively gonna affect them”. Using the capacity to minimise exchanges with the enemy team, players like Shane build on their gaming experience to bring their own agency and gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007) to shape overall game interactions.

Muting the chat does not rule out all player communication, which can still occur via pings, however Eva and Toby commented that *muting* can negatively impact gameplay. Eva said, “I try not to mute people because sometimes they say important things”. This sacrifice of in-game communication in favour of avoiding toxicity has been noted by Kordyaka et al. (2023). Toby took a more complex approach, “selectively muting people” throughout the game, adding “which is frustrating because it actually makes the game harder because when I’m muting pings – the defence mechanism from not tilting yourself is to make the game harder”. Toby’s strategy of severing all communication, potentially inhibits the organisation of teamplay. In order to protect themselves, players sacrifice in-game communication which can be integral to winning.

Muting was used by four players to help them enjoy the game. DK said that “The chat is cursed”, and told me that he would tell friends that “if they actually want to enjoy the game at their ranks, I would just tell them to turn off chat”. DK noted that players have said “this game’s a lot more fun when there’s no chat”, which demonstrates the positive impact of muting and indicates that negative player interactions contribute to poor gaming experiences. Mei found muting communication valuable, suggesting “You feel better because you’re just playing the game”. Muting

chat allows players to shift their focus to the game itself, rather than experiencing social or communication elements. This can be seen as slightly different to avoiding being tilted by interactions, as Johnny and Jack noted above, however muting remains a clear mechanism for maintaining undeflected player focus in a game. Kieran did not use the chat as it “risks your mental”, explaining that his enjoyment of *LoL* came from “doing something well, realising it for myself, and then reaping the rewards for it”. Rory said “My least favourite thing is the talking to people in League” which made “feel a bit like shit” after a game, so for Rory lack of chat was a positive experience.

For Kieran toxicity in chat was “part of the experience, but it shouldn’t be part of the experience, should it?”. Muting that chat enabled players to take personal responsibility for managing their exposure to toxicity, no longer accepting toxicity as part of the experience and positively manage their gameplay. However, that some players reported a need to use the mute tool acknowledges that toxicity is a normalised part of the environment and impacts the game negatively.

7.3.2 ‘Premade?’

Players can further manipulate their experience by controlling with whom they play. Players can choose to queue for games as a ‘premade’ team (one or more players already known to them). Supkey said, “If you're playing with friends, you can choose who you're interacting with”. In this sense, players can manipulate their game experience in that they can minimise the potential for toxic players: playing with one other known player, or friend means one less potential toxic team member. Playing with friends has been found to reduce opportunities for misunderstandings between players (Kordyaka, et al., 2023, p. 13) thus limiting toxicity, and increased familiarity between teammates

facilitated better communication (Kahn & Williams , 2016). Playing in a pre-made team was seen as a way for players to utilise agency in controlling and shaping their game circumstances and structure.

Mei and Toby each discussed playing with friends as a means to venting their feelings outside the in-game chat; for example, sharing frustrations with team-friends on Discord during gameplay. This served as a release mechanism, saving them from the possibility of behaving toxically in the chat.

Mei said:

I join on Discord and talk about how crap this game is, like how fucked up your day was in general - it's like 'It's a bad day. But let's play this game to make it worse' [laughs]

Mei acknowledged that external factors can impact players potential to be toxic, or player responses to toxicity. By playing and communicating more privately with known players, frustrations can be shared whilst reducing exposure to or engagement with toxicity.

Participants were clear that playing with friends was more fun and held a different energy. Mei preferred to play with friends because they “only play for fun” and would not judge her skill level. Supkey preferred playing with friends because “playing with four random players that I do not know, I have zero energy with - it's not gonna be that same pull that I have with my friends”. Nella shared a similar sentiment, saying “we know how to play” and when playing with randoms “you never know what happens”. Participants generally agreed that playing with known people brought a different element of synergy, respect and reliability.

Playing with friends took Jason back to when he was first learning the game. He started learning by playing with friends, which he found “a lot of fun”. After experiencing a ban and taking a year break he decided to maintain focus on *fun*: “I'm only gonna play with my friends now and not really take it seriously”. Muting facilitated a focus on gameplay, but playing with friends enabled Jason to

prioritise fun and entertainment. Having control around who players play with can reduce toxicity by manipulating the game environment. Players can concentrate on what they like about *LoL* rather than being distracted by negative communications. Teams comprising of friends is not an option for all players as it requires pre-existing connections. Friendship does not entirely eliminate toxicity which limited the efficiency of this method, yet participants in the study frequently used friend-based teams to reduce toxicity in play.

7.3.3 Approach to play

Six participants said their approach to the game had changed over time and had helped them towards a more positive game experience. This was realised through stopping playing and not retaliating or responding to toxicity.

Some players committed to stopping playing when they were no longer having fun. Ray and Elliot both reported making conscious decisions to take a small break from playing when they no longer felt the fun of playing. Ray said, “I only play League as long as I’m happy [...] I only want to play League if I’m having a good time playing League”. For Ray, this meant moving away from his ritual of *one more game* or playing until he won a game, saying that if he was no longer enjoying playing, he would take a break. Jack said that “if I don’t enjoy the game, I’ll quit it but right now I enjoy playing the game”. Jason adopted a similar strategy: “when I have my off days, I never really chat. I just completely go dead silent and just play it out and then after the game’s finished, I stop”. When he is having a bad game – or day – Jason was explicit that he did not outset retribution in the chat. To keep the game fun for himself and others Jason would stop playing. Rather than retaliating, Elliott stopped playing if he encountered a toxic player: “I would always just stop - I’ll play it for a little while again and then just sort of move on, go to another game, do some uni work instead”. Shifting focus to a different task was mirrored by Kieran’s strategy of uninstalling the game based on “a small

realization that there's probably better games that I could play right now for myself, personally, so I'm not gonna load it up for a while". DK had developed a more specific break-taking routine, in comparison to the previous approaches, taking a three month break every year to focus on other games, adding "I kind of do it now as a tradition I guess where I'm like, 'Have I taken a break yet this year? Well, I guess I'll take one now'".

For these players stopping play has been important in mitigating their *contribution* and *exposure* to toxicity and to adjusting their feelings about *LoL*. For them the focus on keeping *LoL* as something that offers entertainment and not negativity was important, and breaks facilitated this thereby protecting their relationship with the game.

Participants reported actively changing and managing their gameplay experiences to be more positive. They made conscious decisions to avoid retaliation in negative gameplay, or take breaks from the game when playing was no longer rewarding. Participants were clear that they developed their approaches and changes in mindset over time, seemingly part of a process of maturation with/in *LoL*. Temporary disengagement seems to be regarded by seasoned *LoL* players as something that emerges with experience.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how participants reported their active engagement with tools provided by Riot within the game, and with wider strategies beyond the game, to ensure their experiences with *LoL* were positive. Some participants reported actively taking steps to avoid exposing themselves to all forms of in-game toxicity. There was one anomaly within the data, with Jack stating that he takes a 'fight fire with fire approach' saying: "Just flame them back. If you can't beat them, join them". This approach is something which other participants reported that they purposefully disengaged, but

Jack's comments demonstrate that not all players seek to mitigate, manipulate or manage exposure to toxicity in the same ways.

However, where a vast majority of participants seek to utilise their own agency, they are for the most part engaging with tools and methods – provided to them by the game client – to create safe spaces, spaces of coherence. These represent the restriction of agency imposed by the game; the “illusion of player control while simultaneously reflecting on-screen the players’ subjection to the game” (Garite, 2003, p. 7). These players form a subculture which is based on “shared identities, values, practices” (Haenfler, 2014, pp. 16-17) – those being non-toxic players who value positive game experiences and achieve this through muting, playing with friends, and adapted approaches to play. Here, we then see less conflict arising due to members of this group being united in their approach, goals and values, producing a particular ingroup (Sherif & Sherif, 1953; Sherif 1966; Sherif et al., 1988). This is then a form of cultural cohesion, achieved through the use of exclusionary practices (Ortiz, 2019), as shaped by the affordances of the game, and management practices can be framed as ways to fracture and then rebuild communities of safety. It should then be noted, however, that there are other subcultures which may exist – for example off-meta players, for whom the same exclusionary agency-enabling tools do not exist: there is less in-game, client-based support available from Riot for players to unite under these shared values. This then constructs off-meta players, despite Riot's seeming support of them (Riot Games, 2023a), as a distinct outgroup to the player base more broadly.

Participants were in broad agreement that seeking to ensure that *LoL* remains a fulfilling and enjoyable game is a factor that keeps players returning to the game and remaining engaged with the franchise. This theme is further developed in the next chapter. Chapter 8 presents the key themes identified by players about their continued engagement with *LoL*, and what makes them return to the game despite their awareness that toxicity is deeply embedded in the *LoL* experience.

Chapter 8

The Magnetism of *League of Legends*: Why do we return to play in toxic spaces?

You will end up playing League for more than one game.

You always come back to it.

- Jason

8.1 Introduction

Previous chapters have discussed how individual characteristics and perspectives shaped participants' interpretations and responses to toxicity, and the necessity of nuance in capturing and understanding how players interpret toxicity. Interview participants revealed that toxicity was a very real and persistent issue for them. The ability to manipulate their exposure to toxicity was found to be one factor in players' continued connection to the game. Other elements attracted players to return to the game, and it is important to consider the positive experiences provided by *LoL* that counter the reported toxicity sufficiently so players continue to return.

This chapter asks what binds players to *LoL*, so much that they stay committed to it despite it being constructed as 'toxic'. Prevalent themes emerging from participants in this study were the *LoL* universe and immersion within the game world (8.2), the phenomena of watching people play as an encouragement to play (8.3), *LoL* 'does it better' (8.4), patch notes and game updates (8.5), community (8.6), self-improvement and progression (8.7), and familiarity (8.8).

8.2 “I come back so I experience the *League* universe”: Immersion within and beyond *League of Legends*

For seven participants, the experience of the *LoL* universe, known as Runeterra, was particularly important and was cited as a key reason for players to return to the game. Ray summarised this saying “I come back so I experience the *League* universe”. However, it became clear that participants experience -even crave - this immersion in two distinct ways. Firstly, there is an investment and a desire to experience the characters and lore within *LoL*. Secondly, the *LoL* characters and universe build on players’ existing interests, thus enabling them to engage with these interests in different ways. The following section will explore these two types of immersion which significantly contribute to players continued investment and play.

8.2.1 Investing in *League of Legends*: characters and lore

In *LoL* the characters and the lore are relatively well developed and woven throughout the game. The narrative within the *LoL* universe pertains directly to the characters, with lore developed and realised through their interactions or relationships to each other, their affiliations and conflicts with different factions of the world, and overall champion design. Characters were key for five participants, with Johnny saying “That’s a huge part to me. I can identify with a character I am playing [...] It’s not a champion you’re playing – it’s you. You are the champion”. Whilst Johnny was the only participant to note this intensity of immersion – of *being* the character – other participants were also clear about the personal importance of the characters they were playing. For DK an element of connection between him and the characters led him to say:

I said my main purpose for playing the game is the characters, you know? I’m really attached to the characters. I think they’re cool and I’ll play them no matter how boring or how hard their kit is.

What is particularly interesting here is that DK is not necessarily concerned about how *interesting* a character's playability or playstyle is, nor does he focus on difficulty levels or how a champion aligns with his preferred playstyle. Instead, he talks about being drawn to the champions themselves as holistic elements of the game. This investment in champions also extended beyond the game, with Shane saying, "I'm really excited about watching *Arcane* - this new show", expressing an interest in seeing how the characters and their lore develop through the *LoL* - Netflix exclusive -animated show. But Shane also commented on this idea of closeness and connection between players and characters:

You know, you have the archer, you have the melee person, you have this and then that - it's infinitely easier to do that than to make a game that has the crazy combo network of a thing like League. And it's not just the skills and things you're doing - it's how that character looks [...] I just feel like there's a lot of connection that we have with these characters.

Shane spoke in quite a lot of detail about liking the champion Vi, saying "She's just an awesome character to me - just strong and she's awesome. So, I'm glad she's gonna be in [*Arcane*]", saying when he tried character art as a hobby, he drew Vi "just because I love her big fists". Shane feels there is a bond between the characters and players: they are not just animated, 3D objects that players control, but players become attached to characters based on their designs and what they represent. Ray expressed a similar sentiment: "I think because there are so many different champions, a lot of people identify with different ones". The playable champions in *LoL* appeal to players for a number of reasons. Johnny also spoke to this, saying:

If they remove the personality from the champions when they rework them that feels so awful. Gangplank used to be a charming pirate – 'har har!' - but now, I don't know.

Johnny went on to mention that he used to play a lot of Mordekaiser, but since the champion was reworked “he’s just a metallic dude”, and he no longer cares to play him. This demonstrates how some players invest in the characters as a whole entity, not solely on their aesthetics or ability, and instead the overall *feel* of a character is important. It was, however, interesting to see that Eva’s focus for selecting champions was more on their aesthetics:

I'm definitely more likely to play a champion that I like the look of. If they release a cute little bunny - I'm playing that. I don't care what role it is. If they release a champion and it's some ugly little armoured thing - no.

Eva said that she has even switched roles to play champions before, noting that when Lilia was released – a fawn-esque character with a Scottish accent – Eva intended to learn the Jungler role to be able to play her. She also suggested that aesthetics played into her current champion choices: “If Janna looked [ugly]? No”. Johnny’s comment suggests that it is both the visual aesthetics of champions and the bond that can be created between player and champion that is important, as he said, “I tried *Heroes of the Ancient*, *The Heart of the Storm* was one, but they look so ugly - I can't identify with the champions or heroes”. For Eva it might be that she only forms a connection with characters if they appeal to her aesthetic, because that is an intrinsically important element to her, as with Johnny. This illustrates that Riot have developed playable characters that appeal to a diverse player base, all of whom engage differently – but still seek connection – with champions. Shane tracked this development in his discussion around how Riot have grown and shaped their champion base over time, highlighting some key issues that were important to him in being a father to three girls. He discussed that, as a games designer, he has learnt a lot about sexism – broadly and within the workplace – and thought about this in relation to champion design specifically:

I do think that they've started to become a lot more diverse for women and I love that. I think that that's really important and to have a big girl like Illaoi. I hope they make a Gragas-like

woman. I hope they do these things. I hope they create obviously trans people as well. That stuff to me, as a game developer – it is so important that we start to create characters that people see themselves. [...] I think it's so freaking awesome when they create these other people - and they miss the mark sometimes, they do.

Shane acknowledged that some of the older champion designs “really did over sexualize” women, giving the example of “the hero poses with the girls with their butts out”. However, key here is that Riot have continued developing new characters in response to their player base – and wider social issues and progression - and are expanding their approach to character design. In noting that Riot have not always been successful in this, Shane spoke to the idea of representation, stating that “this stuff matters”:

And to a huge segment of the population - for the like 20-year-old white kid boys - they're like 'Why does that have to happen? and it's like: Your representation has always been there, forever. You're every hero. You have every combination of how you see yourself on earth exists

This suggests that characters that did – and still do - appear overly sexualised – were created in the shape of gaming culture, for a stereotyped audience and therefore created characters for the male gaze. However, Riot are on the right track in working to appeal to a range of players in developing champions with diverse body types, narratives and backgrounds. Importantly, over time, Riot seems to be moving away from the stereotypical, ‘strong white male’ and ‘sexy white female’ champion designs – although it should be noted that even the original seventeen *LoL* champions only featured three champions which strictly adhered to these stereotypes.

The way champions play into the whole *LoL* ecosphere is as important as the individual champions themselves. Ray mentioned his love for the champion Kayne and how his backstory is well-integrated into the lore for Ionia, the area of Runeterra Kayne is from: “It's like the whole user

experience of fantasy. It's perfect". Supkey also mentioned his love of lore in *LoL*, especially the region development:

[M]y favourite area being Piltover and Zaun - I just think that sounds so cool. [...] The lore keeps me attached as well because I always want to see what they do.

For Ray, it is the whole experience of the *LoL* as a whole:

[P]artaking in the game gives you like a higher degree of immersiveness. I don't really care about relationships from the champions in the game but the little missions - I mean, you don't get many, but if you're Kha'Zix and you kill Rengar at [level] 16 you get the buff - I'm like 'That's sick'. [...] It transcends the fantasy.

Ray and I discussed the 'Battle for Freljord' event that takes place on the 'Howling Abyss' map in ARAM mode. This occurs when any two of the Freljord leader champions (Sejuani, Lissandra or Ashe) are in the same game, on opposite teams, and have participated in twenty kills each. For this to occur in-game is quite rare as the champions played are randomly assigned to players as opposed to being a play choice. When this then happens, Ray said:

We've got this opportunity, this little extra Easter egg type thing. [...] there's all these little moments, little things that combined together made me want to go 'I want to be involved in this because I really like parts of it'.

For Ray, there is an immersive and playable element to the lore of *LoL*, which transcends the written background of characters, and allows for the community to come together and *play* the lore through the game. The rarity of these events make it feel more special. The love of this whole, immersive experience embeds in some players a sense of excitement when new content based in and around the *LoL* universe is due to be released. Supkey explained that he has studied the map of Runeterra, and this has made him especially excited about the long-teased *LoL* MMO:

I think that would be so cool - just to walk around the jungles of Ixtal or, the deserts of Shurima, seeing characters or champions that I've known walking through the Noxian Army or something like that - that would be so cool to see.

The ease at which Supkey was able to list of the regions of *Runeterra*, and reference happenings within these regions is indicative of the level of investment that some players have in the *LoL* universe, and the sense of joy which it brings. DK also commented on how he enjoys building decks in the *LoL* card game, *Legends of Runeterra*, and he bases his builds around the *LoL* characters that he enjoys playing in the MOBA game: “If I like their characters, I'll try to use them in *Runeterra*”. Participants indicated that as well as investing personally in the champions, it is the lore and environments the champions inhabit, and what those champions and world represent that keeps players invested and returning to the game.

8.2.2 League of Legends builds on players existing interests

For two players, Mei and Ray, champions appealed to existing interests and being able to engage with and build on things they already enjoyed was an important feature. Mei mentioned how she started playing a champion known as Ahri: The Nine-Tailed fox:

I started playing Ahri because I was very into anime. I liked foxes and nine-tails [...] I think it's because I used to watch a lot of Naruto and Naruto's nine tails mode - so that's why I started playing [Ahri]. And then switched over to Orianna because of her story - the way she was born.

Mei explained that champion voices and lore are important to her, but also that *LoL* has champions like Ahri who allow her to embody interests from other media forms. I had a similar experience when I started playing Ahri as some of my favourite Pokémon were Ninetails and Vulpix: cute, animal characters with nine tails. Mei also discussed how she listens to a lot of K-pop music, and therefore enjoyed the K-pop group, named *KDA*, which Riot made out of *LoL* champions. The *KDA*

characters then received a dedicated skin line with the *KDA* aesthetic, and the 'band' have released music and music videos, which Mei said she listened to. Ray expressed something similar, exploring why he started playing the *LoL* champion Garen:

I never used to play Garen ever, but when they released the God-King skin I really liked that thematically because it reminded me of [Warhammer 40k] [...] all I saw was 'Oh it's Roboute Guilliman' - the Primarch of the Ultimate Marine Legion. I thought that's literally what that is [...] I was like 'This is basically from Warhammer'. I loved it.

Ray said he liked the champion Viego for similar reasons, seeing parallels between Viego and Ulquiorra from the Manga *Bleach*, saying "This is as close as I'll ever get to playing this guy I'm obsessed with in this Manga in a game". Particular champions, or visual adjustments such as skins, within *LoL* allowed Ray to engage with interests and hobbies beyond *LoL* and provided an opportunity for him to play as some of the characters outside of the *LoL* universe in a way which he was unlikely to by other means, thereby expanding on existing interests and providing a novel opportunity for an immersive gaming experience.

8.3 Watch me play: the phenomena of watching people play as an encouragement to play

During interviews, participants spoke about the relationship between playing *LoL* and watching others play. Participants revealed that watching others play keeps them engaged with *LoL* and therefore participation within the universe. Interviewees would watch others play on a variety of platforms including Twitch and YouTube, or via the client to watch other players on their friends list play their games. DK said, "I really like watching other people, like people I know, play *League*", Elliott also enjoying watching people he knew playing, and adding that he would likely always stay

engaged with *LoL* even if it was only through watching people play - professionally or otherwise.

Elliott discussed how he watched Twitch streamers, specifically that he watched the League European Championship (LEC) whilst on a work placement because the company he worked for had connections with other brands invested in esports, and watching competitive play urged him to start playing again. He said:

I think it's a mix of I have friends doing it or I'll see it and I'll be reminded - because of nostalgia, maybe because it is a fun game - I'll jump on it again, why not?

Interviewees DK and Elliot both reported that they enjoyed watching people play and found that it motivated them to play. Shane expanded on the exact impact that watching professional players of *LoL* had on him. Shane recalled watching the professional esports scene more than he does American football. Whereas he used to watch every American Football game he moved to only watching his own team. Yet, when it comes to competitive *LoL* games he reported that he makes a point of watching all three days of professional games for his region, sometimes then also watching games from other regions. Shane specifically noted that part of his enjoyment of *LoL* is that observers can experience the same thing – “can play the same game” - that the professional players experience.

I can play on the same patch that pros are playing on – [...] for the most part, the game is basically the same game between the two of us. And watching what they can do versus what I can do. I love it. I love that idea.

Thinking about watching professional gamers playing, Shane, reflected that he enjoyed watching professional players at their best and at the top of their game, and what was especially important to him was being able to engage with and participate in exactly what they are doing, in the same way.

Whilst players might not be at the same skill level as professional players, they can play within the same map, play the same characters, and be *in it*. These characteristics sets esports apart from more traditional sports in terms of how close the viewers can be to the game. Whilst it was only Shane who specifically commented on this, it was a feeling that I could relate to, and it would be interesting to explore whether other players enjoy and experience this more broadly.

8.4 League of Legends ‘does it better’

Eight participants reported that they have not been able to find something that ‘does’ for them what *LoL* does, for example, Ray said:

I think ultimately I come back because I can’t find something that has a better or the same high [...] Just that feeling that you get when the things that you enjoy about the game.

He noted that whilst there are negative experiences within the game, “over time the negative part starts to go down and remembering the positive parts remains, and then I want to feel that again”. Ray – in saying this – noted that he was not trying to make an association between *LoL* and drugs but noted that it was about chasing a feeling and a moment of experiences. It became apparent early on in my data collection that there is *something* that *LoL* offers to players as part of the experience that players have been unable to find in other games. This presented differently amongst my participants, and it seems that what players cannot find within other games is different for everyone but can be broadly categorised into skills and champion design (8.4.1), memorable plays (8.4.2), and a particular expression or experience of fun that they cannot get elsewhere (8.4.3).

8.4.1 Champion design and impact on gameplay

Three participants explained that the way Riot have approached and developed playable champions – and how this impacts the game style and playability – is a feature they particularly enjoy and have not found anything equivalent in other games. Shane summarised: “I love the variety of champions. The fact that any two games are never the same because of the champions selected”. Kieran associated the variety of champions with approaches to play and game style:

It must be something in the game style because it's just different. Sometimes I go onto League, and I won't know a champion I want to play, I won't want to pick a role.

Kieran noted how he would go to play the game even when he did not know exactly how he wanted it to play out because he knew that there would be something within the champions and how they played that he would find satisfying. Kieran also noted that he enjoyed the complexity, nuance, and individuality of some champions kits. This complexity of interaction was noted by Amy in acknowledging how important the combinations of skills and abilities that champions can exhibit was to her:

My favourite part of the game is the moves and how different they are and how different the characters are. And getting good at it, and how it feels when you put those combinations of moves together and you're like 'Yeah, I nailed it' - or like dodge - I play a lot of Fizz, you know when you dodge stuff? This is so great. [...] like getting good farm and you're like 'Oh my God, it's clicked! I've got it!'

This was also noted by Kieran, stating that “what makes League quite interesting in itself is the fact there are over 140 characters or something, so the combinations of what can happen in your game is obviously immense”. Overall, the participants perspectives indicate that there is something particularly special around how Riot have developed their playable champions, and how players then *feel* when playing and mastering. They discussed their sense of appeal in how the champions are

played – in the skills and abilities that each champion has – that is unique both in terms of design and in how they impact each game. Every game will be different because of the endless combinations of champions, how champion abilities interact and impact the direction and play of the game, and due to the diverse expression of skill by each player in. As a developer, Riot has created a game that offers endless opportunities for play, in a way that enables players to play the same game, map, or champion, but provide a different experience in each game instance.

8.4.2 Memorable plays: “The insane moments”

Interview participants attest that the champion design, abilities, and skill levels combine to provide opportunities for what players deem memorable plays. These are moments of gameplay which stay in their memories and provide satisfaction in terms of skill development and progression, or moments which feel exhilarating or even unbelievable. Ray identified that much of this was associated with the specific circumstances and “contextualising that match”:

I can remember times where I did think ‘I can’t believe I lost that’ or ‘I can’t believe I won that’. How do I explain it? The insane moments and certain times - and it’s not even when I’m doing good half the time. It just something that I find really funny, or I’m playing with some guy, and he does some mental stuff, or some girl – sorry - but yeah, they do something mental and I think ‘Oh that’s sick.’

Such “insane moments” are clearly connected with the unpredictable nature of *LoL* games, where the combination of players, champions, playstyles, builds, and skill creates an element of the unknown in each game instance. This speaks to the range of opportunities for skill expression and mastery of play within the game. WN spoke to this, comparing it to the more recently developed MOBA *Pokémon Unite*:

The way that the games played out were just very predictable, but I think League does a good job considering that over 10 years there's only really been one primary map, [...] games still tend to just be so unpredictable - you really don't know what your next League of Legends game is gonna be like and I think that's a really like a big part of it for why I've kept coming back.

Participants have suggested that the approach that Riot has taken towards developing their game has resulted in a game that keeps players returning due to the replay-ability, unpredictability, and opportunities for memorable and unique gameplay moments in every game instance. These seem to be regarded as features that many other games, particularly those within the MOBA genre, have not achieved to the same degree.

8.4.3 League of Legends is a 'fun' game

Hobbies and pastimes are intended to bring us joy and pleasure, and video games can be seen as synonymous with playful pleasure. Games are meant to be fun, even if parts of play are challenging and taxing. As DK said “If I wasn't playing a game for fun, then I just won't be playing it, you know? [...] I'll play it if I like it”. Four other players mentioned the idea of fun as an important characteristic in *LoL*. Interviewees Amy, Elliott, Supkey, and DK acknowledged that it is – overall - a fun game.

Elliott said:

Maybe because it is a fun game - I'll jump on it again, why not? I still have it - even though I haven't played it in ages- I still have it installed, I still have it updated, just in case, I come back to it.

Important here is that what makes the game fun is not always intrinsically tied to winning – a theme discussed in Chapter Seven. Amy spoke to this, saying “It's not even about winning. We played a game the other day and I had so much fun. We lost”. Amy tied the fun to the champion combination

she player with her friend in that game: “he was just like ‘Are you going Lulu support? I’ll just go Yasuo’. I was like, ‘Yes!’, because when you get the knock up it’s just so, so good [...] that’s the best”. Presented here are gameplay elements which come together to produce thrilling and enjoyable moments, making the “ride” of the game enough for player to feel they have had fun without the experience of a victory. Speaking to the combination of Lulu and Yasuo is just one of those instances of unique gameplay potential that feels fun. Supkey recalled this sense of fun being important in early experiences of *LoL*:

I remember playing Annie for the first time – with Deathfire Grasp – and just doing silly damage to tanks – that was so fun and thrilling, like I’d never experienced something like that before.

Riot’s attention to detail in gameplay, and the diversity of available champions, builds, playstyles and matchups has created the opportunity for endless new gameplay experiences which keep excitement in the experience of playing. Participants have suggested that these features mean that winning a game is not necessarily a condition for having had fun. As Amy, said “I like to win, but I’ve had just as many fun games that you end up losing”.

8.4.4 Section summary: An elusive factor

Section 8.4 has explored various elements that participants have suggested that sets *LoL* apart from other games. Notably these are elements of champion design, gameplay, memorability of plays, and overall enjoyment that they have not found to occur as successfully in other games titles. Participant responses indicated that *something* about *LoL* speaks to players in ways that they have not found in other games, but this *something* might differ between players. It is clear, however, that participants found it difficult to articulate this elusive *something* that *LoL* offers them. This is summarised by Johnny, who said that whilst he is sticking with *LoL* for now, he is “constantly trying to find

alternative which sucks me in. It's a long-term addicting experience to me, but I don't really find anything similar to League which is well done". Shane shared a similar perspective:

I look for the same feeling I want, and I can't find it and then I end up getting frustrated or anxious [...] I'm like "Oh shit. I feel like the only option I have is to go back to the game" [...] I think ultimately I come back because I can't find something that has a better or the same high.

Whilst it has been possible to identify various elements that *LoL* 'does better' into tangible gameplay elements, summarising the *something* is difficult. However, maybe it can be associated with this notion of a 'high'. Perhaps the difficulty in defining what is really *is* in which *LoL* finds its success, is in some ways the secret of the 'something'.

8.5 Patch notes and game updates

Balance changes, game updates, champion releases, and rotating game modes are all elements which keep the game fresh, and this was discussed by six players. Jason said: "What will bring me back is either friends wanting to play but mainly something that Riot releases that will spike my interest". He noted that the constant change is something that he felt a lot of players would come back to the game for; something that Elliott said also keeps him playing: "I think if they add new stuff to it, or if I see it progressing, I'm like 'That sounds really interesting' - I think I would come back to it". Elliott discussed that he has enjoyed changes to Jungle mobs or the Dragon, because they were reworks rather than drastic changes to the game structure or style:

I almost like that because it's familiar but they update and they change it so I can come to it and be like 'Oh, this is cool. This is new' or 'Oh, that's interesting. They've changed it that way'.

This combination of familiar and novel content is found across many online multiplayer game titles, including *World of Warcraft*, *DOTA2*, and *Overwatch 2*, and for the study participants, these features kept a familiar game feeling fresh. This is further explored in 8.7 on the theme of familiarity. Keeping the familiar game ‘fresh’ was regarded by participants as integral if it is to still be the same game yet still retain players overtime. WN praised Riot in accomplishing this, saying:

[A]ll those big preseason changes that happen all the time; they keep the game fresh so that it can still be fun despite it still fundamentally being the same game that it was 10 years ago.

Rory, who gave up playing *LoL* but continued to play the mobile version, *Wild Rift*, also felt that the updates had helped to keep *LoL* feeling like a new experience each time:

It's not the same game all the time - although it looks like the same game - it's the same map, it's still all the same champions, the prices are all the same - it appears to be the same game but obviously there's a meta, the game plays differently.

Nella noted that she looks out for particular updates. She follows *LoL* on Instagram and said that when she sees a new skin line announced that appeals to her, the comments and gameplay surrounding the announcement as part of the marketing are something likely to attract her to play again. Nella explained that the social media posts made her think “‘Wow, I actually miss playing this’” but added: “so I go back - I lose and I’m like ‘What a shit game’ and I just log out”. Whilst some game updates lure Nella back in temporarily, she reported that they were not usually enough to keep her playing consistently. Instead, she said she preferred the FPS game *Valorant*, also developed by Riot, although Nella was clear: “if they update and buff Neeko, I’m definitely gonna go back and

just start Ranking more”. This suggest that there is a relationship between the pull of characters and the updates themselves which can work to keep players returning.

Whilst Kieran said that the patch notes and game updates did not necessarily keep him coming back to the game, he could see why it would for some, adding “when they bring another element, I guess it does add some flavour to the game if you were feeling like the game had lost that anyway, beforehand”. Factors which kept the game constantly evolving and therefore interesting for some players, were sometimes reasons why some players decide to take a break. For Jason, the meta – influenced heavily by the patches and game updates - was something that determined both his return to and departure from the game:

I'll play a different game until they fix it, like, if all the champions that I play are just not strong at the moment and I don't fancy learning any of the new or new strong champions. I have gone through metas where I have completely roll swapped, or if I really didn't enjoy it, I would just stop playing League until it changes.

Clearly a games developer such as Riot cannot please all players simultaneously, but adjustments made in the name of ‘game health’ might fundamentally change an aspect of the game that some players find to be ‘fun’. However, with the pace of change and with which new changes are to *LoL*, it is unlikely that the impact of an undesired change will last for very long and new changes to the game will either reverse fundamental change or adapt another element in which attracts players back to the game.

8.6 “League is more than just the game you play for 40 minutes”: Community within and beyond the game

This chapter has predominantly considered gameplay-based phenomena that keep players returning to LoL. However, as Rory noted, “*League is more than just the game you play for 40 minutes*”. This section explores how, for many participants, friendship, social connection, and opportunities outside of the gameplay itself has a place in their continued engagement in *LoL*. This section will focus on exploring esports (8.6.1), community diversity and engagement opportunities (8.6.2), and the social aspects of *LoL* (8.6.3).

8.6.1 esports: *League of Legends as a spectator sport*

Five players – Amy, Elliott, Shane, Jason and WN – all spoke about how they very much enjoyed *LoL* esports. Amy said that this was fundamentally her favourite thing about *LoL*:

I really like the community behind the esports, and when I wasn't playing League I was keeping up with esports and now I'm going back into esports and I'm like 'I really miss this, I miss watching this'.

Amy said that she was sometimes asked “Why don’t you play the game yourself?”, responding “Football - like every sport that you ever watched - why don't you just go outside and play it?”. This demonstrates that there is something about watching *LoL* that is similar to watching other sports, yet this conflicts a little with Shane’s notion of watching and being also able to play in the same space, unlike with traditional sports. Jason said he would still engage with the *LoL* esports scene when he was not playing the game as much:

I am also currently not playing much League, but I still watch a lot of the LEC/LCS/LCK games with some LPL if I can keep myself from sleeping. [...] At the moment I tend to just like the esports scene more than playing it. [...] because it's just a lot more interesting to learn what they're doing than it is to be playing myself and not realize all the mistakes that I'm doing.

This speaks a little to Shane's enjoyment of seeing professionals' own skill expression, but it is interesting then that Jason finds not being able to play at a professional level frustrating at times. Elliott and WN also reported that they enjoyed watching the professional scene, with Elliott noting that it led to him playing the game again. Shane said that he loved watching streamers on Twitch because the "huge esports events and interacting with streamers that are good people" are some of his favourite things about *LoL*.

Noteworthy is how Toby, Amy and Shane commented on the atmosphere at *LoL* events, with esports matches being slightly different to the online gameplay environment. Toby noted that when he attended Worlds in London in 2015, he started chatting to a group of Australian Diamond players who he said were really sociable. He also recalled that at an event in Leicester, casters including Quickshot and content creators including ThePeacePigeon were friendly and chatting to attendees. Amy similarly found this at the Worlds 2015 event in London:

[...] the atmosphere was great, and it was great, and everyone was really nice. It was amazing. Which is weird because then you're like "Which of you is the one that was shouting at me?"

This suggests that there is an in-person atmosphere that is friendly and welcoming, which is at odds with how the in-game community is often experienced. Shane shared his experience of offline esports events in a similar way, highlighting that they were very social and had caused him to think about why these events might be much more pleasant than many in-game interactions. His theory revolved around how team and player fan-ship and spectatorship operate in esports:

I'm a TL fan but I like a lot of other teams [...] If you're an [American football] fan, statistically you're just not any other team's fan and so that's my tribe and so if I'm at a game, there's your tribe and my tribe and there's not a lot of neutral parties [...] At an esports match, there may be multiple games that day - in fact, most likely there are - and so the fact is the whole audience is made up of a hodgepodge of fans of different things and different [...] I don't think the formula or the crowd makeup is one that creates as much conflict.

Offline events are not about players' own games – their skill, ability, expression, or reliance on others. Players can just enjoy the game for the game, and the nature and set up of professional play does not encourage conflict between team supporters in the way that is seen in traditional sports. When discussing their experiences of watching professional play at live events, study participants mentioned different reasons why this was a favourite form of gaming engagement, or reasons why such experiences kept them engaged with the *LoL* universe. For Jason, esports was informative and provided a connection to the game when the gameplay itself did not feel to be a source of enjoyment. Amy, Toby, and Shane each commented that there was something about the offline esports community that was welcoming and sociable, which for them served as a welcome break from the often-toxic interactions which on occasion occurred during their own gameplay.

8.6.2 Community diversity and engagement opportunities

Arguably, esports is one domain in which community diversity and engagement opportunities present themselves in *LoL*, although they have been considered separately here due to the number of participants who identified this form of engagement specifically. The study participants indicated that they enjoyed the considerable community engagement in developing content around *LoL*. Further, they appreciated how players can engage with game or lore related material beyond the gameplay itself. Ray said:

I don't think every game has that [...] I don't know if it makes me come back to it, but I enjoy League more because of it. It has all these additional things. Alright, I don't necessarily go and view art contests all the time, but I'll see it and I'll think 'Ah that's sick' and that wouldn't happen without all these things.

Ray acknowledged that whilst he does not participate in the creation of such content, he gets “added benefit” from it being created and being able to see it. The diversity of community and engagement opportunities is demonstrated by the range of activities or content forms that participants said they enjoyed engaging with. Jason noted the in-game events, such as the *Pentakill III: The Lost Chapter* event in 2021 which was a streamed community event, and the content around *KDA* that had been released by Riot over the last few years, commenting “when those come out it's nice that everyone's partaking in it”. Much like Mei enjoyed listening to *KDA*, DK mentioned music-based content released by both fans and Riot, saying:

I really love the Fiddle rhyme that [Riot] released. That was pretty neat. And then you obviously have the Jinx and Vi music - they're also pretty cool. And when it comes to fan made, like I said before, you got to like the rap battles and custom songs and all that.

Lavender also recalled how, in the past, she followed fan-art on Tumblr, saying she would engage in discussions with some of the artists because as she particularly enjoyed the lore side of *LoL*. Talking about the fan-art community she said:

And there's one artist called Suqling [...] her art is amazing, and she would come up with cool lore ideas and do these really, really beautiful artworks [...] And I had another friend who did more like cartoony, really cutesy, really funny stuff and we would talk through the art - like, re-blog it or comment and stuff like that. We didn't really talk about like our personal lives or anything too much. It was more like communicating on each other's posts kind of thing [...] It was generally a very positive community.

Participants made it clear that for them there was something about the *LoL* community that existed beyond the gameplay that they found particularly welcoming because it generated all-round enjoyable experiences. All of these experiences are removed from the competitive, high-speed, pressured environment and focus purely on creativity and expression based around an interest. For

Lavender, being able to consume created works and connect with others through this was a valuable way to engage with the *LoL* community. Supkey mentioned the Worlds esports events, drawing attention to meeting people who were cosplaying as *LoL* champions. He said that “everyone has the same interests as you and everyone's so nice. No one was toxic at all”. He also shared a story where, after the Worlds event, he and his friends went to a gaming bar in London:

[T]hey all were playing League and having fun and they just spoke the same language as me I guess so it was really easy to talk to everyone and I'd never been in a situation like that before.

This demonstrates participants' views that interactions *based on the game* – online or offline – but *not during gameplay* could foster a positive community for them as players. Further, the participants suggested that they seek to connect with the game and the universe beyond purely playing it. As Jack explained, players could easily find and join Discord servers with a focus on players' particular interests:

You want to find someone that wants to talk numbers, there's a Discord for that. You want to find someone that grinds win rates and just get the accounts as high a win rate as possible, there's something for that. You want to play a particular strategy; you want to talk about esports – there's just a Discord server for everything.

In *LoL* Riot has created a game and game universe which feeds players' imaginations and provides them with a wide range of ways to participate in *LoL* beyond gameplay. Participants have made clear that such opportunities, many of which have been grown and blossomed through the player base's commitment and participation to these community dimensions and initiatives, are features which maintain players connection and engagement with *LoL*.

8.6.3 Social aspects of participation in League of Legends

It could be argued that esports and community engagement are intrinsically social elements of *LoL*, however participants pointed to something different here. Some noted that *LoL* players greatly valued the connection with people, both through pre-established relationships and bonds made through *LoL* itself. Whilst Shane, DK and Toby all mentioned that they enjoyed meeting other *LoL* players and forming new friendships around the game, a majority of participants (ten of seventeen) noted that their continued engagement with the game was heavily dependent on the social aspect of the game. Participants commented on what *LoL* did to support and facilitate existing bonds and connections, reflecting Crawford's (2012, p. 143) notion that gaming and game culture goes beyond play and is a "source of memories, dreams, conversations, identities, friendship".

Jason said that aside from patch notes, friends were usually what brought him back to playing *LoL*.

He explained:

Even when I took a break for like six months - I completely didn't want to play League again and I think if my friend didn't suggest playing with him, I wouldn't have gone back to it, but yeah and now eight/nine years later, I'm still playing.

This highlights how fundamental friendships could be to players' continued engagement, and for Jason it was also about being able to engage in these friendships via Discord whilst watching esports: "I like the laughs, either at the game or the chat that comes along with watching. Just makes it more enjoyable". Toby also noted that he enjoyed being able to play a competitive game online whilst in a Discord call with friends, saying that it was good to "just chill and laugh and stuff and silly things with mates".

Three participants shared personal stories of when *LoL* had been fundamental in maintaining particular friendships or relationships, as captured in the short vignettes which follow.

8.6.3.1 *League of Legends and connection: three vignettes*

Vignette A: Supkey; Worlds apart, together

In 2015, aged 16, Supkey had been playing *LoL* for two months and the current Ranked season ended. Supkey ranked Silver and had found a group of friends through *LoL*. This group of friends lived in London, and he was currently living in Ireland. The *LoL* Worlds Quarter Finals were in London, and Supkey and his friends were trying to get tickets to go. He booked a plane and flew to London and met up with the friends he had made online through *LoL*. He initially did not tell his parents about going, but upon his return his parents said “You’re crazy. You could have been killed, murdered”, but in Supkey’s words “the *League* community in person is so different to the *League* community online”. He met cosplayers and other players and “No one was toxic at all”. After the Worlds games, they went to a gaming bar where lots of people were playing *LoL*, probably because Worlds had been streamed in the bar, and Supkey and his friends found it really easy to speak with everyone. Everyone there “spoke the same language”, as Supkey found that *LoL* and its terminology were the “mother tongue” that night. Since then, one thing that kept Supkey playing is the thought of meeting these friends again at another event. In 2021, Supkey was living in Hong Kong and not able to visit his best friends for their birthdays or other key life events. Whereas he would have caught a four-hour train to visit his best friend, he could no longer do so. But he continued to play *LoL* with her, suffering with 230 ping due to playing on the slow EU West servers whilst based in Hong Kong. As Supkey said, “I just deal with the lag”. As a result, his predictive abilities for Janna tornadoes have become really good, and he “[feels] like [he] can read the future sometimes”. He said “I still play with her but unfortunately, she's moved roles now. She used to ADC with me but now she's in the Jungle but still in the same games. We also have to deal with time difference and

full-time work and stuff like that”. What is clear though is that *LoL* helped develop a friendship that has crossed borders and continues to facilitate that connection across space and time.

Vignette B: Lavender - Love, Laugh, League

In 2011, in the UK, Lavender met her girlfriend - who lives in America - via Tumblr. Lavender had some friends who already played *LoL* and suggested that she play with them. Her girlfriend was already a *LoL* player, and ultimately *LoL* became something that they would play together during their Skype sessions. Lavender said, “It was a fun thing for us to do together”. She has had a difficult relationship with *LoL* over the years, especially in relation to Riot’s history with sexual harassment, assault and ‘lad culture’ in the workplace, especially due to Lavender’s identity. She said “I’m a lesbian. My partner is transgender, she’s bisexual. I’m a woman - that affects everything about my life”, and she said that this had affected how she viewed the gaming community. By 2021, Lavender was living in America with her now wife. Despite a tricky relationship with the game, Lavender feels that the best things *LoL* has brought her is “just having such a funny time with my wife when we played *League* together”. She said, “We recorded it sometimes and I’d see these clips of just us just laughing so hard or playing some hilarious bot lane together and just those times, you’re connecting with somebody you care about and just really enjoying it and it being really funny I think is the best time”. Neither Lavender nor her wife play *LoL* as much as they did. Her wife has a group of friends she enjoys playing with, and Lavender recalled her wife saying, “I don’t actually really enjoy *League* that much anymore, but I just really have fun with my friends”. When *Arcane* was released, Lavender did not initially plan to watch it but ended up doing so because it was something her wife wanted to. And so, *LoL* has remained something they bond over ten years later.

Vignette C: Shane and “the boys”

Shane is a 38-year-old, white American games developer who says: “I’ve lived a pretty privileged life. I work in a cool industry. Things are good”. Sometime around 2019-2020, Shane was playing Zyra support with a randomly matched ADC who he just “clicked” with: “We have good synergy [...] We were kicking butt bot lane”. Shane and this ADC ended up playing a few games together, going on a six-game winning streak. The ADC invited Shane to join his Discord server, and there were five or six people in the server who were playing *LoL*. Upon joining the server, Shane recalls “[j]ust based off of the kinds of things that were posted in there, it was obvious to me that they were probably Black - all of them were Black and I got on voice and I could hear they had kind of Southern accents, and I was like, ‘Oh okay, cool.’ They’re younger guys, but they were really nice”. As it happens, all the guys in the server are Black men aged 18- to 23, who Shane explained have very different life experiences to himself. Shane said that they like that he is the only white person on the server, and that together they all have “really soulful conversations” where Shane will try and be a “good older mentor”. Shane joined this Discord server post Black Lives Matter, where Shane said he had just been on his own journey, which he described as “transformational”, in learning about anti-racism. Shane still plays with the guys in this Discord – he says to his wife “I’m gonna go hang out with the boys”. He said “I trust these guys implicitly. I would legit, if I had an emergency, I would call these guys. That’s how good of friends they are now. I would have never met them if I didn’t meet this one guy on *LoL* and now, I’m friends with them. [...] I love being around them and we play all sorts of games together now [...] I mean we ultimately always come back and play some *League*”.

Vignette Summary

Vignettes A-C demonstrate that *LoL* has the capability to bring people together. It is a game that can help friendships develop from initially having one thing in common, or and it can help maintain or strengthen new and existing relationships, although it should be noted that whilst this is not

something exclusive to *LoL*, it is something that is rarely commented on regarding *LoL* specifically. Instead, it is explored through games such as *World of Warcraft*, which has been found to be used to “supplement, and perhaps even *enhance*, real-life relationships” but also in players “reaching out to people they meet in-game, and incorporating them into their RL social lives” (Schiano, et al., 2014, p. 69). These two themes are evident across the above vignettes. Much like Lavender, Eva noted that playing *LoL* is something she likes to do with her boyfriend who lives in Portugal, she said: “It’s nice that we’ve got something we can do together. It’s always nice to do that”. Theme of connection and friendships were discussed by participants more broadly.

8.6.3.2 Friends bring me back to League of Legends

Three participants said that they will continue to play *LoL*, or have returned to *LoL*, because friends wanted to play, and three other participants noted that friendship is a contributing factor in their continued play. When interviewed, Nella noted that whilst she primarily played *Valorant* at that point, friends would bring her back to play *LoL*. She said:

I think that the best part of League is just friends that come out of it [...] I don't know why - but every evening they would just start playing ARAM rather than Valorant or any of the games they usually play, so I was like I might as well just join.

Nella said that there were periods of time where neither she nor her friends were playing *LoL* – sometimes for six months or so – and then suddenly everyone wanted to play some *LoL* and this, she said, “starts another cycle of only playing *League*”. Nella also indicated that hearing friends talk about *LoL* – even if it is negative – made her want to start playing again. Rory also talked about returning to play *LoL* because of friends, but with a very different tone. They said:

I've come back to play with friends again [...] I certainly think that it works as a good platform to allow those moments because obviously if we all just sat in a call doing nothing, nothing's gonna happen.

For Rory, *LoL* provides an activity between friends that facilitates conversation and catching up and removes the possibility of awkwardness in *just* joining a voice call. They said that the best moments are post-game, where you are chatting with your friends and discussing the game. Elliot, like Rory and Nella, said it was friends who rekindled his interest in the game again, saying that he usually needed “a little push – or a pull, I guess – to go back”. He recalled two instances where this happened recently:

[T]he most recent one was one of my friends who went to university with me, and we both graduated so we don't really see each other anymore and he was like ‘Do you want to play some League?’ And I was like ‘I haven't played in ages but sure’ so he got me back on to it but then when I started playing with him, the next day I then picked it up without him. [...] Even when I was speaking to you all about it when we were walking from the ball, I was like ‘Oh, am I gonna start playing it again?’

While Shane abandoned playing *LoL* a few times, he reflected that he ultimately returned - partly because he cannot find a game which offers what *LoL* does (see Section 8.2) but that this is then coupled with a friend messaging him to catch up, he finds friends online playing or they invite him to a game, and then he is back into it, demonstrating this “push/pull” that Elliott spoke of.

Whilst Shane, Elliott, and Nella spoke of this fondly, Rory was less enthusiastic about this:

I would way rather be doing anything else with those friends. I'll play the game if it means I can hang out with Jason a little bit, but I would rather be doing anything else with Jason, but League facilitates that for both of us.

Here *LoL* is facilitatory, something also noted by Elliott but in a different vein: “I’m not really a person who likes speaking - I won’t really jump into Discords if I’m just sat there really - a lot of time people have to mention ‘Oh, do you want to play this?’”. For Elliott, *LoL* facilitated reconnection with people who have moved to other parts of the country and cannot meet up as easily, reflecting similar ideas to those shared by Supkey and Lavender.

Whilst, for the aforementioned participants, *LoL* offered a way for them to stay connected with friends and partners across physical distance, for Mei *LoL* served an important purpose in helping her to socialise. Mei shared the following:

I can stay in touch with other people [...] I’m very socially awkward in real life and I also have anxiety, so I don’t like to talk with a lot of people in real life. But with League, I can just talk and play games at the same time, so that’s why I come back.

Mei told me how it felt easier to keep a conversation going whilst playing games, because it is possible to discuss general daily life events or updates, whilst sharing something in common though playing *LoL*. This also made it easier to stay in a Discord call for a number of hours. As Elliott mentioned, he is not someone who will generally chat on Discord, but *LoL* being the common ground that facilitated conversation was something that supported both Mei and Elliott. This, again, mirrors the notion of gameplay enhancing offline friendships (Schiano, et al., 2014, p. 69).

Supkey expressed genuine passion for the game, which served as a way to keep in touch with his best friend, and to meet new people on *LoL*, especially “brand new players who know nothing”. Paul (2018, p. 51) has noted that *knowing* about access to knowledge can stop some players continuing with gameplay: “Some players will know to look online for optimal build guides for a character or

where they can search for advice when they get stuck; without that knowledge, other players are left struggling and may give up”, and Supkey’s actions seem to try and combat this. He connected this to his offline life as a teacher:

[W]hen someone asks me a question about League my teacher brain switches on and I'm kind of answering a question for a student so I try to tell them whatever information I have, and I do know a lot - I do like extensive research [...] So definitely helping the new community coming into League is another reason why I continue [playing].

Whilst many of the participants in this study use *LoL* to stay connected and develop friendships beyond the game, Supkey reported genuine enjoyment in contributing to the community by helping new players start their journey with *LoL* in developing their own game knowledge.

8.6.3.4 Section summary

This section has presented participant views which indicate that friends are often integral to keeping many players connected to playing *LoL*. Fundamentally there are enjoyable aspects of the game which maintain players’ engagement. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, friends both make the game more fun, and playing *LoL* can help maintain friendships across distances or through personal struggles. Thus, the game can be considered a hook for many, where – even infrequent players or those who are not a fan of the game overall – find a space they can return to for friendship. Jason summarised this sentiment well:

I think it's one of those where ... you kind of have to fully commit to stopping, otherwise your friends are just gonna be like 'Oh, do you want to play one game of League?'. You will end up playing League for more than one game. You always come back to it.

8.7 Self-improvement, skill expression and progression

The ability to track self-improvement within the game was a feature that several participants reported as contributing to their motivation to remain invested in playing *LoL*. The idea of self-improvement, skill expression and progression within the game was also mentioned by some participants as a factor connected to the notion of competition, of players being ‘better’ than an opponent, and much of this is facilitated by every game of *LoL* being a different in challenge. Jack is an excellent example of how competition, skills and progression come together to create a game with which he remains invested in:

I want to get into competitive because I want to play at the highest level, you know, crowd screaming my name, that fun stuff and [...] because I just enjoy the game and I want to improve and become better because I like improving.

Shane also acknowledged improvement and the competitive element to be key drivers for his continued play. He said that previously he has stopped playing the game three to four times, going so far as to uninstall the game and stating that he would never play again because, as he said, “I’m not good enough”. However, Shane has always wanted to reach Gold rank but never quite made it, and so somehow he would eventually return to *LoL* to try again. He shared the following anecdote of when he reached Level 30 and started to play Ranked games:

I remember when I would play with the students, I went “Guys - I’m getting really close to having an average of one KDA” and now I actually have really good KDA [...] It’s funny - little micro improvements.

Shane commented further on this, talking about how, like Supkey, he liked teaching other players to help them improve their game. Whilst teaching Games Development at a college, Shane sponsored

the college's *LoL* club. He mentored the students and took them to tournaments and events to play against other colleges. He started meeting people at such events and post-Level 30 he analysed his improvement:

I like to measure my progress and see how I can do. I've never really gotten super far but I think that ability to use skill expression and start getting better, but then also measuring that improvement through rank was a big motivator for me.

What seems important to note here is that Shane expressed his feeling that his ability to measure self-improvement went alongside the social aspects of the game. Shane talked about his changing life circumstances as he was going through a divorce when he started to play *LoL* more. At that time Shane was living alone and so instead of spending evenings with his wife or children as he previously did, Shane used the time to socialise and focus on playing *LoL*. He committed to the game which demands considerable time and practice in order to improve, and so Shane develop a strong relationship with the game itself.

Shane identified “micro improvements”, something which Kieran also found real value in. Kieran commented that he did has no time to “grind achievement-like rewards”, saying:

I don't really care who gets the Nexus first; it's just about: have I made some good decision or has a skillshot landed or I've done well or something. Just all those small things added together - or I've just played a game and I've gone 9-3 and quite a few assists and getting kills, just winning trades and scenarios - all those things are satisfying.

Kieran added that these “small enjoyment factors” are the things that bring him back to the game.

Kieran resonated with Amy's comment on practicing champions and being able to “put those combinations of moves together for champions so you feel ‘Yeah, I nailed it’”. These micro level

improvements, and how practicing pays off for ‘feel-good’ moments where players can *see* their own improvements, were sufficiently significant and enjoyable to motivate Shane, Amy, and Kieran to continue playing: something these three players have all enjoyed.

Toby said that *LoL* has been a good place to escape because he found that “playing a single player game, it doesn't scratch that competitive itch”. He observed that other competitive games such as *Hearthstone* did not offer him the opportunity to “objectively look back and see what I did wrong because there's a lot of RNG there”. Therefore, the competitive teamplay element, combined with the ability to *understand* how to improve gameplay were important to Toby.

Whilst some participants combined the competitive elements with the ability to express their own skill and improve, Nella focused solely on the competitive game. She said that the visuals initially drew her into the game, but then “my competitive side came out when I started playing Ranked”. She talked about how her initial goal when beginning to play ranked games was to get to Diamond because of the border, but now she is only aiming to reach Gold II in order to get the Victorious Skin (a skin exclusively available to players ranking Gold and above at the end of each Ranked Season). Interestingly, the competitive element was very important to Nella here, but it also seems to be combined with her being able to visually express her skill through using in-game skins and borders which are visible to other players.

The facility for continual improvement in a game which fundamentally retains the same aims, structure, and format is a factor which retains players. Further, participants value the opportunity to track their improvement, and to gain satisfaction from small, micro improvements which provide immediate, palpable moments of accomplishment. From participants' perspectives, Riot has

produced a game which feels both fresh and familiar enabling players to sustain their involvement whilst continually progressing. This feeling of familiarity is further explored next in Section 8.8.

8.8 A feeling of familiarity

As indicated in previous sections of this chapter, familiarity has emerged as a significant factor for some participants, which instigated their return to play the game. Of the five players who discussed familiarity, it was Lavender who found it to be particularly significant, and she connected familiarity with how she viewed digital media formats more broadly:

I think I see media as something that should serve me and not something that I should dedicate myself to [...] And League - it's free to play and I know the controls and I think I'm a good Nami, you know. Like I've got other champions, I can play - I enjoy support, I can get back into it and not much has changed - it can still do the same thing, so it was really easy to pick up and it's very immersive.

The ease at which Lavender can resume playing *LoL* even after spending quite some time away from the game was an experience shared by Elliott, Jason, and Shane. Elliott said:

I think with League the thing for me is it's familiar. It's so familiar because now I've learned it and I've gone through all this understanding of it, it's really familiar so I can just pick it up [...] The familiarity is definitely what brings you back.

Here Elliott was talking about that perfect balance of the old and the new: the familiarity of the overall system, alongside the opportunity to explore new content, champions and changes to existing systems which maintain ever-evolving excitement in the game. Familiarity, however, was discussed by participants with an overall notion of having already invested time into learning and developing skills in playing *LoL*, which made returning easier and also made it a “go-to” game.

Lavender noted that it was relatively easy to resume playing *LoL* because, as she said, “I know how to play it and that’s one of my main things about games [...] I don’t want to spend a lot of time investing, learning -even new controls”. She referenced that she plays *Crash Bandicoot* on the PS4 because she knows how to play.

Familiarity with the game systems and controls, and overall awareness of how a game plays out and progresses, was mentioned by participants as potentially a key driver in returning to play *LoL*. Jason recalled how despite having other games he still returned to play *LoL*:

I looked at all the games in my Steam library and I was just like “Ehh... League” [...] I installed like five games just ready so I have to click and play them and then just give them a go. I haven’t loaded a single one of them yet. It’s been like three - three and a half months.

Shane also spoke of the notion of ‘mastery’ and ‘time’, which Lavender referred to, saying:

When you’ve played a game for five years [...] you have a certain amount of mastery over the game and so it takes time to get there. And so, then when you go to another game, it feels a bit like imposter syndrome, right? You start, you’re playing this thing and you don’t understand all the mechanics and things like that [...] that feels like I’m in a level playing field, you know?

Familiarity, then, offers an ease of resuming the game after a break in playing and instils in some the sense that as a game plays out it feels *fair*. The final result of a game is tied to the context and circumstances of individual instances, uncomplicated by a lack of familiarity with or difficulty in developing skill in a new game title. Participants who commented on familiarity identified the importance of knowing that – regardless of the result – the game can be enjoyable. Eva said “I know I’ll enjoy it and I know that I’ll be able to do it. I know that the people I know play it as well so I can play it with my boyfriend or friends”.

Familiarity, then, also links with the notion of gaming *payoff*: the satisfaction derived for the time invested in learning, improving, and playing the game. Lavender said:

You don't want to pay with your time. I think your time becomes more valuable as you get busier. So yeah - you just want to log in and have fun right away and I don't think there's anything really wrong with that.

When players do not have time to invest into a new game, or they are not in the headspace to commit themselves to learning new mechanics and systems, *LoL* provides a space to return to with the promise of ease of play in relation to game-knowledge and skill. Participants valued experiences of small moments within the game – win or lose – which provided players with a sense of enjoyment. They compared this quality to playing games where and unknown, unplayed games might not offer this opportunity and may result in a feeling of time wasted or dissatisfaction, something participants with limited time find undesirable – especially when time is precious.

8.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has explored why participants discussed their continued engagement with *LoL* when they considered to be so toxic. It has focused on participants' reports of immersion, watching others play, how *LoL* provides something that other games do not, the sense of familiarity alongside 'freshness' to gameplay, the community, and the ability to improve at the game and monitor personal development as a player. What this therefore suggests is that whilst there is a clear embedding of toxicity within the gameplay culture of *LoL*, there exist a variety of subcultures tangential to *LoL* through which players engage. If subcultures are defined by "values, practices,

cultural objects” (Haenfler, 2014, pp. 16-17), then this chapter identifies a number of ways through which this is realised: through connection with other subcultures (such as different gaming titles, anime and Kpop); valuing friendships, familiarity, personal improvement, and engagement with esports. Each of these are realised through either the utilisation of game-provided agency (such as queueing for games with friends, or playing particular champions), or through engaging with *LoL* outside of the gameplay itself in alternate game-related, game culture spaces. This then realises the notion of virtual communities within *LoL*: players are not only connected through the game-space itself, but through other avenues which facilitate people with “common beliefs and practices” (Stone, 1991, p. 85) around the game, to connect with each other despite physical separation. Engagement with these subcultures could be argued to help players form ingroups based on shared values and goals – goals based around particular ways of enjoying the game and game related content – therefore shielding themselves from those without those interests who would disrupt that shared goal.

The question remains as to whether the elements discussed in this chapter are sufficient for players to either overcome or overlook toxicity in the game and motivate them to continue to play *LoL*. For the participants in this study, only one player – Rory - permanently left the game due to experiences of toxicity, yet Rory still played an off-shoot of *League of Legends: Wildrift* – (a mobile version of *LoL*, developed by Riot, which utilises the same champions and universe), with limited the possibilities for toxicity due to the user interface and the mobile device nature of the game. Whilst the remainder of my participants still engaged with *LoL* to some extent and in various ways, this may not be representative of the player base more broadly and is limited by the fact that this study does not provide insight from those who have indeed abandoned the game due to toxicity.

Whilst conducting this study, there have been periods of time when I have played *LoL* very little or sometimes not at all for several months, but I have always, eventually, returned to the game, even if

for short periods of time or just the occasional game. I can identify with participants' comments about what could be called 'the return factor'.

I don't know how to say that that's my favourite part because I had to have gone through other stages of favourite parts to get to here now, but that's just the only way I can describe it today and my answer probably would have been different five years ago.

- Shane

There is something magnetic about *LoL* - its gameplay, design, opportunities, social aspects and its community - that draws players to return to the game – even if occasionally – despite the toxicity that runs throughout it.

This chapter has explored player experiences and understandings of toxicity; how they reported working to avoid and manage their exposure to in-game toxicity, and why they continue to return to *LoL* despite knowing they will inevitably encounter toxicity. Chapter 9 explores how the toxicity that is present within *LoL* represents issues found within gaming culture more broadly. Thus, gaming culture can be considered a microcosm of issues prevalent within wider society. It also considers what Riot might do in their future efforts to tackle toxicity.

Chapter 9

A microcosm of wider social issues: What does this mean for gaming culture and games developers

9.1 Introduction

This thesis has explored how participants reported being first introduced to and becoming invested in *LoL* (Chapter 5). It has reported participant views on how the game developers Riot and players themselves define toxicity (Chapter 6). It went on to present an analysis of the factors which participants reported had an impact on how behaviours were interpreted and how they explained their approaches to navigating toxic game spaces (Chapter 7). The thesis has also uncovered participant perspectives on what leads them to continue playing *LoL* (Chapter 8). The question remains as to what this means for gaming culture more broadly.

This chapter will consider how *LoL* represents a reflection of some issues in our wider social world (9.2), the specific relationship between *LoL* and its player community, and toxicity (9.3), and how Riot might change its approach to addressing toxicity (9.4). Finally, this chapter presents *The Toxicity Interpretation Framework* (9.5), a framework-based approach for understanding dimensions and individual interpretations of toxicity within League of Legends, providing a new way for Riot – and games developers more broadly – to think about how individual players understand toxicity and therefore consider more diverse methods to minimise the potential for toxicity.

9.2 *League of Legends*: A reflection of social values and microcosm of our wider world

The behaviours which occur in *LoL* (discussed in Chapter 6) seem to reflect negative attitudes of sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism which can be found across the broad spectrum of gaming culture and in wider society. Riot's own history with 'lad culture' and sexual harassment cases has sullied Riot's reputation in this regard and therefore the culture within *LoL* specifically. The exposé by D'Anastasio (2018) for the gaming website Kotaku, revealed extensive sexism within the workplace, with, for example, a female ex-employee of Riot recalling being told "her position was a direct result of her appearance". D'Anastasio (2018) cited numerous examples from female ex-Riot employees, which highlighted how female employees were disadvantaged, treated unfairly, and subject to sexual harassment within the workplace including unsolicited nude images of male colleagues, as well as male colleagues compiling lists of female colleagues they would sleep with. One female employee noted that "she felt like an interviewee's record wasn't as valued as their ability to fit into Riot's culture" (D'Anastasio, 2018).

In 2016, Riot conducted a survey amongst its own employees (Wawro, 2016), and found a correlation between toxicity in the workplace and toxicity in-game: "Rioters who received complaints about their in-game behaviour were also awful to work with" (D'Anastasio, 2018). This seems to suggest that something within Riot, or in Riot's apparently inadequate response to its own workplace culture that perhaps filtered through into the culture of its very first game, *LoL*. If Riot, as a game developer, does not adequately address illegal and unacceptable workplace behaviours the question arises as to whether players should expect Riot to adequately handle replications of such behaviours in game. When interviewed, Lavender spoke about Riot's track record, saying:

I think with Riot's stuff that is illegal that they do [...] they're basically just protecting themselves - they're not doing any fundamental change and I think that shows the future of how it will be in game.

Lavender went on to say that she did not feel that in-game behaviour would change without Riot sorting its own practices around sexism and other forms of discrimination. Lavender spoke quite extensively about the link between player behaviour and the social world more broadly, noting that she felt in-game anonymity contributed greatly to player behaviour: “I think it's definitely a reflection of the wider world and how we behave when no one's looking. I hope that doesn't sound too depressing”. Lavender makes an important point here: we know that anonymity can contribute to negative interactions online (Guo & Caine, 2021; Nitschinsk & Tobin, 2022), with Gamergate (Massanari, 2017; Mortensen, 2018; Paul, 2018) as a more extreme, but nonetheless important, example of this. Suler (2004, p. 321) has referred to this as the online disinhibition “where online users will utilise anonymity to use ‘rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, and even threats’”, with Grey’s (2014, p. 39) work on Xbox live articulating this as “toxic disinhibition”. As some interviewees reported in Chapter 8, and further in the current chapter, the lack of repercussions and absence of connection with a human on receiving end of discriminatory behaviours, coupled with game developer Riot’s current approach to dealing with toxicity does little to connect toxic players with the reality or impact of their actions.

The negative, toxic player behaviour in *LoL* as discussed by interviewees (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) can be considered a microcosm of gaming culture more broadly, which is unlikely to see real change until gaming culture itself experiences value changes. This speaks to Paul’s thesis that “the current state of culture around video games is dark, and I think those of us who recognize problems have an obligation to address them” (Paul, 2018, p. 2), and alongside the fact that game world boundaries are permeable (Fairfield, 2008, p. 434). To change the nature of culture within games development and community might mean that this toxicity has less chance of spreading into an in-game culture, also.

Lavender said that “unless there is this level of involvement in the social culture that can really make a change, but it won't [change] because, you know, they can't make money from it”. Lavender's comment seems to reflect the current reality for the state of *LoL*. As Chapter 8 has shown, *LoL* currently offers something sufficient to retain players within the game, thus reform is not necessarily a priority in terms of player retention and company viability. From a financial viewpoint it does not appear necessary to invest workforce into generating non-discriminatory change within Riot's player base, a concern noted by players (Chapter 6). However, the issue at heart here is not about financial viability, but about practices which permeate the microcosm of a game which reflects wider society. Should *LoL* players or developers accept lack of response to unacceptable behaviour *because* it is not financially necessary? Should we ask whether a financial business approach is a valid response, when societal change should really be the main driver? As many research participants indicated there is something here where large – and popular – game developers such as Riot, who hold loud and powerful voices within the gaming world, should be leading the charge for change and showing that it is important for companies to invest in eradicating toxicity and discriminatory behaviours and practices. As of 2022, Riot has teamed up with Ubisoft for the *Zero Harm in Comms* research project, which is a “technological partnership to enhance the reach of their artificial intelligence-based solutions in order to prevent harmful player interactions” (Ubisoft, 2022). The project is the first cross-industry project of its kind, aiming to impact and benefit all gamers through the shared “mission to create gaming structures that foster more rewarding social experiences and avoid harmful interactions” (Riot Games, 2022b). Both Ubisoft and Riot are members of the Fair Play Alliance, which seeks to encourage healthy gaming communities and understand “disruptive and harassing behaviour in games” (Fair Play Alliance, 2024), however Riot did not join the Fair Play Alliance until 2022 (Ousley, 2020), six years after it was established (Fair Play Alliance, 2020c). While Riot is seemingly taking these bigger steps to address toxicity, it is still questionable as to why it has taken so long for Riot to do this, and why they did not start to make such a statement on gaming culture and toxic communities sooner. Therefore, in light of the findings of this study it is suggested

that Riot needs to do better from within their own company in order to start producing meaningful methods to address toxicity which set an example rather than a vocal and loud performance which lacks integrity. The *Zero Harm in Comms* project, thus far, seems to also overlook how to more specifically understand the interactions between factors influencing creation and interpretation of toxicity, meaning more nuance is needed in communications and discussion from Riot.

9.3 The relationship between the community, the game and toxicity

If the negative interactions that occur within the *LoL* community are a reflection not only of one game-developers' culture but of gaming culture more broadly, this suggests there could be some quite complex relationships at work between the game, toxicity and community. When interviewed, Shane noted this:

The relationship between community and the game and toxicity - it's complex one, and especially at scale - this is a big game with a lot of people and a lot of communities.

Part of the strong attraction of *LoL* is that the game appeals to a wide range of interests: from lore, to interests outside of the game, patch notes, character design, roles skill expression, competitive edge (see Chapter 8). The wide array of appealing elements means that whilst players can opt into and easily access information and communities around their specific *LoL* interests, in itself it invites a considerable amount of opinionated discussion and disagreement around and within these interests. This is summarised by Chu (2014, n.p.), who wrote:

I've spent a lot of time in a lot of places that draw the opinionated and the zealous [...] And never have I met a group of people as doggedly convinced that their opinion is 'objectively

correct' as gamers.

Clashes of interests, playstyles, and abilities – combined with anonymity – inevitably create disagreement and potentially negative interactions and behaviours, which can generate the toxicity that is a primary concern of this thesis.

During his interview, Shane expressed the view that it is players who initiate in-game toxicity:

People have this thing about knowing a lot of information about one little part, but they don't really understand everything happening within that game and that leads to these kind of crazy theories and things that happen, but then people latch onto it.

This idea that individual players have such strong knowledge or opinions about small and specific parts of the game, alongside a very narrowminded approach to the opinions of others can be seen to contribute to toxicity between players and is reminiscent of Chu's above statement. That said, it is developer decisions which can ultimately fuel such toxicity, as can the wider community around *LoL*. Johnny picked up this point during his interview, saying, "Then the source of toxicity is obviously their poor decisions and they're not fixing that". With a broad and diverse community to please, can any game developer 'fix' how every player feels about and responds to game-wide decisions?

Two players, Rory and Jason noted that the influence of the well-known, players in the community – the *LoL* 'celebrities', as it were – have considerable influence and are in a position to contribute further to the complexity of the relationship between the game, the community, and toxicity. Rory said the faces of *LoL* contribute significantly, mentioning Tyler⁸ as a key example: "Tyler's quite big

⁸ Tyler1 is a well-known *LoL* streamer. He is known for not necessarily engaging in game-ruining behaviours in-game, but being volatile, reactive and 'toxic' on-stream during his games.

face for League and he's just shouting all the time, so maybe it could be a little bit in the stuff that's around it". Here Rory highlights the relationship between streamers being the 'face' of *LoL* and contributing towards the acceptance of toxicity more broadly. If toxicity is being seen as entertaining by viewers of streamers such as Tyler1, the serious undertones of some toxic behaviour may not be fully realised. Jason also mentioned streamers, but focused not on their influence on toxic behaviours, and instead on opinions around Riot's own decisions might be shaped by popular figures, such as the streamer 'LS', and communities band together in their frustration:

They obviously have quite an influence on the community as well, with their opinions [...] but obviously you have metas set in place with the patches, the community completely changes with that because, obviously, if one of their champions get nerfed and there's a popular champion then the community absolutely hates the patch and then goes against Riot.

Where there was dissatisfaction with the game and gameplay, of course players - gaming personalities or regular players - will voice their opinions. Jason went so far as to say, "The community will just never be happy with the game I don't think". However, when those with a trusted status in the community, such as streamers, speak out against game development and gameplay decisions made by Riot, their articulation can be impactful. This too could contribute towards disagreement between players who present the opinions of others as fact, however it also suggests that a mob mentality emerges amongst the gaming community in making Riot the target of abuse when they 'ruin' the game for players.

Yet another complicating factor is that *LoL* has a reputation for toxic behaviour, based to some extent in reality. Rory commented on this saying:

There's no smoke without fire. I mean it would be odd to me that every person that talks to you about League then goes - if you ask if you should play it, they go 'No - but do'. [...] A reputation alone isn't gonna carry that view on it, it has to be happening regularly.

This then begs the question as to whether toxicity in *LoL* continues *because* of its reputation: *LoL* is notorious for having a toxic community, Riot's own culture has been shown to be toxic (D'Anastasio, 2018), and some well-known streamers convey toxic attitudes and display toxic behaviours on stream. Participants in the research reported in this thesis indicate that such behaviour is accepted 'entertainment' and normalised within *LoL*'s culture. Therefore, it could be suggested that Riot needs to do a better job of educating players and providing opportunities for players to express and engage in more diverse form of play which are focused not only on metas driven either by games design or influencers. This would broaden player horizons in understanding approaches to the game but also provide greater player agency in determining if they want to play in a game mode which supports off-meta play or not, protecting both those engaging in and non-engaging in off-meta play.

Having explored the complex relationship between toxicity, the game and its community, I now conclude this chapter with a consideration of the need for change in addressing toxicity in *LoL*.

9.4 A change of tactics in tackling toxicity

In discussions (found in Chapter 6, 7 and the current chapter) around how Riot deal with toxicity, there is clear discontent from players about the approach, as well as a lack of clarity around exactly what Riot's current approach has achieved, but also how far Riot *can go*. In her interview, Lavender stated, "getting your account banned is pretty much as far as they can go". Eva commented on the lack of efficiency of the report system, saying "I do wonder like what's going on - clearly nothing's happening to these people and they're just carrying on doing this every game", explaining that she rarely received feedback from the report system to inform her that someone she had reported had

been reprimanded. Shane noted a similar experience in rarely knowing if any actions were taken on the reports he made, saying:

The players who want to have a good community don't feel reinforced that Riot is supporting them [...] I think people would report even more if it felt like they felt like it was meaningful.

A sense of mistrust in the effectiveness of the reporting system, or that any reports of toxicity submitted by players, produce meaningful change has emerged, from analysis of the interview data, as an issue that Riot should tackle in order to bring the *LoL* community back on-side and show that Riot as a games developer is unsettled and concerned by the toxicity prevalent in its community. This has, however, already been acknowledged, as analysis of *Tribunal* data found that players were not engaged with reporting toxic behaviours without encouragement or request to do so from other players, suggesting a possible lack of trust (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014). There is also an acknowledgement from interview participants that dealing with toxicity is difficult, and that the very nature of the problem means solutions are limited. Jason noted that Riot have “changed their report system many a time to try and help in every situation they can”, however these changes were not impactful. On this note, Eva suggested that Riot could be doing more but felt that “so many people are toxic - it's like practically everyone [...] you can't just ban your whole player base.” Therefore, players do acknowledge the challenges present in dealing with toxicity yet still feel that there is more that Riot can – or should - do.

Participants expressed the view that there are limitations in developing a system that effectively regulates how toxicity can be presented and performed in diverse situations, whilst simultaneously managing the impact that banning players might have on the business success as a company and on *LoL* specifically. This circles back to the idea of *LoL* reflecting a number of social issues in society, in

addition to a lack of financial incentives to invest in generate a change across such a large community. As a Free-to-Play game, it is easy for any player to create a new account, thus rendering minimal the impact of player-based sanctions, with little, if any, reduction of toxic behaviours and attitudes. However, participants in this study expressed views that introduction of a sanction which banned accounts might deter players from engaging with micro-transactions, such as purchasing visual modifications such as skins. Elliott shared his assumption that game-developer investment in dealing with toxicity would not produce a positive financial benefit for a company was associated with poor anti-toxicity strategy:

You can monitor chat, you can monitor language, you can monitor the reports, you can monitor the game chat as well to see what goes on there - but how much are they gonna dedicate to that? How much money are they gonna put into it? Because they're not gonna get money back from reporting.

Thinking along similar lines to Elliot, Shane shared his suspicion that Riot as a company was not investing enough into addressing toxicity because it is not seen as economically significant. He drew on his experience as a games developer, saying:

They're solving problems about retention and money, right? Like economy in the game [...] If I am an executive and it is most important to me that revenue go up, am I gonna have my highly trained, highly paid team of data scientists working on the revenue problem or this toxicity problem?

Shane noted that this lacks logic, because player retention is impacted by something such as toxicity, but made sense of this by then saying “I don't think there's enough people that care or at least people that have a big enough voice in the room” to suggest that in solving toxicity, other issues will be solved too. Shane acknowledged that whilst on the surface it might not seem worth investing in ‘solving’ toxicity, the financial investment here could produce even better retention rates and

ultimately increase in profits. Yet Shane also acknowledged the challenges present from a developers' perspective, drawing on his experience of working on problems such as toxicity in game chats and connections within the games industry:

I know that it is not solvable - or at least today you can't solve the whole problem, right? You can't literally predict all toxic chat and remove it before players see it. There's a lot of things you can't do.

For Shane, dealing with toxicity with machine learning models is not possible right now because you cannot predict these behaviours and can only respond to them once they have happened. He remained optimistic, saying “I think there's a world we could, in the next five, ten years, with enough research”. In considering this perspective, we could ask whether a key issue relates to what cannot be predicted or halted before it happens, which is where a significant proportion of research on toxicity in gaming more broadly has been focused (Märtens, et al., 2015; Murnion, et al., 2018; Canossa, et al., 2021; Ekiciler, et al., 2022; Jia, et al., 2022; Reid, et al., 2022; Yang, et al., 2023; Fesalbon, et al., 2024). However, a further difficulty lies in what player traits are *harder* (and perhaps most costly) for a game developer to monitor. Jack made several relevant points here:

[T]here's a lot more that's not easily detectable. There's the just completely wrong itemization, and [...] he can R [use his ultimate] at any point in time and like really good choke points but he just doesn't feel like pressing this R button for whatever reason at all.

Here, it is acknowledged that the performance of some toxic behaviours is hard to detect, highly nuanced, and essentially *human*. Riot's lack of investment in what can be dealt with – or the inefficacy of investments - do not, according to the participants in this study, seem to have resulted in impactful change. The challenge of addressing toxicity is highly complex and not easily detected by systems such as AI and therefore will require workforce investment to manually monitor and

check behaviours. However, the additional question is should all focus be on monitoring and predicting, or instead on deterring and educating? If Riot are monitoring everything that *can* be monitored, and responding appropriately, should attention be focused on other aspects, namely providing clearer deterrents for such behaviour, educating player bases about diversity and diversity of play, and providing avenues which foster – rather than suffocate – this?

In tandem with this, the sanction of an account ban is the harshest punishment available. Study participants have suggested that this could be responsible for creating ambivalence and apathy towards any developer led approaches to dealing with toxic *LoL* player behaviours. As Jack summarised: “Yeah, they're not doing enough - people don't feel threatened, they're not going to get banned at all”. He expanded on this based on his experience of playing at a high ELO:

[P]eople feel free to troll. They don't care if they [...] completely ruin the game, AFK in fountain for five minutes, come back, die or just perma split side lane and do nothing and lose the game. [P]eople don't feel like they're gonna get punished so they don't care.

This also highlights how participants in this study did not feel that Riot's current report and ban systems actually worked as intended. Participants made clear their views that Riot's current approach is frustrating for players. In discussing muting players and pings in-game, Toby said: “the defence mechanism from not tilting yourself is to make the game harder, which is frustrating, but I don't know how you fix that”. Study participants, therefore, were of the view that whilst the game developers offer players a number of tools – and a degree of power – this power often has a negative impact on players which is two-fold: it does not feel impactful, and it makes their gaming experience harder.

The key implications of this consideration of how toxic behaviours in *LoL* might be addressed include the need to invest in anti-toxicity measures which are visible to players, feel impactful, and feel like the game developers are taking meaningful and effective measures to address toxicity. Two things are central here: i) that players need to see and feel that Riot, as developers of *LoL*, understands that toxicity impacts players, and ii) that players want to see that, as a company, Riot is on the side of non-toxic players. This requires more than a listing of right versus wrong behaviours, but a more nuanced discussion from Riot which engaged players in discussion, expanding understanding, and encouraging players to do better whilst simultaneously acknowledging from within that not all forms of toxicity easily fit within a binary sense of justice or policing.

9.5 Understanding diversity of interpretation: The Toxicity Interpretation

Framework

In the process of conducting, transcribing, and coding interviews, as discussed in Chapter Four, it became clear that a primary reason for the distinct idiosyncrasies in defining and interpreting what is deemed to be toxicity or toxic behaviour was the fact that we are human. No one player in *LoL* is the same, and whilst Riot – and other game developers – might publish a set of ideal rules for how the game could be played and how players conduct themselves, there is a substantial grey area within these written codes of conduct, or within how players experience and interpret gameplay themselves, and the FPA (Fair Play Alliance, 2020a, pp. 32-37) has in fact acknowledged that cultural and social context are contributing factors. Through listening to player experiences and interpretations of what they consider to be toxic behaviour, we can develop an understanding of how players come to view behaviours as toxic, especially those which are more apt for interpretation (trolling, off-meta play, banter) as opposed to behaviours which clearly go against moral (if not gaming) codes of conduct, such as hate speech. This section uses player perspectives

from the study to propose a framework for understanding the relationship between gameplay preferences, priorities in play, personal characteristics and game environment/knowledge to understand how individual interpretations of toxicity within League of Legends are developed. The Toxicity Interpretation Framework (TIF) proposes a way of identifying the roots of what makes for some players being more in-tune to – or more likely feel offended by toxicity, particularly language-based behaviours. This aligns with what many have already noted as a key problem within gaming, and internet culture, more broadly: white, cis, heteronormativity (Paul, 2018).

The following dimensions emerged as important for players in interpreting and constructing toxic behaviours (as discussed in 6.2.2):

- i. Offline personal characteristics
- ii. Playstyle and approach to play
- iii. Mindset
- iv. Knowledge (including skill, rank) and ego
- v. Who you play with

These five elements can be articulated into four key elements: *Priorities in play*, *Playstyle and approach to play*, *Sensitivities: offline personal characteristics*, and *Social capacity: game environment and knowledge*. Each of these is then explored (9.5.1) before presenting the Toxicity Interpretation Framework (9.5.2). Following the presentation of the framework, its practical applications are illustrated (9.5.3) before a section summary discussing how the application of such a framework can help to minimise toxicity.

9.5.1 Dimensions in constructing toxicity

Toxicity can be seen as something that is socially constructed – and reconstructed – by a group.

Whilst it might be possible to find a consensus on what toxicity is, any consensus will, at times, be redefined, or reconstructed, by individuals according to their context and each game experience.

Section 6.1 has set three dimensions which can be brought together to form a framework for understanding toxicity. These three dimensions in the construction of toxicity: social capacity, entertainment, and sensitivities can be summarised thus:

i. Social capacity

Social capacity encompasses game knowledge, skill, and approach to the game. Each player's 'level' of ability within these areas, including how they approach game play in terms of playstyle or motive (enjoyment, winning – or a combination of both), will determine how players interpret behaviours in-game.

ii. Entertainment

Entertainment encompasses player-approach to the game; including mentality, but also where players derive enjoyment from or termed here *priorities in play*. This produces two dimensions of entertainment. Some players will interpret particular behaviours as 'toxic' whilst others will deem this to be entertaining, and in some cases behaviour might be both. Additionally, context can be relevant here in relation to game mode and/or who players are in a game with, i.e. friends or randomly matched players.

iii. Sensitivities

Sensitivities speaks to individual characteristics of players that might mean that specific language used in text chat has a greater impact on individuals. Whilst there is broadly a consensus socially around language that is acceptable or unacceptable, within in-game contexts this seems to be less respected, or the known impact of racist, misogynistic, ableist, homophobic and transphobic language is known and abused deliberately to provoke a reaction. Sensitivities can also relate to individuals' personal offline experiences, for example where players generate insults based around death and illness can hit close to home for some players.

Summary: The importance of dimensions

If we can identify aspects which make players either i) more susceptible to toxicity, or ii) shape how and if players identify toxicity, we can work towards guiding game developers in tackling such toxicity. This might be through predicting behaviour, increasing, and adapting existing language filters, or providing educational tools to community members to educate players on behaviour, language and interpretation and the effect it can have on others. We should also be aware of the fact that even if a behaviour or action is not identified by a player as toxic, it could still *be* toxic, begging the question as to why such behaviour is tolerated, something addressed in part by discussion of individual differences, as explored above, but also by player understandings of the origins and created context for toxicity to develop and fester.

9.5.2 The Toxicity Interpretation Framework (TIF)

The Toxicity Interpretation Framework emerged from participant data and is a visual presentation of the relationship between player priorities in play, playstyle and approach to play, the player's

sensitivities (offline characteristics), and their personal social capacity (cultural and social knowledge) and how these come together to produce interpretations of toxicity.

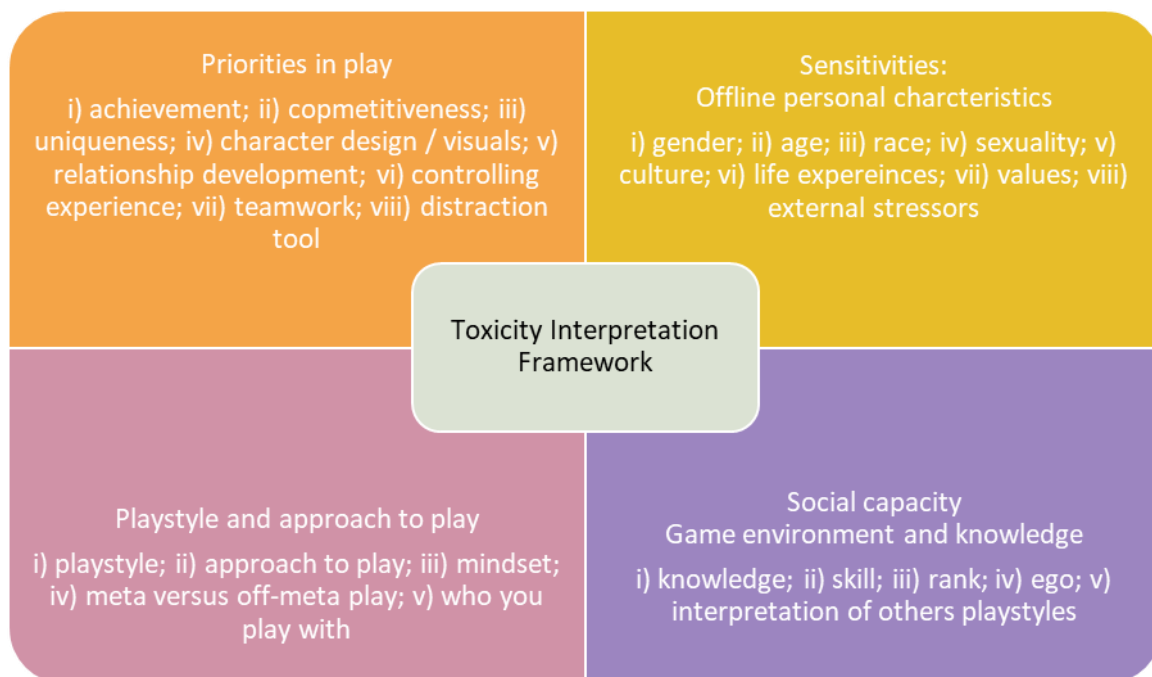


Figure 9.1 The Toxicity Interpretation Framework

Figure 9.1 shows four dimensions that can contribute to how a player might interpret behaviour in-game. Each dimension contributes to whether or not a player deems a behaviour toxic. The purpose of the Framework is to highlight how toxicity is not a ‘one size fits all’ definition for many players, and therefore should not be viewed as such by games developers.

This original Framework consists of four elements:

i) *Priorities in play*

Drawing on discussions presented in Chapter 4 around the ‘hook’ for players to continue

play, key elements or priorities in the game can be discovered. These hooks will in part determine what a player wants to achieve through play, and what their intrinsic factors for enjoyment are. If these factors are disrupted or at odds with those of another player, it could be posited that opposing behaviours might be deemed 'toxic'.

ii) *Playstyle and approach to play*

Player enjoyment of the game is shaped by their playstyle and approach to play, including mindset and meta versus off-meta play, and who players are playing with. As in *Priorities in Play*, player playstyles, mindsets or approaches to play differ, and players could interpret the contrasting approach as toxic.

iii) *Sensitivities: Offline personal characteristics*

As explored above, personal identities contribute significantly to how individuals interpret language and behaviours, thus determining what aspects are deemed unacceptable, harmful or un-entertaining.

iv) *Social capacity: game environment and knowledge*

Player knowledge, skill and rank will create nuanced interpretations: toxicity looks different across skills and ranks and is also interpreted differently. Players own egos will help to define behaviours or language, alongside how players interpret the playstyles and approaches to play of others, all of which is influenced by players' own knowledge of the game.

Considering these four elements can help illuminate nuance in toxicity and aid our understanding of in game harassment and disruptive behaviours. There is considerable focus, on how to *stop* or *predict* toxicity, but little on what toxicity is, how we understand it or the more social-based factors on what contributes to toxic (as discussed in Chapter 2). The Toxicity Interpretation Framework is an

emerging outcome from the participant data in this thesis, and a tool to help construct further understandings of toxicity.

9.5.3 Utilising The Toxicity Interpretation Framework

To demonstrate the potential and usefulness of the Toxicity Interpretation Framework, I am utilising my own experiences as a player. Two different behaviours are presented, one linguistic and one behavioural, with analysis structured as per the Framework.

9.5.3.1 Behaviour 1: 'You play like a girl. Get back to the kitchen'

Behaviour:			
An enemy player types in all chat You play like a girl. Get back to the kitchen'. The game is a non-ranked game. I know no one else personally in the game.			
Priorities in play	Playstyle and approach to play	Sensitivities	Social Capacity
Relaxation and fun – collaboration and teamwork are essential to this. Everyone needs to be on the same page (whatever that page it!); My own performance is overall more important to me here than winning. I want to enjoy playing the champion I have chosen.	Meta; shaped by my own strengths as a player. My mindset is focused on casual play but where everyone is making an effort to play well. In-game chat should be focused on the game, not outside factors unless sharing something of enjoyment	I am a female support main. Early 30s. I have played a range of roles and champions. I view sexist interpretations of play unfavourably, alongside the use of personal characteristics as insults in play. I believe that intrinsically games should be fun, but that team spirit should be present to make play enjoyable. When you start a match, you commit to play as well as you can.	I am silver ranked, but relatively skilled on support and marksman champions. I don't claim to know much about optimization beyond the meta. I have friends who engage in off-meta play.
Behaviour interpretation:			
I would interpret this verbal behaviour as toxic. The remark from the enemy player disrupts my priorities in play and my approach to play marks this as an insult. My gender and approach to equality in gaming and the social world more broadly is strongly at odds with the player's comments. My game knowledge might not be equivalent to those of a higher rank, it is not tied to gender.			

Box 9.1 "You play like a girl" play experience, as analysed by The Toxicity Interpretation Framework

9.5.3.2 Behaviour 2: Allied off-meta play

Behaviour:			
An allied player plays a utility support champion as a marksman (off-meta play). The game is a ranked game. I know no one else personally in the game.			
Priorities in play	Playstyle and approach to play	Sensitivities	Social Capacity
My priority here is winning: collaboration and teamwork are essential. Winning is prioritised. To get there, my own performance is important to me, but the overall ethos and approach of the team is too. We should all be playing to win.	Meta; shaped by my own strengths as a player. My mindset is focused on optimal play. Off-meta play is viewed less favourably as optimization and effectiveness of play is a focus in ranked matched. Winning matters.	I am a female support main. Early 30s. I have played a range of roles and champions. I view sexist interpretations of play unfavourably, alongside the use of personal characteristics as insults in play. I believe that intrinsically games should be fun, but that team spirit should be present to make play enjoyable. When you start a match, you commit to play as well as you can.	I am silver ranked, but relatively skilled on support and marksman champions. I don't claim to know much about optimization beyond the meta. I have friends who engage in off-meta play.
Behaviour interpretation:			
I would interpret this verbal behaviour as non-toxic. In this instance, the player is making an informed effort in off-meta play: I am familiar with how their chosen champion can be played differently and have experience in playing it in this style due to my focus on support and marksman characters. Whilst it is a ranked game, I can see that they are building appropriately for the context. If I did not have this specific knowledge, I might view this differently, but my social capacity enables this view. The player's approach to play is based on optimisation, priorities in play around teamwork and effort, and their commitment to play is in line with my own ideals.			

Box 9.2 Allied off-meta play experience, as analysed by The Toxicity Interpretation Framework

9.3.3 Section summary

The section has presented a number of dimensions which come together to impact how toxicity is interpreted within *LoL*, a framework to demonstrate this, alongside examples of how this framework can be utilised in scenarios. In considering the different contexts and characteristics which contribute to *defining* toxicity, we can then understand how game spaces might be better adapted to provide players with better opportunities to explore and play the game in a way which suits them and does not conflict with other players' play styles. This is incorporated into the policy recommendations in Chapter 10.

9.6 Conclusion

Three key issues have been explored in this chapter:

1. *League of Legends* reflects some of the wider social issues and found within gaming culture
2. The expectation and reputation of *League of Legends* players and its community
3. The game developers, Riot, lack a meaningful approach to addressing toxicity in *League of Legends*

Core to each of these three issues is Riot's ethos. If Riot as a game development company, is not developing an 'anti-toxic' work culture within the gaming world, it is inherently – but silently – affirming a view that toxic behaviours are acceptable within its spheres and spaces. As *LoL* is one of these spaces, the lack of action to address its own internal issues is inevitably reflected in an ineffective response to in-game toxicity. Despite statements on toxicity, and its approach to dealing with in-game game-ruining behaviour (Riot Games, 2020a; Riot Gamesb, 2020; Riot Games, 2023a), the participants in this study reported that the overall message from Riot is that toxicity is not sufficiently important to it as a company to meaningfully address it. Participants made clear that

they regarded statements about toxicity were seen to be a smokescreen. As Shane remarked in his interview, the lack of commitment to addressing of toxicity has a negative impact:

Until the executives say 'This is really important to us. We don't like what this is saying about our company and our game because ultimately we made this game as gamers' [...] If they truly, then, from that executive function level said 'This is important to us', things would get done. I really feel it would get better.

Shane placed considerable weight on the fact that the company was founded by gamers who were veterans in the industry. Riot sees itself as *gamers* making games *for* gamers, which implies that their stance towards in-game and internal issues be representative of “gamers”. Gaming culture in general has a negative reputation (Paul, 2018), so perhaps Riot is to some extent exploiting this to make its approach to toxicity acceptable. However, what is clear from the participants in this study, is that change needs to begin with clear, well-intentioned, and direct plans from Riot. There needs to be a commitment from Riot to *change* the culture that they are within and shaping. An unambiguous statement from Riot, as a game-development company, on how the company *wants* change to occur, around toxicity and gaming culture more broadly is needed. As Shane said, the power lies with Riot:

There are statements they can make - even ham-fisted things they can do - where they might lose a percentage of players but ultimately would make it better for everyone else. They can make that call today.

The discussion in this chapter has revolved around the prevention of, and sanctions against toxic behaviour. These perspectives shed new light on the need for personal change in the players that make up the *LoL* community. Within *LoL*, perhaps toxic behaviours emerge from frustration and misunderstanding, or where gaming as a hobby becomes an outlet for frustration within players' lives beyond the game. Answers to this question necessitates speaking to players who acknowledge

their toxic behaviour and are willing to engage in an exploration of this. Fundamentally, this is a question about how players – and people more broadly – can be persuaded to change their negative behaviours. In one respect, this is about changing the culture that people find themselves in. Changing a culture requires a multifaceted approach and requires all involved to act in a united response. For *LoL* this means developers, players, and community figures sharing responsibility and making change. This begins with a strong statement against toxic gaming behaviours and educating players on the reason why negativity is damaging, acknowledging that “the Internet is real life” (Couts, 2013, np) and has offline impacts. It requires more than banning players for particular behaviours or uses of language, as this divorces the behaviour from the impact that behaviours have on individuals, and thereby falls short in being a meaningful way to address toxicity. It also requires Riot to consider how to support diverse forms of play within its game, to facilitate and support off-meta play that is not intended to be toxic, whilst protecting individuals from disruptive behaviour caused by it, which can be supported by the presentation of The Toxicity Interpretation Framework within this chapter. In developing and considering the utilisation of this tool, it raises questions around how – aside from players changing their behaviours and attitudes or broadening their understandings – the game space itself can be adapted to provide experiences that are more responsive and fitting to diverse approaches to play. This means building into the *LoL* client, ways in which players have more agency to opt in or out of particular game conditions, such as providing clear avenues and game modes for off-meta play, or facilitating matchmaking to reflect particular communication preferences (for example, all players being muted, or exclusively using one form of communication such as pings or voice chat). Such built-in player-focused agency tools would potentially minimise particular conditions which contribute to toxicity arising, such as opposing playstyles or approaches, thereby facilitating avenues through which subcultures of play and understanding can be properly realised.

Chapter 10

“What is broken can be reforged” - Riven

Concluding thoughts on *League of Legends* and the state of play around toxicity

10.1 “You and me, we got this!” - Yuumi, The Magical Cat

An ally has been slain.

“I have my ultimate in two... one...”

“I’m on Lulu – Lee Sin is flanking”

“Nice nice – keep pushing, keep pushing – their death timers are *so long* now – push this wave and go straight to Baron. Start it without me.”

We were making the comeback of all comebacks. Losing the early laning phase, and a few objectives down, but somehow, we were bringing it back. Four of the enemy team were dead, down for forty seconds – “*if we can get the Baron before they respawn, we have this game*”, I think. Three of us are in a voice call together, communicating our moves, our ability cooldowns, keeping an eye on objectives and monster spawn times. The two randoms on our team have been decent too. Our toplaner complained a little early on - the usual “jungler won’t help me” in all chat, but I think it gave the enemy false confidence – they thought we were falling apart, but they couldn’t be more wrong. Carefully thinking through our options, playing strategically – no big risks until we could afford to lose.

“Lee Sin is back up – heading to us”

“Barons nearly down – recall straight away”.

We make the killing attack, and the Baron withers away into the ground as we all recall with our glowing purple buffs. As five we make our way down the midlane – the enemy Varus is solo farming in toplane – surely trying to gain whatever gold possible to build those final items – but we catch him out.

“trash varus. report” appears from the enemy Shen in the all chat.

“hope you get covid”, the Varus retorts.

This is a new insult that I’ve seen since the pandemic. We continue to push, taking down towers, making it to the enemy Nexus. I’m playing Yuumi - I attach to our jungler, Hecarim, speeding him up, providing utility as he dashes into the enemy Lee Sin, knocking him off course.

An enemy has been slain.

Double kill.

Triple kill.

“Balanced” types Lee Sin whilst his death timer ticks down.

Quadra kill.

Ace!

Hecarim kills the final two enemy team members standing – “The power of friendship”, Yuumi says aloud as the Nexus start to explode, signalling our victory. There are sighs of relief. We stay on the voice call for a while, discussing the game, basking in our comeback. “I need a break” says my friend – Joe (who was on Hecarim) who introduced me to the game. “Me too – I’m going to grab a drink”, I add. “You both coming back? Got two friends who are ready to join if you fancy a five man?” says Tina. “Okay, back in five” says Joe.

We enter a new lobby. “Ranked?” I ask. Agreeing sounds are made. When everyone else is ready, we enter the queue and go through the usual pick and ban process.

Welcome to Summoners Rift, the narrator voice booms as we load into the game. “pick kata so op. learn skilled champ” appears in the chat box – a sign of early frustration from the enemy team. I open the scoreboard and mute the enemy team in the chat.

Minions have spawned.

Just one more game...

10.2 Chapter Narrative

The narrative opening to this final chapter demonstrates the agency that is utilised to mitigate and manage experiences of toxicity in *League of Legends* thus facilitating continued play, a key finding of this thesis. It posits that whilst it may not be possible to completely eradicate toxicity, players will continue to play if experiences can be managed. Amidst the fast paced, heated, and intense chaos of *LoL* games, there are profound moments where friendships are built and developed, skills recognised, and players feel incredibly connected to the game world and what it means – or offers – to them. But then what is to be done to support players of *LoL*, to render the game a more-common-than-not positive experience?

This final chapter presents a summary of findings (10.3), considers limitations of the study (10.4) and directions for further research (10.5), alongside recommendations for games developers (10.6), before presenting concluding thoughts of this thesis (10.7). Further, this chapter argues that Riot Games employ a rhetoric of change, development and growth, coupled with the notion that nothing is fixed and we can learn from our mistakes. Yet despite this Riot have made seemingly little progress in dealing with toxicity themselves. This element is presented throughout this chapter using quotes from *LoL* champions, to demonstrate that what is embedded within Riot's own creations, is not fully realised in player experience.

10.3 Summary of findings

"My journey led me here" - Lee Sin

This thesis has addressed the overarching question, 'How is toxicity understood and experienced in *League of Legends*, and what are the implications for gaming communities and culture?'. To answer this, five sub-questions have been addressed, the findings of which can be summarised as follows.

10.3.1 Research question one: How do players begin their journey in entering the *League of Legends* gaming space and community?

Entry into *LoL* was largely facilitated by friends: sixteen out of the seventeen interviewees reported being introduced to *LoL* through friends, family or partners. Playing with known people – such as those who introduced players to the game – was integral to new players continuing to play early in their *LoL* journey; they provided two functions. Firstly, acting as guides or tutors, they helped new players become familiar in a game which requires a large amount of knowledge to be able to succeed. Secondly, they helped protect players from toxicity: where new players witnessed or received negativity from other players, their personal guide would support them through this, sustaining their interest in playing. This contributes to Crawford's (2012, p. 143) notion of gaming culture going beyond the game and gameplay, encompassing friendship, seeing human connection as important to initial and continued play and positioning gaming as an important form of social cohesion.

Participants reported that they enjoyed the challenge that *LoL* offered, and the facility to track their progress in the game. They enjoyed the competitive element of *LoL*, and reported that the game felt unique – different from other titles they had tried – which is reflected in the appeal of champion design and overall game visuals for new players. Using *LoL* as a site to develop existing relationships was also noted, again highlighting the importance of social elements to new *LoL* players, as found in studies of *World of Warcraft* (Schiano, et al., 2014, p. 69) and LANs (Swalwell, 2003).

10.3.2 Research question two: What drives player interpretations and understandings of toxicity? How does this speak to understandings produced by Riot?

Whilst most of the behaviours mentioned by participants fit within Riot's list of 'Behaviours the Community Rejects', study participants expressed different views as to whether the terms 'game

ruining' and 'toxic' were the same and constituted similar behaviours. A range of perspectives were communicated, including the view that both terms were about power; both being concerned with exerting control and dominance. Toxicity, however, was framed as retaliation, and a form of self-protection whilst hurting other people. This can then be seen to be informed and framed by cultures of belonging, as shaped by gaming culture itself. The context within which behaviour was performed was found to be important in determining how this behaviour was interpreted. Whether behaviour is considered to be toxic is shaped very much by players' own identities, whereas actions which are game ruining could more easily be predicted and listed. This complicates definitions of toxicity as how behaviours are understood constantly shifts and evolves within individual players and player communities (Suzor & Woodford, 2013). Further, participants reported that toxic behaviours were associated more strongly with personal impact on individuals which might last beyond the game space. Behaviours considered to be game ruining were reported to have had a more temporary and localised impact, with a more immediate effect tied to the game instance. We could summarise this as 'what happens in the game, stays in the game', although of course frustration can continue into the offline world.

Being able to understand how each of these factors intersects highlights how toxicity is not a one-size-fits-all label and sheds some light on to why some players are less affected by, or less vulnerable in, their definitions of toxicity. Whilst some behaviours are easily pre-empted and listed as something that might be harmful or detrimental to the game instance or player wellbeing, others are easily misinterpreted or indeed might not have the negative impact that might be assumed.

Related to this is the question of whether *LoL* is extremely toxic. Anonymity and a distancing from emotional context of what is being said goes some way in enabling the normalisation and continuation of toxicity, as has been acknowledged within studies on trolling (Phillips, 2015). This can be further conceptualised as being entrenched in gaming culture and perpetuated by Riot's own

culture and stance, which is then replicated by players more broadly within the community. However, some participants in my research said they remembered negative instances for some time after the occurrence, possibly amplifying a problem caused only by a minority of players. Further, participants reported that most of the interaction between players was focused on negative behaviour being performed, called out or responded to. They reported that positive in-game actions received less praise and were given less time by players during the game. This contributed further to the perceived extent and presence of toxicity. Six key factors which created the conditions for toxicity to thrive were identified:

- Passion for the game
- Personal factors
- A lack of consequences
- Perspective
- Influencers
- Game technicalities

A number of these key factors corroborated findings from existing studies. These included toxicity emerging due to frustration from lack of teamplay (Fox, et al., 2018) or reliance on a team corroborated (Breuer, et al., 2014); flaming and toxicity as a form of attributing and passing on blame (Kou & Nardi, 2013); misinterpretation of playstyle due to off-meta play (Paul, 2024; Donaldson, 2017); competitive environments contributing to hostility (Verheijen, et al., 2019; Kordyaka, et al., 2023); and a perceived lack of consequences for toxicity therefore providing no deterrent (Kordyaka, et al., 2023).

The six key factors identified in this thesis further highlight the complex and nuanced nature of toxicity, its prevalence and its presence. It demonstrates that whilst toxicity is, in some ways,

associated with the game design, format, affordances and policy around disruptive behaviours, the players themselves also contribute to the likelihood of toxicity occurring in the game, or elements outside of the game space in the form of streamers. This demonstrates that game developers might have limited power or capacity to address toxicity which is confined to the game space in terms of their current approaches.

10.3.3 Research question three: How do players navigate, mitigate and manage exposure to toxicity?

Participants in this study noted that a lack of meaningful intervention by Riot resulted in them feeling the need to enact their own agency to navigate in-game toxicity. They reported feeling that the disciplinary system within *LoL* is ineffective in deterring toxicity and lacking in meaningful action. Further, participants reported that automatic systems to detect toxicity are not efficient in detecting disruptive behaviours which are often too complicated for automatic systems to identify, or because players develop novel ways of circumventing such systems. Additionally, as *LoL* is free-to-play, participants expressed the view that Riot Games' position could be that banning players would lack impact on toxicity and engender a negative impact on the company's economic model of microtransactions. These factors were reported to lead to players taking additional actions themselves, to enable them to continue to play the game in a way which enabled them to maintain greater control over their experience.

Participants identified three key methods which they used to mitigate their potential exposure to toxicity whilst playing. Firstly, players would utilise functions provided in the game itself, such as the mute function. Players reported that they sometimes chose to mute players either on their team or the enemy team if they felt that contributions from those players were affecting their own gameplay or mute them early on in champion select if they detected the potential for that player to be toxic.

This enabled players to enjoy the game as intended, rather than the experience being characterised by toxicity. Importantly, such action has been explored in the experiences of female gamers (McLean & Griffiths, 2019; Bryter, 2020; Bryter, 2018; Bryter, 2023; Lukianov, 2014; Fox & Tang, 2017), but not of gamers more broadly, thus the findings of this thesis have contributed to this area of knowledge. Secondly, some participants reported that they managed their experiences by controlling who they played with, often opting to queue for games with people already known to them in order to place the odds in their favour: playing with a known person reduces the chances of being matched with a toxic player. This strategy was also noted to enhance players' enjoyment. Finally, participants reported that they developed particular approaches to play which fostered more positive experiences: stopping playing and taking a break when they were no longer having fun; and making decisions to not retaliate or ignoring toxicity which occurred within their games. These strategies placed distance between players and toxicity, enabling a stronger focus on gameplay itself, so that game play was characterised by enjoyment. Therefore, players can be seen to create subcultures of play based on beliefs, practices, values, shared identities (Haenfler, 2014) and executions of agency, which seek to minimise conflict through ensuring shared goals and values (Sherif & Sherif, 1953; Sherif 1966; Sherif et al., 1988).

10.3.4 Research question four: What binds players to gaming spaces, communities, and culture despite toxicity?

Seven key factors were identified as to why players return to *LoL* despite the toxicity they have experienced: immersion within the game, watching play encourages play, *LoL* 'does it better', patch notes and updates, community, self-improvement and progression, and familiarity.

Firstly, not only had players felt that they had invested in the champions and lore of *LoL*, but that the design of champions bore similarities to other franchises that they enjoyed. This meant that in

immersing themselves with *LoL*, they were able to feel a sense of immersion and connection with their other interests such as *Pokémon* or *Warhammer*. Secondly, participants reported that they continued to watch others play, watching either professional games or streamers on platforms like Twitch, or watching their friends play. This produced a phenomenon where participants then wanted to play themselves. The most complex factor, and one that is difficult to define, was that there is something unique about *LoL*, in that it does things better than other games: the champion design and its impact on play, its ability to create incredible and memorable moments of play, and its unique formula of fun. A fourth factor was that constant updates and patches keep the game fresh, and even if players take a break because of something within the game design they did not like, it is likely that a patch or update will either rectify this or introduce something new which piques their interest in playing again. Fifth, there is a community beyond the game: players do not just have to *play* the game, but can find enjoyment through esports, wider opportunities to engage with the game through fan-based content creation, Discords and SubReddits, and social aspects that *LoL* brings where players can meet new people or continue to develop existing relationships. Such social bonding as identified by participants in this study expands on contributions by Schiano et al. (2014) and Crawford (2012) in articulating that gaming culture also encompasses “memories, dreams, conversations, identities, friendship” (Crawford, 2012, p. 143) and contributes to developing existing offline relationships. Sixth, participants discussed their enjoyment around how *LoL* incorporates skill expression and said that they appreciated that they were able to see, feel and track their own improvement and progression within the game. Finally, *LoL* brought a sense of familiarity. An investment in time is needed to learn the game, and participants said that, as players, they felt comfortable to return to when they wanted to relax but lacked the energy or motivation to try out or learn a new game title.

10.3.5 Research question five: What are the implications of player perceptions and responses to toxicity for games developers, communities and cultures?

Chapter nine explored how toxicity within *LoL* represents a reflection of negative social values within our wider world. Riot Games have exhibited discriminatory and non-inclusive behaviours within their company (Wawro, 2016; D'Anastasio, 2018), and therefore the first implication of this study is that Riot, as a games developer, needs to do better from *within* to meaningfully address toxicity. As explored in this thesis, the design and structure of *LoL* has contributed to a gaming environment which provides 'something for everyone': however, this diversity brings divergent interests from players and disagreements on game content. This results in very complex relationships between players, with ingroups and outgroups being created by players within each game instance, in response to the players they are matched with in each game. Goals – or interpretation of goals – can vary based on playstyle and overall game goal, resulting in all players potentially being identified as an outgroup member according to their own values. These, combined with anonymity, can generate concerns which present as toxicity. If players hold strong views, Riot could do a better job of educating players about diverse playstyles and improve avenues through which players can explore diverse forms of play, fostering an environment where this is acceptable within particular game or queue modes, providing alternative ways for players to exert their own agency in gameplay. Finally, participant accounts indicate that a change of tactic is needed by Riot to address toxicity. Research has contributed to ways of predicting and inhibiting toxicity before it happens in-game (Märtens, et al., 2015; Murnion, et al., 2018; Canossa, et al., 2021; Ekiciler, et al., 2022; Jia, et al., 2022; Reid, et al., 2022; Yang, et al., 2023; Fesalbon, et al., 2024), yet this thesis has identified that some players feel there remains a distrust of Riot Games in terms of its efforts thus far. This study indicates that the game developers need to understand how toxicity impacts players more broadly, and that as developers, they have a role to support players.

In response to needing more nuanced methods to understand the complexity of toxicity interpretation, an outcome of the study is a TIF. This was developed to encapsulate the factors which contribute to players' interpretations of toxicity, and to account for the nuanced and idiosyncratic ways in which players decode behaviours in-game. This comprised of four elements:

- Priorities in play
- Playstyle and approach to play
- Sensitivities
- Social capacity

This helps to contextualise toxicity in relation to identity, belonging, and nuanced goals around gameplay and game experience, in order to develop deeper understandings of toxicity as grounded in lived player experiences.

10.4 Limitations of the study

"I'd rather make mistakes than make nothing at all" – Ekko

The following section will consider the limitations of the current study in terms of design and in the presented findings. It considers limitations of the scale and site of study (10.4.1), how the data were shaped by participants (10.4.2), a limited acknowledgement of identities (10.4.3), the evolving nature of *LoL* as a site of research (10.4.4), the nature of a responsive research study (10.4.5), and the limitations of thematic analysis (10.4.6).

10.4.1 The scale and site of study

Possibly the most obvious critique to be levelled at this research study is that of the sample size.

Stage one of data collection recruited 150 valid survey responses, and stage two utilised data from seventeen interview participants. Therefore, this study is built on a small sample size which cannot be generalisable to a community of over 132 million active monthly users (Turbosmurfs, 2024).

However, as is the nature of qualitative research, the current study did not aim for generalisability, nor to represent or articulate all views of the wider gaming community. As presented in Chapter 3, this study prioritised participant voice with the aim of revealing the experiences and perspectives of participants and allowing them throughout the study to speak more broadly, enabling players beyond this study to see elements of themselves, their views, and their experiences within the data and findings of the study. This research sought to provide thick description (Geertz, 1973) rather than generalisable findings. Equally, it considered truth value and trustworthiness (Nowell, et al., 2017, p. 1) in its presentation of data, rather than narrowly quantifiable and shallow description of behaviour or meaning. Additionally, the context of Covid impacted recruitment and general progress of the study. Whilst it could be suggested that participant recruitment could have continued at a later stage, as explored in 10.3.3 below, this would be resulted in recruiting participants from a different era of *LoL* given the changing landscape of the game and developments by Riot to address toxicity. Given these contexts, the experiences conveyed by later-recruited participants might not have been relational to the initial participants. It would, however, be valuable to conduct a second study, and to compare any developments as a result of a changing landscape. Such a study could seek to involve the participants in the current study or further broaden participant recruitment. Future research could recruit participants from gaming communities more broadly, seeking to explore whether the factors identified as contributing to and shaping toxicity in *LoL* apply to MOBAs or other game genres more broadly.

On this note, the site of research for this study focused on one game specifically, *LoL* and therefore could be considered to impact the transferability or ecological validity of the findings presented. Every game has its own environment and ecosystem, with different design factors impacting the possibility of toxicity to be present, but also the forms which toxicity can take. However, broadly speaking the architecture of MOBA games are similar, meanings that there is an element of transferability to wider games within the MOBA genre, even if the findings might not be applicable beyond the genre. Additionally, it might also be considered that in thinking about how toxicity is interpreted in relation to individual characteristics, and what players bring to the game which impact their articulation and interpretation of toxicity, is an important factor in understanding toxicity no matter the genre. Therefore, whilst there are some limitations in terms of the ecological validity of the study, there are elements which can be seen to provide insight beyond the specific site of this research. Conducting similar research projects within other MOBA titles – as well as titles beyond the MOBA genre – would, however, provide greater specific insight into toxicity within specific game sites, and provide the possibility of comparison across sites to garner understanding around whether toxicity presents similarly in all game spaces.

10.4.2 A study shaped by non-toxic and continuing players

One key limitation of the current study is that none of the participants identified themselves to be toxic players. Whilst Johnny noted that he might receive negative reactions from players when he utilised off-meta strategies or playstyles, as did Supkey, they did not articulate this behaviour as toxic nor communicate that their off-meta play was *intended* to disrupt or cause harm within the game environment. Their behaviour is shaped by good intentions. Toby and Ray noted that there were periods in their lives where they both might have exhibited more toxic behaviours, but recounted that they are now very different players, and do not engage with such practices. This means that whilst my sample included players with some experience of behaving toxically – or behaviours which

might be interpreted as such – no participants reported being *actively* and *intentionally* toxic. This has shaped the study's findings in that: the understandings and articulations of toxicity in this thesis are informed by those who experience toxicity, but not by those who claim to perform those actions; therefore, included the study focuses on participant assumptions around what contributes to or causes toxicity. It also means that the shaping of what is considered toxic is informed by those experiencing it: it cannot be compared with understandings of those conducting such behaviours, so cannot begin to articulate where there might be divergent or contradictory descriptions of toxic behaviours between toxic or non-toxic players. However, it should be noted that identifying players who are open about engaging in toxic behaviours could be problematic: players might not actively identify their behaviour as toxic, nor identify with the label of toxic, and so might not present themselves as potential participants. They may also not quantify their practice of such behaviours as sufficient to warrant labelling themselves as being toxic. Additionally, it could be that some of the behaviour deemed to be most toxic occurs during more one-off instances due to a number of confounding factors interplaying at a specific time, as opposed to perpetually being performed by specific 'repeat offenders' over time.

A majority of this study was informed by players who are currently engaged in the game. Only Rory had left the PC edition of *LoL* entirely, based on experiences of toxicity, and whilst Nella and Elliott played relatively infrequently, they still had a connection to the game. Therefore, this study provides little insight into the motivations behind players leaving *LoL* behind, or the reasons why this might be. Whilst it is theorised that toxicity would be the motivational factor for stopping play, further study would benefit from exploring the perspectives of ex-players to gain additional understanding into if – and if so, how – toxicity informed their departure from the game.

10.4.3 An inability to provide depth of discussion around specific identities

Within this study, the importance of identity has been noted in relation to how this speaks to individual interpretations of toxicity, alongside individual responses. Female identifying participants - Amy, Lavender and Eva - all noted how women are treated differently in gaming spaces, but did not suggest that they themselves understand or interpret toxicity differently due to their gender despite noting that they will receive a very gendered form of it. This was also recognised by Ray, in noting how his experience as a male player will likely be different to that of mine as a female player. These contributions by participants suggest that gender is an important factor, however the focus of the present study, and how the data emerged, meant that this research could not focus in great detail or depth on developing this area of understanding. This could then be expanded to consider specific identities beyond a gender binary, but to also go beyond gender to consider with more specific attention the impact that race and ethnicity, sexuality and class have on interpreting toxicity, as alluded to briefly by Lavender within the study. So, whilst the current study can sufficiently suggest that identity and playstyle are all important in interpreting toxicity, knowledge on the specific ways this manifests is limited.

10.4.4 A constantly evolving landscape

Gaming is a constantly evolving landscape and much has changed within *LoL* since the current study was initiated. At the start of study – and at the point of when the initial research questions were reconfigured in response to the data – whilst Riot Games had made some effort to involve themselves with discussion on toxicity, they had not produced a sense of adequately addressing toxicity within the community. During the course of the current research study, Riot Games increased their efforts to address toxicity, as seen in this study through mention of their work with Ubisoft and The Fair Play Alliance in joining with other games developers to tackle toxicity across the gaming communities and culture more broadly. Whilst toxicity is still prevalent in the community (given the

headlines presented in Chapter 1) some efforts made may have had an impact on the prevalence of toxicity in the game, or the perceived presence or form that toxicity is taking. As previous research which utilised *The Tribunal* may now feel less relevant, certain aspects of the current study could be argued to be the same in the sense that the game environment has experienced changes from a developmental and game-policy level. However, it should then still be acknowledged that participant understandings of *what* toxicity is and the aspects which inform this, alongside what participants find valuable within a game, are likely to remain unchanged and were true to their experiences at the time of data collection. Whilst there is the possibility that toxic behaviours might be being met with a different response by developers, and therefore their prevalence might be felt differently within the community, the behaviours themselves may remain the same. Human nature and understandings are constantly evolving and are shaped by our experiences and interactions of the world: as our environment changes, so do our understandings and articulations of this. Nevertheless, they can always serve as a starting point, especially when considering how behaviours which are reoccurring are understood and interpreted by those witnessing or experiencing them.

10.4.5 An evolving and responsive research project

Whilst a strength of qualitative research is the possibility to be responsive to the emerging data, this could also be articulated as a limitation. The initial conceptualisation of the study was to explore *how* participants interacted with the *LoL* community within and beyond the in-game space, and the opportunities and support that this provided to players. Due to emerging data which constructed the game's community as toxic, and the emerging discussion around toxicity ruining the game experience – a discussion lead by VoyBoy – I decided that the way in which my data coincided with an emerging discussion about the environmental state of *LoL* warranted discussion to do justice not only to my data but to players of *LoL* and a matter that was clearly of importance to the community more broadly. This meant putting aside something that was important to me as a player and as a

researcher – considering the positives within video games and contributing to a counter narrative about gaming more broadly – and seeking to understand an issue permeating gaming culture. However, this meant that as a research project, it was not initially developed to respond to this, an alternative research design or structure might have been considered if toxicity was the initial focus of research. An alternative design might have incorporated focus groups to facilitate a wider discussion of shared experiences between players, a more focused effort to recruit participants with greater or acknowledged presence as toxic players (addressing the limitation discussed in 10.4.2), alongside a netnography-based approach to produce a more focused exploration in understanding how toxicity is realised not only within the game, but in different gaming-adjacent spaces such as in livestreaming, YouTube content and discussion, and through forums. Whilst these are themes that emerged through the current study’s exploration of toxicity, a research design initiated with such a focus might have been able to focus attention within these areas in the design of the study itself and anticipate the need to explore in such a way.

10.4.6 The limitations of thematic analysis

Important to consider are the limitations presented by thematic analysis as a tool. Many of the limitations of thematic analysis have been associated with interpretivism as a practice of understanding. Whilst qualitative methods and interpretive forms of analysis are praised for facilitating “genuine sharing of experiences and insights from the participants” (Kadyschuk, 2023, p. 253) there have been suggestions a key limitation lies within the use of language in order to make sense of our experiences. Javadi and Zarea (2016, P. 39) have noted that “each individual has its own world and attention should be paid to context for entering it”, meaning that our own interpretations of language-based experience sharing is limited by our own worlds. An additional limitation lies in that thematic analysis is restricted to primarily description, unless existing theoretical frameworks are used to underpin emerging knowledge claims (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This then might be linked

to the notion that thematic analysis can *flatten* accounts presented by participants, whereas narrative or biographical approaches to qualitative research and accompanying analysis might be seen to be better positioned to capture accounts with added depth that do “greater justice to the totality of the person” (Smith, and Eatough, 2011, np). Therefore, such approaches might lead to closer attention to linguistic nuances that avoid reducing analysis to themes and patterns (Franzosi, 1998). It has, however, been noted that disadvantages here are likely to occur due to poor analysis or research, as opposed to thematic analysis as a method itself (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Therefore, much of the reasoning used to discredit thematic analysis were mitigated within the present study by the prioritisation of participant voice in order to avoid the possibility of reduction, although narrative approaches might have produced data and analysis that allowed for greater acknowledgement of continuity and contradiction, or depth.

10.5 Directions for future research

“The world is changing – we can decide into what” – Kai’sa

The following section considers the future directions for research into gaming, toxicity and *LoL* in light of the findings presented by the study and the limitations discussed in section 10.4. It considers the expansion and utilisation of The Toxicity Interpretation Framework, initially presented in Chapter 9 (10.5.1), methods to achieve deeper investigation of toxicity within gaming contexts (10.5.2), the ecology of *LoL* players (10.5.3), and considering the transferability of current findings to wider contexts (10.5.4)

10.5.1 Expanding and utilising The Toxicity Interpretation Framework

A key contribution of the current study is the presentation of the TIF, which considers how the factors of priorities in play, playstyles and approaches to play, social capacity and sensitivities intersect to produce unique interpretations of toxicity within individual players. As this is a framework which emerged through the research, it would be valuable for future research to be designed in such a way to explore these aspects specifically to consider their intersections and relationships within individual players in greater and more focused depth. Importantly, it would be valuable to conduct such a study within the site of *LoL*, but also across other MOBA games and other game genres. This would i) refine the Toxicity Interpretation Framework, and ii) aid the further development of more in-depth understandings and consideration of identity in relation to the interpretation and understanding of toxicity.

10.5.2 Considering toxicity within specific gaming and gaming-adjacent contexts

As acknowledged in 10.4.5, a major part of this research project emerged and was responsive to first phase data, meaning the study was not initially designed to explore toxicity specifically. In response to participant voice, I redesigned the second phase of the study to include a more exploratory approach to understanding and articulating toxicity within *LoL*. Future research could explore other avenues focusing on developing thicker descriptions and understandings of how toxicity is experienced and presented within different gaming and gaming-adjacent contexts. This could include, as mentioned in 10.4.5, designing a study to achieve a more detailed and focused exploration of toxicity and how it is performed and experienced within specific gaming spaces. This may incorporate an exploration of the various forms toxicity takes, alongside interactions of a toxic nature and responses to toxicity, on gaming forums. This would create a focus on image and text-based discourse, including how toxicity is encapsulated through internet culture such as memes. Consideration of livestreaming would enable observation of toxicity across and between observers of

streams and between the streamers themselves, their audience, and those involved in the game instance played by the streamer. More diverse forms of content creation, such as fan music and artwork, might also be avenues for exploration. Throughout these sites of study, the focus could be on if and how toxicity is presented, the diverse forms it takes, and the responses to it. A greater understanding would be generated as to whether toxicity is *always* harmful, or whether it becomes a shared experience through which players bond.

10.5.3 The lifecycle of a *League of Legends* player

Experiences of toxicity are continually evolving as player understandings and responses change. It would be valuable to explore the lived experiences of *LoL* players in a way which enables access to experiences of the game in a more naturalistic setting. Therefore longitudinal, life-historical, ethnographic or autoethnographic studies could following player experiences of gameplay – toxic and non-toxic – and uncover deeper understandings of how players navigate toxic instances between games. Such as study sample could also include new players from the moment they join the game and their early experiences, as well as established players. Further, such a study would reveal the more nuanced and intricate ways in which toxicity is responded to and shaped *as it happens* in gaming contexts.

10.5.4 Exploring the intricacies of identity in toxicity

As noted in 10.4.3, the current study has not been able to consider – in depth – the impact or, with more nuance, the intricate ways in which particular identities influence how toxicity is understood and interpreted. The diverse experiences of gamer identity have been explored in existing literature in thinking about women’s experiences specifically (see Kuss et al., 2022; Morgenroth et al., 2020; McLean & Griffiths, 2019; Paaßen et al., 2017; Taylor 2006b), or in thinking about race (Gray, 2015;

Phillips, 2015; Monson, 2012; Nakamura, 2009) trans identities (Liang et al., 2023; Pleguezuelos, 2023; Thach, 2021), or disability (Peat et al., 2023; Anderson and Schrier, 2022; Wästerfors and Hasson, 2017), however, such identities have not been considered in relation to toxicity interpretation. The current study has clearly identified that identity is important in understanding toxicity, however the strengths within the current study lie in thinking about approaches to play and articulations of entertainment. Whilst it was able to identify personal sensitivities, which encompass the notion of identity, as being important, it was limited in its ability to explore this in greater detail. Given how integral identity is to notions of belonging, and to how individuals are treated within specific cultures due to constructions around identity (Hills, 2002) it is important to consider in greater depth the impact that identity has upon these experiences.

10.6 Tackling toxicity: Recommendations for games developers

Meaningful, data-led action has emerged from this research, leading to four recommendations. Whilst constructed with *LoL* in mind, they have scope to be applicable to other games and game development more broadly, in building additional protection and agency into games to minimise the potential for toxicity, beginning with the environment – the culture.

Recommendation One: Develop and roll out additional tools which provide players with agency to control their game space

Players currently use the agency provision within the game (selecting game type, game mode, queueing with known players, and in-game communication options) (Chapter 7). Therefore, player agency tools should be expanded and further developed, including:

- Allowing players to queue for games based on preferred communication option, for example only using pings, text chat, voice, or all players being muted. This would ensure that all

players who enter a game have the same expectations regarding team communication. It would also allow players to self-regulate, entering a muted queue if they struggle to avoid text-based toxicity.

- Allowing players to queue for games based on playstyle. In 2014 (League of Legends, 2014), Riot introduced the Team Builder queue type to *LoL*, where players were able to select their desired champion *and* the role they wanted to play the champion in before entering the queue. This allowed players to communicate in advance to their potential team of their playstyle and intentions. Upon being placed in a lobby with a potential team, an existing member could ‘kick’ a player if they did not like their intended play preference, or that player could choose to also leave for the same reasons and re-enter the queue. This provided a clearer statement of support for off-meta play and experimental play more broadly within *LoL*. Reintroducing such diverse and flexible queue types which enable a signalling and selection of play style could contribute to less frustration emerging from players engaging in different play types. This would also help match Riot’s own rhetoric around “Trying something new” (Riot Games, 2023a) and off-meta play being valid forms of play, thereby creating clear and consistent messaging.
- Developing queue types intended for practicing roles. Within *LoL*, there are systems in place which track players use of champions and roles, meaning there is existing data on familiarity with type and role. Win-rates are also tracked, providing data on the success rate associated with champion and role types. This data could be utilised to develop a ‘Practice’ queue, where if players select a champion or role they are unfamiliar with but wish to practice, you can enter a queue of people with similar motives for play. This would mean players are not necessarily matched with players of a similar MMR, leading to more positive play experiences when playing in a way that is unfamiliar. Often, when practicing new roles, champions or styles, a player’s existing MMR will not be reflective of them playing in a new way. Providing an alternative queue type to accommodate for this could result in more

positive play experiences when practicing and learning, and in turn remove frustration from players who are matched with 'practicing players' who then perform less well due to MMR matchmaking.

These suggestions would allow players to have stronger agency in opting in and out of particular game-based experiences, allowing greater control, potentially reducing toxicity born out of frustration from other players. This would facilitate the formation of subcultures of play, and further the possibility of virtual communities (Stone, 1991) based on common practices, uniting players in style of play.

Recommendation Two: Provide players with clearer instructions on how to utilise agency

Developers can provide players with greater instruction on how to utilise agency, especially when creating a new account or playing for the first time. Players would know, early on, how to manage their own play experiences. If some toxicity is inevitable, and tools are available to help manage this, players need to be direct to these tools. This could be realised through instructional videos embedded into the client when changes to such systems and tools are made; on opening the client for the first time post-update, players must watch the instructional video before they can queue for a game. Whilst players ideally would be able to engage in their own playstyles, their own subcultures within the game, there would hopefully be greater understanding, appreciation and respect paid towards players where their values do not align with those of other players.

Recommendation Three: Educate players about diversity and inclusion

Riot, and games developers more broadly, can do more to educate their players and community about equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), especially in educating players about the harm produced in passing off racist, sexist, misogynist, transphobic, homophobia and ableist language as 'banter'. More can be done in Riot's own messaging around diversity and inclusion, making more meaningful

contributions to discussion. Such messaging could be made to feel more present through embedding it across their various platforms, including talking points around EDI not only in recognising international events, such as Pride, through in-game purchases and flare, but through blog posts, charity engagement, and providing moments for this in their live events and broadcasting of esports. This could contribute to changing the culture around games to change representation within games and the overall discourse around gaming itself.

There could be an additional element around EDI when thinking about gaming, which is around differences in playstyle, approaches to play, articulations about the game, and skill. To help broaden player understandings of this, more could be done to represent and consider these areas of diversity in Riot's own communication with players. Better use of Patch Notes would facilitate this. Where items, skill trees or builds are adjusted in game updates and balance changes, often Patch Notes put out by Riot identify champions most affected. These impacts are always based around meta-based play, and therefore more could be done with patch notes to acknowledge off-meta play, and in turn educate players about diverse playstyles and approaches to play. This could include noting the balance change impacts on popular off-meta builds on champions within the usual patch notes. Additionally, many games companies share player-created content, therefore interesting or novel playstyles could be shared in blog posts, live streams, or the client page, accompanied by an articulation of *why* such approaches to play work. This would enable players to become better educated in off-meta play leading to less judgement towards off-meta players. This should acknowledge that off-meta play is highly skilled and calculated, and so should only be pursued with care and thought.

Recommendation Four: Consider the culture created in a game at the point of origin

Toxicity within games and gaming culture is now well recognised, and therefore a key recommendation in the future development of games would be to build into games – from the start

– ways to manage and mitigate the possibility of toxicity. Games themselves are the culture. In providing greater consideration to communication, diversity, broader approaches to play, and agency at a game’s conception means that developers can create a culture from their game where toxicity is less likely. This positions toxicity as a design choice, and developers can make the decision to try and reduce this from the outset.

10.7 Concluding thoughts: “*What is broken can be reforged*” - Riven

The title for this concluding chapter, and this concluding section, comes from one *LoL* champion named Riven. Her weapon is a previously enchanted - but now broken – blade. In one of her voice lines she says, “A sword mirrors its owner”. Chapter Nine explored the question of how we can expect better from players if Riot Games – and gaming culture more broadly – does not set an example for its community from *within*. Working to develop strategies with Ubisoft (Ubisoft, 2022; Riot Games, 2022b) and The Fair Play Alliance (2024; Ousley, 2020) is a positive step, but toxicity persists despite Riot joining the Fair Play Alliance and helping to develop the Disruption and Harms in Online Gaming Framework (Fair Play Alliance, 2020a). It is unrealistic and idealist to think that online gaming can exist without a spec of toxicity *somewhere*, from *someone*: frustration will always tip some players over the edge, or a lack of understanding or synergy between players will be verbalised in ways which are racist, sexist, ableist, transphobic or classist. But perhaps the articulation of toxicity can change. Perhaps enhanced limitations can be placed on players’ ability to hold games hostage or be able to ruin gameplay through champion control. This thesis suggests that, whilst Riot and The Fair Play Alliance (2024b) have argued that toxicity is not a helpful term, it is widely used, and a broader understanding of what toxicity can do is needed. Gaming and gaming culture is at a point where *toxicity* is embedded into the language and landscape of players, and therefore utilising and understanding that language can provide us with insights into player experiences. Perhaps the

gaming community could seek to reclaim the term 'toxicity' with greater understanding of its impact, rather than it being used as a throw-away, blanket term to encompass a range of vague behaviours. Consideration of the factors which aid individual and idiosyncratic interpretations of toxicity can lead to a realisation of how the toxic behaviours and language are symptomatic of harmful behaviour more broadly. This, in turn, could help to reposition games as objects so that they are not seen as the harmful, negative influences that the media often constructs them to be. Instead, the culture exemplified within games could be characteristic of concerns within society: the blade reflects its master.

This thesis has constructed the issue of toxicity as embedded within gaming culture, and recognises that the conditions of anonymity, competition, the transient nature of play, and randomly matched players in high pressure gaming environments create conditions for toxicity to thrive. This is complicated by the fact that whilst the expected ingroup goal is to win, intergroup hostility can emerge due to diverse playstyles and game outlooks. The social identities of players then inform the formation of ingroups and outgroups. Where players deem others as not contributing towards their goal of victory or enjoyment, ingroups and outgroups are created from which further conflict emerges. This pattern provides avenues through which to understand how toxicity can be minimised, (10.6, Recommendations for Game Developers).

Finally, the question remains as to what is to be done? This chapter opened with, the words of Riven, "What is broken can be reforged". Toxicity is complex: it is multifaceted, has various forms – few of which are interpreted in a universal manner. Toxicity occurs across platforms and is hard to predict with any degree of accuracy. This thesis has demonstrated the diversity of toxic behaviours which might then be utilised as a tool to help players understand that meaning-making is individual, and that words can have harmful impact. Riot Games must address how to tackle toxic behaviours through gameplay; such as intentionally feeding, troll builds, or hostage holding. It must do this

whilst still providing space for players to explore novel and off-meta play, and a specific avenue for such playstyle or a way for players to communicate a serious intention with off-meta play. This then helps retain what is fun for players, no matter the approach to play, rather than prescribing for them what is *fun* in games. Much of what is regarded as terms of harassment and disruptive behaviour in games, points to the need to generate a better understanding community that is more sympathetic to its own. Finally, Riot Games must continue to support player agency by providing tools to facilitate player manipulation and management of toxicity, including muting, queuing to play with friends, and developing mechanisms in-game to facilitate friendship formations in online spaces.

LoL clearly has a special hold on many players, despite negative experiences. The player participants in this study have all developed ways to enable a more positive experience of the game. In the words of Riven, they have “[Chosen their] own path”. Going forward, it is essential that Riot Games helps to guide and support players in making decisions that are for the community, and which place tolerance and agency at the fore. With this thesis providing insight into a range of ways in which toxicity could be addressed, there is hope for *League of Legends*. The broken blade can be fixed, *What is broken can be reforged*.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Glossary

Term	Definition
/Allchat	Players can type '/all' in the in-chat chat box in order to communicate with players across both teams. This is then referred to by players as 'all chat' or '/allchat'.
4Chan	4Chan is an image-based forum which facilitated anonymous sharing and commenting, known as a source for popularising various elements of internet subculture including memes.
9GAG	9GAG is another image-based internet forum associated with the generation and sharing of internet memes
Ace	Ace refers to when all enemy team members are dead at the same time.
ADC / AD (see also: 'marksman')	The Attack-Damage Carry – now renamed to Marksman – is a champion role where the champion deals strong and continuous damage using their basic attacks. Often the most significant damage-dealer in-game. Whilst they have been renamed to 'Marksman', many players still refer to them as ADC. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs
Ability	All <i>League of Legends</i> champions have five unique 'abilities', including one ultimate, which are separate to basic attacks. Abilities are unique to each champion and are built around the champion role. For example, a tank may have abilities which give them a shield or temporarily increase their health or armour.
AFK / AFKing (also: 'idling')	'Away from keyboard' means an individual has left their computer, laptop or game system (in the case of gaming). If a player goes AFK, they will leave the game entirely, disconnecting, or will have stayed connected by leave their champion in the base.
ARAM	ARAM is a game mode within <i>League of Legends</i> . It takes place on the map 'Howling Abyss' and features only one 'lane'.

Assassin	An Assassin is a champion type where the champion has low health – is ‘squishy’ – is focused on melee (close range) attacks which can deal vast amounts of damage to ‘burst down’ another champions health. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs.
Baron Nashor	Mob / monster found in <i>League of Legends</i> . It is a neutral monster meaning it can be killed by either team. It is found in the jungle in ‘Baron Pit’. Upon killing Baron Nashor, all members of the killing team who are alive receive a significant buff to their stats. Which team kills Baron Nashor is decided by who deals the final killing blow. Baron is also sometimes referred to as Nashor, Nash or Baron.
Base	Each team has a ‘base’. Within the base is located the team Fountain, Shop, Nexus, three inhibitors, and three towers.
Basic attack	The default means by which a champion will deal damage. The champion will automatically basic attack (also known as ‘auto-attack’) when near an enemy champion, unless the player uses an ability or intentionally stops the basic attack. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> , and other MOBAs.
Bot	This refers to the ‘bottom lane’ of the <i>Summoner’s Rift</i> map in <i>League of Legends</i> . ADCs / Marksmen and Supports start in this lane.
Blizzard	The developers of games <i>World of Warcraft</i> , <i>Overwatch</i> and <i>Hearthstone</i> , amongst others
Bruiser (also: ‘fighter’)	Bruiser is a champion type which focuses on mele or short-ranged attacks and are good at both dealing and surviving damage. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs.
Buffs	<p>When a champion acquires a ‘buff’ in-game, these usually provide the player with a limited-time increase to specific stats on their champion. These are usually acquired by killing objectives in the game.</p> <p>When a champion gets ‘buffed’ in a patch, there are mechanical adjustments to the stats to characters base-stats to ensure they are balanced in their abilities in comparison to other champions. The Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs.</p>
Build	Every champion in <i>League of Legends</i> will build items. A ‘build’ refers to a particular strategy of itemisation, usually in order to develop a particular strength their champion, for example health, armour, or attack speed. A player can build 8 items in <i>League of Legends</i> : full build is reached when all 8

	items are built, which should mean the champion has reached peak strength in the game. <i>Found in League of Legends</i> , and games across other genres.
Carry / carrying	A 'carry' is usually referring to a champion or player who currently has a large advantage (gold, items, XP / levels) and therefore is fundamental or leading in helping their team win the game. If someone is 'carrying', it is used to suggest that they are 'carrying' the rest of the team on their back.
Class	All champions are assigned a class which influence the type of play that character is best suited to. In <i>League of Legends</i> , the classes are: controller, fighter, mage, marksman, slayer and tank.
Clash	<i>Clash</i> is a monthly <i>League of Legends</i> tournament hosted by Riot. Players can team up as teams of five and compete against other teams of similar skill levels. This is open to all players with an account level over 30.
Champion	Champions are the characters that players control within each game instance. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs
Champion select / champ select	When players in <i>League of Legends</i> enter a game, upon a match being found players enter 'champion select' where they get to select the champion that they want to play.
Chat	The in-game text-based communication method for players to talk to each other in-game. There is also a chat in the champion select phase.
Chat ban	Players may receive a chat ban as a punishment for toxic or disruptive behaviour. This means that players cannot use the chat function to talk to players in-game. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .
Chat restriction	Players may receive a chat restriction. as a punishment for toxic or disruptive behaviour. This means that players cannot use the chat function as freely to talk to players in-game, facing limitations on the frequency at which they can send messages. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .
Cosplay	Short for 'costume play'. A fan practice where individuals dress up in the costumes of characters from TV shows, films, books, Anime, Manga, video games or other forms of popular culture.
CS / Creep score	Creep score refers to the number of minions a player has killed in the game. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .

Discord	An instant messaging platform which facilitates the formation of community channels and voice calls. Popular amongst gamers.
Dive / tower dive	To 'dive' means for players to attack an enemy champion whilst they are under their tower.
Dragon	A neutral monster found in <i>League of Legends</i> . There are six types of dragon which may spawn, killable by either team. Upon killing the dragon, the team which deals the killing blow is granted a permanent buff based on the dragon type killed. Dragon is also referred to as 'drake'.
E-girl	Slang term for a woman who is often associated with gaming, internet culture and anime. Usually is associated with a particular aesthetic based around anime. Usually used in a derogatory way, associated with attention-seeking.
E3	An annual video game industry event which ran from 1995 – 2021. Game developers, publishers and manufacturers would attend the event and make big announcements about upcoming games, hardware and developments within existing games.
ELO	ELO refers to a rating system which tracks a player's skill across matchmaking queues, meaning players can have different ratings in each game type. ELO is based on win/loss ratios and number of games played. ELO is a hidden system (i.e. players do not know their ELO) but is utilised in matchmaking.
ELO Hell	ELO hell is a term used by players to refer to when the matchmaking system is poor and matches players in a way which results in poor quality games due to bad team coordination, poor player attitude, or poor player skill. If a player is stuck in ELO hell, they are likely suggesting that they are losing matches because of other players being bad, not due to their own ability.
Emote	Emotes in <i>League of Legends</i> are sticker-like images that appear on the screen according to particular in-game events (e.g. player kill, victory, ace, loss). Players can also choose to display stickers at their own choice through pressing T, holding the left mouse button where a wheel will appear for players to select their chosen emote. Emotes are customisable by players. They can be earned or purchased, and players can then choose which they wish to equip for their own use.
Esports	Esports (electronic sports) is the competitive play of video games, usually organised through the developers

	themselves or national or international competitive organisations (such as NUEL).
Feeding / fed	Feeding refers to a player dying repeatedly to the enemy resulting in the enemy receiving kills rewards in the form of gold. If a player is 'fed', this implies that they have a substantial number of kills, and therefore gold, meaning they have been able to purchase in-game items to make them strong. Players might say 'stop feeding' to player on their team repeatedly dying, or 'I'm feeding' if they are making silly mistakes in-game and repeatedly dying to the enemy.
Fighter (also: 'bruiser')	Also known as bruisers. Fighters are a champion type which focuses on mele or short-ranged attacks and are good at both dealing and surviving damage. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs
Flame	A common form of toxic behaviour often characterised by offensive language, insults and swearing.
First Person Shooter	Game genre where the perspective of the player is first person, and the focus is on weapon-based combat.
Fog of war	For of war refers to there a player's vision of the map is limited. By default, players can automatically see their half of the map and can only see the enemy half is they have placed a ward (see 'vision', 'ward'). Bushes also obscure vision: you cannot see if an enemy is inside a bush without a ward being places within it. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .
Fountain	The Fountain is where players spawn at the start of the game, and re-spawn after death. It is located at the back of the team's base. This is also where the in-game shop is found where players will buy items to develop their 'build'. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .
Gank	A 'gank' is where a player from another lane will move across the map, entering the lane of an allied member of their team to provide them with support. This usually means the enemy player in the given lane is outnumbered, therefore at a disadvantage. A Jungler will often be involved in 'ganking', although other roles can be involved also.
Griefing	A form of intentionally disruptive behaviour. It is usually utilised knowing that it will cause frustration or annoyance to other players. It is not characterised by offensive language. It takes various forms depending on the game type, genre and affordances of the game.

Guild	Guilds are a group of players who play together, usually to achieve particular goals or objectives which rely on teamplay. Often players need to request to join a guild, and guilds may have particular entry requirements, such as holding particular item levels or in-game levels. Often found in MMORPG titles.
Healer (see also: 'support', 'utility')	Healers are a type of champion which possess healing abilities which can be used to restore health to themselves or other allied players. Support or utility champions often have healing abilities. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs.
IGN	IGN refers to In-Game Name. This is a player's username or usertag, similar to a username on forums or websites. It is visible to other players. In some instances, players will refer to each other over voice chat by IGNs.
Inhibitor	Inhibitors are structures which prevent 'super minions' from spawning in the lane in which the inhibitor sits. Inhibitors are protected by 3 towers, and all three must be destroyed (is 'down') before an inhibitor can be attacked and destroyed. Inhibitors respawn after 5 minutes, returning to full health. One inhibitor must be 'down' in order to players to attack the Nexus. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .
Int / inting / intentional feeding	Inting refers to players intentionally dying to enemy players in order to give the enemy gold, allowing the enemy to buy items and gain strength in the game. This gives the enemy team an advantage. A form of toxic behaviour. Players may say 'don't int' if a player is repeatedly dying.
Items	Items are purchased within each game instances according to champion type, stats and desired build. Items can be bought from 'base' / 'fountain' from the in-game shop. Items are bought using gold. Each item provides unique stats. Items are required for champions to become stronger in the game.
Jungle	The 'Jungle' is the area in-between the lanes on the Summoner's Rift map. Within the jungler are various Jungle Camps. (see 'Jungle camp'). Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .
Jungler	Jungler is one of the 5 key roles within a normal or ranked Summoner's Rift game. The jungler will clear camps and is usually responsible for ganking other players (see 'gank'). The Jungler will 'roam' to other lanes to support their team. Junglers will usually take the 'Smite' Summoner Spell as one of their two Summoner Spells to aid with killing objectives such as Baron and Dragon. There is usually only one jungler

	per team. Having two Junglers is a form of off-meta play. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .
Jungle camp	Jungle camps are found within the jungle, each with unique monsters / mobs. Killing these mobs grants gold. This is the primary way in which a Jungler will level up in the early game. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .
Lag / lagging	Lag refers to when a player's internet connection is providing a lower speed or quality than usual / intended, producing a delay in the gameplay appearing on the screen in real-time.
LAN	Local Area Network is where multiple internet-based devices connect on a single network.
Lane	In <i>League of Legends</i> , the maps in which the game is played has 'lanes' where most fighting takes place. Roles within the game usually start in one of the three lanes: top, bot, or mid.
LAN café	LAN cafés are cafés with computers with internet connection where players may go to play online games together, or to play with friends if they do not have their own gaming device.
LAN party / event	A LAN party or event is where players take their gaming devices and connect on the same network in the same physical space in order to play together. It is a social aspect of multiplayer gaming.
LARP	Live Action Role-Play is a type of in-person, 'live' role-play where participants will enact scenarios, scenes and situations. Often this is themed, such as medieval LARPing.
Let's Play	Let's Plays are a type of video-based gameplay content. Content creators will upload videos of them playing games from start to finish. Sometimes these involve additional commentary on the gameplay itself. It is also a form of livestreaming content, where this content type is livestreamed to an audience on platforms such as Twitch.tv, rather than uploaded to a site such as Youtube.
Level	<p>There are two types of Level in <i>League of Legends</i>. Account level indicates how long a player has been playing the game for. Players cannot engage in Ranked games until they reach Level 30. This does not reset and continues to accumulate over time.</p> <p>Champion level refers to the in-game character level within each game: in each game instance, players earn XP through play which levels up their character, unlocking abilities and levelling up said abilities. Champions can achieve up to Level</p>

	18. At each level, players can upgrade one or their champions' abilities, increasing their champion strength. This resets at the start of each game.
Lobby	When players select a game-type within <i>League of Legends</i> , they first enter a 'lobby'. In the 'lobby', players select their roles (if applicable) before queuing up to be matched with other players. If queuing up with already known players, players will start in the lobby, and assign roles, and can communicate via the lobby text-chat. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs
LP / League Points	LP or League Points are relevant to Ranked play in <i>League of Legends</i> . Players will lose or gain LP based on whether they win or lose games. The amount gained / lost depends on a players MMR (see 'MMR'). When a player is at 100 LP, they will enter a 'promotion series'. They must win three out of their five next games to be prompted to the next division / rank.
Lurking	Lurking is an online practice where websites or content is browsed without actively commenting or engaging with said content. Someone who engages in this practice is called a 'lurker'.
Mage	Mages are a champion type in <i>League of Legends</i> . Mages rely on abilities and ability power rather than basic attacks and often specialise in magic-based burst damage. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs and across game genres.
Main	If a player 'mains' a champion or role, this means it is the role / champion they primarily play, and therefore theoretically should be most skilled in; 'I main ADC'; 'I main Yuumi'. (see 'Role'; 'Champion')
Map	The 'map' refers to the specific arena a game of <i>League of Legends</i> is played in, for example Summoner's Rift or Howling Abyss. In-game, a top-down view of the map is visible to players in the bottom-left-hand corner of the screen.
Marksman (see also: 'ADC')	Marksman is a champion role in <i>League of Legends</i> , previously known as ADCs. Marksman champions deal strong and continuous damage using their basic attacks. Often the most significant damage-dealer in-game. Whilst they have been renamed to 'Marksman', many players still refer to them as ADC. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs.
Matchmaking	Matchmaking is an algorithmically led process, often

	utilising ELO or MMR, in order to be matched for a game with players of similar ELO / MMR.
Meme	Memes are a common part of internet culture, often formed of an image, video, sound or piece of text, which is usually humour and widely shared across the internet. Sometimes memes have a 'format' which are then adapted and revised.
Meta	Meta refers to the conventional style or accepted way of working. In videogames, this refers to the accepted and conventional – often expected – style of gameplay.
Mid	This refers to the 'middle lane' of the <i>Summoner's Rift</i> map in <i>League of Legends</i> . Assassins or mages usually start in this lane.
Minions	Minions are small units which spawn from the Nexus in <i>League of Legends</i> . They progress down the lanes (across all maps), and automatically attack the enemy minions, champions and structures (towers, inhibitors, Nexus). Players will kill minions to gain gold and experience points. The number of minions killed by a player is referred to as CS. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs.
MMR	MMR is a hidden number assigned to each player, calculated based on skill level and wins/losses. It is used primarily in Ranked games due to its impact on LP. The MMR of a player determined how many LP a player will lose or gain based on the win or loss of each game. The higher a players MMR, the more LP they will gain for a win, and the less they will lose in a loss. MMR will fluctuate over time according to a players performance.
MMOGs	MMOGs – Massively Multiplayer Online Games – are an online game genre which usually feature a persistent large open-world. Players interact together within the game world / game environment simultaneously.
MMORPGs	MMORPGs – Massively Multilayer Online Role-Playing Games – are similar to MMOGs, however are often story driven where players will take on a character, usually of their own creation, in a fantast open-world environment.
MOBA	MOBAs – Multiplayer Online Battle Arena games – are a genre of team-based real-time strategy games. Usually this is team v team. The goal of most MOBAs is to destroy the enemy teams base. In most MOBAs, the base is protected by a series of structures – such as towers, turrets or inhibitors.

Modding	Modding is the practice of developing script, codes or add ones which 'modify' an existing game. Sometimes this adds new features, functions or elements, and sometimes these are to improve quality of gameplay.
MUDs	Multi-User Dungeons were an early form of online multi player game which utilised text commands in order to battle through online worlds / dungeons.
Mute / Muting	Muting is a function offered in many online games which allows players to hide communications from other players. The other player can still type / use voice chat / pings, but it will not be visible to the player who has muted them.
Nerf	When a champion or game element has been rebalanced, reducing some of its base strength or stats, this is referred to as it being 'nerfed'. This is usually done to ensure they are balanced in their abilities in comparison to other champions.
Nexus	The Nexus is <i>League of Legends</i> is the structure which must be destroyed for a team to win the game. It is located in the games base, in front of the Fountain. At least one inhibitor must be 'down' for the Nexus to be attacked. When a Nexus is destroyed, this marks the end of the game. The team whose Nexus is destroyed loses the game. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .
Normal	'Normal' refers to the casual play mode of <i>League of Legends</i> . Whilst lots of players will still take this seriously, it does not utilise the Ranked system so has no impact on players 'Rank'. Usually takes place on Summoner's Rift. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other game titles.
NUEL	NUEL – or the National University Esports League is an organisation which organises esports tournaments across multiple game titles. Players must be university students to participate. Teams can be University or inter-University based, depending on the specific tournament.
OP	OP – or overpowered – refers to when players believe a particular champion, ability or item is so strong that is advantageous. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other game titles.
Patch	A 'patch' is a release to the game which includes new context, possible game or bug fixes, and general improvements to the game. Patches are released periodically, when required or when new content is ready to be released.

Pentakill	A pentakill is when one player kills all five enemy players within 30 seconds of each kill.
Ping	<p>Pings are part of the communication system found in <i>League of Legends</i>. Pings are a way to communicate pre-programmed, strategy-focused messages to other players quickly, such as 'On my way', 'Caution', 'Defend', 'Enemy Missing', 'Assist Me', or 'Need vision'. Pings are utilised by holding down the left mouse button, where the Ping wheel appears and then moving the mouse and releasing it over the required 'ping'.</p> <p>Ping is also used to refer to the latency between the <i>League of Legends</i> servers and a players own internet connection. High ping usually causes lag in-game (see 'lag', 'lagging').</p>
Premade	Premade is a term which refers to players queueing together. Players might queue for a game in pairs, threes or fives; this would mean they are 'premade'. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs.
Queue	When a player leaves the lobby and looks for a game, they enter the 'queue'. A timer appears with the expected time until a game is found, and a real-time counter showing how long a player has been in the queue for. There are separate queues for each game type.
Randoms	Randoms is a term used to refer to the additional players within a game of premade players. If three players enter a queue together, they are premade; the other two players found to form the team of five are 'randoms'; or they could be a premade of two.
Rank	<p>Rank is used to refer to the level a player has reached within the rank system. There are ten tiers, which from lowest to highest are: Iron, Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Emerald, Diamond, Master, Grandmaster and Challenger. Lower tiers are often used as insults towards other players, criticising their skill level. Whilst 'Wood' is not a division, it is often used as an insult to suggest a player is of a lower skill level than Bronze.</p> <p>Within each rank, there are four divisions: fourth is the lowest division, one is the highest.</p> <p>On ranking up in <i>League of Legends</i>, see 'LP'.</p> <p>Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs.</p>
Ranked	Ranked game play is a competitive mode where players seek to rise through the ranks (see Ranks). Players earn or lose LP

	(see 'LP') for games won / lost respectively. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs.
Reddit	Reddit is a social news and discussion website. Users can post their own content, or share content from elsewhere, and generate discussion through the voting system and comments. Anonymity facilitates discussion. Reddit is organised through separate 'SubReddits' (see: 'SubReddit')
Riot Games / Riot	<p>Riot Games is the developer and publisher of <i>League of Legends</i>, <i>Wild Rift</i>, <i>Legends of Runeterra</i>, <i>A Bandle Tale</i>, <i>Team Fight Tactics</i> and <i>Ruined King</i>, all of which are based on the <i>League of Legends</i> universe, Runeterra.</p> <p>Riot Games have also released a game outside of the Runeterra universe, <i>Valorant</i>, an FPS game.</p>
Role	Role refers to the in-game role a player wishes to choose: ADC/Marksman, Mid, Top, Support, or Jungle. It will often determine playstyle, and choice of champion played. (See also: 'main'). Found in <i>League of Legends</i> , but other game titles and genres feature similar.
RP / Riot Points	RP or Riot Points are the in-game currency which is used to buy aesthetic changes to champions and wards in-game through microtransactions. It is purchased using offline world currency. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> , but other game titles and genres feature similar system.
Runeterra	Runeterra is the fictional universe that <i>League of Legends</i> is based in. It is comprised of eleven regions: Freljord, Demacia, Noxus, Piltover and Zaun (dual cities), Ixtal, Shurima, Targon, Bilgewater, Shadow Isles, and Ionia.
Run it down mid	Used to refer to the practice of a player manoeuvring their champion down the middle lane of the map, with no regard for gameplay, usually resulting in inting. A form of toxicity or griefing. <i>League of Legends</i> based terminology, may be found in other MOBAs with lanes.
Skin	Skins are visual changes to a champions default appearance. They can be earned or bought through micro-transactions. They have no other impact on the game aside from visual changes. Skins are often released in themed 'skin lines', meaning multiple champions will have skins of a similar aesthetic, e.g. 'Arcade: Battle Bosses', 'Heartbreakers', 'Definitely Not', or 'Elderwood'.
Smurf / smurfing	A smurf is when a player uses an alternative account to play with or against lower-ranked players.

Soloq / Soloqueue	SoloQ or Soloqueue is where a player will queue for a game of <i>League of Legends</i> by themselves.
Spamming	Spamming is the practice of sending text or pings (see 'pings') very quickly in succession, often to irritate other players.
Squishy	Where a champion or character has low health, armour or magic resist stats and therefore is easy to kill. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs.
Stream	A stream is the product or content produced by a Streamer; a live, real-time video broadcast. In gaming this is usually located on Twitch.tv.
Streamer / livestreamer	Streamers or livestreamers broadcast themselves live on the internet. In gaming, this is often streaming themselves and their screen whilst they play a video game, so their audience can watch them play. In gaming this is usually located on Twitch.tv, but can also be live on Youtube or other streaming sites.
SubReddit	Reddit is organised by 'SubReddits'. There are SubReddits for a wide range of topics. (See also: 'Reddit').
Summoner	A player of <i>League of Legends</i> is referred to as 'summoner' in-game.
Summoner's Rift	Summoner's Rift is the <i>League of Legends</i> map where 5 versus 5 games take place for both normal and Ranked modes.
Summoner Spell	Aside from a champion's five abilities, players can select two Summoner Spells at the start of a game, from a pre-set choice of eleven. These spells can aid champion abilities in various ways. Available spells are: Clarity, Cleanse, Exhaust, Flash, Ghost, Heal, Ignite, Mark, Dash, Smite, Teleport
Super minions	Super minions are upgraded minions which only spawn when an inhibitor is down. They stop spawning if the inhibitor respawns. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .
Surrender@20	A news site dedicated to sharing <i>League of Legends</i> news. Named after the minimum time that must pass before players can initiate a surrender vote in a game.

Support (see also: ‘healer’, ‘utility’)	A role within <i>League of Legends</i> which focuses on providing ‘support’ in the form of heals and utility to the ADC / Marksman in the early stages of the game, and the whole team in later game stages. Starts in bot lane with the ADC / Marksman. Often critiqued for being a low-skilled role, this has been questioned and debunked. Often associated with female players. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs.
Tank	Champion type with melee attacks. Tanks usually have crowd-control abilities, and large amounts of health or defence stats. They are less focused on damage dealing. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs and across game genres.
Teamspeak	A voice-over-Internet Protocol platform, which used to be popular among gamers but is now less used due to the emergence of Discord. Enables voice chat between users.
Tilt / tilted tilting	Tilt describes the feeling or experience of a player feeling that they are not in rational control of their gameplay or decisions. It is usually brought on by frustration in game, or when a team is losing and players start making rash decisions to try and ‘bring back’ the game, but these do not work out. Players might say ‘don’t tilt’ or ‘I’m tilted’.
Throwing / throw	To ‘throw’ a game means to ‘hand over a win’ to the enemy team. This is within the context of Team A being in a winning position / advantage / ahead, and then making decisions which ultimately lead to giving Team B the opportunity to even out the game and potentially win. Players might say ‘Don’t throw’ or ‘We’re throwing it’.
Top	This refers to the ‘top lane’ of the <i>Summoner’s Rift</i> map in <i>League of Legends</i> . Tanks or warriors usually start in this lane.
Tower / turret	Towers or turrets (referred to interchangeably) are structures within <i>League of Legends</i> . These structures will attack the most immediate enemy unit in front of them, minions or champions. If a champion attacks an enemy champion by their tower, the tower will twitch to attack the attacking player. Turrets must be destroyed to advance through the game. There are three turrets per lane, and two turrets protecting the Nexus. Upon destroying a turret, the team destroying the turret received gold. The turrets do not respawn. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs.
Trash talk	Trash talking is a form of ‘banter’; it might sometimes be characterised as harmful, hate speech, or toxic, however usually trash talk is more light-hearted.

Triple A / AAA	AAA, games produced or distributed by major to renown publishers
Troll / trolling	The act of trolling is intentionally making decisions which negatively impact an individual. In gaming, a player who is trolling will make decisions that will negative impact their teammates.
Tutorial games	When starting <i>League of Legends</i> , new players must play 'tutorial games' which introduce players to the fundamentals of gameplay.
Twitch / Twitch.tv	Twitch.tv – colloquially referred to as 'Twitch' is a live streaming website which primarily hosts video game streamers. Esports tournaments are also streamed on Twitch.
Ultimate / Ulti / Ult	Of a champions five abilities, one is called their Ultimate. This is an ability with a longer cool-down, meaning it can be used less frequently but is usually most powerful. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs.
Utility	Utility encompasses abilities which are useful to teams and teamplay, such as heals, stuns, slows, buffs, and shields. Tanks and Support champions often have utility-based abilities. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> and other MOBAs and across game genres.
Vision (see 'ward')	Not all of the map is visible to players in <i>League of Legends</i> . By default, players can see their half the map, and the remainder of the map – the enemy half – is in the 'fog of war', as are neutral monsters (Baron, Dragon). Additional, fields of vision are provided in areas surrounding the player as the move around the map, and through the placement of 'wards'. (See also 'Fog of war', 'wards'). Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .
Ward / warding (see 'vision')	Wards are items which can be placed by players which provide a field of vision in otherwise 'fog of war' areas of the map. Wards last differing amounts of time, and can be destroyed by enemy team players to then deny this vision. (See also 'fog of war', 'vision'). Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .
Waves	In <i>League of Legends</i> , minions spawn in 'waves'. A minion wave for each lane spawns at the Nexus every thirty seconds. A wave of minions comprises of various compositions of super minions, caster minions, melee minions and siege minions, depending on the game stage. Found in <i>League of Legends</i> .

WNUEL	A branch of NUEL, the Women and Non-Binary National University Esports League is an organisation which organises esports tournaments across multiple game titles. Players must be university students to participate. Teams can be University or inter-University based, depending on the specific tournament. Often WNUEL tournaments are inter-University to account for the lower number of female and non-binary players across games, so all women and non-binary players can engage in competitive play, and are not limited by player numbers at their institution.
XP / Experience points (Champion)	Throughout a game of <i>League of Legends</i> , players gain XP – or experience points. This is gained through killing enemy, champions, assisting in killing enemy champions, being close to enemy champions or minions when they die, killing enemy minions, killing jungle camps, and being close to enemy wards when they are destroyed. As XP is gained, players can level up their champion, upgrading champion abilities. <i>Found</i> across game genres.
XP / Experience points (Summoner)	Summoners earn experience by playing games, levelling up their account level. Experience is earned through playing games.

Appendix 2. Behavioural toxic practices: examples from games. Generated from a range of literature and practical examples.

i) *Assisting the enemy team*

Many behaviours may be identified as those which assist the enemy team. Often this will include the intentional passing of resources to players on the opposing team. This is most commonly achieved through *intentional feeding*, where players will deliberately die at the hand of an enemy player. Another method is *role diversion*, where players refuse to abide by the commonly understood rules of the position or role they have been assigned in a game. This may also be considered *not playing to win, ignoring the game aim or a lack of team play* (Riot Games, 2023b). *Assisting the Enemy* also includes not communicating with teammates. A linguistic form of assisting the enemy team may occur where toxic, allied players give details via all chat which assist the enemy team. Voyboy (2020) has suggested that particularly skilled players are increasingly finding ways to feed or advantage enemy teams whilst avoiding automatic detection by using sophisticated tactics undetectable by computer systems, particularly within *LoL*.

ii) *Obstructing the allied team*

Obstructing the allied team may result in similar outcomes as *assisting the enemy team* but is distinct in that the methods of achieving this outcome are markedly different. These often comprise of more covert behaviours, including behaviours which may be misinterpreted as toxic. This could include *malignant* banning – the banning of a champion or character a player expressed intention to play, or *ability misuse*, where abilities or items are used at a detriment to the allied team. Behaviours which obstruct the allied team are characterised by a lack of cooperation or team play. Examples include flashbanging in *CS:GO*, where using a Flashbang (a type of grenade which will '[blind] all players with a clear sight to it, including teammates (regardless of whether the option "friendly fire" is enabled or disabled). This has the effect of obscuring players' entire screen with white for a short

moment, before fading out again' (Counterstrike Fandom, 2014).Flashbang may be used to obstruct the allied team, in turn providing an opportunity for the enemy team to take advantage of such a moment. Ultimate abilities in *OW* may be used to disadvantage allied team mates, such as using Symmetra's "Teleporter" ability to transport allies into unfavourable positions on the map, even resulting in allied players deaths (Similar to Ryze's ultimate in *LoL*), or Mei's "Ice Wall" ability to block allied teams from either advancing through the map or barricading allied team mates with enemy players (JIMBOTHY, 2016).

iii) AFKing (leaving the game prematurely, going AFK)

Going 'away from keyboard' (AFK) is a commonly used toxic behaviour, characterised by leaving a game prematurely, or even remaining in the game but staying in the spawn point (idle), moving only to avoid AFK detection system, often leaves teams disadvantaged. It could be viewed as obstructing the allied team, or inadvertently assisting the enemy team, although it is not often characterised as such. AFKing is sometimes innocent, occurring due to internet issues, problems with game clients, or things in the offline world the need attention. Despite not necessarily being an intentional behaviour, this disadvantages the allied team while it is a player or players short. However, sometimes rage quitting specifically has well-meaning intentions, with players "using rationalization in order to set a distance between them and the game" (Moreau, et al., 2024, p. 335) to calm down when they are frustrated at the game.

iv) Smurfing

Smurfing is not usually identified by game developers as toxic behaviour but is often regarded as a way to ruin the game environment for some players. Smurfing refers to "experienced players dishonestly present themselves as inexperienced to unfairly compete against less-skilled competition" (Monge & Matthews, 2024, p. 2). Studies of smurfing are limited, but exploration of

perceptions of smurfing revealed smurfs to be perceived “more likely to be toxic, to disengage from the game, and to enjoy the game” (Monge and Matthews (2024, p. 6). Sometimes players inadvertently smurf by creating a new account to play with lower-level or new-to-the-game friends to improve the playing experience for newer/lower-level players (N/LL player): playing with a N/LL player on a higher-level account may mean the N/LL player has a diminished experience when playing against higher skilled players too soon.

v) *MMR tanking*

MMR, or the Match Making Rating, is “a metric used by games to determine which tier on the “ranked” ladder a player is supposed to be” (Gaming Glossary, 2017), thereby identifying which players, of similar levels, should be matched with each other in competitive game modes. MMR tanking is characterised by intentionally trying to lose games to negatively impact a players’ MMR resulting in them being placed with lower ranked players.

vi) *Off-Meta Play*

That off-meta play is toxic is a matter of contention, and dependent upon individual experience. Anti-meta play occurs when playing champions in roles or positions in which they are not usually intended or deemed to be effective. Christopher Paul’s recent work marks the first thorough exploration of off-meta play, where he notes, “Although playing in your own exploratory play style is definitely not against the official rules of the game, conformity is a key part of the norms governed by players” (Paul, 2024, p. 31). Theorycrafting is an element associated with off-meta play, where players engage in “pushing the boundary and rules of a game to maximize the odds of victory” (Paul, 2024, p. 2) which often leads to players not conforming to established norms of play. Sometimes off-meta play is well intentioned, and can even result in good game results, however it is sometimes used intentionally to troll allied team members, thus disrupting and ruining games. When well-intended off-meta play results in a loss of game, the behaviour may be deemed toxic by other

members of the team. As Donaldson (2017, p. 441) has noted “conforming to conventions of the metagame is an implicit part of behavioural etiquette, and breaking the meta can often be met by rejection from allied players”. This exploration can lead to established metas – optimized modes of play. Importantly, theorycrafting itself is not regarded as an issue, but rather the focus on optimisation to which it leads. As (Paul, 2024, p. 3) “when min/maxing becomes dominant within the game’s community, choice is limited to a singular answer and games can get less fun to play and far less compelling to watch [...] making it harder to find surprise, awe, and joy in a game”. Optimization in gaming is a contributing factor to meritocracy and the continuation of inequality in gaming. As Paul (2018, p. 51) notes, “Some players will know to look online for optimal build guides for a character or where they can search for advice when they get stuck; without that knowledge, other players are left struggling and may give up”. Off-meta play has been met with hostility which is exemplified by professional streamers: “The styles of celebrity players such as DiscoHeat, who intentionally uses off-meta champions as a way of showing the oftentimes hostile attitudes attracted by those who do not play by “the rules” (Donaldson, 2017, p. 441). Important to note here, then, is off-meta play produces a particular culture of play, thereby demonstrating that there are cultures within specific games themselves based around approach to play.

vii) *Stream-based trolling [stream sniping, queue controlling, queue manipulation]*

Streamers can be the targets of particular forms of toxicity where players will try to manipulate game queues in order to be placed in a game with a particular streamer who is mid-broadcast. *Queue manipulation* is usually done with the intent to then troll within that streamers game, aiming to frustrate and disrupt that particular player. *Stream sniping* used to be a problem in games where map positioning of the enemy team is obscured for allies without particular items and involves players observing a broadcasting streamers’ game in order to gain an advantage by being able to see map positioning of enemy players. This has been combated by stream delays, where those watching live streams of games are no longer watching in real time, and instead are watching gameplay from

three minutes prior. Stream sniping interestingly is included in Blizzard's player support section and alludes to it being against the code of conduct for all Blizzard games (2020). There is minimal research on stream sniping, however Felczak (2023, p. 411) has noted its presence as a form of toxicity within esports, is "an extremely effective means of disrupting not only one's gameplay but also the entertainment value of a broadcast". This puts streamers in a detrimental and difficult position in that it affects their own agency.

viii) Exploiting and scamming other players

The exploitation and scamming of other players is usually relevant where in-game economies are a significant part of game play, and trading items or in-game currencies is common practice, such as MMORPGs. Much toxic behaviour surrounding trades would be through stealing loot or not following through on trade deals which are established between players.

ix) Environment and resource control

The control of resources is often practiced by environment control, especially when some resources in a game can only be obtained from particular areas within the game world. Environment and resource control may result in players being killed for trying to obtain resources from an area or exploiting players into paying inflated prices for resources that they are then not able to obtain in any other way. This was seen with the farming of Devilsaur leather in Player versus Player (PvP) servers in *WoW*, where players would control areas, often using faction collusion to maintain control, and prevent players from collecting the resource (Nekrage, 2019; Qémpal, 2019; vaulty, 2018).

x) Corpse camping/spawn killing

Spawn killing or *corpse camping* is where a player will kill another player and then wait for them to respawn in the same place, only to kill the same player again. This has been noted as a problem in

forums for *Overwatch* (Shiranui, 2018), *Sea of Thieves* (backoff11, 2019), and *WoW* (Tecchnokoos, 2019). Camping, as opposed to corpse camping, is a strategy used in CS:GO, where a player will find a particular spot and wait for enemy players to come to them in order to get kills, rather than roaming the map to look for kills. This is viewed as un-sportsman-like, and possibly toxic, but not against game rules (Paez, 2020). *Camping* in MOBAs, such as *LoL*, is usually where a role such as 'jungle' who roams the map looking to help other lanes get ahead and secure map objectives, selects a particular enemy champion to 'camp', that is, to repeatedly attempt to kill. This is viewed as a tactic, as opposed to toxic, and it often used to 'tilt' the enemy team, meaning aiming to frustrate other players, often making them 'try hard' and as a result often make poor in-game decisions, or even leave the game.

Appendix 3. Online survey

Section 1: About you

This section asks for some details about yourself that will help me to identify any trends.

5. Age *

6. Gender

Mark only one oval.

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Prefer not to say

☐ Other:

7. Current country of residence *

Section 2: You and League of Legends

The next few questions ask about your current relationship with League of Legends

8. Do you play League of Legends?

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

9. How long have you been playing League of Legends?

Mark only one oval.

☐ Less than a year

☐ 1 year

☐ 2 years

☐ 3 years

☐ 4 years

☐ 5 years

☐ 6 years

☐ 7 years

☐ 8 years

☐ 9 years

☐ 10 years (since it was released!)

10. How often do you play League of Legends? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Every day

☐ Once a week

☐ 2-3 times a week

☐ 4-5 times a week

☐ Once a month

☐ A couple of times a month

☐ Once every few months

11. Who do you play League of Legends with? Please select all which apply

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Alone
- ☐ With friends I have offline
- ☐ With friends I have made online
- ☐ Other: _____

12. Which League of Legends game modes do you play? Please select all which apply.

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Summoners Rift (normal)
- ☐ Summoners Rift (ranked)
- ☐ Team Fight Tactics
- ☐ Howling Abyss
- ☐ Twisted Treeline (normal)
- ☐ Twisted Treeline (ranked)
- ☐ Rotating game modes

13. Do interactions between players differ depending on the game mode type? If so, in what ways? This could refer to attitude, pings, in-game chat, all chat etc.

14. Do you watch League of Legends? i.e. streams, esports

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Section 3: Community in League of Legends

The following question is interested in finding out the ways in which you feel that players and fans can interact with, get involved with, or otherwise engage with the League of Legends community.

15. In what ways can players interact with the League of Legends community? Please list as many as you can think of.

Section 4: How do you interact with League of Legends?

The following question is interested in finding out how you interact with, get involved with, or otherwise engage with the League of Legends community.

16. How do you interact with and engage with the League of Legends community?

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ In-game [via the client through text chat]
- ☐ In game [via the client through voice chat]
- ☐ Official Riot forums
- ☐ Third party forums e.g. Reddit, Neoseeker, Esports team forums
- ☐ Gaming news websites e.g. Daily Dot, Surrender@20,
- ☐ Youtube
- ☐ Esports [watching online]
- ☐ Esports [attending live matches]
- ☐ Tournaments [participating]
- ☐ Tournaments [viewing]
- ☐ Streaming
- ☐ Watching streams
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Attending conventions
- ☐ Purchasing official merchandise
- ☐ Purchasing fan-produced merchandise
- ☐ Fan art [making]
- ☐ Fan art [viewing]
- ☐ Cosplay [making/wearing]
- ☐ Cosplay [viewing]
- ☐ Gameplay guides [text - based, viewing]
- ☐ Gameplay guides [text - based, making]
- ☐ Gameplay guides [videos, viewing]
- ☐ Gameplay guides [videos, making]
- ☐ Gameplay videos e.g. highlights, montages, spotlights [viewing]
- ☐ Gameplay videos e.g. highlights, montages, spotlights [making]
- ☐ Music [listening]
- ☐ Music [creating]
- ☐ Visiting gaming bars
- ☐ LAN parties
- ☐ University Societies
- ☐ NUEL
- ☐ Other: _____

Section 5: What three words come to mind when thinking about the idea of 'community'?

This question is interested in how you describe the concept of community. Community means many different things to different people. In this question, community refers to the general concept of community, not tied to any particular location or group, and not relating to League of Legends specifically.

17. Which 3 words come to mind when thinking about the idea of 'community'?

Section 6: Thinking specifically about League of Legends, what three words come to mind when thinking about the League of Legends community?

This question is interested in how you describe the League of Legends community.

18. Which 3 words come to mind when thinking about the League of Legends community?

Section 7: Thoughts on the League of Legends community?

Is there anything else you would like to say about the community in League of Legends? This can be about any aspect of it! But please do specify what aspect you are referring to, e.g. in game, forums, community content, esports, specific game modes, events etc. Please feel free to give as much information or detail as you feel necessary.

19. Please give as much information or detail as you feel necessary.

Where did you come across this survey?

It would be great to know where you came across this survey - e.g. via a specific form of social media, a website, a friend

20. Where did you come across this survey?

Would you be willing to be contacted to talk about the League of Legends community?

I would also like to conduct some interviews about the League of Legends community. If you are happy to be contacted about this, please indicate below.

Indicating that you are will to be contacted does not mean you have to. You can change your mind at any time. If you are contacted, you will be sent more information about what will be involved and you can decide whether you would be happy to proceed.

21. Would you be willing to be contacted to talk about your interaction, involvement, and perceptions of the League of Legends community?

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes, I am willing to be contacted. *Skip to question 22*

☐ No, I do not want to be contacted.

Skip to section 14 (Please click the 'submit' button below to submit your responses. Please remember to make a note of the time you are submitting your response in case you do decide to withdraw from the study. Thank you for participating in this survey! Your contribution is greatly appreciated.)

Yes, I am willing to be contacted to talk about the League of Legends community.

Please leave your name and the email address you would like to be contacted on below.

22. Name

23. Email address *

Please click the 'submit' button below to submit your responses.

Please remember to make a note of the time you are submitting your response in case you do decide to withdraw from the study.

Thank you for participating

in this survey! Your contribution is greatly appreciated.

Appendix 4. Interview schedule

Intro:

How're you?

Thank you for talking to me today and being a part of my research.

Do you have any questions before we start?

I will start recording, and we will get started!

Warm up questions

1. How did you start playing league of legends?
2. What did you like about it?
3. How often have you been playing in the last year?
4. Which game modes are you favourite? Why?

General experiences of LoL

I'd like to talk a bit about your experiences playing League of Legends, and basically I'm really interested in player experiences in League of Legends and the League of Legends community. Generally, how would you explain your experience of playing the game?

Toxicity

In my survey, a lot of people described the league of legends community as toxic – which may not be a total surprise! So if that's okay, I'd like to chat you a bit about the idea of toxicity really.

1. How would you describe player behaviours in league of legends?
2. How would you describe what *toxicity* or *toxic behaviour* is?
3. Do you think league of legends is toxic?
4. How would you describe the state of toxicity in League of Legends?
5. What do you think has led to League being as toxic as it is?
6. How do you feel about how Riot has responded to issue of toxicity?
 - a. Riot now use the phrase 'game ruining behaviour' – do you think there is a difference between toxicity and game ruining behaviour?
7. Influence of prominent figures in setting standards of behaviour
 - a. Streamers
 - b. Professional players
8. Would you describe yourself as a toxic player?
9. Have you ever engaged in toxic behaviours?
10. Why are people toxic? Where does this behaviour come from? [added 21/6/21]
11. Is toxicity inevitable in a team game? [added 21/6/21]

General experience – expand on Toxicity maybe?

1. What has been your experience of in-game chat?
2. Who do you play with? Had that shaped your experience of the game?

3. Does game mode make a big difference?
4. Does rank make a difference?
5. What has been your experience of League of Legends *outside of the game*? - creativity
 - a. Forums
 - b. Esports
 - c. Youtube
 - d. Twitch/streaming
 - e. Cosplay
 - f. Conventions
 - g. Live events
 - h. Music
 - i. Art work
6. Is there a difference in the League community *in* game vs the community outside of playing the game? Why do you think this is?
7. Is it easy to make friends in LoL?[asked previously to 21/6/21 - added formally from here]

Why do we come back?

1. Why do you keep playing League of Legends?
2. Have you ever quit? Or said you'd quit?
3. What is your favourite thing about League of Legends?
4. How does playing league of legends make you feel?
5. How does the league of legends community make you feel?
6. Do you feel connected to the community?
7. Do you think that having other spaces where the league community can share and create content and discuss things – such as twitch, youtube, reddit, esports events – helps us to keep coming back to league?

Describing and comparing the League of Legends community

1. You described the League of Legends community as _____. Can you talk a little about this?
2. Do you think the League of Legends community is different to what we often perceived communities to be and to be about?
3. Is there any other community that you feel a part of?
4. What 3 words would you use to describe it?
5. How does it compare to the League of Legends community?

Impact of identity on experience

1. Is there anything about your identity or you as a person generally which you feel has affected your experience of playing League of Legends?

Pandemic

1. **Did the pandemic and lockdown change your engagement with League of Legends?**
2. Did you play less/more?
3. Did you engage with it and the community in different ways to what you would usually?
4. What did league of legends do for you in this time?

Closing questions on experience

1. **What has been your worst experience whilst playing league of legends?**
2. **What has been your best experience whilst playing league of legends?**
3. **Anything else you would like to add?**

Do you think League of Legends embodies what we expect communities to be like? [added from 21/6/21 - emailed to previous participants]

Note: I will aim to have our conversation transcribed within a month and I will email you a copy for you to have a look over if you wish, so that you can check that you are happy with everything that you said. Am I also okay to email you with a couple follow up questions, if absolutely necessary, after I have transcribed our conversation?

Thank you so so much!!!! I have really enjoyed talking to you!

Appendix 5. Ethical approval



Downloaded: 15/08/2024

Approved: 20/02/2019

Bethany Nutbrown
Registration number: 160264289
Sociological Studies
Programme: Sociological Studies (PhD/Sociology PT)

Dear Bethany

PROJECT TITLE: You're the real MVP. Understanding community in League of Legends, On and Off The Rift.
APPLICATION: Reference Number 024508

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 20/02/2019 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 024508 (form submission date: 29/01/2019); (expected project end date: 01/02/2024).
- Participant information sheet 1055560 version 1 (28/01/2019).
- Participant information sheet 1055559 version 1 (28/01/2019).
- Participant consent form 1055562 version 1 (28/01/2019).
- Participant consent form 1055561 version 1 (28/01/2019).

The following optional amendments were suggested:

The most pressing recommendation relates to the documents drawn up for (potential) participants. The information sheets are rather long and clinical. While the examples provided by the University are a guide to all the elements that need to be included, the rather impersonal language of those example forms does not have to be replicated and they could be much shorter. As you are a member of the community you are researching, you could draw on your own experience to make the forms much more friendly and inviting. There is a typo in section 12 - 'Data that is collected for this projects will be used in the thesis' - plus most people outside academic life will not have come across the word 'pseudonymised', so you might want to think of a different way of explaining that. Other suggested amendments include: 1. Providing a clearer statement of the benefits of the research (eg its original contribution to knowledge) 2. Expressing methods more clearly in methodology section. For example: what will the survey include - qual or quant questions or both?; can you provide examples of the questions that may be asked in the survey and in interviews? 3. Demonstrating awareness of how to deal with the ethical challenges posed by the ethnographic elements of the research in a situation in which it will be very difficult/impossible to gain consent from all parties present.

If during the course of the project you need to [deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation](#) please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

Jamie Rodgers
Ethics Admin
Sociological Studies

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/research-services/ethics-integrity/policy>
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.6710661/file/GRIPPpolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Admin (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

Appendix 6. Information sheet – Interview

Participant Information Sheet

Understanding community in League of Legends, On and Off The Rift

Invitation to participate

You are being invited to take part in a research project, Understanding community in League of Legends, On and Off The Rift. Before you decide whether or not to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. Participation is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time before October 2021 without any negative consequences. You do not have to give a reason. If you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact Bethany Nutbrown: bmtnutbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk

Purpose of this research project

I have played League of Legends for eight years and have since found myself engaging with League of Legends and the surrounding community in a variety of ways. I am interested in how players of League of Legends construct and understand the League of Legends community, their experiences of the community, how they engage with it, their feelings towards it, and what it means to them. This project aims to explore these ideas, and contribute the video game research and understandings of video game communities.

As a disclaimer, this research is not endorsed by, associated or affiliated with Riot Games, the developers of League of Legends, in anyway.

Your participation in this research

Why have I been chosen?

You have been invited to participate as you have identified yourself as a player of League of Legends in the survey you completed entitled Community in League of Legends: A survey investigating perception of and interaction with League of Legends, and therefore your opinion and experiences of the community are important to this project.

What do I have to do if I decide to take part?

If you take part, you will be asked to discuss your experience of the League of Legends community with the researcher via an online interview via Google Meet. The interview will be audio/video recorded. Google Meet will also record the video if you have your camera on, but no images from the video will be used in the project. The interviews will take approximately two hours, or possibly less. Upon completion of the interview, your involvement with the research project is complete. Questions will be open-ended, meaning you can answer in as detailed a manner as you wish. The researcher is also a player of League of Legends and is familiar with the terminology and ideas relating to the game.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The only possible disadvantage of taking part is time. There are no other expected disadvantages or risks of taking part.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will contribute to the understanding of video game communities, specifically within League of Legends, and contribute to the growing field of video game research.

Use and storage of your data

The audio and/or video recordings of your interview in this research will be transcribed. The transcription will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations, publications, and lectures. Quotations of your words may be used in the thesis for this project, and any publications, reports, conference proceedings or other research outputs as a result of this project.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that we collect from you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to members of the research team. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this. You will be given an alternative name (a pseudonym) to be used when your words are referred to within any research outputs. You have the opportunity to choose this name yourself, within reason, or you can allow the researcher to choose an alternative name for you.

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

Data collected will be stored securely and will be anonymised so you will be not identifiable from the data. Only the researcher(s) involved in the project and transcription services will have access to the data that is collected. Data that is collected for this project will be used in the thesis Understanding community in League of Legends, On and Off The Rift, and may be used in publications, reports, presentations, web pages and other research outputs as part of this research project. Data will be destroyed upon completion of the project, which at latest will be February 1st 2026.

What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.

Who is the Data Controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that The University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

Ethics

Who is organising and funding the research?

This project is organised by Bethany Nutbrown (PhD student) at the University of Sheffield. A funding body is not involved in this research project.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by The Sociological Studies Department's ethics review procedure.

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research?

If you have any complaints regarding your treatment by researchers during or following your participation in the project, please contact the Lead Researcher, Bethany Nutbrown at bmtnutbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk, or Dr Tom Clark (supervisor) at t.clark@sheffield.ac.uk.

If you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, please contact the Head of Sociological Studies, Professor Nathan Hughes at nathan.hughes@sheffield.ac.uk who will then escalate the complaint through the appropriate channels.

If your complaint relates to how the participants' personal data has been handled, information about how to raise a complaint can be found in the University's Privacy Notice: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

Contact for further information

If you wish to obtain more information about the project, please contact Bethany Nutbrown (Lead Researcher) at bmtnutbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk or Dr Tom Clark at t.clark@sheffield.ac.uk.

You will be given a copy of this information sheet, a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for taking part in this project.

Appendix 7. Consent form – Interview



Understanding community in League of Legends, On and Off The Rift **Consent Form**

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated DD/MM/YYYY or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include a video/audio recorded informal conversation (interview).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study before October 2021 I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that the interview will be audio recorded and that this data will be confidential and pseudonymised for analysis in this research project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this. I understand that any data I provide will be anonymised and I will not be identifiable from the data.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of participant [printed]

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher [printed]

Signature

Date

Project contact details for further information:

Principal Investigator/lead researcher; Bethany Nutbrown - bmtnutbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk

Supervisor; Dr Tom Clark - t.clark@sheffield.ac.uk



In publications, conferences and in reports of the project on social media platforms, how would you like to be referred to? (Please initial box and fill in name where appropriate)

Pseudonym (selected by you) : _____

Pseudonym (chosen by researcher) : _____

I consent to the above information be used in publications, conferences, reports and other research outputs of the project. I understand that if I have chosen to be identified by Summoner name or offline-world name, then there is the possibility of being identified.

Name of Participant (or legal representative)	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____

Lead Researcher	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Appendix 8. Information sheet – Survey

A survey about community interaction in League of Legends

My name is Beth Nutbrown and I am a PhD student at The University of Sheffield. My research looks at video game communities, specifically the League of Legends community. I am interested in how people participate in the League of Legends community, and how players think about the community.

If you have an affiliation with League of Legends - whether you currently play, used to play, watch friends, follow esports, make fan content, cosplay - I would love to hear from you.

If you would like to find out more about my research, please visit <https://bethnutbrown.wixsite.com/youaretherealmvp> or email me at bmtnutbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk

If you are aged 18 or over and you would like to take part in this survey, please have a look at the information sheet on the following page.

Thank you!

Please make a note of the time that you submit your survey. If you choose to withdraw at any time, the time stamp will be required in order to identify your responses.

bmtnutbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk [Switch accounts](#)



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A survey about community interaction in League of Legends

bmtnutbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk [Switch accounts](#)



Not shared

Information Sheet

Below is a participant information sheet to provide information about the project, and what you will be asked to do, should you choose to take part.

Research project title

You're the real MVP. Understanding community in League of Legends, On and Off The Rift

Invitation to participate

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please only participate if you are over the age of 18. Please do ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the project?

I have played League of Legends for eight years, and I have since found myself engaging with League of Legends and the surrounding community in a variety of ways. I am interested in how fans of League of Legends engage with the game, both online and offline, how fans construct and view the community, and what League of Legends means to fans.

This project aims to explore these ideas, and contribute the video game research and understandings of video game communities.

Participation in the project

If you identify as a fan of League of Legends, you are invited to participate in this project, as your opinion and experiences of the community are important to this project. This research project aims to understand community in League of Legends, the spaces in which the community meets and interacts, and what this means to members of the League of Legends community. The information you provide as part of this research will help achieve the research project's objectives.

It is up to you whether you take part. If you do decide to take part, please save a copy of this form. You will then be asked to sign a consent form. You can withdraw at any time before December 20th 2019 without any negative consequences. You do not have to have a reason. If you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact Bethany Nutbrown: bmtnutbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk with the time stamp of the submission of your responses.

If you take part, you will be asked to complete an online survey which will take approximately 20 minutes. The survey comprises of a variety of questions about engagement and interaction with the League of Legends community. The researcher is a player of League of Legends and is familiar with the terminology and ideas relating to the game. Upon completion of the survey, your involvement within the research project is complete.

Responses and quotations of your words may be used the thesis for this project, and any publications, reports, conference proceedings or other research outputs as a result of this project.

Possible benefits, risks and disadvantages of taking part

The only possible disadvantage of taking part is time. There are no other expected disadvantages or risks of taking part.

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will contribute to the understanding of video game communities, specifically within League of Legends, and contribute to the growing field of video game research.

Will my participation be confidential?

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to members of the research team. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this.

The legal basis for processing personal data

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

Data collected will be stored securely, and will be anonymised so you will be not identifiable from the data. Only the researchers involved in the project and transcription services will have access to the data that is collected. Data that is collected for this project will be used in the thesis You're the real MVP. Understanding community in League of Legends, On and Off The Rift, and may be used in publications, reports, presentations, web pages and other research outputs as part of this research project. Data will be destroyed upon completion of the project, which at latest will be February 1st 2026.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This project is organised by Bethany Nutbrown (PhD student) at the University of Sheffield. A funding body is not involved in this research project.

Who is the Data Controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that The University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by The Sociological Studies Department's ethics review procedure.

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research?

If you have any complaints regarding your treatment by researchers during or following your participation in the project, please contact the Lead Researcher, Bethany Nutbrown at bmtnutbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk, or Dr Tom Clark (supervisor) at t.clark@sheffield.ac.uk.

If you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, please contact the Head of Sociological Studies, Professor Kate Morris at kate.morris@sheffield.ac.uk, who will then escalate the complaint through the appropriate channels.

If your complaint relates to how the participants' personal data has been handled, information about how to raise a complaint can be found in the University's Privacy Notice: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.

If you wish to obtain more information about the project, please contact Bethany Nutbrown (Lead Researcher) at bmtnutbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk or Dr Tom Clark at t.clark@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Appendix 9. Consent form - Survey

A survey about community interaction in League of Legends

bmtnutbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk [Switch accounts](#)

Not shared

* Indicates required question

Consent form

Please read the below questions carefully. Ticking the boxes and submission of your survey responses is taken as your consent to participate in this project.

If you no longer wish to take part, please close this window.

If you decide you no longer to participate part-way through the survey, please close the window and your responses will not be submitted.

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask question about the project. *

☐ Yes

I understand that my participation if voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. *

☐ Yes

I understand that responses will be anonymised and I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with research materials. and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. *

☐ Yes

I agree to the part in the above research . *

☐ Yes

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