

*From DotA to MOBA: the emergence and crisis of
playful co-creativity in multiplayer online battle arena
games*

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Thesis abstract

The Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) genre represents one of the most popular, dynamic and influential spaces of digital play. Since the genre's first commercial release in 2009 with the title *League of Legends* (2009 – present, Riot Games), MOBAs have played an integral role in pioneering 'fair' models of free-to-play, live streaming as a ubiquitous spectator activity and e-sports as an increasingly recognised mainstream industry. This thesis posits each of these trends as connected to the influence of MOBAs as a genre with a rich history in grassroots spaces of non-commercial play and participation. Adopting an online ethnographic approach, the thesis describes how the transition of the genre away from its non-commercial and collectivised origins has introduced an influential model of hybrid power relations characteristic of the affective economics that underpin many wider digital platforms.

Central to this thesis is the introduction of playful co-creativity as a conception for describing the productive role that play and closely related participatory activities exert in the vibrant activities of MOBAs. Through framing play as a co-creative practice that informs design, spurs participation, creates professions and sustains vast sums of affective value, the thesis asks how the political economy of playful co-creativity in MOBAs can be critically approached. The research mobilises approaches from game, fan and Internet studies to approach the complex set of relations encompassed by MOBAs.

The online ethnography of this research comprises observations, personal experiences, in-depth case studies and player responses from online open discussions on *Reddit*. In particular, the research focuses on three influential examples of MOBAs in the original *Warcraft III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2003) custom game *DotA*, *League of Legends* and *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013 – present). Through grasping the differing modes of governance in each of these games, the aim of this thesis is to exemplify how MOBAs are a genre imbricated with affective forms of playful interaction that both sustain and at times threaten the hybrid power dynamics of this heterogeneous genre.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Topic: Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas

This thesis is born out of a long-standing fascination with, and prior research interest in, the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) genre and its influential role as a site of playful co-creativity that typifies the political economy of participation found across the Internet.

MOBAs are a genre of a game that typically involves ten players each controlling a single avatar in a competitive five versus five setting. The objective of the game is to destroy the opposing team's base structure with the assistance of periodically spawned computer-controlled 'units' that follow a pre-set path into conflict with the opposing team. Players pick their avatar before the game begins from a vast selection of highly stylised and distinctive characters. As the game progresses, players must navigate their way across the map, further customising and combining their avatars with their team until one side controls the map, destroys the opposing base structure, and wins. MOBA games typically last 25 – 40 minutes and the experience of playing or watching them has been described by game designer Frank Lantz, as a combination of Chess, Basketball and Pokémon (1). As complex and compelling as any individual MOBA game proves to be, it is the influential role that MOBAs have played in the games industry and surrounding digital landscape that this thesis is largely focused.

For the past seven years, MOBAs have established themselves as one of the most played games genres in the world (Gaudiosi, 2012). They have been instrumental in pioneering several industry and cultural defining trends; including, the ubiquity of live streamed play practices, the rapid rise in popularity of electronic sports (e-sports), and the introduction of 'fair' free-to-play models. Each of these trends is causally tied to the development of MOBAs

and in their own way, each of these trends reflects the playfully co-creative character of the genre as one that hybridises the playful and political economies of digital games. It is this intersection between playful and political economies that this thesis seeks to critically explore through MOBAs.

As a genre derived from a rich playing and modding culture that was responsible for the incipient version of MOBAs named *Defence of the Ancients (DotA)*, this genre offers a distinctive example of a game that was pioneered in an extremely participatory, non-commercial and playfully productive context. These characteristics are constitutive of what I term playful co-creativity and each facet remains central to the continued functionality and sustainability of MOBAs. After all, without play a game ceases to function and moreover, without the co-creative properties of play a game remains static and undeveloped. In games created by participatory modding cultures such as *DotA*, the co-creative role of this playful agency was instinctively understood. Comprehending how and why this playful mode of co-creativity emerged in a participatory game such as *DotA* is a central topic of this thesis.

However, it is the continued commercial development of this playful mode of production into MOBAs and their influence across the games and wider digital landscape that this thesis is critically concerned with.

In contrast to when the genre was first co-created as a mod in *DotA*, the playful co-creativity of MOBAs is a commercially hybridised one. Games such as *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009 – present) and *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013 – present) that were inspired by *DotA* not only represent complexly ever-changing playful systems, but they are also representative of an ever-widening radius of playful control into the cultural and economic. The tensions caused by this commercial transition and the critical significance of these games acting as platforms of dispersed affective control are the primary focus of this thesis.

1.2 Key themes

As explored in subsequent chapters, game design decisions in MOBAs can have far reaching consequences for not only players and their respective forms of gaming capital, but also the cultural and economic capitals of professional players and e-sports organisations. Moreover, by controlling games such as MOBAs, commercial developers such as Riot Games can exert control over emergent practices and industries such as live-streamed play or e-sports events. Calling into question their status as merely games ‘developers’, this expansion of influence beyond the playful puts organisations such as Riot Games in a position of power that is emblematic of the platformed digital landscape. Similar to social media platforms such as *Facebook* or *Youtube*, games such as *League of Legends* act as a nexus for a surrounding ecosystem of participation that is dependent upon the game’s governance.

As this thesis contends, it is the collective genealogy of play and participation that is central to the fabric of MOBAs and is also reflected in moments of tension or crisis that frequently occur in the cultures of these games. These moments of crisis could include the loss of player (and professional player) expertise due to frequent or undesirable game updates, differing philosophies of game design between players and developers, controversial e-sports rulings, or controversies arising from the connective relations these games share with other digital platforms. At their core, these moments of crisis are a symptom of the incredibly valuable yet contradictory political economy these games have come to encompass. In this critical scope, I share a perspective of MOBAs that parallels the critique often made of wider participatory or social media platforms where similarly vast sums of centralised economic value is generated from the bottom-up movements of a dispersed network.

For many wider social networks such as *Facebook* or *Youtube*, the governance and economics of the platform have become crucial sites of critical investigation by media scholars as new models of affective economics have developed that control the lives of millions (see section 3.4.6). Although digital games and social networks differ in vital ways, this thesis posits that there are many parallels in the way games such as MOBAs are monetised as similarly lucrative affective economies. The monetisation model termed ‘fair’ free-to-play by developers such as Riot Games is representative of this affective turn in the ongoing monetisation of games. As a model that does not require players to pay anything in order to play, but nonetheless accrues billions of dollars in revenue year on year through voluntary payments, it is crucial to understand the precise affective sentiments of players who contribute to this economy.

Moreover, in the ways MOBAs now govern their ecology of actors both in-game and out of it, profound parallels to social media platforms are developing. Just as social media enables multiple actors to participate and variously contribute value to a platform, MOBAs invite the same participation from their players and wider paratextual actors such as e-sports industries and live streams. Writing about the establishment of *Facebook* as a company at the centre of an entire ecosystem of content generation, David Kirkpatrick (2010: 218) notes that once a platform is established, ‘it becomes maddeningly difficult to dislodge it.’ Over the past seven years, MOBAs have come to establish themselves at the centre of similarly vast ecosystems of playful and participatory content generation. It is one of the key themes throughout this thesis to critically frame how this system of relations has come into being and moreover, how MOBA developers continue to govern these ecologies.

Following established co-creative perspectives such as Banks and Humphreys (2008), this thesis views the governance of MOBAs as a hybrid set of relations where players, professional players, user-generated content producers, paratextual industries and developers

all contribute to the experience of the game. However, as Banks and Humphreys emphasise (see section 3.4.3), the hybridity of this co-creativity does not mean that power relations between actors are equal. MOBAs exist to generate revenue for their developers and as such, the governance of these games often conflicts with the aims of its many co-creative actors who may want something entirely different out of the game. For example, frequent game updates may be a way to keep a MOBA fresh to players and the spectacle of watching e-sports exciting. However, it also represents diminished gaming (and sometimes economic) capital for many players and professional players causing frequent discontent (see chapter seven). Identifying these moments of tension or crisis in the governance of MOBAs is a consistent theme throughout this thesis.

As this thesis contends, it is the collective genealogy of play and participation that is central to the fabric of MOBAs and is also reflected in these moments of tension or crisis that frequently occur in the cultures of these games. To critically frame the transition toward these commercialised power dynamics and examine the model of hybrid governance MOBAs have come to represent, three key themes can be identified that are revisited throughout this thesis. As key themes of this research, it is worth giving a succinct description of them here.

1.2.1 Outlining playful co-creativity

Playful co-creativity is a perspective of viewing the play in games as inherently co-creative. In contrast to many related notions of co-creativity that focus on specific acts of content generation (see section 2.3), such as a forum post, a strategy guide or a mod, a playfully co-creative perspective seeks to identify the productive aspects tied to play itself. For example, it could be the play of any multiplayer game that co-constitutes the experience for players, it

could be the ways playing informs ongoing design or it could be in the ways play is increasingly industrialised as statistics via various media platforms. In each of these examples economic value is being generated from playful acts that are not in themselves creating anything. Mobilising co-creative theory to identify and critically frame these moments of ambiguously productive play in MOBAs is a consistent theme throughout this thesis.

Furthermore, playful acts in MOBAs are each contributing to the affective dimensions of the game. Due to MOBAs 'fair' free-to-play model (see below), these affects have become increasingly valuable to commercial developers and it is a key theme of this thesis to explore the ways play can contribute to this economic value generation. In a playfully co-creative approach, I hope to provide an account of play that critically frames its myriad functions and affects in the political economy of online games.

1.2.2 Outlining 'fair' free-to-play

'Fair' free-to-play refers to a model of monetisation first pioneered by *LoL* in 2009 and now utilised by many online games. The model allows anyone to download the game for free and promises players that paying money is not required if you want to play the game evenly with other players. The game generates revenue through the sale of purely aesthetical in-game goods such as avatar skins. When Riot Games first introduced the model in 2009, they made a distinction against many existing free-to-play models common across social media that their game would never be 'pay-to-win' (the term pay-to-win has since become a common critique of free-to-play games across the industry, see section 5.6.2). Of course, there are still many sociological factors involved in being able to play a game such as *LoL*. Players require a suitable computer, spare physical space, free time, an internet connection and gaming capital surrounding the game in order to play. For these sociological reasons, I always approach the

term ‘fair’ critically when describing this free-to-play model as no model is ever truly fair due to real world inequalities that are impossible to separate from the virtual.

What is noteworthy about this monetisation model and why it forms a key theme throughout this thesis, is that ‘fair’ free-to-play has radically altered the design structure, lifespan and co-creative relations of online games. As detailed throughout this thesis, the optional model of monetisation that is central to MOBAs is a distinctive form of affective economy. Although players are not required to pay, games such as *LoL* generate billions of dollars year on year in revenue. Moreover, many players such as those I interviewed in chapter six have individually spent hundreds or thousands of dollars/euros/pounds on MOBAs. The reasons players give for spending this money is varied, but it can be summarised as by a view that MOBAs are not commercial games in any traditional sense. Players spend money on games such as *LoL* due to its social status in their lives and often feel compelled to reciprocate value to developers such as Riot Games for providing them with the free game. Asking what the critical implications of this lucrative affective economy are for the fields of fan, Internet and game studies is a key theme of this thesis.

1.2.3 Outlining the crisis of playful co-creativity

The crisis of playful co-creativity refers to the contradictions central to the political economy and hybrid governance of MOBAs. As mentioned above, MOBAs are an exemplary genre of playful co-creativity as they were pioneered in grassroots modding spaces of collective play and participation. As chapter two, three and five detail, many facets of grassroots residue remain crucial to MOBAs new commercial form, for example, in the emergent play, constant patches and ‘fair’ free-to-play model. However, in contrast to *DotA* the mod, the political economy of MOBAs is representative of vast economic value that is owned in uneven ways.

Paralleling political economic critiques of social media platforms that focus on the exploitation of user's interactions (see for example, Andrejevic, 2011b; Fuchs 2011; Scholz, 2013), playfully co-creative acts are now subsumed into MOBAs commercial value. The industrialisation of playful co-creativity is a key theme in this thesis as it is crucial to frame these affective economics alongside the wider landscape of the Internet. However, the crisis of playful co-creativity also refers to the problematic control of MOBAs as hybrid models of commercial governance threaten the gaming, social cultural and economic capitals of players, professional players, user generated content producers and paratextual industries.

As conduits for connective activity including *Reddit* spaces, guide writing, live streams and e-sports industries; game design decisions taken in the game have implications beyond the game itself. As chapter seven explores, game design decisions can destroy the gaming capital of players and professional players, threatening identities and livelihoods. Furthermore, the role of MOBA developers has significantly transformed due to their position of control over these connective spaces. For e-sports organisations such as professional teams especially, this centralised control can be extremely problematic as their success and potentially existence as a team can be entirely decided by games developers (Khan, 2017). Controversies of control such as these are common in MOBAs as commercial developers attempt to govern their games and related ecosystems in a way that maintains existing power relations. For the sustainability of MOBAs, however, these moments of crisis highlight how tentative the power relations in these games are and it is a key theme of this thesis to reveal any potential disruptions that are occurring in this model of hybrid governance.

1.3 Research questions

The research questions underpinning this project have been variously discussed in the past two introductory sections, but it is worth briefly explaining how I arrived at them here. As chapter four details, I utilise an online ethnographic approach throughout this thesis that relies upon my experiences in and around MOBAs, particularly *Dota 2* and *League of Legends*.

Furthermore, from chapter four onwards I utilise *subreddit* spaces for these games to bring in the experiences of players directly through utilising a participatory open discussion methodology. These ethnographic experiences have been fundamental to my understanding of MOBAs and directly underpin the key themes I previously outlined.

When starting this project in 2013, I had planned to critically explore the political economy of co-creativity in MOBAs due to their prominent influence in the games industry and relative lack of any research in game studies (at the time). As both my ethnography and the growth of this genre developed, some of my research aims extended. Throughout my research, MOBAs grew in popularity at a rapid rate and they played a significant role in the growth of live streaming and e-sports (see section 5.5.2). With these developments, I witnessed a connective economy of play developing with numerous controversies surrounding the governance of these ecosystems. Although my fundamental research question remained focused on the political economy of co-creativity in MOBAs, I frequently found myself reflecting on the expansive parameters of playful governance these games now encompass. Moreover, through my discussions with players and observations of *subreddit* spaces it was clear that players possessed an affective connection to MOBAs that was continuously nourished by the playful and paratextual ecologies of these games. It was here that I began to develop a playfully co-creative perspective that could bring together many of

these themes and ask critical questions surrounding the models of affective economics and hybrid governance I witnessed developing.

Although I did not arrive at all these research questions initially or in a linear way, the guiding lines of inquiry for this research can be summarised as the following:

- What is playful co-creativity? Why is it distinctive? How did it develop in collectivised grassroots *DotA* spaces?
- What pieces of grassroots residue remain fundamental to MOBAs commercially hybrid structure?
- How do acts of playful co-creativity enable affective economics and commercial forms of hybrid governance?
- Why is the commercial economy of playful co-creativity problematic from a critical political economic perspective?
- What moments of crisis exist in MOBAs to suggest that the grassroots genealogy of playful co-creativity in this genre is difficult to commercially maintain?

In each of these questions overlapping themes can be identified that this research aims to provide ethnographic insight into.

1.4 Aims and objectives

As mentioned above, one of my initial aims in this research was to provide a critical account of MOBAs political economy in a way that had not yet been provided in game studies.

Indeed, when I began this research there was no significant peer reviewed research regarding MOBAs at all despite them representing one of the most played genres in the world. As expected, this gap has been filled in recent years by a variety of original and critical

interventions. Throughout this thesis I detail many of the approaches that now surround MOBAs and I hope this research further complements lines of inquiry that have been established surrounding this genre. At present however, there is no comprehensive history or detailed critical analysis of MOBAs including *DotA*'s modding origins. One of my aims in writing this thesis in a linear way that starts off discussing the origins of the genre in *Warcraft III* custom games (see chapter two) is to provide an account of this important period in the genre's development. Critically analysing how MOBAs developed from mods, why that period of collectively playful production is crucial to the genres structure and identifying what pieces of grassroots residue still exist in the genre is an important aim in this research. Although the questions guiding this thesis are critically focused on the present political economy of MOBAs, I hope this longer account of playful co-creativity starting off from *Warcraft III* custom games justifies why MOBAs are a crucial site of study in the fields of game, fan and Internet studies.

The fields of game, fan and Internet studies are the most frequently discussed areas of research in this thesis and it is my aim to position the contributions of this work primarily in those fields. In game studies, as already mentioned, MOBAs, e-sports and live streams are all growing areas of research this work fits directly into. In a more theoretical context though, this research also draws from and extends many relevant game studies approaches. As expanded on in section 2.3, existing accounts of co-creativity underpin my understanding of playful co-creativity and it is a primary objective of this research to extend understandings of what can be considered co-creative. In doing so, I also draw on several well-established discussions in game studies regarding the productivity that can be tied to play (see section 2.3.1). It is an aim of this research to provide an ethnographically grounded account of MOBAs that fits into the field of literature surrounding playful productivity. Moreover, I

hope the playfully co-creative approach of this thesis opens up new directions for considering the role of play in affective economics and hybrid models of governance.

In the affective economies of MOBAs explored throughout this thesis, I utilise many related approaches from fan and Internet studies (see section 3.4.4 – 3.4.6). For many fan studies scholars, exploring the intimate relations that exist between fans and producers is a crucial line of inquiry for critically grasping new models of media production. Similar to accounts of co-creative relations, fan studies scholars such as Jenkins (2006a), Scott (2008) and Hills (2015) explore the way fan relations can define the experience, economics and production of various media forms. In MOBAs, these relations between fans/players and developers are equally fundamental and in the ‘fair’ F2P model of affective economics described in this thesis, an important example of the way these relations are transforming is explored. In contrast to many similar models of fan participation that are often focused on film or television examples, games such as MOBAs represent an ongoing media experience that is worth billions of dollars year on year. It is my aim to apply the findings from fan studies to MOBAs and explore the ways affective economies and hybrid forms of governance are crucial to understanding the experience of these games.

In a related scope, I also aim to frame the yield of this research in the field of Internet studies. As a field occupied with understanding the operations of giant social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Youtube* or *Twitter*, the scale of participatory activities described in Internet studies is immense. In MOBAs, a similarly vast scale of interactions exists and is equally lucrative to commercial developers such as Riot Games and Valve Corporation. Drawing parallels between the way affective models of monetisation operate on platforms such as *Facebook* with that of a game such as *LoL* is an aim of this research. In the research of scholars such as van Dijck (2013), Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012), Andrejevic (2008) and Jarrett (2016b) the valuation process of social media is given critical attention. Exploring the

valuation process that similarly non-monetary modes of play (or use-values) are exposed to in order to become economic capital (or exchange-values) for MOBA developers is an important finding this research aims to establish.

Furthermore, by making parallels between the monetisation of these social media platforms and MOBAs I am making explicit comparisons between the way these platforms are governed. It is an aim of this research to understand MOBAs as platforms for wider participatory and paratextual activity. As chapter five explores, the system of relations encompassed by MOBAs is vast and interrelated. However, it is one that MOBA developers sit at the centre of and unevenly monetise. Critically framing the significance of MOBAs operating as platforms similar to social media in their affective economics, connective relations and hybrid governance is an important objective of this research. As chapter seven explores, these relations are increasingly representative of the ambiguous position now occupied by games developers as governors of vast paratextual ecosystems such as e-sports or live streams. For these growing industries, uneven relations to a games developer can cause moments of crisis (Khan, 2017). It is these moments of crisis I aim to outline and critically explore. As scholars, unions, national and international law makers become increasingly aware of these uneven relations emanating from the control of games such as MOBAs, it is likely that the importance of grasping these hybrid relations will increase.

1.5 Format of this thesis

The second chapter outlines the context of *Warcraft III* custom games that MOBAs emerged from as well as my own relationship to this space as a researcher and former player / co-creator. In discussing the way *Warcraft III* custom games invited and relied upon emergent play to develop their incipient hybrid genres, this chapter posits that emergent play always

carries the potential to become productive. This productive capacity of play (especially online play) is central to a conceptualisation of playful co-creativity and as this chapter details, it is this playful mode of agency that can be understood alongside participatory culture.

The third chapter expands upon the conceptualisation of playful co-creativity through detailing several useful approaches and frameworks that can inform this ambiguous mode of productivity. These approaches include framing games and their play as assemblages, cybernetic systems/ecologies, connective ecologies, participatory cultures, and as extensions of the political/affective economy of the Internet. Each of these approaches informs a critical understanding of playful co-creativity and each approach is revisited throughout this thesis in relation to MOBAs. As well as reviewing this body of literature, the third chapter also seeks to use examples from *Warcraft III* custom games such as *DotA Allstars* as a way to further illuminate the context of MOBAs origins. Describing in a linear way, how MOBAs developed and why they are distinctive as a genre of bottom-up and top-down or non-commercial and commercial agencies is the aim here. The third chapter ends at the arrival of the 2009 moment when *League of Legends* was released and the term MOBA was introduced.

In chapter four, the methodological approach of this project is expanded on by outlining a multi-sited or connective approach to studying MOBAs. Building on the context of MOBAs connective power relations described in the past chapters, the methodological challenges of grasping a connective game space are explored here. Through outlining an online ethnographic approach towards the MOBA genre that is continued in subsequent chapters of this thesis, this chapter describes how the platform *Reddit* can be utilised as a conduit for understanding the MOBAs *League of Legends* and *Dota 2*. This methodological approach is carried forward in the subsequent three chapters.

The fifth chapter follows the linear progression of MOBAs development through establishing a critical understanding of the word MOBA and its symbolic representation as a network of commercially hybrid relations. Utilising Michel Foucault's notion of a 'dispositif', this chapter explores the way MOBA is not a neutral term and its onset is representative of a new normalisation of playful, cultural and economic control. This chapter identifies three categories that are essential to understanding how the dispositif of MOBAs operate and why the genre has become so popular. They are, the bottom-up mode of playful co-creativity, the vast network of paratextual actors and the 'fair' model of free to play. Introducing a paratextual and gift economy perspective that is also essential to the subsequent chapters, the aim of this chapter is to outline what a MOBA encompasses, how they function, why they have become so popular and crucially, how they follow a rich genealogy of play and participation.

In chapter six, the notion of affect is further explored with the aim of understanding the precise feelings of players who spend money on *League of Legends*. Up until this point, affect and affective / gift economies are only described theoretically. However, as it emerged in the fifth chapter, it is essential to understand the reciprocal way that monetisation in this genre operates as it is responsible for the billions of dollars developers such as Riot Games generate every year. Moreover, it is this model of monetisation that is tied to the playful co-creativity and connective power dynamics of the genre. In representing the qualitative views of players, several reasons and consistent themes are detailed describing what players value in this genre and why in some instances, players spend so much on a single game over unusually long periods of time.

In the seventh chapter, many of the playfully co-creative themes of the project are brought together in a critical exploration of Valve Corporation's and Riot Games' approaches to governing their playful ecologies. The notion of ecology and ecosystem is essential here as

MOBA developers often use the same terminology to describe their activities in a neutral way. Understanding ecosystems critically, this chapter challenges the perspective that MOBA developers are interested purely in the ‘wellbeing’ of their ecosystem and highlights several intricate instances of play and moments of discontent that have arisen. Various views from players, professional players and team owners are utilised that highlight the potential for crisis to arise in this genre as top-down decisions are made that affect tens of millions of players gaming capital, as well as professional players careers. These examples point towards avenues for future research and exemplify the ever-expanding sites of playful, cultural and economic control that MOBA developers have come to encompass.

2. Introducing playful co-creativity

2.1 The co-creation behind a custom game tab

When I and a group of friends accidentally stumbled across a custom games tab in *Warcraft III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2002) in 2005 we had little idea how influential these games would be to us and more profoundly, the influence we would have upon them. In 2005, I was in my mid-teens and played games frequently with a group of friends that I had met through both in-game and out of game connections. Many different games would capture our imagination and attention during this time ranging from browser-based strategy games, to massively multiplayer online role-playing games, to competitive team-based games to sandbox games with open modding access. If a game or platform presented a means of playing together socially, along with an opportunity to be creative through modding, theorycrafting, or various other modes of emergent play, then it would likely garner our interest. *Warcraft III* was a game that fulfilled all of these requisites. Establishing itself as an innovative hybrid of the real-time strategy (RTS) and role-playing game (RPG) genres, *Warcraft III* presented us with a new scope for playful experimentation. In addition to *Warcraft III*'s flourishing online community complete with its own competitive league of players, *Warcraft III* contained a 'world editor' tool that afforded its players a relatively low barrier to entry into generative 'mod' or 'map' creation. It was these player-generated maps that were accessible via the custom games tab we accidentally stumbled across. For a group of players in their mid-teens, it would be the space behind this small unassuming custom games tab that would come to represent a uniquely boundless digital playground.

The enclosed, competitive, duration-based conventions borrowed from the RTS genre and the more character-orientated, identity-based, customisable conventions borrowed from the RPG

genre converged in a myriad of ways through the custom game space. Incipient hybrid genres such as ‘Dotas’, ‘Hero Arenas’, ‘Enfos’, ‘Tower Defences’, ‘Footmen’, ‘Werewolf’, ‘Sheep Tags’, ‘Maze Runs’ and many more that remain formally unnamed flourished during this time. Although similar custom games could be found in other popular online RTS games such as *Starcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998) or *Age of Empires 2* (Ensemble Studios, 1999), the potential for generic hybridity that the *Warcraft III* platform afforded radically widened the potential for the generation of new genres.

In contrast to established RTS games typified by early titles such as *Command & Conquer* (Westwood Studios, 1995) or *Total Annihilation* (Cavedog Entertainment, 1997) that were focused around the simultaneous control of many different in-game avatars, or ‘units’, *Warcraft III* custom games experimented with the potential inherent *within* the diverse functionalities of those units. Refocusing the emphasis away from the control of many different units and the armies they comprised, *Warcraft III* custom games were smaller in terms of scope of control over multiple units, but exponentially denser in terms of the customisation afforded to individual units. It was this intervention of RPG conventions into the RTS genre that defined the space behind the custom games tab as one with new generic possibilities and it was this new generic potential that would be explored through the significant agency of the collective playing and modding community we were a part of.

Free from the constraints of RTS that typically prescribed bland characteristics upon in-game structures or avatars (1), many new branches of experimental play emerged from this bottom-up activity in what might be called ‘digital folk genres’. Genres that combine the reciprocal folk cultural practices of grassroots cultures with the digitally enabled technological capacities associated with mass culture. It is through this intersection that these genres were

continually developed by the circulation of bottom-up actions that carry the potential to spread throughout the custom game space and by extension, the wider ecology of the Internet.

These convergent dynamics were influentially described in 2006 by Henry Jenkins as a coming together of ‘media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence’. A combination of social and technological agencies that could, Jenkins (2006a: 2) argued, redefine both the form of media as well as its surrounding political economy. As new modes of collectively enabled creativity emerge from participatory cultures reminiscent of the values of pre-commercial folk cultures, the question for Jenkins in 2006 and one that is revisited throughout this thesis, is has this creative and emancipatory potential been realised? Although this question of participatory potential has been significantly reframed in the space of time since 2006 as Jenkins (2013: 272) readily admits, and this thesis explores in more detail in subsequent sections; it is worth remembering the convergent potential of online media and their participatory cultures as a critical compass moving forward here.

The *Warcraft III* custom game culture is noteworthy as an instance of what Jenkins would call in 2006, the bottom-up creativity of participants exercised through an instance of convergence culture. For Jenkins (2006a: 18), the site of convergence culture was defined by the relationship between ‘both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process’. More specifically, top-down actors can be identified as representing a professional, centralised and commercially orientated mode of agency that is often reliant upon providing the tools or platform for participants to use. Depending upon the particular example or perspective, these top-down actors are opposed or complemented by the more amateur, collectively organised, non-monetary and heterogeneous agencies typical of bottom-up actors. These boundaries are not always clear-cut as divisions between

professional and amateur or commercial and non-monetary are frequently blurred, especially in online games.

Throughout this thesis, these notions of ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ are utilised as a practical way to grasp various convergent agencies, however critical consideration for how these categories intertwine and obscure particular power dynamics is never far removed. In the *Warcraft III* custom game culture under consideration here, a palpable example of convergent activity existed that is similar to many broader examples of modding cultures where relations between top-down and bottom-up agencies are intertwined (see for example, Kücklich, 2005; Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 136; Nieborg and van der Graaf, 2008; Postigo, 2010). It is worth briefly recounting why mods more generally are an influential example of convergent activity here, as *Warcraft III* custom games offer a distinct example of a modding and playing culture that requires careful consideration when approaching the significance of its genres.

For many modding cultures such as the influential *Counter-strike* (1999) that is mentioned in all of the sources above, the original developers of the platform game will remain actively involved in monitoring, assisting and potentially monetising the productive activities of modders. In the example of *Counter-strike*, the original commercial developer of the platform game *Half-Life* (1998) was Valve Corporation who is renowned as a pioneer of close-knit convergent relations. As the bottom-up development of *Counter-strike* in 1999 became more pronounced as its own distinct variation of the first-person shooter genre it was derived from, its playing community grew rapidly. Valve Corporation quickly noticed this newly popular grassroots sub-genre as a commercial opportunity and subsequently, they recruited *Counter-strike*'s modders, acquired its intellectual property and rereleased the game commercially. *Counter-strike* would eventually become more popular than its platform game *Half-Life* and remains one of the most influential first-person shooter games in existence. As an example of

convergence culture, instances of modding such as *Counter-strike* exemplify the creative and political economic dynamics at play when top-down and bottom-up agencies converge.

Throughout the games industry, similar examples of convergent activity can be found. Many of the most popular genres, taken for granted in-game aesthetics, mechanics or interfaces, as well as the professionals themselves who are employed to make games are often found foremost in bottom-up spaces of participation and play such as modding cultures. Game studies literature often refers to these convergent dynamics as the ‘co-creative’ status of videogames, a term that signals the ubiquity of these back and forth relations. Like the critical mappings of convergence culture outlined above, co-creative perspectives are concerned with similar questions of bottom-up involvement in the creative and political economic structures of games (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 123; Banks, 2013). In later sections, I return to the importance of convergent and co-creative perspectives with regards to their political economy. However, in this introductory chapter it is crucial to define my own understanding of what convergent co-creativity encompasses for the online games analysed in this thesis. This co-creative definition starts with the curious autonomy of bottom-up practices found in *Warcraft III* custom game genres.

In contrast to many other mods or examples of convergence culture such as *Counter-Strike*, the developers of *Warcraft III*, Blizzard Entertainment, remained relatively absent from explicitly monetising or exerting influence over the custom game space (see chapter 3.2.7). Although Blizzard Entertainment would benefit from the additional popularity custom games afforded their platform game *Warcraft III*, they remained absent from the processes of grassroots online development taking place here. For the development of these custom games, this relative autonomy from top-down interventions would be significant in pioneering a participatory and playful mode of bottom-up development that would shape

these genres in a profoundly influential way. The onset of these custom games, or digital folk genres, points towards an early digital example of a participatory agency in the collective role of online play that requires close attention here.

Through players such as ourselves playing with custom games and doing so in relation to custom game modders who continually re-iterated new versions of these games, the experiences of players innovating with new strategies or combinations was aggregated into the constantly changing co-creative structure of these genres. It is with consideration for the role of online play in these convergent dynamics that this project takes its impetus as the fields of Games, Fan and Internet studies all overlap when considering the multifaceted role of online play here. In the period of 2003 – 2009, hundreds of thousands of players would contribute towards the circulation of iterative game design in the playground of *Warcraft III* custom game spaces (2). For the object of this thesis that originally emerged as an influential genre co-created through the role of online play in custom game spaces, it is crucial to contextualise this moment of collectively playful creation through delving into the specificities of what playing in a custom game entailed. Or, to return to the notion of a digital folk genre, why these genres could have *only* been pioneered through a collectively enabled mode of agentive bottom-up play.

2.2 Collectively enabling the complexity of custom game genres

The Custom Map creators, unconcerned by commercial constraints, pushed the boundaries of generic hybridity and in doing so, opened up many raw potentialities for play that were by no means known in their creation. In many of these games, individual player-controlled structures or avatars represented specific rules or variables that were designed to be

innovative and often risky mechanics in the game. To take an example of one now popular genre pioneered in this space known as ‘Tower Defences’, exemplified by the custom game *Shango TD*, it becomes clear how problematically complex these games quickly become.

In *Shango TD*, many different player-constructed towers represented different rules or variables that could be combined in pursuing the object of the game; which was to build elaborate mazes of towers from farm-themed structures to defeat incoming waves of automated enemies. As these different structures come together, their independent properties combine to create what Jesper Juul would call a ‘game of emergence’ (Juul, 2002: 323). Adapting the term ‘emergence’ from the field of complexity studies, Juul describes emergence in games as ‘simple rules combining, leading to variation’ and it is this depth of playful variables that custom games represented to an often-problematic extent. From different in-game variations such as the towers of *Shango TD*, a plethora of strategies and modes of playful expression emerged in custom game genres. However, this same multiplicity made these games problematically unstable.



Figure 1. The Warcraft III Tower Defence custom game, *Shango TD*.

For example, in *Shango TD* one tower fired sheep that stunned incoming enemies momentarily in their tracks. In itself, the ability to stop enemies momentarily with a weapon is a relatively minor mechanic in the game. In combination with the entirety of the games minor mechanics, however, it could prove problematic. If another player constructed tower fires dogs and when these dogs hit the incoming enemies they teleport the enemy backwards a few steps, what happens when the dog weapon is combined with the sheep one? The answer could be, and often was, something far too potent for the game to remain ‘balanced’. In this case, everyone playing *Shango TD* would build dogs and sheep and incoming waves would never move forward; ultimately breaking the game and unhinging its appeal to players seeking a balanced game.

The concept of a ‘balanced game’ is important here and it refers to the notion that all components of a game should be equally viable to players with every interrelation of

variability in a game accounted for to ensure a ‘balanced’ play space. For many players both amateur and professional, what defines in-game balance is a subject of extensive and continuous debate that is explored throughout this thesis (particularly in chapter 3.2.4). On its surface, designing for balance in a game can seem straightforward and indeed, for many games or isolated mechanics such as the *Shango TD* combination mentioned above; re-balancing a game to address problematic emergent variables that present themselves through play is achievable. As with any complex informational, biological or societal systems however, the pursuit of an ideal balance between all variables becomes exponentially more difficult to achieve the more interrelating variables are contained within a system or ecology.

In Mark Taylor’s (2001: 138) extensive description of the histories and implications of complexity in various disciplines (for example, systems theory, cybernetics, biology, semiotics), he notes a similarly interrelational definition of the term when he states that:

Complexity, then, is formed by interweaving, interconnecting, and folding together different parts, elements, or components. Complexity not only harbours multiple implications but is actually an intricate process; complication implicates and implications complicate. (Taylor, 2001: 138)

For Taylor, who is interested in defining complexity alongside a general ‘theory of systems’ (140), this definition emphasises the role of different variables within a system and importantly, how those variables interconnect to generate, organise and renew emergent potentials. As ‘complication implicates and implications complicate’ the system in question changes as emergent combinations generate new potentials and these new potentials perpetuate a continuous development.

Games can be read as similarly interrelational systems where the rules or variables created by a designer provide unknown potentials that can only be complicated by the role of play. To return to Juul’s notion of a ‘game of emergence’ as differentiated from a ‘game of

progression’, the latter being a more structured ‘on a rail’ narrative experience evocative of a book or film, Juul argues that ‘the primordial game structure’ is one of emergence. That is, following Taylor’s description of emergence above, as a system that can be replayed many times and continuously yield new interactions due to the variability of a games rules and the agency of players in realising and renewing those rules. Custom games such as *Shango TD* epitomised a ‘game of emergence’ as the inherently varied and unbalanced state of their rule-bound structure could only be viably realised through the emergent agency of players interacting in these games.

2.2.1 Emergence and complexity: play and games

For various scholars of game design (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Sweetser, 2008) and game studies (Bogost, 2006: 144; Pearce, 2009), defining games as a complex space of emergent possibility has been an influential perspective. The specificities of these perspectives are returned to throughout this chapter, however it is important to note here how closely accounts of games and play overlap with those of complexity and emergence. In 1958, Roger Caillois noted this complex depth to seemingly repetitive game structures when he stated that,

It is common knowledge that what to begin with seems to be a situation susceptible to indefinite repetition turns out to be capable of producing ever new combinations.
(Caillois, 1958: 30)

As Caillios notes here, even in closed rule systems that encourage a competitive or ‘agon’ mode of play and are therefore strict in their ludic boundaries such as Chess, Go or Bridge, there is an almost ‘indefinite’ depth of playful variation. The emergence of new play styles or strategies represents a development of the system by players who play these games as

rule sets that are far more open to exploration than their seemingly rigid form might suggest. Although the goal of a game does not change through the actions of players, the means of accomplishing that end goal represents a vast space for playful emergence that is always in motion. For pre-digital games such as those Caillois was concerned with, the development of ludic systems was a gradual process due to the relatively unchanged rules of the long-standing games (3). Despite the relatively stagnant status of the rules in these games however, play styles have shifted significantly over time as the means of communication between players has developed (through printing presses, newspapers, the Internet, etc) and more players interact with what the rules of the system make possible. In Chess for example, Penny Sweetser (2008: 82) notes how ‘Chess strategies have evolved and become more sophisticated over time, so that a Chess master of the last century would be unlikely to beat a Chess master of this century’. What has changed here is not the rules of the game, but the intricate complexity *between* those rules as they interrelate through play.

The (scope for) movement in and of the play space in this sense has always been present for any ludic game from Chess to Go and it is in this context that Caillois’ original statement was made. Similar to Mark Taylor’s definition of complexity outlined previously, Caillois’ position towards games producing ‘ever new combinations’ shares ground with theorists of complexity and emergence (Holland, 1998). Both of these approaches see the game, system or ecology in question as inherently malleable and unpredictable in how complexity might develop. Emergence researcher Jaegwon Kim (2008: 127) points out that it is exactly this transcendent potential of the constituent parts in a system to organise ‘unpredictably’ that defines emergence and sets it apart from merely ‘resultant’. What defines ‘unpredictability’ in an emergent system is important to identify here, as it was the unpredictability latent between the rules of *Warcraft III* custom games that was explored through the playful actions of players such as myself. So exactly what does ‘unpredictable’ emergence imply in

the context of a ludic system?

For researchers of emergent systems more widely, unpredictability is frequently defined as the potential of a system to be computationally simulated (Bedau, 2008: 163). In relatively simple systems such as a game of Noughts and Crosses, it is possible to computationally simulate every potential combination. However, in more expansive sets of rules such as the games Caillois describes or to a greater extent, the online games under consideration here, the emergent potential of a system is impossible to fully simulate in any practical way.

Many researchers of emergent systems use the term ‘in principle’ here when describing the philosophical potential of a hypothetical computer with near endless computational power to simulate a system (Bedau, 2008). However, for my own set of research questions concerned with grasping the bottom-up agency of emergent play in online games, the idea of computational simulation has a more explicitly practical relevance here. ‘In principle’, it may be possible to simulate every ludic combination or strategy that is possible in a digital game such as *Shango TD*, however in practice, no computer is currently capable of this.

Although there is much excitement and discussion surrounding current developments in self-learning AI as evidenced by breakthrough wins in 2017 against top Go and 1v1 *Dota 2* professional players (Haridy, 2017), the full potential of every variation in these games remains unknown. New models of Google’s ‘AlphaGo’ AI continue to raise the level of play in Go to new heights and Open AI’s 1v1 *Dota 2* AI remains far from being able to compete against human players at the standard (and much more complex) 5v5 game.

Moreover, these developments in AI represent the pinnacle of recent breakthroughs in computational play and are not widely available in digital games, much less so in the mid-2000’s period when *Warcraft III* custom games were developing. Alternatively, what was and is available to explore these vastly unpredictable spaces of ludic emergence are humans

at play. Unlike a computer simulation, the agency provided by humans at play introduces a curious set of intuitively lived sensibilities to a ludic system that are constitutively bottom-up and unable to be simulated through the capacity of a computer alone.

Describing the play of competitive e-sports games, T.L. Taylor (2012: 58) notes precisely this unpredictability inherent between the rules of games when she states that ‘algorithmic rules will only ever provide us with the barest outline of potential, not actualised play.’ For Taylor, who is similarly interested in describing the development of competitive play practices in e-sports games, she notes how the social and situated (Suchman, 1987) sensibilities of humans at play differs substantially to that of a computer. When playing, regulating, or balancing a game, these lived sensibilities are crucial as Taylor (2012: 58) notes.

Until computers are able to act as sophisticated *social* machines, ones that understand situated action and participate in shared ethical schemas, they will never fulfill the idealised scenario in which the computer fully takes over the regulation and operationalisation of play.

As noted later in this chapter, the *Warcraft III* custom games described here are a prelude to some of the most popular e-sports games and in the agency that balanced these initial genres, a very similar set of lived sensibilities to the ones Taylor describes were essential. Although it is important to note, as Taylor does, that the role of technology is imbricated throughout these lived sensibilities (the notion of ‘human’ is problematic in itself, as noted in chapter 3.1), there is a salient point here regarding the agency of human play.

The unpredictability inherent to the varied rule sets of *Warcraft III* custom games required the actions of humans at play to explore the varied spaces between the rules of these games. Without that bottom-up exploration, games such as *Shango TD* or *DotA* would have remained unexplored, unbalanced, full of glitches and ultimately, unknown as distinct

game genres. It is this inherently bottom-up and unpredictable experience of play that Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 165) suggest is essential to complementing the complexity latent in the rules of any game. However, in computer games specifically, that are constitutively algorithmic and often provide a space for emergent play that exceeds the simulational capacity of any computer, the coming together of human and nonhuman is especially important for developing the potential of these games.

Miguel Sicart (2014: 99) points out that it is no surprise that what many label ‘the ludic century’ is taking place in the era of computing as ‘computation and play share some ontological traits’. In the unpredictable properties inherent to any varied system and the unpredictable agency of play, these overlapping ontological traits are palpable. The ontological implications of this relationship between the human and nonhuman is a frequent topic in game studies and one that is returned to more substantially next chapter. Similar to wider notions of the sociotechnical that are frequently employed in science and technology studies to describe the malleability of technology as always open to change from social actors (see for example, Bijker, 1995; Latour, 2005); games display similar change emerging from their play. This change can be immaterial as in the case of Chess or Go where the tangible change takes place in understanding the potential of the rules and in the visible (at least to expert players) variations of play. However, in online games such as the custom games described here that are from their inception, mods of another game, the role of playful emergence can take a material form as the games are constantly re-iterated. The wider online context of gaming is crucial to understanding the development and significance of these genres here and more specifically, why emergent play took on a productive role.

2.2.2 Emergent online play

Individual custom games such as *Shango TD* typically contained hundreds of mechanics similar to the example mentioned above and this meant there was an emergent complexity that was impossible for any single custom map creator to fully comprehend through merely making the game. In relation to the collective actions of a vast online playing culture however, the problematically unbalanced complexity typical of custom games could be harnessed by modders and players through continuously re-iterating these games in relation to the latest developments taking place in online play spaces. This combined role of players and modders interacting in grassroots spaces was crucial to co-creating the viability and balance of these games, ultimately stabilising them into recognisable new hybrid genres. An important difference between non-digital and digital games can be identified here as custom games differed significantly from non-digital games in the frenetic pace of their emergent change and constantly moving depth of complexity.

In Celia Pearce's (2009: 37) exploration of socially emergent practices in the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* (Cyan Worlds, 2003), she notes with reference to the work of biological complexity researcher Yaneeer Bar-Yam (1997), how the bottom-up role of players in online games has an accelerated rate of emergence in virtual systems. Due to a number of virtual factors including the networked capacity of players, their diverse backgrounds, and the accelerated pace of tasks in a digital game resulting from immediate feedback loops; Pearce asserts that online games are an ideal environment for emergence to take place. Although the ludic interactions of *Warcraft III* custom games differ from the forms of social emergence Pearce is largely concerned with, the ludic emergence of custom games were subject to the same online conditions of accelerated emergence.

Players interacted with these games collectively and play styles spread throughout the play and paratextual spaces of these games rapidly. I am using the term ‘paratext’ as a way of referring to any text or space outside of the game that in some way influences or affects the game (a more detailed analysis of paratexts is given in chapter 5.5.1). If an emergent strategy or combination was considered too potent or ‘broken’, as players would often name these instances, then these emergent combinations would quickly spread throughout the networked paratexts of these games. After becoming known to the culture at large, the status of these emergent modes of play could be altered or removed from the structure of a game by modders in what are referred to as ‘updates’ or ‘patches’. It is with this interrelational theme both at the micro-level of playing in an online game and more macro-level where online games interact in a wider ecology of the Internet that this thesis critically frames online games. In *Warcraft III* custom games, it was precisely this relationship between the collective agency exerted from the bottom-up by players and the creative agency of modders situated in wider paratextual spaces that these genres were defined by. The details of this co-creative relationship are further explored in the subsequent chapter, however, it is noteworthy here to emphasise the importance of this playful emergence when framing these custom games as digital folk genres.

As I argued in the opening section, these games could *only* have been co-created in this way. That is, through collectively aggregating the generative agency that online play possesses in a participatory model of iterative game design. It is through the lived experiences of players such as myself that the raw variability of these games could be complexly realised as innovative, viable new genres. Crucially, it is these traits of bottom-up generativity and collectivity that remain paradoxically central to the play of many commercially governed online games such as MOBAs as later chapters explore.

2.3 Playful co-creativity

It is with the theme of playful bottom-up agencies and their significance in the constantly changing structures of online games that I wish to introduce the term ‘playful co-creativity’ here, as it will be referred to throughout this thesis. The term co-creativity has been widely utilised in game studies as a way of signalling what John Banks (2012: 1) terms, ‘the non-trivial’ role of consumers in ‘the design, development, production, marketing and distribution of a new or existing product’. For Banks (17), co-creativity is a term closely related to notions of ‘convergence’ (Jenkins, 2006) or ‘produsage’ (Bruns, 2009) that describe similarly dynamic relations of production between professional media producers and (often amateur) consumers. However, whereas notions of convergence or produsage are more general in their applicability across the digital landscape, Banks’ conception of co-creativity is rooted in ethnographic fieldwork from games development studios, particularly Auron responsible for *Trainz* (2001). Describing in rich detail, the ways players and developers ‘co-evolve’ the experience of *Trainz* through forum posts, in-game editing tools and modding projects, Banks describes *Trainz* as a site of hybrid relations that does not altogether privilege any one actor. A crucial detail for Banks here is that every game represents a unique set of relations and that he hopes ‘productive tensions will remain among the empirical detail of ethnographic case studies’ (21). In the conception of playful co-creativity posited here and throughout this thesis, it is my aim to provide one such case study that delves into the productive tensions that are rife in a genre such as MOBAs.

Playful co-creativity can be understood as analogous to co-creative or convergent approaches that consider the relation between top-down and bottom-up actors as integral to the networked becoming of many online media forms. However, whereas co-creativity typically refers to specific instances of content generation from participants, such as modding (Morris, 2003; Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Banks, 2013), or playful in-game activities with directly

productive consequences, such as building in-game environments in *LittleBigPlanet* or *Minecraft* (Rafalow and Salen, 2014; Abend and Beil, 2015; Koutsouras et al, 2016), my usage of the term ‘playful co-creativity’ seeks to widen the scope for what can be considered playfully productive.

As the brief outline of custom game genres in the previous sections suggests, playing in these games was essential to their development and these playful actions were not explicitly producing anything. They were acts of emergent play, creative in their agency to complicate the way games are played and consequently, given productive game design implications through their interrelation in networks of online players and modders. It is with this wider scope for considering the nascent elements of play that define online games or as is evident here, entire genres, that I utilise the term playful co-creativity.

Although the scope for this approach may seem vast, there are many specific instances of playful co-creativity that can be identified. For example, throughout this thesis the play of *Warcraft III* custom games, the play of MOBAs, live streamed play and the interrelation of MOBA play in big data sets are all explored. Each of these playful interactions represents an ambiguous site of playful productivity, where the bottom-up role of players is essential to the co-creative structure of the games despite players themselves not directly producing anything.

In a discussion of types of co-creativity in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), Patrick Prax (2015: 5) recently made the assertion that for co-creation to take place, ‘a distinct activity other than play’ needs to happen. For Prax, play is a deeply creative act, however, co-creation cannot involve merely the creative act of playing alone as that would weaken the usage of the term and its critical impact in discussions of production and democratic potentials. In the approach described here, I would concur that isolated play on its own is not constitutive of co-creativity. However, the extent that online play is ever isolated

is arguable, especially in the examples utilised throughout this thesis. The playfully co-creative approach described here asserts that all online play has the potential to become co-creative as playing online forms consequential collective agency, it is used in an integral way to inform game design processes, it is recorded in ever more explicit (streams, videos) and implicit (big data sets) ways and ultimately, it is subsumed into the economic valuations of games and their paratexts.

In later chapters I explore these interrelations through the MOBA genre and its affective economies of monetisation that are sustained through these playful modes of co-creativity. What is evident in these influential affective economies and the playful modes of co-creativity that imbricate them, is how closely related these developments are with much wider trends across the Internet. Online play, the same as many other acts of online sociality, is now subject to what many Internet scholars have variously described as a process of commodification whereby previously communal and ephemeral experiences are commodified and made productive (Terranova, 2000; Andrejevic, 2011b; Fuchs 2011; Scholz, 2013). These overlaps between playful and political economies are further explored in the next chapter, particularly in section 3.4. However, it is worth briefly mentioning the significance of these online contexts when framing the ambiguous state of productivity at stake in playful co-creativity, as these wider contexts inform how this term will be deployed throughout this thesis.

2.3.1 Playfully productive tensions

The tensions between play and productivity have been well noted by scholars of online games through refuting the influential positions of Johan Huizinga (1949) and Roger Caillois (1958). Both Huizinga and Caillois wrote from a humanist perspective and described play as an essential factor in human civilisation and culture, however it was one that existed ‘outside

“ordinary” life’. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it.’ (Huizinga, 1949: 13) Although it is easy to criticise this position in the context of online play and its all-encompassing political economy of bottom-up economic valorisation, connotations of unproductivity have nonetheless followed notions of play. For scholars of online games in particular, an unproductive view of playful activities has been untenable. As Julian Dibbell put it when writing about ‘gold farming’ practices in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004 – present),

At its peripheries and at its core, the world’s economy appears to be waking up to the interesting fact that play can be productive – and that digital environments can be especially effective in channeling play toward productivity. (Dibbell, 2008: 85)

For many other scholars of online games, this position is one that is shared (to name a few; Humphreys, 2005; Pearce, 2006: 141; Sotamaa, 2007; Dibbell, 2008; Wirman, 2009; Glas, 2010: 31; Kerr, 2011). Sal Humphreys (2005: 41), for example, described the state of the MMORPG *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment, 1999 - present) as inherently ‘emergent, mutable, and ongoing’; continuously in a state of productive flux as ‘social aspects of the game are structural and textual.’

For scholars of online games such as Humphreys, play is viewed similarly to participatory culture in its agency to speak to relational actors through explicit acts of playful productivity such as modding or in-game content creation. Although many of the sources mentioned above largely describe a direct form of productivity that differs from the one I am referring to here, there is a broader assertion shared in this literature that ‘the boundaries between play and production, between work and leisure, and between media consumption and media production are increasingly blurring.’ (Pearce, 2006: 18) It is within these increasingly blurred lines of productivity that the playful co-creativity I am describing here, that is exemplified in *Warcraft III* custom games and their eventual development as the MOBA genre, must be framed.

In Axel Bruns (2009: 1) influential critique of the word ‘production’, he rejects the term ‘production’ as too industrial and linear in its connotations. For Bruns, the variety of dispersed and collectivised activities that constitute many online media forms such as *Wikipedia* or the activities of an online game are an amalgamation of both production and usage; what Bruns terms ‘produsage’. Bruns describes produsage as the moment when:

Users who participate in the development of open source software, in the collaborative extension and editing of *Wikipedia*, in the communal world-building of *Second Life*, or processes of massively parallelised and decentralised creativity and innovation in myriads of enthusiasts communities do no longer produce content, ideas, and knowledge in a way that resembles traditional, industrial modes of production; the outcomes of their work similarly retain only few of the features of conventional products, even though frequently they are able to substitute for the outputs of commercial production processes.

Although the direct ‘production’ that can be attributed to Bruns examples are varied, there is a similarity between the approach I am describing here and the emphasis produsage places on an interrelated and collectivised understanding of production. Through a playfully co-creative perspective, I aim to address the specific contours of ambiguous productivity that emerge from the co-creative milieu of MOBAs. As a term, playful co-creativity is not intended as an entirely novel or radical reworking of co-creative approaches. Rather, it is intended to distinguish between the multifaceted agencies that are exemplified in online games such as MOBAs where the participatory and playful, or co-creative and playfully co-creative are distinct yet inseparable.

It is with these co-creative themes and their relevance to bottom-up instances of playful online activity that several important sub-questions that complement the key themes of this thesis begin to emerge. As outlined in the key themes section (1.2), identifying what is distinctive about playful co-creativity is crucial to critically understanding MOBAs, but it is also a research aim that leads into a series of important sub-questions. These include:

- How do nascent instances of online play gain collective or productive agency?

- What is distinct about the game design philosophies in playfully co-creative games?
- What forms of governance and economic valuation are playful modes of co-creativity exposed to?
- What rights do players responsible for playful forms of co-creativity have?

Throughout this thesis, these sub-questions are revisited through the topic of MOBAs and their significance as affective economies imbricated by bottom-up modes of playful co-creativity. As this section has drawn attention to, playful co-creativity is evident in many online gaming activities where diverse convolutions of agency and power implicitly flow through the structure of an online game. By using the word ‘structure’ here, I am alluding to both the ludic structures of the games being played as well as the structure of their political economic power dynamics. In later chapters, the bottom-up role of players contributing particular agencies and affects towards these structures is explored through an online ethnography of MOBAs. However, as this introductory chapter has explored, the *Warcraft III* custom game culture was an influential site of complex co-creative development and one that MOBAs can trace their origins to.

2.4 Summary: towards a playfully co-creative understanding of MOBAs

When critically approaching the diverse agencies and affects that flow through MOBAs, it is essential to contextualise the bottom-up and collectivised development of the genre. This development started through the actions of players and modders such as myself collaborating in complex webs of playful co-creativity. However, the influence of these activities and the culture of *Warcraft III* custom games would be felt most profoundly in 2009 and the

proceeding years with the commercial release of the first MOBAs and the beginnings of several influential trends including live streaming, the widespread popularity of e-sports and ‘fair’ models of free-to-play. These far-reaching trends are often cited as causally linked with the popularity of MOBAs as the most played genre in the world, however in their own way, each of these trends echoes the recent genealogy of the genres past as a digital folk genre imbricated by playful co-creativity.

Understanding MOBAs in this longer convergent scope poses a question of what this genre’s grassroots development and its manifestation as a structure of multiple commercial interests represents alongside the wider political economy of the Internet. If as Crawford et al suggest (2011: 281), online games must be framed alongside ‘the potential histories associated with the Internet as a historical artefact’ then what does it mean to consider the political economy of the Internet alongside a constitutively online genre such as MOBAs? As was noted in the past section, the landscape of the Internet has seen a similar process of commercialisation whereby many previously communal and ephemeral acts have become platformed and economically valorised in increasingly pervasive ways. Framing MOBAs in the same critical scope as digital platforms such as *Facebook*, *Youtube*, *Reddit* or *Twitter* is perspective of this thesis. However, it is not a perspective that can be arrived at without considering the longer histories of emergent play and co-creativity outlined in this introductory chapter.

Exactly how this transition from a playful and participatory culture underpinned by the logics of non-monetary collectivised production has become a commercially platformed space that paradoxically, is still bottom-up in its constitution, is a central question that occupies this thesis. More widely, this critical question mirrors the state of platformed power across the Internet and in subsequent chapters, the significance MOBAs as an example in these macro-level paradigms is considered. However, to address the macro-level significance of MOBAs

as part of the commercial online landscape, it is essential to first delve into the more micro-level interactions of their participatory and playful past. That is, with the complex and ontologically ambiguous status of *Warcraft III* custom games introduced in this chapter.

In the next chapter, the co-creative status of *Warcraft III* custom games is further explored with the aim of outlining my own approaches to the questions raised here. In outlining the approaches and positions of this thesis with regards to framing playful co-creativity, I also aim to further traverse the development of *Warcraft III* custom games. Through further exploring the co-creativity of *Warcraft III* custom games, I arrive at a contextualised understanding of the 2009 moment when these playful and participatory cultures were influentially introduced to MOBAs and their hybrid set of commercial relations. Although I resist giving a detailed definition of what a MOBA game encompasses until the third chapter, I hope the linear structure of this thesis provides the wider critical contexts necessary for understanding why MOBAs are especially significant to the fields of Games, Fan and Internet studies.

3. Critically approaching playful co-creativity

Aims of this chapter

In the proceeding sections, I aim to critically frame the playfully co-creative relations of online games through further considering how the agentic role of online play in *Warcraft III* custom games intersects with established approaches regarding games as co-created spaces. Two prevailing questions underpin this chapter. Firstly, what does a playfully co-creative perspective represent for framing games as an amalgamation of different social and technological influences? Secondly, what does the co-created status of online games exemplified by *Warcraft III* custom games entail for framing games as part of the wider political economy of the Internet? Both of these questions overlap with the playful and participatory perspectives regarding online games already outlined and it is the broader aim of this chapter to contextualise the productivity of playful co-creativity alongside participatory culture approaches. In addressing these broad questions, this thesis moves towards a thorough contextualisation of how MOBAs came into being, why they are a significant and timely topic for this thesis, and what my own role as an ethnographic researcher situated across these spaces entails for my approaches moving forward in this project.

3.1 From interdependent to ecological: situating playful co-creativity

3.1.1 Ambiguous agencies of a game

As a field, game studies has focussed considerable attention on the deeply assembled and cybernetic quality of games as irreducible from the actions of their players and wider sociotechnical actors through utilising a variety of conceptual frameworks (to name a few that are discussed here; Aarseth, 1997; Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 212; Steinkuehler, 2006; Malaby, 2007; Giddings and Kennedy, 2008; Taylor, 2009; Crogan and Kennedy, 2009). In each of these sources, different conceptual tools are employed to address the status of games as a co-constituted form between the agencies of various actors both technological and social. In contrast to many more traditional media forms, games function through play as a requisite and this has marked games as more explicitly interactive than traditional media forms. As John Fiske would note when writing about arcade games in 1989,

Even though the reader does exert some control over the meanings of the TV narrative, the control is semiotic rather than material. Videogame joysticks and firing buttons concretise this control by extending it from meanings to events. (Fiske, 1989: 73)

For Fiske in 1989, playing a videogame marked a significant act of resistance on the part of the player through the requisite freedom of playful interaction with the game. Comparable with the emergent approaches towards play spaces outlined in the opening chapter, Fiske drew attention to the way videogames blur the boundaries of authorial control and following established approaches towards media audiences at the time (Hall, 1981), how this resembled a significant moment of resistant control for audiences turned players / authors. Fiske's observations of arcade games are noteworthy here for the ambiguous space that play occupies as both a requisite function and resistant moment of authorial control. For Fiske, this

ambiguity of agency put any potential resistance resulting from the play of a game in a precarious position of simultaneous control. How a player resists dominant ideological forms through play when simultaneously, the games rules set the boundaries of that resistance was an ambiguity Fiske identified in arcade games. When approaching the structure of any digital game and the role of players, these theoretical ambiguities regarding the agentive role of various actors repeatedly present themselves across games literature.

In the space of time since Fiske made these observations about arcade games, literature surrounding both games and wider media audiences has developed significantly. In games studies, the role of players is now often viewed as synonymous with what constitutes a game. For example, Espen Aarseth (1997: 5) influentially termed the structure of a game a 'cybertext' to convey the raising of stakes, from those of 'interpretation to intervention'. Similarly, in wider media studies the role of audiences (or participants) is now often viewed as a performative practice whereby everyday people are responsible for contributing in significant ways towards the experience of the media (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 159). Both of these perspectives were not widely adopted at the time of Fiske's writing in 1989, however their assertions regarding the agentive role of everyday people are now taken for granted in accounts of games and the Internet. This overlap of agency between the playful and participatory has been gestured to thus far and will continue to be explored throughout this chapter. For games, that are the primary focus here, the status of play as a requisite to the functions of a game has marked much of the literature surrounding games as one of interdependence.

3.1.2 Human and nonhuman

In the sample of literature mentioned above, the interdependence of a game between various agencies, actors and contexts is notable in the approaches adopted. These approaches include framing games as ‘cybernetic’ (Aarseth, 1997; Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 212; Giddings and Kennedy, 2008), an ‘assemblage’ (Taylor, 2009), a ‘mangle’ (Steinkuehler, 2006) or a site of ‘contrived contingency’ (Malaby, 2007). What is shared in each of these accounts of games is an emphasis on the indispensable role of various co-constituting agencies. As has been discussed thus far, this co-constitution of form is found explicitly in the structure of a game where the system of rules and their emergent potentials are dependent upon the lived experiences of players in realising the ludic potentials inherent to any particular rule set. This particularly cybernetic ontology of games as a circuit that does not privilege any overriding agency is noteworthy here for the multifaceted perspective it provides when approaching the agencies co-constitutive of a game. The specificities of a cybernetic approach and its application in *Warcraft III* custom games is more thoroughly detailed in the next section (3.2). However, the salient point here is that the technological intimacy between human and nonhuman that is implied in cybernetic perspectives is representative of the interdependent way games, players and their wider connected actors have been framed in games studies literature.

In contrast to more traditional paradigms of audience studies that framed any ‘active’ agency of everyday people as especially significant or resistant towards the media in question (exemplified in the ambiguity of resistant play Fiske identified), games studies literature such as the sources mentioned here do not formalise these divisions to the same extent. The feedback loop between game and player is one that necessitates the experience of a game and to completely untangle these agencies is to deny the essential status of both human and nonhuman as at play through a game. That is to say, as Giddings and Kennedy (2008: 19)

note, how it is possible to turn the agency of ‘gameplay upside down’. Not only are players playful in their exertion of emergence or mastery of a game, but the rules of a game that afford specific inputs or combinations to players are equally agentic in how they affect players according to their own protocols.

Understood in the context of *Warcraft III* custom games, this intertwined agency between human and nonhuman was central to the complex becoming of its unique genres. Players were collective in their identity and agency to define the way a game is playfully approached. However, the rules of a game still determined the constraints that influenced players and their emergent modes of play. Moreover, modders could alter the agency of a custom games rules, further complicating and intertwining the human and nonhuman in ongoing dialogues surrounding the pursuit of ludic balance. As boundless as custom games were in their potential for new emergent combinations or modes of play, it was a boundlessness between multiple interrelational agencies. That is, between the rules of the game, players and modders.

Warcraft III custom games offer a dynamic illustration of this sociotechnical interdependency as they only functioned as viable genres through both the human and nonhuman intertwining their own agencies. However, what is noteworthy in *Warcraft III* custom games along with a plethora of other online games, is how open this interdependent ontology of a game is to other influences not limited to the game and its play specifically. *Warcraft III* custom games were after all, modifications of an existing game and always contingent upon the dialogues between players and modders taking place in the wider online paratextual spaces. When framing the diverse agencies that flow through an online game, particularly the frenetically participatory games under consideration here, it is necessary to widen the scope of interdependency constitutive of a game.

3.1.3 Assemblage

T.L. Taylor (2009) usefully adapts the term ‘assemblage’ from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to describe the variety of co-constituent agencies at play when approaching the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft*. For Taylor, an assemblage is a way of grasping the interdependent structure of an online game where many different actors situated across various networked spaces readily intersect.

In the space of interrelations lie the dynamic processes of play. Thinking about games as assemblage, wherein many varying actors and unfolding processes make up the site and action, allows us to get into the nooks where fascinating work occurs; the flows between system and player, between emergent play and developer revisions, between practices and player produced software modifications, between local (guild) communities and broader (server) cultures, between legal codes, designer intentions, and everyday use practices, between contested forms of play, between expectation and contextualisation. (Taylor, 2009: 332)

An assembled approach such as the one Taylor maps out here is shared in many similarly co-constitutive approaches to MMO games (to name a few; Steinkuehler, 2006; Malaby, 2007; Chen, 2012). As Taylor notes, there is a clear resonance here to ecological understandings of the media as the scope and potential pathways for entering into this more expansive conceptual framework are vast (Fuller, 2005). To fully account for the constituents of this more expansive understanding of an online game would be a vast undertaking that is beyond the scope of this project (and any other similarly qualitative project). However, although this more expansive approach is challenging in its scope, it is from this perspective that many critical questions regarding the relations between different actors, motivations, and modes of agency or affect that all flow through an online game open up.

As with the microcosmic circuits of interdependent feedback necessary to any game, it is the interrelation of networked actors that is crucial to an assembled approach. For inherently online games such as *Warcraft III* custom games, this means following the relation between; for example, a games rules and its players; the players and modders; or the modders and their games rules. To formalise any strand of this interrelated structure is to miss the significance of their reciprocal agency that, in the examples under consideration here, would be to reject the co-creative form of these games entirely. An immediate challenge presents itself here then, of how a researcher practically approaches this expansive assemblage or ecology of online interrelations?

For Taylor (2009, 333), one way to traverse this challenging terrain is through an ‘ethnographic sensibility which seeks out “found objects” from everyday life’. Similar to any ethnography that is always necessarily selective in its use of representative data from fieldwork, the ethnographic sensibility for identifying pertinent case studies or fluctuations in the interrelated network of an online game is how this thesis aims to move forward (the methodological implications of this approach are revisited in more detail in chapter four). Through framing online games as a circuit, an assemblage, or an ecology that extends beyond a merely formalist interpretation of the digital act or object in question, this project posits online games as interrelated networks that are both configured by, and configure, their various relational actors.

As an online ethnographer situated in these spaces and with a pre-research familiarity with the genres under consideration here, I am attentive to the interrelated flows of agency that constitute these online games. My awareness of the wider relational ecology of participatory activity that these games co-constitute does not mean I can represent every strand of this vast online ecosystem. However, it does mean I am reflective upon my own lived experience in

this ecology and how the relationality of these agencies is representative of particular convolutions of power between different networked actors. It is between these interrelations that the central questions behind this research emerge, as the co-constitution of online games is also a deeply co-creative practice where traces of playful online agency hold different affects and values to different actors. An awareness of these interrelations is essential to grasping the productivity at stake in playful modes of co-creativity and for *Warcraft III* custom games in particular, these relations were intricate. In the next section, I further consider how the circuits of feedback loops in an individual custom game relate to the wider ecology of the Internet that these playful modes of co-creativity are situated in.

3.2 Circuits of playful co-creativity

This section follows the interrelational theme of the past section to further consider how the micro-level movements of *Warcraft III* custom games interacted with the more macro-level contexts found across the Internet. Through exploring the precise online interrelations that co-created custom game genres, this section utilises two distinct but overlapping frameworks, cybernetics and ‘connectivity’ (van Dijck, 2013), to consider how this mode of playful productivity can be critically approached. Up until this point, I have given only passing mention to the precise processes of playful co-creativity at stake in *Warcraft III* custom games with regards to their emergent complexity. However, in this section, I aim to further map out the playful interrelations of this influential online culture as I move towards a definition of MOBAs. Through expanding upon a cybernetic perspective and introducing a connective approach, I outline two important frameworks that are revisited throughout this thesis in relation to critical questions surrounding playful co-creativity (see section 2.3). Although cybernetics has been variously mentioned thus far alongside conceptions of ludic

complexity and sociotechnical becoming, it is useful to start with a brief account of the term and how I intend to utilise it here.

3.2.1 Cybernetic circuits

Put succinctly, cybernetics is concerned with the regulation of input in a system and how particular inputs are restrained or accentuated by a variety of feedback mechanisms. Inputs, for example a temperature registering in a thermostat or command registering in a game, can be understood as pieces of communicative information that are either negatively or positively responded to by a system. Negative feedback stabilises the system through restraining the direction of the input, for example a thermostat triggering a heating or cooling system to keep a temperature stable. Positive feedback on the other hand, accentuates the direction of the input, causing it to circulate until the system collapses. An example of positive feedback might be a game of *Monopoly* where a player buys property to make money and in turn, buys more property with that money, thus gaining an increasingly unstable advantage and winning the game (or collapsing the system).

As a field, cybernetics can be traced to the foundational work of Nobert Wiener during World War II who was occupied with building an anti-aircraft system that could predict the non-linear movements of piloted planes based on their trajectories. Running parallel to many other influential computational developments during World War II that were similarly occupied with anticipating the intentions of enemies (Galison, 1994), cybernetics is another important approach responsible for understanding the interrelational complexity of systems. These wartime developments in systems theory would have a significant role in the development of computer programming and later, in the development of videogames (Crogan, 2011: 3).

However, Wiener's conception of cybernetics and its applicability across different systems was, as the brief ludic example above indicates, extremely far-reaching in its scope. Wiener was not only interested in the engineering applications of cybernetic feedback systems, but also the way these systems can be found universally. For Wiener (1950: 26), the boundaries between physical functioning and new communication machines were non-existent as both entities are 'analogous [in] attempts to control entropy through feedback.' Moreover, as Peter Galison (1994) notes in a historical account of the development of cybernetics, the wartime inception of the field provided a palpable example of the human and nonhuman combining through the circuitry of 'servomechanical' weaponry. In other words, the ontological distinction between human and machine had been tangibly blurred.

As the last section mentioned in relation to cybernetic approaches that have been utilised to understand games, such as Aarseth's 'Cybertext', this ontological perspective has been hugely influential across many fields. Although it is beyond the scope or aims of this section to fully consider the varied usages of the term 'cyber' in the span of time since Wiener's work, it is with this wider scope for considering the way circuits of feedback are found universally that I begin to utilise the approach here.

3.2.2 Circuits and ecologies

Similar to and often mobilised in wider digital cultural conceptions of the post-human, a cybernetic approach in relation to videogames emphasises the 'interdependent' relation between human and nonhuman agency (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 109). As Dovey and Kennedy note in mobilising a cybernetic approach, the 'player is not outside the game and the game is not outside the player – both are part of the loop which information and energy flows.' These 'loops' are central to any cybernetic system and in my usage of the term here, I

aim to draw attention to the way *Warcraft III* custom games represent explicit systems of feedback loops. For describing an ontology of online games, or even non-digital rule bound structures (Aarseth, 1997; Trammel and Sinnreich, 2014), the idea of various agencies circulating towards the identity of an overriding system through feedback loops is as Seth Giddings (2014: 109) notes, explicit in its applicability to games.

For the custom games under consideration here, the feedback loops between in-game rules and players were numerous and intertwined as multiple strands of the game, or what Salen and Zimmerman call the ‘sub-systems’ of a cybernetic structure (2004: 218), all contributed towards the potential experiences of a game. For Salen and Zimmerman who are concerned with the game design implications of approaching games as cybernetic systems, they are clear in their assertion that ‘the entire game [is not necessarily meant] as a single feedback system’, but rather, the ‘emphasis is on the ways that cybernetic systems are embedded in games’. In other words, games are networks of cybernetic feedback loops and similar to any interrelated network, assemblage or ecology; ‘when more than one cybernetic system is operating together, things get complex quite quickly.’ (216)

As already noted, it was these complexities and playful potentials that were a large part of the appeal of custom games. However, what I want to draw attention to here is how far the system of feedback loops extended beyond the game. What made these custom games so significant is how far the feedback loops at play in an individual game were embedded in much wider ecologies. In Gregory Bateson’s (1972) influential expansion on the principles of cybernetics as constitutive of an interrelated ecological worldview, he emphasised that individual systems of feedback loops are always open in two fundamental ways.

- (a) in the sense that the circuit is energised from some external source and loses energy usually in the form of heat to the outside; and (b) in the sense that events

within the circuit may be influenced from the outside or may influence outside events.
(Bateson, 1972: 410)

For Bateson, this description of feedback can be applied universally to organisms, ecosystems, thermostats, societies, computers, to name just a few systems. The salient point here is that all of these systems are interrelated in their potential to influence or be influenced, by wider ecologies of feedback. This approach towards cybernetics is often referred to as ‘second wave’ cybernetics (Hayles, 1999: 131), where the reflexive role of an observer is considered as an additional feedback loop in any given system. The implications of this approach are vast and overlap significantly with the assembled and media ecology perspectives discussed in section 3.1.3. In the online context of *Warcraft III* custom games that I am concerned with here, it is with this perspective towards how these online games function in and through the influences of the Internet that I am concerned with. Although the scope for Bateson’s approach is inexhaustibly vast, it is with the Internet specifically that I ground the ecology of feedback loops in this thesis. It is through the interrelations of online systems that the productive consequences of playful co-creativity emerge as what Bateson would call the ‘energy’ or ‘heat’ that is emitted from any system, in this case the consequences of playing, can be variously found across the Internet.

3.2.3 Connective ecology

A more specific framework for considering the critical aspects of these playful online interrelations is José van Dijck’s (2013) more recent notion of the Internet as a ‘connective ecology’. She uses the term ‘connective ecology’ to describe the network of platforms or ‘microsystems’ that constitute the online landscape of social media. Van Dijck’s conception of connectivity emphasises the way different microsystems are differentially ‘sensitive to

changes in other parts of the [connective] ecosystem' (21) and that these relations are representative of particular convolutions in power. For example,

if *Facebook* changes its interface settings, *Google* reacts by tweaking its artillery of platforms; if participation in *Wikipedia* should wane, *Google's* algorithmic remedies could work wonders. [...] [I]t is not enough to study individual platforms; rather, we need to apprehend how they coevolved in a larger context of interpenetrating platforms and to dissect the cultural logic undergirding this process. (van Dijck, 2013: 21)

With parallels to the cybernetic approach regarding ecologies of systems outlined above, a connective conception of online games as additional microsystems in a connective ecology of the Internet allows for a similarly interrelational perspective on the consequences of online games. As an approach, connectivity is informed by both a 'Latourian techno-cultural [perspective] and Castells-inspired political economy' critique (43). Throughout this thesis, I return to the methodological and critical implications of a connective approach, particularly in section 3.4 when I further examine the political economy of online play. However, before discussing the political economy of online play found in MOBAs, it is necessary to consider how both a cybernetic and connective approach can inform an understanding of the playful co-creativity found in *Warcraft III* custom games. As already noted, it is the playful co-creativity pioneered in *Warcraft III* custom games that underpin the fabric of the MOBA genre and it is these interrelations that require close attention. To fully grasp how far the feedback loops at play in custom games extended and why players such as myself were so curiously captivated by this space, it is necessary to begin delving into how the circuits of custom game play extended into much wider microsystems of influence.

3.2.4 Circuits of custom game feedback

```
#####  
## Heroes & Items ##  
#####  
  
* Medusa: Lowered Stone Gaze cooldown (70->35 seconds)  
* Medusa: Minor improvements to Mystic Snake speed , cast range and cooldown  
* Medusa: Improved Mystic Snake's damage from 60/100/140/180 to 80/120/160/200  
* Meepo: Rescaled Geostrike from 4/8/12/16 to 5/10/15/20 damage per second  
* Nerubian Weaver: Reworked Watchers [details below]  
* Nerubian Weaver: Lowered Shukuchi cooldown from 13/11/9/7 to 12/10/8/6 seconds  
* Night Stalker: Improved Intelligence growth from 1.25 to 1.6  
* Ogre Magi: Reduced Multicast from 30%2x/45%2x+22.5%3x/60%2x+30%3x+15%4x -  
>25%2x/40%2x+20%3x/50%2x+25%3x+12.5%4x  
* Pandaren Brewmaster: Increased Drunken Brawler critical from 1.8x to 2.0x  
* Razor: Lowered Intelligence gain from 2.2 to 1.8  
  
[...]  
#####  
## Bugs ##  
#####  
  
* Fixed natural regeneration on rax  
* Fixed an area where you could get stuck using TP scroll on the minimap.  
* Fixed -ns mode  
* Fixed a chance for duplicate heroes in -CD  
* Batrider: Fixed Radiance from triggering Sticky Napalm  
* Medusa: Fixed Splitshot triggering Essence Aura  
* Razor: Fixed an error in the damage calculation method for Plasma Field that caused it to be  
slightly off sometimes  
* Rooftrillen: Slightly increased Eyes in the Forest cast range (+25) to fix some order issue bugs
```

Figure 2. Extract from ‘DotA Allstars 6.61’ patch notes, July 7th 2009.

The above figure is a small extract from what is often referred to as a ‘patch note’, ‘changelog’ or ‘update’ that typically accompanied the release of any new version of a custom game. Although much of the information contained within these patch notes is

illegible to those unfamiliar with the games and is evidence of the frequently high levels of ‘gaming capital’ (Consalvo, 2007) that are assumed from players, patch notes offer a window into the circuits of feedback that take place between ludic systems, players and modders. The above patch note is taken from one of the most popular *Warcraft III* custom games, *DotA Allstars*, that was a pioneer of the MOBA genre which is returned to more substantially in the next chapter onwards. As version 6.61, it is one of hundreds of iterations of the map with each edition refining, adding and adapting to the emergent complexity these games represented.

In a palpable form, patch notes provide evidence of the agency that play represents as each note can be read as a response to the collective actions of players experimenting with the potentials of in-game feedback loops. For example, the note ‘Razor: Lowered Intelligence gain from 2.2 to 1.8’ is exemplary of one particular feedback loop being negatively reinforced in an attempt to control its agency in positively deciding a game. ‘Razor’ is a player-controlled avatar (or ‘hero’) in the game and as the hero gains experience or ‘levels up’, the hero gains increased ‘intelligence’. Increased intelligence gives players more options to use a variety of different unique hero abilities, so although this change may seem minor, it is likely to cause a non-trivial change in the way players approach the game. For a change such as this to be made, extensive play, discontent, and discussion would have taken place to justify the change to the player base. As this particular hero becomes less influential in the game, the relative impact of many other heroes and their respective sets of feedback loops would be elevated as the game is replayed by players until a similar process of ‘patching’ occurs.

Game design decisions such as these mirror what game designer Marc LeBlanc (2006: 446) has called the ‘dramatic’ consequences that are tied to in-game feedback loops. For LeBlanc,

a game that contains more negative feedback loops is likely to have a more even outcome and thus be ‘dramatic’. Negative feedback in this sense is any game design feature that allows players to catch up when they are behind in-game. A widely acknowledged example of this could be *Mario Kart 64*’s (Nintendo, 1996) powerful ‘Spiny shell’ (or ‘Blue shell’) weapon that is only available to players who fall behind in a race. When used, the Spiny shell is a weapon that specifically targets the player leading the race with little to no counter play options available for the player leading the race to dodge the incoming Spiny shell from hitting them. Once the Spiny shell hits its target, every other player has an opportunity to take the lead until the process of utilising Spiny shells typically repeats itself with ‘dramatic’ consequences for the outcome of the race. Game design choices such as *Mario Kart*’s Spiny shell represent a particular type of game design philosophy relating to what modes of play are encouraged in-game. As Ian Bogost (2014a: 1) notes when writing with particular criticism about the philosophical implications of *Mario Kart*’s Spiny shell, he states that it is ‘a hazard that strips certainty and authority from the player (...) Spiny Shells are chaos, unfairness, injustice.’

In custom games, discussions regarding the philosophy of how to balance these games were commonplace in paratextual spaces and resulted in frequent and nuanced approaches regarding in-game balance that are reflected in patch notes such as those in Figure 2. Unlike the Spiny shell however, the aim for competitive games such as *DotA Allstars* was not to create games where anyone regardless of skill can win. In contrast, as Christopher Paul (2012: 147) puts it when writing about early game design philosophies in ‘Multi-User Dungeons’(MUDs), the aim was to create a meritocratic space constantly ‘striving for perfection in balance’ to ensure that ‘skill, rather than birthright, will enable players to succeed’.

The co-creative implications of these game design philosophies and the particular sets of capital that are implied in the conceptions of player 'skill' are further examined in later chapters with reference to MOBAs. However, what I want to emphasise here is the nuance and complexity at stake in the balancing task at hand. The custom game cultures responsible for pioneering these (relatively) balanced yet wildly varied games were accomplishing something that only a convergent culture can. They were leveraging the collective intelligence of their players in attempts to consider every interrelation that these varied games contained. Through productively acting upon those collectively vast lived experiences, players and modders crafted entirely new digital folk genres complexly woven by playful co-creativity.

Similar to the evolutionary strands of any species that are in a condense way, the result of vast lived experiences over very long periods of time, patch notes can be read as the DNA of a game. Representative of similarly vast amounts of lived experiences but rather than developing over long periods of time, the underlying experiences that inform these patch revisions are collectively enabled through online relations. Evoking earlier assertions made about the quality of online games as an ideal space for emergence (see section 2.2.2), it is with this collective scope that I consider the playful circulation of feedback in *Warcraft III* custom games. At a more micro-level however, it is essential to grasp what playing in a custom game such as *DotA Allstars* actually entailed. Or more particularly to the critical questions raised surrounding playful co-creativity (see section 2.3), how did playing in a custom game acquire such collective agency?

3.2.5 Controlling collective custom game play

With parallels to the evolutionary perspective mentioned previously, some theorists of play and games describe a similar process of bottom-up variation and selective retention involved in the play of a game. Play theorist Bernard De Koven (2013: 40) describes a ‘well-played’ game as a combination of ‘the playing mind’ as ‘innovative, magical, boundless’ and the ‘gaming mind’, as more ‘concentrated, determined, intelligent’. For De Koven, it is the negotiation between these modes of play that define what a well-played game entails for the players of any game. In many ways, the play of *Warcraft III* custom games was the crystallisation of this fine line between a playfully inquisitive and a more determined and rule bound game space. In experimenting with the emergent potentials of these custom games and utilising new strategies, combinations or glitches in the competitive context these games represented, a process of playful experimentation was taking place. Crucially however, it was a playful experimentation that was always selectively retained into the conventions of a game by the more competitively orientated ‘gaming mind’.

For all of the creativity and innovation that surfaced as ‘the playing mind’ experimented with the game, only certain modes of play were judged viable by the more competitively orientated ‘gaming mind’. For Brian Sutton-Smith (2001) who similarly describes the ambiguities of play in its various forms, this mode of play could be described as both ‘imaginative’ (127) as well as simultaneously ‘agonistic’ (74). This section explores the significance of this ambiguous quality of competitive play as it was this playful activity that, collectively enabled, was crucial to the rapid evolution and production of custom games.

Much has been written about the way complex systems never remain static due to the serendipitous interactions of various actors (see section 2.2.1) and in custom games, the self-regulating processes of competitive play emerging out of continuous variation exemplified

this process. When writing about the collective creation and maintenance of *Wikipedia*, David Gauntlett (2011: 199) notes that unlike many expressive media forms that require a more coherent auteur to give vision to content, *Wikipedia's* encyclopaedic ethos of neutral objectivity has enabled anyone with relevant expertise to contribute.

Although controversies do arise surrounding the 'neutrality' of *Wikipedia's* content (Keen, 2007: 39; van Dijck, 2013:149), in principle, the objective structure of the platform provides a universal means of aggregating any suitable content additions. If new content written for *Wikipedia* is not true or reliably indexed, then the new content is removed by the collaborative peer review that sustains the platform's objective coherence. For any form of dispersed collective intelligence to co-create a media form, this universal method of 'aggregation' is essential as James Surowiecki (2005) argues in his influential description of 'wise crowds'. For Surowiecki (2005: 10), a method of 'aggregation' is some sort of 'mechanism' that turns 'private judgements into collective decision making', exemplified in *Wikipedia's* objective ethos of peer review. In the activities of a competitive online game and their respective systems of cybernetic feedback, a similar mechanism of universal content aggregation can be found in the way play is mobilised towards productive game design iterations.

The mechanism for aggregation here is in its simplest form, the winning conditions of the game. If new variations of play prove to be effective in winning games, then the agency of that play spreads until it feeds back to modders and results in potential structural changes to the game. The latest patterns in play are often referred to as the 'metagame' by players as a way of referring to what is currently considered the most competitive way to play. Due to the fluid structure of custom games as constantly changing, the 'metagame' was always in a state of flux in games such as *Dota Allstars* (1). However, in the way metagames emerged and

were identifiable as macro-level patterns of play across many different individual games, clear parallels to wider mechanisms of collective aggregation were evident.

These playful mechanisms of aggregation could be compared to the conditions for collective intelligence to function as noted above, but additionally, they also mirror the evolutionary processes of much wider systems. When writing about the transcendent fluctuations evident in the evolution of emergent systems, Wiener (1948: 37) noted that,

In tidal evolution as well as in the origin of species, we have a mechanism by means of which a fortuitous variability, that of the random motions of the waves in a tidal sea and of the molecules of the water, is converted by a dynamical process into a pattern of development which reads in one direction.

Although the evolution of tidal patterns and species differ in significant ways from the collective aggregation of user-generated content on *Wikipedia*, or the playful co-creativity of a competitive game such as *DotA Allstars*, they each share similar mechanisms for controlling what is viable in their emergent variations. As already noted, these mechanisms of control are central to Wiener's conception of cybernetics. However, mechanisms of control are also essential to the viability of coherently realising the vast experiences of people in collective forms of intelligence. Without a mechanism for control, a collective media form can easily become what Gauntlett (2011: 198) describes as a 'mush-making process'. That is, a media form overloaded with content and lacking coherence, what a cybernetic perspective might describe as an unrestrained positive feedback loop that is inherently unstable. Custom games such as *DotA Allstars* navigated this terrain through the mechanism of their competitive play, coupled with the levelled relations of players and modders productively acting upon the observable variations in the metagame (the significance of these 'levelled relations' are returned to in section 3.2.7).

In chapter seven, I draw upon online ethnographic fieldwork to further examine the micro-level movements of precise instances of play that spread to influence the metagame and

surrounding culture in MOBAs. However, in custom games that were a prototype for what would later become these commonplace practices of playful co-creativity, it is important to identify the varied yet competitive mechanism of online play and its interrelation with wider microsystems of playful influence. Although individual custom games such as *Dota Allstars* typically contained ten players and lasted 25 – 45 minutes, the influence of playing in these ephemeral experiences was much longer lasting due to the collective agency of play extending into various microsystems across the Internet. It is with these connective microsystems that the circuits of play in custom games gained their co-creative agency and it is with these systems that I necessarily turn my attention to here.

3.2.6 Microsystems of play

Henry Lowood (2007: 92) argues that with the onset of competitive online multiplayer gameplay in the mid-1990's, the appeal of online games increasingly turned towards the performative potential of players interactions. Citing *Warcraft III* as a central example, Lowood asserts that the function of online play took on a much more social role as it was preserved through paratextual spaces such as video replays. Although Lowood's focus is on the implications for online games as play becomes performative (a theme I address in more detail in chapter five and seven), there is a claim implicit in his assertion that play had also lost its sense of ephemerality in this moment. Through play becoming externalised across different microsystems or paratexts such as video replays, it had taken on a more enduring quality that resulted in playful acts acquiring a more agentive role in the co-creative developments that define a games evolution. This appearance in *Warcraft III* of an enduring quality of play through paratextual production was particularly noteworthy in its custom game culture.

Through the proliferation of a variety of paratextual spaces, the emergent conventions that rapidly evolved in custom games were continually under additional scrutiny. Actions in the play space extended beyond custom games to in-game chat rooms, team speak channels, forums, video replays, community databases and player-written guides. Consequently, these connective loops of feedback circulated to both players and modders. Similar to wider online fan activities where participants carry significant agency in defining the changing content of commercial media through collective action (see for example, Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Jenkins et al 2013; Andrejevic, 2008; Schäfer 2011), custom game players carried significant agency in defining ongoing iterations of these games through influencing each other, as well as modders.

In Jenkins et al's (2013) description of the way media 'spreads' through the participatory capacity of online consumption practices, they emphasise that it is the 'recirculation' of material through ubiquitous social media functionalities such as a 'comment', 'like', 'share' or 'upvote' that increasingly decide the influence of any given media. My use of the term 'participatory' and 'consumption' is purposely ambiguous here as traditionally, participatory practices have been considered more active, do it yourself (DIY) and productive than consumption practices. However, as Jenkins et al (2013: 154) point out, these 'less active [examples of spreading media] involve substantial labour that potentially provides value according to both commercial and non-commercial logic'. The ambiguities of participatory agency are further explored in section 3.3. The salient point here, is that the playfully co-creative agencies of an online game exist in a similarly spreadable capacity to social media functionalities. It is from this 'spreadable' perspective that the non-trivial agency of custom game play and its intersection in a wider connective ecology of participatory microsystems must be understood.

Through the in-game play of players such as myself and the connective relationship we shared in discussions, recordings, or theorycrafting activities such as writing a guide, our play carried the potential to be made productive in its spreadable capacity. The potential of play to spread here, parallels the mechanisms of collective control described in the past section whereby only certain modes of competitive play were adopted into a ‘metagame’. Just as a metagame exists as an observable macro-level pattern emerging from the collective movements of players, so too, were playful movements visible across wider microsystems of participation. These connective relations between playful (in-game) and participatory (paratextual) activities are vital to understanding the varied influences behind playfully co-creative change. Moreover, the interrelational agencies at stake here raise a series of fundamental questions regarding exactly who, if they can be identified, is responsible for influencing the ‘metagame’ and therefore the co-creative change. Did a player’s peculiar way of playing inspire a guide? Was a guide responsible for popularising a way of playing? Did these resulting playstyles define the metagame? More importantly, how have these connective movements affected different actors and their respective gaming, cultural, social and economic capitals?

In chapter seven of this thesis, specific examples of MOBA play that spread through the connective ecology of the Internet to influence various commercial and non-commercial actors are examined. In the custom game cultures that preceded the more recent playful movements of MOBAs however, the spreadable capacity of play was notable as a defining aspect of these genres co-creative development. Several similarities to other notable co-creative or competitive playing cultures can be noted here. John Banks (2013: 157) for example, describes the development of norms in the co-creative culture of *Trainz* (2001, Auran) as existing in a state of ‘emergent governance’ that is resistant to the impositions of ‘top-down, central planning’. T.L. Taylor (2012: 83) similarly describes the development of

competitive e-sports games as ‘an ongoing process’ occurring ‘in dialog with emerging technologies *and* [emergent player created] techniques’. Both of these examples emphasise the ongoing the collective agency of players as significant in deciding how games and their cultures develop. Similarly, it is this ongoing state of collectively negotiated change that could be readily observed in the playful co-creativity of custom game cultures. For the densely complex rules often encountered in custom games, where many different variables were thrown into the play space with little regard for how these variables might interact to create emergent or exploitable outcomes, this iterative mode of playful development proved to be crucial in honing the functionality and far-reaching competitive appeal of these genres.

When I was playing these games alongside friends during the period of 2005 – 2008, none of us knew what potentials the play space contained, what conventions could be developed and in what ways the games could be broken. It was the uncertainty of traversing these games and what game designer Greg Costikyan (2013: 2) calls the ‘struggle to master’ their rules that was a large part of the appeal. Through these ‘struggles’, new modes of play emerged, new combinations were pioneered and various glitches were found. The response from modders who were themselves embedded in the same grassroots playing communities as players was nuanced, as the patch notes in Figure 2 exemplify. Sometimes playful innovations would be removed or limited and at other times, they would be celebrated and implemented into the conventions of the game. Game design decisions such as these reflected particular game design philosophies (see section 3.3.4) that were contingent upon the circuited relations of players and modders as being relatively levelled in their power relations (these levelled relations are explored further in the next section).

For players such as myself, the constant redesigns ensured that custom games remained fresh and constantly changing. For the evolution of the games themselves however, this mode of

playful circulation in relation to ongoing redesigns mirrored the role of alpha or beta testers whose playful interactions refine games into more balanced and polished play environments. Alpha or beta testing is an essential development process in any professionally produced digital game as controlling the uneven feedback loops inherent in the creation of computer systems is a necessary process in ‘debugging’ a game (Newman, 2004: 42). Due to the varied, competitive, and constantly changing structure of custom games, ‘bugs’ or ‘glitches’ were commonplace. However, unlike traditional development processes of ‘debugging’ that imply a pre-existing vision for the game that is refined through playtesting, custom games always existed in a much more collective state of negotiation.

Central to these negotiations was the role of various participatory microsystems where discussions regarding the status of in-game bugs as either an ‘exploit’ or a viable instance of ‘emergence’ were commonplace (2). In later chapters, the importance of this non-commercial, bottom-up and ongoing collective development is re-appraised as many more recent commercial games including MOBAs adopt similar ongoing development processes. Due to the hybrid power relations of these more recent commercial iterations, controversies frequently arise due to what I argue is the participatory residue that resides in the genres that developed from these custom game spaces.

When van Dijck (2013) discusses the connective ecology of social media microsystems on the Internet, she emphasises that the interrelations between different microsystems are constitutive of particular convolutions in power between large economic stakeholders. As noted variously throughout this thesis, these uneven power dynamics make critical perspectives surrounding democratic freedoms, exploitation of users, and the accumulation of economic value pertinent (see section 3.4). However, as van Dijck (19) also emphasises, these critical perspectives are the result of ‘*historical and cultural* convolutions’ that have

emerged from the short but ‘rich history of social media platforms and the online sociality that came along with their evolution’. As the normalisation of power relations has changed, so too has the pertinence of particular critical perspectives. For example, Christian Fuchs (2012) discusses how the relevance of Dallas Smythes (1981) critical notion of ‘audience commodity’ has a renewed relevance in the current power dynamics of the Internet. For many participatory, social and playful activities, this changing state of power relations towards a more economically valued and platformed state of power can be noted.

In the playful co-creativity of online games, many of these same critical positions can be similarly taken to critically address the role of play in connective power relations. The process of changing power dynamics in online games is a subject further examined in the next chapter. However, what is important to emphasise here is how the arrangement of microsystems surrounding custom games along with the particular convolutions of power they constituted, differed from the more commercial contexts such as those van Dijck or Fuchs are more recently concerned with. In contrast to more commercially orientated games such as MOBAs which would proceed them, custom games normalised a set of participatory power relations that were participatory culture manifest. That is, as a connective ecosystem with a relative absence of money, a levelled set of relations, and a functional model of collective production. As a result of the non-monetary creation of custom game genres, the relations between players and modders were levelled to an extent not often seen in commercial productions. It is this participatory inception of the genre that was significant in enabling many of the playfully co-creative modes of agency described in this thesis and it is these levelled set of relations that require further consideration.

3.2.7 Levelled relations of custom game design

Essential to custom games development process was the status of these game cultures as grassroots and non-monetary which was reflected in the collective decision making that underpinned game design choices. In contrast to many online developers who have ongoing dialogues with their modding communities, Blizzard Entertainment took an extremely hands-off approach with regards to the actions of the *Warcraft III* custom game space until 2010 (Lynley, 2010). Although Blizzard Entertainment benefited from the development of custom games through the increased popularity and exposure it provided their platform game, *Warcraft III*, their absent involvement with the activities of the custom game space was reflected in the independently run paratextual spaces and ultimately, the custom games themselves (3). Much has been written about the way modders operate in a different cultural or ‘moral economy’ than that of commercial developers and this is often reflected in the lack of regard modders show for copyright laws (Postigo, 2008; Johnson, 2009). In these custom games, however, a differing cultural economy to that of commercial productions was also notable through the collective decision-making displayed on the part of non-professional grassroots game designers. It is the levelled relations of this alternative cultural economy that this section seeks to outline.

This alternative cultural economy of creation was most apparent in the game design choices that refined custom games as they were, to an extent not seen in commercial games, collectively agreed upon by the community. If a game design choice was introduced by a modder that was unpopular with its player base, it was very easy for players to revert to an earlier version of the map or discuss the change freely through forums. Due to the relative ease of making changes to custom games structure, this often resulted in many incrementally different versions of a single game. For example, with the endlessly different variations of the

DotA game, that *DotA Allstars* was one example of (1). The ‘Allstars’ in *DotA Allstars* actually refers to the aim of this particular map, which was to combine many different innovations found across the many different iterations of DotA into one unified DotA map (Dean, 2014). Postigo (2008: 68) asserts that ‘modders typically seek community support and encouragement to validate their hard work’ and in the evolution of *Warcraft III* custom games, this reciprocal relationship modded games shared with their playing communities was notable on many levels, but particularly through the games design.

The custom game platform of *Warcraft III* operated through players hosting and sharing particular maps they wanted to play, meaning the choice of what versions were widely accepted, was entirely in players hands. In any popular custom game with multiple iterations, this meant the playing community would collectively decide upon what game version should be played depending solely on their playing preferences. Well received maps would be regularly hosted by players whereas more obscure, less known and more controversial versions of a game would be neglected. In contrast to commercially produced games where players are subject to the top down decisions of a developer enforcing design changes through controlling the games platform, a power dynamic that can lead to significant moments of resistance from playing communities (Švelch, 2016), the game design of custom games was distinctly bottom-up. In the example of DotA, many different modders can be attributed to the design of particular features in the mods during the span of 2003 – 2009. Modders known by their pseudonyms including Eul (who first came up with the name ‘Defence of the Ancients’), Meian, Ragnor, Guinsoo, Neichus and IceFrog were all notable as grassroots game designers of different versions of the game that were each popular with players. Each of these designers had their own nuanced game design philosophies but each was receptive to the feedback from players as integral to the ongoing design process. Crucially, it was the players in their collective agency that gave particular maps and their

creators legitimacy as the vast plethora of different map versions always offered an alternative if the direction of a game proved controversial.

This levelled state of relations contrasts many fan cultures where the fandom in question is closely tied to commercial media producers who control the means of production and only consider the input of fans as another consideration in their commercially motivated decisions. The bottom-up culture of playful co-creativity in custom games was much more egalitarian in their collectivity. As a sharp contrast, Jenkins once stated when writing about television fans that,

Fans must beg with networks to keep their favourite shows on the air, must lobby producers to provide desired plot developments or to protect the integrity of favourite characters. Within the cultural economy, fans are peasants, not proprietors (Jenkins, 1992: 27)

It is this tight control over the production of a media form that custom games were not only resistant to, but incompatible with. Although it is important to stress, as I have throughout this chapter, that mechanisms of control were prevalent in these game design decisions, as is true for any collectively assembled creation, there was also something unprecedented about the bottom-up development of these games.

In my conception of custom games as representative of ‘digital folk genres’ in the opening chapter, I discussed how the folk cultural practices of grassroots cultures converging with the technological capacities of mass culture were essential to the creation of these genres. As prototype genres native to a participatory milieu, custom games exemplified a capacity for many overlapping agencies and collective mechanisms of control. As far reaching and influential as these circuits were in their surrounding connective ecosystems of play, this ecology was by a large extent free from commercial influences during the period of 2003 - 2009. If these games had been commercially motivated from their inception, it is arguable whether many of the collective feedback loops reliant upon a levelled set of relations between

players and modders would have flourished to the extent they did. It is in these conditions that various playful forms of co-creativity emerged and as I argue throughout this thesis, it is these participatory influences of reciprocal exchange, bottom-up collectivity and levelled relations of control that remain crucial to critically understanding the playful co-creativity of MOBAs.

In the next section, I further consider how established perspectives on the productivity attributed to participatory cultures can inform a conception of playful co-creativity. As this sub-chapter has explored, the space between participatory cultures and playful modes of co-creativity was extremely blurred in the playing and modding cultures of *Warcraft III* custom games. For establishing a wider conception of what constitutes playful co-creativity, it is necessary to consider how similar themes have been approached in related modes of participatory productivity.

3.3 Participatory Culture and playful co-creativity

3.3.1 Participatory productivity

As an approach to framing emergent modes of bottom-up online productivity, participatory culture follows the longer history of preceding audience or fan orientated approaches that similarly analysed the various negotiations people make with the media. In one influential fan studies text that pre-empted the online landscape and its participatory becoming, Fiske (1992) described fans as operating their own ‘shadow cultural economies’ whereby three overlapping but distinctive modes of fan productivity could be identified. These were ‘semiotic’, ‘enunciative’ and ‘textual’ modes of productivity. For the pre-online context Fiske

was considering, semiotic productivity could be identified as ‘interior’ productivity whereby an audience negotiates the meanings of a text but does not outwardly express those readings. When these negotiations with the text are outwardly expressed, for example through a conversation sharing discursive readings or an adoption of media-inspired styles, these expressions become enunciative. Finally, and with clear relevance to core examples of participatory culture such as modding, Fiske showed there is textual productivity when fans create new texts alongside existing ones. As these different modes of interacting with the media become more pronounced and thus, widely mediated, Fiske argued that this process of externalising readings meant fan interactions become more productive. At the time of writing in 1992, Fiske admitted that ‘any example of fan productivity may well span all categories and refuse any clear distinction among them’ (37) and, in the span of time since this claim was made, many more recent scholars considering the agency of online participatory cultures have re-iterated this assertion (see Scott, 2008: 212; Sotamaa, 2009: 86; Hills, 2013: 132).

As has been variously discussed thus far, the boundaries between different acts of participation and their respective agency are blurred online. For Jenkins (2006: 137), whose influential account of participatory culture follows the same fan-orientated origins as Fiske’s, a similar distinction is made between ‘interaction’ and ‘participation’. If participation carries ‘social and cultural’ agency, it is preceded by interaction that is concerned only with the technological protocols of a feedback loop. For example, playing an offline single player game would be interacting, but taking those playful interactions online where other actors are affected by that interactive agency becomes participation.

To participate one must interact with technology, just as to enunciate an expression one must engage semiotically with a text. Although it is a simple distinction and one that proves to be problematically narrow when considering the multitude of playing practices (Crawford, 2011:

104), Jenkins' definition of participation as social or cultural agency is one that mirrors Fiske's categories in pointing towards the way that participatory is synonymous with a more widely mediated and thus productive agency. As has been variously noted with reference to *Warcraft III* custom game play, the mediation of play to a wider set of actors can be productively capable of affecting change or adding value. The circulation of this playful agency can affect the ludic structures of a game, as custom game development exemplifies. However, as the wider connective ecology these games are situated in would also suggest, playing can also affect the social, cultural and political economic structures of games. It is this agency to spread and affect other people that has been a consistent theme of studies surrounding participatory culture (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013; Jenkins et al, 2013) and one that I claim in this thesis to also apply to playfully co-creative practices.

In taking a similar line of critical inquiry to studies concerning participatory cultures, I am suggesting there is an overlap between participatory and playful agencies. This is not an entirely novel claim, as I outlined when describing playful co-creativity (see section 2.3). Multiple scholars of play, participation and activities where the two explicitly overlap such as modding have established that these are blurred boundaries. In an attempt to separate some of these boundaries, Joost Raessens makes some relevant distinctions here when considering how participation as a term relates to games.

I consider participation to consist of three domains: that of interpretation (deconstruction is understood as a specific form of interpretation), the domain of the reconfiguration of existing game elements, and the domain of the construction of new game elements. (Raessens, 2005: 381)

With parallels to Fiske's three notions of fan productivity outlined above, Raessens' description of playful forms of participation in games describes a similar escalation of more pronounced productivity. For Raessens, 'reconfiguration' describes the activities of play that could include the emergent custom game play described thus far. 'Construction', like Fiske's

textual productivity, is ‘when players work with game-mods or game patches, editing tools and source codes’ (381). Similar to Fiske’s distinctions, Raessens admits there is ambiguity between certain forms of reconfiguration and construction, for example, when players exert significant agency through ‘unlock[ing] secrets’ in single player games (381). Although there is only passing consideration given to the emergent practices of online gaming cultures (374), it is clear how the emergent practices described here extend conceptions of what could be considered textually productive or constructive.

The playful mode of co-creativity described thus far is a combination of both playing (semiotic productivity, reconfiguration) and modding (textual productivity, construction) but crucially, one does not exist without the other. The balance changes of a patch for example, are entirely a response to the collective productivity play represents. Without the playful agency here, the content of a patch would be meaningless and inert. For any game, this cybernetic relationship shared with players is necessary to function (see section 3.1).

However, in the connective spaces of online games and the newly participatory genres they can represent, this playful experience is also integral to iterating the development of these games. A question quickly arises here then, of how useful distinct categories of participatory productivity are when describing the diverse activities involved in playful co-creativity?

3.3.2 Implicit and explicit participation

One alternative to analysing the inherent productivity associated with an activity is to focus instead on what the response to that activity is. In M.L Schäfer’s (2011) description of participatory culture as an increasingly platformed activity that is commercially appropriated in ever more pervasive ways, a useful distinction is made between ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ participation.

Explicit participation reflects conscious, voluntary, often intrinsically motivated activities; it is often community-driven, based on mutual social relations and communication. Implicit participation, on the other hand, depends on the formalisation of user activities as default functions in the technological design. (Schäfer, 2011: 120)

For Schäfer, implicit participation reflects user actions that fit within the prescribed constraints of a particular technological platform and can be seamlessly appropriated in the continuation of its intended function. For example, the creation of a copyrighted *Youtube* video, ‘liking’ a *Facebook* comment or making a *Google* search could be considered implicit participation. What defines these actions are their status as seamlessly implemented into the (often commercially motivated) protocols of the platform. In contrast, explicit participation is an action that was never anticipated by the original developers of the platform or intellectual property. The content created through explicit participation presents either a ‘confrontation’ or opportunity for ‘implementation’ (146) within the wider frameworks of the technological platform or intellectual property that it utilises. Notable examples of explicit participation could include fan fictions, modding or fansubbing, however it should be emphasised that the subversive potency of explicit participation differs greatly between different activities.

Throughout his book *Bastard Culture! How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production*, Schäfer emphasises that what is noteworthy about explicit participation is that despite its unpredictable status, it is often implemented alongside the motivations of the original platform developers. The differing cultural or ‘moral economies’ of modders and developers discussed in section 3.2.7 exemplifies this capacity for implementation. Mods that were never imagined by developers, mods that are often illegal due to their precariously copyrighted material, are nonetheless often implemented into the co-creative identity and economic value of digital games (Postigo, 2008; Johnson, 2009). Across the participatory landscape, similar instances of unanticipated, explicit participation that is implemented

according to the motivations of commercial interests can be found. Indeed, the MOBA genre as discussed from the next section onwards could be framed in this way.

As Schäfer notes (126), identifying the ‘implementation [of explicit participation] is less obvious and attracts less attention’ than instances of confrontation. However, it is within the explicit practices of participatory cultures that the precursor to many taken for granted pieces of media content or new implicit modes of participation can be found. Although the scope for this perspective is wide and recalls many longer-standing examples of grassroots or subcultural acts of creativity that were commercialised by the culture industries (discussed in more detail in the next section), the distinction between explicit and implicit is useful when grasping the productivity of online play. Just as the practices of explicit participation have pioneered new media content and digital platforms for new implicit modes of participation, so too, has the agency of play pioneered many new practices and genres.

As with any participatory act, playing in a game can be identified as either implicit or explicit in its relational agency. The practice of implicitly playing is commonplace and describes many of the unproblematic interactions of players whose play falls roughly within the conceived parameters of a game as imagined by designers. My use of the term ‘roughly’ here refers to the emergent status of a game as impossible to fully predict in any complex set of rules. As Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 159) point out, even in a relatively simple game such as *Pong* (1972, Atari), play is emergent and not fully predictable. However, despite the emergent status of play in any game, many playful practices roughly follow the rules of the game rather than actively attempting to break the rules or play ‘between’ them (see section 2.2.1). Implicitly playful practices are especially noteworthy in non-competitive or single player games of ‘progression’ (Juul, 2002) as the agency of play remains relatively contained and preformed.

In contrast, explicit play is an action that creatively or disruptively reconfigures the games rules or established approaches towards playing those rules. Due to the relational agency involved with explicit practices, explicit play is more common in multiplayer games that contain many different rules or ‘emergent’ potentials (Juul, 2002). Various playful activities that have garnered substantial attention in game studies literature could be framed as explicit play including, to name a few, the practices of ‘cheating’ (Consalvo, 2007), ‘counterplay’ (Apperley and Dieter, 2010), ‘theorycrafting’ (Karlsen, 2011), ‘power playing’ (Taylor, 2006) or through exhibiting various forms of unexpected social emergence (Pearce, 2006; Chen, 2012; Johansson, 2013).

The play of *Warcraft III* custom games described in this chapter is another example of explicit play. As games created in an environment of explicit participation, many of the rules set in place by modders of custom games were extremely open or underexplored in their raw and grassroots creation. The emergent role of play was crucial to the ongoing development of games here, as new modes of play provided the culture with new choices regarding combinations or modes of play that could either be confronted (removed from the game, or ‘nerfed’) or implemented (the emergent way of playing is left in) into the structure of the games. Just as explicit participation is responsible for opening up new possibilities for participatory activities, so too, were explicit modes of play responsible for opening up new strategies or conventions of play that often-caused instrumental changes to the identity of *Warcraft III* custom games.

Crucially, it is the response to explicit modes of play that is productive in the context of playful co-creativity. Unlike the distinct categories of participatory productivity described in the past section, explicit participation and by extension explicit play, is reliant upon a creative or disruptive agency that affects wider connective actors. As this chapter has emphasised, it is

these relations of play that are crucial to addressing the critical implications of playful co-creativity. For any similarly participatory conception of how play productively functions in online games, attention must be given to the relationality of players to other players as well as wider participatory actors. As distinctions between what is enunciative/reconfiguring and what is textually productive/constructive break down in conceptions of playful co-creativity, the responses to online modes of play become crucial in critically addressing the playful productivity at stake here. In later chapters (particularly chapter seven), these participatory perspectives are further exemplified through online ethnographic examples of explicit MOBA play.

3.4 Political economy of playful co-creativity

Throughout this chapter, various perspectives from games, fan and Internet studies have been utilised to frame both a playfully co-creative perspective as well as the significance of *Warcraft III* custom games. Both of these objects of study are crucial underpinnings for critically understanding the significance of MOBAs and as this thesis further develops, the implications of these discussions are further exemplified in MOBAs. However, one notable absence from the line of critical inquiry explored throughout this chapter has been the political economy of digital games and the Internet. Although political economy has been alluded to several times and in the literature discussed throughout this chapter, it often forms a crucial critical underpinning, its relative exclusion in this work up until now has not been due to its irrelevance in discussions of playful co-creativity. As mentioned early in this thesis, the *Warcraft III* custom game culture was one that exemplified a bottom-up participatory culture. Unlike so many similar cultures of modding and playing where the top-down

influences of developers intervene with the creativity of participatory cultures; *Warcraft III* custom games were until 2009, relatively free from any overriding monetary influence. This relative isolation from monetary motivations would have a lingering influence on the hybrid structures of MOBAs design, culture and economy. Chapter five discusses the implications of this transition in more detail. In a wider scope however, *Warcraft III* custom games and their essentially non-commercial status are the exception when considering the practices of playful co-creativity.

As this chapter has discussed, the connective relations of online play are crucial to their potential as a playfully co-creative practice. In *Warcraft III* custom games these relations encompassed players, modders, and wider connective cultures of participation. For nearly any other online game however, the influence of the original game or platform developer is impossible to separate from these connective webs of interrelations. Furthermore, as the inception of the MOBA genre discussed at the end of this chapter exemplifies, the creativity of any online action is by the token of its non-commercial status, paradoxically exposed to the potential of economic industrialisation. These movements between the bottom-up creativity of everyday people and the top-down economic motivations of the culture industries are by no means limited to digital games and the Internet. As Tiziana Terranova pointed out when writing about the emerging digital economy in 2000,

Subcultural movements have stuffed the pockets of multinational capitalism for decades [...] In this sense, the digital economy is not a new phenomenon but simply a new phase of this longer history of experimentation [in economic incorporation].
(Terranova, 2000: 39)

As the various permutations of playful co-creativity described in this thesis exemplify, capitalism's history of 'experimentation' in incorporating new bottom-up innovations continues. These issues of commercial influence and its role in perpetuating unequal power relations are central to a critical political economy perspective. I take political economy in its

broad sense to mean what Vincent Mosco (2009, 24) identifies as the social and commercial power structures that impinge upon the ‘production, distribution and consumption’ of the media. Similar to the critical underpinnings of convergent approaches outlined in chapter 2.1, the question of how bottom-up agencies inherent to co-created games transform existing power structures has become one of particular academic importance in the fields of game, fan and Internet studies. In this section, I aim to outline the critical implications of co-creative relations from a critical political economic perspective and ask what role, if any, the practices of playful co-creativity have in potentially transforming political economic power relations. These critical perspectives provide an apt introduction to the context of MOBAs inception and at the end of this chapter the significance of MOBAs as a culmination of *Warcraft III*'s custom game culture is addressed.

3.4.1 Political economy and online games

As has been discussed throughout this chapter, the bottom-up movements of *Warcraft III* custom games were dispersed, dynamic and never-ending in their emergent innovation. For online games more widely, many of these same characteristics can be identified and just as the connective circuits of agency were crucial to producing new genres in *Warcraft III*, similar movements produce contested forms of value in other games. The bottom-up movements of online games are diverse and are too vast to fully recount, but it is worth briefly mentioning a few examples here.

Many forms of co-creativity take the form of explicit participation (Schäfer, 2011: 120) where the outcome of the creative action is a tangible addition or iteration of content, exemplified in modding practices. As noted when describing co-creativity (see section 2.3),

many of these creative practices have been implemented fully into games where players remix and create games anew, for example in *LittleBigPlanet* (2008, Media Molecule) or *Minecraft* (2011 - present, Mojang). Where user practices begin to closely resemble the model of playful co-creativity I have described in this chapter is through emergent play and the productive agency it often carries in its connective capacity. Examples of ludic emergence such as ‘cheating’ (Consalvo, 2007), ‘counterplaying’ (Apperley and Dieter, 2012) or ‘theorycrafting’ (Karlsen, 2011), as well as the plethora of socially emergent modes of interaction notable in massively multiplayer online games (see for example Pearce, 2006; Chen, 2012; Johansson, 2013) exemplify these play orientated practices. In these latter examples of emergent play, the label of ‘co-creative’ is not often attached to the agency these practices represent. As argued throughout this thesis however, these playful practices each demand a response from someone and each example is collectively capable of structural design changes to a game and/or its wider ecology. Where many of these examples differ from each other is in the respective motivations of players or participants. For example, modders seeking to recreate a game hold very different motivations to ‘theorycrafters’ or ‘cheaters’ looking to break one. However, as divergent as the bottom-up interactions of co-creators may be, the political economy of their relations to top-down actors often remains the same.

In all of these cases the game exists as a hybrid form of bottom-up and top-down interrelations where, as Aphra Kerr (2011: 26) notes, various actors seek to ‘create various forms of capital (social, cultural and economic) and value (exchange value, use value and sign value)’ out of these practices. For Kerr, the adequacy of participatory or co-creative conceptions of player production in online games is problematic as the ‘production does not stop when a product is launched’ (25). Unlike the production cycles of many traditional media forms or videogames prior to their online ubiquity (Kline et al, 2003: 66; Kerr, 2006:

78), contemporary online games increasingly resist the filmic business model of releasing new individual games in favour of longer lasting cycles of production and monetisation tied to single games.

What Kline et al (2003: 66) termed the economy of ‘perpetual innovation’ that videogames find themselves in is still present. However, product innovation increasingly takes the form of less actual games and more activity and industrialisation of players bottom-up agency in existing games. This trend was evidenced in 2016 by the statistic that among the top five most played games on Valve Corporation’s *Steam* platform, none of these games were actually released in 2016 (Grayson, 2017). Furthermore, this trend has been recognised by award giving bodies such as the *British Academy Games Awards* who in 2017, created a category for ‘Best Evolving Game’. This award goes to the game that ‘displays [the best] ongoing evolution and developer support, including games as a service, persistent online games, massively multiplayer online games, evolving free to play games, and any other types of game that receive ongoing updates.’ (BAFTA: 2017: 7)

The cultural implications of this longer lasting cycle of production are returned to more substantially throughout this thesis (particularly in chapter six, as well as chapter 7.2.2), when discussing the affective economics of free to play models and the significance of e-sports. For the political economy that these online games find themselves in however, this trend towards a never-ending process of convergent production, or what Esther MacCallum-Stewart (2014: 149) calls a phase of ‘always in beta’, asks us to re-evaluate the roles and power relations of those co-creating online games. As MacCallum-Stewart (51) notes, players are increasingly ‘made to feel as if they are at the forefront of dynamic construction and design’ in online games and this co-creative role comes with a series of questions regarding the larger power

dynamics at play. It is necessary to consider the wider political economy of the Internet when framing these co-creative or participatory questions here.

3.4.2 Political economy and the Internet

Many of the same political economic frictions that can be noted in online games play out across Internet studies as framing the online actions of users takes two differing perspectives. On one hand, there is an optimistic appraisal of co-creative relations as an empowering and democratic mode of innovation capable of meaningfully negotiating power dynamics through democratically innovating systems and their inherent media forms (Jenkins, 2006a; Tapscott and Williams, 2006; Shirky, 2008; Leadbeater, 2008; Gauntlett, 2012). These positions are underpinned by notions such as ‘collective intelligence’ (Levy, 1997) or ‘democratic innovation’ (Von Hippel, 2005) that argue for the capacity of connected users as significant in creating new expressive media forms that are culturally and economically emancipatory through their collective agency. As Charles Leadbeater (2008: 7) put it:

The web’s underlying culture of sharing, decentralisation and democracy makes it an ideal platform for groups to self-organise, combining their ideas and know-how, to create together games, encyclopedias, software, social networks, video-sharing sites or entire parallel universes. That culture of sharing also makes the web difficult for governments to control and hard for corporations to make money from. (Leadbeater, 2008: 7)

This newly realised agency is reminiscent of many earlier claims surrounding the Internet that circulated in influential publications such as *Wired* in the 1990’s and predicted online spaces that would form a cyberspace of non-hierarchical collectives that could level established power structures (Turner, 2006; Flichy, 2007). Although the Internet has developed quite differently from these early predictions, the emancipatory promise for something new and collectively free of control remains a profoundly influential position, both

in media and cultural studies literature as well as in more popular discourses such as Leadbeater's above account. Van Dijck and Nieborg (2009) argue that it is precisely these discourses that have obfuscated overarching power structures and, either implicitly or explicitly, contributed to an online landscape that resembles something else entirely. It is here that the other more pessimistic perspective regarding the political economy of participation and co-creativity presents itself.

As theorists such as Terranova (2000), Kücklich (2005) or Scholz (2013) have discussed, there is the view that these connected relations are from their inception always contingent upon overriding structures of capitalist control. Far from seeing co-creative relations as providing a levelling capacity to established power dynamics, this latter perspective emphasises the way actors from below are industrialised and economically exploited through a myriad of structures, forms of governance, and affective modes of control. In online games, examples of this economic valorisation of bottom-up actors are numerous.

Julian Kücklich's (2005) term 'playbour', provides one of the most widely applicable examples of this perspective in game studies. Kücklich originally deployed 'playbour' as a term to describe the practices of modding where the distinction between play and work readily breaks down. However, just as similar terms such as Terranova's (2000) 'free labour' or Scholz's (2013) 'digital labour' have gained currency when critically approaching wider online activities, so too has playbour been deployed to describe wider practices of play. For example, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009: 23) note how the play of MMOs as well as the making of 'machinima' are both prominent examples of playbour. In a similar scope, many of the playfully co-creative practices described throughout this thesis, including emergent MOBA play, streamed play and paratextually recorded play could be viewed in this critical frame. These labour orientated framings of online power dynamics employ a neo-

Marxist position influenced by the work of autonomists such as Antonio Negri (1989). Positions such as Negri's emphasise the widening practices of automated production from outside traditional factories and into the social spaces of everyday lived experience (for example, online games). In the context of the Internet and its prolific commercialisation of social actions via large commercially operated platforms, the autonomist perspective provides a persuasive way of interpreting online power dynamics. Just as critical interpretations of the culture industries address the power dynamics of traditional media (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979), the emphasis here is on how the overriding structures of economic extraction ultimately govern participatory and playful actions.

3.4.3 Political economy and co-creative relations

Throughout this thesis, the interplay between the two above framings are revisited in relation to the political economy of MOBAs and their respective forms of playful co-creativity. As T.L. Taylor (2006: 127) notes when writing about the MMORPG *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment, 1999 - present), there are no clear answers regarding 'whose game it is' when the 'push and pull' of actors is as diverse and complexly interconnected as it is for many online games. For many scholars including some mentioned above, a similarly tentative middle ground between the two perspectives described here is preferred to dichotomising these perspectives. As Kline et al put it in 2003 when describing the merits of both perspectives,

Such a [middle-ground] perspective would permit analysis of the increasingly ominous capacities for targeting, tracking, and strategic management that digitalisation put in the hands of media corporations; but it would also recognise the potential for crisis in the market system as well as dissidence, transgression, and alternative practice to emerge among, in our case, video game players and workers alike. (Kline et al, 2003: 41)

In the space of time since 2003 when this statement was made, the landscape of games and the Internet has changed vastly as already noted. The entire *Warcraft III* custom game culture described in the past two chapters evidenced the potential for alternative practices and entirely new genres to emerge from commercial games and their platforms. However, the story of games such as *DotA* transitioning into commercialised MOBAs is also emblematic of a turn in this political economic debate. Rather than viewing games as a site for dissident crisis in capitalism, many critical frameworks surrounding online games and the Internet now favour a more hybrid, co-evolutionary approach whereby players and developers both inflect their values onto each other.

In Banks and Humphrey's (2008) influential account of the way co-creative relations in games can be framed through a critical political economic perspective, they propose a perspective of viewing games as an 'emergent social network market'. Borrowing perspectives from wider Internet studies in a similar way to this research, Banks and Humphrey describe the site of co-creativity in games as a 'co-evolution' of 'social' (non-commercial, participatory, broadly bottom-up) and 'enterprise' (commercialised, developer lead, broadly top-down). As they describe:

We are interested in the emerging hybrid relations that cut across the commercial and non-commercial social networks and markets. We look at non-monetary, social economies and their central and increasingly constitutive role in monetary or financial economies. But rather than saying the social has become commoditised, we suggest that the extraction of economic value from social relationships is a dynamic and emergent process which also transforms the practices of businesses and capital. The intersection and co-evolution of these two economies (the social/affective and business) produce not outright exploitation of unpaid labour by capital, but a terrain of negotiation and power relations quite different from those of industrial era production. (Banks and Humphreys, 2008: 402)

Negotiating the two perspectives outlined in this section surrounding the Internet as a means of emancipation/exploitation, Banks and Humphrey's co-creative view is one that avoids notions of 'corporate winners and user losers' (413). Many scholars in game studies utilise a

similar approach, opting for more situated conceptions of the multifaceted values players and developers gain from their activities. In Humphreys' (2005b) related work, for example, she questions the adequacy of end user licence agreements in MMORPGs, finding that developers may have to change their conceptions of intellectual property in order to maintain governance. It is these pushes and pulls between co-creative relations that Banks and Humphreys argue will define the ongoing structures of games and their related industries, jobs and modes of play. In later ethnographic chapters of this thesis, particularly chapter 7, the playfully co-creative mode of governance negotiated in MOBAs is critically reflected on with the aim of identifying who is in control of these new playful practices.

It is important to emphasise here, as Banks and Humphrey's (2008: 413) do, that these relations are not even as 'The power derived from the social economies is not necessarily consonant with that derived from financial economies'. Through controlling the platform of a game, commercial developers can extract vast sums of economic value out of playful practices that do not necessarily reflect the sites where productivity has taken place.

However, as an approach directed at understanding hybrid relations in online games, co-creativity and social network markets provide a vital perspective for this thesis. As detailed in section 2.3, playful co-creativity is distinctive in its scope to many similar co-creative approaches, but it shares the same critical stance on viewing the political economy of games and their play as in a constant state of negotiation. In later chapters of this thesis, notions of exploitation and hybridity are explored in ethnographic depth to critically frame the MOBA model of playful co-creativity.

Banks and Humphrey's view on the potential of co-creative relations to change the industry is a salient one to the topic of this thesis as they state that 'what may initially seem to be a hobby can become new markets, industries or even jobs, as yet unthought of or defined,

under the right circumstances and conditions.’ (414). The playfully co-creative development of *DotA* in *Warcraft III* custom games provides a brilliant example of this co-creative potential as *DotA* would eventually result in the industry defining MOBA genre. MOBAs comprise the topic for the ensuing ethnographic research in this thesis. However, before discussing the onset of MOBAs specifically, it is necessary to critically explore one more crucial underpinning for many of the political economic approaches described here and that is affect.

As described by Banks and Humphreys, affective economies underpin many co-creative models of governance due to overlapping relations of commercially, socially, culturally and playfully inclined actors. MOBAs are a particularly noteworthy example affective governance as games such as *League of Legends* and *Dota 2* are monetised through new models of ‘fair’ free-to-play underpinned by affective economics. The details of this model are listed in chapter five, however, it is the aim here to explore how notions of affect can further inform an understanding of political economy and playful co-creativity.

3.4.4 Affect

Throughout this thesis, I have used the word ‘affect’ as a way of describing a more social form of agency that is not always explicit in its full causation in the nonlinear systems of relation encompassed by an online game. For example, if a player pioneers a new play style in a MOBA and this style takes on a playfully co-creative identity in iterating the game, its affects are multiple. Players, professional players, user-generated content producers and developers are each affected by the new ways to play, the creation of new paratextual content utilising the new mode of playing (for example in an e-sports setting or live stream), and

every actor is affected variously by the ensuing changes to the game if the innovation is viewed as unbalanced by developers (a more detailed example is given in section 7.2.1) . Asking what the ‘affect’ of playful or participatory modes of bottom-up co-creativity are in MOBAs means being attentive to these interrelational flows and how these movements are constitutive of the games collective structure, identity, value and power dynamics. For scholars working across the wider humanities and social sciences, related notions of affect have had a profound influence in considerations of culture and political economy in recent years. It is worth reflecting on these notions of affect here as they inform and extend my own perspective on what constitutes MOBAs affective relations.

Writing about the recent onset of ‘affect theory’, Seigworth and Gregg (2010: 5) note that the watershed moment for considerations of affect began in the mid 1990s with the publication of two influential essays, ‘Shame in the Cybernetic Fold’ (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995) and ‘The Autonomy of Affect’ (Massumi, 1995). Both of these essays follow different disciplinary inspirations. Sedgwick and Franks’ consideration of affect draws upon the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkin and considers the evolutionary role of social affects in various biological ‘hardwires’. Massumi’s approach follows Gilles Deleuze’s Spinoza inspired philosophy to consider affect as existing in the midst of bodies (understood broadly as not only biological bodies, but any material or immaterial entity) and co-constitutive of the assemblages they compose. As Seigworth and Gregg note (2010: 6), both of these approaches have been influential in subsequent work surrounding affect, with scholars of affect describing this paradigm as ‘the affective turn’ (Clough, 2007).

It is beyond the scope or aims of this chapter to consider the full extent of this ‘affective turn’, however, three common characteristics of affect can be identified as relevant to the exploration of MOBA affect in this thesis. Firstly, affect is an interrelational mode of causation similar to many of the co-creative and connective flows of agency described

throughout this chapter. Secondly, affects are not always easily grasped due to their immaterial status as existing between, but co-constitutive of, bodies and/or assemblages. As Lawrence Grossberg (1992: 57) once put it when writing about the affective sensibilities of fans, affect is ‘what gives colour, tone, or texture to our experiences’. Thirdly, affects are often (but not strictly as in the Deleuze/Spinoza example above) social in their status and are most commonly understood as the lived capacity of human minds, bodies or feelings to inflect upon (and be inflected upon by) their wider spheres of influence. This more socially inclined definition of affect is most often taken by cultural studies theorists such as Grossberg mentioned above. Many different scholars will provide their own nuanced perspectives on what constitutes affect, but it is from these three broad categories that I aim to grasp the affective status (and economics) of MOBAs.

A relevant example that combines all three of these affective characteristics can be found in Michael Hardt’s (1999) conception of ‘affective labour’ as a specified form of ‘immaterial labour’ (Lazzarato, 1996). For Hardt, the labour of many jobs such as those found in the service industries are affectively imbued with human interaction and communication. A retail service, for example, does not only provide an exchange of goods but a setting of affective exchange that is also bound up in processes of economic valuation.

The labour is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion – even a sense of connectedness or community. Categories such as ‘in-person’ services or services of proximity are often used to identify this kind of labour, but what is essential to it, its in-person aspect, is really the creation and manipulation of affects. Such affective production, exchange, and communication is generally associated with human contact, with the actual presence of another, but that contact can be either actual or virtual. In the production of affects in the entertainment industry, for example, the human contact, the presence of others, is principally virtual, but not for that reason any less real. (Hardt, 1999: 96)

Hardt’s description of affective labour provides a widely applicable example for considering how the three characteristics of affect outlined above combine in an everyday setting. These

characteristics of affect as an interrelational, immaterial and primarily social mode of agency are how I intend to utilise the term in this thesis. As Hardt's account of affective labour exemplifies, affect is a difficult sensibility to quantify, but it is also impossible to separate from economic processes. However, what makes Hardt's conception of affective labour particularly relevant to the themes of this chapter is the mention of 'virtual' experience as no 'less real' in its affective qualities. For Hardt who was writing in 1999, a virtual affect signalled any mediated experience, be that through a film or a brand. Although there is no explicit consideration given to the potential of online affects in Hardt's account here, the relevance of affective labour and the wider 'affective turn' this literature was situated as part of would foreground the networked development that now encompasses the Internet.

3.4.5 Affective economies

As discussed throughout this thesis, the Internet is a constitutively social, networked and highly interrelated landscape where many ambiguous agencies can become collective, productive or economically valuable in myriad ways. The affective relations of an online game, fandom, culture or social network are not absent from these connective flows and in recent years, many scholars of the Internet have noted the overlapping spheres of affect and economic valuation that have developed. Writing from a fan studies perspective in 2006, Jenkins (2006a: 61 – 62) utilised the term 'affective economics' as a way of describing 'a new configuration of marketing theory, still somewhat on the fringes but gaining ground within the media industry, which seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions.' For Jenkins, the newly convergent relations of participatory cultures represented a more dynamic interplay between bottom-up and top-down actors (see section 2.1). As bottom-up

participants such as fan communities exerted a more productive role in the creation of the media, so too, were top-down media professionals becoming more like fans through participating in fan communities. This overlap between the top-down and bottom-up or the professional and non-professional also represented an overlap of fans affective sensibilities with commercial motivations. Or in other words, a collapse of the distinction between what is commercial and non-commercial as opaque new forms of affective monetisation entered the setting.

Jenkins used affective economics to describe the way television producers of *American Idol* (Fox, 2002 – 2016) anticipated the sentiments of their audience to help shape their programme accordingly. Only briefly does Jenkins consider the wider significance of affect as a larger paradigm in cultural studies. However, as Hills (2015) notes in a more recent account of affective economics in relation to fan crowdfunding, Jenkins observations surrounding the blurred boundaries of online affect between commercial and non-commercial were prescient. Hills account of affective economics follows the same fan orientated perspective as Jenkins and describes the affective status of convergent relations that exist in crowdfunding campaigns on platforms such as *Kickstarter*.

Detailing a *Kickstarter* campaign that successfully crowdfunded a film adaptation for a cancelled television show, *Veronica Mars* (Warner Bros, 2004 - 2007), Hills emphasises the transformative potential of fan crowdfunding to the practices of media professionals. In a successful fan crowdfunding campaign, such as the one Hills describes, the money given by fans is entirely voluntary and an important reason why fans give any money towards a project is due to its perceived ‘authenticity’ as an extension of fans affective sensibilities. Or as Hills (184) puts it, a commoditised affective economy sustained through the emotional labour of professional producers performing ‘a coherent ‘social front’ where fan-like identities and commoditising discourses are mobilised.’ Through interacting on platforms fans

themselves use, and through ‘critiquing commercial processes in highly visible yet coded ways’ (186), Hills demonstrates how organisers of crowdfunding campaigns occupy a liminal role between fan and professional that is essential to the functionality of crowdfunding campaigns.

The affective economics of these fan orientated case studies closely resemble the hybrid gift economy of ‘fair’ free-to-play in MOBAs, as subsequent chapters ethnographically explore. In chapter six specifically, players are asked how far the playfully co-creative agencies of MOBAs can be viewed as a similar decommunitising agency in the affective economics of ‘fair’ free-to-play models. However, the influence of affective economics also extends beyond the convergent context of fan relations Jenkins originally considered it in and it is worth briefly considering these wider theoretical developments here as they also inform an understanding of MOBA affect. For more recent scholars of online affect such as Garde-Hansen and Gortan (2013: 60), affective economics has provided a useful framework to build on when considering the multitude of affective relations and means of economic valuation that have developed since the mid 2000’s.

3.4.6 Affective value

One useful term that combines theoretical developments from feminist writing on unpaid domestic work with that of immaterial labour is Kylie Jarrett’s (2016b) notion of ‘The Digital Housewife’. For Jarrett, the term ‘digital housewife’ refers to any kind of digital work regardless of gender that creates surplus value online. For example, through managing ‘community forums, uploading new data to the Wikipedia commons, commenting on a friend’s Facebook status or coordinating a guild run in a massively multiplayer online game’

(2016b: 2). Jarrett's intention in making the term explicitly gendered is to make parallels between new emergent online activities and their related discussions of labour and affect with that of earlier feminist discussions on unpaid domestic work. Following Leopoldina Fortunati's (1995) influential account of the way women's unpaid reproductive work is productively captured by capitalist societies, Jarrett notes that similar 'forms of immaterial and affective labour [...] are exploited in the economic circuits of the commercial web' (Jarrett, 2016b: 3). This connection is a crucial one as it allows online activities and their affective relations to be framed in a well-established line of feminist critical inquiry that questions the way affective value is captured.

As Jarrett's perspective is underpinned by Fortunati's Marxist feminist critique of affect, she understands online affective interaction as a form of non-commercial use-value. As Jarrett states,

Affect is an autonomous energy, a state of potential that cannot be captured or confined within a body, perception or cognition without undergoing a fundamental transformation. It is inherently inalienable and so, to return to the language of Marx, can only be consumed (experienced) as use-value. (Jarrett, 2016b: 121)

What is noteworthy about Jarrett's understanding of this form of affective use-value, is that she understands it as possessing a dual function, in both use and exchange. Paralleling the political economic perspective regarding a hybridised set of co-creative relations outlined in previous sections, Jarrett views modes of affective interaction as always holding intense meaning to the people creating and sharing in them. However, the same affective interaction also possesses exchange value for the commercial platforms economically valuating them. Liking someone status on *Facebook*, for example, is always representative of a personable, socially meaningful and affective use-value. However, Jarrett stresses that the same socially imbued use-value also creates exchange value for the platform holders. Similar sets of complexly intertwined affective value exist across the digital landscape.

In the playful co-creativity of MOBAs, one such set of ambiguously social, yet economically valuable forms of affective interaction can be identified. In chapter five and particularly six, the affective economics of MOBAs are critically explored in more detail alongside the influential model of gift economics that Jarrett similarly turns toward in her analysis. As Jarrett describes, ‘Affective intensities, as an inalienable product of socially embedded, reciprocal exchange, are clearly aligned with moral economies of gifting rather than the dominant political economy of today.’ The moral economy of gifting has always played a crucial role in the digital landscape of the Internet as section 6.1 explores, however, its hybridisation in the economics of large commercial platform holders is a complexly intertwined one, as Jarrett notes. It is my aim in subsequent ethnographic chapters to critically explore how far similar such gift economies operate in the affective flows of MOBAs. Moreover, I aim to outline the hybrid ways these playfully co-creative games are governed and to establish how closely they parallel wider digital platforms. Notions of the digital housewife provide a compelling critique for framing these practices, however, related notions of affective economics in social media platforms are also crucial to explore here.

For example, Andrejevic (2011b: 606) extends Jenkins fan inflected account of affective economics to consider ‘sentiment analysis, opinion mining, predictive analytics and ‘super-crunching’’. Andrejevic’s account of affective economics is much less specific in its focus than Jenkins or Hills and is more closely aligned with a critical political economic perspective of how affective economics function on a macro scale across the Internet. In contrast to fan specific accounts of affective economics that described the bottom-up capacity of participatory cultures as potentially transformative to the practices of top-down media producers, Andrejevic’s examples exemplify a total industrialisation of affect. For Andrejevic, ‘in an affective economy, a circulating, undifferentiated kind of emotion (neither solely ‘in’ the stories nor ‘of’ the audience) comes to serve as an exploitable resource, a part

of the ‘infrastructure’ (608). Both Jenkins/Hills and Andrejevic’s examples are informed by a marketing orientated perspective of what affect represents to the economics of the Internet, however, they both arrive at very different conclusions regarding the significance of affective economics to the content and political economy of the media.

Similar to Andrejevic’s political economic account of affective economics, Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012) employ an affective model of understanding social media value as differentiated from more Marxist influenced free labour accounts. For Arvidsson and Colleoni, what is vital to understanding the political economy of online media is not merely the explicitly productive agency of people creating and sharing online, but also how these practices are constitutive of ‘affective webs’. As Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012: 145) put it when describing their model of affective value,

What we have is rather an “affective economy” (Jenkins 2006) where the main measure of value is, as Antonio Negri (1999) suggested long ago, not labour or attention time, but new forms of “affective self-valorisation” on the part of the “multitude,” whereby advertising or other kinds of messages are given value by being inserted within such communicative and affective webs.

Arvidsson and Colleoni’s model of affective value is underpinned by an understanding of how stock market valuations of large Internet platforms far exceed the revenue these platforms produce. What is sustaining the vast economic valuations of platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* or *Google* is not only their revenue derived from the labour of users, but also the ‘objectified forms of abstract affect that support financial valuations’ (146).

Arvidsson and Colleoni suggest that as the economic valorisation of affect becomes more sophisticated, the vast economic valuations tied to these platforms could become justified.

Exactly what form this affective valorisation might take is a question left open by Arvidsson and Colleoni who state that ‘such an affect-based “law” of value has yet to be formulated.’ In the work of scholars such as Kylie Jarrett or Matt Hills, ‘laws’ of affective value have begun to be conceptualised and the ethnographic research presented in this thesis aims to add

another perspective to this ongoing line of inquiry. However, the salient point in all of the work surrounding affective economics is that these models of online affect, as emergent, imprecise and speculative as they may be, have come to define the content and political economy of the Internet.

The governance of MOBAs and their model of ‘fair’ free-to-play explored in chapter five offer a vital and influential example of the emerging affective economics developing in online games and wider digital platforms. Furthermore, the implications of viewing online affect as constitutive of particular forms of affective economics adds another more exploitative dimension to critically understanding the role of playful co-creativity. Similar to affect, the productive consequences of playful forms of co-creativity are not always explicit, but they are nonetheless co-constitutive of a games design, its culture and its affective identity. The myriad forms of playful co-creativity in MOBAs offer a dynamic example of circulating affects and in chapter six this theme of affective economics is returned to in ethnographic detail. The underpinning inquiry that guides chapter six is how the free-to-play model of MOBAs functions as an affective economy and in what ways do the bottom-up flows of playful co-creativity in MOBAs enable this hybrid set of power relations to operate.

In many ways, the status of these game cultures resembles the more fan orientated account of affective economics as a voluntarily given model of monetisation reliant upon a decommoditised identity surrounding the game and its culture. However, unlike the participatory culture of a television programme or an instance of fan crowdfunding, the scale of large MOBAs such as *LoL* or *Dota 2* is immense. In 2016, *LoL* generated a revenue of \$1.7 billion and *Dota 2* remained the highest grossing game on Valve Corporation’s *Steam* platform (1). What is staggering about these figures in comparison to other fan orientated examples of affective economics is that they are persistent year on year, as the popularity of

these games has continued to grow since their release in 2009 and 2011 respectively. It is the substantial scale and economic value that is harnessed through the affective economies of MOBAs that resemble wider digital platforms such as the social networks mentioned above.

Framing MOBAs alongside social media networks remains a vital critical perspective throughout this thesis. However, MOBAs, as they are widely understood, are digital games. The crisis from a critical political economic perspective is that developers such as Riot Games are no longer small indie developers. Throughout this thesis, I use the term ‘developer’ loosely to refer to organisations such as Riot Games or Valve Corporation, but it is worth emphasising here that they do not merely develop the game. Both Riot Games and more famously Valve Corporation and their *Steam* platform, also publish and distribute their games themselves. As chapter seven discusses, both of these developers also govern increasingly wide spheres of influence surrounding their games that defy the traditional role of a games developer. Moreover, both Valve Corporation and Riot Games are now companies worth billions of dollars respectively. Valve Corporation’s prominent role in the Western games industry is well known through the influence of their *Steam* platform (Boluk and Lemieux, 2017: 205), but Riot Games are also part of a giant multinational media conglomerate in the form of Tencent Holdings Limited, who have controlled a 100% stake in Riot Games since 2015 (Frank, 2015). Tencent Holdings Limited are a large Chinese multinational conglomerate (although their tax registry belongs in the Cayman Islands; see, Kerr, 2017: 61) that was founded in 1998, but are now worth an estimated \$500 billion (Hannam, 2017). Although the scope of this thesis is MOBAs, this changing definition of what encompasses a games ‘developer’ is a constant consideration that follows the term throughout this research.

3.5 Summary: birth of a playfully co-creative genre

Although many custom game genres from *Warcraft III* may have become forgotten or have gone on to create ripples of influence in games quite removed from the custom game space (4), the role of *DotA* in influencing MOBAs has had a profoundly influential impact. This impact can be observed not only in the games industry where MOBAs have established themselves as one of the most played genres in the world (Gaudiosi, 2012), but also across the landscape of digital fandom and the Internet. MOBAs have been instrumental in pioneering an influential live streaming and e-sports industry (see chapter five), alongside new models of ‘fair’ free-to-play that call into question established notions of online value and affect that pervade the Internet (see previous sections). However, what is often overlooked about this genre is its inherently co-creative past and the role that playfully collective interactions such as the ones explored in this chapter had, and continue to have, in assembling these games.

The MOBA genre stands as a prominent example of the potential for play to co-create innovative, complex, competitively appealing and ultimately, very valuable systems. It is in relation to this question of value that the enthusiasm which underlies these playful actions needs to be read in its larger political economic context. During the same period of time that custom games such as *DotA* were emerging through a collective agency of online play, the Internet was undergoing a profound transition towards an industrialisation of previously non-commodified or immaterial forms of sociality. As Jenkins noted in 2006 (2006a, 17), participatory cultures were caught between two seemingly contradictory trends. On the one hand, there was a dynamism surrounding new models of bottom-up, collectively enabled creative expression. On the other hand, there was an increasingly ‘alarming concentration’ of

top-down ownership beginning to control these activities. In the span of time since 2006, the ‘increasingly alarming’ rate at which participatory actions, online forms of sociality and various attentional agencies have been channelled into concentrated spheres of economic ownership has resulted in an online landscape dominated by commercial platforms and affective models of monetisation. The MOBA genre and its bottom-up mode of playful co-creativity has been a part of the same transition towards concentrated ownership and top-down commercial influence as much as any wider participatory, social, or attentional form.

During the year 2014, Riot Games and their single MOBA game *League of Legends*, saw an average of 27 million daily players and a revenue of \$1.3 billion. Less than five years prior, they were an unknown indie developer beginning to utilise game design ideas pioneered in the *Warcraft III* custom game space. It would be impossible to imagine in 2005 when I and my group of friends stumbled across that unassuming *Warcraft III* custom game tab, that the playful interactions we were curiously involved with would collectively contribute towards this kind of far-reaching influence and economic value. Just as commentators such as Jenkins saw many participatory acts shifting towards centralised economic control and a blurring of boundaries between commodity and non-commodity, so too has online play been engulfed by the same paradigmatic shift towards economic valuation and implicit top down influence (5).

The remainder of this thesis takes the MOBA genre as its primary case study to explore how online play is a co-creative or participatory form of agency that is responsible for assembling new variations and iterations of games, alongside new modes of playful expression, identity and even livelihood. Analysing how these playfully co-creative agencies are negotiated and controlled (economically, culturally and playfully) by commercial MOBA developers is the fundamental critical inquiry behind this thesis. As this chapter has aimed to exemplify, the custom games of *Warcraft III* provided a unique set of circumstances for many novel forms

of playful co-creativity to emerge and new genres to be pioneered. The complex interrelations that were essential to the production of custom games were a coming together of many in-game and out of game practices. In MOBAs, many similarly interrelational forms of playful co-creativity remain, however, these practices are now interwoven with a set of commercial motivations representing what I'll refer to as a hybrid state of power relations.

The hybridity of power relations found across the Internet is by no means limited to online games. Extending and critiquing Jenkins (2006b) notion of convergence culture, Astra Taylor (2014: 28) notes that commercial Internet platforms have thoroughly hybridised the lines between 'communal spirit and capitalist spunk, play and work, production and consumption, making and marketing, editorising and advertising, participation and publicity, the commons and commerce'. As noted variously in this chapter, these blurred categories have become increasingly difficult to fully untangle, however, it is these hybrid boundaries that also describe the context of playful co-creativity that MOBAs are situated in.

My own personal experience with the MOBA genre that has been referenced in the past two chapters forms one of the underlying inspirations underpinning the themes and extended research presented throughout this thesis. As a researcher interested in exploring the intersection between playful and political economies, it is impossible to ignore the grassroots past behind the genre, as it is impossible to ignore my own small role in that collective creation. My original experiences surrounding this genre in my teens and the subsequent ethnographic research I carried out a few years later culminating in an MA thesis (Jarrett, 2012) have informed my view of this genre and its intricate cultures. As with so many online game cultures however, it is one that has transformed rapidly in a relatively short span of time, asking scholars to revisit and potentially revise critical perspectives. It is perhaps due to this rapidly changing dynamic that MOBAs have remained until very recently, a relatively

underexplored genre academically. As such, it is an emerging field this research seeks to investigate through the playfully co-creative perspective outlined here. Following this line of inquiry, the next section considers how the MOBA genre can be methodologically grasped through an online critical ethnography. This ethnographic approach is crucial to understanding the hybrid state of power relations these games entail, as chapters five, six and seven all explore in ethnographic detail.

4. Grasping a connective game space

4.1 Connective ethnography

In the first three chapters, the onset and development of MOBAs connective structure was explored with the aim of moving towards a critical interpretation of the bottom-up movements that are integral to this genre's continued functionality. As argued throughout these chapters, the intrinsically playful and participatory structure of MOBAs is one imbricated by bottom-up movements that can be framed alongside many wider online platforms that are similarly structured around affective economies. These affective economies are, as the MOBA genre exemplifies, complexly overlapping in their co-creative agencies as many varied actors across many connective spaces are engaged in a hybrid state of power relations. Paralleling the hybrid power dynamics of MOBAs outlined thus far, Banks (2013: 8) describes co-creative relations in online games as 'hybrid and radically distributed collectives of amateur and professional, expert and non-expert emerging from the increasing reliance of the creative industries on user-led innovation and user-generated culture'. For Banks, as with many wider games (see section 3.1.3) and participatory scholars (see section 3.3), these connective agencies of 'radically distributed collectives' represent an overlap of 'business and consumer practices' that present a particularly dynamic paradigm of co-creative relations. It is between the interplay of these co-creative relations that the political economy of MOBAs can be found and the themes of this thesis are situated. However, it is also here that several methodological challenges immediately pose themselves. When online games are defined by the distributed status of their multiple actors or paratexts then how, as researchers, should this connective ecology be approached?

In section 3.1.3 this methodological question was briefly explored with reference to T.L. Taylor's (2009) conception of MMO games as an assemblage. Rather than attempting to account for every interrelation that constitutes an assemblage of play, Taylor proposes that the dispersed networks of a game can be approached through an 'ethnographic sensibility' for seeking out "'found objects" from everyday life'. For Taylor (2009: 333), this ethnographic sensibility is 'deeply interwoven with the contextual analysis of games and play, one which situates them within their specific interrelations and practices.' Throughout this thesis a similarly ethnographic sensibility has been adopted, whereby representative fluctuations or motivations in the connective structure of MOBAs have been highlighted due to their interrelational significance. Although a broad picture of the differing sites of MOBAs (playful) co-creation has been given through these descriptions, and it is with this macro-level significance that I situate MOBAs *dispositif* as part of the wider political economy of the Internet, it is not the aim of this project to detail and quantify the vast interrelations of MOBAs. In contrast, the aim here is to give an account of MOBAs bottom-up genealogy and its continued influence in the hybrid power dynamics of affective valuation and uneven control exemplified by this genre. My lived experiences as a researcher and long-time player of these games has been crucial to the 'ethnographic sensibility' that has allowed me to traverse these connective structures and the transformation of their power dynamics. However, as this project moves beyond describing the genealogy of these power dynamics and towards the critical questions concerning MOBAs contemporary status as affective economies imbricated by playful co-creativity, it is necessary to widen my ethnographic methodology.

In this chapter, the methodological challenges of grasping a connective game space are explored through outlining an online ethnographic approach towards the MOBA genre that is continued in subsequent chapters of this thesis. In part, this approach builds on my own long-

standing experiences with the genre that have informed the previous chapters. It is these personal experiences that I have gestured to as ethnographic in their close position with the games cultures in question. However, there is a danger here in equating ethnography with merely personal experience as Boellstorff et al note when considering what defines a virtual world ethnography:

Personal experience is part of ethnographic research. However, the converse is not true: ethnographic research is not just personal experience. Nor is it simply the recording of firsthand experience. Thus it is a myth that writing about your own experiences is the same as ethnography. This reduces ethnographic research to an exercise in data collection, to the consternation of many ethnographers. (Boellstorff et al, 2012: 43)

As Boellstorff et al discuss here, good ethnographic practice is more than simply personal experience or the recording of experience through data collection methods. Ethnography involves *both* the lived experience of the researcher interacting with a culture as well as their qualitative fieldnotes that often involve participant observations, interviews or discussions. Crucially, ethnography involves bringing these first and second-hand experiences together through an interpretative approach that relies upon the cultural expertise of the researcher to reveal what Clifford Geertz (1973: 9) would influentially call, the deeper ‘structures of signification’ that are inherent to any culture.

For Geertz, whose work was influential in the revision of ethnography during the 1970’s, any culture contains a ‘multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit’ (10). Information about a culture alone cannot reveal these structures due to the different ways information can be contextually interpreted. It is only through the lived experience of the researcher interpreting cultural information that the contextual meanings and ‘implicit’ structures of signification reveal themselves. Although the Internet presents a vastly different context for cultural activity than the geographically grounded cultures Geertz

and many traditional ethnographers studied, it is with an ethnographic approach that I aim to further explore the play, affects and power structures of MOBAs.

4.1.1 The ambiguous scope of a MOBA ethnography

Writing about online ethnographies, Cristine Hine (2013: 13) notes that a ‘complex and confusing’ problem immediately poses itself for any Internet based ethnography of how, exactly, to situate the culture in question.

The Internet is multi-spatial, in the various new forms of space that emerge online, the connections that it enables across geographic spaces, and the forms of mobility that its users engage in as they encounter it on different devices. The experience of the Internet spans different forms of temporality, as we engage in interactions that are sometimes persistent and archived for the long term, and at other points as fleeting, immediate and ephemeral as a chat on a street corner. (Hine, 2015: 13)

As a cultural activity, any individual MOBA is not only vast but also dispersed across the Internet and across the world. Furthermore, in contrast to the persistent virtual worlds of an MMO where many influential online game ethnographies have been carried out (see for example, Boellstorff et al, 2012), MOBAs are duration based games. Although, as noted throughout this thesis, these games carry playfully co-creative consequences that persist beyond the temporal status of their in-game experience, the persistence of these affects can only be understood through a connective perspective. Attention must be given not only to the play spaces of a MOBA, but also the games various paratexts or microsystems that co-create the experience, culture and affective relationships. Scholarly interest in MOBAs remains an emerging field in games studies, however, it is worth briefly reflecting on the ways scholars have methodologically approached this connective set of challenges.

For various scholars of MOBAs looking at similar flows of agency across games and across paratexts, a more quantitative ‘big data’ orientated approach is preferred when attempting to

grasp these movements (Ratan et al, 2012; Drachen et al, 2014; Egliston, 2016). In each of these sources, the movements of many in-game MOBA players is studied through various quantitative means. For Ratan et al it involved gameplay survey data from over 15,000 *LoL* players; for Drachen et al it involved analysing the replays of 200 *Dota 2* games through analysing individual player movements with an automated external program; while for Egliston, it involved utilising the existing big data sets of MOBAs detailed in section 5.5.1. Although differing in significant ways from an ethnographic approach, the usage of these big data orientated methods reveals something significant about the way MOBAs are connectively experienced.

Writing about freely available *Dota 2* paratextual data sets such as ‘Dotabuff.com’, Egliston (2016) notes that as a methodology, more quantitative big data approaches have been overlooked in games research, particularly in the humanities. Egliston notes that with the prevalence and open accessibility of paratextual big data sets discussed in section 5.5.1, new methodological avenues are open for researchers to utilise this data when discussing the co-constitution of games by players. Due to big data’s ‘perceived incompatibilities at an ontological level’, however, Egliston argues that humanities research surrounding games often overlooks this data in favour of more ethnographic methodologies that have been similarly influential in wider cultural studies. In this research, I recognise the usefulness of these freely available big data sets as a tool for viewing the macro-level trends of MOBA play. However, the research themes and questions that have emerged out of this research, namely the significance of MOBAs affective economy and the continued role of playful co-creativity in reinforcing the dispositif of their power relations, cannot be answered (or indeed, arrived at) through big data alone.

What big data sets can convey about the playing practices of hundreds of thousands of players says nothing about the affective relationships these same playing practices may

encompass. For any big data orientated approach, these issues of context and interpretation remain a challenge as boyd and Crawford note when writing critically about the paradigm of big data.

Data are not generic. There is value to analysing data abstractions, yet retaining context remains critical, particularly for certain lines of inquiry. Context is hard to interpret at scale and even harder to maintain when data are reduced to fit into a model. Managing context in light of Big Data will be an ongoing challenge. (boyd and Crawford, 2012: 671)

Boyd and Crawford's critique of a big data approach parallels Geertz's emphasis on the importance of context when approaching ethnography and the particular research questions or themes an ethnography is suited to addressing. An ethnographic approach remains essential to this research due to its themes. However, the connective set of circumstances that big data has arisen in also cannot be ignored.

For boyd and Crawford, the paradigm of big data is emblematic of a 'wider computational turn in thought and research' (665). As noted throughout this thesis, MOBAs are a thoroughly computational experience not only in their status as a systemically complex games genre, but also in the way they are experienced online, across paratexts, and in relation to a wider collective of players. It is in this profoundly connective ecology of play that a big data approach provides a compelling tool for researchers, just as it does for the players and developers who equally utilise these datasets (Kerr, 2017: 110). The challenge for the online ethnography of this thesis is conveying the richly qualitative and contextual experiences of players while retaining the more expansive, connective quality in which these games are experienced.

Fortunately, ethnography is an approach as adaptive as the cultures it studies. Although there are not many examples, some existing studies of MOBAs have explicitly employed ethnographic techniques. Two notable examples include the in-depth interviews and analysis

of play recordings carried out by Ratan et al (2015) when addressing the issue of gender disparity in *LoL* (it should be noted that this example is also complemented by further quantitative research); another example is the interviews, in-game observations and analysis of 'tribunal' game logs carried out by Kou and Nardi (2013) when addressing the regulation of anti-social behaviour in *LoL* (1). These studies provide a useful comparison of mixed method qualitative MOBA fieldwork, however, the focus of this thesis remains distinct in its connective approach. As crucial as the game is in the connective ecology of any MOBA, it is equally important for the questions of this thesis to account for the connective experiences of players across multiple paratexts. How far this expansive and potentially problematic scope for a connective ethnography extends is crucial to clarify here.

4.1.2 Multi-site ethnography

Boellstorff et al (2012: 59) point out that this expansive scope for an online games ethnography is not an entirely novel or unique position to be in. Utilising George Marcus's (1995) influential conception of 'multi-site' ethnography, Boellstorff et al demonstrate how each of their independent virtual world ethnographies frequently traversed various spaces. For example, Celia Pearce's virtual world ethnography surrounding a player community of the MMOG *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* was radically ruptured when the game permanently shut down, however, her fieldwork continued.

Through participant observation, Celia discovered a constellation of activities when investigating how players of the game *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* migrated to a different game, *There.com*, when *Uru* closed. She learned that an online forum was their primary form of communication, defining the group as transcending any one of the virtual worlds the diasporic community inhabited. (Boellstorff et al, 2012: 60)

The varied way players traversed different online spaces in this example is what I similarly aim to convey with a connective approach to MOBA ethnography. Hine noted in 2000 (61)

that as an approach, multi-sited ethnography is an ‘encouraging’ development for ethnographies of the Internet due to the inherently connected spaces that exist online. In a similar vein, this more multi-sited or connective view of MOBAs is one I have aimed to convey throughout this thesis and will continue to do in the following fieldwork. For Marcus (1995) however, multi-site ethnography was more than just a practical way to describe cultural influences as existing in different places. It was also part of the more holistic and critical view of the ethnographer towards wider systems of power.

Marcus (97) noted that for more interdisciplinary and critical ethnographies found in work ‘such as media studies, feminist studies, science and technology studies, various strands of cultural studies, and the theory, culture, and society group’; a discrete view of spaces and cultures is rarely applicable.

Cultural logics so much sought after in anthropology are always multiply produced, and any ethnographic account of these logics finds that they are at least partly constituted within sites of the so-called system (i.e. modern interlocking institutions of media, markets, states, industries, universities – the worlds of elites, experts, and middle classes). Strategies of quite literally following connections, associations, and putative relationships are thus at the very heart of designing multi-sited ethnographic research. (Marcus, 1995: 97)

Marcus’s assertion that multi-sited ethnographies share a perspective similar to that of any critical ethnography concerned with the influence of wider power structures is one with clear relevance to the themes of this thesis. For any critical ethnography, even those strategically situated in a single space, a wider comprehension of power is essential. Marcus (110) uses the example of Paul Willis’s (1977) influential ethnography of working-class British school boys as exemplary of this wider critical perspective. Willis’s ethnography is noteworthy as it took place entirely at a British school during the 1970’s. However, the experiences that emerged as vital to understanding the children’s educational prospects were those on the factory floors where the children also worked. Willis’s ethnography never studied the factories directly, but his work was always indirectly informed by the exertion of influence

and power that the factory spaces possessed through their effect on the children at school. For any critical ethnography concerned with questions of power, this multiple perspective is essential as Marcus emphasised when he stated a set of principles for multi-sited ethnography as; ‘Follow the people’; ‘Follow the thing’; ‘Follow the metaphor’; ‘Follow the plot, story, or allegory’; ‘Follow the life or biography’; ‘Follow the conflict’.

Following the ‘thing’ or ‘metaphor’ of MOBAs and the ‘people’, their various players, across the connective spaces of the Internet is how this thesis adopts an approach similar to a multi-sited ethnography. The heterogeneity of a multi-sited approach recalls many of the approaches adopted in this thesis, namely a Foucauldian conception of power and an assembled, cybernetic or connective conception of online games. Marcus (1995: 102) notes that these more postmodern frameworks provided an inspiration for a multi-sited ethnographic approach and in the following description of a connective MOBA ethnography, these critical underpinnings remain integral.

To reflect the constitutively multi-sited context of MOBA play, this chapter proposes a conception of connective ethnography that is centred on the discussions, controversies, movements and memes that flow through *Reddit* spaces. As the subsequent sections of this chapter explore, *Reddit* combines elements of both the qualitative experience necessary for an ethnography and the more collective actions that so thoroughly co-create MOBAs form. Moreover, *Reddit* also presents a constitutively multi-sited or connective context of participation where many different actors, motivations and power structures readily flow through its collectively assembled architecture as a platform. To comprehend why *Reddit* provides a uniquely connective space and why it plays such an influential role as a central hub in MOBA cultures in the English-speaking West, it is necessary to grasp the distinctive significance of *Reddit* as a platform.

4.2 Microsystems at play: *Reddit*, subreddits and MOBAs

4.2.1 Reddit and subreddits

Reddit is a news aggregation website that allows users (or ‘Redditors’) to share links to specific webpages, images, or start original discussions around a topic. Organised by particular *subreddits* centred around a theme, for example ‘[www.reddit.com]/r/worldnews’ or ‘/r/funny’, users are able to vote on what particular links they like and the more a link is liked, the further it moves up the page of a particular *subreddit*. In the process of moving up a *subreddit* page, a link becomes more visible to the *Reddit* community at large. Alongside any *Reddit* link, there is a comments section with its own respective up-voting and down-voting system for every individual comment. These comment sections constitute a further paratextual commentary on the particular issue or discussion at stake, similar to any Internet forum. For heavily up-voted links that rise to the most visible front pages of *Reddit*, comments often number in the thousands as people from around the world contribute their own content through comments, pictures, videos, memes or further points of discussion.

As of April 2017, *Reddit* is the 7th most popular website in the world with a far more prevailing influence in the English-speaking West (2). For many activities, movements or controversies that are centred around the Internet as a means of organisation or impetus, *Reddit* is likely to play a prominent mobilising role. For example, as it has done in the creation of memes (Milner, 2013), the mobilisation political movements such as ‘anti-SOPA’ (Loudon, 2014) or in assisting controversies such as ‘the Fappening’ or ‘Gamergate’ (Massanari, 2015a). *Reddit*’s slogan is ‘the front page of the Internet’ and in a very literal way, *Reddit* has emerged as one of the most influential microsystems in the connective ecology of the Internet. Responsible for some of the most progressive but also most

controversial aspects of online culture. As Adrienne Massanari (2015b: 13) puts it in her online ethnography of *Reddit*; '*Reddit* is regularly an infuriating *and* inspiring place.'

As a platform, *Reddit* is a commercially operated site that was valued at \$500 million in 2014 (Cheredar, 2014). As a company, however, *Reddit* only employs a very small number of people (roughly 100) and the commercial valuation of the platform is rarely a topic of interest to users on the site. *Reddit* does not sell the data of its users and relies heavily on them to self-moderate its spaces through the voting architecture of the platform as well as the more devoted time of moderators who uphold the rules of particular *subreddits*. The creation of new *subreddits* is an open source process with users able to freely create *subreddits* around any particular theme or emergent topic. Unlike a social media site, users of *Reddit* are identified by pseudonyms that gain reputational points or 'karma' for the posts or links submitted by a user. If a user gains 700 upvotes and 200 downvotes for a particular comment for example, 500 points of 'karma' will be added to their profile. Users can also customise their accounts preferred *subreddits* so that only particular *subreddits* are visible on their 'feed', evoking Eli Pariser's (2011) notion of the Internet as increasingly becoming a space of closed circuited 'filter bubbles'. For many users of *Reddit* however, the site is much more than a news aggregation website.

For many users of *Reddit*, a more playful relationship with the platform exists. Users can create new accounts with ease, often leading to 'throw away' or 'troll' accounts where users roleplay a particular persona. Kelly Bergstrom (2011) notes how users of *Reddit* often engage in 'identity games' to collectively uncover the authenticity of a user's claims. Similarly, Massanari's (2015b) ethnographic description of *Reddit* describes an inherently participatory and playful platform where, similar to forum games of the past in which users playfully pooled together their collective experiences towards common goals (Jenkins, 2006a: 25; Mcgonigal, 2011: 95), *Reddit* users often seek playful new ways to interact with

the larger collectives encompassed by the platform. It is worth briefly drawing attention to these playful modes of collectivity here as they overlap significantly with the playful co-creativity described in this thesis and illustrate why *Reddit* and MOBAs are so closely aligned.

4.2.2 The playful collectivity of *Reddit*

Two recent examples of this playful mode of collectivity can be observed in the *subreddits* surrounding 2014 event ‘Twitch Plays Pokémon’ (‘/r/twitchplayspokemon’) and the 2017 April fools event named ‘/r/place’. In ‘Twitch Plays Pokémon’, users each contributed to the collective movements of a *Twitch* live stream of the Gameboy game *Pokémon Red* (Nintendo, 1996). Through an automated aggregation of player inputs in *Twitch*’s live chat (for example, typing Gameboy commands such as ‘up’, ‘left’, ‘A’), thousands of players collectively controlled the actions of a single character in *Pokémon Red*. These in-game movements were often sporadic and lacked any coordination due to the sheer number of people trying to accomplish different things through collectively playing a single game. However, due to the coordination efforts of thousands of players communicating on the *subreddit* ‘/r/twitchplayspokemon’, players were able to coordinate their actions past difficult stages of the game, eventually completing it after 16 days and 9 hours (Jarrett, 2014; Ramirez et al, 2014).

Another example of *Reddit*’s playful collectivity comes from a 2017 April fools event surrounding the *subreddit* ‘/r/place’. In this event, *Reddit* users each had the ability to place one pixel every five minutes on a large canvas that any user could contribute to. What played out for 72 hours was a game between different *subreddits* as users from each *subreddit* pooled together their collective agency to co-create or sabotage the artwork of particular fandoms, themes, memes or identities (Wardle and Bassett, 2017). For particularly large and

active *subreddits* such as those from MOBAs including *LoL*, *Dota 2* or *Heroes of the Storm*, a large number of users and thus pixels could be mobilised and thus their logos were displayed prominently (see Figure 5). Both of these examples are typical of the role *Reddit* plays in collectively mobilising users to participate or play in larger structures and it is in this context that the playful co-creativity of MOBAs thrive as additional connective microsystems.

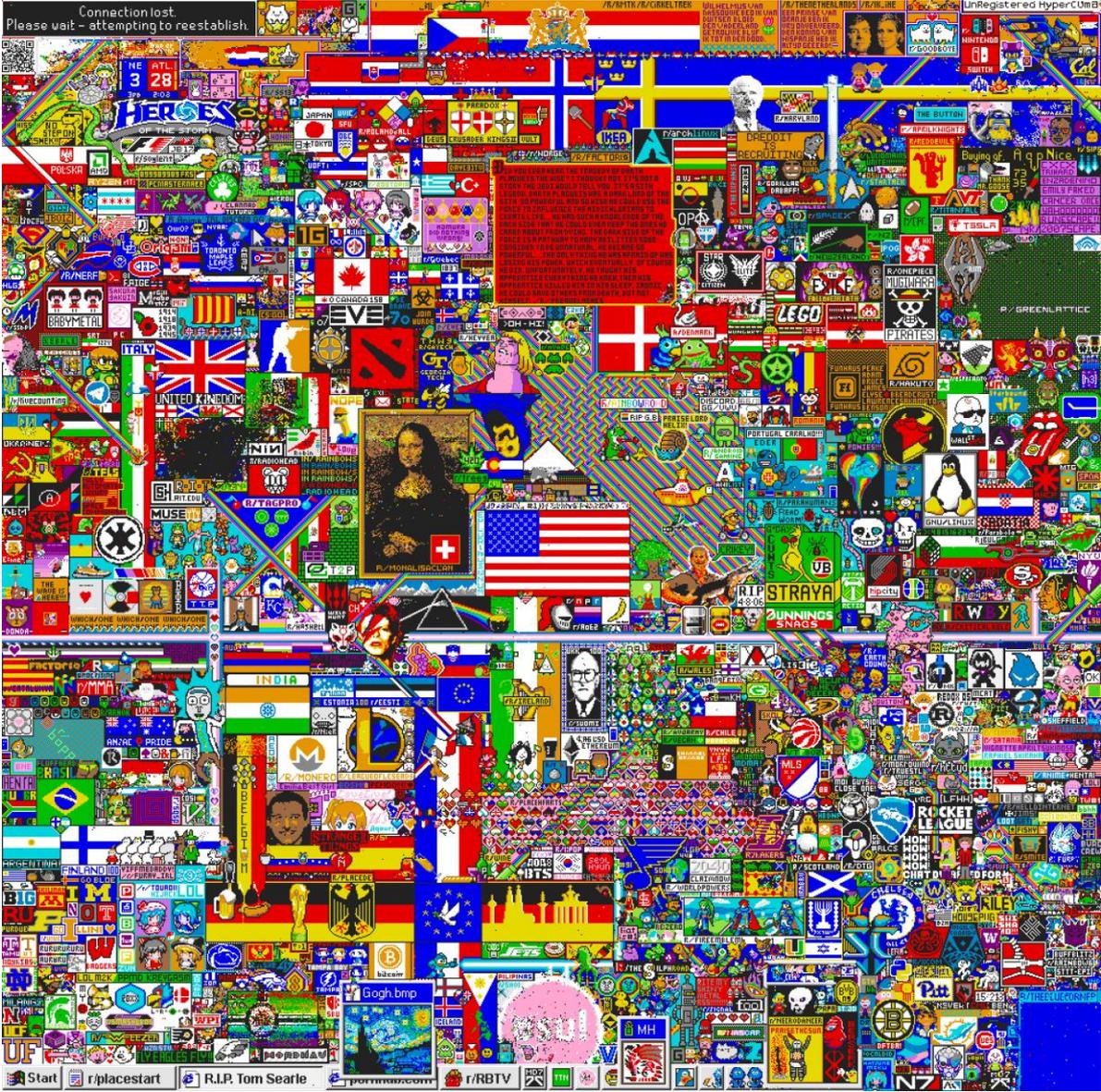


Figure 5. The final picture that was collectively created through the 2017 April Fools event on the ‘/r/place’ subreddit. Note the *Dota 2* logo above the central *Mona Lisa* and the *League of Legends* logo displayed further below.

4.2.3 MOBAs and *Reddit*

Due to the collective way MOBAs are playfully co-created, they have always shared a close relationship with *Reddit*. Many of the most important discussions and developments in MOBA culture happen through *Reddit* rather than official forum spaces that were traditionally encouraged by developers (or used by older fan cultures such as *DotA*’s). For the two most popular MOBAs primarily under consideration in this thesis, *League of Legends* and *Dota 2*, the centrality of their *subreddits* to these game cultures is indispensable. In addition to the many thousands of players that create, upvote or downvote the content in MOBA *subreddits* are professional players, user-generated content producers, game developers and even CEOs of e-sports organisations and the games themselves (see chapter 7.2.4) who all actively participate in their respective MOBA *subreddits*.

Similar to many wider paratextual spaces or tools that co-constitute the experience of playing, watching, or interacting with a MOBA (see section 5.5.1), the importance of *Reddit* can be felt in the games where players implement strategies based upon discussions. Or, throughout the wider connective ecology of MOBAs, for example on a *Twitch* stream where streamers will often browse *Reddit* in front of their viewers between waiting for new games to start. One notable *LoL* professional player, streamer and team owner is ‘HotshotGG’ who, as one of the first popular pioneers of MOBA live streams on *Own3d* between 2010 - 2012, would frequently browse *Reddit* while streaming. Many users of *LoL*’s *subreddit* often credit HotshotGG’s early habit of browsing *Reddit* on stream as their first introduction to the platform and similar accounts can be found with fans of other MOBA streamers (3). The

connective relationship of MOBAs, livestreams and *Reddit* now exists at such an intimate level that any actor involved with MOBAs cannot meaningfully interact in these cultures without a presence in each microsystem. Commentators of e-sports events for example, necessarily speak to and utilise the information or memes that arise in concurrence through *Reddit* as a way of situating themselves as part of the participatory flows that their audience are also aware of. The affective significance of this professional involvement in *Reddit* spaces is returned to in the next chapter. What is important to emphasise here however, is how co-constitutive MOBA *subreddits* are to the way these games are variously experienced.

This thesis seeks to utilise *Reddit* as a primary site from which to grasp the connective ecology constitutive of MOBAs through observing, participating, recording, and holding open discussions in the *subreddits* for *League of Legends* and *Dota 2*. Just as Marcus's (1995) 'multi-sited' approach and van Dijck's (2013) connective approach emphasise the critical importance of following or mapping the convolutions between different sites or microsystems of power, *Reddit* provides a unique platform for qualitatively and collectively experiencing those convolutions. As a website composed of links to other websites, as well as distinct fandoms from wider microsystems (in this case MOBAs), *Reddit* provides an ideally multi-sited or connective space from which to grasp the network of relations at stake in MOBAs. As mentioned in previous sections, my perspective will continue to be a multi-sited one that is attentive to the games themselves, their streaming spaces, big data platforms and other paratextual spaces. This multi-sited perspective is the same for any user of a game based *subreddit* where detailed knowledge of a games rules and its wider connective ecology is taken for granted in order to participate. From an ethnographic perspective, this submersion in the culture under study is typical. However, the requisite expertise demanded by these MOBAs does pose a particular ethnographic challenge to myself that is worth reflecting on here.

Players of MOBAs often speak about the difficulty of switching to play a different MOBA, or attempting to understand the flow of a game when spectating a MOBA they are not as familiar with. Due to the respective complexity of individual MOBAs and their often-harsh competitive play, many players often stick with one game, a trend that is reflected in emerging scholarly work surrounding MOBAs. The perspective of this thesis differs in its emphasis on understanding the continued role of playful co-creativity to various MOBAs (particularly *LoL* and *Dota 2* as the most prominent), and how different commercial developers have provisionally controlled or regulated their ecologies of play and participation. As a researcher, this wide scope has presented a particular ethnographic challenge as being knowledgeable and experienced in these different games along with their connective ecologies, including their expansive e-sports cultures, requires a varied awareness of the constant developments encompassed by these game cultures. For any multi-sited ethnographic approach to the Internet, this abundance of information can be problematic as Hine (2009: 18) notes, research ‘is still bounded, by some extent, by what the researcher can practically achieve’. One methodological way I have navigated this terrain throughout this research is to identify representative moments or fluctuations that have emerged from my close observations and field notes of everyday issues arising in MOBA *subreddits*.

Many examples of issues that arise in MOBA *subreddits* can be found and in chapter seven the tensions between players, e-sports professionals and developers are further examined in a series of ethnographic examples. However, before describing the more practical implications of this ethnographic methodology and how it informs the central themes of this thesis, there is an important critical point regarding the connective status of these *subreddits* that is crucial to scrutinise. For van Dijck (2013: 21), one of aims in developing a connective approach is to establish a critical perspective of viewing social media through a ‘multilayered analytical prism that allows us to see more than just a technological platform deployed by users and run

by owners'. As noted previously, the technological architecture of *Reddit* as a platform is one that provides a thoroughly connective experience. For particularly active and commercially tied *subreddits* such as those in MOBAs, it is crucial to look beyond the playful and often non-serious content that pervades their everyday status. Attention must also be given to the multiple motivations and actors that seek to extract value from these influential *subreddit* spaces.

4.2.4 The connective power relations of a MOBA *subreddit*

For *LoL*, *Dota 2* and their respective *subreddits* of '/r/leagueoflegends' and '/r/dota2', it is crucial to be critical from the outset when approaching the connectivity of these spaces. As of May 2016, '/r/leagueoflegends' is the most popular games focused *subreddit* in the world with 700k active subscribers (registered users) with the next most popular games focused *subreddits* being '/r/Pokemon' (444k) and '/r/Minecraft' (400k). '/r/dota2' ranks 8th with 222k subscribers respectively (4). Despite the significant size and activity all of these spaces garner, alongside *Reddit's* playful and independent identity as a site free from the direct control of game developers, there are intricate convolutions of top-down power that flow through these spaces even if they remain largely hidden. On occasions, these convolutions in power make themselves known and it is worth drawing attention to one of these instances here.

In March of 2015, the commercial power relations of '/r/leagueoflegends' received close scrutiny when it was revealed that community moderators who regulate the content of the *subreddit* to ensure that rules are upheld (for example no spam or hate-speech) had close relations with Riot Games; to the extent that they were made to sign non-disclosure agreements (NDA) upon becoming a moderator (Lewis, 2015). What were perceived as being completely autonomous spaces of influence for many users reassured by the bottom-up and

collectivised agency of *Reddit*'s voting structure, was actually revealed to be a far more symbiotic relationship with Riot Games than previously thought. Similar to many criticisms of *Wikipedia* articles where commercially or politically motivated interests can exert influence through the platform (Keen, 2007: 39; van Dijck, 2013:149), the content of *Reddit* is not always directly democratic. Due to the intricate overlap of participatory and commercial content that constitutes much of *Reddit*, various commercial entities have a vested interest in the influence and activity a site such as this wields. For 'r/leagueoflegends', this overlap in interests has always meant a very close relationship with Riot Games even if the specifics of this cooperation are not obvious to most *Reddit* users.

The NDA that moderators of 'r/leagueoflegends' sign covers issues relating to information about *LoL* that is only known to Riot Games, such as the functionality of servers. However, when the NDA's existence became widely known it caused a rupture in the *subreddit* with many users even going so far as to set up a new *LoL* devoted *subreddit* with no such affiliations. The separate *subreddit* is called 'r/RiotFreeLoL' and describes itself as 'An alternative subreddit for League of Legends where there are no conflicts of interest, and no ethical dilemmas.' Although 'r/RiotFreeLoL' only has 5.1k subscribers (in May, 2016) and receives limited activity compared to the primary *LoL* subreddit, its existence is still significant as a moment when the contours of connective power that are imbued throughout these popular *subreddits* palpably presented themselves to the culture.

On one hand, there is a practical reason for this close relationship that shares similarities with descriptions of digital media as necessarily co-creative or convergent, whereby top-down and bottom-up actors can mutually benefit each other. For many *Reddit* users, this unproblematic position of mutually beneficial co-creativity was taken as Riot Games involvement with the *subreddit* was read as valuable to both parties. In this example, for both the *subreddit* of 'r/leagueoflegends' users through inside information (about server status, new features, etc)

and for Riot Games through closer relations with their players. As one prominent voice in the ‘/r/leagueoflegends’ community known as ‘esportslaw’ (a professional lawyer specialising in e-sports who frequently participates in *Reddit* discussions) optimistically put it at the time:

From my standpoint, the fact that Riot has mods sign NDAs is actually a positive sign about their respect for Reddit’s role in the community and desire to have mods in the loop on certain key issues, where other gaming [*subreddits*] might be completely left in the dark. (5)

Although this perspective is a popular one and the continued use of ‘/r/leagueoflegends’ represents the acceptance many users are able to give towards this relationship, it is critically important to be aware of these convolutions of power between various microsystems in this ethnography. As van Dijck’s (2013) model of a connective ecology emphasises, along with related critical interpretations of media ecology approaches (Kemba and Zylinska, 2012: 182; Dovey, 2014), in any ecological relationship there are uneven power relations at play. In this example, Riot Games position of power over their game *LoL* extends into a significant aspect of its connective ecology, an active culture of 700k users who identify as independent.

As is often the case in MOBAs, the space between professional and non-professional becomes extremely blurred here. Chapter six and seven explores these blurred lines between professional and non-professional in more detail as it is this hybrid identity that is essential to enabling the affective gift economy of monetisation that these games rely upon for revenue. However, to return to the notion of *subreddits* such as ‘/r/leagueoflegends’ being an inherently connective space, imbricated by multiple interests including the ludic, social and commercial, an ethnographic challenge moving forward in this thesis is remaining aware of these multiple converging actors, field sites and power structures. An instance such as ‘/r/leagueoflegends’ NDA’s becoming public knowledge exemplifies the complexity of relations at stake here. In the following connective ethnography, awareness of these power relations is essential to illustrating the dispositif of MOBAs as well as its potential moments of rupture.

4.3 The practical implications of a connective *Reddit* ethnography

Throughout this chapter I have described the connective framings of this thesis and how I intend to continue and extend aspects of this heterogeneous perspective in relation to *Reddit* based ethnographic fieldwork. In this final section I outline exactly what form this fieldwork will take, how it methodologically relates to similar Internet based ethnographies, and what the potential issues or limitations of this approach might be.

4.3.1 What am I doing? Mixed methods and cultural artefacts

In the subsequent three chapters, various issues relating to the dispositif of MOBA relations are explored through drawing upon online ethnographic fieldwork that has taken place in the *subreddits* ‘/r/dota2’ and ‘/r/leagueoflegends’ between 2013 – 2017. Although other *subreddits* occasionally come into focus, for example ‘/r/RiotfreeLoL’ that was mentioned in the past section, these are largely as a result of following connections from these two primary MOBA *subreddits*. The methods utilised throughout these ethnographic chapters include observations, reflective fieldnotes from particularly meaningful events or threads and holding participatory open discussions. In addition to the methods listed here, the following ethnography also relies upon the persistent status of online material as existing in a state of what Hine (2000: 14) would call a ‘cultural artefact’.

For Hine, who influentially wrote about online ethnographic technique in 2000, her use of the term ‘cultural artefact’ was part of a wider recognition of online discussions such as those found in ‘newsgroups’ (19) as inherently cultural. At the time of writing, Hine’s description of online discussion newsgroups as inherently cultural on the merit of their own interactions was an important step away from viewing the Internet as merely an ancillary aspect to more

physically bound ‘offline’ cultures. In calling these discussions an ‘artefact’, Hine described something distinctive regarding the persistent status or ‘artefact’ these cultural interactions represent. In contrast to physically bound ethnographies that necessarily record ephemeral experiences through various independent means by the ethnographer (for example, through a camera, field notes or conversational transcriptions), the digitised bits constitutive of an online culture such as those found in Hine’s ‘newsgroups’ are recorded automatically. For online ethnographers, this enduring quality of cultural interactions opens up a plethora of radical possibilities for Internet ethnography, as Hine noted.

It appears that ethnography can be time-shifted so that the ethnographer’s engagement can occur after the events with which they engage happened for participants. Ethnographer and participants no longer need to share the same time frame. (Hine, 2000: 23)

In the space of time since 2000, the status of online interactions as representing a more persistent form of ‘cultural artefact’ is taken for granted when discussing the implications of big data, the widespread issues surrounding online privacy or in permutations of persistent online activity such as playful co-creativity. *Reddit* is an exemplary cultural artefact as the status of every comment or thread is available for anyone to publicly access, so long as the comments have not been deleted by the user or moderators.

Throughout this thesis, the enduring quality of *Reddit* discussions and various other online websites or forms of communication such as the now archived forums of ‘archive.playdota.com’ (6) have been crucial to informing this research. For many researchers of online cultures, observing or directly quoting discussions from forums or *subreddits* is an indispensable way of conveying the culture in question. In game studies for example, forum discussions are heavily drawn upon in descriptions of modder / developer relations (Kow and Nardi, 2010; Prax, 2012); in explorations of ‘theorycrafting’ communities where the role of forums is impossible to separate from in-game play (Paul, 2011); or in various studies of

MMOG communities or ‘guilds’ where a forum can be central to an in-game groups organisation (MacCallum-Stewart, 2011; Chen, 2012). Each of these examples utilises the archived status of forum posts as a cultural artefact, often directly quoting particularly pertinent forum posts. Analogous to forums, the archived structure of *Reddit* presents a continuation of this method and one that is utilised in the subsequent ethnographic approach. However, as an ethnographic tool, tracing the cultural artefact of *Reddit* posts poses a limitation with regards to the wider connective context that these posts were originally experienced in. It is crucial to be clear about those limitations here as they remain a methodological consideration throughout the subsequent ethnographic approach.

It is important to stress, as many of these studies do, that there is no equivalent to experiencing and participating in events first hand as they happen. In a connective space such as *Reddit*, events unfold across multiple threads and platforms and these dispersed movements are extremely difficult to fully trace through viewing single archived threads alone. Although the experience of reading a discussion thread long after it has taken place is an indispensable tool for tracing these cultural interactions, it cannot capture the full connective context that a thread was experienced in at the time. Many ethnographies describe the immediacy of first-hand lived experience as essential to interpreting deeper ‘structures of signification’ (see section, 4.1) and when approaching the overlapping network of a connective setting, the same lived approach remains essential to grasping the context of any particular moment. Questions regarding the connective context of *Reddit* and MOBAs remain a methodological consideration throughout the subsequent chapters and are the reason why the ethnographic approach of this thesis relies upon a flexible mixed methods approach. An approach to ethnographically understanding MOBAs that utilises not only the cultural artefact of discussions on *Reddit*, but also my lived experiences, observations, reflective field notes and more interventionist open discussions.

The mixed methods of this ethnographic approach shares similarities with Robert Kozinets (2015: 4) more recent description of online ethnography as 'Netnography'. For Kozinets, a 'netnographic' approach is a multifaceted approach to online ethnography that is 'positioned somewhere between the vast searchlights of big data analysis and the close readings of discourse analysis'. Similar to Hines notion of cultural artefact, Kozinets asserts that social interactions have become ubiquitously archived through the architecture of the Internet, particularly through social media platforms. For Kozinets, a netnographic approach is one that considers the radical implications of this abundance in cultural activity and what it represents to established notions of culture, community and ethnography.

Up until now, I have treated definitions of community and culture as somewhat interchangeable with their offline equivalents, but as Kozinets points out, these definitions have become much more fluid online. With correlations to a connective or multi-sited perspective, Kozinets argues that the Internet represents an abundance of overlapping cultural settings that allows people to traverse freely between spaces, cultures and identities. In contrast to more grounded and discrete cultures of traditional ethnographies, participants of fan cultures such as MOBAs are dispersed geographically, across the Internet and across many groups or identities. Furthermore, the social experience of playing MOBAs or participating on *Reddit* is ephemeral insofar as the players or users encountered are likely to be people you have no interaction with again due to the sheer size of the culture. The implications of these assertions for the fields of game, fan and Internet studies are vast, but the salient point here is that the cultures being researched are distinctively fluid in their identities. The conventions of ethnography to spend extended time with a culture and thickly describe the practices of a small number of people are difficult to replicate here and moreover, they do not correlate with the experiences of people in these cultures. For these reasons, the following ethnography does not focus on any particular players or participants

and does not clearly identify the demographics of the people under consideration. Although particular instances allow for a more in-depth view of a particular user's position or experiences (see for example, chapter 7.2.1), and insight into the demographics of users are sometimes palpable in the (often masculine) language adopted, the focus here remains many disparate people and their co-creative role in the political economy of MOBAs.

As already mentioned, the approach here is mixed in its methods. Ethnography generally, and multi-sited (Marcus, 2009: 181) or Internet ethnographies (Kozinets, 2015: 177) in particular, often find themselves utilising a variety of methods due to the varied quality of the cultures under consideration. The observations, reflective fieldnotes and cultural artefacts constitutive of the subsequent connective ethnography are taken together as a way of constructing a representation of these co-creative MOBA cultures. Through the ensemble of these methods it is my aim to further enrich the genealogical description of the MOBA genre and its transition towards hybridised commercialisation that has been presented thus far. The genealogical significance of this research is further revisited in the next chapter alongside a Foucauldian understanding MOBAs hybrid power dynamics. As this thesis further develops in chapter six and seven, however, it is necessary to widen the methodological tools of this ethnography. In addition to the methods mentioned here, I will also utilise a more interventionist approach based on participatory open discussions that it is worth discussing here.

4.3.2 Participatory open discussions

The following participatory open discussions are an attempt from myself to ask direct questions and intervene with the culture of these MOBAs in a way that replicates the types of discussion often found daily in these spaces. Through introducing myself as a player,

academic researcher and someone interested in the issues at stake in these cultures, I have posed various questions to these *subreddits* over the course of 2013 – 2017. Questions regarding the playful co-creativity or the affective relationship players share with MOBAs have received significant responses, with 315 qualitative responses in the threads I have made (after discounting my own responses to some comments). Some of these responses are more substantial than others, ranging from single line responses, to many hundreds of words from a single person.

These threads have always been extremely open about my status as an academic researcher, but I have not attempted to formalise these discussions through introducing questions regarding demographics or surveys. In contrast, my aim has been to respond dynamically to the directions these discussions have taken and allow for any interested user to contribute a response. Like most ethnographies, the scope of this research only allows for a selective (direct) representation of these discussions. However, the lived experience of participating in and analysing these discussions has informed many details in this research (7).

Similar to many virtual world ethnographies where new accounts are made solely for the purpose of research, I created an account solely for my research activities on *Reddit* named ‘innovateplay’. The discussions found on this account all follow the same conventions of introducing myself as an academic researcher, and linking my blog, my playing profile and sometimes my personal academic profile if participants are curious. Through introducing myself as an academic researcher I state explicitly that responses may be appropriated in a published research context to ensure that any potential ethical issues regarding consent should not arise. A typical introduction of myself in these discussions would be,

I am a long time player of League of Legends and reader of this sub-reddit and I would very much appreciate any opinions people have on a couple of questions.

I am a researcher of game cultures and am currently working on a PhD research project surrounding the themes of online play, creativity and power dynamics. In the past, I have written about the modding /playing community behind the original DotA and I have been really interested (as a player and researcher) in the development of the MOBA genre ever since. What really interests me with LoL and in spaces such as this sub-reddit is the relationship between players, developers, professional players and content creators alike. When their relations create exciting new outcomes and when these relations sometimes break down. [a series of questions follow] (8)

One of the challenges in these discussions has been gaining traction in *Reddit's* structure of upvoting and downvoting as, like the majority of threads on large *subreddits*, nobody will see a thread unless it receives early 'upvotes'. Some threads I have started receive next to no responses and have 'sunk' as many *Reddit* users would say. However, some discussions have gained traction with the top discussions receiving around 100 comments comprising many thousands of words. In addition to the qualitative responses themselves, there is also the more quantitative feedback of 'upvotes' that appear next to any comment and allow for another way of viewing what responses people agree with. In the subsequent chapters, responses from these open discussions are taken as part of the mixed methods described in this section to provide direct responses from players themselves.

4.3.3 Gender, expertise and exclusion: my entry into MOBAs

A fundamental methodological component to this ethnographic research that has been implicit throughout this chapter, but encompasses the whole thesis, is the status of myself as a male player of MOBAs for several years. As noted at the start of chapter two, my experiences with MOBAs date back to my teens when I was first introduced to the genre by friends in *Warcraft III* custom games. These experiences were by no means ethnographic, however, they nonetheless influenced my own prior understanding of the genre as well as my relative ease in being accepted by its cultures to research it. For any ethnography, the ability of the researcher to integrate themselves into the culture in question is a defining facet of the

research. For example, the ‘thick descriptions’ emblematic of Geertz’ (1973) approach to ethnography were reliant upon the researcher contextually embedding themselves in the field to an extent that revealed the intricate norms of a culture. These norms are not always visible without acceptance of the researcher by the culture and to an extent, my own status as a male player of MOBAs for several years helped me gain access to studying these games cultures.

It is worth stressing here, that the experience of interacting in MOBA cultures and play spaces is by no means a friendly or accepting process for everyone. MOBAs such as *Dota 2* and *League of Legends* are profoundly competitive game cultures, each supporting extensive worldwide esports industries and each normalising social practices and in-game representations oriented at young male players (Ratan et al, 2015). For many competitive digital gaming cultures, especially those attracting esports scenes, these substantial barriers to entry and acceptance are noteworthy for those that do not fit the stereotypical demographic of young male individuals with high levels of gaming capital. In Taylor’s seminal research into e-sports cultures, she noted the difficulties of such barriers in her own methodological approach to ethnography.

Unlike my prior research on virtual worlds and massively multiplayer online games, I never felt myself become a natural inhabitant of the e-sports community. If you, the reader, have noticed the omission of the term “ ethnography, ” you have spotted a key break in my own practice. By virtue of the games played (I have never been a FPS player and RTS games come with some work), its often misogynistic culture, and its deeply insider nature (which is largely only broken by being an avid player and fan), I was always fairly outside what I was studying. At live events I always felt my otherness. I was a noncompetitor, a woman, and a bit older than most attendees. [...] Things that were otherwise obvious for the insiders generally weren’t for me. (Taylor, 2012: 29)

Taylor’s ‘outside’ experiences of e-sports cultures and her reluctance to name her research ethnographic is representative of the barriers to entry many non-expert, non-male and older players face in competitive digital games cultures. Contrasting my own relative ease in

following and being involved in MOBA cultures, this research accordingly adopts an ethnographic approach.

Although the ethnography of this thesis is based exclusively online and I never stated my gender specifically in participant discussions (although it could be found if you followed enough links from my blog and many players adopted the male pronoun when addressing me), there remained significant amounts of MOBA relevant gaming capital I carried with me as a long-time player of these games. When I first played *LoL* in early 2010, I remember the distinct feeling of ease the game evoked due to my past experiences in *DotA*. This is an unusual feeling to have when first playing a MOBA and for many of the players I have encountered, an opposite, more daunting experience is described when first playing. The salient point here is that my life experiences and status as a relatively young male player enabled much of my in-depth understandings of the norms, strategies and economies at stake in these games. This was knowledge I could easily draw on in participant discussions and it helped to quickly establish myself as a genuine player of these games to these cultures. As a critical ethnographer, however, I was frequently reminded of how overwhelmingly gendered the identity of these games cultures is by a form of what could be called ‘geek masculinity’.

Geek masculinity is a term with varied meanings depending on its context, but it most widely refers to a type of masculine identity that exists as an alternative to more hegemonic expressions. Taylor (2012: 111) discusses the complexities of the term in relation to e-sporting identities where many of the practices are highly gendered alongside new forms of athleticism tied to technological ‘expertise, skill and knowledge’. As a term, geek masculinity has also been deployed to describe the way cultures based on platforms such as *Reddit* (Massanari, 2015b: 129) and controversies such as Gamergate (Braithwaite, 2016; Salter, 2017) work to protect a technologically dependant male identity. The pervasiveness of these

practices creates cultures, spaces and/or activities that are ‘unfriendly if not hostile to female users in particular’ (Salter, 2017: 251). It is not my aim here to delve into each of these examples and their precise relations to hegemonic modes of masculinity, however, it is vital to recognise the place of MOBA cultures alongside these practices.

As mentioned above, many participants assumed my gender as male in open discussions and moreover, many players across MOBA *subreddits* do the same for any player. Of course, *Reddit* as a platform is criticised for the same inclination towards a male gaze of geek masculinity (Massanari, 2015b: 130), however, the connective status of MOBAs also go beyond typical *Reddit* conventions in their exertion of a male centric view of games culture. As mentioned above, the in-game representations of avatars and many of the skins for sale in MOBAs such as *LoL* display a particularly fanciful depiction of women's body types, often in exotic clothes, positions and settings. It is beyond the scope or aims of this chapter to provide an in-depth analysis of these in-game skin representations, however, critiques such as the fan run *Tumblr* blog ‘leagueofsexism’ have chronicled the many examples that are frequently released in *LoL* (9). Sites such as League of Sexism are known by many players of *LoL* on its *subreddit*, however, any sustained critical engagement and lasting pressure on the developers to reconsider their design ethos are notably absent (or not upvoted).

In addition to the design of the game itself, the culture of geek masculinity encompassed by *LoL* frequently presents itself in everyday practices. One noteworthy controversy from 2013 that is emblematic of the way *LoL*'s culture projects a form of geek masculinity, is the story of Team Siren. Team Siren was an all-female *LoL* team that formed in late 2012, with aspirations of competing in tournaments with the normalised all-male teams. Each of the players was skilled at the game and as a team, they acquired external sponsors to sustain a livelihood in a gaming house until June 2013 (Marcus, 2018). One of the drawbacks of this

sponsorship was the marketing for Team Siren was produced in an overly mainstream and at times sexualised way. This promotional content included a video that quickly went viral due in part to its dialogue sounding fake and ridiculous to most *LoL* players. The lines Team Siren players were required to say included ‘we live together, we *play* together’ and ‘I’ll bait you *and* outsmart you’. A member Team Siren named Solvanas would later remark that the players protested to the dialogue of these lines at the time, but it was a condition of their sponsorship that they said them (Lin, 2016). However, as Solvanas goes on to note, there was a more fundamental hostility to their promotional content from *LoL*’s culture due to the women that were saying it.

Was our video any different than Riot’s own promotionals? They’re pretty corny. We weren’t the first people to make a corny video, and we aren’t going to be the last. But I think because we are women, and people were not yet prepared, they latched on and lashed out. (Lin, 2016)

These promotional activities, along with Team Siren itself, would quickly become a source of ridicule and memes as general sentiments of male superiority in *LoL* culture permeated its connective spaces of *Reddit*, live-streams, user-generated videos and in-game play.

This domineering behaviour was exemplified when several male professional players from different teams grouped up on June 4th 2013 to intercept one of Team Siren’s practice sessions (10). Through watching Team Siren’s streams (or ‘stream sniping’), the male players were able to time their queue launch so they could be matched in the same game. The male team proceeded to live-stream a comprehensive win over Team Siren with characters/item builds largely considered a joke or ‘troll build’ by *LoL*’s culture. This controversy was led by the influential professional player and celebrity in the community named HotshotGG (mentioned earlier in this chapter) who is also the founder of the successful ‘Counter Logic Gaming’ esports organisation. Eighteen days after this incident, Team Siren disbanded and there has been no visible all-female team in *LoL* since.

This controversy happened early in my ethnographic observations of *LoL*'s culture, but its message is one emblematic of the unequal gender relations that play out every day in MOBAs. As controversies such as Gamergate developed in 2014 and *Reddit*'s role in enabling Gamergate has been well noted (Massanari, 2015a), my research was never far removed from similar examples of a pronounced form of geek masculinity. As chapter six and seven explore in more detail, Riot Games has often aligned themselves unproblematically with the 'core gamer' identity of their culture as a means of enabling their F2P model of monetisation. However, this association also reinforces the uneven gender relations encompassed by *LoL*'s culture, further marginalising people who do not fit its perceived identity. For Riot Games, this unproblematic embrace of the 'core gamer' identity would become a profound source of widespread criticism in the technology sector when, in August 2018, the extent of sexism in their workplace culture was revealed (D'Anastasio, 2018).

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to substantially explore the many examples of geek masculinity I have briefly mentioned here. However, as noted above, the interrelated system of relations encompassed by co-creative games such as *LoL* reveals the ways uneven norms can co-evolve through the actions of players, user-generated content producers, professional players and the developers themselves. The salient methodological point here is that my own status as a researcher in this field was never seriously questioned, beyond occasional comments questioning the validity of humanities / social sciences research. In later chapters of this thesis, particularly chapter six, the at times privileged positions expressed by players in this culture is considered in more depth.

4.4 Summary

Throughout this methodology chapter I have aimed to outline an approach to grasping the connective quality of MOBAs that is both richly contextualised and mindful of the more collective way these games are experienced. Through utilising a multi-sited or connective approach that centres on *Reddit* as a central conduit in MOBAs Western cultures, the following two chapters combine the mixed methods described in this chapter to grasp critical questions surrounding the affective economies and playful regulations of MOBAs. As noted in this chapter, the particular focus of this ethnography is *LoL* and *Dota 2* and their respective *subreddits*, */r/leagueoflegends* and */r/dota2*. Similar to the way players encounter MOBAs alongside many other cultural activities and identities found across the Internet, this ethnography does not present MOBAs as a unified culture. Rather, the aim is to present the overlapping cultural activities of these MOBAs as they are playfully experienced, along with their affective dimensions, hybrid power dynamics and moments of tension or crisis.

The potential of this methodological approach to be appropriated in many online cultures beyond MOBAs that may rely upon particular *subreddits* for substance and activity is likely to become increasingly relevant as *Reddit* continues to play a substantial role in many online and offline cultures. Although the focus of this thesis is specifically MOBAs, the way MOBAs are representative of a wider trend in the way disparate people collectively and playfully come together on platforms such as *Reddit* or *Twitter* suggests the potential for future ethnographies structured in a similar way.

The next chapter returns to the genealogical transition of DotA to MOBA, seeking to explore why and in what ways this genre transitioned into one of the most played activities in the world. More critically, the aim of the ensuing chapter is to establish how MOBAs maintain a

new model of hybrid power relations underpinned by playfully co-creative activities and commercially valuable affects.

5. Critically Approaching MOBAs

The following chapter is a result of my ethnographic time spent in the field of MOBAs, as well as being informed by my past knowledge of DotA spaces. The research is underpinned by many of the discussions I have followed and participated in with players over the time period of this research, but all of the evidence presented is recorded with reference to statistics, developer interviews, videos and Reddit discussions. It is important to stress here, that many links from *DotA*'s culture and even early *League of Legends/Dota 2* culture are often difficult to find. As stated in the past methodological chapter, the Internet's structure as a cultural artefact provides an unprecedented level of recorded information with regards to everyday cultural interactions. However, the architecture of the Internet means that finding many of these links is at best difficult and sometimes impossible due to servers closing, websites/forums shutting down and users deleting their comments/threads. I have navigated this terrain by archiving many of the links utilised in this thesis on 'www.archive.org'. However, it is important to stress that as the Internet is ever changing many of these links become ever more difficult to find.

This chapter picks up from the moment described at the end of chapter three, where MOBAs superseded DotA as the classification of the genre. As this chapter describes, this transition is symbolic of the new model of governance and commercially hybrid power dynamics that have since underpinned the genre. Through adapting Foucault's term of the 'dispositif' and applying a genealogical approach aimed at mapping the transition from the mod *DotA* to the genre of MOBA, this chapter argues that MOBAs continue to be imbricated by significant bottom-up movements and characteristics. It is these lingering characteristics of playful and participatory residue that account for many of the genres most notable game design and paratextual aspects. However, it is here that the crisis of playfully co-creativity

also evidences itself as the platformed state of these relations abide by an altogether different set of commercial logics to that of the mod.

5.1 MOBA as dispositif

It's hard to deny that gaming is in the age of the MOBA. Valve's *Dota 2* is the most popular game on its Steam service; *League of Legends* is arguably the most popular game in the world. How did a genre that started from the humblest of beginnings — a genre whose definition and even very name is in dispute — come to take an industry by storm?

- Funk, 2013

In September of 2013 when this statement was made the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) genre had already assumed its position as one of the most played online genres in the world for over a year (Gaudiosi, 2012). Since late 2009 when the first commercial iterations of this genre began to be released, MOBA has become the predominant term used to refer to this genre by the games industry, journalists, academia, and players alike. This chapter gives close attention to the term MOBA, establishing what it implies in popular discourses as a term with specific generic connotations and more critically, what its short but eventful history symbolises alongside wider participatory trends across the Internet. Despite its far-reaching influence and now commonplace usage, MOBA is not a neutral term and it signals a precise moment in a transition towards a new normalisation of playful, cultural and economic control of the genre.

Michel Foucault's (1980: 194) notion of a 'dispositif' provides a useful theoretical tool here for approaching this rapid but nonetheless genealogical shift in power dynamics. Foucault describes a dispositif as

a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as

much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the dispositive. The dispositive itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.

Although Foucault's original use of this term was a way to theorise wider societal frameworks in which power circulates and knowledge is produced in a reciprocal dynamic, a dispositif perspective on power dynamics as the 'system of relations' provides an apt way of grasping the diverse and deeply connective actors at play in MOBAs. Avoiding a one-dimensional account of top-down influence, this approach parallels the co-creative ecology of online games explored in the past chapter and emphasises the interplay of heterogeneous actors as crucial to the becoming and maintenance of established power dynamics. The vital difference to the approaches detailed in chapter four is that the MOBA dispositif of relations described here generates vast economic value and these models of value extraction are reliant upon the dispersed affects emitted by forms of playful co-creativity. It is these interrelating set of relations that I call the MOBA dispositif. Together they form not only the site of some of the worlds most played, watched and participatory games, but also an emerging societal framework of affective control characteristic of the digital age.

The notion of 'affect' was discussed in chapter three and is returned to throughout this thesis (particularly next chapter), but in a broad sense, I am referring to the way diverse sets of participatory or playfully co-creative agencies are constitutive of MOBAs affective texture. This affective texture is both heterogenous and constantly circulating, however, it is the dispositif of these relations that sustain the affective economics of MOBAs (affective economies are elaborated on throughout this chapter and chapter six). These affective economies are monetised through a distinct form of 'fair' free-to-play that is continuously nourished by a plethora of dispersed forms of (playful) co-creativity, making a late-Foucauldian notion of power pertinent. The aim here is to understand power as emanating from 'everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.' (Foucault, 1978: 93) A playful form of emergence, a player live stream, a

professional e-sports broadcast, a guide, a discussion, a ‘meme’ (2), or even the originality of player’s name can all be interpreted as constitutive of what a MOBA game encompasses and each contributes affectively towards the MOBA dispositif.

Consistent with Foucault’s genealogical approach that historically contextualises the contours of power structures to elucidate the emergence of their norms, a dispositif can be read as a provisional categorisation for the ensemble of these contours. As Jeffrey Bussolini (2010: 91) notes in a close reading of the term, ‘the dispositive would seem to be a kind of moving marker to allow some approximation of a particular preponderance or balance of forces at a given time’. It is with this particular usage of the term that this chapter is concerned as MOBAs represent a similar ensemble of nonlinear and connective systems, actors, agencies and discourses. Crucially, following the exploration of *Warcraft III* custom game playful co-creativity detailed in the past chapters, the MOBA dispositif of relations emerged out of a profoundly bottom-up, collectivised and non-commercial ecosystem of connectivity. The transition of these participatory characteristics into MOBAs poses critical questions surrounding not only how this change occurred, but also what pieces of participatory residue continue to influence this genre and its hybrid power dynamics.

It is here that I follow recent linkages made between notions of the dispositif with regards to participatory culture (Schäfer, 2011: 15) and the critique made by various scholars that ‘participation’ or ‘Web 2.0’ has served as an enabling tool for heterogeneous cultural or social relations that implicitly support uneven economic power structures (Scholz, 2008; van Dijk and Nieborg, 2009; Berry, 2011: 59). Through contextualising the short but eventful history of MOBAs, the aim here is to move towards an understanding of the way different connected actors co-create the experience of this genre and in doing so, reinforce similarly uneven economic power structures. In following the history of how various actors have come to embrace or negotiate their respective roles in this model of co-creativity, similarities to

wider participatory trends that have moved towards a more platformed and affectively monetised state of relations become evident. To repeat Crawford et al's (2011: 281) assertion mentioned earlier in this thesis, that online games must be framed alongside 'the potential histories associated with the Internet as a historical artefact', then what does the dispositif of MOBA relations represent alongside the wider political economy of the Internet? It is with this central question concerning the context of MOBAs becoming and their wider political economy that this chapter is largely occupied.

Although many different explanations are often given for the popularity of MOBAs, this chapter also offers an account behind what the most influential and definitive aspects of this genre are. Through critically contextualising the power relations inherent to MOBAs, three broad categories that are essential in their connective milieu emerge as particularly influential features of MOBAs. They are:

1. The bottom-up mode of playful co-creativity.
2. The vast network of participatory actors and paratexts; including live streaming platforms and e-sports industries.
3. The 'fair' model of free-to-play.

In each of these features, many overlaps between differing modes of agency and affect are in evidence. It is between these three, however, that phenomena such as playful emergence, live streams, e-sports and the profoundly affective model of valuation intrinsic to controlling these activities all open themselves to critical analysis. For subsequent chapters of this thesis that ethnographically research specific sites of MOBA play and culture, it is crucial to first contextualise their connective and genealogical status. This chapter and by extension thesis posits these emerging trends as constitutive of what defines MOBAs and why they are particularly influential both from a popular and playfully co-creative or participatory

perspective. To begin framing these developments into the critical contexts that derived and define them, it is necessary to start with the precise moment that MOBA as a widespread discursive term emerged.

5.2 The MOBA moment: re-platforming play

Tracing itself to the *Starcraft* (1998) custom game named *Aeon of Strife* (1999) and subsequently, *Warcraft III's Defence of the Ancients (DotA)* that was discussed in the past chapter, Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) is a word that first came into widespread use with the release of *League of Legends (LoL)* in late 2009 (1). MOBAs typified by *LoL* follow the description of the genre given in the introduction to this thesis. Similar to the RTS origins they are derived from, MOBAs are duration based games that typically last 25 – 40 mins. They typically involve two opposing teams of five players in an enclosed 'arena' space who must fight their way to destroying the opposing team's base structure in order to win. Players have access to a vast variety of playable avatars, customisable items, level-up options and teamwork dynamics that, in addition to the in-game skill required to play MOBAs, creates complex, creative and often competitive play experiences. A more detailed exploration of MOBAs core gameplay experience and the varieties of MOBA that now exist is given in section 5.5.

As a genre MOBAs possess many of the same playfully co-creative conventions found in the custom game genres of *Warcraft III* discussed in the past two chapters. Among the players that composed the custom game cultures that preceded the release of *LoL* and the use of the term MOBA, the genre was known by the acronym of the most popular modded map, *DotA*. In addition to my longer personal history with the genre outlined previously, in 2011 I carried out online ethnographic research into the original playing and modding culture behind *DotA*

(Jarrett, 2012). One of the central motivations in that research was to understand the significance of *DotA* as an independent fan culture free from commercial interests and although not a dominant position among players, *DotA* did evoke many sentiments of an independent or ‘alternative’ media culture (Guedes-Bailey, 2008). As variously noted in the past chapter, *DotA* can be read as exemplifying a more grassroots, collectively organised, and non-commercial classification of the genre that in many ways epitomised the original promises of the Internet as a tool that would combine the capacities of users and level economic power dynamics as early cyber theorists often predicted (Turner, 2006; Flichy, 2007).

The release of *LoL* in late 2009 marked a new chapter in the history of this genre. The commercial developers Riot Games, who included several prominent modders and community members involved with *DotA* (Parkin, 2014), sought to build on the core conventions of the genre in their own seemingly distinct way. Riot Games built a game platform (and engine) specific for this new genre with the release of *LoL* and this would free the genre from the constraints of the original *Warcraft III* platform that shaped *DotA* in many unavoidable ways. These new features for the MOBA genre will be discussed in more detail throughout this chapter but they included new in-game mechanics, integrated matchmaking systems, sophisticated records of individual games, and many new options for aesthetic customisation of in-game characters. Similar to many platforms that emerged across the Internet at this time, *LoL* promised its players new potentials for participation and connectivity through technological innovations and gameplay opportunities designed specifically for this genre (LeJacq, 2012).

This moment between *DotA* the constitutively participatory culture and *LoL* (synonymous with MOBA), the re-platformed and more explicitly commercial of the two games, requires

close attention here. Far from a simplistic progressivist narrative of commercial innovation resulting in MOBAs as the newly influential genre they are now known as, there is a much more nonlinear and unofficial history at play behind the transition away from *DotA*. The custom game culture described in the past chapter was a fundamental part of that history and its bottom-up, collectivist, and even non-commercial influence is still evident in various strands of MOBAs playfully co-creative structure.

Paralleling many wider examples of ‘affective economies’ where the means of monetisation are often obscured through social dimensions (Andrejevic, 2011a: 85; Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012; Andrejevic, 2013: 50) or voluntarily given through networks of fandom (Jenkins, 2006a: 61; Bennett et al, 2015), MOBAs are a hybridised commodity form. Their playful structure, vast network of connective actors and free to play model of monetisation all evoke the genealogy of their grassroots past in various ways while paradoxically, enabling new structures of control to develop for commercial ends. In no other moment was the transition of these traits more pronounced than when *LoL* was released and the use of the term MOBA first began to displace *DotA*. For any definition of MOBA to be adopted critically, it is crucial to map this moment and what its transition represents for MOBAs as exemplary of emerging ‘hybrid’ power relations (Banks, 2013; Jenkins, 2013).

It is through mapping the systems of relations that played a role in the inception of *LoL* that this chapter provides the foundations for a conceptualisation of MOBAs as a dispositif. In doing so, this analysis surrounding the context of MOBAs co-creation also relates to recent bodies of work surrounding sociotechnical histories (Montfort and Bogost, 2009; Therrien, 2015) or archaeologies (Huhtamo, 2005; Apperley and Parikka, 2015) of gaming and wider media platforms. Although the focus here is specifically upon an influential transitional moment as opposed to a comprehensive (pre) history of an entire media platform, this section shares an approach towards mapping what Apperley and Parikka (2015: 4) describe as the

underlying ‘potential pathways, technological dead ends, lost histories, circuitous routes, and alternative conceptions’ inherent to any widely accepted technical or discursive construct. As the past chapter explored, *DotA* was a functional games culture of bottom-up and non-commercial playful productivity before MOBAs and their commercial set of hybrid relations. The potential for something other than a commercialised play space did exist and it is important to not forget that potential as a critical alternative, as scholars of social media platforms often similarly argue (van Dijck, 2013: 19). However, the transition to new commercial games did take place and players switched to MOBAs for many playful, technical, social and participatory reasons. Following this approach, it is necessary to briefly reflect on some of the characteristics and limitations of *DotA* the mod, as these would be fundamental to the inception of MOBAs.

5.3 Re-platforming *DotA*’s grassroots game design

Due to its status as a total conversion mod, *DotA* was always inherently limited by its technological architecture. In comparison to its platform game of *Warcraft III*, the custom games *DotA* grew out of were considered as one prominent *Warcraft III* professional player named ‘Grubby’ put it, a feature that ‘will get casuals’ interested in the platform game (Schenkhuizen, 2012: 30). Using ‘casual’ as an equivalent to non-competitive play, Grubby’s assertion is problematic when applied to *DotA*. As already discussed, the myriad of playing practices that flourished in custom games such as *DotA* would dispel any notion of its play being an exclusively non-competitive activity. However, there is an important point in Grubby’s assertion that mirrors Blizzard Entertainment’s stance towards *DotA* and the custom game space in general. In contrast to the treatment of similar grassroots productions on other modding platforms created by notable developers such as Valve Corporation (see

section 2.1), *DotA* was nearly always treated as something peripheral and non-competitive by Blizzard Entertainment, even when the playing practices represented something else entirely.

For players of *DotA*, this dismissive treatment by the platform developers did not stop their competitive play from co-creating this innovative new genre and indeed, was even crucial to its creation as I argued in the previous chapter. However, there were problematic consequences for the playful, social and technical potential of this new genre existing on the *Warcraft III* platform. For players of *DotA* and any custom game, many dissatisfactions with the platform existed that included a lack of dedicated player profile accounts, reconnect functions for players that disconnected from a game, and a lack of in-game skill-based matchmaking systems. In contrast to the non-modified mode of *Warcraft III* play that Blizzard Entertainment supported through an apter technological architecture which supported many of these features, the culture of *DotA* had to be creative in playing around these limitations.

For players of *DotA* these dissatisfactions with the limitations of the platform were often mitigated through various fan-made resources. Most of these, however, were impossible to implement into the game of *DotA* itself. For example, if a player wanted a reliable game of *DotA* where the players that disconnect are held accountable (for ruining the game) and the outcome, win or lose, is recorded, then the only way to find such a game was through external clients such as the popular '*Garena*'. *Garena* was an external game hosting client that was popular for players of *DotA* seeking more structured play. Players would host games in the client, launch the client when players had entered (which would prompt *Warcraft III* to launch and group these players together in-game) and the outcome of the game would be recorded by the client. Alternatively, players often pre-arranged games among people that already knew each other through for example, a forum such as '*PlayDota.com*'. These paratextual attempts to provide a reliable, persistently social, and competitive activity were

often problematically difficult to access for players as these features were built around paratextual clients, forums, and identities that were tied to those external spaces. For the highly competitive team-based genre that was emerging here, these persistent identities and opportunities for more structured and meaningful games were essential to realising what this genre could potentially become. Due to the limitations of *DotA* as a mod and Blizzard Entertainment's hands-off approach however, this more competitive and persistently social mode of play was resigned to the status of a niche activity in the West (3).

The limitations of *DotA*'s technical platform and the alternative ways cultures of play developed to compensate for it demonstrate the sociotechnical agencies that were at play in the genealogy of MOBAs. These sociotechnical requirements for playing *DotA* in this more meaningfully competitive and social way serves as an important indexical marker into the original technicities inherent during the formative stages of this genre. There is a similarity here to Taylor's (2006: 67) description of instrumentalised power play as a mode of play only accessible to those with the required time, social connections *and* technical capabilities for playing in this particular way. Taylor examines how in MMORPGs such as *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment, 1999 - present) or *World of Warcraft*, power modes of play are supported by the technological architecture of the game. A notable example of this in-game support in MMORPGs comes through the in-game 'guild' structures that offer 'a natural home for the power gamer' (Taylor, 2006: 73). Guilds are fully implemented structures for in-game groups of players that allow a seamless level of communication, collaboration and persistent social networking in MMORPGs. For power players looking to pool together the capacity of their avatars, their in-game resources and looking to share knowledge about the game, guilds provide an essential feature in these goals.

Although power gamers often optimise playing a game to new extremes through more explicit means, for example, new interface mods or modes of play that are sometimes

considered cheating (Taylor, 2006: 71), developers of MMORPGs frequently support and react dynamically to these modes of play. In many MMORPGs, the prevalence of these more power orientated modes of play are even essential to the functionality of the game world. For example, Constance Steinkuehler (2006) details the way guilds of experienced players ‘interactively stabilised’ the game world of *Lineage II* (NCSOFT, 2003) through killing (or punishing) the players that prey on new players. The salient point here is that through the formation of in-game groups or ‘guilds’ of players and the persistency of their social networks, many playing practices that balance or co-create the game world emerge (also see for example, Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2011; Chen, 2012; Johansson, 2013).

DotA differs from MMORPGs in the smaller scale and duration of its game sessions, but is comparable to them in the complexity of gameplay and the complete reliance upon online teamwork dynamics. The clear difference from MMORPGs however, was that the platform *DotA* appeared on was never designed to support this power mode of play. Despite players not insignificant paratextual attempts to push *DotA* in a more intensely competitive and persistently social direction, it would take an entirely new platform designed specifically around this mode of play to realise the potential of this genre.

Accessibility to this ‘power’ mode of play changed dramatically with the release of *LoL* and subsequent commercial iterations as these dissatisfactions were largely resolved through new platforms designed specifically for this genre. In *LoL* for example, reconnect functions were fully implemented, skill-based match-making was made a core feature of the game, and persistent identities tied to players accounts were required to play. When writing about *Xbox Live* player accounts, Mikael Jakobsson (2011) has persuasively argued that due to the ubiquity of achievements in games, player accounts and the information they convey about playful practices amount to an identity that mirrors avatars in MMORPGs. In a very similar vein, games of *LoL* and similar MOBAs were given much more social significance with the

onset of these features as expressive information about the intricacies of a player's style could be persistently viewed through their integrated account.

Individual MOBA games that typically last 25 – 40 minutes in duration began to take on a much more social role by default here, as player accounts acted as signifiers for a persistent in-game identity. Through individual games contributing information towards player profiles, detailed identities surrounding a player's in-game preferences or their 'gaming capital' (Consalvo, 2007) could be built up. Unlike the more ephemeral identity typical of players in a *DotA* game, *LoL* and subsequent MOBAs were establishing this more persistently social and structured mode of play for the genre. It is this widening of power play practices that would have several profound consequences for the affective relations and influence tied to MOBAs.

Following the release of *LoL* in 2009, several influential trends in the games industry can be identified. The decline in popularity of MMORPGs (Tassi, 2014), the rise in popularity of live streams and e-sports, along with the inception of free-to-play models that wholly rely upon the affective relationship players share with a game (see section 5.6.1) all rose to prominence from around this time. Although it would be a simplification to point exclusively towards the re-platforming of these more niche power modes of *DotA* play as the only reason behind these far-reaching trends, the sheer popularity of *LoL* and subsequent MOBAs suggests it played a significant role in these transformations.

For the original playing communities of *DotA* that pioneered these more competitive and persistent modes of play out of their dissatisfactions with the constraints of the mod, this commercialised widening of their play style echoes the trajectories of many susceptible commercialised subcultural innovations or styles (Clarke et al, 1976; Hebdige, 1979).

Through re-platforming *DotA* as a more social and competitive mode of play by default, Riot Games transformed what were problematic paratextual resources utilised by fans for the

independently designed *DotA* mod into seamlessly implemented features, easy to access and available to anyone upon playing. To borrow the terminology of Schäfer (2011) discussed in section 3.3.2, what was once an ‘explicit’ mode of play had become ‘implicit’. The implementation of these features in new technological platforms, the widening of a competitive mode of play, and the subsequent commercial value that was generated by players playing MOBAs or later watching/playing e-sports, all follow this more alternative and participatory genealogy of play. The dispositif of MOBAs is imbricated by these participatory and playful moments industrial incorporation and commercial capture of value. In subsequent sections, the ways games developers have captured affective economic value out of these practices is further explored alongside playfully co-creative perspectives. What is crucial to emphasise here, however, is the bottom-up sociotechnical complexity that was inherent to the design of MOBAs as popular gaming platforms.

5.3.1 MOBAs as platforms

The promise inherent to platforms such as *Youtube*, *Facebook* or by extension, *LoL*, is that the innovative potential of the platform on offer can realise new forms of networked sociality, expression and capital (cultural, social, economic, gaming) creation. As Tarleton Gillesepie (2010) notes in a critical appraisal of the term ‘platform’ and its digital connotations,

“platform” emerges not simply as indicating a functional shape: it suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, lifting up those who stand upon it. (Gillesepie, 2010: 350)

Through implementing features derived from paratextually augmented *DotA* play in the *LoL* platform, Riot Games expanded the ‘power’ mode of play and fulfilled a similar promise of ‘lifting up’ the play of those who use this new gaming platform. It is because of the more social and competitive mode of play afforded by these implemented features that *LoL* and

subsequent MOBAs achieved their initial popularity. However, it is also here that I return to the genealogical question that is a critical underpinning to understanding the confluence of forces that formed the MOBA dispositif. Was there any other alternative to *DotA* being commercially re-platformed?

In Jonathan Zittrain's (2008: 8) analysis of the creative potential inherent to Internet technologies, he describes the trend towards using 'tethered appliances' as one that limits the potential for user generativity. Generativity can be understood as the ability for users to generate new innovations, structures or behaviours through the open structure of a particular platform. As Zittrain argues, through limiting or constraining user generativity in 'tethered appliances', the networked potential of the Internet that has been central to many of its more collective and egalitarian movements is undermined. For Zittrain,

Internet users are again embracing a range of "tethered appliances," reflecting a resurgence of the initial model of bundled hardware and software that is created and controlled by one company. This will affect how readily behaviour on the Internet can be regulated, which in turn will determine the extent that regulators and commercial incumbents can constrain amateur innovation, which has been responsible for much of what we now consider precious about the Internet (Zittrain, 2008: 8-9).

The *Warcraft III* custom game space was by its name and form, very different to the type of non-generative space Zittrain warns against. However, it was also far from a perfectly generative space that is malleable on the level of its underlying platform. This distinction between generative potential over the play space and generative potential over the platform is what in essence defines mods and it is this vital distinction that also played a crucial role in constraining *DotA* as a new genre.

For any participatory or fan culture that is even tangentially related to commercial base material, be it a television show or a gaming platform, the relation of their cultural output to the original content has always been problematic from a free labour perspective. As Matt Hills (2002: 35) notes on the subject of fan works, 'fan 'appropriations' ... or 'resistances' to

consumption can always be reclaimed [by the original content producers] as new instances of exchange value'. *DotA* is different in so far as it was not the original content producers, in this case the platform developers Blizzard Entertainment, who 'reclaimed' the output of this shadow cultural economy. Rather, it was another but no less industrially motivated developer, Riot Games, along with other subsequent commercial developers that utilised these grassroots modes of game design (4). This moment of commercial investment in new games platforms was crucial to the transition and subsequent control MOBAs underwent as they came to represent a new set of hybrid power dynamics.

However, what if *DotA*'s platform had been malleable? What if the generativity that Zittrain argues is intrinsic to the Internet's dispersed structure had allowed modders and fans to resolve the original dissatisfactions with the platform and open up the power mode of play before *LoL*'s release? These are unanswerable questions. However, they do hint at an alternative conception for how this genre could have continued to develop outside of the hybrid logics of economic, cultural and playful control that MOBAs and by extension the Internet now represent.

For *LoL*, this moment of technological innovation through commercial investment in new platforms specific for this genre was fundamental at signalling the arrival of MOBAs as a hybrid power structure where bottom-up movements and affective relationships are constantly valuated from above. To return to the dispositif of MOBAs that is described throughout this chapter, this process of re-platforming grassroots modes of playing into a more widely adopted power mode of play is only one example of the bottom-up agency that contributed towards MOBAs current form. The next section considers what other more game design specific changes Riot Games began to introduce with their inception of *LoL*. Although the account of technological re-platforming described in this section is not an entirely problematic development for players as the continued popularity of the genre exemplifies.

Critical questions quickly arise when these new precedents for platformed power relations are set and they extend far beyond merely hosting a game.

5.4 The paradox of re-platforming collectively playful innovations

Tom Caldwell, a design director at Riot Games noted two aims behind the creation of *LoL* in a 2012 interview when he revealed that,

We believed that a standalone game could bring players much-needed functionality like matchmaking, persistent game features, and so on,' Caldwell tells me in an email. 'And we also believed there was a ton of room for exploration and improvement in terms of game design there. (LeJacq, 2012)

For Caldwell and Riot Games, the opportunity to re-platform this genre represented a moment in which the play of this new games genre could be redirected towards their own vision that, in a paradoxical way, was also a break from the collectively derived structure of this genre (see section 3.2.5). The authorial control exerted by Riot Games and the collective genealogy of playful co-creativity inherent in MOBAs recent past is the paradox at play here. Riot Games' new games engine built specifically for this genre sought to smooth out many of the more nuanced and often exploitative game mechanics that characterised the original mod (Remo and Sheffield, 2008). Borrowing Mia Consalvo's (2007, 114) definition of 'exploits' as functions of a game that were never intended by designers, *DotA* and indeed the entire model of collectively playful co-creativity outlined in the previous chapter were laden in this definition of exploits (see chapter seven for further consideration of 'exploits').

Riot Games break from the collective game design philosophy of *DotA* can be seen in *LoL*'s absence of many influential *DotA* mechanics that were pioneered through its playful co-creativity. To take one influential example that was prominent in *DotA* called 'creep denying', it is clear how Riot Games began to redefine the genre in this moment. Creep

denying is when players land a killing blow on friendly non-player characters (NPCs, or often referred to as ‘creeps’) on low health to deny their opponents the in-game experience and currency they would otherwise gain from killing the NPC themselves. As a player pioneered strategy that became a conventional in-game mechanic, creep denying was never intended to be a central feature of *DotA* play when the mod was originally developed. However, due to its emergent centrality in *DotA* play and the significant in-game skill required to deny creeps effectively (5), it became a commonplace feature in every iteration of *DotA*. Creep denying is just one example, however, it crystallises what made *DotA* unique as both an example of emergent play and collectively aggregated playful co-creativity. For latter commercial sequels such as *Heroes of Newerth* (S2 Games, 2010 - present) or *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013 - present), mechanics such as creep denying remained central to the re-platformed gameplay in an attempt to directly recreate the appeal of *DotA*. In *LoL*, however, creep denying and many similar mechanics were actively resisted.

Through removing many gameplay conventions derived from exploits that had become commonplace in *DotA* and introducing a set of game design principles explicitly for the purpose of making the genre ‘fun’ and ‘accessible’ (6), Riot Games sought to craft out a more widely appealing but no less complex identity for their game. The accessible, complex and inherently ‘fun’ structure of *League of Legends* can be attributed to Riot Games pursuit of a game that counteracted a number of game design principles embodied in *DotA*. The game design principles Riot Games formulated early in *LoL*’s development as guidelines to resist in every iteration included, ‘Power Without Gameplay’, ‘Burden of Knowledge’, ‘Unclear Optimisation’, and ‘Fun Fails to Exceed Anti-Fun’. These principles were listed in an influential forum post made in 2010 (6) that summarised why Riot Games balances and updates their game in the way they do. Taken together, these principles serve as a distinct

example of an authorial control that differed from *DotA*'s more collective decision making regarding game design choices such as these (see section 3.2.5).

To briefly expand upon one of these principles named 'Burden of Knowledge', the game design principle here is that no in-game ability should ever give an advantage to a player based solely upon their differential knowledge of the game in relation to their opponent. If for example, an ability stops another player from moving by destroying their health if they move, then knowing not to move against this ability is essential to the survival of a player's avatar. Due to the particular piece of in-game knowledge required to competently play here, this feature would be considered an in-game 'Burden of Knowledge' mechanic and resisted by Riot Games when iterating the game. This example closely resembles a popular mechanic in *DotA* named 'Rupture' that has subsequently been replicated in *Dota 2*, however in *LoL*, game design choices that reflect this kind of mechanic are absent. Again, a facet of competitive play that was collectively negotiated through the grassroots space of *DotA* was being redefined by *LoL*.

Throughout this thesis, the dichotomy between these differing philosophies of game design and how they influence the playful co-creativity of players is a subject that is revisited (particularly in chapter seven). Bottom-up collective game design that emphasises the necessity of emergent play is opposed by more centralised top-down game design that puts emphasis on an original vision of the game that exploitative (as opposed to 'emergent') play compromises. These differing philosophies of regulating the emergent properties of play in a system has consequences for the co-creative relations inherent to a game. With the release of *LoL*, it was exactly these relations that were beginning to be contested. For both Riot Games and Valve Corporation who have come to represent differing philosophies of game design (explored further in chapter seven), these design decisions must be carefully considered alongside the wider dispositif of relations encompassed by a game.

Unlike the playful co-creativity of *DotA* the mod, the dispositif of relations encompassed by MOBAs contains many commercially motivated decisions that influence both the play space and its wider connective ecology. The decisions made by developers such as Riot Games or Valve Corporation are always in a state of negotiation with their dispersed connective actors (including not only players, but professional players, e-sports industries, live streaming platforms, etc). To maintain the considerable affective value tied to these relations (explored in later sections of this chapter), developers must remain receptive to playful agency, just as modders did with *DotA*. At times, these relations run relatively seamlessly and the iterative game design decisions of commercial developers are widely accepted by the playing community; nourishing affective relations and the acceptance of a MOBAs dispositif.

However, controversies in these games cultures often arise when these games are iterated according to rigid game design principles, when established modes of play are removed and when the gaming or cultural capital of players is lost. In these moments, the dispositif of relations encompassed by MOBAs can be ruptured as the economic and playful inequalities of the activity become obvious. It is in these moments of rupture that moments of resistance in these games cultures can take form. In chapter seven, moments of controversial MOBA game design that resulted in moments of rupture or resistance in the culture are more thoroughly explored through online ethnographic examples such as the meme ‘Rito Plz’. The salient point for the conception of MOBA dispositifs here, however, is that at the heart of this genre is a paradoxical interplay between bottom-up and top-down contingencies that was not prevalent to the same extent in *DotA*. It is these top-down contingencies that contradict the playfully co-creative fabric of the genre and can, at times, cause a state of crisis for those involved in MOBAs. The crisis here is that actors involved in co-creating MOBAs each require different forms of value or capital (social, cultural and economic) from its playful activities. These value or capital sets are not always aligned with the top-down rules set by

game developers who are now responsible for governing not only the game, but esports industries, live streams and the people associated with those activities. The crisis of playfully co-creative governance is returned to throughout this thesis but fundamentally, it is a tension born out of the genres transition away from *DotA*'s more collectivised design and governance.

5.4.1 *DotA*'s residue

On the subject of *DotA*'s identity and what makes commercial iterations distinctive, Steve Feak (more widely known as 'Guinsoo'), an influential community member and modder behind *DotA* along with a subsequent founding designer of *LoL*, noted in 2010 that,

DotA is a mod that many people have contributed to, not a single person or development team like most typical games. As soon as you step away and create a new game, like we at Riot Games did with *League of Legends*, it's no longer *DotA*. After all, *DotA* wouldn't be where it is today without the many contributions the community has made over the years. (Fronczak, 2010)

For Feak, the identity of *LoL* and in particular *Dota 2* (that overtly attempts to capture the identity of the mod through its name) would have always struggled to capture the same collective grassroots identity that defined *DotA*. The game design philosophy outlined above that is enforced from the top down begins to hint at the tensions that arise as game design decisions are implemented by commercial designers who are not motivated by the same collectively communal goals that this genre was originally co-created through. As Feak notes, for this genre to become commercial and abandon the collectively grassroots quality that crafted *DotA*, it would need to take on a new identity altogether. The challenge for developers

such as Riot Games was to commercialise this collectively crafted genre and retain the same devotion and affective appeal that it relied upon to sustain itself.

During the same period of time Feak made this statement, the new generic identity of MOBAs was beginning to emerge. As *LoL*'s popularity grew at a rapid rate and Riot Games went from a start-up indie developer to the global developer and brand responsible for the most played game in the world; MOBA became the accepted name for the genre and its many different iterations. To some players the term MOBA continues to be a point of contention as 'Dota' or 'Action Real-Time Strategy' (ARTS) remains for them, the more authentic definition of the genre that aligns with their own sense of cultural capital (7). These players often come from games other than *LoL*, such as the *DotA* mod, *Dota 2*, *HoN* or more recently, *Heroes of the Storm* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015 - present). Each of these MOBAs differ from *LoL* in their game design philosophies and for some players, the association of the term MOBA with *LoL* is undesirable so they resist using it. These views are however, increasingly a minority. As of 2015, the second most popular user-defined tag for *Dota 2* on Valve Corporation's online distribution platform *Steam* is 'MOBA' (second to 'Free-to-play'). Considering *Dota 2* is the game that most closely resembles the genre's modding history in name and content, along with the developers themselves opposing the term 'MOBA' in favour of ARTS (Nutt, 2011: 3), it is understandable to see why statements such as 'gaming is in the age of the MOBA' have become normalised and unquestioned (Funk, 2013).

There is a sense here in which 'Dota' (as both a game and symbolic moment of grassroots participatory culture) has quickly become what Raymond Williams (1977: 123) would call a piece of cultural 'residue' as its eroding but still influential cultural presence is displaced by the once emergent, now dominant culture of MOBAs. For Williams, cultural residue represented 'areas of human experience, aspiration, and achievement which the dominant

culture neglects, undervalues, oppresses, represses, or cannot even recognise' (123 – 124). As the residue takes on a less prominent role in the new institutional, cultural or technological forms that are displacing it, Williams argued it is crucial to understand what has led to that transition taking place and more crucially, who it benefits. *DotA* is far from being forgotten or overtly oppressed (8), but its collective character of playful co-creativity has taken on a residual identity in the mass market of MOBAs that have superseded it. MOBAs such as *LoL* are definably commercial, however as with various online platforms, MOBAs occupy a precarious position between allowing their participants new potentials and opportunities for agency in the game whilst simultaneously extracting economic value out of their respective actions.

It is between this stabilisation of different motivations that the residue of *DotA*'s grassroots past often permeates into the identity of MOBAs through for example, the bottom-up role of playful co-creativity, the expansive network of copyrighted user-generated content, and the deeply affective models of 'free' monetisation (explored later in this chapter). In other words, the onset of MOBAs may represent a profound shift in the power dynamics for this genre from grassroots to corporate publishers, but it remains a genre that grew out of a non-commercial and deeply participatory practice. It is impossible for this newly commercialised genre to completely move beyond that past and remain sustainable. These residue characteristics contribute towards the MOBA dispositif as a dynamic and systemic set of relations distinct from, but clearly related to, the model of grassroots co-creativity that preceded it. It is in this context that a central question raises itself for this thesis: given the dispersed and various bottom-up flows that are apparent in MOBAs, how have commercial developers established and sustained their favourable power relations?

This is a question that pertinently raises itself across critical interpretations of the political economy of the Internet as various activities governed by top-down protocols are increasingly

obfuscated in terms of control, influence and monetisation. Critical commentators such as Bernard Stiegler (2010: 14) have argued it is this context that is developing a new paradigm of proletariat workers whereby the cognitive capacities of users are increasingly deprived of the tools for knowledge in which to escape or even negotiate the systems of control they inhabit. MOBAs point towards a similar trajectory in terms of their power relations. However, as the short but eventful history of this genre would suggest, at present there remains a hybridised state of co-creative relations where there is space for emergent negotiation over the direction of the game. These co-creative negotiations resemble the dynamism of Banks and Humphrey's (2008) emergent social network markets, but they begin with the everyday actions of playing. To comprehend the ways play can inform the ludic and political economies of MOBAs, it is essential to begin delving into exactly what their experience as a game entails.

5.5 Playing a MOBA

Since *LoL's* release in 2009 and the widespread adoption of the term MOBA that followed its rapid growth in popularity, many different variants of the genre have arisen. In addition to MOBAs such *LoL*, *Dota 2*, *Heroes of Newerth*, *Dawngate* (Electronic Arts, 2013-2014), or *Heroes of the Storm* that retain many overt RTS conventions and are exclusive to PC or Mac formats, there are now many different iterations of the genre across other subgenres and platforms. 2D Side scrolling MOBAs such as *Awesomenauts* (Romino Games, 2012 - present), 3D third-person MOBAs such as *Smite* (Hi-Rez Studios, 2014 - present) and mobile format MOBAs such as *Vainglory* (Super Evil Megacorp, 2014 - present) or *Wangzhe Rongyao* (Tencent Games, 2015 – present), to name a few, all expand conventions of what a MOBA can encompass. Due to their widespread influence and the playfully co-creative

identity already outlined, the focus here and throughout this thesis is on the PC or Mac-based MOBAs, in particular, *LoL* and *Dota 2*. As two of the most popular and influential games in the world, *LoL* and *Dota 2* also provide the clearest link to the genres more participatory past. However, it should be noted that the genre continues to evolve in many novel and expansive ways. Although the conception of MOBAs that follows has relevance to any of these games listed, the particular nuances of MOBAs vary in similar ways that any respective iteration of a genre does.

MOBA play involves a player taking control of a single avatar usually called a 'hero' (*Dota 2*, *Heroes of Newerth*, *Heroes of the Storm*, *Vainglory*) or 'champion' (*League of Legends*) that possesses a unique set of abilities distinct from any other avatar players can choose. In MOBAs such as *League of Legends*, *Heroes of Newerth* or *DotA 2*, the game involves a conflict between two teams of five players (5v5) situated in a virtual map or 'arena'. Like a game of Chess where the board remains the same in different games, the map of MOBAs all follow a similar format that was pioneered in the original *DotA* mod (see Figure 3). Similar to the genres RTS origins, vision over the map is incomplete for either team as players can only see what they and their allies can see. The objective of the game is to destroy the opposing team's base structure that is situated on parallel ends of the map and is where players 'spawn' when beginning a game or after 'dying' (what is called 'respawning'). To destroy a base structure and win the game, players manoeuvre around the map, attacking the opposing team's units and utilising the assistance of other in-game characters, both human and non-player character (NPC).

MOBA Map Comparison

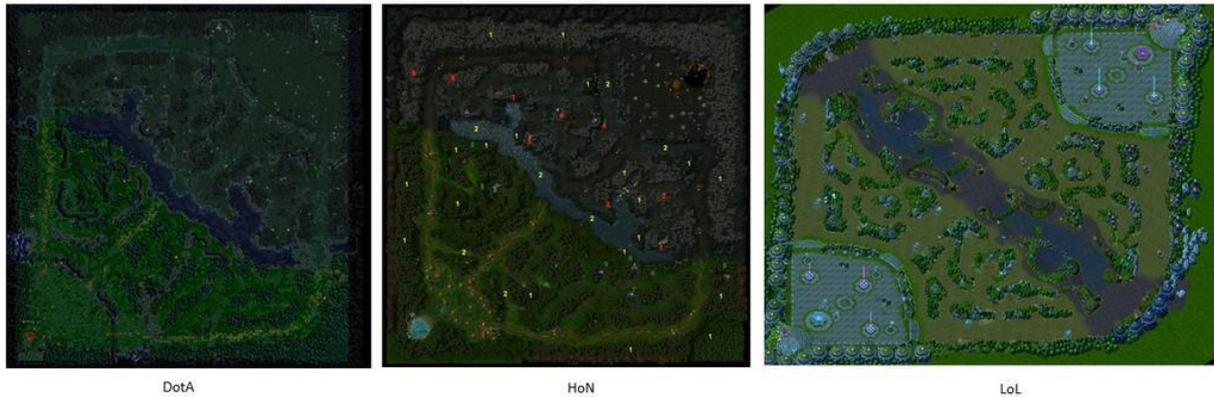


Figure 3. An overview screenshot of the three maps from *DotA*, *Heroes of Newerth* and *LoL*.

As both teams attempt to accomplish the goal of destroying the opposing team's base structure, many smaller objectives can be achieved along the way. For example, killing enemy player controlled heroes, defeating large creatures (or 'bosses') on the map, gaining 'vision' over the map, or destroying smaller structures leading to the opposing team's base. As these objectives are accomplished, incremental advantages grow for a team and its players as they are rewarded through in-game experience or currency that increase the options available for customising in-game avatars in creative and expressive ways. The appeal of MOBA gameplay lies in the interaction of variables during play as the variety of heroes (over one hundred unique heroes each with a distinctive set of properties is now the standard for these MOBA games) and in-game customisable items combine to create many strategic, creative and intuitive decisions. What differentiates this already complex set of in-game variables from similarly varied single player games is the real-time teamwork dynamics that ensure the playing experience is constantly 'emergent' (Juul, 2002).

It is this blend of RTS and RPG conventions typical of *Warcraft III* and its custom games that is a consistent feature of MOBA design. As Eron Rauch (2015) argues in an extensive series

of essays entitled ‘Demystifying MOBAs’, the comparison of RTS (in particular *Warcraft III*) and a typical MOBA is central to grasping the form of this genre.

MOBAs have inherited many obvious aspects from RTS games including 3/4 overhead view, many units which each have different skills that interact with each other, combat-centric interactions, and a large map that is played double-blind. (Rauch, 2015)

As mentioned here, the map in particular is one generic convention that is derived from RTS. MOBAs largely revolve around the same objective of destroying the opponent’s base and manoeuvring around a map with limited vision in a way that parallels the core gameplay of a typical RTS. However, whereas RTS gameplay is often heavily orientated around ‘micromanaging’ many different facets of a particular faction the player commands, for example, through gathering resources, creating buildings and controlling every individual unit to optimise their effectiveness. MOBAs remove these intricate aspects of micromanagement and switch the focus to the player controlling one significant figure concerned only with fighting the opposing faction.

The factions themselves in MOBAs are non-customisable and the player has no involvement in configuring any characteristics of the faction other than the combat aspect. When the genre first emerged in its modded custom game form, this break from RTS was a way for players to avoid the often intensely skill based micromanagement required to play RTS games but still enjoy the creative, strategic and combat elements of RTS (see Schenkhuizen, 2012). ‘Micro’ is a common term in RTS cultures as a marker of in-game mastery and a player’s ability to micro their faction is often measured in the actions per minute performed by a player. This quantitative measurement of player skill often reaches extreme heights as professional players can record up to 300 – 400 actions per minute. In contrast, MOBAs do not require nearly the same level of micro ability because the game does not demand the same level of control over multiple units across the map. Similar to the core features of *Warcraft III* custom

games noted in the opening section (chapter 2.1) of this thesis, the importance of this moment when MOBAs switched from RTS towards this new hybrid RTS/RPG genre serves as a fundamental insight into its wider appeal.

Many of these core features can be identified in the game design principles Riot Games articulate when they describe their design philosophy behind MOBAs (see section 5.4). The importance of these generic conventions in paratextual spaces, particularly for professional players crafting out unique identities from the game is returned to more substantially in section 5.5.2. What is important to briefly note about the setting of MOBAs here however, is how peculiar and at times estranged the setting may seem. In *LoL* for example, many different player controlled ‘champions’ come from different historical eras ranging from prehistoric dinosaur like creatures, to medieval knight like characters to futuristic alien entities with laser weapons. As detailed in the past chapter when describing the complexity of *DotA*, every variable of these games is deeply scrutinised to be ‘balanced’, so all of these characters are (in theory) equally powerful. As a coherent setting, however, this deluge of influences and narrative material is problematic for developers to maintain as evidenced in 2014 when Riot Games decided to completely rewrite *LoL*’s ‘lore’ (the games underlying narrative) (9). For many fan cultures, the decision to completely overturn a fictional universes setting would be a radical and unpopular decision (Brooker, 2002: 101). For *LoL* and similar MOBAs however, the significance of a narrative is not essential to many players because as one *LoL* developer put it at a 2014 Game Developer Conference presentation, ‘Plot is highly overrated’ (Makuch, 2014).

It is not the aim here to delve into the ludology versus narratology discussion that often surfaces in game studies scholarship. The salient point here is to exemplify what is important in the experience of MOBAs and to identify more precisely, where the new narratives that make MOBAs so perpetually captivating for players originate from. What is emphasised in

MOBAs is not the coherence of the setting or its respective narrative, but the variation of characters and the complex possibilities of the play space. More particularly, it is the paratextual narratives that emerge from that complexity through MOBAs connective culture of playing, participation, streaming and e-sports that is essential to the fervent activity of the genre (the paratextual influence is returned to in the next section). The combination of in-game variables and somewhat estranged setting often lead MOBAs to be characterised as having obscure settings that look unusual and even unfriendly to those not familiar with their form (10). For the cultures that play these games however, the details that make MOBAs so confusing on the face of their design, such as the in-game distinction between human and NPC, are all carefully scrutinised and measured during play.

Although the map of a MOBA typically contains many non-player characters (NPCs) or ‘minions’ (11) these are predictable components of the game that can be utilised by players in their play to achieve their own goals. For example, by destroying a minion in order to gain in-game currency or experience which players typically do hundreds of times in any single game. In *League of Legends* the status of NPCs is symbolised by a popular meme naming them ‘winions’, a play on the words ‘minion’ and ‘win’, to describe the moments when these in-game NPC units display their own agency in defining the outcome of a game. These moments are so rare (indeed they are often quasi in so far as a ‘winion’ condition is often the result of a particular player strategy) that when the NPCs decide the outcome of a game it is a comical moment for players of all skill levels due to the way MOBAs are purposely structured to avoid this outcome. In contrast to even a simplistic AI, such as the relentless but unpredictable pursuit of the player by the NPC ‘Ghosts’ in *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980) (Mateas, 2003), the AI in MOBAs is almost wholly predictable. The emphasis here is placed solely upon the player versus player (PVP) element of the genre and at its core, it is this elevated

role of player controlled avatars that has contributed to MOBAs appeal both in-game and outside of it.

5.5.1 Playing a MOBA paratextually

The residue of bottom-up participatory culture in the experience of MOBAs and the relations of their dispositif can be identified most palpably in the genres vast network of paratexts. For the original custom game culture that pioneered *DotA*, the role of paratexts was integral to the genres form, foremost as a modification of an existing game, but also as a way of aggregating the collective agency of its dispersed players and participants (see section 3.2.6). These paratextual characteristics remain essential to the genre as MOBAs in their post-modding format have played a fundamental role in the transformation of paratexts and their significance to the games industry in recent years. In this section, I aim to describe the significant role paratexts play in the experience of a MOBA and how these paratexts contribute to its dispositif of power relations. I have used the term paratext throughout this thesis as a concise way of describing the crucial role of various connective microsystems that co-create online games, but it is worth considering the term in more detail here.

The term paratext was originally coined by literary theorist Gérard Genette (1997) in an attempt to describe the many texts that accompany and frame the main body of text in a book, for example a table of contents, a preface, an index or a review. For Genette, a paratext was a text that could impose meaning upon the main body of text and meaningfully shape the reader's response to that text in the process. With the participatory turn in media studies and more specifically, the increasing malleability of new media that videogames are exemplary of, Genette's notion of the paratext has seen significant development in recent years,

especially within the field of game studies (Consalvo, 2007; Apperley, 2010; Glas, 2010; Paul, 2012; Egliston, 2015; Švelch, 2017).

One of the first game scholars to consider paratexts as fundamental to the playful practices of a game was Mia Consalvo when writing about cheating.

Before a player loads a game on to a console or computer, the opportunities to learn about that game have become vast. And once a game is released, that steady stream of information becomes a flood. Reviews (commercial and non-commercial), ads, cheat code releases, G4 TV specials, walkthroughs, discussion board topics on GameFAQs.com and perhaps the opportunity to pay more real money to upgrade your game experience all appear. (Consalvo, 2007: 8)

For Consalvo, the plethora of paratextual content that surrounds any game is no longer a peripheral consideration by players. Rather, it forms a key influence in the play of a game from its outset, to an extent where the peripheral quality of ‘para’ in paratext becomes questionable altogether. For media studies scholars more widely, a similar blurring of boundaries has been noted with the onset of online media and its rapid state of content delivery. Writing about the continued relevance of paratexts, Jonathan Gray notes that ‘the “para” is deceptive because it might suggest it’s outside the text when, in fact, I think paratexts are intrinsic parts of the text as [a] social and cultural unit.’ (Gray and Brookey, 2017: 102) For Gray and Brookey, Genette’s notion provides a vital starting point for seriously considering the ‘para’ in any text, but clear distinctions between the two categories become increasingly difficult to make for new media forms that substantially differ from Genette’s pre-online, literary examples.

Considering the differences in the way media forms are constructed, modified and generally experienced is crucial to avoiding what Jan Švelch (2017: 64) has called the ‘dysfunctional state of paratextual theory’. For Švelch, who writes extensively on paratextual theory and its application in games, he suggests a ‘culture-specific update of the concept of paratextuality that will acknowledge the differences between literary culture of the 20th century and the

current video game culture'. In both Gray and Brookey's and Svelch's critique of paratexts, they support a broader view of authorship that follows the work of production studies in viewing media artefacts as inherently collaborative and potentially ongoing projects.

The playful mode of co-creativity described throughout this thesis exemplifies the relational agency of online play to influence both paratexts, and for paratexts to influence play. This connective relationship is receptive to change from any point in the network as Ben Egliston (2015) similarly notes when writing about the paratextual relationships of competitive MOBA play in *Dota 2*. For Egliston,

games such as *Dota 2* are not confined to the audiovisual plane that is the game space: they are presented and perceived as part of a larger structure. The networked system of strategies, tactics, spectator texts and platforms, and game systems are evidence of this very open and linked ecology of competitive gaming. While the primary text, in this case the game, is necessary in the production of additional texts, the structure of the primary text can too be influenced by surrounding texts. (Egliston, 2015: 5)

Egliston uses quantitative data sets of both professional and amateur players archived by popular paratextual sites such as 'www.Dotabuff.com' to analyse the assemblage of play in *Dota 2*. What is notable in Egliston's work and is similarly noted throughout this thesis in other MOBAs, is that MOBA players traverse both the traditional game space as well as the paratextual as if there is no divide between them. This particularly connective identity of MOBAs as assembled by various online spaces or actors is notable in many other online games, particularly MMOGs as various scholars have noted (see for example, Pearce, 2009; Nardi, 2010: 132). However, the playfully co-created identity of MOBAs also presents a uniquely post-paratextual case study that is now reflected in the hybrid power relations of MOBAs dispositif.

By 'post-paratextual' I am referring to the ways that a paratext, by Genette's original description of the term, can often become more important than the 'central' text altogether. In Consalvo's (2017) more recent writing on paratextuality, she similarly notes how the central

artefacts of games can become ‘de-centred’ and paratextual in their own right by practices such as modding or live streaming. Using examples such as a ‘Game of Thrones’ total conversion mod for *Crusader Kings II* (Paradox Development Studio, 2012) and live streamers on *Twitch*, Consalvo demonstrates that the central experience of the media in question here is the mod or streamers respectively. Although the original modded or streamed games are impossible to disconnect from these examples, the experience that people are repeatedly playing/watching is the mod/streamers. As the paratextual becomes the central, and the central becomes the paratextual, Consalvo suggests ‘we need fewer “central” texts and more study of the relatedness, interconnectedness, and contingent nature of many kinds of popular culture texts.’ (Consalvo, 2017: 181) The MOBA genre provides an apt example of a de-centred object of study where a post-paratextual approach focused on the interconnections that flow through these games is needed.

As the MOBA genre evidences by its very existence as a genre derived from (paratextual) mods, the significance of paratexts now often outweigh the ‘original’ significance of the central text in unanticipated and heterogeneous ways. MOBAs began life in the paratextual and subsequently, have been thoroughly imbricated by the dispersed agencies of successive paratexts ever since. It is a fundamental claim of this thesis that these dispersed agencies of bottom-up play and participation were formative to the genre’s status as playfully co-creative. Moreover, these bottom-up agencies remain essential to MOBAs continued functionality, popularity and dispositif of hybrid power relations. For Foucault (1978), it is this plurality of relational forces that is essential to perpetuating the accepted power dynamics dispersed networks produce in their bottom-up, reinforcing agencies or affects. The paratexts of MOBAs are diverse and span many connective spaces across many regions of the world, but crucially, they each relate to their platform game and each play a role in its power dynamics.

As this thesis further develops, one of the prevailing themes is the multiple ways large commercial developers of MOBAs such as Riot Games often position themselves as indie, gamers, or in some cases amateur for very specific reasons relating to the ‘governmentality’ of their network (Foucault, 1991). With regards to the creation of paratextual content by their players or invested stakeholders, this position has been evident for developers such as Riot Games or Valve Corporation from their outset. In contrast to many other notable copyright holders who have rigorously sought to protect against or overtly monetise their fan-created content, such as Lucas Arts (Jenkins, 2006a: 135) or more recently Nintendo (Kohler, 2015), developers of MOBAs have come to represent the opposite, often going to extreme lengths to support the paratextual ecologies of their games. The extent of these paratextual ecologies is truly vast as both amateur and professional content producers have expanded the MOBA games culture in myriad ways.

In their guidelines for intellectual property use (12), Riot Games state that ‘we think it’s great if you create awesome, free and original content for League of Legends fans’ and with few exceptions, this sentiment has proven to be true for its surrounding cultures. As games cultures, MOBAs are rich with bottom-up paratextual content such as strategy guides, discussion topics, video guides, machinima, mods, chat shows, fan art/fiction, and multiple paratextual statistics websites that all shape the experience of playing a game. Unlike the modding culture that preceded MOBAs, the lines between amateur and professional are frequently blurred here. It is not only the bottom-up participatory cultures creating paratexts, but also significant commercial institutions such as e-sports organisations, live streaming or video-sharing platforms and commercial holding companies such as Tencent Holdings Limited. Although it should be noted that these large commercial paratextual industries also have a history in more amateur participatory movements, MOBAs in their present form are the site of significant external economic investment. The significance of MOBAs surrounding

industry of professional paratexts is returned to more substantially in the next section. The salient point here, however, is just how vast, integral and bottom-up many of these paratexts remain.

One of the clearest examples of this paratextual activity that might have been viewed as undesirable in another genre, are the many statistical websites that impact the way the game is played in instrumental ways. In *LoL* for example, many sites exist to give statistical information about in-game ‘champions’ (*LoL*’s name for heroes) and specific players skill at playing those champions. Sites such as ‘*LoLking.net*’, ‘*LoLnexus.com*’, ‘*LoLsummoners.com*’, ‘*LoLprofile.net*’, ‘*LoLstarz.com*’, or ‘*LeagueofGraphs.com*’, to name a few, all offer nuanced information designed to assist players in critically analysing their own play and to offer a tool of insight into other players they may encounter in-game. The specifics of these sites differ, but they each exemplify the connective co-evolution and power dynamics surrounding *LoL*’s paratexts. To take *LoLking* for example, the site was founded by two *LoL* fans in January 2012 and rapidly grew in popularity (13). In May 2012, *LoLking* joined the ZAM network which controls a number of popular statistical sites for games, including ‘*Wowhead.com*’ for *World of Warcraft* and ‘*Hearthhead.com*’ for *Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014 – present). As of March 2012 (CSN2, 2012), the ZAM network also joined Tencent Holdings Limited, the same giant Chinese holding conglomerate that owns *LoL*. The underlying political economy of these connective relations are opaque to players, however these overlapping relations do exemplify the paratextual significance of these sites to large commercial organisations who, in Tencent’s case, already own *LoL*.

The paratextual relationship these statistical sites share with *LoL* is obvious from their names, but the experience of playing *LoL* is also symbiotically assembled by sites such as these. Similar to many other databases of play (Medler, 2011; Egliston, 2016) or examples of user-interface mods where players augment the interface of the game to improve their play

(Scacchi, 2010), these sites not only affect the way MOBAs are interpreted but also encourage very particular modes of play. In Scott Donaldson's (2015) research surrounding metagame development in *LoL*, he notes that sites such as *LoLking* are inseparable from competitive play practices in *LoL* as they allow players to find out details surrounding their opponents. Knowing a player is new to a particular champion or is on a losing streak could lead to strategic choices in-game, as Donaldson notes,

One team may even choose to focus their attack on an opponent who is on a losing streak, so as to lower their already-fractured morale. (Donaldson, 2015: 13)

It is through intricate paratextual relationships such as these that many sites related to MOBAs sustain particular play practices, paralleling the fundamental role of paratexts in the participatory development of *DotA* (see section 3.2). The major difference to the participatory cultures that preceded MOBAs however, is that many of these paratexts can represent large commercial interests that appear opaque. Moreover, in contrast to *DotA*, the central node in MOBAs network is a commercial one and it is this centralised importance of the game that has severe repercussions for any paratextual activity that flow freely through them.

In looking at the form of MOBA-related paratexts such as statistics sites, something revealing about the structure and play of MOBAs begins to make itself evident. Similar to the play of custom games outlined in the previous chapter, MOBA play is both intensely competitive and creative. Given the complexity of variables inherent within these game systems, for example with *LoL* currently (as of December 2016) standing at 134 unique champions, each with unique move sets and strategies that interrelate with other champions, it is little surprise that paratexts find ways of adding to this complexity. After all, it is these collective movements that were always integral to complementing the dynamic complexity of these games (see section 2.2). For the developers of MOBAs, cultivating these surrounding participatory cultures and their paratextual spaces means a more vibrant culture of play, heightened

affective relations between players, and the maintenance of a self-sustaining bottom-up mode of activity that intensifies the popularity of their game platform. As discussed in section 5.6 through the free-to-play models of MOBAs, all of this activity imbues the game with affective relations and it is these relations that are essential to the affective economy of these games and the constitution of their dispositif.

It is here that I follow van Dijck's (2013: 18) conception of social media as a 'connective ecology' of interrelating platforms, or 'microsystems', that are sensitive to the changes in other parts of their respective ecology. MOBAs exemplify conduits for paratextual flows that enrich their surrounding ecology of participation and by extension, their own microsystem of play. Even minute changes to MOBA gameplay by a developer cause ripples of influence that carry the potential to both intensify and rupture these surrounding paratextual ecologies (subsequent chapters explore these instances in more ethnographic detail). When the stakes of playful, cultural, and economic capital inherent in these paratextual spaces is significant as it is in the many statistical tool sites listed above, the play space begins to take on a different role. Game design choices that may seem entirely ludic in their justification, such as *LoL*'s specific game design principles (see section 5.4), often carry ethical consequences when for example, somebody's identity or livelihood is tied to that decision (as explored in chapter seven). For no other group of players or stakeholders is this truer than the professionals whose work or play, depending upon the perspective, is symbiotically tied to the MOBAs under investigation here.

5.5.2 Playing a MOBA professionally

Until now one notable paratextual influence has been absent from this account of MOBAs, however, its widespread appeal and emergent industry exemplify the connective ecology in

which MOBAs are experienced, played and co-created. In January 2013, a popular streaming platform for viewing gameplay named 'Own3d.tv' announced it would be shutting down due to increased competition from a rival platform named 'Twitch.tv' (*Twitch*). From the time of roughly *LoL*'s release in late 2009, these two platforms had experienced growth at a rapid rate as many different players streamed their play on these platforms and monetised it through advertisements, donations, and sponsorships. As the names of these platforms suggest, the types of games that were popular here were competitive games. In general terms, the appeal of watching these games was derived from a spectacle of mastery, ongoing social relations between players, and creative play that could be easily mimicked by anyone through watching. Many genres such as RTS, FPS and MMORPGs garnered large audiences on these platforms but it was the MOBA genre and in particular, *LoL* and later *Dota 2*, that propelled these streaming spaces to new levels of activity and reach in the West. When 'Own3d.tv' announced its shutdown in January 2013 for various complex reasons (14), it left the following statement in a final blog post; 'The gaming revolution will not be televised - it will be streamed'. Less than twenty months later, its rival *Twitch* was sold to *Amazon* for \$970 million (Lingle, 2014). Own3d.tv, which is now little more than a footnote in the development of these paratextual platforms, was proven correct in its prediction.

With many similarities to the rise of 'Let's Play' videos whereby individual content producers garner extensive and devoted fan followings (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014), live streaming has become an integral part of the identity of games and the way they are now played or watched. Just as MOBAs were causally tied to the rise in popularity of live streaming, so too, was live streaming fundamental to the recent rise in popularity that electronic sports (e-sports) have undergone in the West. As players stream their actions on a platform such as *Twitch*, they not only affect the game they are playing, for example by popularising a particular mode of play, but they also express their personality. Spreading

memes, conventions and cultural motifs in the form of playstyles, phrases or actions that can come to define a game and its culture. To take an example of how MOBAs, live streaming, and electronic sports all come together to co-constitute the identity of one another, it is useful to think through an example of playful co-creativity typical of MOBAs named 'xPeke'.

'xPeke' is the pseudonym for a Spanish *LoL* player who began playing professionally in early 2011 and rose to fame within the culture in mid-2011 after winning the first *LoL* world championship. As with many professional players who began competing in *LoL* during this time, xPeke streamed his practice play on Own3d.tv attracting a significant fan following for his in-game play and laid-back personality. Xpeke was one of many professional players who ascended to prominence during this period by streaming their practice play and creating affective relationships with fans who in turn, would become an audience for the broadcasts of professional play between teams of these players. Just as the MOBA genre more generally is the result of various bottom-up modes of playful agency refining its system, it was through the bottom-up user-generated content of streamers such as xPeke and their respective fan followings that the broadcasts of e-sports matches began to flourish. To the *LoL* community more widely however, xPeke is also famous for another reason.

During a game at the e-sports tournament 'Intel Extreme Masters Katowice' in January 2013 that had a total prize pool of \$44,000 and was streamed to the world, xPeke successfully carried out a move that had never been seen before on a professional stage. The move in question was a daring attempt to end a close game single-handedly by sneaking behind the opponents when they were not expecting it and consequently destroying their base structure, thus winning the game. What played out during this move was a dramatic sequence of events where the opposing team attempted to intercept xPeke, however due to some skilful movement made possible by a particular champion named 'Kassadin' employed by xPeke as his avatar, they were unsuccessful (see Figure 4). xPeke, along with his daring move, passed

from what Ferrari (2013) would call a ‘generative’ mode of play into a ‘conventional’ one overnight, essentially becoming a new bottom-up motif within *LoL* game culture. The word xPeke is now synonymous with this move and professional players along with regular players across the world have since adopted variations of this daring move in their own play.



Figure 4. The final moments of SK Gaming vs Fnatic at Intel Extreme Masters

Katowice, when the player xPeke performed what would later be called the ‘xPeke’.

This is not a unique story to *LoL* and other e-sports share similar examples of players imposing their styles onto the system of the game (Taylor, 2012: 94). Another notable example of this explored more substantially in chapter seven is ‘the Fountain Hook’ move in *Dota 2* that provided a vivid and high stakes example of what these modes of play represent to the wider connective ecology of play. What xPeke’s example crystallises however, is how the interplay of actors both player and game, game and paratext or human and nonhuman contribute in complex ways towards the playfully co-creative identity of MOBAs.

The creativity xPeke displayed during play benefited his professional career through affording him authenticity and popularity within *LoL*'s culture. The popularity has funded his own career in ways that the rewards for professional play (Taylor, 2012: 97) or other bottom-up modes of online creativity (for example modding; Postigo, 2010) have struggled to economically support in the past. From a connective perspective focusing on the political economy this act of playful co-creativity exists within, however, a question arises surrounding how has this creative and influential example of play impacted the platforms such as *LoL* where it was played, and *Twitch* where it was largely watched?

It may be an entirely different context than the participatory genre mapped out here, but it is easy to be reminded of Adorno and Horkheimer's (1979: 122) polemical position towards the culture industries wherein they state any 'talented performers belong to the industry long before it displays them'. For Adorno and Horkheimer who were concerned with the 1940's film industry and were key influencers in the Frankfurt school of Cultural Marxism, dualisms between the controlled position of the performer and the industry who exploited the means of production were prominent. In the conception of MOBAs mapped out in this thesis I have necessarily resisted such dualisms in favour of a more co-creative perspective describing the interrelations between different stakeholders, platforms, and paratexts that overlap in their convolutions (see section 3.4.2). However, inherent within these convolutions are many uneven power dynamics that in their most tangible form, are reflected in the vast economic value now associated with platforms such as *Twitch* or *LoL*. The play of a player such as xPeke is in many ways, the same as any player of a MOBA game, caught between these structures of economic control that both influence and monetise playful, social and cultural actions in multiple ways. It is here that the semblance between Adorno and Horkheimer's performer caught in an unescapable industry of economic exploitation and the player caught in platforms of relentless economic valuation begin to overlap.

In any event, for any critical conception of what MOBAs represent, the continued role of paratexts and the bottom-up agency exercised by players cannot be ignored. The widespread use of the term MOBA is emblematic of the heterogeneous ensemble the genre represents, however like participation or web 2.0 (see section 3.4.2), it is also implicit in its delegation of ludic agency and economic power as ultimately platformed. In other words, as industrialised and implicitly controlled by top down structures. To return to the notion of a *dispositif* that Foucault (1980: 194) and others (Deleuze, 1992: 338; Agamben, 2011) have used when referring to power relations that are heterogeneously reinforced between actors to ultimately benefit a taken for granted power structure, it begins to become evident how MOBAs operate in this way. MOBAs, similar to wider perspectives surrounding participatory culture (Schäfer, 2011: 15), are a term synonymous with bottom-up movements of players; be that through play styles that spread throughout the connective play space, paratextual resources that symbiotically co-create their primary game text, or through the streamed play of an e-sport as in the case of xPeke. These diverse bottom-up movements are responsible for many of the trends that are attributed to MOBAs significance that have been discussed in this chapter. For MOBA players, the agentive role of diverse bottom-up actors produces an abundance of content through continuous acts of playful co-creativity and through the vast networks of paratexts. For MOBA developers such as Riot Games however, all of this activity is integral to what they commonly call the sustainability of their ‘ecosystem’ (15).

As is explored in greater detail through specific online ethnographic examples in chapter seven, large MOBA developers such as Riot Games and Valve Corporation now often refer to themselves as more than just game developers, but as curators of their ecosystems. These ecosystems encompass the playfully co-creative circuits of the game, but they also extend to the networks of paratextual user-generated content and paratextual industries, for example large e-sports organisations that have emerged from these activities. The responsibility for

occupying this new position of far-reaching influence is by no means a field with established practices, however as has been argued thus far, it is one that mirrors wider trends across the Internet. How MOBA developers occupy this new position of ecological influence through walking a precarious line between allowing connective actors respective agency or power and extracting economic capital out of those same activities is one of the primary questions behind this research. Up until now, one of the fundamental elements that underpins this question has only been touched upon, but it is here that the discussion of MOBAs necessarily takes an affective turn. The glue that combines this amalgamation of connective influences and enables the developer (and its larger commercial interests) to extract value out of those relations is a profoundly affective economy. To critically grasp how MOBAs navigate and commodify this affectively imbued dispositif, it is essential to frame one of the most pronounced forms of grassroots residue that pervades this genre. That is the non-commercial background of *Dota* that is reflected in the ‘fair’ model of free-to-play.

In the next section, the influential notion of the gift economy is considered as a way of coming to terms with the model of ‘fair’ free-to-play that underpins the monetisation of MOBAs. This model of monetisation is an important example of an affective economy that is also another element of re-platformed participatory culture central to the functionality of MOBAs as a dispositif of hybrid power relations. Before delving into the specificities of the ‘fair’ free-to-play model itself, it is necessary to outline what anthropologists term the gift economy as its parallels to MOBAs ‘fair’ free-to-play model are readily apparent.

5.6 The online gift

The obligation attached to a gift itself is not inert.

- Marcel Mauss (1950: 9)

In Marcel Mauss's seminal work surrounding the significance of gift giving in non-capitalist social structures, he described the processes of gift-giving in several 'archaic' societies as one bound up in obligation and reciprocity. For Mauss, to give a gift is to bestow upon someone a socially significant property that, unlike more commodified forms of exchange, is one that carries with it a profoundly lasting and affective mode of address. For the more tribal and non-capitalist social groups Mauss was concerned with such as the indigenous peoples of Polynesia or North America, the circulation of gifts was central to maintaining or solidifying relationships between individuals and groups. In many customs, such as those of the Maori, Mauss (10) observed that the 'the bond created by [giving] things is in fact a bond between persons, since the thing itself is a person or pertains to a person'. To the extent that the material object of the gift in question could be considered an extension of a person, Mauss asserted that the importance of giving a gift was an inherently social (or even spiritual, what Mauss described as the *hau* character) experience for all people involved. As such, the gift always carried a communal obligation to reciprocate. To not reciprocate the gift was as Mauss noted, 'dangerous' because the gift is in essence, 'alive and often personable'.

It was these anthropological case studies that were fundamental in describing what Mauss would call a 'general theory of obligation' and what many subsequent studies have built upon in the field of gift economics (see for example, Hyde, 1983; Berking, 1999; Godelier, 1999). However, there has always been a limitation in applying gift economics to larger modern societies and that is as Lewis Hyde (1983: 91) notes, 'that gift exchange is an economy of small groups. When emotional ties are the glue that holds a community together, its size has an upper

limit.’ For larger societies, meaningful personal relationships between all members of that society are impossible to maintain and as such, the significance of gift giving and its affective connotations are diminished along with any sense of an obligation to reciprocate. Unlike smaller scale societies or groups that most examples of gift economies are centred around, modern society has codified the processes of exchange through law and in that process, largely eliminated the lasting reciprocal properties of socially imbued exchanges. However, in the technological optimism that surrounded the Internet during the 1990’s, a renewed interest in gift economies and their potential for much larger scale collectives of collaborative reciprocity emerged.

In Richard Barbrook’s (2005) influential 1998 essay entitled ‘The Hi-tech Gift Economy’, he argued that due to the ease of copying and zero-cost sharing that the Internet represents, a viable paradigm of an alternative political and economic model akin to a large-scale gift economy could exist. Comparable with other optimistic readings of the Internet that were prominent during this time (see section 3.4.2), Barbrook cited new open source projects and open access to information through collaborative knowledge communities as prototypical systems whereby ‘everyone takes far more out of the Net than they can ever give away as an individual’. In subsequent years with the rise of file sharing and what Michael Strangelove (2005: 56) would call the destructive ‘napsterisation’ of established means of commoditisation, Barbrook’s claim has seen continued relevance (see for example, Anderson, 2009). Indeed, the culture that collectively created *DotA* stands as one of the clearest examples of a knowledge community that operated according to this more gift orientated cultural economy. As argued previously in this thesis, *DotA* could *only* have been pioneered in this way. However, the transition of *DotA* towards MOBAs that has been described in this chapter as mirroring the trajectories of participatory cultures to commercialisation in the form of proprietary platforms is one that has

also engulfed the idyllic model of a large scale, non-commodity online gift economy envisaged by Barbrook and others.

As Barbrook (2005) and other scholars would also note in later work (Terranova, 2000; Fuchs, 2008; Scott, 2009: 35), the state of online gift economies is one that has paradigmatically shifted away from the social and spiritual autonomy of Mauss's gift and towards hybrid models of commodified affective economies. The post-scarcity surplus that was predicted to be openly shared in online gift economies has become, in these critical accounts, a surplus that is under constant commoditisation by platforms leading to what has been described as an 'attention economy' (Goldhaber, 1997; Crogan and Kinsley, 2012). That is to say, it has been analysed as representing a return to a modified culture industries model of commodification whereby the human capacity for attention becomes the scarce economic resource in place of the media that is reducible to instantly distributed and replicated bits. As with other bottom-up movements that have contributed towards the dispositif of MOBAs, the means of monetisation also exists as a genealogical characteristic of its bottom-up and non-commercial past. MOBAs themselves can be read as quite literal examples of a fully commercialised online gift economy whereby in theory at least, players only pay if they want to (the specificities of this model are further explained in the next section). Unlike Mauss's societally autonomous grassroots gift economies or a fully measured and explicitly commodified attention economy such as a social network, MOBAs refuse a clear categorisation as they begin to represent a model where the affective relations of the player are the scarce resource. To understand the significance of this model and why it operates along the lines of a commodified gift economy, it is necessary to first make a distinction between two different types of free-to-play.

5.6.1 Economies of online play

On the 3rd of June 2013, *Wargaming*, the online games developer of the popular free-to-play (F2P) title *World of Tanks* (2011, Wargaming) announced a new initiative to remove all ‘pay-to-win’ (P2W) options from their games (Graft, 2013). ‘P2W’ (also referred to as ‘freemium’) takes many forms, however at its core, it stands for a type of F2P game whereby paying out of game money can equate to meaningful in-game advantages. When *Wargaming* made the announcement in 2013 that they were switching their monetisation model away from P2W, it followed the trend of numerous MOBAs that had pioneered an alternatively affective model of ‘fair’ F2P. In this model, the game is given to players for free (as a download) and payment to the developer is, in theory at least, completely optional and non-essential due to the sale of in-game virtual commodities being purely aesthetic. For example in *LoL*, the large reptilian avatar named ‘Cho’Gath’ has purchasable ‘skins’ that can make the character look like a dinosaur fossil, or give the character a top hat and monocle. These aesthetic changes do not change the properties of the avatar in any way to give a player an in-game advantage, but they do provide alternative themes for the avatar to players willing to pay money. In essence, this is what Riot Games called ‘fair’ free-to-play and it means that playing the game remains a fair and even ground for everyone involved (17).

The game is a freely distributed gift to players where the reciprocation of economic value to the commercial developer is optional. It is a difference concerning monetisation that has not always been clearly articulated as the F2P model has continued to develop into the dominant mode of online games production that it now is, however, it is one that has defined MOBAs and *LoL* in particular from their outset.

When *LoL* was released in 2009 and rose to popularity in subsequent years, it was by no means the only MOBA game. However, its monetisation model was unique at the time, not just to

MOBAs. When *LoL* was released in late 2009, F2P games were synonymous with P2W which was a term Riot Games themselves popularised as a means to make their game distinctive. Depending upon the particular game, P2W content is only accessible through paying and this content is necessary to remain competitive at playing the game, leading many more recent commentators to question its definition as ‘free-to-play’ altogether (Alha et al, 2014: 4; Bogost, 2014b). Before delving into the specificities of Riot Games fair F2P model and its underlying gift approach, P2W and its appeals must be clearly framed as it was exactly this model of P2W that *LoL* successfully defined itself as an alternative to. Moreover, it is the allure of this alternative model of monetisation that many other commercially motivated games developers such as *Wargaming* would later attempt to emulate.

P2W can be understood as a continuation of economic models of codified exchange whereby paying money is required to unlock necessary content, just as traditional monetisation models throughout wider societal economies have been predicated upon explicit monetary exchange for goods or services. The fundamental difference in this comparison is the same as the potential Barbrook outlined in the late 1990’s; that the zero-cost distribution of a post-scarcity Internet is, as digital economy commentator Chris Anderson (2009: 13) has more recently put it, an ‘economics of bits’ inclined towards being freely available and encouraging alternative forms of value. By relying upon more codified models of monetary exchange, P2W games represent a number of inconsistencies that arise when more explicitly codified monetisation models are applied to the Internet.

As a model P2W is in some sense initially free. Beyond the initial playing experience however, P2W games begin to make demands from the player that resemble a demo or arcade machine whereby money is required to continue viably playing. It is here that several inconsistencies with the P2W model can be identified that have become a divisive topic among players, developers, journalists and academics alike due to the consequences for

playing inside such an explicitly commodified virtual space. Many P2W games give rise to potentially unethical practices where single players can spend vast sums of money on content within a single game due to the lack of limits on what can be digitally replicated and distributed. The amount spent by single players can often number in the thousands of dollars and for many P2W games, it is these top two percent of paying players who generate around forty percent of a games revenue (Carmichael, 2013).

For the state of ludic and social balance in these games, the sale of this concentrated P2W content where an elite few players who have the required economic capital to become the most influential players' in the game raises a number of questions. For instance, what rights do the majority of players have if only a small number of players generate most of the revenue for a game? It is these ambiguities in the model that has led some commentators to describe P2W games as a paradoxically self-destructive playing experience for everyone involved (Shokrizade, 2012). As Ian Bogost (2014b) notes with particular criticism of the P2W model and the political economy that has given rise to it,

The [P2W] free-to-play structure isn't just a business model that somehow got hurriedly tacked onto a game that might have been commercialised in any number of other ways. Rather, it's a sophisticated new gloss on the classic playing-for-time model pioneered by the coin-op games of the seventies and eighties—only instead of coaxing pocket change from users, it extracts a kind of surplus value that, in the new digital economy, is infinitely more valuable: it embeds within the actual gaming experience the relentless quest for attention, word-of-mouth, and (ultimately) remuneration that drives virtually every other overcapitalised form of online activity. (Bogost, 2014b)

As Bogost gestures towards here, P2W can be read as an explicitly commodified economy that in its 'relentless quest for attention', compromises the balance, integrity and social sustainability of the game. It is these traits of the P2W model that require a closer examination here because as noted in previous sections, Riot Games viewed themselves from the outset as curators of a connective ecosystem. As a model, P2W and its appeals were incompatible with the more balanced and longer lasting ecosystem of play Riot Games

envisioned (chapter seven expands on Riot Games ecological perspective). The unsustainability of P2W derives from its traditional forms of monetary exchange that are imposed upon the inherent sociality of online play spaces.

5.6.2 When gaming capital meets economic capital: the paradox of P2W

In her exploration of in-game ‘cheating’, Mia Consalvo (2007: 122 – 23) coins the term ‘gaming capital’ as an adaptation of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of cultural capital. For Consalvo, possessing gaming capital connotes cultural authenticity upon an individual and often the wish to ‘acquire status or prestige’ leads people to adopt ‘specific techniques or programs to gain that wealth and power more quickly than they would if they didn’t cheat’. Although Consalvo’s investigation of cheating makes no direct reference to P2W, the ramifications of ‘gaming capital’ and the status or prestige that it can connote are extremely relevant in understanding the appeal of P2W for players. In social media games the term ‘whale’ has become popular as a term in commercial contexts for the top two percent of players who drive roughly forty percent of the revenue in P2W games (Carmichael , 2013: 1) such as *Legacy of Heroes* (5th Planet Games, 2011) or *Dragons of Atlantis* (Kabam, 2011). ‘Whales’ are players who fully adopt the pay to win practices and as Carmichael (2013: 2) has found through interviews with these players, the value of paying to win is inherently social.

Some of them relish the glory of competition — being the top player or owning the most — just as much as they value the fellowship that comes out of it. (Carmichael, 2013: 2)

The purchase of in-game goods that represent status or prestige can be read here as a form of gaming capital not altogether alien from notions of cheating in multiplayer games. Although

the purchase of in-game advantages or tokens of authenticity is legitimised, indeed encouraged, the impact of players such as ‘whales’ on the overall balance of a game appears to be the equivalent of cheating. Or in other words, a non-trivial and detrimental action for the majority of players (Consalvo, 2007: 114). Numerous games researchers have noted that the subject of balance is an extremely important issue for players (Castronova, 2005: Taylor, 2006: 90; 164; Ham, 2010) and with regards to the P2W model of monetisation, it quickly becomes clear just how compromised that balance almost always is. What starts out as an equal play space is always predisposed to become imbalanced as money enters the virtual world and with it, so do the inequalities of wider society (17).

Virtual economist Ramin Shokrizade (2012: 1) has defined P2W as any game that sells ‘supremacy goods’ to its players. Describing the P2W model in paradoxical terms, Shokrizade describes supremacy goods as ‘a good or service that reduces the value of all other linked goods and services in its space, *including itself*.’ Similar to the introduction of a foreign species to a balanced ecosystem, the P2W model’s reliance upon supremacy goods as a means of extracting economic value from its players is ultimately a self-destructive mechanic in online games. Although the sale of P2W content or supremacy goods is initially valuable to the player who owns it as a form of gaming capital, it alienates the much larger player base who pay in moderation or not at all. The paradox for the P2W model is that the sale of supremacy goods that represents economic value to commercial developers also represents a diminished value of their virtual world, community and by extension, their future supremacy goods. Whales, although lucrative in the short term, ultimately destroy what Huizinga (1949: 1) would call the ‘essence of play’ by paradoxically prescribing to the very rules the game requires and therein lies the reason why Riot Games were so opposed to what at the time, was this paradoxical expectation for F2P games.

5.6.3 The gift of a 'fair' game

We know players form the foundation of our community and it's for them that we continue to evolve and improve the *League of Legends* experience.

- 'The Riot Manifesto' (18)

In contrast to the P2W model that was synonymous with F2P in 2009, Riot Games released their game for free with all of the content that can give any form of competitive advantage to players available through playing. The monetisation model for Riot Games was twofold. Firstly, players could pay to unlock content in the game that they could otherwise gain through playing, such as new 'champions' or customisable 'runes' with the purpose of saving time for the player (16). Secondly, players could pay to unlock 'skins' that are customisable aesthetical ways to look different in-game for a particular champion and are only available through paying. Due to the complexity of playing *LoL* and the time required to gain mastery over various elements of the game, the need to pay money in order to play competitively was greatly reduced here as in-game player accounts were aimed at easing players into playing rather than explicitly paying (16). To return to Huizinga's terms, the 'essence of play' was valued above any other external monetary influence giving the game a much more authentic experience from the perspective of players.

It is important to note here, that developers such as Riot Games and Valve Corporation also gather extensive sets of data about their players. Although the data of players is not directly monetised in the same way that the affective activities of users might be on a social network, similar platform logics of data driven design and governance are utilised. Kerr (2017: 110) notes that 'large-scale online games can be thought of as data gathering systems' with Riot Games acting as a pioneer in the analysis and application of player data. Using player data to intervene in game design (through detailed champion win rates statistics), player toxicity (through player reports) and skins sales (through identifying popular champions in different

geographic regions), Riot Games is constantly deriving value from the data emanating out of their game. For nearly all players, these datafication activities are not visible or disruptive to the game and the affective relationships being cultivated. However, the datafication processes of developers such as Riot Games are exemplary of the way that their gift of a free and fair game is mutating notions of an online gift economy; even if players view the game as a gift.

The outcome of this fairer F2P approach has been a phenomenally influential game that has not only turned *LoL* into one of the most lucrative games in the world, but it did so through a thriving worldwide culture of participation and playful co-creativity. Rather than alienating the majority of players relationships with each other through in-game economic power structures and with developers through strictly codified economies of monetary exchange; *LoL* has been pioneering in reducing the social barriers between players and between player and developer with regards to F2P (chapter six explores this relationship in more ethnographic detail). The outcome has been an affectively imbued gift economy whereby players are invested in the connective ecology of the game as well as with the developers whom, in giving the initial and significant gift of a free and fair game, are rewarded through economic reciprocation that in *LoL's* case, numbers in the billions of dollars every year.

What is especially significant about this model however, and an important reason why developers such as *Wargaming* switched to utilise it, is its sustainability. When the wider connective ecosystem of play and participation begins to thrive as it did for *LoL*, then all of that content including a forum post, a fan-made video or a mode of playful co-creativity such as xPeke's contributes towards a bottom-up form of affective reciprocation in the game culture. These various forms of bottom-up agency contribute towards what I have been calling in this chapter an affective economy, but can be understood as a bottom-up form of authenticity that imbues the game culture and sustains the commodified gift giving economy. As this thesis

explores further in chapter six, it is through this activity that MOBAs are not viewed or positioned as a traditional commodity, but rather as a hybridised commodity form that is at times subject to disruptions when for various reasons, that affective relationship between actors breaks down (see chapter seven).

As crucial as the connective ecosystem of play and participation is in the success of this genre and the affect it can evoke for players, it should also be emphasised that a lack of this bottom-up activity can equally lead to a collapse of this model. For MOBAs such as *Dawngate* (Electronic Arts, 2013 – 2014) or *Infinite Crisis* (Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2015 - 2015), the connective ecosystem of actors that typifies *LoL* or *Dota 2* was never able to gain traction and the player base along with their affective relationship with the game was diminished, resulting in both of these games getting cancelled and their servers shut down. In both of these examples, significant economic investment and intellectual property (the fictional universe of DC Comics in *Infinite Crisis*'s case) was available from their inception. However, without the establishment of a substantial, productive, contributory player culture and its attendant paratextual resources, maintaining these games fair F2P model was untenable.

As a model, fair F2P and its affective economy is reliant upon the bottom-up actors and paratextual production described throughout this chapter to an extent that other monetisation models are not. Due to the longer lifespans games following a fair F2P model aim for (sometimes lifelong, see chapter 6.5.2), repeated reciprocal purchases are essential. It is here that the push towards viewing MOBAs as e-sports by developers such as Riot Games or Valve Corporation can also be framed, as the definition of a sport often transcends commercial concerns for fans. Later chapters explore this subject with more in-depth ethnographic detail as the bottom-up actions of professional players or user-generated content producers frequently

interact with the actions of wider players and it is through this activity that the affective economy is maintained.

Notions of value overlap here, as the diverse practices relating to this genre can be framed in ways that serve different functions to different stakeholders. However, as has been argued throughout this chapter, it is the commercial developer, publisher or investment holding company who ultimately controls the vast majority of economic value emanating from this connective ecosystem of playful co-creativity. As opaque as this control may often be, it is through the fair F2P model described here that all connective actions must be framed as it is the affective agency of these co-creative actions that sustain this commoditised gift economy.

5.6.4 Re-platforming the gift

‘[Fair] free-to-play is an extension of that [modding background] and is based on the aggregate incremental value of another player to all the other players.’

- Gabe Newell, Co-Founder of Valve Corporation, 2015 (19)

The perspective of viewing MOBAs as part of the ‘Internet as a historical artefact’ (Crawford, 2011: 287) has been a central underpinning throughout this chapter. In the design of MOBAs commodified but simultaneously affective gift economy, another instance of re-platforming a previous phase of non-commercialised participatory culture can be noted. However, unlike some aspects of the MOBA re-platforming process such as gameplay features (see section 4.2), the transition of *DotA* and its respective gift economy of non-commercial circulation into *LoL* (followed by other MOBAs) and its commercialised affective economy outlined here has always been met with relatively little resistance. Due to many of the reasons listed in previous sections relating to the distinction away from P2W and the particularly affective mode of address to players that Riot Games and subsequent developers have utilised (see chapter 7.2.4);

fair F2P can be read as a direct and almost seamless continuation of the non-commodity ethic that can be traced to the original mod. Of course, the economic value that emanates from this new commodity form quickly dispels any notion that MOBAs are solely about giving and playing. However, resistance towards the monetisation of this genre is far less pronounced than was the case in other subcultural innovations or styles that have undergone a similar commoditisation (Clarke et al, 1976; Hebdige, 1979).

In the quote above that comes from Gabe Newell during a *Reddit* ‘AMA’ (‘ask me anything’, an open discussion with users), Newell claimed that a large part of the popularity tied to mods such as *Counter-Strike* (1999) or *Team Fortress* (1996) that Valve were responsible for supporting was due to the fact that they were originally free. Due to the differing moral economy of modders that are not necessarily concerned with money in the same way that professional developers are (Kow and Nardi, 2010; Sotamaa, 2010; Postigo, 2010), mods always gain significant traction according to Newell and it is this freely given model that fair F2P is a continuation of.

However, there is a further reading of Newell’s comment in relation to the context that it was given. In the particular *Reddit* AMA Newell was participating in, he was defending a recent initiative of Valve Corporation to monetise individual mods for *Steam* games starting with *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011). The intention was to codify the process of exchange between players and modders by charging players for downloading particular mods and then sharing that money with the modders. Unlike the fair free to play model described here, this mode of commoditisation was codified and relied upon a more enforced structure of exchange in order to unlock further playing material.

As an initiative, it was staggeringly unpopular with the *Steam* community. Newell rushed to defend the decision in the face of a *change.org* petition protesting the policy that reached 130

thousand signatures (20). Due to mounting pressure and Valve Corporation's valuable reputation as a games company working in the interests of players (similar to Riot Games, Valve rely upon this reputation to affectively monetise *Dota 2* and *Team Fortress 2*), the initiative was soon abolished. Although this example differs from the process of re-platforming a mod and its genre, it does stand as a significant example of the resistance that can be exerted when monetisation is seen as explicitly codified and suddenly enforced. The irony of this example is that Valve Corporation already employ a similar model of monetising user created 'skins' in *Dota 2*, however any palpable resistance towards the sale of these mods is non-existent there due to the game itself being free.

It is this powerful mode of gift giving in the fair FTP model that can be framed alongside the wider online trends of crowdfunding platforms such as *Kickstarter* or 'early access' games that are now common across *Steam*. Similar to crowdfunded projects, early access games are released incomplete and rely upon the voluntarily given money and free labour of players to continue developing a commercial project. *Kickstarter* projects and early access games both exemplify a similarly affective relationship between fans/players and project organisers as both funding models rely on a continued promise of more content to follow as a direct result of fan/player involvement (both monetarily and through the free labour many early release games depend on). MOBAs rely on a similar premise of players having an affective stake in the ongoing co-creativity of these games. In chapters six and seven, this theme is further explored to consider what the precise affects of this hybrid relationship are, how the gift status of these games is maintained, and in what instances does the reciprocal relationship rupture. As it becomes apparent throughout this thesis, the residue of grassroots non-commercial cultures is still evident in the status of these hybrid relations and the enormous affective value that is extracted from these webs of playful co-creativity.

5.7 Summary: Gaming the gift

The network of influence MOBAs now extend into is vast as playful, cultural and economic activity overlaps into many spaces, cultures and industries that are not traditionally within a games developer's control. Video or streaming platforms such as *Youtube* or *Twitch*, expansive worldwide e-sports industries and fervently active participatory spaces such as *'/r/leagueoflegends'* on *Reddit*, to name a few, all testify to the complex relationality of online power structures surrounding this genre. Following van Dijck's (2013: 18) conception of social media as a 'connective ecology' of interrelating platforms, or 'microsystems', that are sensitive to the changes in other parts of their respective ecology, so too are MOBAs conduits for paratextual flows that channel their surrounding ecology and its respective motivations productively and monetarily.

Whereas players of *DotA* participated with the game but were constrained due to limited in-game functionality, now players of MOBAs participate without those same limitations but are subject to many commercial and connective logics that obscure the direction of the genres continued development. In contrast to the open collectivity that defined the *Warcrat III* custom games context out of which *DotA* emerged, MOBAs mirror the wider transition towards closed/circumscribed/commercially delimited platforms across the Internet. It is this commercial transition that is problematic for the collectivised and grassroots agency of playful co-creativity and a fundament reason why I call it a crisis. The crisis here is one of control, as the underpinning logics that govern this genre are commercial and span many different platforms including the game, e-sports industries, live stream platforms and other user-generated content. In contrast to an open field of playful co-creativity where the game reacts collectively to the movements across these spaces, MOBAs are a constant site of tension as commercial logics potentially conflict with playful ones.

The challenge for developers of MOBAs is weighing up decisions regarding the iterative games they co-create along with the surrounding ecosystems they curate through such decisions. Although different developers negotiate this role differently as has been mentioned in this chapter, it is an area for further research in this thesis to fully comprehend the extent to which platformed game design decisions affect players and wider connective stakeholders. The critical challenge here is to uncover these connective flows that often begin through bottom-up movements as commonplace as play but quickly circulate through affective commercialised networks to a point where their new form seems normalised and unquestioned; despite its industrialisation by political economic motivations.

For the Internet more widely, these participatory networks of uneven agency are what have come to define the connective ecosystem of platforms that is now prevalent. The MOBA genre is typical of this platformed landscape and the dispositif of its overlapping power relations continues to complicate and implicitly industrialise bottom-up flows of agency through new modes of connective decision making and affective control. As large commercial interests continue to be obscured by the various bottom-up flows of agency that are constitutive of MOBAs dispositif, the critical impetus of this thesis takes form. In delving behind the genealogical transition from *DotA* to MOBA, multiple critical questions begin to emerge surrounding this new dispositif of hybrid power relations. It is the ambiguities that arise from this profound transitional period that inform the critical questions surrounding MOBA affect and the governing role of developers that the remaining online ethnographic research in this thesis delves into.

6. Playing with MOBA Affect

In the past chapter, I described the dispositif of MOBAs as one imbricated by various facets of the genres grassroots past as a participatory culture of non-commercial playful co-creativity. In the playfully co-creative structure of the games, in the continued role of participatory cultures including the now extensive e-sports and live streaming industries, as well as the ‘fair’ F2P model that generates vast economic revenue for MOBA developers through the activities of this connective ecosystem, critical questions are abundant regarding the hybrid power relations at play here. In this chapter, I further explore the dispositif of these relations through ethnographically exploring the processes and affective sentiments of this commercialised gift economy. For large MOBAs such as *LoL* and *Dota 2*, vast sums of money are given to the developers of these games when the games themselves make no demand from the players to spend anything to play. Why players make these gifts to large commercial developers is a revealing insight into the affective status of MOBAs and their game cultures.

Through exploring how players affectively perceive MOBAs, how MOBA developers or related professionals variously imbue the affective relations of this gift economy, and how in particular instances, the affective quality of these relations has provisionally broken down, I address critical questions central to the co-creative themes of this thesis. Moreover, as I have established throughout this thesis, issues regarding affective relations, control, and value that emanate from MOBAs are representative of wider societal frameworks characteristic of the digital age. For many scholars working across the fields of game, Internet, fan and wider media or cultural studies, questions regarding ‘affect’ remain at the forefront of critically addressing the power dynamics of contemporary Western society. The overlapping discourses of these fields provided a useful starting point for approaching the term ‘affect’ in

section 3.4, but it is necessary to sharpen the usage of affect here. Before delving into the affective status of MOBAs, it is important to reflect on how the affective economies described in chapter 3.4 overlap with notions of gift economics mobilised in the past chapter.

6.1 Gift economy as affective economy

In chapter 5.6 I described the monetisation model of MOBAs as a gift economy that evokes the genealogy of the genres grassroots past as a culture of non-commercial, playful co-creativity. As a monetisation model first utilised by Riot Games' *LoL* in 2009, the gift economy of *LoL* differs in significant ways from gift economies as they are commonly understood in the seminal work of Mauss (1954) and Hyde (1983). Perhaps most obviously, the economy here is a digital one. What is exchanged is no longer the atoms of material objects, but what Nicolas Negroponte (1995) once called the seamlessly replicable and transmittable bits that compose digital objects. As noted in section 5.6, this point is a crucial one as it is the instantly replicable and transmittable bits of digital games that enable the gift model described here to function. However, the model of gift giving described here also differs substantially from classic accounts of gift economics due to the hybrid status of *LoL* and subsequent MOBAs as a monetised affective economy.

The initial gift of a free and fair game is given by developers without asking players to spend any money to play competitively. What is available for players to buy is a wide variety of aesthetic 'skins' for avatars that do not change an avatar's in-game functions, but provide new ways for players to look in-game (see Figure 6). The next section ethnographically details how the purchasing of skins in *LoL* resembles a gift exchange for players, however it is crucial to first outline exactly what the affective identity of a gift economy is. As noted in

section 5.6 following the work of Mauss, the exchange of gifts is a reciprocal process that binds together individuals or social groups through a relationship of mutual exchanges. Helmuth Berking (1999: 37) points out that Mauss often uses the terms ‘exchange’ and ‘reciprocity’ interchangeably, however, *‘reciprocity and exchange are not the same’*. If exchange is a codified transfer of goods equivalent to ‘acquisitiveness and property transfers’, then reciprocity is a less exact obligation bound up in ‘social relationships’. The fair free-to-play model of MOBAs presents elements of both reciprocity and exchange as the sale of in-game content is a codified exchange (money for skins) but the actual motivations to purchase these non-essential skins is bound up in social forms of obligation (as explored in the next section). It is this social element of gift economies that I want to emphasise here. Similar to the affective economics of freely given fan purchases described in section 3.4.5, gift economies are underpinned by a particularly social and non-monetary identity that sustains the reciprocation of gifts.

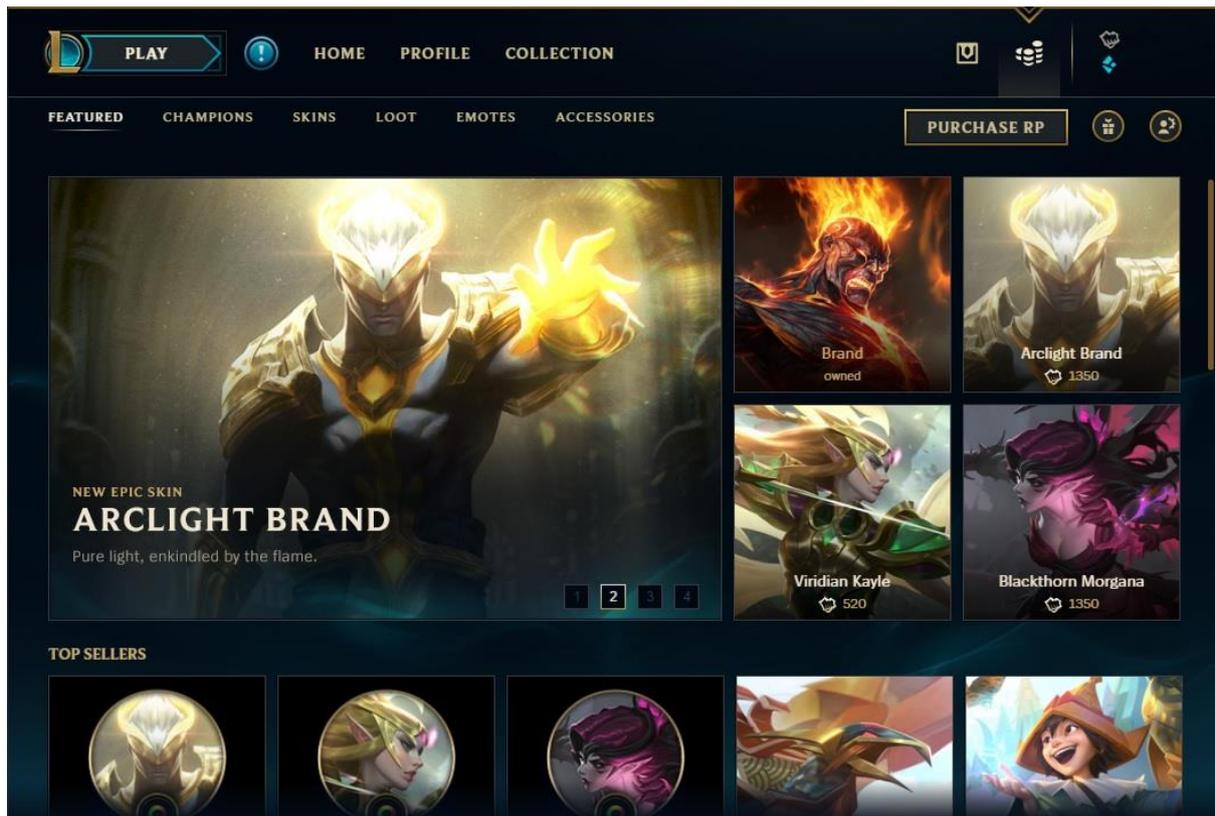


Figure 6. A screenshot of the *League of Legends* in-game store, taken March 2019.

In Mauss's account of non-capitalist gift economies, he described reciprocal relations as existing in what he described as a 'total social phenomenon' (1954: 76). For Mauss, who was writing in the 1920's as an early adopter of ethnographic technique, it was not enough to view reciprocal gift exchanges as discrete interactions between people or even between social groups. What was essential to understanding how people formed and sustained reciprocal relationships was not only the act of giving itself, but the totality of the social structure these reciprocal relationships were situated in. As Mauss put it:

'We are dealing then with something more than a set of themes, more than institutional elements, more than institutions, more even than systems of institutions divisible into legal, economic, religious and other parts. We are concerned with 'wholes', with systems in their entirety. (...) It is only by considering them as wholes that we have been able to see their essence, their operation and their living aspect, and to catch the fleeting moment when the society and its members take emotional stock of themselves and their situation as regards to others.' (Mauss, 1954: 76)

Mauss's description of how gift economies are reflected by the totality of their 'social phenomenon' is a perspective that can also be applied, as Hyde would later note, to any economic model. For Hyde (1983: 86), gifts are best described as 'an anarchist property. The connections, the 'contracts', established by their circulation differ in kind from the ties that bind in groups organised through centralised power and top-down authority.' Hyde contrasts the top-down systems of 'legal contracts' constitutive of capitalism with the bottom-up 'contracts of the heart' constitutive of gift economies. Evoking Mauss, Hyde emphasises the totality of a societal structure as essential to enabling certain modes of economic exchange, be they gift, capitalist or hybrid. It is beyond the scope or aims of this section to fully consider the totality of social structures that co-constitute various economic models. However, in descriptions of gift economies as bottom-up, imprecise, non-capitalist and profoundly social, there is a discernible overlap with the affective economies of fans mentioned in section 3.4.5 (Jenkins, 2006a: 61; Hills, 2015). Similar to affective economies of fandom reliant upon 'decommoditising discourses' of affective address (Hills, 2015: 195), gift economies are equally dependent upon what Mauss and Hyde noted as the totality of their social relations.

The task that occupies the remainder of this chapter is to ethnographically understand how the affective economy of gift giving between players and commercial developers in MOBAs functions. Through asking what affective sentiments players feel when making these purchases, how developers and related professionals have decommoditised affective economies of reciprocation, and how in particular instances, this model of monetisation has provisionally broken down (more so in the next chapter), I delve into critical issues that are fundamental to understanding the political economy of online games and platforms. To begin this critical exploration, it is necessary to begin bringing in the views of everyday players who constitute the reciprocal relations of this affective economy.

6.2 Identifying MOBA Affect

6.2.1 The ambiguous functionality of a skin

In 2015 I posed a simple question to the *League of Legends* subreddit of why, exactly, do you spend money on an essentially free game? I received 49 direct responses to this question, followed up by 37 subsequent comments (2). In this section, I will draw upon these responses and detail the various reasons, sentiments and opposing views that were expressed by *Reddit* users. Although many views will be omitted from directly quoting here, it is my aim to convey the responses and ensuing discussion as accurately as possible to identify the affective sentiments involved when players spend money in *LoL*. Through using this discussion as a starting point, I aim to reflect on the significance of my findings mentioned here to address the critical questions outlined in the past sections regarding the governance of affective gift economies in MOBAs.

As a discussion that took place on *Reddit* (*/r/leagueoflegends* to be precise), there is a set of metadata in the form of ‘upvotes’ and ‘downvotes’ that further frame any comment. As discussed in chapter four, this further level of data influences users collective experience with the platform as what is upvoted is much more likely to be read and replied to by other users due to it appearing more visibly, at the top of the page. There is a temptation here, to view the most upvoted comments as representative of the culture or in some way more valid due to their collective agreement. However, as users of *Reddit* often lament when quality responses are ‘buried’ due to lack of visibility, what quickly rises to the top of a thread can stay there due to increased visibility causing more upvotes, acting as a positive feedback loop. Regardless of the inherent issues involved when treating the most upvoted comments with more importance, I wish to start with the two most upvoted comments in the thread here as that is how the thread

was experienced by most people and it makes a useful starting point. Less ‘popular’ (and often more detailed) responses are brought into the analysis as the chapter develops. The ‘point’ value listed next to the anonymised *Reddit* user name represents the aggregate number of upvotes.

The two top comments in the discussion thread were as follows:

I feel like skins are an upgrade to a champion (aesthetically), and whenever I start playing a champion a lot, and start enjoying them and getting better at them, I feel like for me to keep playing and enjoying them I should get a skin to keep me interested. I often feel like I'm having more fun when I'm playing a champion with a skin that makes me feel 'unique' even though many other people have that same skin. I think the fact that it makes you feel unique, and almost like you are the 'only' player using this champion with this skin makes it more fun and rewarding, because a lot of people want to feel different, and I think skins give people a way to feel different inside League.

- Reddit user 1, 25 points (A1)

I spend money on F2P games that I have fun with
I don't know, I feel obliged to "donate"
I have fun with *LoL*, so I buy RP [‘Riot Points’, the in-game currency bought with money that is used to unlock ‘champions’ or skins]

- Reddit user 2, 15 points (A2)

These two comments were some of the earliest comments in the thread and consequently gained traction quickly as their high points scores indicate. In their own way, both of these comments reflect views that were repeated throughout the discussion as two common themes regarding exchange and reciprocity can be identified. As mentioned in the past section following Berking’s (1999: 37) distinction between ‘reciprocation’ and ‘exchange’, reciprocating an object can be read as a constitutively social act whereas exchanging an object is more concerned with its use value. Throughout the discussion, players variously emphasised the reciprocal and exchange value of purchasing skins, however there were many ambiguities regarding exactly what function skins serve.

For 'Reddit user 1', the value of skins derives from their function as an aesthetic customisation. The sentiment for spending money on the game here is a desire for use value from the monetary exchange, whereby in-game skins directly contribute towards making the game more 'fun' and 'enjoyable'. A salient point in this comment is the use of the word 'unique' to describe the value of skins with a concurrent acknowledgement that the skins themselves are not at all unique, due to many players owning the exact same skins. The ambiguous status of skins as an exchange commodity that is implicit in 'Reddit user 1's' comment was present in several comments throughout the discussion as many players noted that skins serve no clear purpose, but felt that the money was nonetheless well spent. The justification for spending money on skins for these players often followed the 'fun' reasoning outlined by 'Reddit user 1', but players often pointed out other affects that influence their spending. As 'Reddit User 2's' blunt comment also illustrates, players often mentioned either implicitly or explicitly, that the free-to-play model represents good economic value and there exists a profound obligation to spend or 'donate'. For example, in the following comments, players emphasised the ambiguous use value of skins as digital commodities that make the game more enjoyable. What is particularly insightful though, is how this ambiguous exchange orientated sentiment was often always justified in relation to the monetisation of other games or hobbies.

Skins make the game funner. Having them makes you feel empowered on the champion, like you have enough mastery over them that you are willing to get cosmetics. Or something like that.

Everybody loves skins. They look great, and while they don't have any -real- value, they bring happiness and there's nothing wrong with spending money on things you enjoy. Its like the same reason you buy games that are not free to play - to have fun. You invest in skins so that in the future you will have more fun (or you gift friends because you want to give them a gift that will let them be happier in the future!)

- Reddit user 3, 1 point (A3)

I occasionally spend money on RP [Riot Points]. Mostly to buy champions because I don't play enough to be able to buy them all with IP [influence points, the in-game currency that can be earned through playing]. Sometimes I also buy skins if they're really cool like Crabgot or Definitely Not Udyr [examples of skins].

I have no problem spending the money because I consider it a hobby like any other one. Football also costs me (membership fee, boots, ...) and that's way more than the 50€/year I spend on LoL. Also, as a working adult, those 50€ are not much.

- Reddit user 4, 1 point (A4)

I love Mystery Skins. Most of my RP I have spent on Mystery Skins for myself. I have spent around 200€-250€ on LoL. It might sound much at first, but it is almost nothing compared to what I pay for other games.

I have paid around 50€ for games which I played for 10, maybe 20 hours which results in 2-5€ per hour. I currently have around 500 hours on LoL, so that would be about 50cents per hour. So I would say that it is definitely worth it.

- Reddit user 6, 1 point (A5)

[Reply to Reddit user 6]: I spend about 10 pounds a month as I figure I play it so much that it's like a wow [World of Warcraft] sub [subscription]

- Reddit user 7, 1 point (A6)

After playing the game for a long time i feel kinda obligated to buy a skin for my fav champs, however it doesnt count for every champ. Newer champs tend to have a really nice original model and spell fxs but older champs are harder to enjoy without skins imo

- Reddit user 8, 1 point (A7)

I don't know exactly WHY I do it. I think it's my way of paying Riot back whilst also trying my best to look as badass as possible. But even then some of the classic skins accomplish that just fine.

Game is free for a reason. Because for the majority of players, it isn't REALLY free.

- Reddit user 9, 1 point (A8)

To me league is my primary form of entertainment. I don't pay for cable tv or anything like that which means purchasing RP could be looked at as my "payment" or "subscription" in order to play league. I don't feel obligated to purchase RP but it

makes the game that much more enjoyable for me. I have also been playing for the last 4 years and spent over \$1000 on the game. While that is a tremendous amount, if you calculate out the money spent/hour played, the cost is actually really low. Maybe that is just me justifying it but seeing as in I play multiple games every single day, it's worth it to me. The money invested into league helps keep things fresh and alive.

- Reddit user 10, 2 points (A9)

In each of these comments a functional reason based on the use value of skins is given to justify spending money. For some players, this use value is derived from the skin itself as a symbolic form of gaming capital (even if many players recognised that there is nothing inherently unique about a skin); a way to look 'badass', 'cool' or 'empowered'. In 'Reddit user 3's' comment, for example, it is stated that a skin can be connotative with mastery over a champion and that this can increase the games 'fun'. However, many of these same players also gave a reason that is variously described above, that the experience of *LoL* represents good economic value. In comparison to other monetisation models in digital games, or even as 'Reddit user 4' describes, in comparison to other hobbies, the money spent playing *LoL* is perceived as comparatively little. The paradox here is that *LoL* requires no money to be paid at all. Yet, even if it is not always stated explicitly, there is an obligating affect at play here that goes beyond any reasons for buying skins related merely to their use value. The question that immediately arises then, is exactly what is obligating players to spend beyond merely the (often ambiguous) use value of skins?

In the comments above, three sentiments surrounding *LoL*'s affective status can be identified in its perceived good economic value, its deeply social status and its de-commoditised form.

In the subsequent sections I will describe these three sentiments through referring to the comments above and bringing in additional relevant comments that exemplify these three sentiments. Although I will describe these sentiments as distinct, it is worth noting that each of them overlap to co-constitute *LoL*'s affective status. Similar to the affective economies of crowdfunding campaigns or the 'total social phenomenon' that underpins gift economies, the

affective underpinnings of these sentiments enable the economic model of *LoL* to operate. The first affective sentiment that is mentioned above, but is crucial to expand upon here, is the paradoxical view that *LoL* represents good economic value.

6.2.2 Money / time well spent

In both the sentiments expressed above, as well as other comments throughout the thread, players justified their spending by comparing the cost of playing *LoL* to the monetisation models of other games or hobbies. In ‘Reddit user 7 and 10’s’ comments for example, the large amount of money spent on *LoL* is compared to a ‘subscription’ payment that is required in MMORPGs such as *WoW*. The status of *LoL* as a relatively cheap option in the landscape of digital games is one that needs to be read in the larger political economy of digital games here. As various virtual ethnographers of MMORPGs have similarly noted in their own fieldwork (Taylor, 2006: 125-126; Boellstorff, 2008:206), the historical juncture of neoliberal commercialisation that many digital games genres have developed alongside has set precedents for how games are governed, monetised and experienced. In MMORPGs for example, commercial ownership of a virtual world is expected, paid monthly subscriptions are commonplace, and the ongoing design and governance of these game spaces is controlled from the top-down by commercial developers. These co-creative dynamics differ between respective games and it is not the aim to describe different models of MMORPG governance here (for a more detailed description of these dynamics see; Dow et al, 2013). The salient point here is as Taylor (2006: 125-126) points out when tracing the origins of the MMORPG genre to non-commercial MUD communities, that the political economy of this genre is a

constitutively commercial one and this influence can be felt throughout every facet of the games experience.

The monetisation model of *LoL* and subsequent MOBAs differs significantly from similarly commercial online genres such as MMORPGs that often require a monthly subscription payment. However, they still exist in the same connective ecology of the Internet where players affective experiences and expectations readily cross between the boundaries of respective game spaces and genres. For some players in the discussion, particularly those who described spending large amounts of money, this overlapping proximity with the commercial status of other games and genres was given as a primary reason for spending money in *LoL*. In the following comment for example, one player describes spending vast sums of money and justifies this spending by making a direct comparison to the requisite money that would be required to play other games for similar lengths of time.

Free to play games often have increased longevity. They aren't usually "one and done" games with an up front price tag and an average or expected play time, excluding any replay value.

Some games are done in a few days or weeks. So in the case of an RPG of about 100 hours. Spending money "Frequently" on a free to play game feels worthwhile to support the company when you get so much play time out of it. I've actually spent upwards of 2-3 *thousand* dollars on League. It sounds like a lot, it is a lot, but it's also over the span of almost 3 years. That's what, 100 bucks every few weeks/month for a game I play almost every day? I don't think that's not worth it.

It's not just about how much you spend on singular things, but how much play time I get out of it, and showing appreciation for the game and time I've spent on it. If you were to buy a new game every 2 weeks you'd be spending much more.

- Reddit user 11, 2 points (A10)

This comment exemplifies the overlapping affect at play in MOBAs as a clearly reciprocal sentiment can also be identified towards the commercial developer, a point that is further explored later in this chapter in section 6.2.4. However, with regards to the perceived economic value of *LoL* as a relatively cheap (but paradoxically free) game, this comment also

illustrates an affective engagement with digital games more widely as inherently commercial media. As 'Reddit user 11' describes with reference to vast sums of money being paid for *LoL*, it is money that would likely be spent on other games if not *LoL*. The sentiment expressed here evokes many longstanding critical perspectives surrounding the inescapable industrialisation of culture, sociality and play through the media as a totalising apparatus of commercial control (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009). Although digital games, and MOBAs in particular, differ substantially from traditional forms of commercial media in their playfully co-creative structure and optional model of monetisation, affective expectations surrounding digital games as a paid for media form still permeate the sentiments expressed by some players justifying their spending.

One important but understated consideration from the responses that is evident in a comment such as reddit user 11's, is how far the people involved in this discussion identified with *LoL* and games culture more generally. As discussed in chapter four, *LoL* is a particularly competitive and at times hostile culture to those who do not fit stereotypes of 'gamers' as reasonably young, male and knowledgeable about the game. Although there were no questions surrounding age, gender or familiarity with the game, and this was not an aim of the research methodology, inferences regarding the identity of players could be made. For example, in reddit user 11's case, this is someone who clearly identifies with games culture more generally as a primary pass time. For players such as Reddit user 11 and the majority of respondents mentioned here, *LoL* is embraced unproblematically and often affectionately. Due to the open discussion taking place on the */r/leagueoflegends subreddit*, it is worth emphasising that these players may not be representative of everyone that has tried (and potentially stopped playing) *LoL*. However, these responses do describe the particular affects at play for those players who do identify closely with *LoL*, its players and games culture more generally. For the majority of responses in the thread a similar identification with games

culture was noteworthy as a justification for their spending, as the money spent was compared to other commercial gaming activities.

As a player and researcher that has followed the MOBA genre since its non-commercial development as a playfully co-creative modding culture, I found this position an especially paradoxical one. As noted in chapter five, *LoL* and subsequent MOBAs retain elements of their non-commercial genealogy in various features such as their optional model of monetisation, or ‘fair’ free-to-play. For some players, however, this genealogy of playful co-creativity is relatively inconsequential and MOBAs exist as another product in a landscape of commercially available digital games. Moreover, for some players such as ‘Reddit user 11’, new models of ‘fair’ F2P paradoxically represent an opportunity to spend *more* money, despite requiring none. This paradox remains central to any notion that *LoL* represents good economic value, especially as the majority of the players who expressed this sentiment in the discussion were also some of those who described spending the most (often hundreds or thousands of pounds, euros or dollars). The immediate question that arises here then, is why *LoL*? What is it about the affective experience of this game that obliges players to perceive the game as good economic value, even when vast sums of money are being paid?

It is important to stress here, as I have throughout this chapter, that these sentiments are not straightforward. Far from being a reductive example of cultural industrialisation, the sentiments of players frequently exemplified a more reflective and nuanced co-constitution of affects. For players that primarily justified their spending as an example of good economic value such as ‘Reddit user 11’, emphasising what is unique about *LoL* as a game was integral. One crucial point that is made clearly by ‘Reddit User 11’ and was expressed by many users throughout the discussion, was that *LoL* does not represent a traditional game due to the longevity of its play space.

In section 3.4.1, I discussed the political economy of games as one that is shifting towards fewer games that are played more often. Or what is often called in the games industry, the ‘evolving games’ or ‘games as service’ paradigm. MOBAs and similarly competitive e-sports titles that utilise a ‘fair’ model of free-to-play have stood at the forefront of this paradigm shift due to their capacity to monetise themselves throughout their prolonged life cycle. As noted throughout this thesis, this paradigm shift has been pioneered by, and reflected in, the playfully co-creative structure of the games themselves that are experienced across various paratexts such as player streams, e-sports events or Reddit spaces. However, one aspect of this influential paradigm shift that I have not discussed, is how this trend towards fewer games that are played more often has influenced players affective views on the value of these games. In various comments throughout the discussion, one of the main justifications given for *LoL* representing good economic value was that unlike many other games, *LoL* provides much more longevity in its play. As ‘Reddit user 10’ points out, ‘if you calculate out the money spent/hour played, the cost is actually really low.’ This point is a crucial one to emphasise when understanding players affective relationship with *LoL* as, similar to many examples of fandom that persist over long (often lifelong) periods of time, the amount of time a player spends with a game can altogether transform its identity and social significance.

In Celia Pearce’s (2006: 7-8) ethnography of the MMOG *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, she points out that the advent of single player games genres are a ‘historical aberration of digital technology’. Viewing games historically, Pearce notes that ‘Prior to the introduction of the computer as a games-playing platform, the majority of games played by hundreds of cultures for thousands of years, with few exceptions, were multiplayer.’ In contrast to single player games that typically follow what Juul (2002) would call a ‘progression’ orientated design, where the game reaches a definitive conclusion, multiplayer games are typically games of ‘emergence’. In contrast to a progression structure, games of emergence are ongoing and

offer players opportunities to playfully co-create styles or identities in the game, as noted in chapter two. Although Pearce only mentions the historical significance of playing habits in passing, game designers have recently followed a similar line of inquiry when considering the implications of genres such as MMOGs, MOBAs, and their associated models of co-creativity and F2P monetisation (Cook, 2013; Green, 2013).

Writing about ‘single games as a lifelong hobby’, Daniel Cook (2013) similarly emphasises the historical importance of games turning towards a more multiplayer or emergent centric activity of play. For Cook, the key difference to progression orientated games is that genres such as MOBAs represent ‘evergreen activities’ that are continually nourished through their play and consequently, played over long periods of time. Similar to Pearce, Cook emphasises that rather than an entirely new paradigm in play, the turn towards ‘single games as a lifelong hobby’ represents a return to pre-computerised playing practices. For traditional pre-computerised games, such as Chess, Go, Mah Jongg, or sporting games such as association football, players spent significant amounts of time with a game over potentially many years. Cook argues that it is this longevity of play which gave individual games a fundamental role in the identity and sociality of the people who played. The precise reasons why this mode of play was common are multiple and exploring the myriad contexts of pre-computerised game cultures is a subject too vast to explore here (3). However, in the current paradigm shift taking place in the games industry that is seeing a return to these playing practices, several consequences can be noted that are crucial to understanding the affective status of MOBAs such as *LoL*.

Cook offers an outline of several characteristics typical of these longer-lived games as the following: ‘evergreen activities’, ‘high-mastery ceiling’, ‘strong communities’, life-long identities’ and ‘grassroots or service-based business models’. These characteristics speak to

several playfully co-creative themes that have emerged out of the study of MOBAs in this thesis, but significantly here, these characteristics also encompass several affective sentiments described by players when justifying their spending. For players such as ‘Reddit User 11’, the perception that *LoL* represents good economic value is one that exists in contrast to the shorter-lived games typical of a progression orientated design and their more traditional business model of selling games directly. With the paradigmatic onset of games as services that *LoL* and subsequent MOBAs exemplify, expectations surrounding how much should be paid for different games have blurred for some players. Furthermore, with players spending longer periods of time on games such as *LoL*, the personal and social significance of these games has shifted in line with the characteristics of longer-lived games that Cook describes. The affective significance of these trends contributes to *LoL*’s affective economy and the ‘total social phenomenon’ that allows its monetisation model to function. It is here that I turn to the second sentiment expressed clearly throughout the discussion as an integral affect that permeates any game of *LoL* and any notion of MOBA affect. That is, the games deeply social status.

6.2.3 Deeply social status

Throughout this thesis, I have described the activity of playing MOBAs, both in their current and modded form, as an inherently social activity. The ‘multiplayer’ in MOBA refers exactly to this social centrality. As noted in chapter five, the design of *LoL* and subsequent MOBAs fully implemented design features to sustain social relationships within the games platform so that players could freely connect, share, compare, compete and cooperate with each other in-game. These in-game social functions have long been an indispensable part of genres such as MMORPGs where players frequently interact and exchange in-game goods with each other (Taylor, 2006: 58). In MOBAs however, due to the session-based format of the game and

ethos of competitive ‘fairness’, the only things players can exchange with each other in-game are skins or monetarily paid for in-game currency (4). Throughout the discussion of why players spend money in *LoL*, the satisfaction of gifting in-game friends a skin was a reason variously given and it is this socially inclined gifting that I want to briefly explore in this section. As ‘reddit user 3’ put it, gifting friends a skin spreads the ‘happiness’ of playing and provides further satisfaction in future games between friends. Throughout the discussion, similar sentiments were expressed.

I love gifting skins to my friends I don't know Why

- Reddit user 12, 1 point (A11)

I think I spend Money on League because it's a way for me to instantly gift a friend for example (The group I play with often isn't in my state, were all scattered around), and since we play often, wed put the skins / champions to good use, and they're of good quality :) I also enjoy doing it because it supports Riot and allows them to continue making such awesome stuff! Sure I could just not buy skins and stuff, but I just like knowing that me buying Blade Queen Lissandra for example, helps to fund them to create better stuff, and get even bigger :)

- Reddit user 13, 2 points (A12)

Personally, I've only spent \$10 on this game after 3+ years of playing, but I've gotten gifted a few skins.

- Reddit user 14, 3 points (A13)

In each of the comments above, the act of giving or receiving skins in-game from friends is described. *LoL* is not unique in this regard as many online games or platforms provide opportunities for players or users to spend money gifting friends digital commodities in a

mode of monetisation closely aligned with affective notions of value described in section 3.4.6. On Valve's *Steam* platform for example, multiple opportunities exist to gift a friend digital goods such as badges, currency, or games. The mode of gifting in *LoL* follows a similar model, as gifted skins are purchased entirely with money as opposed to any form of in-game currency gained through playing. In its most straight-forward sense, acts of gifting between players most closely resemble the gift economics described by various scholars mentioned in this chapter. Similar to any gift economy, what is essential to sustaining the movement of in-game gifts between players is the sociability of relationships as well as the 'total social phenomenon' that encompasses these reciprocal modes of exchange.

The total social phenomenon that encompasses gift giving practices between players is important to consider here as, similar to the sentiment of 'good economic value' described in the past section, what enables this mode of giving to thrive are the other co-constituting affects at play. As Reddit user 13 describes, it is not only a gift between players but also one between player and developer (a relationship I explore in more detail in the next section). What is taking place with gift purchases between players is a social exchange of giving or reciprocating skins that are utilised and enjoyed communally through the shared activity of play. However, it is also a communal exchange that contributes towards a decommoditising affect that encompasses the *whole* experience of *LoL*, as the game takes on a deeply social status for the players involved.

In Viviana Zelizer's (1997: 71) influential account of the commercial hybridity surrounding gift giving practices in western society, she notes the ways money is often obscured or restricted so that it can take on the social function of a gift. For example, in gift cards or a bought object, the exchange-value of money is restricted by the use-value of the gift. By restricting the quantitatively measured exchange-value of money, the use-value of objects can

inhabit the more socially bound affective ties constitutive of a gift. In *LoL*, money is similarly obscured and restricted as soon as it is deposited in the game and becomes ‘Riot Points’.

When these points are spent on gifted skins for in-game friends, the skins use-value becomes further removed from the original exchange-value and fully embraces the social function of a gift. It is possible to frame sharp distinctions between exchange-value and use-value here and to begin mapping the precise moments of economic valorisation (the purchase of Riot Points, the purchase of skins, the gifting of skins, the use of skins) as affective ties between players are converted into exchange value for Riot Games. However, as accounts of gifting such as Zelizer’s emphasise, the site of economic valorisation is not merely an opposed process of gift giving between exchange-values and use-values. It is, to return to the language of Mauss, part of the ‘total social phenomenon’ of what is enabling the system of relations to function.

Approaching similar questions of affective value in the context of social media, Kylie Jarrett draws on feminist accounts of domestic work to make a useful intervention into notions of economic valorisation. Following Fortunati’s (1995) Marxist-feminist perspective surrounding domestic work as unpaid labour, Jarrett (2016b) notes that the transition between use-value and exchange-value is never straight-forward or oppositional. Writing about inalienable facets of domestic work such as esteem and care, Jarrett notes that,

They all are consumed in the process of producing a worker and once so instantiated become commodifiable. In effect, the production of these products is one phase of a longer value chain associated with the generation of labouring subject and body. Thus, rather than being detached from the commodity production process, intimate and inalienable use-values such as affection, sex and love are fundamentally implicated in the capitalist circuits of value creation. Fortunati insists, then, that the work of producing workers is not “merely” the production of (pre-capitalist) use-values but a distinct phase in the transfers of value inherent to the capitalist process. (Jarrett, 2016b: 134)

What is notable in Jarrett’s discussion of domestic work here is the assertion that a longer chain of use-values nearly always underpins any moment of economic valorisation. For

example, Jarrett discusses the way that ‘liking’ a friend’s status on Facebook is a valuable moment of exchange-value to the platform holders. However, the reasons why a person likes a Facebook status are deeply social and take place before the quantitatively measured moment a ‘like’ is digitally registered. The social status of friends in a game is the same as they are often dependant on pre-existing social relations and are continually reinforced through socially playing the game. Just as the reasoning for ‘liking’ something on Facebook is a longer more affective one than the moment it is measured in, so too, is the buying and gifting of skins underpinned by a much more social, cultural and playful set of surrounding experiences. Viewing the larger total social phenomenon that underpins any gift exchange in this wider scope is essential to identifying not merely the moment affect is economically valorised as exchange-value, but how inalienable use-values necessarily underpin these moments. The notion of playful co-creativity and its affective qualities noted throughout this thesis describe variously inalienable, yet deeply valuable sets of use-values.

These affective use-values could be identified variously across MOBAs, for example: in the observed play of professional players in esports or live-streams; in the identities players construct through their play that is recorded in paratextual big data sites; in the established modes of connective play pioneered by players (see next chapter); or in the creativity and sociality afforded to players in any MOBA game. Each of these playfully co-creative practices is tied to the affective texture of *LoL* and they each contribute to the shared affective identity of the game. As discussed in this section, these practices can contribute to the deeply social status of *LoL* for its players. Moreover, though, it is not merely the relationships between players that underpin *LoL*’s important social role in the lives of many players, but also the relationship players share with the game and its developers. In contrast to many other examples of gift economies where there is a sharp distinction between objects with exchange-value and objects with reciprocal use-value (Hyde, 1979: 4; Berking, 1999: 37), in *LoL* the

whole connective ecology of the game takes on a hybrid identity that is thoroughly social and reflects a decommoditised trajectory.

The decommoditising affect at play here exists on multiple levels. The deeply social status of the game and the prevalence of gift giving between players is further evidence of the social role *LoL* serves to many players. However, the circulation of these gifts also serves as another co-constitutive affect at play in the hybrid identity of MOBAs affective economy. As ‘reddit user 13’s’ comment expresses in their support of both in-game friends and Riot Games, the social relationships between players also overlap with the reciprocal relationship players feel with developers. It is this pronounced sentiment surrounding *LoL*’s decommoditised identity that I seek to illuminate in the next section. What is evident in several of the sentiments already discussed in this chapter, is that *LoL* and their developer Riot Games are not perceived as a commercial entity that is motivated by profiteering in any traditional sense. Similar to the affective economies discussed by Hills and Jenkins (see section 3.4.5), *LoL* occupies a hybrid status whereby the game is perceived as commercial but distinctively good value, as deeply social but inherently monetised, and as a game operated by commercial developers unlike any others.

6.2.4 Decommoditised affect

For many players throughout the discussion several sentiments were expressed at once when listing why they spend money on *LoL*, with the most repeated sentiments explored in the past three sections. One of the most frequently expressed sentiments I have not yet engaged with, however, was the feeling that spending money on *LoL* is a reciprocating act between player and commercial developer. In this section, I aim to convey and critically frame some of these sentiments before asking a crucial question that underpins the subsequent chapter, of exactly how this decommoditised hybrid identity is sustained by MOBA developers. As ‘reddit user

2' put it when asked why they spend money on *LoL*, the reply was 'I don't know, I feel obliged to "donate"', but exactly what does this obligation entail?

In many of the comments throughout the discussion this obliging sentiment was variously expressed, sometimes as an implicit suggestion that the game represents good economic value and at other times, as an explicitly stated obligation to reciprocate money towards Riot Games. In the following comments for example, an explicit sentiment of reciprocation is exemplified.

I buy skins simply to support Riot. I play the game quite a bit and want to give back. Plus, the skins allow for a level of customisation. It's win-win.

- Reddit user 15, 4 points (A14)

The biggest reason I keep on convincing myself to buy skins, is to support riot devs that keep on making this game unique and fresh. Without them we won't have a fun game to play and might just ignore league as a whole, and I do hope my money reaches their wallets.

- Reddit user 16, 2 points (A15)

I have been playing for a long time and have enough disposal income that I don't mind giving £30 to Riot per month to help them improve the game. League is also pretty much the only game I play, so I spend less on league than I would do buying new game releases. Also skins are cool.

- Reddit user 17, 1 point (A16)

It is good to see how much work Riot puts into the entire experience, with updates, new skins and game modes, LCS [League of Legends Championship Series, the Riot Games governed e-sports league], etc. and feel really justified in spending money on it. It makes me feel nice to think that I am providing the opportunity to pay someone to work on something they love, rather than get a boring job at some software company.

- Reddit user 18, 5 points (A17)

In each of these comments as well as others mentioned throughout this chapter, the feeling of a reciprocal relationship shared between players and Riot Games is evident. In fundamental

ways, this relationship differs from reciprocity as it is commonly understood in anthropology due to the differences of scale, motivation and power that exist between a player and a large commercial developer. Nevertheless, as a discernible feeling that was frequently expressed throughout this discussion and is notable as an affective set of relations spread across the connective ecology of *LoL*, this hybrid notion of reciprocity is essential to understanding the political economy of *LoL* and many other MOBAs. Curiously, players did not view the substantial differences of scale, motivation and power as a barrier to engaging in a reciprocal relationship with the developers Riot Games.

For some players, a simple obligation to support Riot Games was expressed that follows the status of the game as a freely given gift and therefore something that should be reciprocated. As ‘reddit user 9’ put it, ‘I think it’s my way of paying Riot back’. However, for many other players such as ‘reddit user 18’, the bond with Riot Games was described as a much more ongoing and totalising relationship of reciprocity as players expressed their gratitude towards Riot Games for in-game updates, for their close relationship with players (for example, through *Reddit* interactions) and for their active involvement in e-sports leagues. The specific ways MOBA developers and associated professionals sustain and negotiate these connective ecologies of hybrid power dynamics is a subject explored further in the next chapter. What is noteworthy for identifying the affective texture of MOBAs here however, are the parallels between the sentiments expressed by *LoL* players and the affective economics of fan and gift economies explored in section 3.4.5 and 6.1.

Hyde (1983: 58) noted that the initial act of giving a gift is one that begins a social bond distinct from a commodity exchange and often, these bonds can become ongoing relationships. A meal that is freely given and socially shared between strangers for example, inevitably leads to conversations and a shared communal experience that initiates potentially

lasting social ties. The decommoditised identity of the shared experience is crucial to the sociality of these bonds as Hyde (68) emphasises, ‘we do not deal in commodities when we wish to initiate or preserve ties of affection.’ In the initial gift of a fair and free game through *LoL* and many other MOBAs, a similar set of decommoditised social bonds is necessitated. Like a shared meal, the gift of a free and fair game is one that carries the potential to develop into an ongoing relationship with the game, its players, its connective ecology and by extension, its developers. From the moment the game is downloaded and available to play for free, players are invited into a much wider connective ecology of play and participation that continues to blur professional and commercial boundaries. These webs of playful co-creativity continue to preserve and intensify the ‘ties of affection’ associated with MOBAs through functioning as what Hills (2015: 184) would call, the performed ‘social fronts’ that are essential to decommoditising and thus enabling affective monetisation models.

A performed ‘social front’ can take many liminal forms between professional and non-professional. For Hills, who is occupied with exploring the affective economies of *Kickstarter* campaigns, the fan-like performance of professionals running these campaigns is described as the ‘ongoing emotional labour of a coherent ‘social front’’. It is only by positioning themselves as authentic fans through performed ‘social fronts’ that professionals can embed themselves into the affective economies of fans. In online games such as MOBAs however, where affective monetisation takes place over increasingly longer periods of time due to the enduring and potentially ‘lifelong’ monetisation of a game (see section 6.2.2), the performed ‘social fronts’ that permeate the game arise continually across its connective ecology. Players, participatory cultures, professionals, game designers and ambiguous actors that blur these boundaries altogether (such as an e-sports organisation owner as explored in chapter 7.2.3), each contributes towards the affective texture of *LoL* as a more social, decommoditised and playfully co-creative activity.

As noted throughout this thesis, the playfully co-creative structure of MOBAs means they are necessarily experienced across paratexts where various participatory and playful agencies readily intersect. These agencies are often motivated by the bottom-up, for example in instances such as *reddit* threads, player streams or in new play styles circulating through the metagame. However, these bottom-up agencies also readily intersect with those of professionals, for example, professional players who derive a living off streaming, creating video content and/or competing in e-sports events. Professional players are exemplary of the liminality between professional and non-professional that underpins *LoL*, as they provide a direct link with the player base (that they emerge from) and the fans whom they frequently interact with (see section 5.5.2). At the same time, professional players are also responsible for consistently co-creating playful content beneficial to *LoL* and even receive a salary from Riot Games to compete in their North American and European based *League of Legends Championship Series (LCS)* leagues. Fundamentally, professional players are employees of Riot Games. However, similar to many other employees across the company such as e-sports ‘casters’ or game designers who identify more alternatively as community focused ‘Rioters’ (further explored in chapter 7.2.5), the commercial purpose of professional players occupation is obscured. The tensions that present themselves when the liminality of these performed ‘social fronts’ breaks down or displays moments of discontent is a subject explored further in the next chapter. The salient point here, is that it is these blurred motivations, occupations and forms of agency that are emblematic of the heterogenous control exerted in the affective economics of a playfully co-creative game.

6.3 The Affective Context of the MOBA Model

Through aligning themselves with the decommoditising social fronts of various playfully co-creative actors, Riot Games have managed to monetise and sustain their games affective status as something that transcends a more formally commoditised game. As the varied responses of this chapter exemplify, this affect is not equivalent to a wholly decommoditised gift economy in the same way that the ‘total social phenomenon’ of non-monetary gift giving described by Mauss and Hyde was. In contrast, *LoL* is a microcosm of decommoditising affects operating within the commercial logics of the online games industry; a hybrid economy of playful co-creativity with all of the political economic paradoxes that entails. Players are aware of the voluntary role they serve in spending money, but nonetheless feel justified in making purchases due to the games distinctive longevity, its inherent social relations and the hybrid power dynamics Riot Games as a commercial developer has come to represent. Each of these rationales overlaps to co-constitute the affective texture of *LoL* and as the sentiments of players expressed in this chapter highlight, it is this diffusive MOBA affect that underpins player purchases.

These affective sentiments share similarities to what Hills (2015: 191) describes as the ‘dialectics of value’ fans engage in when making media influenced purchases. Through ‘transforming their own use-value into exchange value by converting affect into capital’, Hills argues that fans have always exerted a productive role in the potential continuation of media franchises. *Kickstarter* campaigns are a logical extension of this affective economy in the Internet age, that puts collectives of fans in the symbolic position of media producers. However, in contrast to *Kickstarter* campaigns, there is a crucial difference with the affective economics of *LoL* discussed here. That is, that Riot Games along with their giant holding company Tencent Holdings Limited, are not equivalent to *Kickstarter* producers.

When a *Kickstarter* campaign reaches its goal, backers of the campaign are rewarded through the promise of new media content and if a campaign exceeds its initial goal, ‘stretch goals’ are often implemented to ensure that any excess funding is productively utilised. In *LoL* and any similarly monetised fair F2P game however, there are no guarantees regarding where the money, around \$1.7 billion a year (as of 2016) in the case of *LoL*, is spent. Despite the genuine sentiments of players feeling involved in a reciprocal relationship with Riot Games and thus symbolically closer to the continued production of the game and its expansive culture, the political economy of this relationship remains one sided.

Of course, it is worth noting that a *Kickstarter* campaign and a fair F2P game have some key differences. Fans that collectively support a *Kickstarter* campaign ultimately pay for the risk of not knowing the final outcome of a project, a risk that can sometimes end with projects being controversially unreleased (Schreier, 2015). In comparison, fair F2P games arrive fully playable and do not obligate any payment from players to spend money before playing the game. In recent years, these crowdfunding models have become increasingly hybridised in the games industry with the rise of ‘early access’ games common across *Steam*, where incomplete games are released for sale or through a F2P model (Consalvo and Paul, 2017). In *Dota 2* for example, the game was not officially ‘released’ until July 2013 despite being playable in a widely accessible ‘public beta’ phase since late 2011. In the span of nearly two years during its ‘public beta’ phase, *Dota 2* became the most popular game on *Steam* and accrued a thriving affective economy through the sale of in-game cosmetics (5). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to fully account for the nuanced differences between Kickstarters, fair F2P models and early access games. What I want to emphasise from even a cursory description of these monetisation models however, is the influence that affective economics is continuing to exert on the practices of media professionals and their modes of production.

In the case of *LoL* that was first released in 2009 (the same year *Kickstarter* was launched), the decision to release the game for free was a bold one that can be read as an adaptation of the non-commercial genealogy the MOBA genre derived from. The influence of *LoL*'s monetisation model on subsequent MOBAs and other fair F2P games has been well noted throughout this thesis (see chapter five), however, the wider context of these hybrid relations is also significant. In Suzanne Scott's 2009 exploration of gift economies in fan fiction communities, she described emerging attempts to co-opt the reciprocal gift economies of fans as a rapidly developing 'mixed economy'.

Media producers, primarily through the lure of "gifted" ancillary content aimed at fans through official Web sites, are rapidly perfecting a mixed economy that obscures its commercial imperatives through a calculated adoption of fandom's gift economy, its sense of community, and the promise of participation. (Scott, 2009)

LoL can be interpreted as perhaps the most lucrative example of an attempt by media producers to co-opt an economy of fans into a new 'mixed' model of monetisation and production. In the scale and longevity of *LoL* and subsequent MOBAs, a sustainable model of affective economics and heterogenous control has developed that appears to crystallise Scott's 2009 assertion that media producers were 'rapidly perfecting a mixed economy' of obscure 'commercial imperatives'. From the perspective of developers such as Riot Games and many players such as those mentioned in this chapter, the power relations of MOBAs are relatively unproblematic. However, for many other actors playing, participating and living professional careers through MOBAs, there are significant critical issues that have arisen from this model. The fundamental contradictions of MOBAs rapid genealogical change from a culture of non-commercial collectivity, towards an affective economy of hybrid relations that heavily favour game developers such as Riot Games, is one that has demonstrated the potential for discontent or crisis. The next chapter delves into some of these examples.

6.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have attempted to represent the affective sentiments that underpin the monetisation and power relations of *LoL* through directly drawing on the views of players. What is evident from the open discussion and my wider ethnographic observations, is that players share a closely affective, but complexly nuanced relationship with *LoL*, Riot Games and the related professionals encompassed by the games connective ecology. Although the research presented in this chapter only provides a small snapshot of a vast game culture and genre, the rich responses offer a qualitative insight into the affective texture underpinning the economics and hybrid power relations of MOBAs. It is this complexly overlapping and at times paradoxical affect that is crucial to sustaining *LoL*'s popularity, monetisation and hybrid power dynamics.

In the next chapter, I widen my ethnographic observations across both *LoL* and *Dota 2*, to consider how the MOBA affect described in this chapter is governed and sustained. In particular, I am interested in the moments when discontent or cracks appear in the MOBA model and what that means for the power relations of these dispersed gaming ecologies.

7. Governing Playful Ecosystems

In section 5.5.2, I briefly noted the ways Riot Games refer to their game as an ‘ecosystem’ or ‘ecology’. For Riot Games, the ecosystems of their game may refer to the balance of in-game feedback loops, the wider network of paratextual content that extends around the game, or the e-sports industry that now variously exists across the world. Each of these ecosystems constitutes parameters of *LoL* that Riot Games plays an active role in monitoring, influencing and governing. From their outset as a developer, the co-founders of Riot Games, Brandon Beck and Marc Merrill, identified the sustainability of a games ecosystem as the role of a developer to maintain. As Beck pointed out, ‘They [other games developers before *LoL*] felt pressure to move on to something else. We were like, ‘Yo, we don’t need another SKU. Stay here. There’s some obvious improvements that could really make this ecosystem last for a long time, and we love playing in it.’’ (Kollar, 2016) As noted in the past chapter, it is this decommoditising ethos of creating above all a good and fair game that has enabled the affective economics of *LoL* and subsequent games to thrive. However, behind the naturalistic discourses of Riot Games tending to the wellbeing of *LoL*’s ecosystems are a set of intricate power relations at play here. Riot Games envisioned a game to stay, an affective economy underpinned by the playful co-creativity of an ever-evolving connective ecology, but ultimately, it would be one that Riot Games sit at the centre of and control.

Riot Games aim was not unlike many other games developers such as Valve Corporation and their *Steam* platform, or indeed many social media platforms, most notably *Facebook*, in its aim to sustain and control an ecosystem. Writing about the history and rapid growth of *Facebook*, David Kirkpatrick (2010: 218) notes that *Facebook* founder Mark Zuckerberg had always envisioned a platform that could sustain an ecosystem.

Creating a platform enables a software company to become the nexus of an ecosystem of partners that are dependent on its product. And once a company is at the centre of an entire ecosystem, it becomes maddeningly difficult to dislodge it. (Kirkpatrick, 2010: 218)

In the context of a game acting as a platform to sustain an ecosystem of playfully co-creative activities, the same ‘maddeningly difficult’ position of the company at the centre applies. In contrast to the custom game culture MOBAs originally derived from, where amateur game designers were collectively decided on by players through the many different versions of any single game (see section 3.2.7), commercial developers are immovable in their central position of control. In MOBAs such as *LoL* and *Dota 2*, this control most immediately encompasses the ongoing design of the game itself and the respective ecology of feedback loops that are constantly patched in the pursuit of ‘balance’. However, as mentioned in reference to Riot Games varied conceptions of ‘ecosystems’ above, when the game becomes the nexus of a much wider set of activities, as *Facebook* did, then the significance of control over the game extends far beyond the traditional role of a games developer.

This chapter seeks to critically explore the governance of playfully co-creative ecosystems in and around the two most popular MOBAs, *LoL* and *Dota 2*. Following Riot Games understanding of ecosystems outlined above as constituting the feedback loops of the game, the wider paratextual network of participatory content, and the worldwide spanning industries of e-sports; this chapter details several controversial instances in the governance of these three categories of playfully co-creative ecosystems. In particular, the ongoing ‘balancing’ of in-game feedback loops and their relation to players and professional players are given extended attention here. It is these forms of in-game governance that present one of the clearest continuations and contradictions in the playfully co-creative relations of MOBAs. The examples mentioned in this chapter are informed by my ethnographic observations of MOBA cultures between 2013 and 2017. However, as I finalise this research in late 2017 it is

worth emphasising that new examples of governing controversy are constantly presenting themselves.

At the time of writing for example, there is a developing controversy surrounding the ongoing franchising process of Riot Games' North American *LCS* leagues; a situation involving multiple e-sports organisations and their associated fans with stakes amounting to tens of millions of dollars (Khan, 2017). The political economy of power relations in examples of regulatory intervention such as this remains an extremely blurred and contested area where the rules are still being written. It is the aim of this chapter to critically explore similar instances of regulatory intervention into MOBA ecosystems and establish what governing practices have developed. In doing so, I aim to follow the findings of the past chapter and ask exactly why these commercial developers govern their games in the way they do. More critically however, this chapter seeks to explore if the MOBA model of affective economics that has been established throughout this thesis is in any way threatened by these top-down governing interventions.

In asking critical questions surrounding the governance of MOBAs, it is a further aim of this chapter to frame the governance of MOBAs alongside similar critical discussions of in-game and out-of-game governance. For many other genres of game, particularly MMOGs, issues surrounding governance have been of critical importance to games researchers aiming to analyse the norms and power relations enacted in these spaces. Drawing on Foucault's notions of governance, Humphreys (2008) makes a useful distinction between 'dominance' and 'governance'. If dominance is the forceful imposing of rules onto someone, potentially crushing in its agency over people, then governance is the recognition and negotiation with the human capacity to act. As Foucault (1993) put it,

Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word, governing people is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with

complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself. (Foucault 1993: 203-4).

Recognising governance as a negotiation between those enacting the rules and those living by them is an essential one in game studies due to the variety of games available for people to play. A game that is not sensitive to its in-game norms, as well as the needs of its stakeholders, will likely cause controversy and potentially stop players returning. However, in many games such as MOBAs where players often invest significant playing time, money and affective relations, switching to another game is not so easy.

In Melissa de Zwart's (2009) account of governance in the MMOG *Eve Online* (CCP Games, 2003 – present), for example, she describes the intricate ways tensions between players and developer can arise when there is a perceived lack of in-game governance. As a game famous for its in-game politics and stakes amounting to tens of thousands of hours of play-time, players often look externally to larger societal governmental intervention if they feel they have been cheated by the game. As this chapter explores, what determines cheating in a governing context is a complex discussion that requires attention to the specific experiences and relations in a game (see also, De Paoli and Kerr, 2010). The salient point here is that, similar to definitions of cheating, modes of governance are always in negotiation with the people being governed. However, as Foucault's position above emphasises, specific power relations are nonetheless established in the processes of these negotiations. Similar to the hybridity of co-creative relations described throughout this thesis, governance may be negotiated, but it remains a vastly unequal process favouring the developer. One term that has come to exemplify the hybridity of these power relations in everyday discourse surrounding MOBAs ongoing governance is 'ecosystem' or 'ecology' and it is vital to critically frame these terms here.

As I have implied thus far, this chapter approaches the terms ecosystem and ecology critically. In asking how and why MOBA developers treat their games as ecosystems or ecologies, I parallel the critique made by various scholars that naturalistic approaches or language can problematically obscure power relations. For example, Kemba and Zylinska (2012: 182) criticise Mathew Fuller's (2005) Media Ecology approach for overlooking what he calls the 'minor processes of power' inherent in the complex relations of media ecologies. Similarly, Jonathan Dovey critically approaches the naturalistic implications of the ecosystem metaphor when discussing documentary ecosystems. As Dovey points out,

Ecosystems do not have one measure of value but many ways of enacting value in a complex web of significance. The functions of mutuality and exploitation, of co-dependence and co-constitution are understood as inseparable in biology. (...) However, the post-Marxist analysis of the ecosystem places emphasis not on collaboration but on exploitation as a model. Value is systematically abstracted from users' activities. (Dovey, 2014: 18)

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to approach notions of ecosystem and ecology in a similarly critical way, largely through appropriating van Dijck's (2013) connective framework (see section 3.2.3) and a Foucauldian *dispositif* approach (see section 5.1). Both of these critical frameworks share similarities to ecological approaches in their emphasis on the heterogeneous, multi-layered and co-constitutive relationships of any social structure. However, in contrast to the neutrality that is often implied by ecological language, power is understood as a constitutive framing in the sociality of these systems of relations. As van Dijck describes, a connective approach emphasises the tracing of 'power relationships in the ever-expanding ecosystem of connective media to identify how institutional structures control social enactment' (van Dijck, 2013: 37). In the following chapter, close critical attention with regards to the political economic power relations of MOBA ecosystems remains a crucial underpinning. Despite many popular usages of ecological language assuming a certain normalisation of power relations, it is exactly the status of these relations I seek to question and unsettle.

To begin this exploration, it is essential to grasp the most immediate space familiar for games developers to govern and that is the feedback loops of the game itself. As the following sections describe, the playfully co-creative relations of MOBAs create constant moments of governmental contention that most immediately impact players and professional players. However, when games operate as widely encompassing platforms for connective ecosystems as these MOBAs do, then any governing decision has myriad implications for many different actors.

7.1 Governing *Dota 2* play

7.1.1 The Fountain Hook

On the 9th August 2013, the third international world championship event for Valve Corporation's *Dota 2* was underway in the heart of Seattle with a rapturous reception and the largest prize pool in e-sports history to date (\$2.8 million at the time). For the developer Valve Corporation (Valve), the tournament was a huge success and marked another stepping stone in e-sports rapid rise towards mainstream popularity and acceptance. However, Valve also made another and no less profound statement of intent during the events of the tournament and that was emphasising the generative potential of play. This statement of intent became clear after a controversial incident occurred on the 9th August involving the Ukrainian team named 'Natus Vincere' defeating the much-favoured Chinese team named 'Tongfu' in the semi-finals. The circumstances of Natus Vincere's victory were dramatic as they fell hopelessly behind in-game and any comeback seemed extremely unlikely. Spontaneously, or perhaps desperately, Natus Vincere turned to utilising an in-game move

that many considered to be a ‘bug’, ‘glitch’ or ‘exploit’ in the games rules and consequently, succeeded in turning around the game and winning the series.

The move in question was the now infamous ‘fountain hook’ Pudge / Chen combination that utilised a unique ability of the two ‘heroes’ (Pudge’s ‘Meat Hook’ and Chen’s ‘Test of Faith’) to create an essentially unstoppable move that pulled an opposition player into the certain death of the base fountain if executed correctly (see Figure 7.). In a typical MOBA such as *Dota 2*, each team consisting of five players is allocated a specific spawning location in their base that is designed to be safe and inaccessible by the opposing team due to a ‘fountain’ that destroys all enemies almost instantly upon entry. The fountain hook took advantage of this design mechanic through an unlikely combination of abilities from different heroes that purposely pulled an enemy player huge distances across the map and into what was designed to be the forbidden zone of the fountain; thus killing the opposing player outright. The fountain hook required a tremendous amount of skill on the part of Natus Vincere (they were the only team that could successfully employ the fountain hook) and as a result it became a popular crowd favourite, however it was also highly controversial.



Figure 7. A 'Fountain Hook' during the 2013 match between the teams 'Natus Vincere' and 'TongFu'.

By all accounts, the emergent combination of rules the fountain hook represented was an ‘exploit’ (Consalvo, 2007: 114). Valve and *Dota 2* lead designer ‘IceFrog’ never intended for the heroes’ abilities to be combined in this way and although they were aware of the fountain hook’s existence as of 2011, at the time it was ‘deemed too hilarious to fix’ (1). Prior to the events of this tournament, the fountain hook could be considered akin to ‘easter eggs’ that are found in many games as usually inconsequential and humorous things for players to seek out (Consalvo, 2007: 18; Sotomaa, 2009: 84; Ashton and Newman, 2010). Similarly, the fountain hook existed as little more than an easter egg exploit and was considered completely impractical in professional play. The exposure of the fountain hook on a high-profile stage with a particularly large prize pool of money radically revised this perspective and as a moment of playful co-creativity, it would be mired in controversy and scrutiny.

On one hand, the fountain hook was never intended to be used on this stage and had just denied TongFu progression to the final, with serious monetary implications. As one outraged player from the rival team ‘Alliance’ named ‘Loda’ remarked after the game when he confronted Natus Vincere,

Like, how could you even be allowed to win that way? Tongfu had that game! Is that balanced? You need to get them to remove THAT from the game. That was the biggest joke I’ve ever seen. (2)

On the other hand, the fountain hook was a crowd favourite. It was a moment of extraordinary skill and creativity by Natus Vincere and in particular, their star player ‘Dendi’ on his signature hero Pudge. Dendi is often affectionately referred to as ‘The Face of Dota’ by many in *Dota 2*’s Western culture (3) and in the events of the fountain hook, a moment of pure playful co-creativity took place; the likes of which have defined the MOBA genre since its emergent beginnings in the custom game tab. However, due to the professional stage, the monetary stakes and above all, the vested interests of Valve as a commercial developer

pushing *Dota 2* as a legitimate e-sport, the status of the fountain hook as a permanent option in the game were in doubt.

In the following weeks after the event, Valve took the decision to leave the fountain hook in the game and many heated discussions took place regarding the legitimacy of its existence. Perspectives on the fountain hook either took the stance that it was an undesirable exploit which disturbed the balance of the game, or that it was a viable breakthrough of emergent play which added complexity to the game. Both perspectives had merit and the debate in many ways paralleled the similarly nuanced discussions surrounding game design philosophies that regularly took place in the grassroots communities of custom games (see section 3.2.4). What the prevailing sentiment revealed for most players on */r/dota2*'s *subreddit* in the weeks following these events, was that the fountain hook represented a radical move, but was balanced due to the skill and risk entailed to successfully carry it out (4). Furthermore, as many players pointed out, the notion of what constitutes an 'exploit' in *Dota 2* is problematic as the game is quite literally built on many unintentional exploits raised to the profile of legitimate emergent play. As one popular comment from a *Reddit* user at the time argued,

What people don't realise is that if fountain hooking is "a bug" then almost everything in Dota is a bug! Nothing was intended in the first place, even at the most basic mechanic levels such as double spawning a neutral creep camp. (...)

Being able to back-arrow on mirana, curve the hook of pudge or make it longer using a force staff, fountain hooking by throwing the hook from the fountain before teleporting etc. were features of wc3 dota that are not implemented in Dota 2. Instead Dota 2 has taken a new course so people are discovering new "bugs" as you call them like the new fountain-hook which is one of the most difficult things to pull off.

It's how Dota was discovered all along and what makes it the game we all love.

- Reddit User 19, 367 points. (B1)

In this comment, several intricate examples of playful co-creativity utilised in competitive *DotA* and *Dota 2* play can be noted that recall the description of ‘digital folk genres’ given in the second chapter. The salient point here is that the fountain hook is viewed as a continuation of this ongoing evolution and more specifically, it is this bottom-up form of playful development that makes *Dota 2* ‘the game we all love’. To bring the discussion back to Valve’s problematic position as the overriding governors of play, it is this profound sense of ‘love’ for the game and its play that is, following the affective economics described in the past chapter, a valuable commodity for MOBA developers. Valve’s immediate response to leave the fountain hook in the game supported this popular view on bottom-up game design and the integral role of players as co-creators. More widely however, this position can be framed as consistent with Valve’s reputation for empowering various bottom-up actors across their production processes. It is essential to grasp the wider context of Valve’s bottom-up approaches to production here, as they also influence Valve’s approach to governing play.

7.1.2 The governing role of IceFrog

As a company, Valve are well known for their unorthodox approaches to game design, economics and supposed lack of hierarchies in labour organisation (Boluk and Lemieux, 2017: 207). In *Dota 2*’s ‘fair’ F2P monetisation model and (playfully) co-creative structure many similarly unorthodox approaches to production can be noted, however, they are perhaps best exemplified in *Dota 2*’s lead designer, a figure named ‘IceFrog’. IceFrog is a name that has been mentioned several times in this thesis as it is the same person who was an influential modder in the development of *DotA* as a *Warcraft III* custom game (see section 3.2.7). As a figure in Dota culture, IceFrog is enigmatic. Aside from various rumours, nothing is known about IceFrog’s real name or origins other than their extensive role in co-creating the mod of *DotA* and their subsequent employment by Valve in 2009 as lead designer for *Dota 2*. As a liminal figure caught between professional and amateur, IceFrog serves an important

decommoditising function for *Dota 2* through serving as an authentic link to the genres non-commercial past in *DotA*. Furthermore, as someone with a longstanding non-commercial concern for the diversity and balance of *DotA*'s and now *Dota 2*'s play space, IceFrog also serves a crucial governing role for Valve as an almost universally trusted and respected figure in the culture.

As someone that was heavily involved in the collective design of *DotA* as a mod, IceFrog is known for an extremely meticulous yet hands off, more player focused philosophy of game design (6). If a bug is revealed in the game that serves little purpose or is unfavourably viewed by the playing culture, it is quickly removed. However, if a bug is deemed fun and serves a competitive purpose such as the fountain hook or those described by Reddit user 19, then attempts are made to integrate it into the ecology of feedback loops encompassed by the game. Despite IceFrog rarely, if ever, giving interviews or justification for game design decisions, IceFrog's distinctive approach to game design remains acclaimed by the majority of *Dota 2*'s culture. A cursory search of the */r/dota2 subreddit* for 'IceFrog' reveals many threads celebrating or thanking the game designer for their devotion to the game and the vastly varied yet balanced space *Dota 2* has come to represent (see Figure 8). Of course, IceFrog is an employee of Valve and any game design decision taken with *Dota 2* is one permitted by Valve's (unorthodox) commercial structure. However, to *Dota 2*'s culture, it is IceFrog that is viewed as responsible for any balance change or playful development in the game and as such the fate of the fountain hook was viewed primarily as IceFrog's responsibility. Leaving the fountain hook in the game was a balance decision typical of IceFrog's longstanding game design philosophy, however controversially, it would be short-lived.

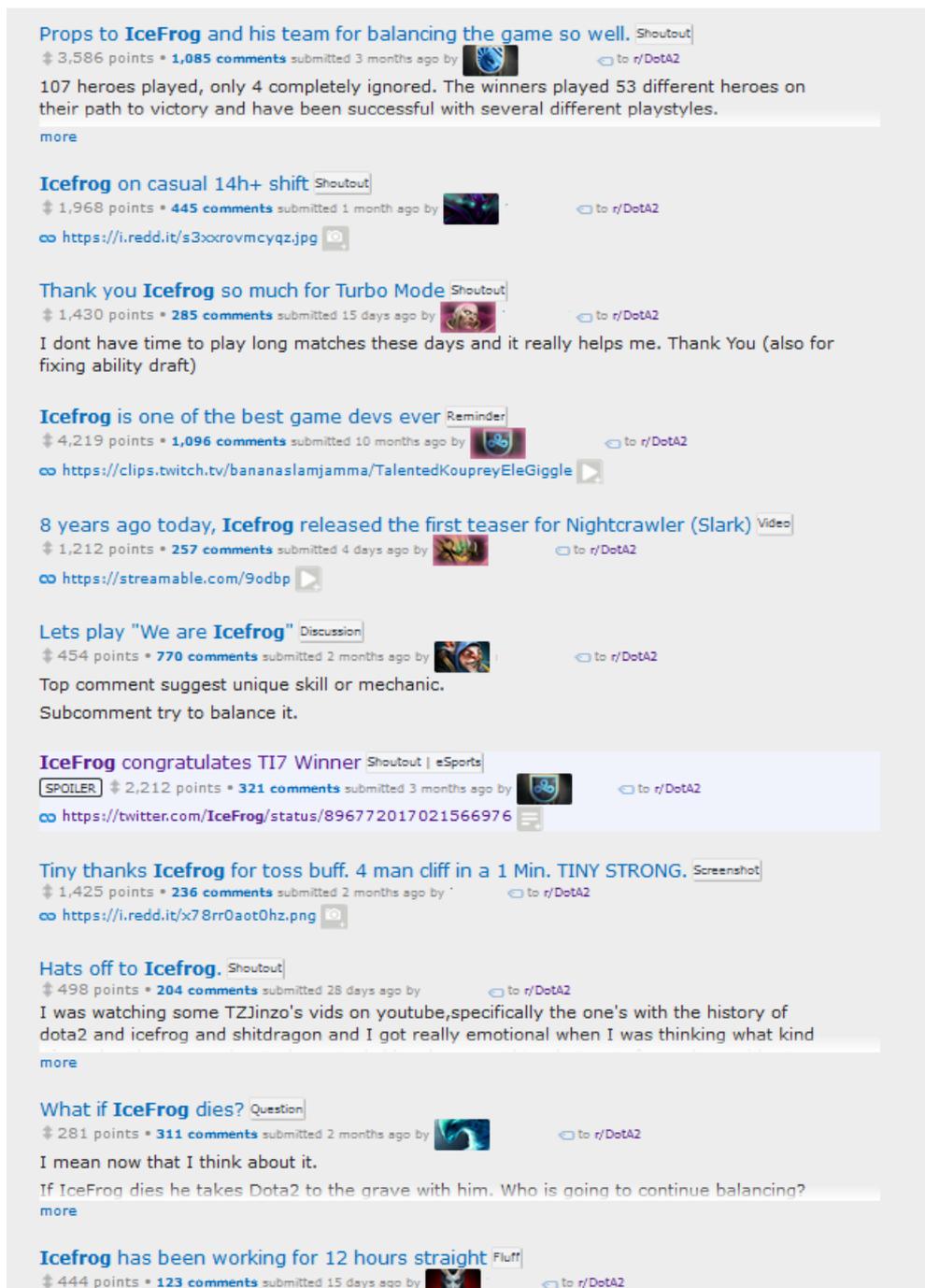


Figure 8. A search of ‘IceFrog’ on the /r/dota2 subreddit sorted by ‘all time’. Screenshot taken 12th November 2017.

Almost a month and a half after the events of the fountain hook, Valve’s latest patch changes contained the short line: ‘Pudge: Meat Hook now pulls the target to the initial hook position regardless of where Pudge is’ (7). In effect, the fountain hook would be removed from the

game with this patch and understandably, it was a governing decision met with a contentious reaction by the culture. Some players saw the decision as a sign that Valve and IceFrog were leaving behind the more bottom-up game design philosophy that had been so instrumental in playfully co-creating what *Dota 2* is; some players saw it as a detrimental action against Natus Vincere as they remained the only professional team to successfully carry out the fountain hook; some players saw it as a sign that Valve was now solely motivated by the integrity of their rapidly growing e-sports industry. For the vast majority of players however, these contentious feelings towards Valve were short-lived as the patch was released and the game continued to quickly grow in popularity and affective driven revenue.

IceFrog remains the trusted figure s/he always was and revealingly, as soon as the patch was announced players began to accept and become understanding of the decision to remove the fountain hook; affirming the enduring trust players place in IceFrog. As one player replied in 2017 when I asked what the ramifications of the fountain hook were four years on, the reply was:

It was pretty obvious Icefrog didn't want such a mechanic to be a deciding factor in a multi-million [dollar] tournament. It was a fun gimmicky mechanic for pubs [public games]. It had no place in serious competition and e-sports.

- Redditt user 20, 6 points (B2)

Although not representative of everyone, this general understanding and alignment with IceFrog's position has remained a consistent response to any potential balance change in *Dota 2*. This is not to say there is always an agreement between players, professional players, user-generated content producers and developers regarding the direction the game takes, but that IceFrog remains the most trusted person to govern this ongoing process. Similar to many wider examples of commercial producers who seek to align themselves with the affective

economies of fans as discussed in the past chapter with reference to Jenkins (2006a: 61-62) and Hills (2015), IceFrog represents a compelling governing influence for Valve.

The fountain hook and its eventual fate as a bygone moment of extreme playful co-creativity provides a rich example of the complexities, perspectives, stakes and modes of governing influence that surround the constant development of play in MOBAs. What is noteworthy about Valve's response and is the reason why I described these events as a 'statement of intent' regarding the generative potential of play, is that the fountain hook was given a chance to exist. For many similar MOBA developers such as Riot Games who are further explored in the next section, exploits such as the fountain hook are patched out of the game as soon as they become known. Through allowing the fountain hook to exist and by allowing a debate to play out for over a month after its high stakes professional display, Valve and IceFrog exemplified a nuanced, more bottom-up philosophy of game design. To this day however, the viability of leaving the fountain hook in the game remains an inconclusive subject of discussion for *Dota 2's* culture.

In August 2016, almost three years exactly after the events of the fountain hook, Dendi revealed that the fountain hook had a relatively simple in-game counter all along (see figure 9).



Danil Ishutin ✓
@DendiBoss

Follow

If you "fountain hook" someone , this person could still tp out while they fly to the fountain. :) back in the days .

3:50 PM - 12 Aug 2016

672 Retweets 2,263 Likes



68

672

2.3K

Figure 9. A tweet made by the professional player Dendi in August 2016.

In MOBAs, 'TP' is short for teleport, which in *Dota 2*'s language is most commonly short for a 'Town Portal Scroll' teleport; an item any player can buy at a cheap price in-game and use to return to their own fountain. What Dendi reveals in this tweet, is that any player could have used a teleport item to escape the fountain hook as they were being dragged across the map, thus nullifying the hooks competitive potency completely. Unknown at the time, this piece of information could have altered the events of the third international world championship and offers a glimpse into the ways players would have continued to govern the fountain hook through the same emergent agency of play that was responsible for bringing it into the game in the first place.

As discussed in the opening chapters of this thesis and was reiterated in Reddit user 19's comment, it is this playful agency that was responsible for co-creating the very fabric of the MOBA genre. When play is left to govern play, complexity and novel bottom-up responses surface that continually renew ideas about what is 'meta' or balanced. There is a powerful

argument here, that the agency of play (and players) can act as the sole governing function in a game due to what Caillois (1958: 30) described as the ‘ever new combinations’ that will continually arise in any rule set (especially particularly varied rule sets such as *Dota 2*). The reality for *Dota 2* and any actively monetised game however, is that top-down governance of playful co-creativity is unavoidable. The critical question for researchers concerned with the ongoing production and hybrid power relations of these games, is what is motivating these governing decisions? Or more specifically in MOBAs, how do governing decisions regarding play reflect the affective economics developers are seeking to maintain and incite?

In the case of the fountain hook, this answer is ambiguous due to Valve and IceFrog’s lack of any justification. However, as many players noted, the motivation to make this change likely follows the reasoning outlined by *Reddit* user 20, that Valve was protecting the reputation for ‘serious competition’ in their growing e-sports industry. The affective significance of e-sports as a continuous source of playfully co-creative activity is a subject further reflected upon later in this chapter. The salient point here is that a diverse set of motivations surround any moment of ‘balancing’ (or playful governance) in MOBAs and these motivations are not merely concerned with the wellbeing of the games playful ecosystem.

The following sections of this chapter further explore how the governing decisions imposed by MOBA developers represent particular motivations and at times, are potentially ruinous to the cultural, gaming, and economic capital of many players and professionals involved with these games. The fountain hook exemplifies some of the contradictions at the heart of these hybrid relations as the move remains a nostalgic and widely celebrated moment in *Dota 2*’s history. In August 2016, Valve produced a short documentary celebrating the fountain hook’s third anniversary (8). The paradox here, is that it was Valve who ultimately removed the fountain hook from the game and are now responsible for governing the playful co-creativity

of *Dota 2* so that similar instances of controversial but highly entertaining play do not occur. Valve's paradoxical position is not unusual in MOBAs, and it is with these hybrid relations in mind that I turn to the modes of playful governance employed by Riot Games in *LoL*.

7.2 Governing *LoL* play

7.2.1 AP Tryndamere

As noted in the past section, instances of playful co-creativity and governing intervention from developers are ubiquitous in MOBAs. In this section, another instance of playful governance that differs in many ways from the fountain hook in its origins, ubiquity and governing response is explored. In comparison to the fountain hook, this instance of playful co-creativity is much less well known and documented, but represents a far more ubiquitous example of how bottom-up creativity on the part of players is commonly responded to by MOBA developers. The governing significance of these in-game moments of playful co-creativity become increasingly important as this chapter develops, as it is the precedents set by this mode of ubiquitous in-game governance that can be observed more widely across participatory and e-sporting ecosystems. The example of innovative play in this section comes from *LoL* and is named 'AP Tryndamere'.

In *LoL*, AP refers to 'ability power' which is a way of levelling up and equipping a player controlled champion so that the potency of their unique abilities is increased, for example by increasing the damage, healing or movement speed of individual abilities. In more thematic terms, building a champion with AP is supposed to reflect an avatar that resembles the role of

a magical user such as mages, wizards or witches that are found in many wider RPGs.

‘Tryndamere’ (also the pseudonym of Riot Games co-founder Marc Merrill) differs from typical AP champions as an avatar inspired by the ‘barbarian’ archetype found in many other RPGs, for example the barbarian class in *Diablo* (Blizzard Entertainment, 1997). Champions such as Tryndamere are designed to be played with a more physical orientated playstyle that favours the auto attack function, or what is known in *LoL* as an ‘attack damage’ (AD) build. However, when one low ranked player found success utilising Tryndamere in an unusual AP mode of play, many wider players on the */r/leagueoflegends subreddit* began to take notice.

The date was January 27th 2013 and the player was named ‘Pitotrek1997’ who on the surface, looked like a below average player with a ‘Bronze’ ranking (roughly the bottom 40 % of players) that played on the ‘EU Nordic & East server’. Utilising paratextual big data archiving sites that are common across MOBAs for representing the in-game data of players, users on the */r/leagueoflegends subreddit* noticed that this particular player recorded unusually impressive statistics when playing Tryndamere (9). Pitotrek1997 possessed an 80% win ratio when playing Tryndamere and to further confound *Reddit* users, Pitotrek1997 built the champion with AP items in a way that was unimaginable to the accepted metagame surrounding how Tryndamere functions in *LoL*. In short, the AP items and runes utilised by Pitotrek1997 were thought to do nothing purposeful for Tryndamere due to the champion’s move set only gaining AP damage from one seemingly limited spin attack ability and one self-healing ability (see Figure 10). Subsequently, many *Reddit* users quickly assumed that Pitotrek1997 was a ‘smurf’, which is the name given to a high ranked player who purposely lowers their actual rank to play or ‘troll’ lower ranked players. Troll-play is a common activity in *LoL*’s culture, particularly among streamers seeking to entertain viewers with novel styles of play or as a provocative demonstration of skill (Donaldson, 2015: 16; Karhulahti, 2016). However, Pitotrek1997 was not a smurf or a troll but something much

more unlikely; an innovator whose play would unknowingly at the time, cause a fundamental change to the games structure.

 Bloodlust Cost: No Cost Range: 400	Q	 Spinning Slash Cost: No Cost Range: 650	E
Tryndamere thrives on the thrills of combat, increasing his Attack Damage as he is more and more wounded. He can cast Bloodlust to consume his Fury and heal himself. Passive: Tryndamere thirsts for blood, gaining 5/10/15/20/25 Attack Damage plus 0.15/0.2/0.25/0.3/0.35 per 1% Health missing. Active: Tryndamere consumes his Fury, restoring 30/40/50/60/70 (+30% Ability Power) Health, plus 0.5/0.95/1.4/1.85/2.3 (+0) Health per Fury consumed.		Tryndamere slices toward a target unit, dealing damage to enemies in his path. Tryndamere spins through his enemies, dealing 80/110/140/170/200 (+0) (+100% Ability Power) physical damage to enemies in his path and generating Fury. Spinning Slash's cooldown is reduced by 1 second whenever Tryndamere critically strikes. This reduction is increased to 2 seconds against champions.	
 Mocking Shout Cost: No Cost Range: 850	W	 Undying Rage Cost: No Cost Range: 400	R
Tryndamere lets out an insulting cry, decreasing surrounding champions' Attack Damage. Enemies with their backs turned to Tryndamere also have their Movement Speed reduced. Decreases surrounding champions' Attack Damage by 20/35/50/65/80 for 4 seconds, and enemies with their backs turned also have their Movement Speed reduced by 30/37.5/45/52.5/60% for 4 seconds.		Tryndamere's lust for battle becomes so strong that he is unable to die, no matter how wounded he becomes. Tryndamere becomes completely immune to death for 5 seconds, refusing to be reduced below 30/50/70 Health and instantly gaining 50/75/100 Fury.	

Figure 10. Tryndamere’s four abilities with their input keys. The green writing refers to the AP ratio on the two moves (‘Q’ and ‘E’). Screenshot was taken November 2017 from the official *League of Legends* website.

As the intrigue surrounding Pitotrek1997 grew, Pitotrek1997 soon entered the *Reddit* thread and declared they were not a smurf and that they would be willing to do an ‘ask me anything’ (or an ‘AMA’, where someone volunteers to answer any questions from *Reddit* users).

During the AMA (10), many players questioned how the AP Tryndamere playstyle could be viable and Pitotrek1997 offered both advice and to start streaming their games so that the playstyle could be observed first-hand. The secret behind the AP Tryndamere playstyle was that it reimagined the role of the champion away from a more straight-forward damage dealing ‘bruiser’ role and towards what is known as a ‘split pusher’ in *LoL*. A split pusher is a champion that focuses on map objectives and relies on movement speed and the ability to ‘sustain’ in lane, which in Pitotrek1997’s unorthodox build, Tryndamere excelled at. Very quickly, many players, user-generated content producers and professional players observed

this new playstyle and began to copy it in a way reminiscent of the collective mechanisms of aggregation definitive of *DotA*'s metagame as described in section 3.2.5.

The pinnacle of AP Tryndamere's influence would come on February 21st 2013 when a professional player from 'Team Curse' named 'Voyboy' would employ the AP Tryndamere playstyle in two games during the spring playoffs for Riot Games North America *LCS*. Team Curse would not cause any upsets akin to the fountain hook, but AP Tryndamere nonetheless performed well and received significant exposure as the professional matches were widely streamed on *Twitch*. Within days on March 1st 2013, Riot Games would release a patch that severely diminished or 'nerfed' the AP Tryndamere style out of the game (11). AP Tryndamere remains an option in *LoL*, however it has not been seen in professional play since this series of events and the style is now widely regarded as at best, an alternative mode of play only viable in much lower ranks (12). Pitotrek1997's moment of fame quickly past as their impressive statistics on the champion were no longer possible. As with so many instances of playful co-creativity in MOBAs, the short story of AP Tryndamere serves as a moment representative of *LoL*'s heterogeneous structure and its hybrid power dynamics.

What is particularly noteworthy about this instance of playful co-creativity is that its bottom-up origins can be so precisely pinpointed to Pitotrek1997 and the *Reddit* thread that brought attention to the AP Tryndamere playstyle. There is a tendency among many players of MOBAs to assume that the metagame is defined solely by professional players and their coaches and, unquestionably, e-sports professionals can act as influential trend setters (Egliston, 2015). However, as AP Tryndamere exemplifies, there is often a much more bottom-up and playful genealogy behind any prominent playstyle or accepted metagame. These playful genealogies are elusive to trace due to the way metagames become quickly collectivised or attributed to a particular professional player whom might be the first to utilise

a playstyle on an e-sporting stage. Moreover, with MOBAs being some of the most played games in the world that span many different regions, languages and e-sports industries, the task of tracing the bottom-up origins behind any moment of playful co-creativity is a challenging one. The potential for future qualitative research into playful genealogies exists (Jarrett, 2016), however it is not my aim here to delve into further examples.

In retelling the context of this playfully co-creative instance I have aimed to exemplify the milieu of bottom-up agencies, expertise and professional performances that are productively at work in *LoL*. This mode of playful co-creativity is a ubiquitous reality in MOBAs, however as AP Tryndamere's short influence also illustrates, it is a mode of production that is always contingent upon developers in order to find any sustained playful presence (also see Ferrari, 2013). Unlike Valve and IceFrog discussed in the past section, Riot Games philosophy of game design combines intense regulatory control with an open channel of communication between developers and players to justify any decision. Quick to nerf, refine or remake emergent playstyles, Riot Games are responsible for removing innumerable playstyles out of *LoL*. However, as was the case with AP Tryndamere, a justification is always provided as the following explanation for the AP Tryndamere nerf is typical of.

These changes preserve the intended gameplay and counterplay of **Bloodlust** by forcing AP Tryndamere to build up Fury before being able to fully take advantage of his heal. Using **Bloodlust** at 100 Fury will result in the same 1.5 AP ratio as before the patch.

Bloodlust

- Ability Power ratio adjusted to $0.3 + 0.012$ per Fury consumed (total 1.5 at maximum Fury) from 1.5

Figure 11. Patch notes for *LoL* version 3.03 released on 1st March 2013, the patch responsible for nerfing AP Tryndamere.

Long lists of patch notes such as this are typically released every 2 weeks (although ‘hotfix’ patches designed to adjust one feature are much more common) with the initial number on the patch corresponding with the e-sports season in which it was released, for example the above patch was released early in season 3. Riot Games always justifies every minute change with an explanation surrounding how the adjustment is intended to address the balance of the game, but it is this notion of balance that needs to be questioned here. Similar to notions of ecologies or ecosystems that were criticised for their inherently uneven power dynamics at the start of this chapter, balance is always a matter of perspective. Preserving ‘the intended gameplay and counterplay of Bloodlust’ as the example above claims to do, preserves a particular mode of play Riot Games originally designed but its balance is not applicable to everyone. For players such as Pitotrek1997 or Voyboy who utilised AP Tryndamere, what is ‘preserved’ is at the cost of diminishing their mode of bottom-up play. Every balance change in any patch carries similar repercussions with varying levels of severity and controversy regarding how the changes affect the gaming capital, expertise and identity of players and professional players. What is crucial to emphasise here is that particularly in the case of Riot Games, these patches are unrelenting in their ubiquity. By forcing players to constantly adapt and change with the game, numerous examples of highly controversial balance changes or modes of playful governance can be noted. As the following sections detail, these balance changes can present a profound crisis for various stakeholders.

7.2.2 Rito Plz: The governing discontent of ‘balance’ changes

There is a meme that is known throughout *LoL*’s Western culture that reflects the frequent discontent players have with Riot Games named ‘Rito Plz’. Every time Riot Games fails to act on something the community repeatedly suggests, for example a balance change, a new feature in the game, or a hiring decision regarding e-sports casters (Volk, 2016), it is common to see *Reddit* threads beginning with Rito Plz. The name Rito refers to a misspelled Riot

(supposedly originating from hurried and frustrated typing) and is often invoked when players are describing the actions of Riot Games critically or with disdain. From the perspective of *LoL* representing an affective economy of reciprocity as detailed in the past chapter, instances of Rito Plz represent palpable moments when the reciprocal feeling between players and developer provisionally breaks down. In this section I explore how moments of discontent or Rito Plz arise as a consequence of Riot Games approach to playful balance. What is at stake here is the value of play to the vast numbers of players and professionals interacting with *LoL* and before delving into the moments of discontent, it is useful to outline exactly what value play takes.

The governing response to AP Tryndamere detailed in the past section is typical of Riot Games rigorous approach to balance and as briefly noted, for players such as Pitotrek1997 the change carried severe consequences to their style of play. AP Tryndamere is only one example of a balance change that was relatively well received by *LoL*'s culture (13), however it nonetheless illustrates the implications for players invested forms of expertise, expression and identity. There is a significant point here that intersects with much of the current research and mainstream excitement surrounding e-sporting modes of play as the question that frequently gets asked is, as Taylor (2012: 109) puts it: 'Can you tell who someone is by how they play a computer game?'

Taylor discusses the way e-sports cultures prior to the popularity of MOBAs often involved players who could be identified based solely on their in-game play, or who were known for pioneering particular playstyles or techniques similar to xPeke's backdoor (see section 5.5.2) or Dendi's Fountain Hook (see section 7.1.1). In a related scope, Todd Harper (2014: 135) discusses the culture of competitive fighting games as one where 'two people engaged in different discourses of play are no longer playing "the same game" anymore'. Harper notes

that due to the high levels of expertise that are required to play particular characters competitively in fighting games such as *Street Fighter 2* (Capcom, 1991) or *Super Smash Bros. Melee* (Nintendo, 2001), players specialise to an extent that they become tied to the identity of their chosen characters playstyle. More recently, Brock and Fraser (2018) have noted the ways competitive play resembles a ‘craft’ that involves distinctive forms of prehension and pride associated with gameplay. The salient point in each of these bodies of work along with the wider acknowledgement of e-sports in Western society, is that competitive digital play is increasingly becoming recognised for its distinctive forms of expertise, expression and identity. A related argument surrounding the increasingly productive role of play has been put forward throughout this thesis, however, it is crucial to emphasise here that play also carries significant value to the individuals playing.

In many ways MOBAs crystallise the idea of play as a recognisable form of identity more so than any other competitive games genre due to the variety of signifiers for playstyles that come in the form of avatars, roles, runes, skins, item builds and team combinations. Indeed, the immediate recognition of professional players through their role, preferred avatars, skins and their team combination is a constitutive part of why MOBAs are so popular as a spectator event. For example, in the pre-game banning stage of *LoL* where each team picks and bans several champions, a detailed knowledge of each player’s in-game identity is a necessity for both the professional players picking/banning and the spectators watching (see figure. 12). The subject of professional players is returned to later in this section, however, it is crucial to also recognise that these intimate relations between the identities of players and affordances of the game are not limited to professionals.



Figure 12. A screenshot from the pre-game pick/ban stage for the 2017 *LoL* World Championship finals between ‘Samsung Galaxy’ and ‘SK Telecom T1’.

Throughout this thesis, I have noted the significance of paratextual player databases to MOBAs and in the everyday non-professional play of millions of players, these databases afford detailed information about friends and opponents playstyles (also see Donaldson, 2015: 13; Egliston, 2016). The salient point here is that the expertise, expression and identity associated with particular modes of MOBA play are not limited to professionals and are constitutive of anyone’s experience when playing a MOBA competitively. It is the significance of these widespread playful identities that underpin the discontent surrounding patch changes as particular styles (and therefore identities) of play are frequently nerfed, remade or altogether removed.

One example typical of players disagreeing profoundly with Riot Games decision making regarding their approach to balance can be found from 2015 with the ‘patch 5.4’ changes to the ‘jungle’. The jungle in *LoL* represents the space between the three lanes on the map and is

typically occupied by one player out of five from each team who specialises in roaming around the map securing objectives and ambushing the lanes. At the time patch 5.4 was released, the jungle position was considered by many in the community to be in a bad state as the position lacked a diversity of champions that were commonly picked in the role.

Moreover, the general influence of the jungle role had waned. The 5.4 patch was a further nerf to the jungle position as prices increased for jungle items that players were required to buy as a requisite to playing the position. Due to one-fifth of all players in any *LoL* game typically playing the jungle position, these nerfs were met with widespread discontent from players, user-generated content producers and many commentators (LeJacq, 2015).

In one popular *Reddit* thread at the time that attracted over two thousand comments, many players expressed their discontent and frustration with Riot Games as the following opening statement in the thread articulates:

Dear Riot,

I, as a player, am quitting jungling. I started jungling in Season 2 because all my friends either hated doing it or were much better at their other roles and know what? I loved it. (...)

You, however, have killed my fun over and over again and I'm not taking this anymore. (...) Every champion that is good in the jungle becomes weaker, but they stay relevant in the mix because... they still work. You tell me these champions are just too good compared to their counterparts. You tell me the gap is too large. Meanwhile, the champions that have been struggling since the beginning of the year have seen no help. You tell me tank jungle help is on its way in a couple patches but... you said that last year and effectively nothing happened. (...)

Until that is thoroughly examined, until that becomes your paradigm when it comes to jungle balancing, until I know you won't make the same mistakes off the past, I can't trust you. I won't trust you. I won't let you do this to me anymore. (...) I'm hoping you clean up your act but know you probably won't.

e[dit]. I told myself I'd just post this and let the comments be, but I feel the need to clarify because a lot of [people are] misconstruing my message. I'm not going to be quitting League, I'm just going to stop being a jungle main.

- Reddit user 21, 4831 thread points (meaning the post displayed prominently at the top of the /r/leagueoflegends front page) (B3)

The intricate game-related details of this post are much more extensive in the full version, however, what the user articulates here is a clear disdain for the way Riot Games had continually altered the jungle position. Revealingly, the user describes a clear breakdown of trust with Riot Games but as they clarify in the edit change at the end of the post (at the request of many users in the thread), this does not mean they will stop playing *LoL*, only the jungle role. Throughout my research observations and discussions, players have often expressed a similar sentiment regarding the discontent they may feel towards developer's governance, but crucially, it is one that rarely stops them playing the game. Resistance takes the form of *Reddit* posts, upvotes, downvotes, videos or memes as seen in the response to patch 5.4. However, any coordinated attempts intervene in the power structures underlying this discontent are absent. Throughout this thread expressing discontent at patch 5.4, many players variously expressed their shared solidarity in the fate of their jungle role.

In protest, let's all agree to not use the jungle role at all. Duo top [lane position] until Rito learns from its mistakes!

- Reddit user 22, 29 points (B4)

I watch [the former professional player] TheOddOne's stream a lot, and have ever since I started LoL over the summer. Jungling seemed awesome when I started.

It's really not awesome now. Brian [TheOddOne] discusses on stream how tank junglers will take forever to clear [creep] camps unless they blow all of their mana (Quill Coat [an item that was removed] was apparently nice while it was around). The different smites [variations of an item] were cool until they got nerfed into uselessness. For a few minutes, there were ranged junglers until the hard reset changes nerfed those into the ground as well. So much for strategic diversity.

And it sucks to watch, because it's a less fun experience watching someone try to have fun playing an underpowered, un-diverse role. Riot's performance this season is hurting TheOddOne, hurting me, and I expect other viewers, streamers, and players.

- Reddit user 23, 454 points (B5)

These comments only represent a small sample of thousands of similar comments expressed throughout the thread and the example of patch 5.4 is only one instance in a continuous cycle of Riot Games' playful governance. What is noteworthy about these comments in particular, is that the discontent arising from patch changes is an authentic and shared sentiment in *LoL's* culture. However, it also raises an immediate question of exactly why these controversial governing decisions happen in the first place. As mentioned previously, Riot Games justifies every governing decision regarding play in the context of their philosophy of a balanced game. This game design philosophy has been articulated by various members of Riot Games design team and is frequently defended in *Reddit* posts from Riot Games employees, or 'Rioters'. In one defence of why patch decisions are so controversial, a Rioter named 'CertainlyT' suggests that players have a tendency to overstate the extent that champions are nerfed and moreover, are inclined to comment when frustrated rather than when content (14). Given the complexity of interrelations in *LoL* that can be misunderstood when reading balance changes in isolation; along with the platform architecture of *Reddit* that is prone to creating what Massanari (2015b: 9) calls (following Pariser, 2011) an 'echo chamber' or 'filter bubble' of views, CertainlyT's position has merit. Indeed, disagreement surrounding ludic balance is nothing new or unique to MOBAs as Paul (2012: 153) notes, 'players routinely appeal to developers with balanced based concerns'. However, what is missing from any official justification regarding balance changes is the political economy underpinning this playful governance. The culture of *LoL* frequently cites two reasons for why Riot Games balances *LoL* in the severe and rapid way they do and both are commercial. The first reason is that Riot Games has increasingly come to balance their game strictly so that it makes an intuitive to understand spectator event. By removing many facets of the game such

as early critical hits (or critical hit runes), dodge mechanics, many silence abilities from champions and by rebalancing the map's turrets in a way to directly deter oppressive early game professional strategies (15), Riot Games intention of creating an intuitive to understand e-sport is clear. Many of Riot Games general game design principles outlined in section 5.4, such as 'Power without Gameplay' or 'Burden of Knowledge' have also contributed towards this spectator focused aim (also see Winn, 2015). What unites all of these changes is that they attempt to curtail professional play so that it resembles non-professional *LoL* play and thus, make it obvious for spectators to recognise exactly what professional players are doing. It may sound simple, but this approach to balance has consistently defined *LoL*. Further refining the MOBA genre away from its RTS origins, this philosophy of spectator-lead game design has greatly widened the appeal of e-sports away from previously popular titles such as *Starcraft* that demanded high levels of gaming capital to fully appreciate (due to the rapid number of inputs professional players displayed that were only comprehensible to a few). However, this intuitive mode of spectator-lead game design comes at the cost of many emergent and arguably more strategic professional strategies, as many commentators have critically noted (16).

The second related reason is that Riot Games continues to incite change in *LoL* to keep the metagame constantly moving and therefore, to keep both players and professional players exploring the ever-changing spaces between rules. This second reason may sound contradictory given the intense value players place in particular styles of play, along with the affective dimensions of Riot Games monetisation model. However, the constant patch updates and rebalancing of the game ensures there is always new content for players to explore and new playstyles on display by professionals. Resembling Kline et al's (2003: 66) notion of 'perpetual innovation' as the rapid low-cost production of new knowledge-based commodities, the constant playful change of *LoL* maintains the game as one of the most active and participatory online games cultures. Consequently, all of this participatory and

playful activity has contributed towards *LoL*'s status as the global leader in e-sports. As I have variously explored throughout this thesis, the ecosystem of e-sports is responsible for much of the playfully co-creative activity that sustains the affective monetisation of MOBAs through the variety of playfully co-creative styles professionals promote. Riot Games approach to playful governance may diminish the lasting influence of many play styles and destabilise the ecosystem of play for players and their respective forms of expertise, expression and identity; however, it also spurs new forms of playful co-creativity and therefore, generates revenue for Riot Games.

There is a paradoxical logic at work behind Riot Games approach to balance here as the constant changes resulting from patches can be read as a form of self-inflicted 'creative destruction'. Creative destruction is a term often utilised in discussions of capitalist economics to critique the destructive impact new creations or technological innovations have in displacing 'past investments and labour skills' (Harvey, 1990: 106). Building on Marx's foundational outline of the notion, David Harvey notes that the result of creative destruction is 'to exacerbate insecurity and instability, as masses of capital and workers shift from one line of production to another, leaving whole sectors devastated.' Harvey's description of creative destruction follows the most common utilisation of the term as related to the cyclical motions of capitalist economies, however there is pertinent overlap with *LoL*'s microcosmic modes of playful co-creativity discussed here.

Riot Games constant and severe approach to balance is not merely creative destruction as it is commonly understood, where the creation precludes the destruction, but it is also a form of *destructive creation*. By removing features from the game through constant nerfs and forcing players to seek out new strategies or play styles, a mode of creation akin to the accelerated evolutionary processes observable after a destructive event takes place. Extinction events in

naturally occurring ecosystems are commonly understood as contributing to many of the variations constitutive of life as a destructive event can ‘can reshape the evolutionary landscape in more creative ways, via the differential survivorship of lineages and the evolutionary opportunities afforded by the demise of dominant groups and the postextinction sorting of survivors’ (Jablonski, 2001). The impact of constant and severe patches on a playful ecosystem has a similarly creative effect for variations in play, however it comes at the same cost of ‘insecurity and instability’ Harvey mentions above. For non-professional everyday players such as those mentioned in this section, the cost of this change is their playful expertise, expression and identity. The discontent arising from this change is a ubiquitous reality for players of *LoL* as exemplified in the past two sections; however, for professional players the stakes are even higher.

7.2.3 Rito Plz: the precariousness of professional play

On 22nd August 2016, former *LoL* professional player and founder of one of the largest e-sports organisations in the West, ‘Reginald’ of Team Solo Mid (TSM), criticised Riot Games unrelenting approach to balance as a devaluing and destabilising influence in professional players careers. Reginald’s criticisms followed a significant *LoL* patch that heavily influenced the play of games during the NA LCS playoffs, which TSM would go on to win. Paralleling the discontent of players discussed in the past section, Reginald criticised the effect of constant and severe patches as ruinous to professional players expertise, identity and careers. These comments caused much discussion and controversy in *LoL*’s culture and it is worth quoting an extract from Reginald’s interview here.

From a fan perspective right, they have a lot of fun. Watching LCS and worlds with new champions, it gets all crazy. [To] see a bunch of new champions like Darius and new people running around killing everyone.

But like, from an [e-sports organisation] owners and [professional] players perspective, it’s honestly really discouraging playing in the LCS when there are these

big changes. To make an easier example, if you look at the NBA right, when they head into the playoffs [when the games matter the most]. It would essentially be like changing the basketballs weight so you are [now] shooting a bowling ball instead.

A lot of my players practice 10 – 12 hours a day. It's not fun practice either. They wake up at like 10 am, they do VOD review from 10 – 12, and then they scrim from 12 – 9 pm, and then they play solo queue. So, they're pretty much really invested into this, and essentially all their hard work goes away. So, from a spectator standpoint it seems really funny when people don't know what they're doing playing all these champions. At the same time, from a pro player and owners standpoint, it's really discouraging because they spend their whole entire lives practicing and essentially, within like a second without any notice at all, the whole entire game changes. I think it's a big reason why you see a lot of player burnout and why players careers are so short. (...)

It's like essentially going to school to learn how to become a maths teacher and then you find out six months later you have to teach science, or you will lose your job. (17)

Reginald's interview details the complexities and challenges faced by professional players adapting to the constant patches of *LoL* and his criticisms of Riot Games approach to playful / e-sports governance are extremely pertinent to many current debates surrounding the work practices of professional players (Woodcock and Johnson, forthcoming). In discussing issues such as team stability, player burnout, the typically short length of professional player careers (the average *LoL* professional playing career is two to three years) and the devaluing of their playful expertise and identities due to the shifting structure of the game, a response is offered to some of the most significant and ambiguous issues facing e-sports. I will not delve into these topics at length here, however it is worth briefly noting the significance of Reginald's claims surrounding the consequences of Riot Games mode of playful governance.

There is a tendency among many commentators and some researchers of e-sports to assume that the short length of professional player careers is due to a biological decrease in reflexes that typically occurs in a person's early 20's (see for example, Thompson et al, 2014). Many of these studies are based on competitive games that require a high level of actions-per-minute (APM) such as *Starcraft II* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010), however APM as a measure of player skill is not nearly as relevant in MOBAs and especially *LoL* as mentioned

in the past section. There is an ambiguity here, as professional player careers in *LoL* remain very short with the average player age being 21.2 (18). To further problematise this ambiguity, significant progress has been made in recent years with regards to several previously unstable sociological factors for professional players. These include player coaching, salaries and improved working conditions that have become the norm for professional teams such as those operating in the NA LCS. Although the working norms for professional players remain controversial due to the intense schedule of time required from players to work (often justified due to the professions close relation to play), this relative stability differs from the state of pre-MOBA e-sports (Taylor, 2012: 150). Begging the question, again, of why professional playing careers are so short in *LoL*? It is here that Reginald's statements surrounding the effect of Riot Games' mode of playful governance provide a compelling explanation.

The exact causal reasons for professional playing careers remaining so short is a question that time (professional *LoL* play is at present, six – seven years old) and further research will provide insight into. However, when comparing different e-sports titles a clear difference can be noted between the average age of players in games where play is rarely governed compared to those that rapidly change. *Super Smash Bros. Melee* (Nintendo, 2001) provides an intriguing example as it is a game that has far less financial security than *LoL* and is notable for being extremely demanding in terms of APM (Greszes, 2016). However crucially, the game has never been patched due to its offline console format and as such, the average age of professional players is significantly higher at 25.2 years on average in comparison to *LoL*'s 21.2 (18). Of course, *Super Smash Bros. Melee* is also a much older game, but the evidence remains compelling that a rapidly changing ecosystem of heavily governed play fosters substantial challenges and instability for professional players.

In her study of the haptic engagements professional *Counter-Strike* players share with the game, Emma Witkowski (2012: 365) notes how even the smallest change to a player's familiarity with the game can affect playful control. Witkowski draws a comparison to the FIFA 2010 World Cup where an alternative football, the Adidas *Jubulani*, was controversially utilised with many commentators criticising its impact on players ability to control the ball. In the comparisons Reginald makes with basketballs and bowling balls, a similar but much more severe parallel is drawn that exemplifies the palpable relationship players also share with the rules of the game. The criticism of Riot Games mode of playful governance that Reginald expressed was a position supported by many in *LoL*'s community with many *Reddit* users naming similar instances where damaging patch changes have occurred for professional teams (19). Moreover, as noted in the past section, the issue of governed play affects any player's respective gaming capital and throughout the ensuing discussion of Reginald's statements, many players expressed solidarity with Reginald's position. However, the subject quickly became even more controversial when Riot Games CEO and co-founder Marc Merrill intervened to defend Riot Games position.

7.2.4 Rito Plz: the contradictory power dynamics of e-sports

Marc Merrill (also known as Tryndamere) made the following controversial comment soon after Reginald's interview was being discussed on the */r/leagueoflegends subreddit* (see figure. 13).

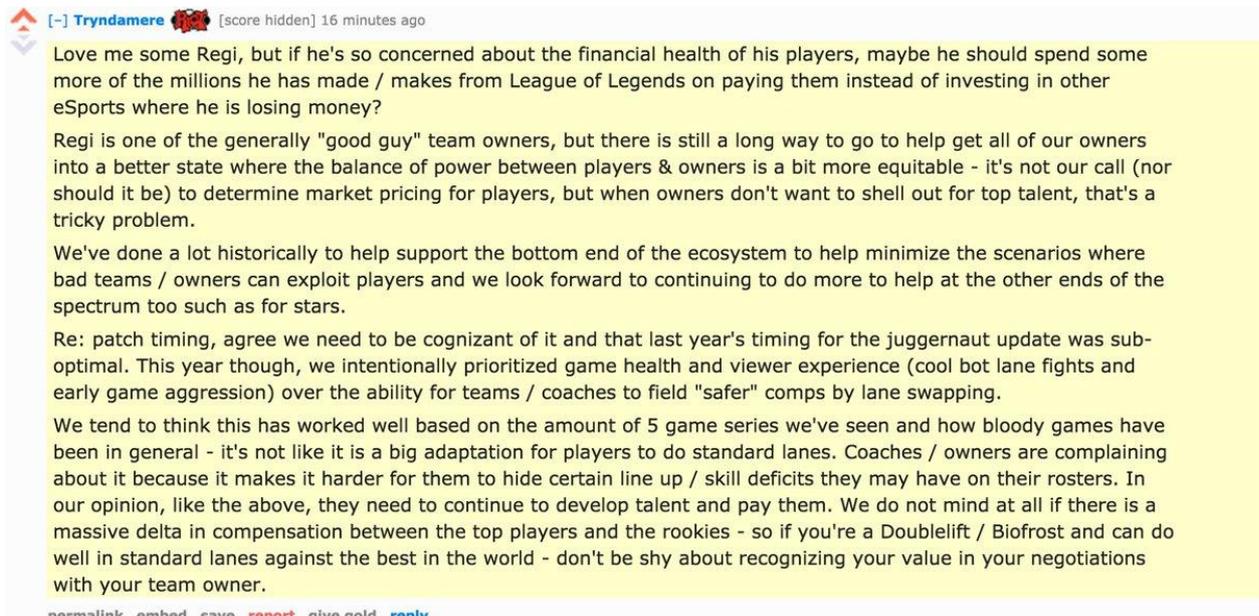


Figure 13. An unedited screenshot of Marc Merrill’s comment replying to Reginald’s criticisms, posted 22nd August 2016.

Merrill would later edit this comment and respond again in a longer post to further clarify his (and Riot Games) position (20). To the culture of *LoL*, however, the status of this comment as disconnected from the realities of competitive play were clear and the comment soon became ingrained into the consciousness of the community. The comment quickly became the most downvoted comment in the thread and many players and commentators expressed discontent with Merrill’s position for various reasons (Tapsell, 2016; Moore, 2017). Many criticised the term ‘sub-optimal’ in reference to patch timings as a severe understatement; many criticised the dismissal of player expertise as out of touch when it was stated players should simply transition to ‘standard lanes’; many criticised the overt corporate tone in the language notable in terms such as ‘delta’; moreover, many criticised the power relations of the e-sports ecosystem as one that heavily favours Riot Games. The implications of Merrill’s comment speak to many of the tensions outlined at the start of this chapter surrounding the unequal and highly motivated control Riot Games exert over an expansive set of playful, participatory and e-sports ecosystems. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to fully explore the full

implications and continuing dialogue that surrounds Merrill's comment, however, it is worth briefly noting its political economic significance when considering e-sports ecosystems.

In comparison to traditional sports, e-sports are always tied commercially to a digital game and this puts the sport in an ambiguous position of what Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2017) recently called 'executive ownership'. For Karhulahti, the 'e' in e-sports does not refer to 'electronic' but 'economic' as it is the extra economic foundation of an explicitly commercial game that sets e-sports apart from traditional sports. While it is tempting to compare e-sports governors such as Riot Games to governing bodies of traditional sports such as Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) or the National Basketball Association (NBA), Karhulahti emphasises that their roles are 'utterly different' (46). The contradictions and tensions of this difference speak to a recurring theme throughout this thesis, that the role of commercial games 'developers' is expanding as they become publishers, platform holders, holding companies, and governors of expansive ecologies (playful, participatory and e-sporting in this case). The contradictory differences between a games developer and these more expansive roles have been variously referred to in this chapter through playful and e-sports examples. However, in Merrill's comment the tensions and potential crises of these multiple roles becomes palpable. As the opening line of Merrill's comment suggests, Riot Games position of governing control not only encompasses their own game, but potentially any other game as e-sports organisations such as TSM must comply with Riot Games or risk being locked out of playing *LoL* altogether. This is not the first time this issue has arisen in *LoL* (Chalk, 2013) and the potential power it signifies for large developers such as Riot Games to control games other than their own is highly problematic.

Writing about the discontent and political economic contradictions surrounding Merrill's comment, Jack Moore (2017) points out the severity of this potential power.

Effectively, Merrill's demand that esports teams plow profits from LCS back into *League* before funding other games is a demand that would create a system where the entire esports world runs through Riot and *League of Legends*. If we carry Merrill's exclusionary logic to its inevitable conclusion, we wind up with a world in which Riot is the NFL or FIFA of esports *as a whole*. In this world, if scenes exist for other games, they would do so in a subservient role to the *League* ecosystem, like the minor leagues do for Major League Baseball or like college football or basketball do for the NFL and NBA. While that may prove extremely lucrative for those at the top of the economic pyramid—Riot executives like Merrill and a few top players—such an arrangement could damage the health of more grassroots events and teams in the esports scene, and is unlikely to help esports players as a whole. (Moore, 2017)

These tensions remain unresolved and are a frequent cause of controversy in *LoL*'s culture as Riot Games occupies the ambiguous position of games developer and e-sports governor (for a further example of Riot Games related e-sports controversy see: Karhulahti, 2017: 47). As noted in past sections, this combination of monopolistic control over both the playful ecosystem of the game and its affective monetisation, along with the ecosystems of e-sports and their respective organisations, allows Riot Games to govern a vastly lucrative political economy of playful co-creativity. As many governments across the world such as the UK's (Ukie, 2016) rush to establish e-sports as growing industries in their respective nations, critical questions surrounding how the economic value created through e-sports initiatives is ultimately subsumed into large transnational corporations such as Riot Games (and their majority stakeholder Tencent) remain extremely ambiguous (Jarrett, 2017). Issues regarding the political economy of e-sports require further research and critical engagement with on all levels (research, industry, governmental). As the reaction to Merrill's comment suggested though, this contradictory undercurrent of unchallenged control exerted by developers such as Riot Games is frequently felt by players and e-sports actors. To return to the question of how of such ecosystems are regulated, it is useful to follow the reaction to this controversial comment further.

7.2.5 Rito Plz: The governing role of memes

As an instance of discontent when the affective relations between players and developers break down, the reaction to Merrill's comment is exemplary of a break in reciprocity.

Typically, *Reddit* comments from Rioters such as Marc Merrill are welcomed by *LoL*'s culture and exemplify the hybrid relations that underpin the games decommoditised affective economy. In this instance however, the culture was almost universally aligned alongside several influential figures (such as TSM Reginald) in its disdain at the governance of playful and e-sports ecosystems. What is particularly noteworthy about the controversy surrounding this comment though, is how quickly its status and the underlying discontent transformed into something else.

Issues surrounding the identity and job security of professional players, the destructive ways Riot Games governs their game, and the overall unequal political economy of these power relations were quickly diffused. Terms from the controversial comment such as 'Love me some Regi', 'good guy owner', 'sub-optimal', 'delta', along with Marc Merrill himself, would all become humorous memes in their own right. In the span of time since Merrill's comment was made, players have evoked these terms or signifiers in *Reddit* threads, *Twitch* chats and perhaps most prominently, on the homepage for */r/leagueoflegends* the following April's fool's day in 2017 (see figure 14).

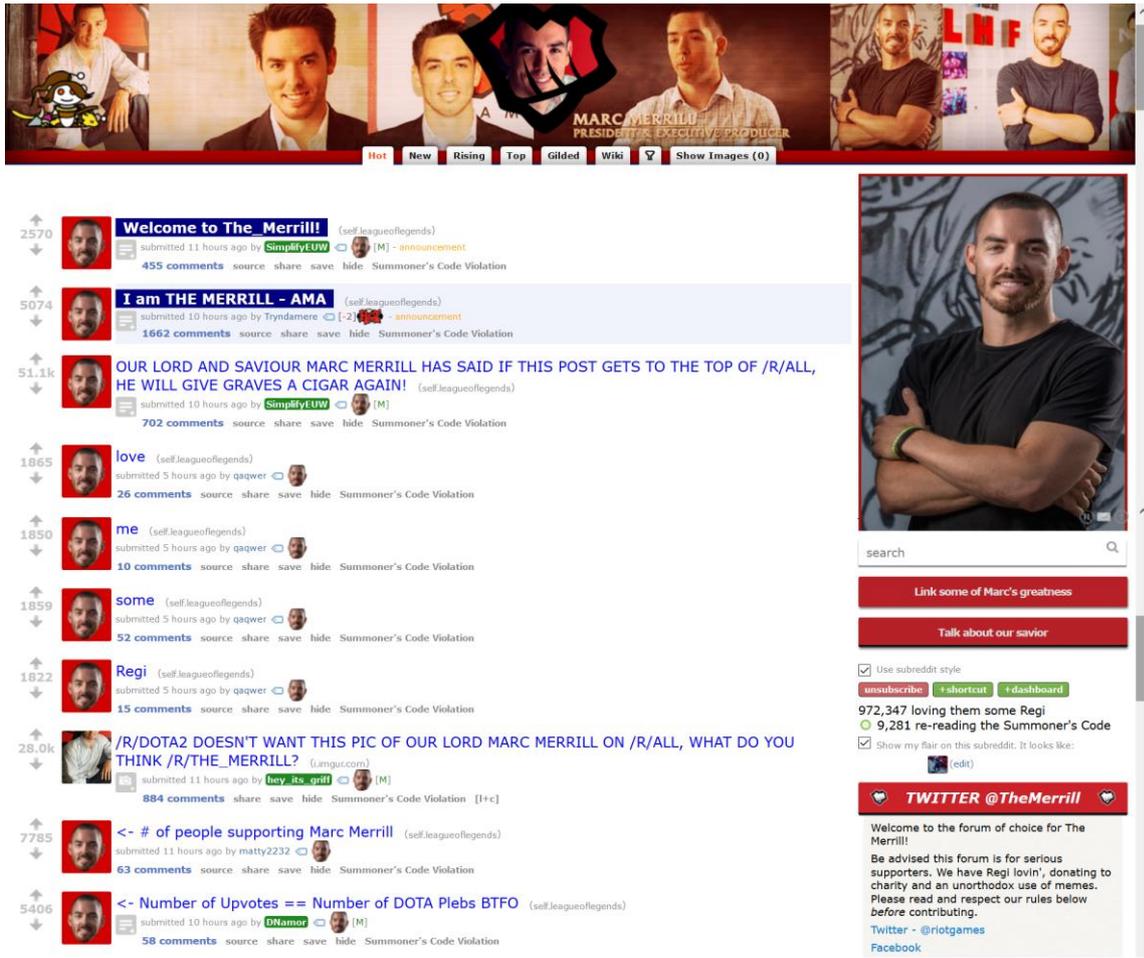


Figure 14. A screenshot taken from the /r/leagueoflegends subreddit on April 1st 2017, where the page became devoted to Marc Merrill.

Similar to ‘Rito Plz’ mentioned earlier in this chapter, the underlying cause of discontent behind these memes is authentic. However, as the above figure exemplifies, this discontent is subsumed into the hybrid power relations Riot Games have come to represent as collective games are made surrounding terms such as ‘Love me some Regi’ that were originally met with disdain. It is common on /r/leagueoflegends to see users question where particular phrases or memes originate from and as users respond to explain the origins behind particular terms, forms of subcultural capital unique to *LoL*’s culture are shared. Limor Shifman (2014: 173) discusses the way different memes require differing levels of literacy regarding their references, with many memes acting as anchors that can unite digital subcultures in shared

experiences. The transition of Merrill's controversial comments into shared subcultural capital on /r/leagueoflegends represents the heterogeneous way controversy becomes diffused as a conventional part of the culture. This transition from controversy to humour is not uncommon in *LoL*'s culture (21) and parallels the position expressed earlier in this chapter by players such as Reddit user 22 who stated that ultimately, the shortcomings of Riot Games are something to be lived (or played) with.

There is an ambiguity here regarding how far these widely circulated *LoL* memes represent the residue of their original discontent and moreover, can such prominent memes actually affect change to the power dynamics of the game? As the example in Figure 14 exemplifies, these memes are reliant upon their message resonating with the culture as the collective placement of the 'love' 'me' 'some' 'Regi' threads display. However, exactly what does this collective expression represent? An immediate answer is that this is a collective display of subcultural capital, a form of collective play common across *Reddit* (see section 4.2.2), especially on a game based *subreddit* on April Fool's Day. However, in collectively playing with the representation of what was a serious moment of controversy and discontent in the culture that evoked a strong emotional reaction of solidarity from players at the time; that original feeling becomes humorous, playful, obscured and normalised.

Indeed, looking inside of any one of the 'love' 'me' 'some' 'Regi' threads there is no critical discussion surrounding the power dynamics of *LoL*. In contrast, a mode of participation similar to Ryan Milner's (2013) description of image memes as a 'hyper-humorous, hyper-ironic, hyper-distanced mode of discourse' is evoked. This discourse of collectively formed humour is obscured from any critical position as Milner observes; "Only joking' can be used to 'whitewash' exclusion and silence countering perspectives, online or off.' The constant circulation of memes that are often created out of controversy regarding *LoL*'s top-down

governance have become similarly humorous and playful extensions of the game culture that normalise many of the contradictory inequalities arising from its hybrid power dynamics. There is one important difference to other image-based memes here however, and that is that on some level, Riot Games do listen to their moments of controversy and respond in an attentive way.

Riot Games extremely communal approach towards interacting with the participatory culture of their game means they are consistently intervening in the cultural circulations of *Reddit*, including many critical discussions or memes. Through embedding themselves thoroughly into discussions, memes and at times discontent emerging from their own governing acts, Riot Games exemplify what Hills (2015) called the ‘coherent social front’ essential to enabling the affective economics of fans (see Figure 15). These ‘Rioter’ interactions serve the function of levelling the relations between players and developers and as noted in the past chapter, are essential to decommoditising the games affective gift economy. However, they also serve to level the reaction to any discontent or controversy regarding the game’s governance by assuring players that their views are being heard.



Riot Pls

BY BANKSY, SCUTTLECHRIS

TL;DR: Riot Pls is a new experimental blog to talk about the priorities and values that influence what we're doing, what we're not doing, and why.

That's a pretty good TL;DR for something this long and it definitely doesn't encapsulate all the content within, but we still hope you'll read it. Just do it!

Discuss [\(LOGIN TO COMMENT\)](#)

1562 comments sorted by **BEST**



988 You guys spelled "Rito" wrong

988



Old Jack Burton - 2 years ago



788 We... considered this.

788



PWYFF - 2 years ago

Figure 15. A screenshot taken of a regular Riot Games blog post named 'Riot Pls', which seeks to address concerns to fans or announce significant new content updates. Screenshot taken 8th May, 2015.

To some extent Riot Games sensitivity to their players is meaningful, as the developer often admits to mistakes (as Merrill soon did in the above instance) and will at times, change their

approach. For example, in the governing controversy involving Reginald mentioned in this chapter, changes were eventually introduced to increase revenue sharing between professional players, teams and Riot Games (D’Anastasio, 2016). These changes included sharing 25% of the revenue from a select few skins with teams in the form of increased prize pools, and promising a closer cooperation between professional players, teams and developers in the future. As Riot Games put it:

We recognize that we can help rebalance the scene by accelerating some of our longer-term economic tactics to help address short-term pain felt by many of our partners. (...)

As we face additional challenges and future unknowns, we’ll continue to stick to our core beliefs; to put esports fans first, to build a great ecosystem that keeps the sport you love around for the long-term, and which fans, pros & teams all aspire to. (22)

Without the prominent discontent displayed by the *LoL* culture it is arguable whether these changes would have taken place. However, these changes do little to address the core contradictions of the political economy of *LoL* that detrimentally impacts its ecosystems of play, participation and e-sports. The approach to balance remains severe and potentially damaging to players and the political economy of relations between developers, e-sports teams and professional players remains extremely unequal. When Riot Games mentions ‘rebalancing’ the e-sports scene by sharing revenue, they speak from a position of power. Furthermore, they are still employing the language of ‘balance’ normalised in game design when as noted throughout this chapter, these ecosystems are far from equitable and are likely to rupture into crisis again as Riot Games continues to occupy its position of contradictory but unquestionably far-reaching control.

7.3 Summary: the expanding ecology of playful governance

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to represent instances of contested play that occur in the MOBAs, *Dota 2* and *League of Legends*. In exploring these instances of play, differing philosophies of game design and their governing significance have been explored. Whereas *Dota 2* exemplifies a more nuanced and gradual mode of governance that allows some room for innovative play to define the metagame, *LoL* is much more prone to swiftly regulating playful modes of co-creativity to make way for newer forms of gameplay. Both of these models of governance are hands-on approaches to regulating play (as the fountain hooks eventual demise is evidence of), however they both exemplify the nuances and consequences that come with game design decisions. When the game has become a platform for a much wider set of interrelated ecosystems as these games have become, the question of how play is governed becomes far more encompassing as players, professional players, user-generated content producers and wider sets of actors such as e-sports industries are all affected.

In the concluding discussion of her 2006 book *Play Between Worlds*, T.L. Taylor begins to ask similar questions regarding the significance of game ‘balance’ in *Everquest* as a precursor to more expansive regulatory sets of influence.

The dream of perfectly balanced game mechanics spreads out to encompass players and the culture of the game. Not only are the formal components of the system imagined to be infinitely regulatable, but the individual players themselves through their location within the system are presumed to be as well. Indeed we might even say this colonisation, where hyper-rationalisation begins to infiltrate all arenas, follows from the pursuit of system balance since there is, in fact, no clean line between mechanics and players, system and culture. (Taylor, 2006: 158)

Taylor’s critique of game balance as a regulatory justification for controlling players and wider systems or cultures is one that is particularly pertinent to describing the way MOBA developers have come to govern vastly differing ecosystems of influence. For Riot Games perhaps more so than any other developer, the control they now exert over not only their play space, but wider

participatory cultures, e-sports industries and even other digital games is unprecedented. To some extent, this same governing influence exists in *Dota 2* and is prominently on display in the way Valve Corporation also control their *Steam* platform, however, Valves approach differs from Riot Games.

Just as their game design philosophies differ, so do their approaches to governing wider ecosystems of participation and e-sports. Although it has not been given much focus in this chapter, Valve's approach to governing e-sports is much more hands-off than Riot Games with Valve not interfering in issues of player payment, event organisation and league management to nearly the same extent. One commentator talking about the differences between Valve and Riot Games approach to governing their e-sports ecosystems puts it this way.

If you were to compare Valve to other publishers, Riot would be the one genetically engineering the planet and Valve is like, here's a bag of seeds and some dirt. Like, get it done. (...) We don't care what kind of plant grows as long as it's healthy and it's something that you want. (23)

The issues raised in this chapter surrounding Riot Games hands-on approaches to playful, participatory and e-sports governance exemplify some of the consequences of power remaining so concentrated. Valve's *Dota 2* does not run into as many of these same issues as *LoL*, however, it is also not nearly as popular and does not have the same level of e-sports infrastructure (investment in teams, player salaries, structured leagues) as *LoL*. This chapter has attempted to give insight into the differences between these MOBA developers and the way they govern their play space, however, further research establishing the links between playful and political economies is needed.

One curious issue that remains unresolved in any discussion of a game developer's governing influence, however, is how far they are needed at all. As the discussion of the fountain hook exemplified, modes of unpredictable playful emergence can rebalance playspaces and in a

similar vein, e-sports and participatory ecosystems have the potential to govern themselves. The example of *Super Smash Bros. Melee* mentioned in section 7.2.3 as a game where professional careers typically last much longer than *LoL*'s is also an example of a game where developers have barely ever intervened (in fact, for many years Nintendo tried to shut down the e-sports culture of the game, see Pitcher, 2013). As a game that has never changed, the metagame remains dynamic and slowly changing, the game continues to grow to an extent that major sports companies such as *ESPN* now cover *Super Smash Bros. Melee* extensively and moreover, prize pools from sponsors and *Twitch* streams continues to grow organically. The amount of monetisation invested into the game does not compare with the two big MOBAs discussed in this chapter, however, it also exemplifies an alternative development of the playful, participatory and e-sports ecosystems surrounding MOBAs if the transition away from *DotA* never occurred.

In comparison, *LoL* is currently in the process of controversially franchising their NA LCS league with many teams and their significant fan bases being removed in favour of more lucrative external investors. As one player on *Reddit* recently put it,

I think such a "player focused company" [as Riot Games] should listen to the fan base when it says that we want to see IMT [a team removed to make way for a new franchise with more external financial backing] in the LCS. You have to wonder who exactly is benefitting from this decision.

- Reddit user 24, 446 points. (B6)

Corresponding with van Djick's (2013) conception of the Internet as a connective ecosystem of interrelated power dynamics where the task of tracing 'exactly who is benefitting' involves following the political economy of relationships between different actors; the task of understanding regulatory decisions in MOBAs involves a similar undertaking. As the interrelation of these MOBA ecosystems becomes increasingly wide, complex and opaque, the playfully co-creative movements constitutive of their vast economic value will continue

to be captured. The MOBA paradigm may involve provisional ruptures in the affective economics of these games, however, these power dynamics look likely to continue as more money, actors and playstyles continually nourish these playful ecosystems.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Between playful and political economies

At the beginning of this thesis, I described the development of custom games in *Warcraft III* as nascent instances of playful co-creativity, or digital folk genres. In using the term digital folk genre, I drew on Jenkins (2006a) notion of convergence culture to argue that new genres such as *DotA* represented a coming together of top-down and bottom-up agencies that could, potentially, redefine both the form of games as well as their surrounding political economy. The onset of MOBAs and the shifting permutations of playful co-creativity described throughout this thesis have exemplified a paradigm of hybrid power relations that parallel wider developments across the Internet in fulfilling *part* of this creative and emancipatory potential.

MOBAs have indisputably changed the face of the games industry not only in their immense popularity, but also in their playfully co-creative structure lending itself to many extensive paratextual industries. Furthermore, in the model of ‘fair’ F2P first pioneered by *League of Legends*, but now in widespread use across the games industry, a hybrid model of reciprocal monetisation exists that reflects the genres grassroots past. These commercially hybrid dynamics constitute what I termed the MOBA dispositif in chapter five and are noteworthy as a set of developer/player relations that many different games have since attempted to emulate. In noteworthy ways, these developments could be interpreted optimistically as MOBAs represent a genre of vibrant participatory opportunity, playful co-creativity and optional monetisation. These facets of the genre can be viewed as vital pieces of grassroots residue from MOBAs more non-commercial genealogy. As section 5.6.1 argued, it is this model of free monetisation underpinning MOBAs that hybridises the non-commercial potential often

predicted from the Internet in the 1990's (Flichy, 2007). The consequence of this commercial hybridisation is a system of relations and model of F2P suited to playful and participatory cultures. However, as this thesis has emphasised, there are also significant critical tensions and moments of crisis inherent to the MOBA model. These moments of crisis are the result of playful *and* political economies intertwining in often contradictory ways.

For commercial developers such as Riot Games and their holding company Tencent Holdings Limited, a vast and deeply uneven amount of affective driven revenue is generated every year from the activities surrounding *LoL*. The critique of this political economy (that is underpinned by the activities of players, professional players, user-generated content producers and paratextual industries) parallels the critique made of many similarly valuable participatory or social media platforms. Similar to many of the most influential Internet platforms, including *Facebook* or *Google*, large MOBAs such as *LoL* or *Dota 2* represent platforms of vastly uneven economics and what van Dijck (2013: 21) would call, convolutions in connective power relations. It is this more fundamental political economic paradigm shift in the way large games are operated as digital platforms that also underpins the onset of MOBAs and their hybrid relations. As explored throughout this thesis, it is in this connective ecology of playful, participatory and platformed relations that the regulations imposed by games developers (as widely encompassing as the term 'developer' has become) must be framed.

The radius of influence and complexity of connective convolutions in power that encompasses MOBAs is increasing as a growing number of livelihoods and industries now depend on games such as *LoL* or *Dota 2*. This thesis has attempted to give an insight into how this transitional moment for digital games occurred through a critical and ethnographic analysis of the role that playful co-creativity had in MOBAs development. When I started this research in early 2013, many of the contradictory power dynamics mentioned in this thesis,

such as the often-controversial governance of e-sports industries (see chapter seven), were only beginning to be known. As MOBAs and this research developed, the palpable consequences of MOBAs contradictory top-down power dynamics are more regularly notable in examples of governance such as those discussed in chapter seven. It is both this vastly uneven political economy and its top-down governance that contradicts the playfully co-creative origins of the genre and present regular crises to the many actors now reliant on MOBAs.

Continually caught between playful *and* political economies, MOBAs exemplify a genre where exciting new play styles and contradictory player/developer tensions are frequently on display. Understanding the nascent beginnings and complex commercial becoming of these influential games, along with their reciprocal model of affective economics, has been the aim of this thesis. The notion of MOBA affect outlined in chapter six exemplifies how commercial developers such as Riot Games have come to represent an alternative, more reciprocal commercial entity. In part, this obfuscation of commercial intent can be attributed to the ‘coherent social front’ (Hills, 2010) developers such as Riot Games or Valve Corporation directly project. However, it is also due to the wide ecology of paratextual content that is integral to experiencing MOBAs. As conduits for paratextual flows that channel their surrounding ecology of play and participation into a model of affective monetisation, this thesis posits that MOBAs present a crucial area of study to the fields of game, fan and Internet studies. Understanding the playful co-creativity of MOBAs and its continued influence in the fabric of the genre is vital to any future research in this area.

Summarising the key theoretical contributions of this thesis that I hope can be built on in future research, it is worth revisiting the three key themes that have been fundamental to the ethnography of this thesis.

8.1.1 Playful Co-creativity

In the notion of playful co-creativity I have discussed from the outset of this thesis, I have presented a model for redefining the nuances that co-creative approaches more generally can encompass. As discussed throughout this thesis, it is the variously productive agencies emanating from play that have been indispensable in the creation of *DotA* and subsequently the MOBA genre. Critically grasping the centrality of this playfully co-creative energy is vital to understanding the continual developments in MOBAs and more widely, are of vital importance in the games industry. As an increasing number of games turn towards free-to-play or related games as service models, it is vital to critically comprehend the ways play is mobilised into the ongoing developments and monetisation of games. Accounting for collective modes of pioneering play such as the Fountain Hook, live streaming examples such as AP Tryndamere and e-sporting examples such as Xpeke's backdoor provide a glimpse into the vibrant ways play can develop, renew and affectively imbue the appeal of MOBAs.

As these playful activities continue to grow in their significance across the industry and an increasing number of players are preferring single games as a lifelong hobby (see section 3.4.1), continued research into the variously productive permutations of play will be essential to game, fan and Internet scholars.

8.1.2 'Fair' free-to-play

The model of 'fair' free-to-play pioneered by *LoL* and discussed throughout this thesis as essential to the governance and affective monetisation of MOBAs more generally is increasingly noteworthy across the games industry. In the span of time since *LoL*'s release in

2009, nearly every game with a multiplayer aspect has integrated microtransactions into their game on the premise of: what is sold will be ‘fair’ and non-harmful to the competitive experience for players. For many games that resemble the *LoL* model, such as *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017 – present), this model has been extremely lucrative. However, with the inclusion of loot boxes such as those found in *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve Corporation, 2012 – present), large cover prices attached to games with further microtransactions such as those found in *Star Wars Battlefront II* (Electronic Arts, 2017) and clearly defined lifespans for games that diminish the worth of in-game goods such as those found in the yearly released *NBA 2k* series, there are many controversies now attached to ‘fair’ free-to-play goods.

The model described in this thesis describes ‘fair’ F2P’s grassroots origins in playful co-creativity and demonstrates its potential for a hybrid set of affective relations that can monetise a game over many years. The significance of this approach from a political economic perspective is that it allows games and their commercial developers to be viewed as platform holders of a playfully co-creative network. Just as wider Internet platforms are enabled through the bottom-up, non-monetary use values of their users’ interactions, so too, are MOBAs conduits for affectively monetising play. However, as the permutations of this model continue to extend into genres and affective economies not altogether suited to its hybrid form, it will be vital to critically reconsider the ‘fairness’ and sustainability of in-game aesthetical sales.

8.1.3 The crisis of playful co-creativity

The crisis of playful co-creativity I have variously referred to throughout this thesis refers to the coming together of playful and political economies in MOBAs. As a genre pioneered in

the grassroots spaces of *Warcraft III*, the fabric of the genre is an inherently playful and participatory one (see chapter two and three). As the genre has become hybridised with the aims of commercial developers, control over these games has transitioned away from decisions collectively decided on in participatory spaces to decisions that must be commercially justified. This transition not only has consequences for the ongoing evolution of these games due to specific game design principles, but it also means vast quantities of economic capital are extracted out of the play in these games through affective models of ‘fair’ F2P.

Moreover, as these games have continued to grow in popularity and influence across the games industry, the parameters of playful control have continued to extend into the paratextual industries of live streams and e-sports. As chapter seven explored, these game developers now position themselves as governors of vast connective ecologies not limited to a game. As explored in chapter 7 and noted by Taylor in 2006 (158), many games developers continue to persist with the language of game design in new roles of governance and it is becoming evident in MOBAs how problematic that can be. For future research into games, fan and Internet platforms more widely, it is essential to map the boundaries and convolutions that exist in any given media form to critically assess the political economy of what is at stake.

8.2 Future directions

As mentioned above, this research took place at a time of rapid change for the MOBA genre and wider games industry. As the prominence of live streaming platforms has rapidly grown, extensive e-sports industries have developed, and affective models of longer lasting monetisation have become the norm in many games; myriad opportunities for future research

presents itself. The themes and critical approaches discussed in this thesis are highly applicable to many of these developments.

What I have come to believe throughout the course of this research, is that playful online activities that may seem inconsequential at first, always carry the potential to be utilised in the ongoing design, collective identity or affective monetisation of games. Large parts of this thesis have surrounded this topic of exactly what play (everyday play, professional play, collective play, alternative play, streamed play) and its agency represents to MOBAs, however, future research surrounding wider games genres and emerging models of playful capture are needed. Any game is crafted through a genealogy of play. However, playful movements are increasingly becoming the substance that underpins the longer lasting, collectively experienced, and the continual monetisation of digital games.

For MOBAs specifically, the ways play intersects with the complex political economy these games represent could be further examined. In chapter seven, I explored several instances of notable and sometimes controversial forms of playful regulation or ‘balance’ changes, however several themes were left unresolved. How far balance changes impact playful expertise and how far the top-down logics of relentlessly playful governance are bound up in the political economy of a digital game could be further examined. These questions overlap with the various game design philosophies that have been mentioned throughout this thesis. Game design philosophies carry the potential to preserve or destroy playful forms of co-creativity/expertise and although these dynamics have been given significant attention (especially in chapter three and five), further research into how the political economy of a game is reflected in its balance philosophy could reveal common trends between games.

As discussed in the methodological chapter, my approach in this thesis has been an ethnographic one that is not altogether concerned with the precise demographics of players.

This approach has allowed me to submerge myself into the cultures of these games and present a detailed view of the playfully co-creative dynamics and affective models of monetisation in MOBAs. However, in future research it might be worthwhile to track some of the demographics behind players and ask a different set of questions surrounding *who* is playing, participating and paying. As noted in section 4.3.3, MOBA cultures often project themselves in particularly masculine and sometimes hostile ways. As a male researcher myself, I was not always exposed to the same level of hostility others might be when posing questions to MOBA cultures. Critically exploring the ways these cultures can exclude and how exclusionary practices are reflected in the ways people play, participate and pay could reveal insightful details in future research.

The political economy of playful co-creativity has been one of the central subjects of this thesis, however the connective ecology of MOBAs continues to extend. Mapping the convolutions in power between MOBAs and wider platforms such as *Twitch*, an e-sports organisation or an e-sport league sponsor could reveal new dynamics and new potential moments of crisis in MOBAs ever evolving playful co-creativity.

Notes

Chapter one

1. Frank Lantz made this comparison in a talk for the 2015 ‘Games for Change’ festival. The full video of the talk with the MOBA comparison beginning at 7:50 can be found here: <https://youtu.be/8LgJTbvrGsw?t=470>

Chapter two

1. Before the onset of custom games, the bland description of ‘unit’ was used to describe the avatars or structures under player control in real-time strategy games typified by titles such as *Command & Conquer* (Westwood Studios, 1995), *Total Annihilation* (Cavedog Entertainment, 1997) or *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios, 1997). Although variation does exist between units in these games the difference was typically numerical (I.E. one unit has a higher attack or defence value than another unit) and individual units would not gain experience or be subject to player customisation to the extent that *Warcraft III* and particularly its custom games pioneered.
2. There are no official figures detailing how many people played *Warcraft III* custom games at their height. However, some evidence that their popularity at least numbered in the hundreds of thousands can be found in the number of times many of the maps have been downloaded from sites such as *Hiveworkshop* (www.hiveworkshop.com). It should be noted however, that custom games were also distributed across the *Warcraft III* platform and various different websites, so the player base was likely much larger than estimated here.

3. Although traditional games rarely change their rule set it is not unheard of as in the case of the 'komi' or 'komidashi' rule in the game of Go. The komi rule is a points advantage that is given to the player in control of the white stones to compensate for playing second and was widely introduced to Go during the 1950's (Fairbairn, 2004: 68).

Chapter three

1. For evidence of how many different versions of DotA were available from different modders, see the following:
<https://www.epicwar.com/maps/search/?go=1&n=dota&a=&c=0&pf=1&p=1&roc=1&tft=1>
2. Prominent examples of sites where the culture surrounding *DotA* frequently discussed the game were 'www.dota-allstars.com' and 'www.playdota.com', although both sites are now either archived or have been updated to refocus on *Dota 2*.
3. One notable way Blizzard did recognise the activities of custom game cultures was through including *DotA Allstars* as a tournament event at the very first Blizzcon in 2005. Although a small event by today's standards (8000 attendance), it does offer a single exception to Blizzard's overall lack of involvement with the activities of custom game cultures.
4. For evidence of how many different versions of DotA were available from different modders, see the following:
<https://www.epicwar.com/maps/search/?go=1&n=dota&a=&c=0&pf=1&p=1&roc=1&tft=1>

4. Numerous genres have been influenced by the *Warcraft III* custom game space with the most notable being Tower Defences such as *Flash Element TD* (CasualCollective.com, 2007), *Tower Wars* (SuperVillain Studios, 2012) or more recently, *Legion TD 2* (Autoattack Games, 2017). Other examples of commercial games directly based on custom games include *Spellsworn* (Frogsong Studios AB, 2015) that is based on a map named ‘Warlock’ and *The Red Solstice* (Ironward, 2015), that is based on a map named ‘Night of the Dead’.
5. The trend towards an economic valuation of online play is by no means limited to MOBAs. Another prominent example from 2014 was the \$2.5 billion sale of *Minecraft* that similarly to MOBAs, owes much to its bottom-up playful interactions within the game and independent or fan lead paratextual content created outside of it.

Chapter four

1. The ‘tribunal’ system was introduced to *League of Legends* in 2011 as a way of regulating the undesirable behaviour of ‘reported’ players through using the judgements of other players from outside of the game. If a player was reported by several other players in a game then the statistics, chat logs and match history of the reported player in question would be available to tribunal users to make a judgement on their behaviour. If a consensus was reached by the different player judges using the tribunal system, then the reported player could be punished or found innocent. In September 2014, Riot Games removed the tribunal system in favour of a more automated regulating system that provides immediate player feedback. The tribunal system remains noteworthy as an attempt at crowdsourcing the regulation of play in online games, an initiative that attracted much scholarly attention at the time (for example, Kow and Nardi, 2013).

2. A closer look at the Alexa statistics reveals that *Reddit* is especially popular in countries where English is a first language such as the USA where it ranks as the 4th most popular or the UK, Canada or Australia where it ranks as the 5th most popular respectively. Even for countries where English is not the first language, such as France or Germany, *Reddit* still remains in the top 20. These statistics were taken on 5th April, 2017 from *Alexa*.
3. One thread with users citing Hotshotgg's influence in popularising *Reddit* to viewers can be found at the following:

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/1f40fs/the_end_of_an_era_official_hotshotgg_appreciation/ca60l9d/
4. These statistics can be found here:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160508111153/https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/wiki/list-sorted-by-subscribers>
5. This quote is taken from 'esportslaw' or Bryce Blum, in a post made on the '/r/leagueoflegends' *subreddit* in March, 2015. Blum's identity and independent status as separate from Riot Games is verified consistently by his *Twitter* account that often links directly to *Reddit* discussions. The post referenced is named 'A Different Take on Mods Signing an NDA w/ Riot' and is available at:

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/30mreu/a_different_take_on_mods_signing_an_nda_w_riot/
6. The forum 'PlayDota.com' was one of the main hubs of activity for the playing and modding cultures surrounding *DotA*. As an online ethnographic field site, I drew heavily on 'PlayDota.com' in my past MA work (Jarrett, 2012). More recently, 'PlayDota.com' was reworked into a site more specific for *Dota 2* and its long history of millions of posts regarding *DotA* were archived into a separate site. The archives of

Dota's 'PlayDota.com' can be found at: <http://archive.playdota.com/> [last accessed June 2017]

7. For example, the thread entitled 'Unintentional game design prevalent in Dota 2?' received around 100 responses that are not quoted directly in this thesis, but informed the discussion of game design developments and philosophies in chapter five and seven.

The thread can be found here:

https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/3wxpn0/unintentional_game_design_prevalent_in_dota_2/

8. This particular thread can be found here:

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/2jvsf9/role_of_playful_innovation/

9. The *Tumblr* blog for League of Sexism can be found here:

<http://leagueofsexism.tumblr.com/> [last accessed June 2018]

10. The video for the stream snipng incident can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zparciz8Res&t=>

Chapter five

1. Although the activities of *Warcraft III* custom games are given much more attention in this thesis than the *Starcraft* mod *Aeon of Strife (AoS)*, this mod was nonetheless significant as the first instance of MOBAs core conventions. The control of a single unique character, the team vs team structure, the three lane map and winning condition of MOBAs were all present in *AoS*. However, unlike the *Warcraft III* platform that was a hybrid of RTS and RPG, many possibilities for the genre were limited in *AoS* due to the strictly RTS platform of *Starcraft*. The most obvious example of this limitation was in the player-controlled characters of *AoS* who had no

unique skills and a counter-intuitive interface. Character levels, for example, were represented by the *Starcraft* symbol for ‘Gas’, a resource in the non-modified game. Perhaps as a result of these limitations, *AoS* was never particularly popular or achieved any sustained development in the same way *DotA* did. As noted throughout this thesis, (particularly in section 3.2.5), a playful mode of co-creativity was essential to realising the potential for this genre and as a result, *AoS* was never considered a competitive game.

2. The term ‘meme’ was originally coined in 1976 by the biologist Richard Dawkins as a way of describing small units of culture that spread from person to person through imitation or copying. In recent years the term has gained significant cultural traction across the Internet as a way of describing the ‘propagation of items such as jokes, rumours, videos and websites’ (Shifman, 2014: 2). It is with this latter usage, particularly as a joke with cultural significance to particular cultures that I use the term in this thesis.
3. A notable exception here is South East Asia where the combination of a prevalent games café culture and the *Garena* service being based in Singapore meant that *DotA* gained a significant cultural traction. See, Rayo, 2012.
4. The process of commercial developers other than Blizzard re-platforming *DotA* has not been entirely smooth. When *Dota 2* was announced it was met with hostility from Blizzard Entertainment, Riot Games (particularly some of the former *DotA* modders turned Riot Games employees) and some fans of the original mod. See, Welsh, 2010; Augustine, 2010.
5. As a convention in *DotA* and *Dota 2* play, creep denying is viewed as a highly skilled and competitive way of playing due to the ubiquity of its application in any game and the significant practice it requires. Creep denying involves killing a friendly creep

when they are below 50% health with the purpose of ‘denying’ the opponent gold and experience. In high level e-sports play, the mechanic is often additionally used to ‘control’ or ‘freeze’ a lane, another convention that players have learned to play around. Creep denying has always been a part of *DotA* play but it was officially recognised in 2006 with the 6.36 patch that rebalanced denying mechanics so that ‘denied units now give off minor Experience instead of none’. The archived patch notes can be found here: http://liquipedia.net/dota2/Version_6.36

6. These principles were listed in an influential forum post made in 2010 that summarised why Riot Games balances and updates their game in the way they do.

The forum post can be found here:

<http://forums.na.leagueoflegends.com/board/showthread.php?t=293417>

7. There are many large discussions from MOBA players that question the name of the genre, particularly in the first few years of MOBAs widespread usage. See for example:

<http://www.liquiddota.com/forum/dota-2-general/454364-moba-arts-dota-does-it-really-matter>

8. Although *DotA*’s popularity has decreased massively along with *Warcraft III*, it remains an influential cultural term mostly due to its popular commercial sequel, *Dota 2*.

9. Riot Games decision to completely rewrite the ‘lore’ of their fictional universe came in September 2014. As Riot Games stated when justifying the decision, ‘The point is simply that League of Legends constantly evolves, and, as it does, its narrative needs to evolve as well.’

For the full blog post see: <http://na.leagueoflegends.com/en/creative-spotlight/dev-blog-exploring-runeterra>

10. Many commentators not familiar with MOBAs have noted their initial confusion surrounding the setting of the game. Many of these commentators come from the increasing number of traditional sports outlets that have come to cover MOBA e-sports. For example, in *ESPN's* 'Guide to *League of Legends*' article (Bates, 2016), the genre is described as an 'enigma' with 'cryptic rules' to those not familiar with game.
11. In *League of Legends*, NPCs are usually called minions (for team specific NPCs) or monsters (for neutral NPCs). Many different games have different words for NPCs, including creeps in *Warcraft III* and *DotA 2*, or mobs in MMORPGs and MUDs (where the word originates from).
12. The page for Riot Games Intellectual Property use is entitled 'Legal Jibber Jabbar' and can be found here:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180105225327/https://www.riotgames.com/en/legal>
13. The short history of *LoLking* is recorded on their about page. Available at:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180118021036/http://www.lolking.net/about>
14. When 'Own3D.tv' shut down in January 2013 it did so after many months of established streamers and sponsored teams switching to 'Twitch.tv', leaving 'Own3d.tv' in an obsolete position. Unlike Own3D.tv which was an independent Austrian company, Twitch.tv (formally owned by 'Justin.tv' which rebranded as *Twitch Interactive* in February 2014) was based in Silicon Valley and had increased access to investment funds. *Twitch* would use this additional funding to lure away the most popular *LoL* team, *Team Solo Mid*, from Own3d.tv in April 2014. In a manner reminiscent of format wars such as Betamax losing out to VHS or HD losing out to Blu Ray, *Twitch* superseded 'Own3d.tv' and it did so not through any superior technological development, but because it leveraged the popularity of *LoL* streamers

more effectively than Own3d.tv could. The final blog post made by *Own3d* in January 2013 can be found here:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130713104305/http://www.mineski.net/news/1620-own3d-tv-to-shutdown-on-jan-31st>

15. Riot Games use of the term ‘ecosystem’ to describe multiple facets of their game culture. This includes the game itself and its ecology of feedback loops that as ‘Riot Ghostcrawler’ discusses here:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160428153158/http://ask.fm/RiotGhostcrawler/answers/132235536267>

The user-generated content ‘ecosystem’ with regards to terms of use that ‘Riot Tocelot’ discusses here:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160417075314/https://developer.riotgames.com/discussion/announcements/show/mt7a28gy>

The e-sports leagues that Riot Games and many other developers now frequently call the ‘e-sports ecosystem’. See for example, the 2013 Games Development Conference panel named ‘Inside the eSports Ecosystem: A Business Overview.’ (Hiltscher, 2013)

16. It should be noted that in the time that has passed since *LoL*’s release, newer titles such as *Dota 2* have taken the ‘fair’ F2P model to new levels of ‘fairness’ by removing any purchases from the game except aesthetic ones. From the outset, everything except skins is unlocked in *Dota 2* as opposed to *LoL* or many other MOBAs such as *Heroes of the Storm* where characters and customisable ‘runes’ still need to be unlocked by the player. These further aspects of the game are achievable through in-game play or out of game money, what is called ‘influence points’ (gained by play) or ‘riot points’ (gained by money) in *LoL*. Some players have since accused games such as *LoL* of having P2W content in the form of unlockable characters or runes, however, there are

two points to emphasise in response to this criticism. Firstly, it is crucial to recognise that Riot Games originally coined the term ‘fair’ F2P and their game played an influential role the inception of this model. Secondly, games such as *LoL* continue to function as ‘fair’ F2P due to the mastery and time required to play competitively. Similar to an MMO where players must first ‘level up’ to play competitively or in large groups, players of MOBAs typically spend substantial time playing and unlocking what they need before playing competitively.

17. It is important to emphasise here that other forms of capital other than money always flow through any online game and these capitals (gaming, social, cultural) are the result of the sociological conditions a player is exposed to. In this sense, no game is ever truly ‘balanced’ or ‘fair’ due to the imbalances of the real world that are impossible to fully separate from the virtual.

18. The Riot Manifesto is the mission statement available on Riot Games website.

It is available at:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160115192612/http://www.riotgames.com/riot-manifesto>

19. This quote comes from an open ‘Ask me anything’ discussion on *Reddit* following a controversial initiative suggested by Valve Corporation to monetise mods on their *Steam* platform. The thread is available at:

http://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/33uplp/mods_and_steam/cqoj40a

20. The *change.org* petition can be found here: <https://www.change.org/p/valve-remove-the-paid-content-of-the-steam-workshop>

Chapter six

1. These figures come from SuperData. The link is available at:
https://www.tweaktown.com/image.php?image=imagescdn.tweaktown.com/news/5/5/55605_02_league-legends-generated-billion-revenue-2016.png
2. The full discussion I am referring to throughout this paper can be found here:
https://web.archive.org/web/20180126180549/https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/
3. The reasons why players played multiplayer games in pre-computer eras include the relative lack of other games available, the relatively accessible status of the games (often requiring only a ball or board) and the non-existence of artificial intelligence in games (a requisite for many single player games).
4. There are some differences between the things that can be bought and exchanged in respective MOBAs. For example in *Dota 2*, many facets of the game such as HUDs or new announcer packs can be bought. In *HotS*, different skins for in-game mounts can be bought, similar to those found in *WoW*. Similar to *LoL* however, all fair F2P MOBAs rely primarily on skins for player controlled avatars above all else.
5. *Dota 2* was not originally planned as a fair F2P game. However, due to the success of *LoL* and the games extremely popular public beta phase, *Dota 2* later switched to the openly accessible fair F2P model it has become known for. See:
<https://web.archive.org/web/20121225071540/http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2011-08-18-newell-dota-2-wont-ship-until-2012>

Chapter seven

1. Valve's early acknowledgement of the fountain hook's existence can be found in this forum thread from 2011:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180127123629/https://dev.dota2.com/showthread.php?t=2989&p=11512thread>

2. Loda's negative reaction to the fountain hook was widely discussed at the time and was revisited in a short 2016 *Youtube* documentary on the fountain hook entitled *The International Archives – Fountain Hook*. This particular quote Loda used can be found in full, along with its live reaction, in the following clip:

<https://clips.twitch.tv/BreakableRamshackleDogeStrawBeary>

3. Dendi's title as 'The Face of Dota' is frequently mentioned with affection in many threads in *Dota 2's subreddit*. The title was also used as the name of a 2017 *Youtube* documentary on Dendi entitled *The Story of Dendi: The Face of Dota*. The documentary can be found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCt_5gt1o9U

4. The general feeling of acceptance surrounding the fountain hook could be noted in many *subreddit* posts at the time. A collection of these posts can be found here:

https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/1k2l3c/collection_of_posts_regarding_fountain_hooking_in/

5. This popular comment can be found in the thread mentioned in the previous note. A direct link to the comment can be found here:

https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/1k2l3c/collection_of_posts_regarding_fountain_hooking_in/cbkru70/

6. IceFrog's game design philosophy is the subject of much commentary in various threads, articles and e-sports coverage. One widely read example known in *Dota 2's* culture comes from a 2013 parody interview (a parody because IceFrog very rarely gives interviews) by Shostakovich (2013) that summarises IceFrog's bottom-up philosophy of game design.

7. These patch notes were revealed on 23rd September 2013 and can be found here:
<https://web.archive.org/web/20130921210244/http://www.dota2.com/firstblood>
8. The short documentary piece produced by Valve can be found here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6H-HEpnlk8>
9. The first thread that drew attention towards Pitotrek1997 was a thread posted on January 27th 2013 that linked the players *LoLking* profile which at the time boasted an 80% win ratio on the champion Tryndamere. The thread can be found here:
https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/17cczw/how_is_this_even_possible/
10. Pitotrek1997's AMA, posted January 27th 2013, can be found here:
https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/17dza8/ap_tryndamere_pitotrek_1997_ama/
11. The patch responsible for nerfing AP Tryndamere was V3.03 and it can be found, along with its patch notes, here: <https://lol.gamepedia.com/V3.03>
12. One detailed player written guide that demonstrates how a hybrid version of the AP Tryndamere playstyle can still be utilised up to Diamond rank can be found here:
<http://www.lolking.net/builds/tryndamere-build/269009/the-comprehensive-spin-to-win-a-diamond-bruiser-ap-tryndamere-guide>
13. At the time AP Tryndamere was removed, it was a balance decision widely regarded as acceptable, despite its effect on Pitotrek1997. The following thread exemplifies this acceptance:
https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/18xvun/next_patch_rip_ap_tryndamere/

14. This post was made in February 2014 on *LoL*'s main forum and can be found here:

<http://forums.na.leagueoflegends.com/board/showthread.php?t=4320431&page=2#post45460246>

15. The 'oppressive early game professional strategies' being referred to here were the 'lane swap' strategies that were common in professional play in late 2013. By altering the properties of turrets in lanes, Riot Games essentially stopped the lane swap strategy with the v4.1 patch. This balance change was read by many as a change that made professional games resemble non-professional games by removing a layer of strategic depth. At the time of the patch, this balance change caused much discussion on /r/leagueoflegends, for example in the following thread:

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/1v909f/patch_41_riot_enforces_the_meta/

16. One vocal critic of Riot Games approach to balance as diminishing professional strategic complexity is former team owner and commentator 'Montecristo' who has critiqued many of Riot Games decisions, including the v4.1 patch mentioned above. For example, see:

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/1w02te/rift_review_w_montecristo_41_tower_changes_worst/

17. The full interview can be found on *theScore esports Youtube* channel, with the quote extract beginning at 1 minute 30 seconds into the interview. The video is available at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcPP45gj72M&t=>

18. The average age of players from various sports and e-sports were displayed in this 2017 *ESPN* article:

http://www.espn.co.uk/esports/story/_/id/20733853/the-average-age-esports-versus-nfl-nba-mlb-nhl

19. The full reaction to TSM Reginald's comments can be found in the following extensive thread:
https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/4z1eec/reginald_on_how_riots_major_patch_changes_hurt/
20. Merrill's later comment on the subject can be found here:
http://www.twitlonger.com/show/n_1sp1mhh
21. Examples of similar controversies in *LoL*'s culture that have had phrases turned into memes include the term 'e-stalking' during the SpectateFaker controversy (Jarrett, 2015) and the word 'Gucci' after controversial comments were made by a Riot Games employee about the (banned) streamer Tyler1 (Goslin, 2017).
22. The full open letter can be found here: http://www.lolesports.com/en_US/articles/lol-esports-now-and-future
23. This quote can be found at 16 minutes 30 seconds into the following video:
<https://youtu.be/pv7-F-CYczs?t=992>

Ludography

Aeon of Strife (1999), Modding Community, *Starcraft* / PC.

Age of Empires II (1999), Ensemble Studios, PC.

Awesomenauts (2012), Ronimo Games, PC (PC version referred to)

Crusader Kings II (2012), Paradox Development Studio, PC.

Command & Conquer (1995), Westwood Studios, PC.

Counter-Strike (2000), Modding Community, *Half-Life* / PC.

Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (2012 – present), Valve Corporation, PC.

Dawngate (2013 – 2014), Electronic Arts PC.

Defence of the Ancients (2003), Modding Community, *Warcraft III* / PC.

Diablo (1997), Blizzard Entertainment, PC.

Dota 2 (2013 - present), Valve Corporation, PC.

Dragons of Atlantis (2011 - present), Kabam, Android / iOS / PC.

Eve Online (2003 – present), CCP Games, PC.

Everquest (1999 - present), Sony Online Entertainment, PC.

Flash Element TD (2007), CasualCollective.com, PC

Fortnite, (2017 – present), Epic Games, PC (PC version referred to).

Half-Life (1998), Valve Corporation, PC.

Hearthstone (2014 – present), Blizzard Entertainment, PC, Android / iOS.

Heroes of Newerth (2010 - present), S2 Games, PC

Heroes of the Storm (2015 - present), Blizzard Entertainment, PC.

Infinite Crisis (2015 – 2015), Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, PC.

Legacy of Heroes (2011 – 2017), 5th Planet Games, PC.

Legion TD 2 (2017 - present), AutoAttack Games, PC.

League of Legends (2009 – present), Riot Games, PC.

Lineage II (2003), NCSOFT, PC.

LittleBigPlanet (2008), Media Molecule, Playstation 3.

Mario Kart 64 (1997), Nintendo, Nintendo 64.

Minecraft (2011 – present), Mojang, PC (PC version referred to).

Pac-Man (1980), Namco, Arcade.

Pokémon Red (1996), Nintendo, Gameboy.

Pong (1972), Atari, Arcade.

Quake (1996), id Software, PC.

Shango TD (2005), Modding Community, *Warcraft III* / PC.

Starcraft (1998), Blizzard Entertainment, PC.

Starcraft II (2010), Blizzard Entertainment, PC.

Star Wars Battlefront II (2017), Electronic Arts, PC (PC version referred to).

Street Fighter II (1991) Capcom, Arcade.

Smite (2014 – present), Hi-Rez Studios, PC.

Spellsworn (2015 – present), Frogson Studios AB, PC.

Super Smash Bros. Melee (2001) Nintendo, Gamecube.

Team Fortress (1996), Modding Community, *Quake* / PC.

Team Fortress 2 (2007 – present), Valve Corporation, PC.

The Red Solstice (2015), Ironward, PC.

Total Annihilation (1997), Cavedog Entertainment, PC.

Tower Wars (2012), SuperVillian Studios, PC.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011), Bethesda Game Studios, PC (PC version referred to).

Trainz (2001), Auran, PC.

Uru: Ages Beyond Myst (2003), Cyan Worlds, PC.

Vainglory (2014 – present), Super Evil Megacorp, Android / iOS.

Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos (2003), Blizzard Entertainment, PC.

Wangzhe Rongyao (2015 – present), Tencent Games, iOS / Android.

World of Tanks (2011 - present), Wargaming, PC.

World of Warcraft (2005 – present), Blizzard Entertainment, PC.

Online ethnography appendices

Each of the following links goes directly to the *Reddit* comment referenced. The links were all retrieved on 25th January 2018.

Appendix one

A1.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csfeuht/

A2.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csfeiqh/

A3.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csfdrs7/

A4.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csfp8kp/

A5.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csfohh/

A6.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csfpnte/

A7.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csffdk/

A8.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csfsqs/

A9.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csfbh3u/

A10.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csflx8j/

A11.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csfsm4v/

A12.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csff6o0/

A13.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csg2x8y/

A14.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csff5e8/

A15.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csfrxv8/

A16.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csfmw7e/

A17.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3arvrc/spending_money_on_a_free_game/csffil9/

Appendix two

B1.

https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/1k213c/collection_of_posts_regarding_fountain_hooking_in/cbkru70/?utm_content=permalink&utm_medium=front&utm_source=reddit&utm_name=DotA2

B2.

https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/78eztf/some_questions_about_the_fountain_hook_game_navi/dota1nj/

B3.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/2x1nc4/a_letter_to_riot_from_an_exjungler/

B4.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/2x1nc4/a_letter_to_riot_from_an_exjungler/cow8aaw/

B5.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/2x1nc4/a letter to riot from an exjungler/cover5pnt/](https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/2x1nc4/a_letter_to_riot_from_an_exjungler/cover5pnt/)

B6.

https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/777pic/riot_should_reconsider_kicking_int_out_of_the_lcs/dojqzvl/

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