

The Enjoyment of League of Legends:
Cultivating a Sense of Belonging Through Playful Virtual Violence

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Introduction

My participants and I hopped into a Discord server to play League of Legends together. After a couple awkward greetings and my attempts at breaking the ice, we went straight into playing an ARAM match. It was 17 minutes and 44 seconds into our second ARAM game as a team when I



Figure 1: Ryze ult into bush full of Teemo's shrooms

experienced one of many enjoyable moments in League of Legends. “Wait... Ryze can just teleport us there, right?” Andrea asked PLEX. Ryze’s ultimate ability “Realm Warp” creates a portal to a nearby location, allowing allies standing near it to teleport to the target location. “Want me to teleport you guys?” PLEX responded, immediately casting his ability. Little did we know, this would lead to an unfortunate but funny set of events. All of us but Flare were within the ability’s range, teleporting us into a bush near the enemies. “Oh, uh oh!”, exclaimed Flare as he watched all his teammates get obliterated, one by one, by the bush full of Teemo’s “Noxious Trap” mushrooms (Fig.1). Andrea, Zen, and I were the first ones to go, while PLEX and Flare were the last one’s standing. “How to get killed fast”, joked Zen. I laughed in response, agreeing with his statement. As PLEX and Flare were killed off as well, Andrea and PLEX, who initiated the “plan” laughed nervously, “wrong call guys, wrong call!” Everyone began to joke about our pitiful situation, “Hahaha, that was fun!” “It was a little troll but that’s okay!” “Big Ryze play! Team Play!” Although we had lost two games in a row, we found enjoyment in bonding over the game and having fun in the company of others.

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The actions I have described above are from my gaming session with some of my participants, Andrea, PLEX, Zen, and Flare, illustrating playful virtual violence in League of Legends. Video games allow players to increase their enjoyment of playful virtual violence by creating a sense of belonging in the game and its

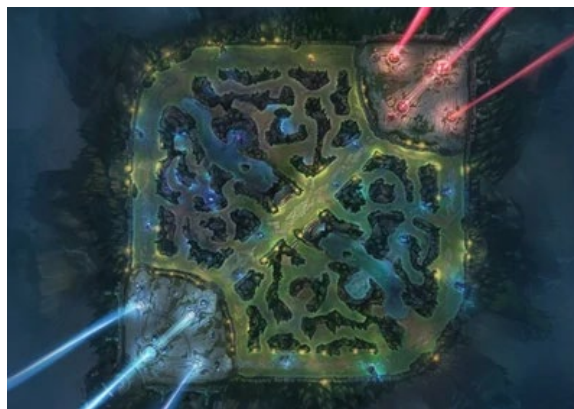


Figure 2: Map of Summoner's Rift

community. League of Legends is a popular multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) video game developed and published by Riot Games in 2009 with over 117 million monthly active players as of 2021 (ActionPlayer, 2022). It falls under the subgenre of strategy-based video games where two teams of players fight each other in a virtual space. The game offers various game modes, including Summoner's Rift (see Fig. 2), ARAM (All Random All Mid), TFT (Teamfight Tactics), and URF (Ultimate Rapid Fire), which allow players to engage in forms of playful virtual violence against non-playable characters (NPCs) and real-life players. According to Bareither (2020), the term "playful virtual violence" refers to digitally generated violence, denoting physical violence. These actions are "playful" in the sense that they suggest, and at the same time do not suggest the "real" action. In League of Legends, playful virtual violence is the use of champions' abilities to attack, kill, and destroy enemies. These actions are made playful through the game's design and mechanics, encouraging players to engage in playful aggression. Playful virtual violent actions are defined as "emotional practices which produce pleasurable emotions" as they "shape our embodied knowledge that evokes, refuses, or enables particular ways of feeling" (5).

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In-game chat functions and other platforms for communication such as Discord and Reddit enable players to develop a sense of belonging within emotional communities. Emotional communities refer to groups of individuals who share emotional experiences (e.g., playing video games) and adhere to the same emotional expression and value-related emotions (e.g., anger and sadness from defeat/failure, excitement from victories, etc.). Emotional communities may take form as fandom communities, player groups, and circles of friendship. They create an environment to project emotional experiences between members of the group, encouraging pleasure in playful virtual violence (Bareither, 2020). Emotional communities are part of what Szablewicz (2020) describes as a “spiritual homeland”, a virtual space that holds significant emotional and cultural value for players and provides them with a sense of belonging. The sense of belonging is a fundamental human need as it influences our perceptions of self, well-being, and the world around us, and is an essential component to the enjoyment of the game and playful virtual violence.

During my ethnographic observations, I explored how playful virtual violence in League of Legends is enjoyable by conducting a series of qualitative research methods which included 6 individual interviews on Zoom and Discord (3.5 hours), 5 hours of solo gameplay, 1.5 hours of gameplay with participants, and 1 hour of observations. Drawing inspiration from emotional practices described by Bareither, I coded my data into the following themes – “Aesthetics”, “Cooperation and Domination”, “Gameplay”, “Playfulness”, and “Seriousness”. Based on these themes, I found that cooperation and community (or sense of belonging) were most prominent in participants’ responses with 57 out of 173 references alluding to feelings of belonging and the importance of socializing in League of Legends. This paper argues that a sense of belonging is essential in the enjoyment of playful virtual violence in League of Legends. By examining the

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role of emotional communities and spiritual homelands as catalysts for this sense of belonging, I hope to shed light on the importance of social interaction and connection in creating a positive gaming experience.

Cooperative Pleasure in Multiplayer Game Modes

Although the participants and I were playing together for the first time, we effectively communicated with each other and joked as even as we continued losing trade-offs against the enemy team. At one point in the game, all of us were caught in Miss Fortune's ultimate ability in

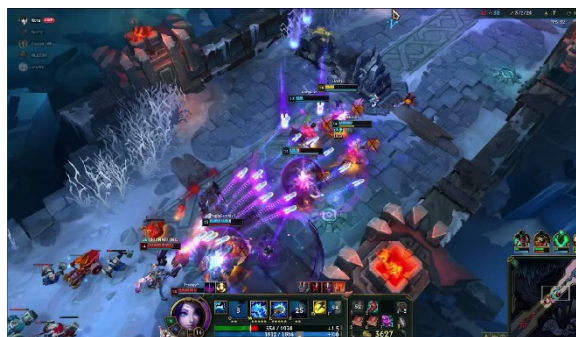


Figure 3: Miss Fortune's ultimate ability in ARAM

the form of a bullet wave (Fig. 3). Everyone was killed in the crossfire, while I survived with just 88 health. Even as we felt somewhat defeated, Flare encouraged us saying “We got this, we got this!” as the enemy takes down our turrets and enters our base. This encouragement and communication between team members is what keeps the game fun even during rough situations. In my interview with Andrea, who’s played the game increasingly often since the Covid-19 pandemic, I asked “What does it mean to have fun?”. In response, she said:

“...the most important aspect is definitely with friends. The atmosphere and the talking part? When I’m having fun, I feel like [it’s when] my friends are cracking a lot of jokes even when we fuck up... I think it’s the interaction that makes it fun and when we make memes about it.”

Andrea emphasized the social aspect and atmosphere of the game, rather than the gameplay as fun. When playing MOBAs, you create emotional experiences in an emotional community and gain a sense of belonging amongst fellow players. This was especially important for Andrea as she gained a new friend group during the Covid-19 pandemic when connecting with friends and

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family outside was difficult. Playing League of Legends and joining a Discord community server allowed her to interact with people who soon became some of her closest friends. This newly found friend group allowed her to feel part of a larger community during times of hardship, creating a sense of belonging that made the gaming experience ever more memorable and enjoyable.

Flare has played League of Legends since its release in 2009 and has gained extensive knowledge about the game and the community. As the most experienced player in our group, he encouraged us by praising our gameplay with “We got this!”, “Nice play!” and “Good damage!” Emotional practices such as mutual praise generate cooperative pleasure in sharing emotional experiences in gameplay. When a player with a higher skill level praises others with the same or lower skill level, it intensifies the pleasure of playful virtual actions such as doing damage against an enemy team. Cooperation amplifies the sense of achievement from playful virtual violence in League of Legends.

During my interview with Lavender, she explained why and how she lost interest in League of Legends. Unlike Andrea and Flare, she did not feel as connected with the game as she did in the past, reminiscing about a time when she would have conversations with friends about the game, including game updates and news. The lack of friends who played the game with her led to a loss of sense of belonging and therefore did not find pleasure in playful virtual violence. She expressed the need to play and communicate with others stating:

“Sometimes I would just play by myself casually and I didn’t mind... but once you start playing by yourself, you’re playing mindlessly... it’s just not as fun... I like the stimuli that it gives when I’m talking about it with someone, like callouts especially, or like vocal pings... hearing it... makes you more attentive.”

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Lavender describes the use of active communication during a multiplayer game and how these “vocal pings” can drastically affect one’s enjoyment of playful virtual violence. “Vocal pings” allude to the use of certain terms to determine a team’s gameplay strategies, tactics, and the enemy’s movements. Active communication allows an emotional community, such as your team, to cooperate in an organized manner thus amplifying the sense of achievement and enjoyment of playful virtual violence.

Developing a Sense of Belonging in a Solo Game Mode

Although active communication can generate a sense of belonging within an emotional community and improves the enjoyment of playful virtual violence in a cooperative game mode, communication can be used to generate a sense of belonging in



Figure 4: TFT board

solo game modes as well. Teamfight Tactics (TFT) is an auto battler game mode in League of Legends where players build a team to compete against 7 other opponents (Fig.4). After picking up on this game mode during the lockdown, I continued to play this game on my own and with friends. It allowed me to exert dominance over my opponents without relying on teammates. Similarly, Hermione enjoyed TFT as a competitive game that relied more on the individual’s skills rather than relying on team-based combat. A month before our interview, she began streaming on Twitch alongside her partner and found an emotional community while playing the game. She found pleasure in the solo game mode’s competitive and social aspect, as she wasn’t required to work with others to compete but could socialize about the game with her friends and on her Twitch stream – thus forming an emotional community and developing a sense of

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belonging. Hermione described how Twitch streaming allowed her to enjoy the game more stating:

“It’s made me enjoy it a little bit more. I do this thing on stream where I don’t push a [team] comp that I actually know will win... I’ll do a number randomizer from 1 to 5... the first number will be which page of comps and the second number will be which one down, so page 3 comp 3 and I just have to push it... which will make it really fun because I’ll still try to win with a comp I’m unfamiliar with”

Using a randomizer during her stream allows her viewers and herself to enjoy the feeling of unpredictability together as an emotional community, creating more opportunities to talk about and connect over the game. Although she feels pressure to continue talking during a stream, she still finds it enjoyable as she has been able to connect with her viewers through the stream and by playing the game with them. The emotional experience of playing a solo game mode while Twitch streaming describes the development of a sense of belonging within an emotional community, thus increasing one’s enjoyment of playful virtual violence.

Sense of Belonging in Emotional Communities and Spiritual Homelands

Why does a sense of belonging increase one’s enjoyment of playful virtual violence? Sense of belonging refers to the “sense of personal involvement in a social system so that persons feel themselves to be an indispensable and integral part of the system” (Scholtes et al., 2016; Anant, 1966). A sense of belonging is developed through membership in an emotional community and collective playful virtual violence (Bareither, 2020, 34). In solo game modes, such as TFT, an individual can develop a sense of belonging through connecting with other individuals with similar interests via in-person interactions or online interactions, such as on Reddit, Discord, Twitch, or through the game’s built-in chat system. In cooperative game modes, such as ARAM and Summoner’s Rift, individuals enact and encourage playful virtual violent

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actions by forming player groups or teams as ‘us’ versus ‘them’. Player groups can be referred to as emotional communities which develop a sense of belonging based on “[emotional] practices of mutual affection, aid, protection, boasting, praise, recognition, and separating ‘us’ from ‘them’” (Bareither 2020, 34). Examples of emotional practices include competing against friends, mutual praise (“Good job”, “That was amazing!”), braggadocio (“Check out my high score!”) and cooperation. Players use in-game chat functions and community platforms like Reddit and Discord to share emotional experiences. Research on the impact of social inclusion on video game enjoyment found that socially included individuals, those engaged in the community, who chose to play Street Fighter IV with others had significantly higher enjoyment scores than those who chose to play on their own (Bowman et al., 2015). The experience of cooperative gaming develops a sense of belonging more than solo gaming as players actively engage with others in the community. Higher enjoyment scores reflect the positive impact of membership in an emotional community on one’s sense of belonging and pleasure in playful virtual violence.

In a study on developing a sense of belonging through playing League of Legends (Scholtes et al., 2016), researchers found that people who have never played League of Legends and people who have before their participation showed no differences in levels of sense of belonging. However, players in pre-made teams had a higher level of sense of belonging than solo players. Pre-made teams are composed of individuals who have developed a sense of belonging through previous co-playing experiences, while solo-player teams consist of “solo queue” players who are placed in randomized, short-term teams that break up after the match, therefore not developing a significant sense of belonging. Pre-made teams have characteristics of an emotional community where they share emotional expressions and value-related emotions,

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whereas solo-queue players lack an in-depth sharing of emotional experiences with their teammates. For the focus group gaming session, the participants and I formed a pre-made team which allowed us to develop a sense of belonging by sharing the emotional experience of losing. The results showed that pre-made teams (emotional communities) have higher levels of sense of belonging, therefore providing a higher capacity for pleasure in playful virtual violence. When a significant cultural and social value is placed on one's emotional community, the virtual space where this emotional community exists can take on profound meaning as a "spiritual homeland".

According to Szablewicz's (2020) book "Mapping Digital Culture in China", a spiritual homeland is described as a virtual space or community that holds significant emotional and cultural value for players, providing a sense of belonging. In this context, the virtual space of a video game is an example of a spiritual homeland. The book examines how WoWers (World of Warcraft players) develop a sense of belonging on the Internet and World of Warcraft servers. She states that a spiritual homeland provides players with a release from the pressures of everyday life by offering a "sideways mobility", compensating for the perceived lack of real-life mobility (115). League of Legends is a spiritual homeland as it provides players a virtual space to enact playful virtual violent actions with their player groups or emotional communities. A sense of belonging is generated within an emotional community and spiritual homeland. It allows players to enact playful virtual violence through the practice of emotional practices such as braggadocio and mutual praise. These emotional practices within player groups (emotional communities) mobilize and regulate emotions, forge emotional norms, and enact emotional experiences between players (Bareither p. 33), thus increasing one's enjoyment of playful virtual violence.

Conclusion

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League of Legends, as a spiritual homeland, creates a virtual space where its player groups, as emotional communities, gain pleasure from acts of playful virtual violence. Through emotional practices and experiences in one's emotional community or spiritual homeland, players gain a sense of belonging coinciding with one's level of enjoyment of playful virtual violence. Emotional communities exchange emotional practices such as "mutual affection, aid, protection, boasting, praise, recognition, and separating 'us' from 'them'" through emotional expressions, such as playing video games, which legitimizes, and therefore increases, the enjoyment of playful virtual violence. Solo players are more likely to stop playing League of Legends than pre-made team players who have a higher level of sense of belonging unless they have built a sense of belonging outside of gameplay like Hermione with her partner and Twitch community. Those who felt a lack or loss of sense of belonging and emotional community in the game like Lavender may find it less enjoyable. Multiplayer games provide a sense of belonging as the players actively communicate to produce cooperative pleasure with their teammates, however, it is not guaranteed for all. For solo players in multiplayer games, the sense of belonging is temporary as the teams break up at the end of the game while pre-made teams tend to stay together. They are also more likely to face toxicity from other players due to lower levels of sense of belonging and community (Scholtes et al., 3).

This paper highlights the importance of emotional communities and spiritual homelands as catalysts for the sense of belonging and enjoyment of playful virtual violence in League of Legends. As a spiritual homeland where gamers develop a sense of belonging in an emotional community, the human need for socialization motivates players to form emotional communities and develop a sense of belonging through solo and cooperative gameplay. By understanding how these factors contribute to players' experiences in the game, game developers and designers can

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improve the overall experience in online games by fostering a sense of community and engagement among players. Comparing levels of sense of belonging between MMORPGs and other game formats may reveal ways to formulate strategies for game design and development.

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