

A Work Project, presented as part of the requirements for the Award of a master's Degree in
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**Why and how can co-creation lead to the exclusion of
potential brand community members in the gaming
sector?**

The case of League of Legends

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Abstract

Co-creation has become a very important topic in Marketing both in theory and practice. This work project specifically investigates how co-creation can exclude potential brand community members in the gaming sector. This topic was explored through a longitudinal single case study on the online video game League of Legends. The insights suggest that, contrary to what the current literature states, co-creation does not necessarily benefit all participants, due to the creation of a complex community dynamic that tends to drive away new members, which does not benefit the company and reflects on the type of value generated for the members.

Keywords: Value co-creation; Community; Video Game Industry; League of Legends

Special Note

As agreed upon with both Professor Catherine da Silveira and Professor Rita Campos e Cunha, this dissertation took the form of a “semi-field lab” project:

Firstly, Joana Caramba and myself worked as a group during the first two months to collect more data and then each of us focused on a topic for analysis, discussion and respective specific part of the thesis.

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1. Introduction

Co-creation has become a very important topic in Marketing both in theory and practice, occurring when “the firm and the customer act together in a merged, coordinated, dialogical, and interactive process that **creates value for the customer, and for the firm as well**” (Grönroos, 2012, p. 1522-1523).

Co-creation occurs in many sectors such as in the gaming industry, where players and company managers are constantly interacting with each other. In fact, the video game industry “provides an open innovation-friendly environment which make this industry suitable for a wide range of co-creation options in the value creation process” (Grohn, 2017, p.2). According to the existent literature, co-creation definitions state that the concept benefits all of the participants involved. However, with this project, based on a case study of the game League of Legends, it was possible to verify that the process of co-creation does not necessarily bring positive value for all parts involved. In fact, it engages members in a way that creates a complex community dynamic, which ends up driving away new potential members. As such, this work adds value to the literature since it challenges most current co-creation theories that assume that co-creation beneficiates all parts involved in the process.

The structure of this Work Project is “atypical”: we first developed research to investigate co-creation in the gaming sector together with Joana Caramba. While doing the preliminary research in order to make sure LoL was meeting all necessary conditions to be considered a case of co-creation, the hypothesis that co-creation was possibly leading to the exclusion of potential brand community members appeared as relevant. We therefore decided to focus this work project in the investigation of this hypothesis.

2. Contextual Background

a. Co-creation and Conditions to Occur

Co-creation is grounded on several theories, developed since the 21st century: “**Service-dominant logic**” (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; 2006; 2008; 2011; 2012; 2014) “**Value co-creation logic**” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000; 2002; 2004) and “**Service logic**” (Grönroos, 2006; Grönroos, 2011; Grönroos & Ravald, 2011; Grönroos, 2012; Kowalkowski, Ridell, Røndell, & Sörhammar, 2012).

The **Service-dominant logic** was developed by Vargo and Lusch (2004). It brings a new vision to the traditional concept of the exchange of goods approach used in marketing, being a “pre-theoretic lens or perspective for viewing the economic (and social) world differently” (Vargo & Lush, 2011, p.218). This perspective distinguishes the notions of value-in-exchange and value-in-use. In the first one, value is created if the firm produces goods/services and exchanges them for money in the market. Contrariwise the value-in-use concept is only applicable when consumers make actual use of the goods and services, thus creating value. With this being said, the service-dominant logic defines the notion of value as “value-in-use”, defending the overall idea that “value is defined by and co-created with the consumer rather than embedded in output” (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, p.6) and that firms cannot create and/or deliver value alone. Therefore, the creation of value is a “join function of the actions of the provider(s) and the customer(s), but is always determined by the customer” (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p.44). In that sense, managers are seen as the producers of the inputs, looking to maximize consumers involvement in the value co-creation process to, as a consequence, improve firm’s performance. On the other side, consumers work together with managers in order to improve their own experience as service beneficiaries and resource integrators. As such, the customer and the organization work together, and value is co-created by **this reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship**. Furthermore, Vargo and Lusch identified eight foundational premises (FPs) (2008), later

expanded to ten, to capture the essence of this logic. One of the most important premises states that **“the customer is always a co-creator of value”** (FP6). Also, Cova and Dalli’s investigations in consumer behaviour found that consumers actively co-produce and participate when the outcome of their participation may affect their personal lives and identity (2009). In addition, research made by Muñiz and Schau (2007) suggested that consumer co-creation is driven by self-satisfaction and a need of personal gratification and social recognition. Also, the co-created outcome needs to affect consumers’ personal lives.

The **value co-creation logic**, created by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), expands the Vargo and Lush’s aforementioned premise (FP6). As such, Prahalad and Ramaswamy believe that **“consumers have work, service, and risks transferred from the firm, and both the consumer and the firm benefit”** (Prahalad, 2004, p.23). Additionally, Prahalad and Ramaswamy state that three conditions must occur to ensure the occurrence of consumer co-creation: dialogue between the firm and the consumer, consumer access to information, and collective risk assessment (2004).

Finally, the **Service logic** (Grönroos, 2012) proposed that, in the process of co-creation, managers (the suppliers) work as value facilitators, **providing support to consumers in creating value for themselves and for the firm**. Under the light of this logic, value co-creation occurs exclusively when **“the firm and the customer act together in a merged, coordinated, dialogical, and interactive process that creates value for the customer, and for the firm as well”** (Grönroos, 2012, p. 1522;1523). Grönroos states that **“the term ‘creation’ implies that the effect on value of customers’ experiences is positive”** (2012, p. 1521).

All in all, the presented theories complement each other, and assume that both parts involved (e.g., consumers and managers) work together because they have intrinsic motivations to do so, and **both benefit from the value co-created**.

Based on the theories summarized above, latest research (da Silveira & Simões, 2017) suggest that the following conditions are required to ensure co-creation: (1) consumer active participation in the process of value creation; (2) the co-created outcome must be perceived by consumers as affecting their identity and personal life; (3) consumer involvement in dialogue with the firm; (4) information – i.e., the firm should ensure access to information to consumers; (5) collective acceptance of the risks intrinsic to the co-created outcome, and (6) evidence of direct interactions between suppliers and consumers.

b. Co-creation in the Gaming Industry

The video game industry has become one of the most profitable industries in the past decades, achieving revenues of \$101 billion globally in 2016 (Newzoo, 2017). The gaming sector is divided between: console games, browser games, table games, Boxes/Download Pc Games and Smartphone Games (Newzoo, 2017). Furthermore, the development of technologies enabled the creation of video game communities, and the consequent interaction between members. As such, this interaction allows for “value creation in an exchange process **by proposing potential benefits to the gamer**” (Grohn, 2017, p.2) as well as to the game managers. The video games’ genres strongly connected to online communities can be divided into three categories: the Multiple Online Battle Arena games (MOBA), the Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMO’s) and the Role Playing Games (RPG) (see Appendix 1). The MOBA are real-time strategy games, centered around two teams competing against each other (Kahn & Williams, 2016) (e.g., “League of Legends”, “Dota 2”, “Strife”, etc.). The MMO’s are defined as the games that can be played simultaneously by thousands of players over the Internet (e.g., “Guild Wars”, “Runescape”, “World of Warcraft”, etc.). Finally, in the RPG, “gamers create and play a character in a fictitious setting” (Cade & Gates, 2016) (e.g., Ashen Stars, Diaspora, Fraggled Empire, etc.). For instance, the online game created by Blizzard, “World of Warcraft”, took one of the first steps into open innovation. “World of Warcraft” added a mechanism that enabled

gamers to customize their interface, according to their personal experience. Finally, Prahalad and Ramaswamy emphasize the importance of co-creation in the video game industry, stating that “**video games could not exist without active co-creation with customers**” (2004, p.10).

c. Gaming Communities

According to Muñiz and O’Guinn, brand communities can be defined as a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (2001, p.412). Furthermore, authors stated that **most members have a share sense of belonging to the community**, share rituals and traditions, and feel a sense of moral responsibility towards each other. Also, “Consumer Tribes offer a viable solution to manage the duality between individuals and organizations. This gives them an undeniable advantage over companies, one they no longer use to simply resist the market but instead to play within and with it” (Cova, Kozinets, Shankar, 2007, p.29).

The evolution of internet generated the creation of countless online communities worldwide (Anderson, 2005; Yen, Hsu, & Huang, 201). In fact, an online community is considered a social group in which consumers interact and share information with each other (Hsiao & Chiou, 2012). Furthermore, the growing popularity of online games has also enabled both consumers (gamers) and firms to develop relationships and interact through online game communities (Hsu & Lu, 2007). In that sense, game companies use the online game communities as a tool for communicating with players (e.g., sharing information and receiving feedback). In addition, “users often establish and manage a successful online game community by leading other members to voluntarily engage in online community related behaviors, including positive word-of-mouth communication, support, active participation, recommendation, and offering information about the game to others” (Kim & Kim, 2018, p. 410).

3. Addressing the Work Project Objectives

a. Case Selection: League of Legends

League of Legends (LoL) is a game owned by Riot, a company founded in 2006, with headquarters in Los Angeles (CA), and 23 offices worldwide (see the game manual: Appendix 1). The game achieved 67 million monthly players in 2014, a number that increased to 100 million a month in 2016 (Statista, 2018). Moreover, players are seen as the core value of the brand, which is known for being involved with the community and for improving their own gaming experience. With regard to the game itself, it is a competitive game, with a team-based strategy and teams of 3 or 5 players, (either formed by friends or randomly selected players). The goal of the game is always to take down the other team's champions¹ and towers². This large community interacts mostly through social media channels (e.g., "Reddit" (Appendix 2), "Facebook", "Twitter", etc.), forums (e.g., game' discussion boards³), events, streaming channels (e.g., "Youtube" and "Twitch") and through the game itself (Appendix 3)). Taking into account players and LoL employees' feedback, the game is updated every two weeks.

- Co-creation conditions

In order to verify if the LoL brand fulfils all the necessary conditions to be considered a case of co-creation (see part 2 of this project), we conducted a preliminary pilot research, which is considered a "small scale version[s], or trial run[s], done in preparation for the major study" (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). With this in mind, we interviewed 5 gamers and analyzed 30 posts on the LoL community, and the results suggested that League of Legends follows the necessary conditions to be considered a case of co-creation, , being a case worth to be studied.

¹ A champion is the character that the gamer chose to play with. There are several categories of champions who have different abilities. Also, each character has a complex backstory (called lore), power and skins variations.

² Towers are heavy fortification that blocks the enemy's champions' path. Champions must destroy enemy towers to push their assault into the enemies' territory.

³ Discussion boards are official platforms, external to the game that offer an environment for gamers to interact with each other, allowing for relevant discussions among them.

The first condition necessary to assume co-creation is (1) “Consumer active participation in the process of value co-creation”. Regarding LoL, consumers proactively share insights among them and with the brand itself through the platforms already mentioned. For instance, through the streaming channels, players comment other people’s plays, champions or game mode. This ends up influencing the way players behave inside the game, and consequently, how the game is going to be updated and developed. Also, players have the possibility to vote in the next years’ champion skins (player-controlled character) with they would like to play.

Second, (2) “The co-created “object” must affect consumer’s identity and personal lives.” Consumers are really connected to the brand and it became part of their identity. In fact, many completely change their ways of life to have more time to play the game and follow the community, which includes making friends in the game.

Thirdly, for co-creation to occur, there is the need of (3) “Consumer involvement in dialogue with the firm”. In that sense, as said before, gamers interact with Riot mostly through social media, direct email and the website boards.

Furthermore, Riot continuously share (4) “information – i.e. the firm should ensure access to information to consumer”, by constantly sharing content on the referred channels, keeping players updated. Also, Riot usually tests with players possible features that are then shared with the community and included into the game.

The fifth condition encompasses the (5) “collective acceptance of the risks – intrinsic to the co-creator object”. In the case of LoL, gamers agree to be part of a toxic community, meaning that they accept negative behaviors from other gamers (e.g., cheating, offensive messages, etc.), as well as other issues generated inside the community (see section 2.e.b.).

Finally, the last condition necessary for co-creation happen is (6) “evidence of direct interactions between suppliers and consumers”. As mentioned before, gamers and managers

interact directly mostly through the online platforms but also emails. All in all, League of Legends fulfills all the conditions for co-creation stated in the literature review.

b. Research Hypothesis

The preliminary research highlighted a very interesting phenomenon. We noticed that the co-creation process was leading to the development of issues that excluded potential gamers of becoming brand community members. As such, we decided to focus the case study analysis on the understanding of this phenomenon. Therefore, the hypothesis tested is: “Why and how can co-creation lead to the exclusion of potential brand community members in the gaming sector?”.

c. Research Methodology

The methodology used to address the work project objectives of this thesis follows a longitudinal single case study research, based on primary data collection.

- Why a case study design?

It was chosen a **case study** methodology since the goal was to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under research, answering to the questions “how” and “why” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Pablo et al., 2007). The case study research “allows for ‘multiple sources’ of evidence and can facilitate in-depth understanding of emerging and complex phenomena, such as co-creation, without removing it from its social context and real-life setting” (Roberts & Darler, 2016, p.18).

We selected a single case study. In this case, a single case study is the adequate design to adopt, as it meets the most relevant rationales that can justify its use, since it is **(a)** critical; **(b)** representative; **(c)** longitudinal case (Yin, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994):

a) It is a **critical case** because it meets all of the conditions for testing the theory (i.e., existing theory on co-creation), allowing the confirmation, challenge or extension of such hypothesis.

b) It is a **representative case**, meaning that “the lessons learned from this case are assumed to be informative about the experiences of the average person or institutions” (Yin, 2009, p.48), regarding the gaming industry.

c) According to Yin (2009), a **longitudinal case** study approach encompasses the analysis of a case at two or more different points in time, investigating how certain conditions change over time. As such, this method was considered to be appropriate, once we aimed to study an evolution of the co-creation process in a game brand, LoL, and the consequences and effects of co-creation in the brand community.

- **Qualitative Research**

The chosen methodology was a combination of **qualitative research interviews**, with managers and gamers, and **digital observations**. We used digital observations to gather information, since the interaction between players and managers happen mostly online. We followed the community for about 4 months, through the following online channels. These social media channels and forums (“Facebook”, “Reddit”, “Twitter”, and Website Boards), contain a vast amount of information about the game and the community interactions. The streaming and video channels “complement the recorded information in online gaming communities and ensure verification (Grohn, 2017, p.6).

To unveil ideas, collect more in-depth insights, and find possible patterns, this work uses **in-depth semi-structured interviews** as a tool to collect data, which is the most appropriate method to perform exploratory research.

d. Sampling and Research Tools

We conducted 29 in-depth interviews with gamers and one with Riot's head of game design. Regarding the players, as most gamers are men, only 3 females were interviewed. Also, the interviewees were aged between 18 and 25 years old and belonged to different economic backgrounds.

The interviewees were chosen through a pre-recruiting questionnaire based on a set of preliminary criteria, such as: being available for interviews, being a LoL player and being active in the community (see pre-recruiting questionnaire on Appendix 4). Also, the interviews followed an in-depth semi-structure (see the interview guides on Appendix 5 and 6), which allowed for flexibility according to the interviewed feedback and information. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and took between 45 to 90 minutes. About 250 people did the pre-recruiting questionnaire, but only 39 met the criteria established.

e. Main Research Insights

1. Members Segmentation

It was possible to divide interviewees according to their level of involvement in the community, through their type of interaction and co-creation with the brand LoL. According to our analysis, there are mainly 3 types of members: **1) LoL employees**, **2) highly-engaged members** and **3) semi-members**. The group of **LoL employees** respect to the managers and staff belonging to the company. They interact with the gamers in order to incorporate their feedback in the game but are also players themselves.

The **highly-engaged group** of players is represented by the ones who are more involved with the community, interacting with it in a daily basis by posting content, commenting other people's posts, etc. Additionally, some have their own Youtube and Twitch channels, in which they post videos of themselves playing or/and other gaming-related content. The majority already interacted with Riot in some form before (online channels, email, etc.). This group also involves the influencers and the professional players.

The influencers are the ones who have more power inside the community and a privileged relationship with the brand (e.g., some already visited the brand offices). They are present on the principal community channels where they give their own opinions, reviews, and share their experience on the game. In fact, when it regards to video content, they not only promote the game, but also entertain and connect with gamers, engaging them even more. As such, their opinions matter a lot to the brand, especially when it concerns to the issues of the game. For this reason, managers try to reach them and create a relationship with them.

“The super fans that are English speaking players and post on Reddit and/or on Twitter [...] I get to know some of them individually because I got really good insights, they are really strong leaders and we pay attention to what they say. Then, we have the big influencers like Twitch streamers and YouTubers, so we want to make sure that we pay extra-attention to what they are saying, because if they think something is really good, it will spread to the rest of the

community. But if they dislike a certain feature we want to know it all the same, because we want to get it fixed.” (Greg Street, Riot’s head of design, Manager)

The professional players belong to a professional team and participate in game tournaments. In addition to their salary (which is paid by the owners of the teams), the teams receive sponsorships, tournament prizes, among others revenue sources. Professional players also have a privileged relation with the brand and are very engaged with the community.

Lastly, the **semi-members** are the ones who enjoy playing the game but have no interest in belonging to the community. Those are the ones playing the game for the enjoyment it gives to them.

Regarding the co-creation process, the representation of the groups and their consequent interaction is represented in Fig.1. The **highly-engaged group is the one who has an active role in the process of co-creation**, due to its involvement with the brand and with the community. On the other side, low engaged gamers do not participate in the co-creation process, once that they are not fully connected with the community.

The connection between the groups is represented below:

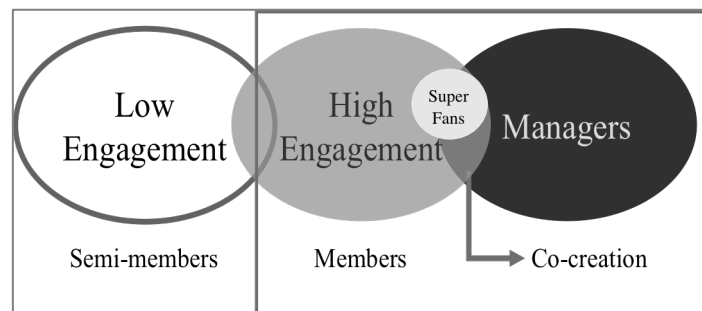


Fig.1 – “Between whom does co-creation occur?”

Source: Work Project Author, with Joana Caramba, based on the investigation done for the same.

We performed 40 interviews: 1 from the brand employee, 32 from the highly-engaged group and 7 semi-members.

2. Members Interaction

Our research suggests that most members interactions are driven by issues generated inside the community. Such issues that can be divided in technical and non-technical issues.

1. Technical Issues

Technical issues occur normally inside the game. Those can be login issues, account information lost/stolen, payment problems, among others. All interviewees were satisfied by the solutions proposed by the community to address their technical issues. In fact, they were all very impressed about LoL responses and the way the brand solved the issues effectively.

2. Non-Technical Issues

Regarding the non-technical issues, they can be divided in: “the toxicity inside the LoL community” and the “champions modification”.

- *Toxic Community*

First of all, it is important to define what a *toxic community* is. There are many negative behaviors present in online gaming, such as cheating, harassment, offensive messages, among others. The collection of this practices is defined as **toxic behavior** (Saarinen, 2017). As such, “the use for the word “toxic” to describe bad behavior in multiplayer games comes from the way numerous players are exposed to the bad behavior” (Saarinen, 2017, p.14). LoL community is known to be one of the most toxic communities in the industry. It is toxic towards both the “official” content creators and other players and is considered as the intentional abuse of certain mechanics to create a negative experience for others. When exploring toxicity towards the content creators - professional players and LoL employees - one practice arise as common among gamers: to unload their frustration through the Reddit platform. For instance, influencers in this community get insulted and criticized for any of their actions, even though they are considered by the community as the best gamers. Thus, **there’s a black toxic cloud over this**

game that leads to a negative image of the brand LoL. Regarding player-with-player toxicity, this may happen for several reasons. Those reasons are explained below:

- I. The game has a “**large**”⁴ **learning curve**, meaning that players may have a hard time in the first attempts to play, due to the many technicalities, moves and champions available. As a consequence, it is fundamental for gamers to dispend a long period of time until their performance is satisfactory, which causes frustration among team members, leading to constant abuse from other players that will discourage beginners to keep playing the game.

“I have been playing for a long time. It has a large learning curve, but you get deeper and deeper in the game!” (High Engagement, Gamer 2)

“It is really hard to start paying, the learning curve is the major problem in the game. Which is always getting worse because RIOT is always updating and creting more champions, which makes it harder to start playing,” (High Engagement, Gamer 5)

- II. The **competition** for achieving higher ranks and the inability of doing so due to losing games, also leads to accumulate frustrations, increasing the number of insults and impropriate language among players.

“The toxicity and mentality in some games is terrible, especially when you play in the higher ranks, you expect people to better behave and avoid toxicity.” (High Engagement, Gamer 14)

- III. The game demands a **high time investment**, especially for the gamers highly involved with the community. Because of that, there is pressured to succeed in the game in order to compensate for the hours spend. Consequently, toxicity feeds on these feelings of wasted time and frustration.

It is a really good game, but sometimes is just annoying because you spend an hour of your life playing and someone ruins the game. Then I get mad in that game, and I'm going to the next one already mad, it's a cycle. I don't have patience now to play with someone that doesn't have the same experience anymore.” (High Engagement, Gamer 16)

⁴ Term used by gamers to describe the *big* learning curve of LoL.

“One of the big problems about this game is how much time you’re stuck inside of one singular match. Sometimes games last up to 60 hours, sometimes games can last up to 50 minutes and all you’re doing is constantly pushing to try and get to that victory screen! And if you lose you just spent 50 minutes losing. It’s so aggravating how much time you have to put in the game.”
(Why I hate League of Legends, MagikarpUsedFly, Youtuber, June/2017)

IV. LoL is **updated every two weeks** (updates are called patches). The company changes champions, giving or taking power from them, which is termed “buffing” and “nerfing”, respectively. As such, through the patches, Riot is able to develop the game in the desired direction. In general, gamers appreciate the frequent game updates since it adjusts the major goals, diversifies the characters of the game, and reduces its monotony, actively increasing the interest and dynamism of the game. In fact, according to the interviewees, gamers confess that the updates are one of the main reasons why the game is still doing so well after more than 9 years, despite being one the main sources of toxicity and the spark that raises a significant amount of conflicts among the community.

“Changing the game is good but the constant changes make it hard to enjoy the game and avoid competitiveness.” (Low Engagement, Gamer 1)

In order to prevent toxicity within the game, Riot has created a complex system of reporting. However, it is not very efficient. In general, it occurs as follows: A player gets reported -> The player is banned temporarily -> The player complains to the community -> Either toxicity increases from the community’s negativity or increases just for unfairness feelings from the player -> The player gets to play again and is toxic with other gamers -> Consequently, the player gets reported -> The player is either banned permanently or temporarily -> The player gets more frustrated for having spent so much time on the game and it’s being wasted -> Toxicity increases...and it goes on.

- *Champions Updates*

One of the major issues of LoL regards the “**balancing of champions**”. In other words, gamers complain that the changes done to champions are not always the best, resulting in characters that do not have the same level of power and ease of gameplay. The constant buffing and nerfing of entire groups of champions to balance the emergence of new ones makes it hard for players to develop long term strategies and perform at high levels in a consistent way, which may cause frustration and anger, another trigger of toxicity. Therefore, there is an evident contradiction of opinions regarding the updates of champions. As a matter of fact, the same gamers who claim that champions’ diversity and frequent patches are one of the best things of LoL, also report that the balancing of the champions is one of the major issues around the game.

According to the LoL head of design, Greg Street, the influencers’ opinions are highly considered by the community, especially the ones given by the Youtubers, Twitch streamers and even the Riot staff (who are also players). However, the brand does not incorporate gamers’ opinion into the game straight away, especially because the feedback differs from gamer to gamer.

“Sometimes players find out that “good, there’s actually a strategy to beat the champion, we just didn’t understand it at first”, so there’s actually ok, we just need to wait.” (Greg Street, RIOT design director)

In addition, according to Greg, sometimes the content of players complaints do not necessarily match their behaviour.

“We got a lot of data to see what players are actually doing because sometimes they say they are doing one thing, but they are doing another, for instance they report in the community that nobody is playing with some champion because this and that but then we see that is not true”, so we use the data from the games to validate players’ feedback.” (Greg Street, RIOT design director)

In summary, the balancing of champions works in cycles:

A new champion is launched -> Gamers see the patch notes -> Gamers try the new champion in the updated game -> Gamers look for influencers' feedback about it and tips to play -> Gamers search for more opinions inside the community and share their own feedback -> The brand analyses the opinions posted, and crosses it with the data collected from the game -> Riot decides how and when to change again the same champion, or doing it on another group of champions. Therefore, the cycle is repeated, and the game is developed in accordance to it. As such, the issue regarding the champions balance is always present, and its constant update through an on-going process that involves both the brand and the community. Furthermore, regarding the interviewees and the manager feedbacks, the study suggests that the "balancing" of the champions is actually one of the major things that motivates LoL gamers, ensuring they remain interested and involved with the community. In Appendix 7, it is possible to see an example of a champion that was changed and balanced.

3. Issues' Impact

When gamers were asked if they would recommend the game to others, all interviewees agreed on **not recommending the game**. We further investigate the reasons behind this behavior. Firstly, the “**unbalancing**” of the **champions** that leads to the frequent updates creates a high complex game and demands a lot of **time investment** and **engagement into the community**. Also, the **toxicity** of the community was appointed by the interviewees as another reason for them not to recommend the game to others. In addition, gamers are so engaged with the community and addicted to the game that they do not feel proud of it, so they do not want others to experiment this level of addiction.

“I do not usually recommend the game, because is really easy to get addictive and other things to do in life in general.” (High Engagement, Gamer 5)

Lastly, as referred before, the “large” learning curve of the game lead players to not recommend others to start playing, since it takes a lot of effort and time to understand the game and be a good player.

“I do not talk with people that do not play already because the game is already really advanced and is not easy to start playing, takes a lot of time to be really good.” (Low Engaged, Gamer 2)

In fact, this is one of the main concerns of Riot. In other words, Riot managers are afraid LoL can become a game “for old people”.

“It’s interesting, the game has like 10 years old and we think a lot about how do we keep it relevant, because what we it to become a game for 30’s and 40’s and a game for old people, we want to stay relevant for the youngsters. As such, since kids start growing up and playing games, we want them to think of LoL as a game that they can still play rather than, “that’s my dad’s game”. That’s something we are really worried about right now. As such, we spend a lot of effort trying to reach out new players and satisfy the ones we already have. As such, we try listen the community a lot, know the players and be a brand they can trust a respect.” (Greg Street, RIOT design director)

4. Discussion and Implications

First of all, through this research it was possible to conclude that the interaction between LoL community members is one of the main drivers of the game development. Gamers have intrinsic motivations to co-create with the brand, since it improves their own experience as members of the community. The highly-engaged members are the ones who care the most about the brand, interacting voluntarily with the community and playing a very important role in the game evolution, by frequently giving feedback and suggestions to the managers, which is later incorporated into the game. Also, influencers' opinions severely impact the way the entire community plays, from the champions they use to their behavior and decisions in the game. Consequently, influencers work as the voice of the community by having direct contact with the brand, personally (e.g., visiting the offices) or, and especially, through the channels presented ("Reddit", "Youtube", "Facebook", website boards, etc.).

With this being said, according to the existent literature on value co-creation, "the firm and the customer act together in a merged, coordinated, dialogical, and interactive process that creates **value for the customer, and for the firm as well**" (Grönroos, 2012, p. 1522;1523). Nevertheless, in the case analysed, the issues created inside the community and driven by the interaction between members, do not result in mutual and reciprocal benefits for both the firm (Riot) and the customers (gamers), challenging the co-creation theories developed so far.

Regarding the **technical issues**, they add positive value to the LoL brand image once they are effectively solved. As referred, all interviewees were very impressed about LoL responses, which consequently **improve their relationship** with the brand and their perception about it.

On the contrary, the **non-technical issues** are constantly being discussed through the online community channels. Gamers got so involved into the community and the co-creation process that they start being aggressive with each other (**toxicity**). In fact, those behaviors are mainly driven by the "large" learning curve of the game, the time consumption, the competitiveness

and the frequent game updates. For instance, the “large” learning curve of the game and its complexity demands a lot of time and effort to be invested by the *new players*, which increase the toxicity behaviors between them and the other players. In addition, regarding the game constant updates, the highly-engaged group showed mix feelings about it. On one hand, they want to be involved into the development process and have their suggestions applied, leading to a constant need to exchange information with the brand. However, on the other hand, updates create more discussion and toxicity in the community, as well as negative feelings. As such, gamers end up developing a **“love-hate” relationship with the community and the game**. They really like the game, which is proved by the high number of hours they spend playing (average: 17hours/week) and by their engagement and addiction to the community. Nevertheless, they **do not feel proud sharing their feelings about the game with others outside of the community due to the issues generated inside**. In fact, they not only do not feel proud, but they also believe that people outside from the community would not accept their *relationship with the game*. Finally, those gamers are so involved with the game that they do not want others to reach their level of addiction, which shows their negative perception on it. Additionally, the low-engaged group also referred not recommending the game to others. Even though this group is not strongly involved with the community and, consequently has less awareness on the issues being created, they also experiment “toxicity” while playing, they faced the “large” learning curve of the game, and they perceive the community as complex. Nevertheless, this situation is much more evident with the highly-engaged members, that are involved into the co-creation process.

In conclusion, **the issues create a negative “inside” brand image, which makes the LoL gamers not recommending the game to others**. As members do not recommend the game to others, the players base does not grow, which is one of the main concerns of the managers and is already being reflected with less gamers joining the community. As such, it is possible to see

that the co-creation process is not benefiting all parts involved, which is not predicted in the literature, “consumers have work, service, and risks transferred from the firm, **and both the consumer and the firm benefit**” (Prahalad, 2004, p.23). In this case, the value created for the firm is not positive, once it loses potential members. On the other side, the value created for the gamers is also not entirely positive once they experiment negative feelings related to the game and its community. For instance, they get frustrated with the game, anger with the community, feel “too much” addiction to the game (a level that they do not want others to feel), among others. As such, although LoL is one of the players favorite games, not all the value created for them is positive, which decreases their level of enjoyment and the way they benefit from the co-creation process.

5. Work Project Main Limitations and Future Research

A traditional limitation of the use of a single case study is the difficult generalization of the conclusions to other cases. In our case, although LoL meets the most relevant rationales for a single case study, being critical, representative and a longitudinal case (Yin, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994), the gaming communities has different characteristics and behaviors among each other. As such, findings cannot be generalizing to communities in other sectors without studying co-creation in those sectors in detail. Nevertheless, as there are a lot of communities working in similar ways, the insights from thesis research could serve as hypothesis for future research.

In addition, the representativeness and the diversity of the sample are another concern to have into account, once most of interviewees are aged between 20 and 25, are men and Portuguese. The longitudinal aspect of the case has been studied through retrospective options. As such, the interviewees needed to reconstitute and remember past experiences, which may already be influenced by posterior events (e.g., external opinions), impacting our results.

Also, we were able to interview only one manager from the brand LoL. As such, for future research it would be important to extend the number of managers and staff interviewed in order to better continue the study.

Finally, we were not able to interview influencers of the community neither professional players, which would be important to better answer the research question, once they are the consumers who interact more with the brand.

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Appendix 1 – How League of Legends works?

League of Legends is a MOBA game (Fig.1), meaning a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena – “also known as action real-time strategy (ARTS), is a subgenre of strategy video games that originated as a subgenre of real-time strategy, in which a player controls a single character in a team who compete versus another team of players”. The competitors are MMO’s - Massively Multiplayer Online Game (Fig.2), “online game with large numbers of players, typically from hundreds to thousands, on the same server” - World of Warcraft is an example of this genre - and RPG’s - Role Playing Game (Fig.2)- “game in which players assume the roles of characters in a fictional setting” - For example Dungeons and Dragons. - although they usually come together.



Fig.1 – MOBA game example

League of Legends is a MOBA and it works as a competitive, strategy game, it is played in teams of 3 or 5 and you can play either with your friends or with a random team. The character you choose to play with is called a Champion. There are 138 of them, each with a different and complex backstory that connects them - including region of birth, family and role.

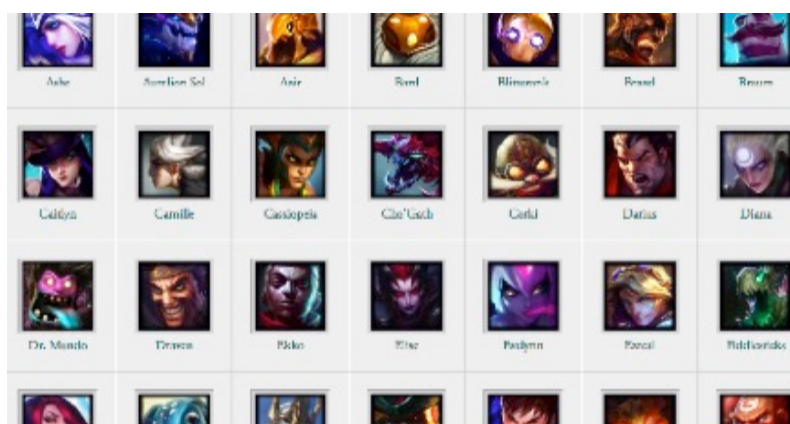


Fig.2 – Champion roster page online.

There are five roles within the game – jungler, attack damage carry (ad carry), support, top lane and mid lane - and several types of champions which you can chose from to play each role – assassin, marksman, fighter, mage, tank and support.

Moreover, Fig.4 represents an example of a champion, named Lux. She has a lot of different skins (Fig.5) - unique new appearances that change the look of their attacks.



Fig.3 – Lux usual appearance



Fig.4 – Lux skin examples



Fig.5 – Usual aspect of the gameplay

To win the game, teams need to destroy several structures of one of three types: turrets, inhibitors and finally the nexus. These are also protected and attacked by minions and both teams have to help them in achieving victory.



Fig.6 – turret, inhibitor, nexus and minions respectively

When playing the game there are several terms that one might take into account:

1. OP - over powered - very powerful champion overall
2. Buffed - boosted positively - stronger - more powerful
3. Nerfed - boosted negatively - weaker - less powerful
4. Balance of Champions - having an equally strong set of champions and making it all about strategy
5. Toxicity – A toxic player is a player that doesn't oblige to the overall fair play, insults other gamers or have a negative attitude towards the whole ecosystem of League of Legends.
6. Patch - the update that applies changes to the game modes, champions, functionalities, etc.
7. Flaming – When a player blames other gamers in toxic ways

Appendix 2 - Reddit

Reddit is the comments section to every corner of pop culture, having content on every subject. From video games to literature, and from sports to everything else. But the main thing about Reddit is that every member of the community contributes with content and knowledge. People can leave comments, and “upvote” and “downvote” various posts. Upvoting and downvoting is how the platform democracy works, if you vote up an item in the ranking or you vote it down it will move up or down the feed. Creating this way an organic, “all knowing” social media.



Fig.7 – Reddit Logo.

Appendix 3 - Twitch

Twitch allows users to create channels where they can broadcast their video and audio through streaming tools (e.g., OBS and Xsplit). Also, users create personal accounts where, through a

username, they can search for their favorite games or interest themselves in the most viewed or promoted channels (displayed on the platforms front page), follow channels that they enjoy (getting notifications of when their followed channels are live), support the channel by buying a channel subscription and communicate with the channel streamer through Twitch's lively chat function.



Fig.7 – Twitch Logo.

Appendix 4 – Pre-recruiting Questionnaire

Filter 1: From this list of the games, which ones have you played in the last 6 months?

- League of Legends (LoL)
- Call of Duty
- Counter Strike
- Minecraft
- Warcraft
- Overwatch
- World of Warcraft
- Smite
- Other games
- I am not a gamer
- I have not played none of these games in the last 6 months

a) Choose LoL: go to filter 2

b) Does not choose LoL: stop the interview.

Filter 2: Now we are going to focus on the game League of Legends (LoL).

As you know, there are many possible ways to interact with LoL. Please read the following interactions and tell me which of them have you had with the game:

- Direct interaction in the game platform (Chat)
- Commented a post on the website board of LoL
- Commented a post on a social page (Reddit, Instagram, Facebook, etc.)
- Shared a content created by LoL
- Made purchases in the game (for example: champions, icons, etc.)
- Post a discussion on the LoL website board

- Bought LoL merchandise (for examples: collectable, t-shirts, etc.)
- Sent an email to the LoL company: RIOT
- Wrote a letter to RIOT
- Tried to personally speak with someone working at LoL company (RIOT)
- Sent an email to someone working at RIOT
- Posted content on YouTube, Twitch TV or other similar platform connected with the game LoL
- Stream yourself playing LoL
- Participated in any organized LoL
- Visited RIOT offices
- Participated in a LoL open day
- Other type of interaction: _____

AGE

- < 18 years old
- 18-20 years old
- 20-25 years old
- 25-30 years old
- + 30 years old

EDUCATION

- High school incomplete
- High school completed
- Bachelors completed
- Bachelors incomplete
- Masters completed
- Masters incomplete

OCUPATION:

- I am a student
- I currently work
- I currently work and I am student at the same time
- None of those possibilities

Appendix 5 – Consumers’ Interview Guide

WARM UP

Thank you so much for this interview. For this research, we are using the non-directive method, meaning that I will not ask you specific questions about the subject, as is a standard questionnaire. After the first question that I will introduce now, you will be free to tell me whatever comes to your mind on the subject.

The interview will last approximately one hour and with your permission, we would like to record this entire interview, but all your answers will remain anonymous and confidential. If you agree, we can start the interview now.

First question: How did you discover LoL and why did you start playing it?

Topics to be developed

1. First contact with the brand
 - a. Reasons to play
 - b. Moment
 - c. Who/What influenced the gamer
 - d. Initial understanding and perception of the brand
2. Player Behavior and Purchase behavior
 - a. Frequency of game play
 - b. Reasons/Motivations to keep playing LoL instead other games
 - c. At pair with the story
 - d. Complexity
 - e. Are you a e-sport player or just fan?
 - f. Experience as player
 - g. Group or rogue preference
 - h. Feelings when playing
 - i. What is going well and not well
 - j. Level of involvement – raking, honour system, etc.
 - k. Number of past purchases
 - l. Motivations for purchase LoL merchandise and game features
3. Interaction with other players LoL managers and staff
 - a. Description of the interactions with the brand of LoL
 - b. Reason / Motivation to contact the community
 - c. Reasons for the importance of those interactions

- d. Feelings related to the community
 - e. Did Riot answer to any of the interactions?
 - f. Opinion about Riot answering or not
 - g. Impact of the interaction
 - h. Issues
 - i. Interpretation
 - j. How the issue was addressed
 - k. Process
4. Brand identity claims and understanding
- a. Brand identity claims to external people (people that do not play lol)
 - b. Brand identity understanding for close friends who play

Appendix 6 – Manager Interview Guide

WARM UP:

Thank you so much for this interview. For this research, we are using the non-directive method, meaning that I will not ask you specific questions about the subject, as is a standard questionnaire. After the first question that I will introduce now, you will be free to tell me whatever comes to your mind on the subject.

The interview will last approximately one hour and with your permission, we would like to record this entire interview, but all your answers will remain anonymous and confidential. If you agree, we can start the interview now.

First Question

- What is your professional background?
- When did you join LoL?

Initial identity

- What was your initial perception of the brand? (when you joined)
- How do the team work?

Relation w/ gamers

- How you and your team connect with the gamers?
 - o How does the team identify the super-fans – gamers that are really into the game
- How do they try to insert more people inside the community?
- Brand future goals

- Issues: Process and Are you satisfy with it?
- What is the identity that you have now about the game?
- Do you include the community feedback right away or do you wait?

Appendix 7 – Champions Updates

- Champion: Zoe

Zoe is one of the many possible examples of champions that were changed since their creation, due to Riot and community feedback. When Zoe was released, she was very popular among all the community. For instance, youtubers like “Imaqtpie” did videos right away playing with her while giving feedback on it. They all said she was overpowered, dealing too much damage, “What was that damage? This champion’s busted. How is that possible?” (Imaqtpie, youtuber, Nov. 2017);

Furthermore, players also started posting content about her in the community matching youtubers opinions, “Zoe is actually insanely unfun to play against” (Gamer, Reddit) or “It’s not competitive at all, it’s broken and ruins the integrity of the game” (Gamer, Reddit). Moreover, also the interviewees had strong opinions about this popular champion.

As an example of these changes, Riot nerfed (took power) Zoe on patch 8.4, “Finally, we're pushing some big changes to a few champions we think require the gameplay changes. There's Zoe, Rengar, and Volibear, plus some smaller changes mixed in.” (League of Legends’ website, February 2018). According to Greg Street, *“The designer who created Zoe is actually one of our senior designers who’s made some of our best champions. He knew he was doing a controversial champion, and he set out saying “we have a lot of majors and we need to do something different, like a whole series of abilities that players have never seen anything like that before. Actually, I sit next to our QA lead (LoL Questions and Answers responsible) and he said the most frustrating game I’ve ever had in League of Legends was playing against Zoe, and the best experience I’ve ever had in League of Legends was playing with Zoe”*, of course we don’t want players to be so frustrated that they quit, that’s not the point.” As such, through this example, it is possible to see how champions are developed at first and they keep being updated according to community feedback and RIOT data analysis. In addition, some champions, like Zoe, are launched to create diversity in the game, and, consequently, to make players talk about it, interact with the community, and engage and connect even more with it.

Appendix 8 - Interview Codes

Code	HIG1	HIG2	HIG3	HIG4	SF 1	HIG5	HIG6	HIG7	HIG8	LIG1
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Age	20-25 YO	18-20 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	18-20 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	25-30 YO
Nationality	American	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese
Education	Masters	Bachelors	Bachelors	Bachelors	Masters	Bachelors	Bachelors	Bachelors	Masters	Masters
Occupation	Work+Study	Study	Work	Work	Work+Study	Study	Study	Study	Work	Work
Hours played/ per week	13h	10h	8h	8h	18h	10h	10h	8h	10h	6h
Code	HIG9	HIG10	LIG2	HIG11	HIG12	HIG13	SF2	HIG14	HIG15	HIG16
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Age	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	25-30 YO
Nationality	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese
Education	Bachelors	Masters	High School	Bachelors	Masters	Masters	High School	Bachelors	Masters	Masters
Occupation	Student	-	-	Student	Student	Student	-	Student	Work	Work
Hours played/ per week	10h	10h	10h	10h	8h	8h	16h	8h	12h	6h
Code	HIG17	HIG18	HIG19	HIG20	HIG21	HIG22	HIG23	HIG24	HIG25	HIG26
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female	Female	Male	Male
Age	25-30 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	18-20 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	18-20 YO	20-25 YO	25-30 YO	25-30 YO
Nationality	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese
Education	Masters	Bachelors	Bachelors	Bachelors	Bachelors	Masters	Bachelors	Masters	Masters	Masters
Occupation	Work	Student	Work	Student	Work	Work	Student	Work	Work	Work
Hours played/ per week	10h	10h	10h	10h	8h	12h	10h	10h	9h	15h
Code	HIG27	HIG28	LIG3	LIG4	LIG5	HIG29	LIG6	HIG30	HIG31	LIG7
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Age	20-25 YO	25-30 YO	20-25 YO	18-20 YO	20-25 YO	20-25 YO	18-20 YO	20-25 YO	25-30 YO	25-30 YO
Nationality	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Italian	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese	Portuguese
Education	Masters	Masters	Masters	Masters	Bachelors	Masters	Bachelors	Masters	Masters	Masters
Occupation	-	Work+Study	Work	Student	Work	Work	Student	Work	Work	-
Hours played/ per week	10h	10h	4h	8h	8h	10h	6h	10h	9h	8h