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**HOW DOES CO-CREATION OCCUR IN THE
GAMING COMMUNITIES? THE CASE OF
LEAGUE OF LEGENDS**

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ABSTRACT

As an emerging topic in Marketing, co-creation has been studied in the literature but there isn't a clear definition yet. In this Work Project, we investigated how co-creation occurs using a case from the gaming community – League of Legends - as it ensured, after careful analysis, the conditions for co-creation. Important insights arose from the Work Project on how co-creation occurs in the gaming community. In particular, we show the complexity of motivations behind co-creation, from the gamers (i.e. consumers), and from the manager's perspective.

KEYWORDS:

Co-creation; Value; Gamer; Community; 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, Beatriz Figueiredo 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 is a concept in Marketing that refers to “joint collaborative activities by parties involved in direct interactions, aiming to contribute to the value that emerges for one or both parties” (Grönroos, 2012, p.1520). Nowadays the study of co-creation is of utmost importance, since we live in an era where people are more connected, active and participative. In this sense we observe consumers behaving as tribes (Cova, B., & Cova, V., 2002, pages 1-15). A tribal approach to consumption practices analyses consumer groups through consumption experiences and cultural patterns, transforming the product or service along the way. Here is where the notion of community, as defined in the Oxford Dictionary, “a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common”, takes its importance. According to Newzoo (i.e. the gaming, mobile and e-sports consultancy company), the gaming sector is increasingly complex, participative and in “contact”. Some games remain static in their brand identity for years, like most console games (e.g. “Assassin’s Creed”, “Mario”, ...), while others evolve according to the inputs of the communities of players. The latter can be divided into three types: (1) MOBA - Multiplayer Online Battle Arena: video games that are played in teams with real-time strategy; (2) MMO - Massively Multiplayer Online Games; and (3) RPG – Role Playing Games (For more details consult Annex 1). League of Legends (LoL) is a MOBA, live-strategy game, played in teams of 3 or 5 people. The community is very active and involved and participate in the development and evolution of the game, as it will be evidenced later on, on this dissertation. Competing with giants like “World of Warcraft” and “RuneScape”, both with very large communities, the community of League of Legends (LoL) remains the largest.

This dissertation focuses on the co-creative dimensions of the game. We study how co-creation occurs in this community.

1) CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

a. CO-CREATION AND CONDITIONS TO OCCUR

Co-creation is based on the assumption that the consumer is always a co-producer and a co-creator of value. The concept of co-creation is grounded on several theories, one of them being Vargo and Lusch's service-dominant logic (2008). Vargo and Lusch clearly distinguish the notion of value-in-exchange and the value-in-use one. In the first one, value is created if the firm produces goods/services and exchanges them for money in the market. The value-in-use concept, on the other hand, is only applicable when consumers make actual use of goods and services thus creating value. The service-dominant logic defines the notion of value as value-in-use, defending the overall idea that firms can't generate and/or deliver value by themselves. Value is determined by the consumers.

The service dominant logic is explained by Vargo and Lusch (2008) through ten premises. One of the most important premises explains that customers participate through their actions and resources (mental, physical, emotional inputs, financial, temporal and behavioral).

Another theory in the process of value creation, according to Muñiz and Schau (2007), states that consumer co-creation is triggered by self-satisfaction, social recognition and personal gratification, where the co-created outcome must affect consumers' personal lives. Also, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) defend the "value co-creation" logic where they explain that value is truly unique to each individual and because of that they must fulfill three criteria for co-creation to occur: (a) dialogue between the firm and the consumer, (b) consumer access to information and (c) collective risk assessment.

The service logic (Grönroos & Voima, 2013) further addresses the role of the supplier and the consumer and the interactions between the two in the process of co-creation – the suppliers (managers) acted as value facilitators and assist consumers in the process of

creating value for both. The managers may seek to influence this process and enhance the value level of a service activity or a good created by consumers, when interacting with consumers. According to Grönroos, “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” (2013), showing why the co-creation of value is defined as a joint activity and a joint contribution.

Based on these authors and according to Silveira & Simões (2017), the following premises need to be fulfilled to ensure co-creation: (1) consumer active participation in the process of value creation; (2) the co-created “object” must affect consumer’s identity and personal lives; (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 “object”) and (6) evidence of direct interactions between suppliers and consumers.

b. CO-CREATION IN THE GAMING INDUSTRY

Co-creation has been present in this industry for quite some time: games like “Spore” and “Little Big Planet” might have been the first steps for it, having personalized level creation or characters. These games depended heavily on user generated content, which gave birth to the role of co-creative gamer (Banks & Potts, 2010). Blizzard, one of the largest gaming companies in the world, created the online game “World of Warcraft”, which is still the largest online game 10 years after its release, with more than 10 million subscribers. Combining aspects of both MMO and RPG types of games, WoW had a free Application Programming Interface (a set of functions and procedures that allow the creation of applications which access the features or data of an application) through which users could customize their user interface (Davidovici-Nora, 2009). Blizzard took the first steps to a more effortless and a simple game design while keeping the core of the game

intact, as the game developers desired. Most examples given in the literature analyze Auran's game "Fury" (a failed MMO) since it was the first time a company looked into the players beta testing and feedback for guidance, even though it ended up failing for not knowing how to balance both sides of the feedback – what the gamers wanted and what the developers desired. 'Co-creative expertise' is very much about how these diverse and conflicting forms of knowledge and expertise (both amateur and professional) interact and converge (John Banks, 2010). So while adding value to firms, this co-creative gamer concept moves the business models towards a more open innovation system. With the gaming technology available nowadays, most expert players have knowledge and understanding of videogame design and aesthetics. They recognize a good game when they play and can often carefully break down and articulate what makes a high-quality game play experience. Therefore, the co-creative gamer is now an important driver for the evolution of this sector.

c. GAMING COMMUNITIES

Newzoo (2017) identifies different categories within the gaming industry: Console Games (31%), Browser Games (4%), Tablet Games (10%), Boxed/Downloaded PC Games (23%) and (Smart)phone Games (32%). Out of these, although mobile gaming is a huge trend, PC Games have the largest communities. According to Cova, Kozinets and Shankar (2007), the form of socialization among gamers is peculiar- they exhibit low empathy and concern for others, have a relatively high level of aggression and may appear more introvert in nature, which explains the critical analysis constantly present in said communities. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) define communities, according to the tribal approach, as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand". The authors state that there are three segments in communities: (1) members who have a shared sense of belonging to

the community, (2) members who share rituals and traditions, and (3) members who feel a sense of moral responsibility towards each other. According to this approach, in the gaming sector members are connected by the feeling of belonging.

We may therefore highlight the links between games with large communities and the co-creative-gamer role. In the gaming sector, community-based co-creation occurs because of active members who integrate all the games' official boards (e.g. online pages where both the game companies and the gamers go to share content, doubts, etc.), social media, and contribute to the overall conversation about the game.

2) ADDRESSING THE WORK PROJECT OBJECTIVES

In order to explore the Work Project objective, the methodology developed for this thesis follows a longitudinal single case study research, based on primary data collection.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

a. WHY A CASE STUDY DESIGN? WHY A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

A case-study methodology was considered the most appropriate, considering that the goal of this dissertation is to find out more about “how” a certain phenomenon happens, and “it requires an extensive and “in-depth” description of that same phenomenon” (Yin, 2009). To analyze the implications of this question, we used a single case study (Yin, 2014) about a game with one of the largest communities online. The referred authors believe this methodology to be appropriate, since it is a critical, representative, and longitudinal case. Yin states that “the theory has specified a clear set of propositions as well as the circumstances within which the propositions are believed to be true. A single case, meeting all of the conditions for testing the theory can confirm, challenge or extend the theory” (2009, p. 381).

A longitudinal case approach consists in analyzing a case at two or more different points in time, and since we wanted to investigate the evolution of a brand, this method seemed appropriate. Hence, we studied a game brand thorough time, asking gamers how they felt since the first day playing. This is again supported by the qualitative methodology, since it can clearly “sort out the temporal dimension showing clearly what preceded what either through direct observation or retrospection” (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

To address this thesis’ main research question – How does co-creation occur in gaming communities – the chosen methodology a combination of qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with gamers, and managers and digital observations. Since we’re investigating an exploratory question - how co-creation occurs - a quantitative research wouldn’t be appropriate for this analysis. Furthermore, we used digital observations to collect information on how the communities interact among themselves and with the game’s company. We observed the game’s online Boards, Reddit and Facebook to gather more information on their social behavior and interactions.

b. CASE SELECTION – LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

The case selected was the game LoL, owned by Riot games. Brandon Beck and Marc Merrill founded Riot in 2006 with a player centric vision. In 2009, Riot released LoL, its only game and a great success among the gamer community. The game became the most played PC game in the world and a key driver of the growth of e-sports.

League of Legends is a MOBA and it works as a competitive, strategy game, which is played in teams of 3 or 5 friends or with randomly assigned people that are online at the same time. The strengths of the game are the variety of champions (i.e. characters you chose to play with), the fun game modes and the in-game competitiveness (for a complete explanation of the game, please see Annex 1). Players are the core value of the company and they are known for being involved and for improving their own gaming experience.

The community of players includes managers and staff – that play in order to know the struggles of the game – and players. In the players’ group, a few are known as super fans – nomenclature that arose in a thesis written by Eduardo Oliveira on co-creation in football clubs. This group is composed by professional players that play on e-sport championships and influencers – usually YouTubers that frequently comment on the game and famous Twitch (Annex) streamers.

To analyze if this case followed the criteria for co-creation skilled in section 1.a, we conducted a preliminary research through digital observations (30 posts online) and 5 in-depth interviews. According to Teijlingen and Hundley (2001), a preliminary study is defined as a trial run, developed in preparation for the major study.

1. The first condition for co-creation, “consumer active participation in the process of value creation”, was easily met because there’s active participation of the consumers in the creation of value. The gamers keep active contact with the company through the official game boards and social media – Facebook, Reddit (Annex 2). They also stream themselves playing on Twitch (Annex 3) and create content on YouTube commenting other people’s plays, champions or game modes (Annex 1). This not only influences the way other people play but also adds or takes value from the game. Players have the possibility to vote in new champion *skins* (different appearances for champions, see more in Annex 1) in contests online. This contact has the sole goal of improving the game and, this way, creates value for the brand itself and for gamers.
2. The second condition – “the co-created “object” must affect consumer’s identity and personal lives” - is met by the community, as the game becomes part of players’ identity. They make friends and talk with them about their real problems - like mentioned by some gamers: “I was very introvert and LoL helped me (the

gamer) a lot with that. It's an escape from real life and it changes the personality of anyone". Consumers are really connected with the brand, so each change ends up having an impact in their personal lives. Furthermore, since this is a competitive game that scales all the way to e-sports, like any other form of sport, time and commitment are required to be a good player.

3. The third condition – “consumer involvement in dialogue with the firm” - is fulfilled by topics mentioned before like the connection through the official game boards and forums, but mostly on Reddit and PBE (beta testing platform). Gamers also send emails to Riot when facing issues, and having the company answering back makes gamers not only enjoy the service but create a bond with the firm and defending it more often.
4. Condition number four - “information – i.e., the firm should ensure access to information to consumers” - is met by Riot’s strategy. Both through Social Media - Reddit, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook - and PBE, Riot constantly shares information, which is later commented by the gamers on all mentioned platforms.
5. Condition number five – “collective acceptance of the risks (intrinsic to the co-created “object”)” - also verifies, for the LoL gamers know that the community is toxic (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 the game, see more details on toxicity in Annex 5) and choose to be part of it anyway.
6. Through the obvious direct interaction between managers and gamers, the sixth condition for co-creation is fulfilled – “evidence of direct interactions between suppliers and consumers”.

League of Legends proves this way to be an appropriate case for our Work Project, fulfilling all conditions mentioned in the literature review to ensure co-creation.

c. SAMPLING AND RESEARCH TOOLS

We conducted 40 in-depth interviews with gamers and one with Riot's head of game design. The 40 gamers were chosen out of the 100 that provided an email out of the 250 people that answered the pre-recruiting questionnaire. This was based on two of preliminary filter criteria, namely: being a player of the game League of Legends and being active in the community (see the pre-recruiting questionnaire in Annex 8 and the sample grid in Annex 10).

The sample was divided into: High Involvement Gamers and Low Involvement Gamers. By High Involvement Gamers we mean active members of the community who frequently visit the game Boards, Reddit, Facebook, and the other mentioned platforms. Some might even have their own YouTube and Twitch channels, in which, they post videos of themselves playing (streams) or evaluating champions or *skins*, for example. In addition, the majority already interacted with Riot through one of the online platforms or through direct email.

Among the 40 interviewees, we identified 33 High Involvement Gamers – two of them being Super Fans - and 7 Low Engagement Gamers. Besides our gamer interviewees, we interviewed Greg Street, head game designer of League of Legends.

By Low Engagement Gamers we mean those who enjoy playing the game but have no interest in belonging to the community. As such, they are not connected with the community nor with Riot.

For data gathering we used both personal in-depth interviews, since they are the most appropriate research tool to do exploratory research and analyze deep motivations and insights. These interviews were semi-structured, which means there was a set of questions that introduced the conversation and then topics to be explored, while not restraining interviewees on possible upcoming topics to all the possible upcoming topics. We also

made digital observations because the gamers' activity is online and the best way to study co-creation is to observe the community's behavior in their own environment.

d. MAIN RESEARCH INSIGHTS

– Co-Creation Between Whom? and How?

The connection among all groups is represented by Figure 1, developed by the Work Project Author, based on the investigation done for the project together with Beatriz Figueiredo.

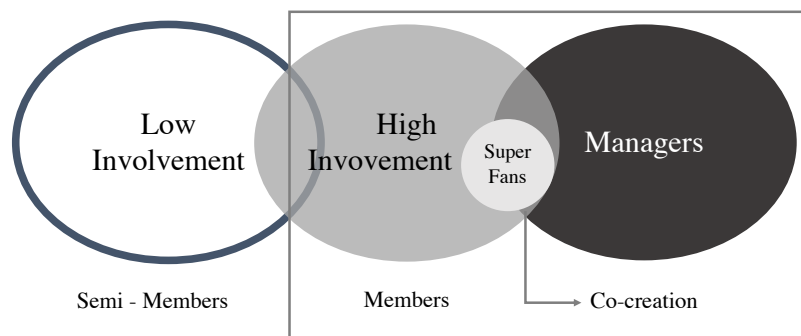


Fig.1 – “Between whom does co-creation occur?” - Work Project Author, based on the investigation done for the project with Beatriz Figueiredo

According to the interviews, gamers with Low Involvement end up not influencing the co-creation process, since they are not sufficiently engaged with the community, playing only for the enjoyment the game gives them. For the purposes of these study, they will be referred to as semi-members. The group that has the most contact with the managers, as seen in the gathered data, and therefore participate more in the process of co-creation in the game, is the High Involvement Gamers. They are active online, writing to Riot through all platforms, and they are up to date with all the patches and play ranks by themselves (See more on patches and ranks in Annex 1).

Super fans (High Involvement) influence the community through the way they play, the champions, the champions they choose and their opinions about them. For instance, gamers adopt influencers' moves and behaviors based on the videos they publish online.

“Gamers learn a lot with Youtubers and that influences the way they play, which also ends up influencing the updates made to the game” (High Involvement Gamer 5).

Hence, super fans end up being the voice of the community, especially regarding the game issues - their opinion and feedback about the game is really important to Riot. As such, the brand tries to reach and create relationships with them. According to Greg Street, Riot’s head game designer:

“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”.

Gamers with Low Involvement end up not influencing the co-creation process, since they are not sufficiently engaged with the community, playing only for the enjoyment the game gives them.

Although gamers belonging to the active members group interact a lot with each other, it is hard for Riot to include all the feedback due to the dimensions of the community – which is also one of the reasons why the brand tries to reach out to super fans. In fact, some interviewees would like to see their feedback included in the game more frequently. However, in order to make them feel more participative in the game development process, Riot tries to include them in other ways, for instance by including their ideas on published content and sometimes champions’ *skins*.

When it comes to how co-creation occurs, we notice it is present in four different areas: Content, Champions, *Skins* and Game Modes.

– Content: Many people in the community have such an intertwined connection to the game that they make several art pieces related with LoL, and Riot appreciates it. They often share the content created by the players and incorporate it on their own.

- *Skins*: This feature has been co-created since almost the beginning of the game. The community has many opportunities to create their own *skins*. There are contests where the gamers submit their design for *skins* of a certain champion and the winner keeps the *skin* and receives money for it. Then the winners of the world championships, for the champion group they played with in the last game, a *skin* best describe the team and its individual players (e.g. A player played with Lux and she has red hair, a *skin* will be made for Lux with red hair).
- Champions: They are co-created similarly to *skins* but also through PBE (platform for beta testing). Champions are tested on PBE and the players give feedback and help Riot release a better champion. Along with that, champions are balanced and improved through the constant patching made by Riot almost every other week, after carefully listening to the community.
 - Game Modes: ARAM – All Random All Mid Lane – A very popular game mode, originated from gamers. “ARAM, is my favorite game mode and it works wonders.”

“[...] People just started playing all random all mid and then Riot created the game mode. It allows you to try out all champions!” (Super Fan 2);

“ARAM was co-created! Players were just trying to enforce the rules, like when you say, “you have to stay mid lane”. There was no way to stop them from doing that, so we just supported that play style and made a game ourselves that they enjoyed!” (Greg Street, Head of Game Design, Riot).”

– **Issues**

We identified three main issues in two different categories: Technical and In Game issues.

a. Technical Issues

The main insight we got out of these issues is that people are happier with the brand if they had to contact it directly to solve a problem.

These issues can happen in several ways. For instance, they can be login issues (account access and login), lost/stolen account information, in-game issues, bad behavior (bans – when people are banned from the game for a certain amount of time), or issues while making purchases in the game (e.g. payment choices and fraudulent charges).

“For some reason I cannot post this thread when I put a link in the link option tab (...) Please help me, thanks very much in advance!” (Gamer, League of Legends’ boards)

Players have some options regarding what to do when facing this kind of issues. For instance, they can go to Riot’s support website and look for some answers, go to the community (Boards, Reddit, Facebook groups, among others), or send an email directly to Riot. At first, they used to visit the community and Riot Support to solve their problems:

“I only had technical issues, like in the login, but I could always solve it through the boards.” (High Involvement Gamer 12).

All interviewees were successful in solving their technical issue. In fact, they were all very impressed about Riot responses and the way the brand solved the issues effectively.

“Riot answered my email, not in an automatic way, but we had a conversation. It was really quick, and they solved the problem. Also, I think they improved the system because now we don’t see that many stolen accounts.” (Gamer, B13)

In fact, gamers are not only happy with the effectiveness of Riot answers, but they also say the answers were all very quick. Another thing worth mentioning regards the consequences of the technical issues mentioned before. For example, this gamer gave justifications to all the things he thought should be improved in the game:

“Although I believe that the team spirit is important, there are some accessing that are not needed, but Riot is working on that, yesterday I saw on Reddit that riot is going to give better improvements to it. Also, Riot needs to find a balance on champions, but I know that is really hard. Lastly, sometimes Riot nerfs champions that were already not good, which does not make sense, but that is 1 in 10.” (Gamer, B21).

b. In Game Issues

When analyzing this type of issues, we find two main issues: the toxic community (Annex 4) and the balance of champions (Annex 6).

i. Toxic Community

The League of Legends community is known to be one of the most toxic in the industry. Gamers are toxic towards both the content creators and other players. When we discuss toxicity towards all content creators, Reddit plays a big part, since people just unload their frustration on everyone.

“It is really toxic, nowadays Reddit works as the voice of the community” (High Involvement Gamer 32)

Even though people aren't as good as the pro-players, they will still feel entitled to comment and destroy the pro-players. This transcends the normal gamer behavior and reflects consequently on other players as well. For example, influencers in this community get insulted and criticized for everything that they do, say or post, even though they are the best at the game. Thus, there's a black toxic cloud over this game that even non-gamers identify, giving the League of Legends brand a negative image. Regarding player-on-player toxicity, besides the obvious existence of bad people, this may happen for several reasons:

1. Large learning curve – people have a hard time when they start playing this game, since players need to learn many technicalities, moves and champions to get one win. This of course, if not playing with friends, makes the rest of the team super frustrated. Before people improve, they need to invest a long period of time in their lives accompanied by constant flaming and abuse from other players, which will discourage one to play the game.

“LoL is not a game of skills anymore, but strategy and it is much more complex than games like Overwatch. Also, the game is really complex, and the learning curve is huge!” (High Involvement Gamer 3); “The game is so draining [...] Then you are just stuck

mistake after mistake in a snowball of losing and you get frustrated” (Why I hate League of Legends, MagikarpUsedFly, Youtuber, June/2017)

2. Rank – the competition for higher ranks and the inability of doing so due to losing games also causes gamers to accumulate frustration and add toxicity to each game: “move!”, “what are you doing?”, insults, etc.

“People that don't like something and start insulting or lose on promos (ranked games); "there are people who pay others that have a higher rank to improve their rank, which is really unfair to others” (High Involvement Gamer 1); “You play with your friends and for the first 10 minutes it's fun, you're joking, you're laughing, but then people just start getting mad at each other and if you keep joking around, your friends will make you feel bad because you lost the game”. (Why I hate League of Legends, MagikarpUsedFly, Youtuber, June/2017)

3. Time consumption – People dedicate a lot of time to the game. It's not only that the games themselves take up to two hours, but also that activities such as waiting in queue, selecting champions or waiting for every player to load are very time-consuming. This consumes a lot of hours in a person's life, making them feel bad for even considering leaving the game, because they won't recover those hours. Toxicity feeds on these feelings of wasted time and people live on it in a loop. Players are already so connected that need to keep going and can't get out.

“It is a really good game, but sometimes it's 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 no longer have patience to play with someone that doesn't have the same experience anymore” (High Involvement Gamer 16);

4. Constant changes – Riot does updates on the game every two weeks: patches. On these updates, Riot changes champions by nerfing (take power from) or buffing (give power to) them, add new champions, new features, solve issues like bugs, among others. In general, gamers appreciate the frequent game updates and the diversify the characters of the game, make it less monotone and more interesting. In fact, according to the interviewees, gamers admit that the updates are one of the main reasons why the game is still doing so well after also 9 years, but also the reason why so much toxicity is raised.

“Changing the game sometimes is good but the constant change makes it hard to enjoy the game and avoid competitiveness” (Low Involvement Gamer 1); “It’s what keeps the game alive but at the same time, you spent so much time on one champion and then a patch comes, and he’s gone. The changes are so fast and frequent that you can’t time sync (synchronize) into champions that you thoroughly enjoy.” (Why I hate League of Legends, MagikarpUsedFly, Youtuber, June/2017)

To prevent toxicity within the game, in what concerns the players, Riot has created a complex system of reporting. People can, after a game, report multiple unsportsmanlike behaviors in one game: Leaving the game AFK (Annex 2), Feeding (or more specifically Inting see more in Annex 2), being directly offensive to someone, using socially offensive commentary, refusing to support your team, incentivizing people to be toxic to other, etc. There’s a hard time explaining to the community that there’s a difference between having a bad behavior and being bad at the game. When a player is reported, the instant feedback system will collect all reports made from the game and compares them with in-game data (statistics, chat, item builds, metrics from past games, ...), of that player, to make a call on a whether or not to he/she should be punished. If a player ends up being punished, they receive a reform card (an in-client message calling out the punishment and evidence of the behavior that caused it). Punishments include mainly bans, temporary or permanent suspensions from the game, where people can’t enter the game, sometime smaller punishments occur, for example if a player leaves the game, while his/her teammates are still playing, you’ll immediately after will have to wait longer to start a game (usually the wait is around 2/3 minutes, if punished can go up to 10), but also chat restrictions and priority queues.

This issue is a never-ending story. There are multiple cycles to explain the process but none of them are very efficient, and many of them just sustain this condition: Player’s feeding or is AFK (away from keyboard, see more in Annex 2) -> Player gets reported -> Player is banned temporarily -> Player complains to the community -> Either toxicity increases from the community’s negativity or increases just for feelings of unfairness

from the player -> Player gets to play again -> Player feeds and leaves mid-game; Player's toxic with other gamers -> Player gets reported -> Player is either banned permanently or temporarily -> Player loses more game time -> Player gets more aggravated for having spent so much time on the game and it's being wasted -> Toxicity increases -> Player gets reported -> and the cycle restarts.

Chat restrictions have showed to be a good punishment and effective, especially to the rest of the people playing with that gamer but it's still no match for the polluted environment that is League of Legends.

a. Balance of Champions

One of the major issues inside League of Legends regards the balancing of champions. In other words, gamers complain that the changes done to champions are not always the best, not having them all at the same level of power and ease of gameplay. The constant buffing and nerfing - giving power and taking power away from (champions) (see more on this in Annex 1) - of entire groups of champions to keep up with new ones makes it hard for players to keep strategies and play well, which may cause frustration and anger, increasing toxicity. Therefore, there is an evident contradiction about the updates on champions and their consequent balance. As a matter of fact, the same gamers who claim that champions' diversity and frequent patches are one of the best things of League of Legends - "the patches make the game more diverse and change it in a way that gamers have more possibilities to play" (High Involvement Gamer 15) - Also reported that the balancing of the champions is one of the major issues concerning LoL. First of all, even before the patch is released, gamers have partial access to it, either through Riot's many platforms online or through social media like Reddit or Facebook. Then, when the patch is released, gamers try to learn as much as they can through the available patch notes. Furthermore, gamers go to the community (Facebook, boards, Reddit, Twitter) looking

for other gamers' opinions, feedback from influencers, and they will discuss it together. About this issue, Riot's role is to pay attention to the gamers' feedback and clarify their doubts on updates and incorporate them (or not) into the next patches. In fact, some gamers go even further saying that:

"a lot of times, they (Riot) change champions and gamers stop playing with them, then afterwards they notice and change it again...it is a cycle." (High Involvement Gamer 3); Riot uses these updates to improve their champions, and consequently try to achieve a more balanced champion rotation. Nevertheless, although the majority of players agrees with the incorporated player feedback, some of them complain that it either takes too long or it's not what the community asked for.

On Riot's side, and according to Greg Street, head game designer, the influencers' opinion matters a lot to the community, especially Youtubers, Twitch streams and even Rioters. As such, they pay "extra attention to what the gamers are saying and try to reach influencers and invite them to visit the studios and try out new features, since they'll share their experience with the community, the good and the bad". The decisions made by Riot regarding how and when to incorporate the feedback received by the community depends on several factors. According to the manager, when they:

"launch something there's a lot of buzz right away and the community tends to overreact and show a million different opinions for this reason Riot doesn't incorporate gamers' opinions into the game straight away, trying to keep consistency".

The team in charge of champion balance is composed by high-ranked Rioters (that are players as well), making their opinions slightly biased, for they are based on their own experience as gamers. Moreover, according to Greg, sometimes players' complaints don't correspond to reality. For example, a player can state that he/she doesn't like to play with Lux (annex 1), but then when playing he/she choose that champion to play with. In conclusion, Riot doesn't always include players' feedback because of all of these inconsistencies.

As explained above, the balancing of champions works in cycles: Riot launches a champion -> Gamers see the patch notes -> Gamers try the updated game for themselves -> Gamers look for influencers' feedback and tips to play with it -> Gamers search for more opinion inside the community + share their own opinion -> Riot analyses the posted opinions, and crosses it with the data collected from the game -> Based on opinion community and data analysis, Riot decides how and when to change the same champion again, Riot sees how they can balance the champion by nerfing or buffing them, or doing it on a group of champions (Annex 6). Therefore, the cycle is repeated over and over again, and the game is developed in accordance to it. As such, the issue regarding the champions balance is always present, and being solved at the same time, creating this way an on-going process that involves both Riot and the community. Regarding the interviewees and the manager feedbacks, we can conclude that the unbalancing of the champions is actually one of the major things that make gamers interested on the game and involved with the community.

3) DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Based on our research, co-creation occurs in LoL as represented in the figure below. This image shows the interaction between the two main groups involved: Managers and High Involvement Gamers.

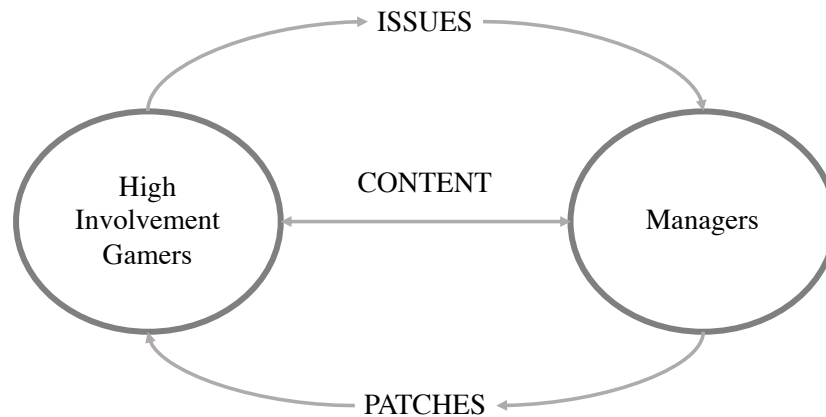


Fig.2 – “How does co-creation occur?” - Work Project Author, based on the investigation done for the project

There are two types of interactions between these groups. On one hand, we have direct interactions where, according to our digital observations, reciprocal share and creation is made in the multiple platforms. Here, co-creation occurs both in an organic way, where the players create content and post it online, and through Riot organized events, where they (managers) give materials to the community to co-create.

On the other hand, we have what we'll name “the co-creation cycle”. This consists in the sequence where gamers try a feature -> gamers find an issue -> gamers report said issue to Riot -> Riot's managers evaluate it -> Riot launches a patch with the integrated feedback -> gamers try a feature -> ...

Besides the players' complaints towards League of Legends, common to all interviews was also the evidence of an emotional connection. LoL players are hooked on the release of stress they get from flaming (Annex 1) in-game, discharging external frustrations on other players. And because all of them have the same pattern of behavior, they turn into

a blob of toxicity and dependence towards a platform that was meant to be fun. The gamers are self-aware and recognize to be toxic themselves but are not willing to change. And although their emotions towards the game are frequently negative, they still consider it to be one of their favorites. Also, the active members (High Involvement Gamers) share the sense of belonging to the community, escaping from their lives outside the game and entering these virtual bonds created from the same passion (the game) and hatred (balance of champions, ranks, etc.).

This odd behavior within the game's community, is interpreted as an addiction – they know they have it but choose to sustain it. The gamers also choose not to engage in conversation about LoL in their day-to-day lives, for their friends, not involved in the community, “wouldn't understand”.

It is also known that the gamers get frustrated by, (a) the large learning curve, (b) ranks, (c) time consumption and (d) constant changing. They blame other players for their failures and frustrations instead of the company, even defending Riot on the company's decisions. Gamers don't necessarily like the changes in the game but instead of showing their discontent towards the game, they show it towards the people that “weren't fast-enough learners” to make this game stable. Riot still gets a lot of complaints, but as seen in (a) it all goes back to the large learning curve and therefore people's ability to play (or in this case disability). High Involvement Players tend to be the voice of the community and have direct or almost direct contact with the managers, through all the previously mentioned channels (email, Reddit, Boards, ...), showing them what should be improved. Unlike other addictions however, gamers contribute towards improving the game. Their contribute towards improving the game by making suggestions, creating content, making videos, etc.

However, by co-creating, High Involvement gamers and Riot managers generate a vicious circle: they co-create to address the in-game issues but, by doing so, they make the issues more complex to overcome.

As established in the literature review, authors like Muñiz and Schau (2007) believe that co-creation is activated by (1) self-satisfaction, (2) social recognition and (3) personal gratification. In the League of Legends community, we see a different notion of what (2) social recognition is – it is the praise given by the community when one plays in a higher rank (Annex 1) - not the praise from outsiders of this community, nor presence on social media. However, the concepts of (1) self-satisfaction and (3) personal gratification are clearly identified in this research, leading to the belief that, these are the main motives for the existence of co-creative gamers in this community.

In conclusion, co-creation occurs motivated by self-satisfaction between active members and managers, to improve Content, Champions, Skins and Game Modes. At the same time, it generates frustration and addiction which was not predicted by the existing literature on co-creation.

4) RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

> A common limitation in the use of this type of case study is related to the generalization of such a specific community to the entire industry. Different communities have different patterns, behaviors and different interactions with game makers. Not all MOBA's are the same, much less different game types. Therefore, it's hard to apply our findings to all the game communities.

> Different communities can also have distinctive patterns depending on the platform, therefore separating this case-study from mobile games for example.

> Representativeness and different profiles in the sample was also a limitation, because most of our interviewees were male Portuguese students between the ages of 20-25 years old.

> Since we used a longitudinal case study, but only interviewed people once, we were limited to rely on what interviewees can recall and reconstitute past events, and feelings. This makes our findings somewhat biased because it is partially their interpretation of events instead of what happened precisely.

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ANNEXES

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ANNEX 1 – LEAGUE OF LEGENDS, THE GAME MANUAL

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 (Img.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 (Img.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



Fig.2 – MMO RPG 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.

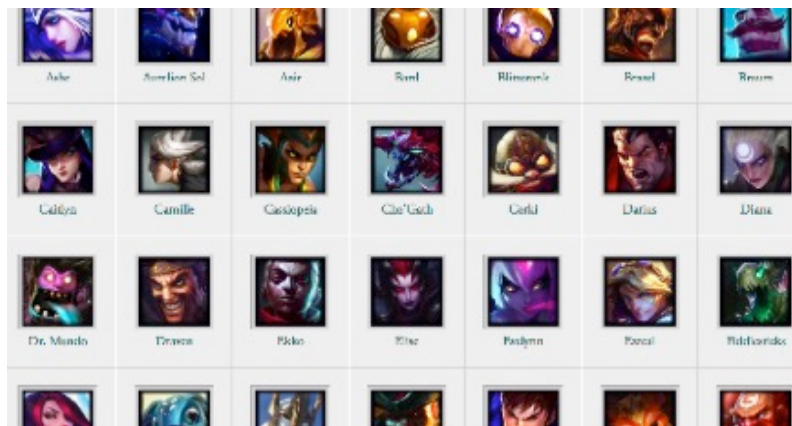


Fig.3 – Champion roster page online

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.

For example, this is Lux! She is a mage that is best played as a mid-lanner, meaning she will push the enemies in the middle lane or roam across the map, allowing her companions to focus on their own objectives. She has a lot of different skins - unique new appearances that change the look of their attacks.



Fig.4 – Lux usual appearance

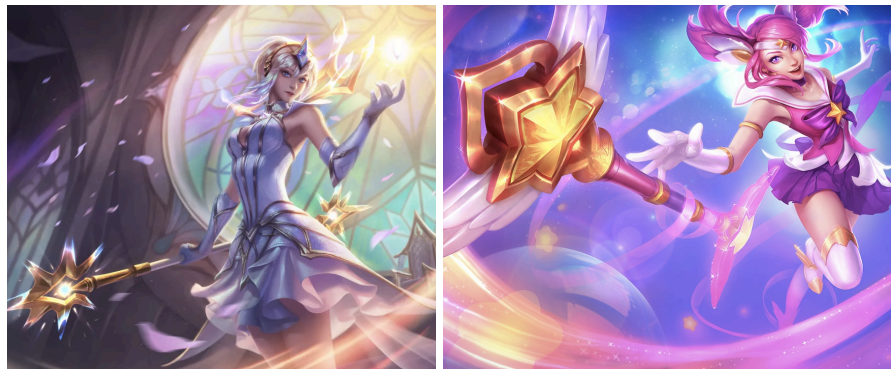
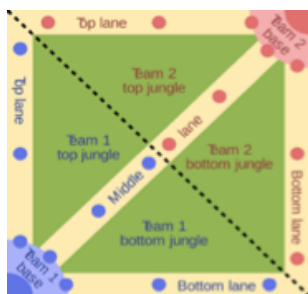


Fig.5 – Lux skin examples

After you chose your champion, you choose one of several **Game Modes**. Usually there are only three maps where you can play: Summoner’s Rift, Twisted Treeline and Howling Abyss. Within these maps you can pick several game modes but once in a while there is an exclusive mode that is either celebratory of something or just a special event, outside



Img.6 – MOBA map layout

of the usual ones. The most common map in LOL is the Summoner's Rift, which layout is similar to those in other MOBAs, displayed here on the left. This game mode by itself has four different ways to be played: blind pick - you are assigned random team mates and you don't know what your

teammates pick as a champion, draft pick - You choose the role, and everyone can see your champion pick, along with champions you don't want to play against in the game.

The other two game modes are for ranked players. Ranks work as an inner competition where players gain or lose points and evolve in a rank as a normal sport: bronze, silver, gold, ... It works around an Elo rank system, which is a system that started from regular Chess.



Fig.7 – Usual aspect of the gameplay

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



Fig.8 – turret, inhibitor, nexus and minions respectively

ANNEX 2 – LEAGUE OF LEGENDS - GLOSSARY

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

- > **OP** - over powered - very powerful champion overall
- > **GG** - Good game.
- > **Buffed** - boosted positively - stronger - more powerful
- > **Nerfed** - boosted negatively - weaker - less powerful
- > **Broken** - always too powerful – op
- > **Patch** - the update that applies changes to the game modes, champions, functionalities, etc.
- > **AFK** – Away From Keyboard – The player left the game unattended mid-match
- > **Flaming** – When a player blames other gamers in toxic ways
- > **Feeding** – You are not a very expert player and you die a lot, “feeding” the other champion that killed you.
- > **Inting** – Feeding on purpose

ANNEX 3 - 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 Redditor – member of the community – contributes with content and knowledge. This feeds the platform creating a complex web of threads.

People can leave comments, post things you find interesting/cool/horrible/strange, 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.9 – Reddit Logo

ANNEX 4 - TWITCH

Twitch allows users to create channels where they can broadcast their video and audio through streaming tools like OBS or Xsplit. On the other end, 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.10 – Twitch Logo

ANNEX 5 – TOXICITY IN GAMING

By the dictionary, a toxic person means - A person who is rude constantly towards others.

In Gaming, 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 the game.

A Toxic community represents, this way, a group of gamers that play the same game and are toxic. We see this behavior mainly in multiplayer games like MMO's, RPG's and MOBA's where people have to interact and depend on others to win.

ANNEX 6 – META SLAVE

A player that only plays the champions that according to the meta have best chances of winning, due to being either broken, op or recently buffed.

Meta in gaming is the context in which the game is inserted in, it's the balance system defined by the way people are playing, the champions they are playing with, what's stronger, ... For example, if tanks (annex 1) are strong, people chose them more and we can state we're in a Tank Meta.

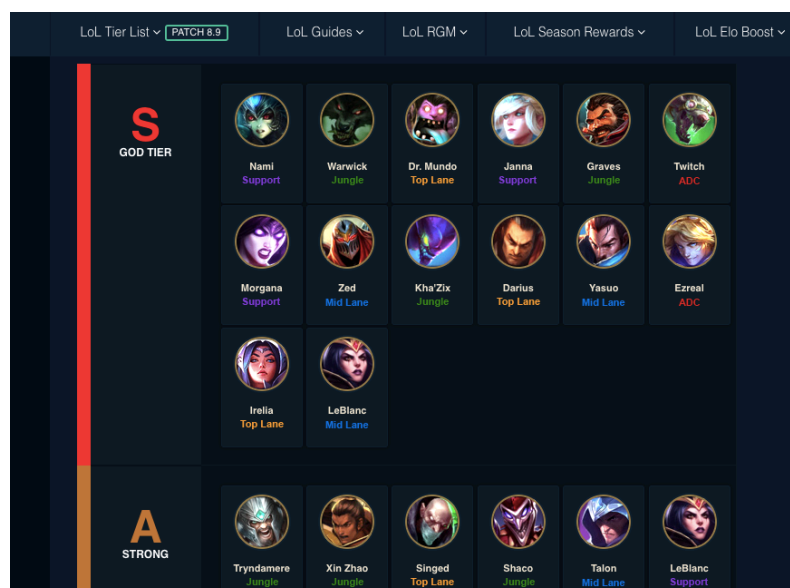


Fig.11 – Meta example, Champions that are rated by tier (God Tier means the broken, op champions that are too strong to beat)

ANNEX 7 - BALANCE OF CHAMPIONS

By Balance of Champions we mean the capacity of having an equally strong set of champions and making it all about strategy. Balance because there aren't stronger or weaker champions.

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, on 21/11/2017, she was very popular among all the community. For instance, youtubers like "Synapse", and "Imaqtpie" did videos right away playing with her while giving his 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); "Was that a one shot? I don't even know what I just did!" (Synapse, 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.

"Assassins were too buffed and could easily kill in 1 or 2 secs along with other champions like Zoe that were to op (overpowered) and killed people with one shots" (High Involvement Gamer 1); "Specially now it happens a lot, people giving suggestions and Riot taking it into account. For instance, I saw a guy saying that they should do X and Y to Zoe and Riot answered to him and did the X and Y he suggested after some days" (High Involvement Gamer 23).

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.

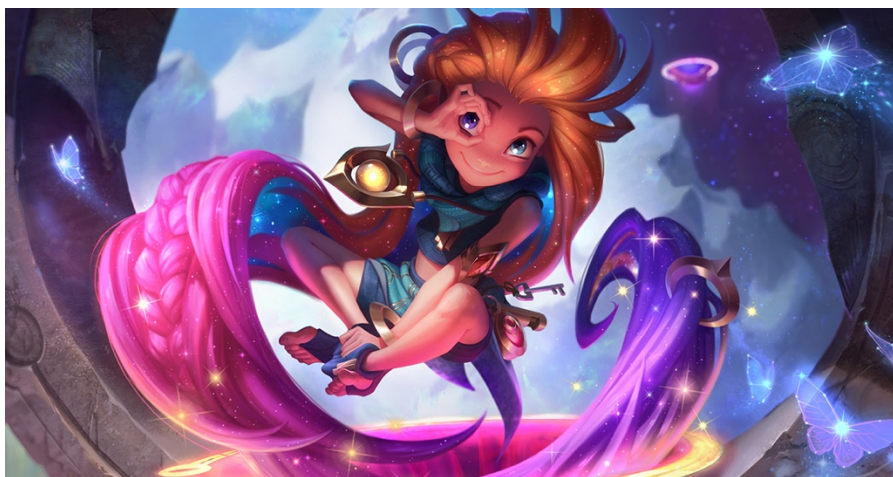


Fig.12 – Zoe usual appearance

ANNEX 8 – 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

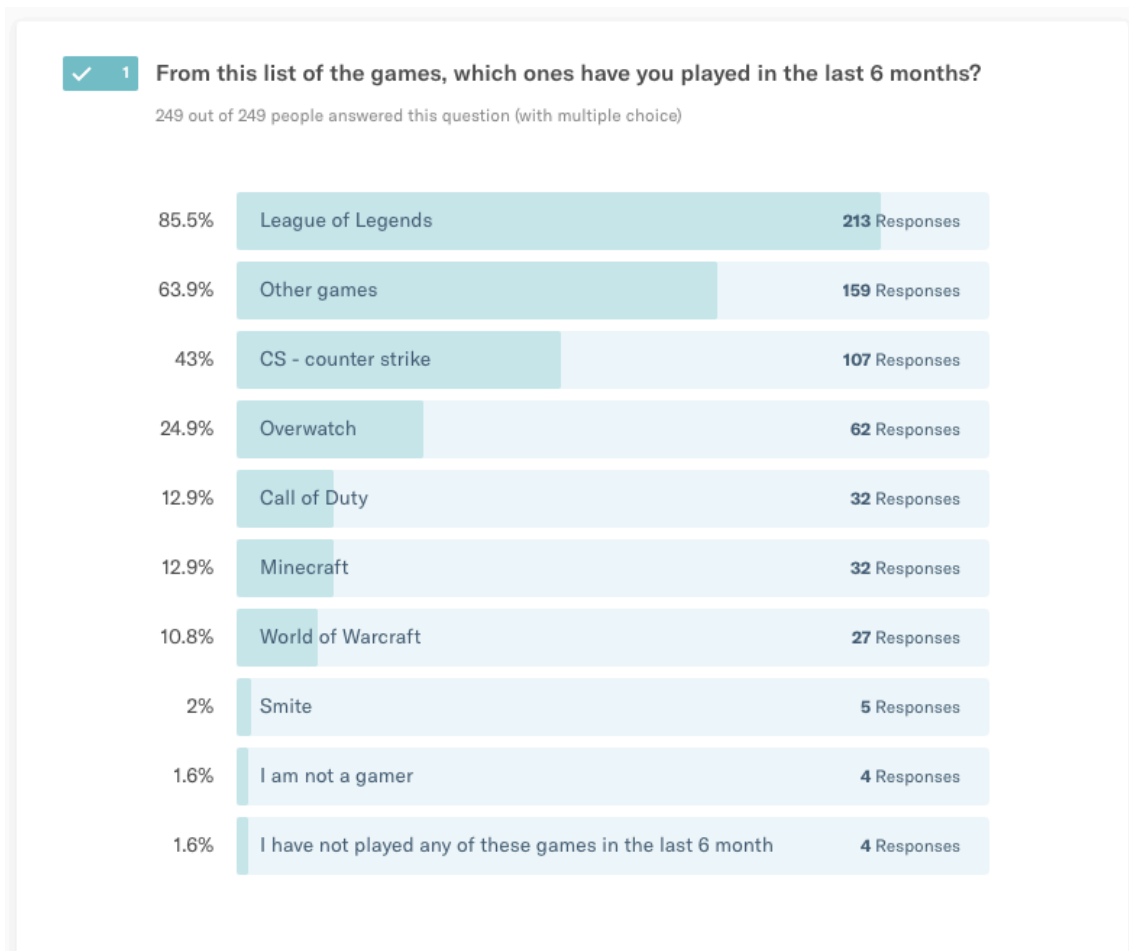


Fig.13 – Answers to games played in the last 6 months

“If you answered League of Legends please go on to the next phase”

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
- 21-25 years old
- 26-30 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

ANNEX 9 – PLAYERS’ INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

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:

First contact:

- > Reasons to play
- > Moment
- > Who/What influenced the gamer
- > Initial understanding and perception of the brand

Player Behavior and Purchase behavior:

- > Frequency of game play
- > Reasons/Motivations to keep playing LoL instead other games
- > At pair with the story
- > Complexity
- > Are you a e-sport player or just fan?
- > Experience as player
- > Group or rogue preference

- > Feelings when playing
- > What is going well and not well
- > Level of involvement – raking, honor system, etc
- > Number of past purchases
- > Motivations for purchase LoL merchandise and game features

Interaction with other players LoL managers and staff:

- > Updates/Patches Opinion
- > Community Influences on updates
- > Description of the interactions with the brand of LoL
- > Reason / Motivation to contact the community
- > Reasons for the importance of those interactions
- > Feelings related to the community
- > Did Riot answer to any of the interactions?
- > Opinion about Riot answering or not
- > Impact of the interaction
- > Issues
- > Interpretation
- > How the issue was addressed
- > Process

Brand identity claims and understanding:

- > Brand identity understanding for close friends who play
- > Brand identity claims to external people (people that do not play lol)
- > What would you change or improve in the game?

ANNEX 10 – SAMPLE GRID

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

ANNEX 11 – 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?
 - 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?