Ranking Practices and Distinction in League of Legends

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ABSTRACT

Player ranking is a common feature of competitive online games, but little research work has closely examined the ways it mediates player practices within this game genre. In this paper, we present a qualitative study of player practices around ranking in League of Legends (LoL), published by Riot Games and currently one of the most popular eSports games. We found that ranking is a cornerstone of LoL's competitive gaming practices, shaping the ways players distinguished and narrated their game experiences, thus engendering a culture of collaboration and competition through distinction.

Author Keywords

League of Legends; ranking; player experience; Multiplayer online battle arena; MOBA.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

Player ranking is an essential feature of competitive online games. A ranking score, calculated based on wins and losses of competitive play, is often considered an indicator of player skill, and serves the dual purpose of motivating players, as well as matchmaking players with similar skills [15]. Apart from research examining general players commitment and engagement [19,20,38], little work has examined why player ranking is so central to competitive gaming. Specifically, we study the extent player ranking mediates social practices and social structure.

We examined player experience with the ranking system in League of Legends (LoL), a team-based competitive game published by Riot Games [28]. Our study consists of semi-structured interviews and an analysis of player forum discussions. We adopted a grounded theory approach to explore the role of ranking in player experience. By adopting Bourdieu's concept of *distinction* [5], we went

beyond earlier findings of ranking as a motivator for player engagement and retention by reporting that player ranking contributed to the formation of social stratification and stereotypes within the LoL community, was incorporated into player narratives of their performance and progress, and impacted the practices of learning and collaboration. Ranking shapes player experience in important ways, which should be considered carefully in game design.

RELATED WORK

Ranking has long been analyzed as an important type of achievement contributing to players' engagement [20,35,38], retention [6,8], and in-game progression [1,14,36]. Much gamification research has adopted ranking as a design feature to motivate players [10,16,17,32].

Previous studies have revealed social practices related to ranking up. For example, people chose to team up with skilled friends for a better chance of winning [13,25,26]. Players with deeper game knowledge might even collude to cheat ranking systems [7,37].

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

With 67 million monthly active players [34], League of Legends is one of the most popular online games. As a Multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game, LoL is match-based rather than presenting a persistent world. Each match occurs between two teams and lasts between 30 – 50 minutes. A typical team contains five players who are selected randomly from a large pool of available players. During a match, players controls their characters (or champions) to destroy their opponents' base, or force them to surrender. During battles, each player gains experience points and gold by killing non-player characters (NPCs) or opponents. Learning to collaborate with strangers in a relatively short time is challenging for video game players [2,11,12,21]. Toxic behaviors are common within such online transient teams [4,18,22,23,33].

LoL ranks players into several tiers: Bronze (about 40.77% of players), Silver (37.54%), Gold (14.38%), Platinum (5.99%), Diamond (1.22%), Master (0.05%), and Challenger (0.02%)[1]. Each of the former six tiers is further divided into five divisions. A division contains 100 league points (LP) that players can gain or lose after a match. On the other hand, players of the latter two tiers participate in a different tournament format designed for the "the most elite players and teams" [29].

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[1] Data obtained on April 18, 2016 from: http://na.op.gg/statistics/tier/

METHODS

This study belongs to a larger project investigating LoL players' social experience. The study contains 16 semi-structured interviews with North American LoL players between 2013 and 2015. Participants had at least two years' experience playing ranked games during the time of interview. One player's rank was Diamond, three were Platinum, five were Gold, four were Silver, and three were Bronze. We recruited the participants by directly contacting them in game, recruiting on forums, and snowball sampling. Interviews generally lasted between 30 minutes to one hour. We asked them why they played ranked games, what were their strategies to improve their rank, and what a ranking meant to them. We searched forum posts that discussed ranking in Reddit's LoL sub-forum[2] and LoL's official forum[3], using keywords such as "ranking," "bronze," "silver," "gold," "platinum," "diamond," "master," and "challenger." In total we collected 37 posts from the former and 32 posts from the latter.

We took a grounded theory approach to analyze the data [31]. We first read the data and used our initial perceptions to generate a starting list of codes, which included ideas about players' perception of ranking and their strategies of ranking up. From there, we returned to the data to conduct a systematic analysis of the themes that arose. After several iterations of coding, we identified a central phenomenon in the data – how ranking is associated with elements of social experience. With this frame in mind, we returned to the data to systematically analyze these elements which we will discuss in the next section.

FINDINGS

In this section, we discuss how ranking influenced player experience in LoL in three different aspects: social stratification and stereotypes, player narratives, and learning and collaboration.

Formation of Social Stratification and Stereotypes

During our interviews, specific ranks were frequently mentioned when our study participants referred to a particular player such as an in-game friend or an offline connection. For example, a participant started answering our questions by saying, "I have a Diamond friend… Another friend who has been in Silver one for a long time thought…" Another participant said, "a Gold I met in normal recommended Zed mid, so I…" In these instances, participants used a specific rank such as "Diamond," "Silver one," or "Gold" to refer to an individual player. A rank became an important descriptor of players.

For players, a specific rank often suggested much more information than a skill level. Stereotypes were formed around different ranks. For example, when asked to explain what "Diamond" meant, a participant said, "they are pretty hardcore, knowing the pros and cons of many champions,

[2] https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends

[3] http://boards.na.leagueoflegends.com/en/

and sometimes arrogant!" "Bronze" according to many participants, did not just indicate a low skill at LoL. They used "Bronze" to refer to players who played mindlessly, often raged in game, refused to learn, and showed little interest in cooperating with teammates. From participants' perspective, the stereotypes of ranks differed along several dimensions such as in-game collaboration and learning, such as skill, knowledge, temper, personality, willingness to cooperate, and awareness of teammates.

Players' accounts oftentimes sustained such stereotypes. For example, here is an excerpt from a Reddit post:

> Before, I was the stereotypical feeding bronze who would autolock a champion either mid or ADC. Back then, League of Legends was a game I played carelessly. I would always find myself in hopeless duels with champions that far outmatched me. After getting sick of blaming everything on Gods creation for my failures I decided to try and get out of my low elo [computed ranking].

"Autolock" refers to the somewhat "abrupt" behavior of determining a champion and a role without communicating with teammates. This player identified with the Bronze stereotype, admitted his shortcomings, and sought to improve his future rank as determined by the ranking system. In such cases, social positioning represented by player ranks suggested players what kind of players they are, and with whom they are playing with.

Foundation of Player Narratives

Higher ranks supplied players sense of achievement and gratification. As a participant said, "I'm proud about reach[ing] Gold in the first season I played." Another participant mentioned, "I once mentioned to a friend that I was Platinum in League. He immediately said, 'oh, that's very cool man! Very cool! Very few can reach that high.' I was very glad to hear that." This echoed the study of Birk et al. that player self-esteem is positively associated with player perception of competence [3].

Such achievements were so central to players' experience, that when they described themselves to others, they often construct narratives which emphasized not only their present rank, but also the trajectory of ranks changing through their gaming history. Here is an excerpt from a Reddit post:

> I played Annie every chance I got and placed somewhere around mid-silver (1300 ish elo). Before the pre-season ended, I was at 1576, which was low gold... I played ... for about 800-900 ~ Annie games. When season 3 kicked off I was put into Gold V. From there, after playing 536 Annie Games, I reached platinum V... After 930 Annie Games, I reached Diamond V... After 1,438 Annie Games, I reached Diamond 1... So now after 1,960 Annie Games I've reached Challenger.

"Annie" is a champion in LoL. For this player, the "Challenger" rank indicated his present skill level. But his story also emphasized a history of diligent effort and persistent play that afforded his present rank, which he cared much about. Similarly, a participant noted:

> *I got my Diamond border this season. Every time I see it in the loading screen, it reminds me of the great moments when I made a big play and changed the game… The bad moments when a single teammate ruined the whole game… the amazing people I have played with. Some have become my friends and even now we still play together.*

Like this player, many participants have played hundreds or thousands of matches in order to reach a desired rank. They kept track of rank gains and losses after each match. The long-term endeavor enriched and complicated their feelings for their ranks. A rank was associated with many precious memories, such as memorable gaming moments and friendship. As such, the rank became part of the narratives of LoL players.

Players did not always attempt to improve their ranks, especially after they reached their perceived limits. A participant who was at Diamond explained:

> *After reaching Diamond V, I didn't play ranked as frequently as before. I didn't want to be demoted to Plat[inum] again. I know I can't get to Master or Challenger anyway, and Diamond V and Diamond I have exactly the same rewards… So I and some people I knew just sat at 0 lp till the end of the season.*

The player was aware that by playing more games, there was a risk that he may slide down the rank, and lost his Diamond status. Thus, he became pragmatic and conservative after reaching a desired rank. Such mentality was also reported by our participants who were at Platinum and Gold, who deemed a higher goal unrealistic. While LoL currently does not include the design of dynamic difficulty [9] for balancing player goal and commitment, participants themselves negotiated the situation through means such as controlling playtime.

Players' conservatism goes against the agenda of Riot Games which profits from frequent player participation. The company thus introduced a decay mechanism, in which a Platinum or Diamond player, after 28 days of inactivity, will be removed from the official league table, and will lose part of his LP score every seven days of further inactivity [29]. But our participants reportedly worked around this decay mechanism by playing only one ranked match every four weeks, which they claimed to be effective dealing with the mechanism.

Structuring of Learning and Collaboration
Ranking influenced LoL players' practices of learning and collaboration in concrete ways.

Learning
Our participants reported generally trusting the advice from players with a higher rank. Many participants admitted that they mostly watched the streams or videos of professional players or at least Diamond players, and preferred to read guides written by people that were Diamond or above. A participant explained:

> *I would probably think twice before believing anything said from a Silver. I mean, why he is stuck in Silver if he does everything right… It would be much convincing if the advice is from a pro.*

Another participant even went into further details to explicate the differences among Diamond players. He said:

> *Diamond I is definitely much better than Diamond V. Diamond V's skill is just around high Plat or something. Diamond I players are essentially playing with professionals or semi-professionals. This is why I like to get answers from Diamond Is.*

Ranking thus contributed to the formation of a social hierarchy along which knowledge about LoL was formed and passed. This echoed with Kow and Young's observation of the StarCraft eSport community where knowledge diffusion happened from expert players to ordinary ones [24].

However, participants also stressed the specialty of each individual rank. While participants thought highly of the opinions of high-ranked players, they also stressed critical thinking when applying some "pro advice" to their own play. For example, a participant said:

> *The Diamond/Platinum mentality doesn't always work at low tiers like Bronze… If you want to climb up in Bronze, you have to play aggressively and try to make big plays. Winning your lane and then moving to the team fight phase is simply not enough in Bronze and Silver. By the time you reach 200 cs in 20 minutes, you probably find all the rest of your team get stomped.*

"Cs" means the number of opponent NPCs killed by a player. Here, LoL players were also aware that each ranked league might also favor distinct strategies, thus influencing what constituted knowledge and learning in each league.

Collaboration
Ranking influenced player collaboration. Players judged their teammates based on the latter's ranking information. LoL provides application program interfaces (APIs) that allow public access to players' profile, setting, and history [30], leading to the emergence of a number of third-party websites, or player dossiers [27]. These websites allow people to check any player's ranking information such as win rate, current rank, match history, and performance.

LoL players used these websites to learn about teammates' capability and strengths. They then utilized these insights to influence their teammates. A player noted:

Manipulate your teammates to play one of their top two roles... Go to lolking.net and open up a tab for every one of your 4 teammates. Click on "Ranked Stats," then sort by "Wins." Your new goal in life is to get your teammates to play one of their top 2 roles, you can judge by their wins with champs (if they also have a positive win rate). Force your teammates into their best role if at all possible... Juggle roles to maximize win rate and therefore win chance.

The player discussed steps he used to influence teammates' decisions to optimize team performance. If teammates were uncooperative and picked unfamiliar champions or roles, players would anticipate a larger chance of loss. A common countermeasure is to quit as soon as possible, which may abort a match. A player wrote:

I prefer op.gg [a third party website], and I'm not afraid to dodge when it's clear to me that 2+ lanes are in a position to get rocked. Save yourself the time, the LP, and the potential tilt and just walk around for a few minutes instead. I feel like I jumped from Silver IV to Silver I simply by dodging the games that were "lost" in the champ select. That, and the release of cinderhulk Amumu [a skin for the champion Amumu].

"Tilt" in LoL refers to the downgraded mentality and rationality after a series of losses. In this case, ranking became a deciding factor in player choice of whether or not to play, and how in collaboration.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
We have discussed how the inclusion of a player ranking system mediated LoL players' perception of social strata in the game, and their interactions with other players. Clues of this social structure can be found in player conversations, learning, and collaborative play. Many participants reported trusting opinions and advice from people with a higher rank. A participant was pressured to improve his rank because "all my friends are either Diamond or high Plat."

Importantly, player ranking is such an important representation in competitive games—especially its position to organize competitive gaming communities—that within it we may conjecture to contain degree of unfairness especially when social biases do not reflect reality of players' true abilities and potentials, as Bourdieu noted:

Commonplaces and classificatory systems are thus the stake of struggles between the groups they characterize and counterpose, who fight over them while striving to turn them to their own advantage. [5]

Players may be unhappy over the ranking system for various reasons. Participants who were demoted to or decayed to a lower rank expressed their frustration and fear of being unable to return to the old rank. Players with limited time may take a pragmatic attitude towards ranking, and further constrain their playtime and investment in the game. Ranking thus can have negative influence over

player participation, posing critical questions into the design of "fair" ranking systems. Apart from the demotion and decay mechanisms, game designers need to explore ways of accommodating players' diversity and background.

Unlike in the real world, in which there are "dominant" social classes influencing knowledge creation [5], online forums surrounding games appear to be self-organized, but nonetheless still contains features of a knowledge hierarchy. This hierarchy is socially constructed, based on perception of stereotypes regarding skill, knowledge, mentality, and personality of player ranks. Players with higher ranks possess more authority in defining knowledge, such as how a champion should be played and what items to buy. However, players also perceived the limitations of this top-down knowledge diffusion—not attending to specific playstyle and team dynamics required at lower ranks. Participants who had successfully climbed up one or two tiers stressed the difference in play strategies at different tiers, for example, a participant said, "In Bronze and Silver I just spammed Master Yi. In Gold I paid more attention to my team composition when picking my champions."

With players' deep engagement, a rank is no longer just a skill indicator and a motivator. It reminds participants of the high and low points of their ranking history, such as the first time they reached Gold or the two times they were demoted from Platinum. Five participants explicitly mentioned being proud of the win rate of a particular champion, or a winning streak of 10 games. While each game passes quickly, these memories remain with players for a long time. Players dossiers such as those third-party websites are helpful in presenting more information about past gameplay besides a current rank. However, the precious moments of one player might differ greatly from another, making them difficulty to instantiate in a universal interface. The design of ranking systems might consider more power and freedom on the player side, allowing players to generate content within ranking systems.

While Medler's analysis of player dossier shows its instrumental value in enabling players to analyze past gameplay and increase social capital [27], we point to the value of such systems and the like in preserving an experience in which a player not only find distinction from others, but also derives pleasure from reminiscing and appreciating his own history of play. We suggest that such experience might be a critical component of player experience in competitive games. More research is needed to explore what constitutes proper ways of interacting with one's own data and what role design can play in this interaction.

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