LOOKING PAST THE ACTION:

A STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF STRUCTURE

ON VIDEO GAME COMMUNITIES

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Last, I want to say something about video games:

Video games are important. They forge real communities with real people with real hopes and real aspirations. It's silly to differentiate between video games and "the real world" because video games *exist* in the real world; they are real. Games have the power to unite, destroy, be art, or be zen. Let's eradicate the stigma and embrace games, whether on a computer, a Nintendo, or a smart phone. Let's all come together and play some games together. The relationships and ideas forged in these fantastic virtual spaces have the power to change the world to be and even better place. Game on.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

I am a gamer. I have been playing video games my entire life, clocking in over 10,000 hours of play since I was young, and I still play to this day. Malcolm Gladwell would describe someone like me as a prodigy in the field of gaming (McGonigal, 2011). He noted that prodigies—people like Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, the Beatles and Bill Gates—spend over 10,000 hours before their mid-twenties perfecting their craft. This is a feat currently being performed by young video game players across the world (McGonigal, 2011). However, despite my prodigy status, the stereotypes of gamers make me feel as though I have to justify my hobby. Video games are often perceived as harmful and negative. In fact, people often quote me studies describing how groups are trying to ban video games, or about video game addiction, or how video games can rot your brain and have no educational benefit. I try to explain the ways that video games can help individuals and argue that they are really not that bad. I even had the opportunity to deliver a guest lecture to a media studies class on the topic of games and communication in February of 2012 to explain my ideas. A familiar question came up from a student: "Aren't games teaching people to be violent and to express their anger in aggressive ways?" Amidst the growing change in video games, amidst all the progress being made, people still link games to violent behaviors, more so than many other mediums. The

question is not limited to older generations, the question from my lecture was posed by an undergraduate student, someone for whom video games have always existed.

Of course, some scholars have argued that violent content in games does make players aggressive, and, therefore, this question is not unfounded (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Bartlett, Rodeheffer, Baldassaro, Hinkin, & Harris, 2008; Huesmann, 2010). However, studies reveal that there may be other variables involved in the video game/player aggression equation, including frustration, player visual perspective, and even player cognitions (Bösche, 2010; Krcmar & Farrar, 2009; Williams, 2006). As I started seriously studying video games and thinking about their impact, I began to notice that all these game studies had a commonality: the impact of violent video game content. Video game content is what the player sees and does in the game, it is their actions and the consequence of those actions in the game. Scholars typically link this content to the game player's behavior. This made me curious as I have been exposed to many violent games. I have seen a person decapitated with a plastic bag in video games; that is violent. I have seen a airplane shot down in video games; that is violent. I have also seen Mario jump on and subsequently squash mushroom men in video games; that is also violent. These acts of violence do not all elicit the same response from game scholars. I noticed that scholars seemed to be ignoring the wide range of violent content across video games. Often studies have one atrocious example represent the entire spectrum of what is considered violence. How could such a broad topic be boiled down to such simple conclusions? This led me to believe that there is more than violent content at work in influencing players.

One aspect of video games that seemed oddly absent from studies was the concept of game structure. It seems that two acts of violence, one brutal and the other comical, will have different impacts on players. It is possible that if a character has the ability in a game to jump on mushroom men, the player approaches the "violent" act differently than if the character has the ability to decapitate another human being. As such, I believe that the way games are structured helps determine how players are influenced. While scholars have focused on violent content, they seem to have neglected the game-side concept of rules and regulations, the setting and genre, and the mechanics of the game worlds players enter when they play.

It seems feasible that the way a game is structured affects players the same way content can affect players, yet scholars do not know because video games are rarely studied in this manner. The lack of scholarship on video game structure and its influence on players is the impetus for this study. In particular, I wish to expand the literature in the field of communication with this project. In this study, I am trying to discover if game structure affect players interactions in *some* way. Because this study is concerned with the manners in which structure affects how players interact interpersonally (with other players) and on a group level (with the larger gaming community), my paper contributes ideas to the ongoing conversation occurring in the communication discipline about not only video games, but community and connection.

I conducted this study by interviewing members of two structurally distinct massively multiplayer online (MMO) game communities, *League of Legends* and *Puzzle Pirates*. I sought to understand the ways in which the structure of these video games

affects communities and, in turn, how those communities affect players. This was to ultimately determine how video game structure affects player interactions. In this first chapter of my thesis, I justify the necessity for this study, as well as provide a definition of key concepts I use in the project. In Chapter Two, I progress into a more comprehensive review of current video game literature. This chapter is divided into three sections, starting with an abbreviated history of video games, followed by a review of the current research focusing on video games. Lastly, the literature review describes how structure has the potential to influence communities by explaining Marshall McLuhan's (1964/2002) medium theory. This section of the literature review describes the affect mediums have over communities, and compares the similarities of these mediums to video games. While not a guiding theory of this project, McLuhan's theory on how structure shapes messages helps to better define my argument for the study of video game structure. In Chapter Three, I explain my methodology for the study, including my justification for observation and interviews, participant recruitment methods, and data collection and analysis procedures. I argue that using an interpretive qualitative approach guided by crystallization allowed me to delve deeper into the personal perspectives of players, as well as provide insight on my own experiences. This is followed by Chapter Four and Five which both include a close analysis of the games I am observing, *League of Legends* and *Puzzle Pirates* respectively. These chapters contain a thematic analysis of concepts discovered in my data and a personal narrative guided by crystallization. Finally, in Chapter Six, I conclude with my findings about the games in regards to

structure and player interactions. I also provide suggestions for future research as well as the limitations of this study in Chapter Six.

An analysis of the recurring themes from respondents in both MMO communities will allow me to observe how the structure of these video games impacts players and their respective communities. This data prompts the questions guiding this study:

1. *How does the ludic structure of a video game[1] influence the community playing that game?*
2. *How do player perceptions of the community of a video game influence players of that community?*

Justification

Video games are a relatively new entertainment medium in comparison to novels and films. Despite their relative youth, video games are an interesting subject of research, as the number of people worldwide who play them continues to grow. The population of game players has become so large that video games are now legitimate cultural texts that cannot be ignored. Further, the communities that video game players have formed cannot be ignored. As I later explicate, gamers have banded together and created their own unique cultures and have solved problems that they could not have without their collective intellect. As fascinating as the swelling population and power of video game players is, most video game research is focused on the content of games. Fewer studies are devoted to the structure of video games. This study will attempt to fill this gap in current literature. To that end, this section explains the importance of video games as a

[1] The definition of a video game in this context is any electronically based game. However, for this study, it should be noted that the chosen games are online, interactive games. This means they can be played with several people via the Internet.

cultural phenomenon and the importance of this additional study in the scholarly literature on video games.

In 1982, video games were touted by United States' news channels as a fad in which "millions of people are addicted to hours of gazing at electronic images on game screens" (MartialArchiveTv, 2010). Despite this negative point of view expressed by some media outlets, video games have become an important part of culture in the 21st century. The sheer amount of time and money invested in video games since the commercial inception of video games in 1975 is staggering. It is estimated that 72% of United States households play video games (The Entertainment Software Association, 2010). This means that video games and video game players are present in almost 95,000,000 homes across the country (USA QuickFacts, 2011). Several games are currently enjoying an immense surge in popularity, given these statistics. For example, competitive strategy game *League of Legends*, which is analyzed in this study, has accumulated over 15 million players in the two years since its creation in 2009. Riot Games, the video game developer behind *League of Legends*, boasts that their servers are seeing their total player base create 10 games every *second* (Makuch, 2011). The space-age action shooter series *Halo* has seen 14.4 million copies sold since their third iteration of the game (Halo 3: ODST, 2009; Sinclair, 2008; Sinclair, 2010). In addition, role playing juggernaut *World of Warcraft* had 11.1 million players as of June 2011, which was actually marked as a significant *decrease* in subscriptions from their all time high. Despite this drop in activity, this number is quite high considering each player subscribes

to the game for $15 a month (Cifaldi, 2011). This totals over $150,000,000 per month in subscription fees alone for the game.

To provide some perspective for these statistics, if *World of Warcraft* subscribers banded together and created a country, the population would roughly equal Cuba's (Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas Cuba, 2010). This would place *World of Warcraft* as the 75th largest country in the world in terms of population. Furthermore, the amount of money generated by subscriptions alone per year would be greater than the yearly Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of countries such as Liberia and Belize (World Databank, 2011). If every *World of Warcraft* player only played the game for 5 hours per week, a very modest estimate, in one year of gaming players would have invested the equivalent of over *300,000 years* of time in the game. The sheer number of video game players across these different games suggests that video games are an important and common factor in people's lives around the world and are, therefore, worthy of study.

If a single game has enough players and income to start its own country, then it is not out of the question that such a massive group could have its own unique culture. In fact, some researchers have already been investigating this hypothesis. Scholars have observed how these gaming communities evolved and how players' relationships and personalities developed within these game settings (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2007; Seay, Jerome, Lee, & Kraut, 2004). Some of these scholars have argued that the potential power these communities possess to change the world is awe-inspiring. If the amount of time harnessed by gamers while playing was used to create a Wikipedia-type reference site, a new resource the size of Wikipedia could be created every day, the

equivalent of almost 100 million hours of thought (McGonigal, 2011). In a more tangible example of the productive power of gamers, the *World of Warcraft* wiki site is actually the second largest online collection of user edited information, second only to Wikipedia (McGonigal, 2011). Some organizations have already begun to harness this immense and raw collective of brain power of video game players in more unique ways. The game *Foldit* was created in an effort to discover a cure for AIDS by allowing players to fold proteins into different complex shapes. Video game players responded to this challenge and managed to collectively solve a problem involving moving toward a cure for AIDS that had baffled scientists for years in *less than ten days* (Whitwell, 2011). Prominent video game advocate and scholar Jane McGonigal (2011) also addressed the benefits and impacts video game structures have on communities and human interactions by looking at the asynchronous chat format in the online word game *Lexulous*. The importance of games not only as entertainment, but as living, breathing places where communities grow and relationships form is being researched by select scholars like McGonigal, but incredibly few others.

The work of McGonigal and these few other studies are an excellent start in taking the role of video games and community building more seriously and my own study joins the spirit of these researchers. However, as I will explain later in Chapter Two, most of these studies are not rooted in the field of communication. Much of the research on video games focuses on game content and the psychology of the player. While these studies are beneficial for seriously thinking about games, it narrows the scope of the research to video game content and its effects. It would be significant to focus on the

inherent structures of video, rather than more inquiries into the player-side of the equation, such as how game content affects players. Without observing game structure, the study of game content and its effects on players is less informative. Games featuring combat as a prominent system of action have the potential to be inherently violent. Games that offer choices on a moral spectrum will eventually have players encounter immoral issues. The content of each game is always relative to the game's structure; therefore, a game's structure will have an effect on those playing the game. My study is important because it will search for insights into how structure affects these massive and powerful video game communities. In particular, this study will investigate this notion from a communication perspective. Video games form communities of players that interact with one another. These shared cultural bonds rooted in video games are based on player interactions. Therefore, a communicatively based exploration of the influence game structure has on communities seems very appropriate, as video game communities cannot exist without the process of communication. Video games are not going to leave the United States cultural consciousness anytime soon, and it is imperative that, through this type of research, scholars broaden their views of an ever growing population of game players and the ways in which they interact.

Defining "Structure" in Video Games

While scholars have studied video games from several different viewpoints, contention arises at a lack of standardized terms and language when it comes to their research; the field lacks precedent. Studies using the term "structure" vary, making it difficult to find consistency in the current literature. Even my own definition of structure

in video games finds overlap and confusion in comparison to similar game terms. Before I move onto the next chapters of this thesis, I want to explain how I define "structure" for the purpose of this thesis.

Structure is often defined in video games studies in the context of narrative structure, or, the plot and story of a game. Ip (2010) describes structure as the way a story gets from point to point and the transitions between major narrative events. Ip argues that the two main types of structure in video games are linear and branching, with current critics calling for more branching—and therefore more complex—narrative structure. Throughout his research on narrative structure in video games he compares video game narrative structure to more traditional storytelling narrative structures, invoking the idea of the Hero's Journey. Ip (2010) studied the narratives of 10 games, determining how they corresponded to the Hero's Journey, as well as the type of narrative structure he believed them to possess. Thus, game structure is defined by some scholars using terms from other mediums, convoluting the ideas of a unified terminology specific to video games. However, narrative structure is not the only type of structure described in game studies.

Other studies involving structure in games treats issues of identity, such as gender or race, as being separate from the content of the game. Just because a game may feature a protagonist rescuing a princess, the gender or race of the princess is not crucial to the plot of the game or moving the story forward. This creates a level of confusion regarding structure, as Brock (2011) was careful to separate narrative structure from cultural context in his work. However, this does not mean that race and gender do not provide any

structural framework for video games. The implications of the princess's gender *does* give subtle contextual clues about the protagonist's sexual orientation. These contextual clues can influence a game's structure to be more masculine in nature (Soukup, 2007). The same structural constraints can be applied to issues of race. This concept is exemplified in Brock's (2011) research on the race of the zombies in *Resident Evil 5*. Brock argues that the depictions of a white protagonist gunning down African zombies is not a plot device, it makes contextual sense for black zombies to be in Africa. His analysis shows that characters of a race or gender differing for the hegemonic European descended male have no bearing on the plot, even in roles of close connection to the white protagonist. Race and gender issues in video games create cultural contexts rather than compelling narratives.

Structure is also described, but not readily defined, in multiple ways by Hutchinson (2007) in her research on player agency in melee fighting games. Hutchinson uses structure to define the style of the game under review, in which she writes "…the game *structure* of binary combat, in which one player's character faces off against another…" (p. 283, emphasis added). Binary structure is referenced throughout the rest of the essay as a way to describe a one on one bout between two characters who must fight until one falls. The idea of narrative structure in video games, as described by Ip, is referenced when Hutchinson (2007) describes that "…Soul Calibur also has liminal elements built into its binary configuration and *narrative structure* that become significant in considering the performative aspects of combative play" (p. 286, emphasis added). Finally, Hutchinson (2007) describes structure in the context that I have offered

for my study, when she describes "…the coded rules and *structures* of the game configuration…" (p. 289, emphasis added). In this context, Hutchinson (2007) describes structure in terms of rules and how the game has been set up for specific interactions. This final use is also repeated later in her work, as she describes that first person shooters (FPS) and massively-multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG) have unique structures (Hutchinson, 2007). This multitude of different uses for a single term adds to the confusion game scholars face when trying to define a concept.

Perhaps it would be more fitting to simply call the structure of a game "rules." This term is much more definable, and is presented by different scholars as the crux of what makes a game truly a game (Huizinga, 1938/1955; Lastowka, 2009; McGonigal, 2011). Though rules and regulations are a large portion of the restrictions placed on players, rules do not seem to encompass some of the base structures of a game. For example, is the chat system of a game considered a part of the rules? Is the way players can organize via groups and teams classified under rules? These more foundational elements of video games, in addition to the regulations, restrictions, and other player constraints, cannot be hastily amalgamated under the term "rules."

Therefore, I use the term *ludic structure* for this thesis. The term "ludic" has been used in other studies that refer to games, including the study of ludology. It has been mentioned by Lindley (2005) in terms of *ludic space*, which refers to the "systems of experience incorporating concepts of game or game play and related experiences" (para. 2). Though a good starting point for my own terminology, Lindley (2005) admits to how broad the concept truly is. Therefore ludic structure, in regard to my analysis, refers to the

rules and regulations of a video game, and also the several aspects of structure that control aspects of the game not necessarily made available to the player. The distinction I try to create is the removal of aspects of game content from my definition. Instances of ludic structure could include the artificial intelligence of a game, the means by which players can chat with one another, the penalties the game dispenses to punish players, the style and format of the game (team shooter, fighter, puzzle-based), and the conditions a player must meet in order to achieve victory. While this definition is also broad, like the definition of ludic space, it covers the aspects of the game that are necessary to have a functional video game, but are not true game content.

Conclusion

Given the cultural importance of video games, as well as a scholarly need to explore the facets of video games in a more broad sense, I have chosen to study the possible affects that ludic structure have on player interactions. In this chapter, I have explained why I have chosen to research this topic, the importance of studying any aspect of video games in modern culture, as well as provided a detailed definition that will help clarify my argument for video game structure amongst the ambiguity of terminology seen in current video game literature. In the next chapter, I discuss current video game literature, including a history of video games in the United States, a review of the work of other video game scholars, and a connection between video games and McLuhan's concept of medium theory.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Video games at their core are a form of entertainment. However, their impact on culture has extended beyond the simple activity of having fun. Video games, like any other leisure activity, have created and formed long lasting communities that grow and thrive. However, the literature on video games and their impact is sparse and unfocused. Video game scholars have come to contradicting conclusions regarding games, and rarely focus on the inner mechanics, or ludic structure, of video games. This review of literature, first, addresses the history of video games and their influences on United States culture. Next, it explores the current literature on video games. This section is divided into studies about video game content, studies about race and gender in video games, and studies about video game culture. Finally, I discuss medium theory as a way to stress the importance of media on communities. I display the similarities between video games and other communicative mediums and, therefore, postulate that video games have the power to change and shape communities.

A Brief History of Video Games

The history of video games dates back to the recreation of table tennis. Game designers attempted to create a virtual environment in which players could challenge each other to a ping-pong match, but without nets, balls, or paddles in the traditional sense.

There had been variations on the game by different companies as early as 1964, but Atari's *PONG* was the first to create a successful version of the table tennis concept in the early 1970's (Kent, 2001). The first prototype of *PONG* was featured in a bar and was designed for two people to play. Thus, the original version of *PONG* was an entirely social machine and intended for public venues like pubs or theater lobbies. It became so popular that patrons visited the bar where the original *PONG* game resided for the sole purpose of playing the machine. In fact, when the game's designer, Allan Alcorn, was called in for maintenance on the first machine, he discovered that it had stopped working properly because of an overflow of quarters (Kent, 2001).

One of the first and most popular commercially sold video games was *Home Pong* in 1975 (Kent, 2001). This was an important innovation for Atari, as it allowed video games that normally resided in public places to be brought into personal homes. After releasing this first wildly successful game, Atari crafted a niche for itself as a game developer and is still in operation to this day with popular games such as *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* and an in-development Facebook application slated as *Dungeons and Dragons: Heroes of Neverwinter*. However, this transition from two person games in smoky bars to mass marketed entertainment did not happen overnight, as the video game industry has changed drastically in the past 35 years. Because the breadth of video games is so massive, the rest of this history will focus on the development of popular consoles and their games, followed by a condensed version of the personal computer's parallel history of games.

The first development most gamers mention as significant is the rise of the 8-bit consoles, named so because these consoles had only 8 bits of processing power to run games. The crowning achievement of this generation was Nintendo's Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), which dominated the 8-bit market after its release in 1983 (Nintendo Co., Ltd., 2011). This system featured titles that would shape the future of video games such as *Super Mario Bros*, *The Legend of Zelda*, *Duck Hunt*, and *Contra*. These games shared common traits, such as very pixilated graphics accompanied by sound that can only be described as tinny and primitive. Yet these games allowed players to assume the role of a character that was recognizable, as opposed to some of the blocky masses that represented characters on earlier game systems like the Atari console. Like *PONG*, the NES and many of its popular titles were playable by two people. The design of the console allowed for two controllers to be plugged in, and even games like *Duck Hunt*, which featured a special light gun controller, let another player control the flying ducks with a traditional controller (trsken, n.d.). Nintendo claimed their target audience was the whole family (described as mother, father, and children), but old commercials for the game seemed to feature almost exclusively male children and young teens (Llewelyn, 2006; NES Two Teens, n.d.; Nintendo 1984, n.d.). Therefore, NES games were still marketed as an activity to be played with friends, but the target audience of video games seemed to shift from bar crowds like *PONG* to a much younger demographic.

As technology progressed and computers became more advanced, 16-bit system became the new standard for console games around 1990. The two consoles that defined this era of gaming were the Sega Genesis and the Super Nintendo Entertainment System

(SNES). These systems provided about twice as much computing power as their predecessors and provided controller interfaces that had more buttons for more complex maneuvers in games. Again, the consoles allowed players to plug in up to two controllers for competitive or cooperative play. The audience of these consoles remained the same; it was again marketed towards younger male children. Graphics had progressed to the point where designers were able to use video recordings of live actors as opposed to animation (GamePro Staff, 1994). The games that revolutionized this graphical technique on the new systems were the *Mortal Kombat* series, a popular fighting game. This series was also the focal point of one of the largest scandals involving 16-bit video game systems, and a turning point that would change the video game industry forever.

One of the signature features of *Mortal Kombat* is the ability to perform a "fatality." When a player has defeated an opponent, they have the opportunity to brutally finish off their foe. Moves range from pulling out a beating heart, to ripping a character's head off with the spine following. Understandably, this upset parents and lawmakers who were afraid children playing these games would be negatively affected by such violence (Elmer-Dewitt & Dickerson, 1993). To curb these fears, the SNES chose to remove the blood and overly violent fatalities from its version of the game, while the Sega Genesis chose to keep all graphic content and place a self-imposed rating on their version of the game (Kohler, 2009). Both options were seen as undesirable to parents and lawmakers.

The violence in *Mortal Kombat* marked a potential merging of government and entertainment. Senator Joseph Lieberman introduced the Video Game Rating Act of 1994 with the intention of having game developers create a regulatory body to rate games

based on content and if such a group was not created, the government would intercede and regulate video games themselves (Kohler, 2009; S. 1823, n.d.). As a result, Nintendo and Sega agreed to the creation of an independently functioning Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB), which became the ratings group for video games the same way the MPAA is the ratings board for movies (Kohler, 2009). The content of video games have been under careful scrutiny ever since in an attempt to categorize games into their appropriate rating.

The next generation of popular video game consoles heralded more modern systems, featuring the Sony PlayStation and the Nintendo 64 (N64), which were introduced in 1994 and 1996 respectively. These consoles were heralded for their graphical achievements, in particular the ability to render three-dimensional images. Games were designed to take advantage of these new technologies which resulted in an increase of first-person shooters (FPS), which had previously only been widely distributed on personal computers. The new consoles allowed for multiplayer capabilities, with the N64 supporting up to four players simultaneously. Content of games on these systems was broad, allowing for game genres of all types to bloom, creating new styles of game play. However, content did remain within the regulated constraints of the well established ESRB. Popular series included an array of James Bond-themed games on the N64 and the now three-dimensional *Final Fantasy* series. Of particular note was *Conker's Bad Fur Day.* The game's content was adult-centered and featured gore, swearing, and incredibly crude humor, causing the game to push the thresholds of the ESRB. While *Conker's Bad Fur Day* could have been the subject of controversy,

Nintendo simply refused to officially acknowledge the game along with several of its distributors who refused to sell the title (IGN Staff, 2001). However, the game received glowing reviews from game critics, some of whom even stated that the game was aimed at a college audience and hit the mark (Hall, 2001; Liu, 2001; Satterfield, 2001). These more sophisticated games marked a shift with games being geared to a more adult crowd rather than focusing on entertainment for children and young teens.

The next generation of systems, which were marketed in 2000, improved by leaps and bounds in regards to their predecessors' graphical and audio capabilities. These systems included the PlayStation 2 (PS2) and Xbox. Eventually these evolved into the modern Xbox 360 in 2005, along with the modern PlayStation 3 (PS3), which was released in 2006 (Video Game Consoles, 2011). The popular Nintendo entry into the modern era of next-gen consoles—also introduced in 2006—was the revolutionary Wii, which allowed players to use motion sensing controls for gaming (Video Game Console Reviews, 2010). These consoles have been locked as the standard of the industry, always trying to outdo one another, as both the PS3 and the Xbox 360 attempted to include motion sensing playability into their titles to compete with the Wii (Video Game Console Reviews, 2010). Notable games from these modern consoles include the *Halo* series (Xbox), *Wii Sports* (Nintendo Wii), and the *God of War* series (PlayStation 2/3). The most popular titles on these consoles usually received an M for Mature rating, meaning the games were intended for players over the age of 17, continuing the trend of video games being developed for an older audience. The consoles themselves each allowed up to four players locally, as well as providing online connectivity for players to connect

beyond their living rooms, with some games featuring up to 16 simultaneous players in total. Unfortunately, there are so many video games from this era among the different consoles that finding a single commonality would be difficult. More games are coming out every year, each one trying to include better graphics, audio, or game play than the last. However, the content of some modern games has sparked controversy.

For example, the media attacked the *Mass Effect* series when it was revealed a player's character could have a romantic relationship with members of the opposite or same sex (McCullough, 2008a; D, 2008). Conservatives attacked the issue, but withdrew their claims after admitting to having never played the game (McCullough, 2008b; Schiesel, 2008). After watching *Mass Effect* being played, one psychological expert admitted having "seen episodes of 'Lost' that are more sexually explicit" (McElroy, 2008). The *Grand Theft* Auto series has also been in the limelight for topics ranging from violence to sexuality, in particular when a non-licensed game modification was leaked that allowed players to engage in sexual intercourse in the game (Chruscinski, 2008).

However, some games have gained attention from the media and players for even more unique, positive reasons. *Braid*, for example, was released on multiple platforms, but challenged players' understanding of what a game was. Most games have a way of tracking points as a feedback system, or at the very least, a limited number of attempts at a certain goal. Most games also have negative consequences upon death or failure. However, in *Braid*, the player has unlimited lives, there are no negative consequences for losing a level, and the game encourages players to learn from their mistakes, thus, redefining the structure of video games that had been centered on points and success for

so long (Wallace, 2009). With the high number of games being released on a variety of consoles, it seems new ground is being broken for good or for bad every year.

No review of the history of video games would be complete without acknowledging computer games. For a long time, computers have been in the background as gaming consoles developed. Personal computers (PCs) have had access to games as long as consoles have, as computer technology develops faster or at the same rate as console-specific technology (Console vs. PC, 2007). Computer games have followed almost in the same footsteps as console games, as most console games are ported—transferred for play on a different system—over to the computer and vice versa, giving both consoles and PCs similar game libraries. Computer games however, have had the advantage of being able to easily access the Internet (Spohn, 2011). This means that games can be developed for the computer to feature multiplayer concepts that the console cannot. While consoles have always allowed for at least two players to enjoy video games together, computers allow players to have multiplayer sessions via the Internet. This means that players can connect and play with people across the globe as opposed to across the couch. Where consoles can only support up to four players in the same room at their current level of technology, computer games connected to the Internet allows hundreds of people to play simultaneously with each other.

A genre known as the Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMO) has blossomed because of computers, creating vast networks of players with titles such as *World of Warcraft*. These games connect hundreds, or in some cases millions, of players together that would not have normally been able to interact. Other games have opted for a

single player environment with online multiplayer modes that at their core do not truly reflect the MMO genre, but could be treated as such because of their massive online player base, such as *Starcraft* (Dana, 2009). The next generation of consoles such as the PS3 and Xbox 360 has also capitalized on this idea with their PlayStation Network and Xbox Live Arcade respectively, allowing console players to experience the same connection usually reserved for native computer players (Spohn, 2011).

This abridged history of video games, their development, and impact on culture through the years shows an improvement in the quality of games, as well as an improvement in the ways players can interact with one another. This historic review illuminates the fact that, by design, games are meant to be social and played with others as each console allows for multiplayer interaction. Throughout their history, video games at their core have not been a solitary activity, a point echoed by Dmitri Williams (2006) when he explained that gamers do not "bowl alone." However, as video games rise in popularity, there is a trend of regulating content. Games developed to a point where they needed to be regulated, then experienced a relatively peaceful stint, and finally underwent controversy again as games became more realistic. It seems that as games begin to mirror real life in appearance, groups seek to control this content for moral reasons like any other media source (Williams, 2003). In sum, video games only become more diverse as time goes on, shaping the field of gaming while simultaneously existing within its constraints.

Video Games in Literature

Video games have experienced a surge in academic popularity in recent years. The growth of video game popularity in the media has been outlined in detail by Dmitri Williams (2003) as he tracked the media's reaction to this new and growing entertainment medium. However, even with this new fascination with video games, Williams (2003) believes that "the video-game industry…remains largely ignored by communication studies scholars" (pg. 523). He also notes that video games are becoming a more important area of study as the evolution of social games on sites like Facebook have made games more accessible to more people (Williams, 2006). While there is a plethora of attention focused on video games, studies from various disciplines tend to focus on violent content in games. Williams (2003) notes that these studies usually focus on how children, not all video game players, are affected by violent content. This section explicates these studies in order to display the progress and limitations in the current body of literature regarding video games. I begin with a review of the research focused on game content, followed by games studies in race and gender, and finally studies of gamer culture.

Video game content. The violent content in video games has been of great interest to scholars across several disciplines—including communication studies—because of violent content's connection to aggressive player tendencies. Scholars want to know if violent content is negatively affecting video game players. Violence in video games is sometimes even linked to mental wellness and levels of aggression when playing games. While some have argued that the cases of aggression and violence is not

linked to video games, Huesmann (2010) used Anderson and Dill's (2000) General Aggression Model (GAM) to prove otherwise. In some studies, long-term exposure to violence in video games has been positively correlated to increased aggressive tendencies (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Huesmann, 2010; Williams, 2009). Scholars have tried to observe the issue of violent content from different angles, trying to eliminate possible causes of aggression related to violence in games. Barlett et al. (2008) researched the topic of aggression in video games while observing possible frustrations from using inferior video game system hardware. They wondered if using an outdated system attributed to video game related aggression. However, their conclusions found that technological frustrations were independent of aggression levels when playing (Bartlett et al., 2008). Bartlett et al. (2008) also observed the levels of immersion players felt when involved in a video game. Again, immersion levels were found to be independent of hostility related to playing video games. This research suggests that, regardless of any of these observed outside variables, violence in video games does indeed make players more aggressive. It should be noted, however, that the violent video games used for Bartlett et al.'s (2008) study were from the *Mortal Kombat* series, which, as I referenced previously, is notorious for its graphic representations of violence.

Other scholars have also linked violent content to aggression. Similar to Huesmann's study, Krcmar and Farrar (2010) also refer to Anderson and Dill's GAM in their research regarding retaliatory aggression in video game players. In their work, they observe media effects on video game players. Their study reinforced the model designed by Anderson and Dill (2000), which suggests that exposure to violence primes the mind

for aggressive thoughts. Therefore, according to Krcmar and Farrar (2010), cognition mediates aggression. This means that if a person is thinking aggressive thoughts, whether consciously or subconsciously, perhaps via exposure to violent content, it opens a gateway for players to act out this aggression. Krcmar and Farrar's (2010) findings were in line with this hypothesis, as players were observed being more verbally and physically aggressive after playing violent video games. However, I argue that there is a trend in game selection that can be observed in these types of studies linking violent content to aggression. Krcmar and Farrar (2010) chose *Hitman II: Silent Assassin* as their case study of violent content. The purpose of this game, as defined by the researchers, is "to maneuver a hitman through several missions, assassinating enemies, while attempting to rescue a friend" (p. 123). It may be more informative if scholars chose games that represent the entire spectrum of violent games. The structure of *Hitman II*, which is centered around assassinations, may mean that the conclusions drawn about violence in video games is limited.

Though some scholars draw a correlation between aggression and violent video game content, other studies have observed how this aggression is assuaged, and in some cases, how violent content can be positive for gamers. Research has shown that violent moral implications of games, such as an enemy writhing in pain before dying or accidentally harming a civilian, removes enjoyment from game play (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010). Players also realized in this study the difference between reality and the game, though their morals toward violence stayed relatively the same in both situations (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010). This shows that violence in video games is not necessarily

harmful to a player's morality and psychological wellbeing. Though first person shooter games such as *Call of Duty* or *Medal of Honor* are centered around violence because of their war-like nature, there are also observable player benefits to this kind of violence. *Call of Duty* has been observed as a highly socially engaging game, as players collaborate together to achieve a common goal (Ferguson, 2010). Other games in the MMO genre have also shown this style of collaboration and relationship forming, such as *World of Warcraft* or *Everquest*, regardless of their violent nature (Ferguson, 2010). Another common adage that video games supporters rally behind in the face of opposition is that shooting games improve hand-eye coordination, if nothing else. These claims have actually been verified as violent shooting games have been shown to improve visuospatial cognition (processing and altering visual information) more so than nonviolent games requiring the same skill set, such as *Tetris* (Ferguson, 2010). Other scholars have even discovered that perhaps the literature regarding video content needs to be entirely refreshed, as they believe that studies regarding aggression are based on older theories involving television and aggression (Lachlan & Maloney, 2008). Regardless of how people may frame violent content, Huesmann (2010) believes that there is conclusive evidence linking violent content and aggression, and this data will not sway defendants of video games and their "ad hominem attacks on researchers" (p. 180). Violence, however, is not the only subject that piques the interest of video game scholars.

Race and gender. Race is another topic of interest for scholars in most disciplines, however it is much less prevalent than violence in video game research (Kirkland, 2005). Kirkland (2005) notes that the content of some games plays to racial

ideals; that is to say, white, whether seen in characters or settings, equals good and pure while black represents evil and tainted. For example, the game *Silent Hill* involves unspeakable evil existing in suburbia, a façade of "white picket fences and immaculate lawns" that are meant to conceal the troubles within while representing the white American dream (Kirkland, 2005). The display of characters in *Silent Hill* also intrigued Kirkland (2005) who noted the lack of non-white characters and villains, even observing that monsters are blanched to become unnaturally white. There is an emphasis of light against darkness in metaphorical and literal ways throughout the game that suggest a greater theme of white being better than black. Because the game is rooted in the horror genre, Kirkland (2005) suggests that *Silent Hill* is directed towards white audiences because "horror is an almost exclusively white genre within the West" (p. 175). Along the same tones of race was the controversial *Resident Evil 5*, which featured a white protagonist against a horde of zombies in Africa. Naturally, the featured zombies were black. However, this visual contrast of a white man gunning down countless infected black villagers raised attention in the video game and black community (Brock, 2011). Several blogs and websites featured the controversy, posing the question of whether the game was racist for having a white hero shoot black zombies, or not racist for having zombies from Africa be black. Video games are not immune to cries of racism from scholars and some games are even guilty of toeing the line of racial issues irresponsibly.

Video games have also been under close scrutiny by scholars for their portrayals of gender. Video games themselves have been framed as a male oriented activity, with tropes of a male character having to save a princess or damsel being seen in popular

games such as the *Super Mario* and *Zelda* series (Thornham, 2008). It is not uncommon for studies to show the male bias towards games whether it is through overly sexualized females, or games centering on more male dominated activities, such as professional sports. This bias is personified in the now iconic *Tomb Raider* series which featured a scantily clad female archaeologist, Lara Croft. The game was the center of attention for both players saying Croft possessed a strong amount of agency and others who decried Croft as another character to be ogled by a male audience (Kennedy, 2002). Video game developers took note of these comments and attempted to reach out to their female demographic. Entire genres of games have been created to appeal to a more feminine market, known as "pink games" (Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2008). However, these games seemed to undermine the point of empowering females playing games, as these games concentrated on objectives such as dating a crush, styling hair and makeup, and playing dress up (Kafai et al., 2008). This idea, unsurprisingly, only served to reinforce strict gendered styles of video game play instead of creating a sense of equality. In order to correct this mistake, developers began to design "purple games," which were again marketed towards young females, but with a wider variety of topics including sports, mysteries, and betrayal in close relationships (Kafai et al., 2008). Despite these changes, the stereotype that games are masculine has persisted. Though this scholarship is bringing attention to a potential gender gap in video games, online game statistics have discovered that women are, in fact, very active gamers (Ingram, 2010). The attempted structural reconfiguration of games into a "purple" genre still means these games are being targeted towards young girls, which may suggest that there is no space in "normal" games for

women to play. While "purple" games try to deal with different, more feminine narrative structure elements, Kafai et al.'s (2008) study still suggests that games can be tailored to specific genders, which may do more harm than good.

Scholars also argue that the inherent nature of games, specifically the goal to master or win games, creates a gendered space. Games with finite endings invite players to reach the end of the game; games with points invite players to beat the high score; open ended multiplayer games invite players to dominate those with less skill (Soukup, 2007). The problem with some of these video games is that the goal of mastery is inherently competitive, mastery being a notably masculine trait. The culture of video games also reinforces this masculine predisposition as seen in video game review discourse, where masculine traits and practices are favored over feminine traits. James Ivory (2006) found that there is a statistically significant difference in game reviews featuring more sexually suggestive female images than sexually suggestive male images. Ivory (2006) also discovered that the majority of female roles in video games are passive or unimportant, which led him to ask: if females have such diminished and disempowered roles in games, should designers even strive to include females in games? This suggests that even increased female presence in games would only further current male and female stereotypes. What is most interesting about studies of gender in video games is that while the game content is analyzed, the research delves deeper into the structure and impact of the games beyond content. Therefore, this type of gender-based research has helped scholars understand the more subtle nuances of gender and femininity in games that are predominantly masculine in nature. Scholars are able to hypothesize that changing the

inherent structure of games could have much more positive effects on perceptions of gender, according to this research.

Structure and culture. Other scholars have observed the effects of the structure of video games, however, they do not directly claim to be studying structure, similar to gendered research on games. This includes the work of Jane McGonigal (2011), who has designed and studied multiple "Alternate Reality Games" (ARGs). ARGs are a unique combination of technology, game play, and the real world, forcing players to interact within a community while modifying the physical world around them. Her games have created several online communities and have challenged the definition of what a game is and how they are played by modifying their structure. Such examples include the *I love bees* ARG, associated with the release of *Halo 2*, and *The Lost Sport* ARG, which was developed for the 2008 Olympic Games (McGonigal, 2011). Her own research has observed that games can be used as a positive catalyst for large scale change, but they need to be properly structured for this to occur. For example, in *The Lost Sport*, in order to encourage global participation in this ARG, the original call out podcast was subtitled in seven different languages so the game was not limited to native English speakers (McGonigal, 2011). By changing basic structure like language choice, the game was able to expand its reach to a global audience, and encouraged participation from several different global cultures.

Scholars have also studied video games and game players as a culture. The culture of video games is no different from other types of culture. For gamers, the uniting factor is the activity of playing video games. Every game, regardless of its objective, allows

players entry into this culture of games with its own references and norms. This is why it is possible for gamers to reference a variety of genres with ease, and also be knowledgeable of classic and flagship games. Specific game communities are created in the wake of this shared gamer culture. These game communities stem from each video game title or series, spawning places for gamers to congregate and speak about topics that concern them. These conversations may range from strategy, to bug corrections, to fan fictions, and airing grievances about game difficulty levels. Within literature on video game culture though, there seems to be little agreement on what exactly constitutes a gamer community. Game communities have been defined as productive—meaning the community produces something unique inside or outside the game—regardless of the initial reaction of early scholars to believe games were inherently unproductive, with more and more scholars shifting towards a view of community as productive as time progresses.

In "canonical texts" on games such as *Homo Ludens* and *Man, Play, and Games*, Pearce (2006) describes that games were originally classified as unproductive, though these referential texts were written over 50 years ago. The sentiment at the time was established as people viewed games, by definition, as an activity that cannot be productive; games are simply entertainment. These scholars, now outdated, believed that nothing new can be created in a game, just as basketball or football games do not technically produce anything unique. However, Shaw (2010) argues that one of the drawing factors of video games are the level of interactivity they possess. Video games

by nature require the player to contribute some form of input. Shaw (2010) even admits that video games are "making audiences active and productive" (p. 417).

The notion of game players creating a productive community is contrary to previous research on games and their communities. However, this is not an isolated incident with the rise of sandbox-type games. In these types of games, players are given reign over a massive area and the opportunity to construct their own stories and landscapes, metaphorically dropping players in the middle of a giant "sandbox." Popular recent games include *Terraria* and *Minecraft*, both games in which players can alter terrain to build their own game worlds. Neither game has a stopping point at which the player can "beat" the game, but allows for almost infinite creative possibilities. Because these games focus on creation, players have even gone to lengths to create magnificent structures, recording images of their feats, and posting them to online "museums," which catalogue and display the marvels that have been spawned in these games (The Minecraft Museum, 2011). This seems to be the most compelling argument that games can indeed be productive, as the sole purpose of these game communities is to create something.

Video game communities are also not limited to creating productive works solely *within* games. Some games actually allow players the opportunity to modify existing games. This practice is called "modding." Some game developers frown upon third party additions to their games because they are protective of their intellectual property and cautious that modifications may give certain players unfair advantages. Other developers, however, openly embrace the concept and give players the tools required to create their own modifications. Game developer Activision Blizzard is well known for giving players

the ability to create their own maps, scenarios, and modifications for their games. This has resulted in tightly knit communities centered around not only the game, but also community created game modifications (Sotamaa, 2010). On more than one occasion, these modifications have led players to experiment with playing original games in unique ways that the developers did not intend. One of the most popular of these modifications was to the game *Warcraft III*. Players created their own style of game play called "Defense of the Ancients" (DOTA).

DOTA became its own game, classified later as a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA). This new style of game play created a rush of clone games that followed in DOTA's footsteps. The most popular iteration of this type of game is one of the games I am studying, *League of Legends*, which is the brainchild of the creators of the DOTA mod for *Warcraft 3*. This is a direct example of a productive community, as the end result was an entirely new product which in turn now has its own community of over 15,000,000 players. While games may have once been viewed as unproductive because they are a form of entertainment, video games have proven contrary to this initial understanding.

Another defining factor of game culture seems to not only be the interactions between the gamers and the game, but also the interactions between gamers themselves. Though the communities between games may differ, one idea on which scholars agree is that video game players are incredibly social individuals (Dmitri, 2006; Shaw, 2010). A generic assumption of video game culture is that it is a group of people coming together and interacting. Though scholars may not have concrete definitions for every aspect of

gaming culture, there is now consensus with current scholars on at least two issues: video game players are productive, and video game players are highly interactive. This makes video game culture and thus, video game communities, places where change can occur via players working together. Video game culture in general is a powerful force, and each community has the potential to radically create change not only within the community, but also change within the game that initially drew them together.

As I have argued in this literature review, there is plenty of research covering the topic of video games, but most studies seem to focus on variations of common themes. Many scholars focus on violence in games. Race and gender issues in video games are also important topics in literature. Of importance to my study, gender research suggests looking to the inherent structure of games as opposed to their content for significant findings. Jane McGonigal (2011) also believes that a game must be designed correctly to foster real change, including but not limited to elements of structure. While this does not discredit the importance of content research in video games, it potentially provides a new framework that can observe video games in a more holistic way.

Medium Theory and its Relation to Video Games

As noted previously, there is ample research on the subject of content in video games, but a noted lack of research exists in studying the structure of video games. This study seeks to identify how the structure of games affects players. Medium theory deals with how mediums influence messages, a concept I compare to the structure of video games. In this section, I include an overview of Marshall McLuhan's (1964/2002) medium theory. Next, I provide examples of prominent mediums and their effects on

people and communities. Finally, I argue that video games exhibit qualities similar to communicative mediums (i.e., the Internet, television, computer), and therefore, can have similar effects on communities as more established mediums.

Medium theory was introduced by Marshall McLuhan in 1964 in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* when he coined the, now infamous, phrase "the medium is the message," to describe media as being unique and standalone technologies. McLuhan (1964/2002) argued that media, regardless of content, will always contain certain messages because of their inherent structure. The medium provides no new content in the way that "the railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society," it simply contains an inherent message (McLuhan, 1964/2002). The railway did however, accelerate and enlarge the scale of previous functions, by increasing the number of ways that goods could be quickly distributed and also connecting cities and people in ways never previously thought possible. The medium is a carrier of ideas that changes the way humans interact and conduct their basic affairs (McLuhan, 1964/2002).

McLuhan (1964/2002) used a light bulb as the ultimate medium as message metaphor. He has the reader picture a room that is completely dark. The room in its current state in unusable. A person can enter, but in the dark, the person cannot function; they cannot work, nothing can be accomplished. However, when the light bulb is turned on, the room in transformed. What used to be an empty space becomes a world of possibilities. The light allows the person to use the room for any purpose possible; any content imagined can now be placed inside the room, for example, a party. The light is

simply the medium that allows the party to exist. Without the light in the room, the party could not have occurred. McLuhan (1964/2002) describes that the existence of activities in a lit area "merely underlines the point that 'the medium is the message' because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action" (pg. 9). Without the light bulb, nothing requiring light can take place, and only activities dependant on light may take place when it is on. While content is important to study, content cannot exist without structure and is undeniably shaped by the medium in which it resides.

The existence of media has allowed the creation of extraordinary content and change in community configuration. For example, DeLuca and Peeples (2002) acknowledged the way in which new media, in particular television, had changed how the public acquires and distributes information. They argue that the existence of a visual medium like television caused protests to escalate into violence during 1999 in Seattle. Deluca and Peeples (2002) believe that the violence in Seattle occurred because it was documented visually via television; the protestors became violent because they knew it would be seen. Thus, the medium of television influenced the message the protestors were sending and the medium shaped the message.

Twitter is a more recent example of how mediums can shape messages. Twitter is an interesting technology that operates via the Internet and Short Message Service, and has a very specific structure. Twitter users may only "tweet," or send, messages that are 140 typed characters or less. This drastically limits the amount of information that people can broadcast (Hannah, 2009). In turn, this influences the content of tweets, which must

be succinct. Because these messages are so short, users typically can only provide the main point of an event rather than details. In addition, when sharing stories online, Twitter users are relegated to simply sending a link rather than providing a link and their personal comments. Twitter also includes a way to track what other users are saying with its trending tweets section. When several users begin to tweet about an issue, it appears on a list for all users to see called trending topics (About trending topics, 2011). Users are also able to use a hashtag, which is the use of the pound sign before a phrase (i.e., #election2012, #justinbieber, #videogames) to categorize tweets in easily accessible lists (What are hashtags? 2011). Advocates of Twitter believe that the use of hashtags not only influence popular trends in what is being tweeted, but adds a level of subtlety and finesse to an otherwise limiting medium of social expression (Orlean, 2010). Hashtags and trending topics allow for a large community of users to become united over a shared interest in a topic or current event.

Twitter has earned a reputation as a legitimate technological function of the Internet—both by shaping messages and changing communities—both real and virtual. In fact, Twitter has become a revolutionary way of allowing people to communicate to one another during times of crisis. The Iranian revolutions of 2009 are an excellent example of Twitter's communication potential. Before the Iranian government shut down Internet access during their 2009 elections, Twitter was not seen as a powerful force for the Iranian people (Grossman, 2009). It was, at that time, considered a way to send short messages among people who knew each other. However, because it is an updatable news source that can also be accessed via phone, when the Internet was shut down in Iran,

citizens were able to report the status of the country to the world regardless of Internet access. While newspapers and other official media were able to edit content and police the Internet, shutting down phones would be too drastic and thus, Twitter was able to remain active and virtually limitless (Grossman, 2009). People across the world initially started to rally behind the hashtag #cnnfail, which was attached to tweets that were criticizing mainstream cable television for their lack of coverage on the issue (Poniewozik, 2009). People living through the election in Iran were able to give live updates of the situation, with such poignant tweets as "Woman says ppl knocking on her door 2 AM saying they were intelligence agents, took her daughter," and "we hear 1dead in shiraz, livefire used in other cities RT [retweet]," (Grossman, 2009). Twitter users across the world took notice and began to raise awareness and retweet messages with the hashtag #iranelection (Allison, 2009). Another hashtag, #neda, was circulated following the killing of Neda Agha-Soltan, whose shooting death during the election protests was videotaped and spread virally across the Internet (Allison, 2009).

Because of this technology, which was established on short bursts of information being shared instantaneously, the world was able to see the actual happenings behind the Iranian elections as opposed to edited news stories (Allison, 2009). At its peak, the #iranelection hashtag was being used 221,744 times *per hour*, conveying the size of the community that was forming to show their support of the issue (Parr, 2009). Because Twitter allowed for this global-scale and real-time exchange of information, the Iranian voters were given a larger voice than previously possible and their movement gained further legitimacy. Countries began to sympathize with the voters' plight, causing the

vast online community protesting the 2009 election to grow beyond the borders of Iran. The attempt of the Iranian government to silence their people was thwarted in part because of the structure of Twitter.

In November, 2009, Twitter changed their interface from "What are you doing" to "What's Happening?" (Dybwad, 2009; Stone, 2009). Previously, users interpreted the original prompt of "What are you doing?" as a request for a personal update of their everyday activities, parodied by popular video game blog Penny Arcade (Holkins & Krahulik, 2008). The new prompt of "What's happening?" led users to begin tweeting about more than just themselves; they began tweeting about the larger picture of the world around them ('What's Happening' with Twitter? 2009). Organizations increased their use of Twitter as a way to track events in real time, such as the basic communication course at Ball State University. Other uses included the live tweeting of sports commentary, awards shows, and other culturally relevant events (Tsotsis, 2011). Although these activities had always existed on Twitter, after the prompt was changed, users followed with this trend of providing more culturally relevant information to a greater and more saturated degree (Dybwad, 2009). Twitter shifted from a social medium concentrated on giving personal updates to a medium that provided broader cultural updates, as Twitter had witnessed in its popularity during the Iranian 2009 election. What is interesting is that this community, the users of Twitter, adjusted the content of their messages when the inherent structure of the medium changed. Again, the medium began shaping the content of messages. The Twitter community began using the medium for broader and more inclusive topics than their personal lives after the shift in Twitter's

prompt structure, even though the developers did not believe this would change usage (Stone, 2009). Thus, the medium influences the message in established communities, especially when the structure of the medium changes.

While not explicitly a new medium, video games draw upon some of the defining factors of the mediums they utilize in order to exist. Video games may be considered a form of entertainment via the television or computer, with the games of my particular study (MMOs) requiring access to the Internet to exist. The entire structure of a game, including the software, the gaming system, the player, the game play, and the interactions between all of these parts is considered technology (Crogan & Kennedy, 2009). Even game scholars are at a loss of how to describe the environment that exists around and in a computer or video game, going as far as to suggest that video games may even possibly be a medium in themselves (Crogan & Kennedy, 2009). This lack of terminology limits studies in their observation of structurally-based video game phenomena. Thus, drawing upon McLuhan's established medium theory is an excellent starting place to describe video games on a technical level.

Though not technically a medium in the truest sense, video games have connected people worldwide and have become a way to transmit information like other media. While video game content is under close research, studying video games as a medium with unique structures may also prove to be beneficial. Every game has an inherent structure that is affecting players. For instance, games like *Words With Friends*, a game in which two players spell words with tiles on a grid, has completely player generated content (Game Rules, 2011). The words the players use are influenced by one aspect of

the game: the fact that players are only allowed seven letters at a time. The structure of the game dictates that large words cannot be often played, due to this restriction. Because the game is multiplayer, players must have contact with others or an Internet connection to play. The content of the game is irrelevant, yet the game shapes and affects players. If games were indeed a medium, their shape would influence their content, or messages. Other games adhere to genres and archetypes in similar ways, giving birth to games simply described as "clones." These are games that are similar to their progenitor; however they have slightly different content and the structure is what is important (Ibrahim, 2009). Players know what to expect because the basic structure of the game remains constant. Studies about the violent content of games observe violent games; a game about war will simulate violence regardless of actual game content because it is inherent to the game's structure. Just as McLuhan (1964/2002) described how a medium influences the content it transmits, the content of a video game is shaped by its structure. Though split among genres and styles, video games—whether as an established technology or new medium—contain inherent messages based on their structures that need to be studied further.

Video games communicate messages whether through the story of the game or whether the games link players together in interpersonal communication. This communication of information at least solidifies video games as a new technology, along the lines of Twitter. McGonigal (2011) observed the unique nature of the video game *Lexulous* and the way it delivered asynchronous messages between players to allow for a more relaxed style of game, like postal chess. While this may seem like a strange way to

communicate, it still allows people the opportunity to communicate and connect via the game. People have begun to use video games as social networks, as shown by the success of game developer Zynga, connecting individuals with friends and family that may live far away via games (AFP, 2011). Games not only act as a means of communication, but also as shared spaces in which players can interact with others across the world. They have become microcosms of people from around the world playing together. Video games allow players to remain in their homes while sharing experiences and knowledge with people from other cultures across the world nearly instantaneously. Video games create the kind of cultures and communities like the Internet and Twitter have fostered among their users. More must be uncovered about how the structure of video games contributes to the formation of community so scholars can truly understand this medium.

Conclusion

Scholars have studied video games from a wide variety of perspectives, addressing several different topics within games. However, this broad study of game concepts has created a lack of depth within the literature, which has failed to draw compelling conclusions about video game structure. With such a vast, new, and constantly growing field, such holes are to be expected. This chapter has detailed the history of video games, including the evolution of games to their contemporary form. This history demonstrated the ways in which games have affected culture and legislation, as well as the resulting gamer culture. This chapter also discussed the works of other scholars who have studied video games and the topics they have breached. In an effort to compare video games to more established theories, I provided an overview of medium

theory and the effects other mediums have on communities and individuals. Because a medium's structure directly influences its content, it is important for scholars to know more about the structure of video games to truly understand their impact upon players. This overview of the current literature has focused on the fact that scholars have been neglecting to study structure in a meaningful way, preferring to study either game content or structure in ways that do not directly implicate the structures of games as influencing players. Therefore, because of the lack of current literature regarding ludic structure in games, I ask the following questions:

1. *How does the ludic structure of a video game influence the community playing that game?*
2. *How do player perceptions of the community of a video game influence players of that community?*

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The goal of this study is to determine how the structure of video games influences communities, and in turn, how communities influence the players of those video games. In particular, I attempted to discover these connections by studying the reflections and insights players have about their time spent playing video games with others. Scholars have noted that content has the potential to influence player behavior. I propose that ludic structure can also influence player behavior. Ludic structure, for this study, refers to a game's format and genre as well as rules of play, chat systems, expected codes of conduct, potential punishments, and victory conditions. Because one person's view—scholar or lay person—can never fully truly explain every nuance of how a game shapes a community, I employed interpretive qualitative research methods to study two games, *League of Legends*, and *Puzzle Pirates*. These methods included interviews with players of these games, as well as my own autoethnographic observations from my time spent playing the games. In this chapter I, first, explain my qualitative research methodology including a description of Laura Ellingson's concept of crystallization. I then explain my data collection procedures, including participant recruitment and descriptions, interview protocols, and data analysis methods, as well as some difficulties I encountered with participant recruitment.

Crystallization as a Guiding Approach

My process of data collection and analysis is derived from Ellingson's (2009) concept of crystallization. This is a process in which a researcher attempts to reach a deep or "thick" understanding of a social phenomenon in a qualitative manner, eschewing some traditional positivist views that believe that one can truly know everything about a subject; knowledge is permeable and personal (Ellingson, 2009). Due to the lack of depth in communication literature on ludic structure and video games, this approach allowed the acquisition of a richer understanding of the concepts discovered in my data. This is because crystallization is a process that adds a richer understanding to phenomena, thus, it can potentially help to fill the current gaps in communication and video games. Through the lens of crystallization, I allowed my data collection to be open to new ideas, as well as expansive in its coverage. This openness is encouraged in the researcher because crystallization is a very reflexive process which calls for the researcher to gain a depth of understanding by approaching the data from a variety of different aspects, including the role the researcher undergoes in the process of the study (Ellingson, 2009). The process of crystallization recognizes the way that the process is enacted, and believes this reflexivity is a strength of the analysis, not a weakness. That is to say, as I was analyzing data, I was aware that the data I had collected may be biased in some way, and even when journaling, I was aware of the fact that *I was journaling for my research project*. Seeing the process unfold and acknowledging my own beliefs and their possible taint on my findings and feelings was a difficult task throughout this process.

One of the facets of crystallization is the use of more than one analysis method. Ellingson believes that a researcher "must encounter and make sense of your data through more than one way of knowing." (Ellingson, 2009, p. 11). By using both autoethnographic observation as well as participants interviews, my study meets one of the basic criteria of crystallization. These multiple "facets" of the crystal metaphor also need to span at least 2 of the 3 branches of the qualitative continuum, which Ellingson (2009) describes as Art/Impressionist (left side of the continuum), Middle-Ground Approaches, and Science/Realist (right side of continuum). These three categories range from more artistic data procedures, such as poetry and personal experiences as narratives, to more positivistic procedures, such as textual coding and discovering objective truth. My work to discover "what is unique about my or another's experience" falls within the Art/Impressionist as a category and my desire to understand how "participant's co-construct their world" (in this case, their community and interactions) falls within the Middle-Ground Approach (Ellingson, 2009, p. 9, Figure 1.1). As a method of analysis this makes crystallization unique because it blends traditional methods with more creative, performative ones. In the case of my study, my interviews with players are my traditional and interprevistic method combined with my own interpretation of my thoughts and feelings as I play the games via autoethnography. Because crystallization does not focus on the discovery of Truth like some more scientific or post-positivist methods, but instead believes that multiple truths can be ascertained, assessing the data from these different viewpoints will provide different interpretations. This is a strength of crystallization, and is indicative to the depth and richness of the data I have gathered.

In addition to viewing data from multiple angles, crystallization also relies on the data to be reported in its final form in multiple genres. Because of the nature of the written thesis, my methods of reporting data are all written, though Ellingson (2009) suggests that art, dance, and song are also acceptable methods. I have first chosen to write about the interviews with players and my journals in a more traditional sense, reporting on data in a thematic analysis. However, after this initial analysis, I present my personal feelings as a player in a narrative fashion. This type of data presentation is less rigid and offers the reader an intimate look into my direct thought process. The data is not modified, and my biases and opinions are clearly stated in intervals during my candid personal narrative. By utilizing a new style of writing, this data will be in compliance with another of the crucial tenets of crystallization; the use of mixed genres. Though the data will be presented in narrative form, my conclusions are presented in a more traditional qualitative manner alongside my interview findings, each section being a clear delineation of the research process. This process of mixing both narrative and traditional styles is modeled after the layered-account style of Ronai (1996) and her piece about her mother. Ronai's (1996) piece was divided into alternating sections: one section would be technical, explaining theory and related scholars, while the next would be a personal narrative from her own point of view. After each narrative section she included a physically typed marker—three diamonds—followed by the theoretical basis for the previous narrative section. While her own narrative was a majority of the article, the processes and styles described with theory were separate, almost like a running commentary on her own story. This shows that a mix of both traditional and narrative

styles of data is possible, and quite effective. Ronai's style is indicative of the crystallization method as defined by Ellingson (2009), who uses Ronai as an early example of the method.

For this study I observed two separate MMO communities, the players *League of Legends* and *Puzzle Pirates*. I chose these games because while they are each MMOs, each game has a unique style. *League of Legends* has a markedly more competitive structure that is notorious for its harsh community. As previously mentioned, *League of Legends* has a community of over 15,000,000 players worldwide, attesting to the game's popularity. *League of Legends* began as a game modification of the popular strategy game *Warcraft 3*. This modification was called Defense of the Ancients (DOTA) in which players would assume the role of a single hero in a large scale strategic battle, as opposed to a large scale army. This style combined both strategy and role-playing elements to the game, the new style being heralded as an multiplayer online battle arena. Two of the influential figures in the creation of DOTA, Steve "Guinsoo" Feak and Steve "Pendragon" Mescon, were hired to work with Riot Games to develop a standalone version of the game. *Puzzle Pirates* is based on the concept of playing puzzles to achieve in game goals. There are puzzles for almost every function in the game that produces a product, such as blacksmithing and weaving puzzle, as well as sword fighting and brawling puzzles. *Puzzle Pirates* endeavors to be a friendly and cooperative game, with cartoonish graphics and an open community that strives to help newcomers. *Puzzle Pirates* has over 4,000,000 registered accounts, as well as an extensive wiki-type website of player created information (James, 2008). The game features players called "greeters"

who help new pirates understand the game, as well as “ocean masters” who serve as moderators of all interactions in the game and can resolve disputes. Despite their difference in style and origin both games are free-to-play online, and players do not have to spend money to enjoy the full benefits of each game. Both games are also considered MMOs, as they have a large number of players interacting with each other over the Internet simultaneously.

While crystallization is well suited to guide my data and conclusions, it is a new and growing methodology. It is controversial due to its seemingly non-discretionary approach towards data collection; everything has potential to be data or interpreted. However, in my study, I attempt to assuage these fears by focusing mostly on more traditional methods for the majority of my reports, using my own testimony to bolster or be used in comparison to testimony of eight other different gamers. Reservations aside, I provide both technical and personal reasons for studying these games, fulfilling the requirements of crystallization. Without these differing views of personal and technical view points, I believe my analysis would not be as complete.

As shown in Chapter Two, there are few studies on video games presented in a qualitative style. Thus, there is a lack of theories that adequately define what I am attempting to observe. However, one of the closer comparisons to my study is the work of Celia Pearce. In her study of the migration of gamers into new gaming community and its in-game cultural effects, Pearce (2006) was able to collect data from her ethnographic experiences. While not autoethnographic, this does set a precedent for the use of ethnographies to explore an online gaming communities. Pearce does not go into detail

about her exact method, but from her writing it is clear she observed the interactions of the players while also playing. Pearce (2006) provides screen shots and intimate details of the reactions of players in the game, which could have only been collected by being in the game herself as a player. This is similar to my own experience as a player and the interviews with my participants, as we have all experienced the game first hand. Therefore, the type of qualitative methodology my study is employing should be able to successfully observe video game communities and interactions from the virtual spaces the game occupies.

While technical information is readily available from game developers and their fans, I also have personal experience with these games. I have logged over 1500 games of *League of Legends* since I began playing two years ago, as well as over 150 hours in *Puzzle Pirates*. In league of Legends I received a bronze award for my ranked play, meaning I was in the top 25% of players in the game playing at a rated level. In *Puzzle Pirates* I have acquired the deeds to two ships, started my own crew, and opened a small blacksmithing shop that creates commodities for other players. I have an intimate knowledge of the rules and expectations of these games, as well as my own opinions about each game's community. My experience provides a unique opportunity for study, as I have an invested interest in what factors are affecting my gaming communities, as well as having the resources and knowledge to study this cause in depth.

Participant Recruitment

For this study I recruited four participants from each game in order to interview them on their thoughts and feelings about the game and their interactions. After receiving

Ball State University IRB approval, participants in this research project were selected via criterion sample from within the video game itself, or from the game's official forum website. Participants needed to be current players of either *League of Legends* or *Puzzle Pirates* in order to qualify as eligible for interview. A minimum amount of time devoted to each game was not be required from participants, as the experience of both veteran and new players were considered valid perspectives of their video game communities. Players of both games were not required to provide any personal information, including their name. Some participants did choose to tell me their real names, as well as their gender. However, any information revealed to me beyond their user name was not considered significant in this study; the opinions of all players were considered equally.

In order to recruit participants, I posted comment threads in the official forums of each game to ask if players would be willing to participate in a study about video game communities. Because both games feature cooperative play, I had the opportunity to ask my fellow players if they would like to participate in the study while we played together. In *League of Legends*, this mostly occurred as the match started, and again after the match in the common chat lobby. In *Puzzle Pirates*, this was less common, as participants contacted me mostly through the official forums. Each game was an interesting experience in participant recruitment, and each community provided unique challenges.

In *Puzzle Pirates*, over 600 different players viewed my recruitment script, with over 15 offering to help me with my research. When I posted my first thread, I was even given information by a *Puzzle Pirates* player about which thread would probably give me the best results for my study. However, despite their initial enthusiasm to help, it took

several e-mails to secure follow-up interviews with participants. While waiting for participants to respond to my e-mails, I attempted to recruit players from the actual game. This occurred at an inn on the second largest island on the server, Aimuari. My requests for participants were usually drowned out by "trade spam," or, the repeated messages of players looking to buy and sell in game items. Several players did eventually respond that they would love to help me, but regretted that they were too young to participate. One player who was of age agreed to help and provided an e-mail address to send my consent form, but never contacted me again either in game or through e-mail. All participants that agreed to the study were asked to electronically sign and return an informed consent form that was e-mailed to them. Participants were also be informed that they may exit the study at any time and have all of their data collected thus far destroyed. Generally I noticed that while players in *Puzzle Pirates* were very friendly and helpful, few of them wanted to follow through to help the project. This could be because of the use of a consent form for the study, which may have intimidated players; it may have turned what they believed to be a casual interview into a matter of formal business.

While trying to gather In the *League of Legends* forums, I posted two different threads, which in total had less than 100 views, 500 less views than my single *Puzzle Pirates* forum thread. There was only one response to my threads—from me—in order to bring my topic closer to the front page of the forums. The forums were constantly being flooded with new topics, and my requests for participants were being pushed back several pages each day. This may have been due to the massive community of players. I also believe that it may have been due to the negative nature of the community. This negative

attitude was later confirmed by the data I had collected about the players through observations, as shared in Chapter Four. Due to the lack of attention my recruitment script received in the forums, I was forced to ask players in game. After running through my script, saying that I was trying to learn about the *League of Legends* community, I was often given short replies of "It's awful" and various other negative remarks. Those that were interested in the study before we began our games would not reply to me again when the game was finished. Only twice did participants agree to help me after a game and exchanged contact information with me. One contact never responded to any of my subsequent attempts to communicate, while the other informed me he or she was not yet 18. The under-aged player offered to ask his or her brother about participating and was never heard from again. Finding myself out of luck on both the games and the forums, I turned to the in-game chat rooms. One participant agreed to the study after being contacted there, we exchanged e-mail addresses and I sent the participant a consent form. After weeks of trying to contact the participant, she regretted that she no longer had time to help me. In a subsequent visit to the chat rooms, I posted my recruitment script and was immediately labeled as a scammer by another player I had never spoken to. I was not contacted by any players on this visit.

I felt out of options at this point and began to contact players I had developed a personal relationship with by playing the game. These were players I tried to play with on a regular basis when I had time in order to avoid the generally negative community. Four participants agreed to the study and the interview. Two of my participants I had met before outside of the game world, while two others I had never physically met. Given the

amount of animosity and fickleness I encountered in previous recruitment, I was thankful for the help of people that trusted me. While I was familiar with these participants personally, they were not influenced by our relationships. In fact, most of my *League of Legends* participants asked me what my research was truly about and what I was hoping to find at the end of our interviews. Therefore, I believe that their responses did not taint my dataset, and they felt able to speak freely to me during their interviews.

Participant Descriptions

Participants in this study varied from game to game. While participants were not required to divulge personal information, some chose to reveal aspects about themselves. Four participants were chosen for each game. Each player had something unique to say about the game they played, but also addressed topics that seemed to be universal for each game. For instance, political intrigue was discussed by three of four *Puzzle Pirates* players, while the negative community of *League of Legends* was discussed by all four *League* players.

Players of *Puzzle Pirates* were mostly female. When all the interviews were collected, there were three interviews that represented the experiences of veteran players and one differing interview of a fairly new and self-labeled "naïve" player. All participants were over the age of 18, with at least one being married and having children. The three senior players all disclosed that they had played the game for over five years, reminiscing on various changes they had seen the game go through. These three players all played the game at least every day when they were "active," or actively involved in the game. If time does not permit, sometimes they can only log on once every week. One

participant even explained to me how she was responsible for the addition of the color maroon into the game as a dye option after discovering a loophole in the game mechanics. Another participant explained how she was a member of one of the most hated groups on her ocean and how they had established a long reputation of refusing to form alliances and simply taking whatever resources benefitted their crews the most. The third veteran player had been around long enough to be one of the original "greeters" for the game and maintained his status to the present day, guiding new players in the ways of the game and answering their questions. The older players also mentioned logging on and playing the game at least once every day. The newer player had only been playing for a few months, and admitting to only logging on once every week, sometimes longer. When asked what made *Puzzle Pirates* different from other MMOs, participants admitted to not actively ever playing another MMO and therefore could not make comparisons.

The participants from *League of Legends* were all male. Interestingly, they all seemed to believe that primarily males played *League*, as all participants used male pronouns throughout their interviews almost exclusively. Some participants had played since the game was still in the testing phases, approximately three years, while others had been playing between one and two years. On average, *League* players admitted to playing four to five times a week, with sessions ranging from one to three hours, though all players admitted to their play time varying from week to week. None of the players discussed their relationships aside from mentioning the few friends they had made playing the game. This was a uniting factor for why they played the game; each participant played because their friends did. Competition was another driving factor for

three of the participants. They felt as though player versus player competition helped them to improve their skills, as well as providing a level of variety not found when facing computer players. All participants spoke to some degree about the intricate details of creating a well functioning team and the roles that players can choose. Venting frustration about teammates and other players of the game was also a very prominent topic in all the interviews. Most surprisingly was the overall acknowledgment of the level of negativity present in both the game itself and the game's community.

All participants were current players of their respective games. All players from both games were familiar to some extent with the basic concepts involved in playing the game and most were familiar with the community of each game. In one instance, a player did note that she did not actually interact with the community very often, and did not feel qualified to speak about them generally or on their behalf. Regardless of individual experiences, general themes were found throughout both games, and specific themes were found within in game. Each of these themes was exemplified by personal examples and stories, as participants were encouraged to speak freely on topics.

Data collection procedures

In order to analyze a deep set of data, I chose to use two methods of data collection. First, I employed autoethnographic journals as a way to reflect on my own experiences playing each game. Second, I incorporated interviews with players from each game. These two different approaches to data helped to fulfill the philosophical implications of my guiding theory, crystallization. The autoethnographic journals were an artistic approach to data collection, while the interviews were a middle-ground approach

to data collection. Blending these two types of data resulted in a richer dataset from which to draw overarching implications, and varying ways of defining these game worlds.

Autoethnography is a process of collecting data that combines autobiographical experiences with larger cultural themes (Ellingson, 2009). It is when the researcher offers their personal opinions, and then analyzes those opinions as if analyzing the testimony of a separate entity. Because of my familiarity with these games, I chose to utilize an autoethnographic approach as "works of autoethnography, in particular, represent the writer's 'personal' experience in order to explore fundamental relationships between experience and knowledge" (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p 310). Autoethnography is an important part of the growing field of qualitative research, as it features participatory research in which the researcher acts as the insider (Duncan, 2004). This style of data collection provides studies an inside look that cannot be reproduced, as the ideas and perceptions of the researcher contain the researcher's unique voice and style (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994). As a game player, I have personal thoughts and feelings of the games I play; some more irrational than others. As a scholar, I have the capability to analyze collected personal data; in this case, from myself. Autoethnography allows me to approach this conflict in a manner that encourages academic discovery. For this project, I chose to make observations during the times I spent playing each game.

My own autoethnographic observations were recorded in a typed file stored on my personal computer. I played each game for at least 20 hours, keeping a log of my playtime. After each playing session I recorded my own thoughts and experiences as both

player and researcher. If there was downtime within a gaming session, I would also take the time to journal as events were unfolding. By tracking my own current experiences, I constructed a concrete set of data to code, as opposed to any previous opinions I may have held of each game. The journals represented my feelings and perceptions of each game literally as each play session unfolded. These observations were included in my documented experiences, though separate from my 20-hour time commitment to each game. Given my unique position as both scholar and game player, I believe my personal observations are more finely tuned than a player who may not see the communicative intricacies of the games they play. That is to say, while a player may be familiar with the finer aspects of the game, a player who is not also a communication scholar may not be able to readily identify how these structures influence his or her behavioral and communicative patterns. To remedy the potential for role overlap, I attempted to journal in my own unique voice as a game player. I recorded my thoughts as I was playing, attempting to not restrict my own data collection. After my 20-hours had been fulfilled for each game, I returned to them with the fresh eyes of a scholar, memoing on my thoughts to form a more holistic view of the data (Charmaz, 2010). This involved connecting my thoughts to concepts connected to communication, explaining shorthand and jargon, as well as pointing out contradicting points in my own testimony.

I began in journaling December 27th, 2011 and completed my journaling on February 9th, 2012. While journaling for these games, I included my emotions and feeling of my games as they arise. I began journaling with *League of Legends*, as it was the game I was playing more frequently. I played *League of Legends* almost every day, playing

anywhere from one to five games a day. Games lasted from 20 minutes to 50 minutes, with a rare occurrence of a 13-minute game. Normally, the shortest amount of time a game can last is 20 minutes—the minimum playtime required before surrender can be issued—however, because of my Internet connection, I was disconnected and forced to end the game early. Initially, I tried to journal all of my thoughts whenever I play playing, but made sure to censor certain words. By about my third game, I realized that this was not a fair representation of my own thoughts and allowed myself to be freer with my language. This resulted in more candid journal entries. My total journaling length on *League of Legends* resulted in 31 journal entries, totaling 14 single-spaced pages of personal game notes.

My journaling on *Puzzle Pirates* began on February 1st, 2012. *Puzzle Pirates* was a more difficult game to become immersed in, as I had not played it in a long time. The game had recently undergone a massive reconstruction when I logged on for my first journal entry. The game servers were experiencing issues and players were confused and frantically trying to figure out the new system. This resulted in waiting almost a week before I consistently began playing again. It was more difficult for me to become actively involved, as I was not as familiar with the new community and did not know any other people that played the game. After about two weeks of intermittently spaced playing sessions, I began to play more regularly, resulting in journal entries almost every day. After I had added up my hours, I discovered I had actually logged approximately 23 hours of game time, exceeding my initial goal. This was due to the nature of playing *Puzzle Pirates*. While *League of Legends* is confined to one game sessions, *Puzzle*

Pirates is much more open in play nature. Play sessions ranged from 10 minutes to three hours in length. My extended playing sessions resulted in only resulted 14 journal entries, totaling six single-spaced pages of game notes. In total, my journals across both games totaled almost 45 hours or game-play and 20 single spaced pages of journal entries on the topic. After my initial two *League of Legends* journal entries, all my subsequent journals for both games were honest accounts of my feelings and thoughts immediately after playing the games.

In addition to observations, I also conducted semi-structured, open-ended, qualitative interviews with members of each game. The purpose of these interviews was to complement my personal observation data, as "interviews enable researchers to *gather information about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means*," (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p. 175; emphasis original). An observation of a community, even though I am a member of each community, was not enough to determine how exactly the structure of a video game influences game players. Interviews can bolster observations, providing a more detailed and insightful view of these specific groups. Because of the nature of the study and its focus on the intangible structure of video games, interviews were particularly beneficial. As Kleinman, Stenross, and McMahon (1994) explain, interviews are "a good way to learn about physically unbound social realities" (p. 43). Thus, interviews with members of the different game communities provided more detail than my reflections alone.

Due to the limited time given for a project of this scope, I chose to interview four members of each game community, to allow for ample transcription and coding time of

the data. I contacted participants both in-game and through the games' official forums. Once players agreed to participate and signed a consent form, they were interviewed in ways ranging from in game chat, Skype, Ventrillo, or phone calls. Of the total eight participants, four participants chose to be interviewed on Ventrillo (an Internet voice chat service), one chose to be interviewed via the in game chat of *Puzzle Pirates*, one chose to be interviewed by phone, one chose to be interviewed through Skype (an online voice service that also provides video chat) via video, and one chose to be interviewed through Skype via text chat. Each medium provided its own unique interview. During the phone based interview the participant was in a car and static was constantly heard. The participant who chose Skype enabled their video though I did not have a camera myself, creating a situation where I could see the participant but they could not see me. The call was dropped and when I reconnected I found a computer with a camera in order to make the participant feel more comfortable by being able to see me as well. The in-game interviews worked well; however, with no verbal cues, questions often interrupted responses, and our messages were usually out of sync or a few lines behind. The Ventrillo interviews were uneventful. Regardless of interview style, each participant chose the way that they wished to communicate with me and therefore, were most at ease in their chosen communication format.

The six spoken interviews ranged from 36 minutes to approximately 66 minutes. The average interview length was 48 minutes. The two text chat interviews lasted 106 minutes and 79 minutes. The larger length of these interviews is probably due to the amount of time spent typing and reading responses, as opposed to the near instantaneous

transfer of information when speaking. In total, 468 minutes of interviews were recorded as data. Each interview—spoken and chatted—was subsequently transcribed, resulting in 114 pages of single-spaced text. The longest transcription was approximately 17 pages, with the shortest interview being 10. On average, interview transcripts were 14 pages long. Nothing stood out to me as odd when transcribing, as even veteran players spoke as long as some of the newer players. The shortest interview was from the self-described "naïve" *Puzzle Pirates* player. This was to be expected as the interview questions focused mainly on aspects involving other players and the participant claimed to rarely interact with other players. Interviews were successfully conducted on the whole, though in one instance my Internet connection was severed. This was promptly corrected by finding a different computer, and the interview picked up where it had left off. The information regarding basic statistical information of each interview can be found in Appendix A.

Interviews were conducted in an open-ended and semi-structured nature. The reason for this open-ended style of interview is because of the lack of information I had from others about their perceptions of their video game communities. This allowed participants to respond in their own words. At the beginning of each interview, I explained to each participant that they were free to discuss any topic at length if they wish. This included letting them know they could stop me to explain a story, or break off onto a tangent. If participants wanted to discuss in detail a factor of the game or their experience I overlooked or had not mentioned in my interview questions, I strived to provide them with the opportunity to speak freely. In accordance with this point of view, I asked questions that avoided leading statements that may have influenced participant

responses. The interview question list I used to question participants can be found in Appendix B. The interview questions were also designed to not specifically reference structure when possible, as I believe this could have influenced responses. However, if a participant did breach the topic of structure, I engaged them on the subject. In other cases, participants would indirectly reference elements of structure, with such examples being the punishment system of *League of Legends* or "blockading" in *Puzzle Pirates*. In these situations, I labeled the systems as structures to provide segues into my more structurally based questions. During each interview I tried to catch myself whenever I mentioned absolute options, and at times even clarified to participants the range of responses that could possibly exist in between or outside of the spectrum of provided answers. After each interview, participants were thanked for their time and informed of the entire purpose of my study if they were interested. Some participants even requested copies of the completed project after it was finished, though they were warned parts would be very dull.

Data analysis procedures

My data was divided into two parts, interviews and personal journals. First I transcribed all recorded interviews. In the two instances of chat-based interview, I saved copies of the chat logs. Once interviews were transcribed, I created memos of my own journals. Memos were a way of stepping back from my thoughts at the time as a gamer, and focused on my interpretation of the entries as a researcher (Charmaz, 2010). Memos included notes about game abbreviations, tying my behaviors to greater concepts, and critiquing myself as a player. What was most interesting was finding the contradictions in

my journaling. For example, I wrote about hating how people blame each other for mistakes, and proceeded to blame someone in a later entry. Observing the work as a whole provided insights into my experiences as a player. In *League of Legends*, I learned that I become very aggressive and frustrated at other players, while in *Puzzle Pirates*, I noticed that I would lose track of hours at a time because the game became so engrossing. After memoing my journals, I moved on to the coding process.

I uploaded all of my interviews and journals into a qualitative analysis program to aid in aggregating themes across several sources of data. For this process, I treated my journals as interviews, coding them with the same criteria as my interviews. For my interview, memos were written in tandem with coding, providing insight to thoughts I had during interview and noting similarities in interviews or corroborating testimonies. Coding involved reading over each interview again and finding themes that seemed relevant to the study, such as participants referencing ideas like frustration, teamwork, or game structures. After coding the data, 40 different themes were discovered. The most commonly referenced themes were aggression (instance of swearing or harsh behavior), pessimism (instances of general negativity not resulting in aggression), participants' personal skill levels, teamwork issues, game structure, in-game punishment policies, blaming, communication difficulties, relationships, and the skill levels of other players. All of these themes were referenced at least 30 times across all interviews, and each appeared in at least six separate interviews. The three themes mentioned in at least nine of the ten interviews were aggression, personal skill level, and relationships. Aggression was the only theme present in all ten interviews, with a staggering 95 references. The

second most commonly referenced theme, negativity, was only referenced 53 times. This traditional thematic analysis provided a foundation for the close analyses and narratives of both games in Chapters Four and Five.

Of the several themes I discovered throughout my coding procedures, I only selected six for analysis; three for each game. For *League of Legends* I chose aggression, teamwork issues, and the meta-game. I chose these themes because of the prominence of aggression and teamwork in *League of Legends* interviews, and because of their relevance to the game. For example, though the meta-game was not often referenced, participants would respond at length describing the process of the meta-game and how it affected them and their play styles. Participants' tones about the meta-game were very negative, and I chose it as a theme because it seemed to cause a more explicit emotional response in players. For *Puzzle Pirates* the themes were relationships, blockading, and politics. Blockading and politics were not directly referenced very often by participants, but they were two themes that were unique to *Puzzle Pirates* interviews. Therefore, I wanted to analyze the themes as they seemed to be a pivotal part of game play, much like the meta-game in *League of Legends*. I chose relationships as *Puzzle Pirates* participants would talk at length about the interactions they had with friends in the game, though did not directly reference them in a teamwork sense. Again, the amount of emotions that players expressed when they discussed their relationships warranted closer analysis of the theme though it was not often referenced.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed my guiding approach of crystallization. The process of crystallization encourages richer analysis of data by drawing conclusions from several different sources, in this case, interviews and autoethnographic journals. Crystallization also encourages different ways of knowing by approaching topics from differing methodological perspectives, such as artistic and scientific. This chapter included a detailed account of my methods as I conducted research for this project, describing my participant recruitment process, my data collection procedures, and my data analysis. The next two chapters feature individual close analyses of each game, describing the fundamental concepts of the games and the significant aspects of these games to my study. Chapters Four and Five also include a personal narrative, combining my own journals with participant interviews to create a more creative analysis of each game.

CHAPTER FOUR

CLOSE ANALYSIS OF *LEAGUE OF LEGENDS*

The games I analyzed for this study were complex entities with several layers of ludic structure. Though I am very familiar with both games, outside readers have little to no understanding of the inner-workings of these games. Therefore, in this chapter I provide an extensive look into *League of Legends*. This includes both an in-depth look into the story and context of the game and some of the layers of ludic structure present in the game. I include a discussion of the basic layout of the game, as well as the rules and regulations of winning or losing a game. Last, I describe the functions of different characters in the game, the roles they occupy within the game, and how they relate to the overall meta-game of *League of Legends*. This close reading of the game explains features that are mentioned in both the interviews and my personal reflections. After a close look at *League of Legends*, I detail the emergent themes found in my interviews and journal entries. Finally, following the guidelines of crystallization, I begin a narrative detailing my feelings and attitudes towards the game. This combination of data, both interviews and autoethnographic, creates a more artistic set of data, and, therefore, a richer analysis.

League of Legends: A Close Analysis

In previous chapters, I have described the history of the game of *League of Legends*, but I have done little to explain the context of the game. According to the game developers at Riot, the creators of the game, *League of Legends* is set in a mystical land known as Valoran, set on a planet called Runeterra. The story behind *League of Legends* is common enough to be inserted into almost any other fantasy game, a tale of wizards and magic and war with hints of political intrigue, the game reeks of Tolkienesque origin. The developers made an interesting divergence from the typical swords and sorcery tale: one of peace and reconciliation. The story pertains to Valoran attempting to find a peaceful way to stop the bloodshed between its various nations. Riot describes Valoran as a vast land where warfare is common between opposing factions. These factions are regionally based, and each nation of Valoran is represented in the game. The two most powerful factions include Demacia and Noxus. Demacia is the stereotypical "good" nation, supporting ideas like truth, justice and righteousness. Noxus is the diametrically opposed "evil" nation, representing cunning, deceit, and violence. These nations are in constant struggle as they strive to gain more control of the world through conquest and strategic alliances. Valoran is described as inherently magical, meaning that wizards exist and sorcery is a common practice throughout the land. Most of the combat between nations is overseen by powerful wizards known as "summoners," who also act as political leaders in practice.

These summoners are akin to powerful wizards and are described as reckless and arrogant, using vast amounts of magical power to destroy their foes at any cost. The

online lore page for the game explains that "With such an abundance of raw magical power at their disposal, there was little motivation for summoners to explore more environmentally-friendly forms of warfare" (Administrator, 2010). That is to say, because the land of Valoran was so magical, the summoners would simply take as much magical power from the land as possible, not thinking of the environmental consequences of basically strip-mining the land for magic. The official lore page goes on to describe how centuries of this kind of magical war has caused the land itself to split apart, creating "violent earthquakes and horrific magically-fueled storms" (Administrator, 2010). In the midst of these natural disasters, the people of Valoran decided to work together towards a goal of sustainability, as their current means of resolving conflict was literally tearing their world apart. A group of key magicians was then selected to devise a way to control such wild magical battles by creating the Institute of War, which was housed within the League of Legends.

The basic concept of the League, from a narrative standpoint, is that each nationality or tribe desiring representation on a political level would be represented by a group of summoners. These summoners would then call forth champions from throughout the land to settle political disputes in controlled arenas known collectively as the Field of Justice. These arenas were placed throughout Valoran in strategic locations, such as on the borders of warring nations. Therefore, the previous large scale magical wars could be settled through non-fatal arena combat, with the political outcome of the battle being enforced by the League. While the incorporation of the League of Legends has not apparently ended all forms of combat in Valoran, it has dramatically decreased

the amount of death and destruction that Valoran experienced in its constant warring state. In sum, the League of Legends is non-lethal gladiatorial combat meant to regulate political affairs in a war torn land in an effort to decrease both death and environmental destruction. The player takes the role of a summoner, choosing a champion to control to help decide the fate of the nations of Valoran.

League of Legends is in part a "Real-Time Strategy" (RTS) game in terms of gaming genre, following in the footsteps of games in which players command large armies. However, *League of Legends* is technically a hybrid of both the RTS and role-playing genre, blending elements of strategy with elements of role-play. The main difference is that players are responsible for only one character who can grow as the game progresses. The game is played by two teams of five players each. These teams consist of players who know each other or random strangers. Though five versus five is the most common format, *League of Legends* also allows players to play on a smaller three versus three map, as well as a different five versus five "node capture" arena. Because my observations and interviews did not include the other arenas, I limit my analysis to the "standard" five versus five arena and structure, as all others formats are variations of this theme. Players attempt to destroy the opposing team's nexus, or base, by reducing its health to zero through various attacks. Once a team's nexus has been destroyed, the game is over, with victory being awarded to the team who destroyed the nexus. Though the end goal of *League of Legends* is relatively simple, the strategies players can utilize are quite complicated, as there are several different factors that define each match.

The most significant part of *League of Legends* is the ability to chose a champion to play. As of March, 2012, *League of Legends* provides players with the opportunity to play 95 unique champions. Each champion has four abilities they can use in the game, as well as different costume options. Though players can play champions in any style they choose, champions are designed to fit into a few specific roles in the game. Officially, *League of Legends* classifies its champions into 12 categories: pusher, jungler, support, assassin, ranged, stealth, recommended, mage, carry, tank, fighter, melee. Each champion fills at least two roles, with some capable of more. Some of those roles are merely defining descriptors of other roles, such as mage/assassin, or ranged/pusher. The core roles of the game are tank, support, fighter, mage, assassin, and jungler.

Tanks are characters who soak up damage from the enemy and tries to keep the enemy focused on attacking them instead of their weaker teammates. These characters usually have shielding abilities. Support champions are ones that usually have a healing ability or an ability that directly increases the performance of an ally, such as a damage boost. Fighters are so called because they fight; it is the fighters job to destroy other players. Their abilities support the amount of damage they output by simply attacking. These characters can be ranged or melee, and are known for their self sustainability in lanes. Mage-type champions are ones that use magical damaging abilities instead of attacking. These characters are known for their ability to do significant amounts of damage in a short burst. Assassins specialize in killing enemy champions. It is their goal to remove a champion from a fight as quickly as possible and then escape. Junglers are the final, and most unique class of characters. These are characters that specialize in not

being in a lane at all, but instead roam the jungles in between lanes. These characters are usually also classified as assassins, but can also serve as tanks, fighters, or mages. Their strength comes in their ability to stay hidden and surprise the enemy. However, the goal of the game is to destroy the enemy nexus, not kill enemy players. It is entirely possible to win a game without killing a single champion. Whenever a player is killed, they must wait for an extended period of time before they can re-spawn (come back to life) and join the fray once more, acting like a sort of penalty box. The advantage to killing enemy players lies in the simple fact that it is easier to attack the enemy base when they do not have any champion alive to defend.

In sum, there is a vast amount of variability in each match of *League of Legends*. The game is played in a fantasy setting and meant to represent a method of combat that is less violent than war. Players become powerful wizards known as summoners, controlling one of 95 characters, with the opportunity to take on several different roles in the game. With these champions, players attempt to destroy the enemy nexus through battle with other players and neutral minions. Having provided a sufficient overview of *League of Legends*, next I analyze the themes ascertained from my data set; both from my interviews with players and my personal journals. My analysis concludes that the ludic structures of the game—particularly teamwork and the "meta-game"—create an atmosphere of aggression. I believe this atmosphere is ultimately caused by the competitive nature of *League of Legends*; the game is inherently structured around competition.

Thematic Analysis

After coding my two datasets, participant interviews and personal journals, I discovered recurring themes regarding *League of Legends*. These themes were aggression, teamwork issues, and the meta-game. Aggression for this thematic analysis was described as instances in which an individual was communicating an idea that indicating hostility, such as name-calling, swearing, or communication intended to harm another individual (Infante & Wigley, 1987). These instances of communication were coded as aggression whether the source of the aggression was the participant or another player. Teamwork issues included instances where participants spoke about their experiences in teams, or how they believed teams were supposed to work in the game. The meta-game is based on the assigning of characters roles, as described previously in this chapter, and how these character selections can be a source of frustration for *League of Legends* players. My themes have been arranged in this way to best answer my research questions. The theme of aggression explains how structures in the game causes the game community to become angry, while teamwork and the meta-game explains how the game community then influences individual players. I posit that *League of Legends* is ludically structured to be inherently competitive, causing both the game community and players to experience frustration.

Aggression. Aggression as a theme was present in all *League of Legends* data. It was referenced in interviews with *League of Legends* participants 33 times, as well as 40 references in my own personal journals. Aggression was coded separately from instances of negativity, as negativity was coded as general feelings of disappointment and sadness

that lacked hostility. Aggression was usually coded in tandem with a variety of other themes, such as teamwork issues, blaming, and skill levels. The prevalence of aggression mentioned in interviews suggested that aggression was an important reality of playing *League of Legends*. This aggression can manifest itself as aggression from others and the self, aggression rooted in blaming and player skill levels, as well as possible aggression rooted in anonymity, or aggression for aggression's sake.

Generally, players described aggression as an unpleasant experience because they believed it to be counterproductive and detrimental to playing the game. In an interview, Habber Dasher explained, "I don't think getting mad and calling anyone horrible names helps anything. It's just a negative experience." In another interview Laser Tornado also expressed disdain for the way aggression is sometimes used in *League of Legends*, saying "..there [are] people who are extremely, extremely critical and whether its directed at me or directed at another player…it's not appropriate for a team like that, you know?" These participants show how aggression from others is not beneficial to playing the game. This is not an uncommon experience, as I was called names, including "noob" (a new player), "jew," and even "faggot" during my time playing the game. These hurtful names sometimes came from my enemies, but often came from my *own teammates*. Players being aggressive towards each other is not beneficial, as negative reinforcement in groups does not usually lead to skill improvement (Thorton & Hanson, 2004). Regardless, such aggression is common in *League of Legends*. The atmosphere of aggression from others sometimes turns into a reifying system, as those who are verbally attacked begin to lash out at their attackers.

Even in my own experiences playing the game, I would notice times when the team would simply break down and begin fighting amongst itself, as shown by this entry on 1/14/2012: "Team yelled and fought with each other. Everyone called everyone an idiot and generally tried to screw each other over." As seen in this reflection, aggression became so rampant in the game to the point where my team was actively trying to ruin the playing experience of our own teammates. I must confess, I was a part of this cycle of aggression, as I also contributed to hurtful comments and withheld information from my team. Perhaps it is because I was also receiving critical comments from others, and felt a need to defend myself; the game is simply aggressive. It may be no surprise that aggression is a negative experience when playing a game. However, it is important to note that even when players see others being aggressive, or they themselves are aggressive, they recognize that it is not beneficial to playing the game. In the previously referenced journal entry, aggression seemed to directly lead to not only poorer performance, but also acts of spite to get teammates to perform poorer as well. The goal of the game is to win, yet players will sabotage their own team's performance at times. Players attempt to avoid aggression, as it serves no positive purpose in *League of Legends*. I believe aggression is actually the product of player frustration because of the structures of the game.

Despite how common aggression is in *League of Legends*, participants had varying opinions on what the source of aggression is for players. Aggression is often the result of another contributing factor; players rarely described it as a singular entity. Commonly, it seems that aggression is a byproduct of anger, or as Habber Dasher

describes it, "Probably what I dislike more…are people who rage." Here he is explaining how the levels of anger are one of his least favorite parts of the game. He continues by explaining that:

> …if they're doing poorly, a lot of people look for someone who is doing worse, or you know, even around the same level; just rip them a new one, just so they feel better about themselves, and that's probably the kind of, to use…Internet parlance, rage that I hate the most.

This quotation displays the connection of emotions and actions leading to aggression. First, a player will perform poorly. The player's performance makes him or her angry; therefore he or she finds another player on their team performing equally bad or who is less skilled. The angry player then proceeds to attack others; a direct display or aggression. Though the target of the upset player's anger is another player's skill level, Raael believes that sometimes this anger has no focus:

> For absolutely no reason someone will call you gay, or someone will call you a noob because you didn't win that game for NO reason what so ever. People get mad for no reason.

While the reason may be seemingly ambiguous, Raael does point out "because you didn't win the game." This sense of loss or failure could be a general cause for player frustration. Regardless, the main root of aggression in *League of Legends* appears to be anger in some form or another. Identifying the source of that anger is more difficult, though I attempt to explain the source of anger in players using my later analysis of teamwork issues and the meta-game. As shown in my interviews, players are touched by this anger and aggression while they play the game. Habber Dasher, as a player, seems aware enough of this concept that he recognizes that anger can easily lead to aggression:

> I try not to rage at people too much, like if someone's interacting negatively with me, I'll, you know, most often, I might defend myself a little bit, but most often I just stop talking to them.

By recognizing his anger has the potential to become aggression, he attempts to avert the situation entirely by simply ceasing communication with other players. However, Habber Dasher was not always able to contain his emotions, as he explained in a story from our interview:

> I just got super mad at this guy, and I forget what I was saying to him, but you know, somewhat along the lines of "You're doing worse than me, how can you be riding me when you're doing just, if not more, bad?!" So, I mean that was…one of the few times that someone's, like, got me really mad.

Again, the link between anger and aggression is apparent, in this case, by attacking another player's skill level. This act of blaming shows how players are willing to chide each other for their mistakes, even when working on a team together. Perhaps blaming is common because the game is competitive; each match has a winner and a loser. If a team does poorly, they will lose the game. Instead of rallying together, they chose to attack each other. Though perhaps his anger is justified, it still culminated in an act of aggressive communication.

Though anger seems like an obvious source of aggression, whether it be player performance or other issues, other participants thought the roots of aggression may stem from more sinister sources, such as bullying. Laser Tornado explained that sometimes players:

> …ask questions and they'll say things like…"You should uninstall" or whatever…their goal is to harass you, it's not to just vent their frustration, its not to help you or to help the team, its just to make you feel bad to make themselves feel better.

This may suggest that there are people trying to bully other players for enjoyment. They are aggressive towards other players for the sake of being aggressive. This type of aggression could possibly stem from the anonymity provided by the online structure of the game. As Raael explained in an interview:

> The community because everybody, it's always, there is no accountability on the Internet, so people just get mad at other people for no reason, people just aren't nice anymore.

Because the game is an MMO, a heavy amount of its structure hinges on the ability to connect to the Internet. Raael believes that by simply being online, people feel less responsible for the way they act. This is a concept echoed by Thomas, as he said in an interview:

> …mostly I am of the opinion that in…being anonymous, it's that nobody knows who you are, I'm [the player is] going to be a prick, and fuck you for it.

The ability for players to come together and be online is essential for the game community to exist in the first place. At its core, *League of Legends* is an online multiplayer game. This, unfortunately, is also the structuration that gives players anonymity. Therefore, it is impossible to change the structure of the game's connectivity to decrease the aggression that is seemingly rooted in anonymity. Doing so would fundamentally change the way the game is played, and not in a positive light, as Laser Tornado and Habber Dasher both explain that they would not play the game if it was single player. They believe as a single player experience, the game would lose its competitive edge, which is a major reason why the play in the first place. This is unfortunate, as the aggression fostered by players creates a reifying atmosphere of aggression.

In my interviews, players suggested that a person acting aggressively sets a standard for aggression. This means that if a player acts aggressively for any reason, they serve as an example for the other players with whom they interact. Laser Tornado explains this concept, describing how:

> Its kind of weird how incredibly negative some people are…I think it's a function of player interactions over time. I don't really know the root cause but…its not uncommon, so there's a lot of people that play…and they're rude players and they see other rude players and that kind of becomes a norm to be super critical.

My own journals mirror this sentiment. In an entry on 1/20/2012, I described my reaction to a player bullying me:

> …if you're going to tell me how bad I am and how we suck and how no one is listening to you, you really better be able to handle what's coming back, because I WILL fight back. So maybe it's just a kind of counter-justice(?) maybe? Is [this] how I rationalize being a dick to people? I only do it when people do it to me first?

Both of these testimonies suggest that aggression may be so prevalent in the game because players see it in their own games and proceed to enact it themselves. The source of aggression could be for a number of reasons, but the community now views it as a normal response. To *League* players, a legitimate response to aggression is more aggression; aggression has become a norm of the community. In turn, an aggressive community becomes a breeding ground for aggressive players. The structure of the game makes players angry, the community uses aggression; aggression becomes a standard game behavior. These structures are how teamwork and the meta-game cause frustration in players, which are the next two themes I analyze. In the following themes, my analysis speculates about some of the root causes of anger and frustration in *League of Legends* and how the structure of the game plays a part in this frustration.

Teamwork issues. *League of Legends* is based on the concept of team-based combat. It's no surprise that my data included several references to teamwork issues. All *League of Legends* interviews, as well as my own personal journals, referenced teamwork in some way. Team work issues in *League of Legends* accounted for 35 of the 39 total references to teamwork. Coding of this data included any information regarding working with others in a team, both positive and negative. Most instances of teamwork, however, were seen as negative by players. They were often frustrated with their team's skill level and the game was represented by participants as a bizarre mix of both a group of individuals playing for themselves and a group that must rely on each other. This data was muddy at times, as players recognized the benefits of teamwork, yet also highly valued individual skill over cooperation.

Working positively with a team has its benefits in *League of Legends*, and players do strive for it at times. If a team works together, they can coordinate and achieve goals and ultimately, victory. Habber Dasher actually enjoys working together with his team when possible, as he explained when asked about his favorite parts of the game:

> I like the team play aspects of [the game], just because I think when a team's working together, you're really rewarded for that in *League of Legends*, and it feels really rewarding.

He goes on to describe how this feeling only really happens when working with other real people to defeat real-life opponents; he does not receive the same level of enjoyment when playing against the computer. Though it may be hard to work with a team, as displayed in my analysis of aggression, ideally, players want to work with their team. Working with a team allows a player greater chances at winning the game. In his

interview, Habber Dasher described how he believes that *League of Legends* is structured in a way that rewards players for working together. Laser Tornado also connects teamwork to competition, an aspect of the game he enjoys:

> …what I like about that competition is I can get better, and I can see what I do and how it affects the game, and how I help my team, that's what seems encouraging and fun.

Laser Tornado's still frames teamwork as being positive in this excerpt, though it is a reversal of Habber Dasher's opinion. While Habber Dasher describes teamwork as a means to winning, Laser Tornado describes helping the team as his end goal. Teamwork was important to both of these players, and both see it as positive aspect of the game. However, these positive accounts are few and far between.

Participant descriptions of teamwork mostly focus on the more negative aspects of teamwork. It becomes apparent that teamwork is tainted by instances of aggression, as described in the previous section. More accounts describe the frustrations associated with teamwork, and how *League of Legends* players tend to avoid situations that involve teamwork. Despite the game being structured around team cooperation, participants often described instances of individualism in the game. Thomas aptly summarizes:

> …[sometimes] you just get very, frustrated very set in their place players who know it's their way or the highway, and despite team composition, despite the group, will make their decision and its locked in their head.

This shows how players will forgo their team to play the game for themselves. Players are mainly concerned with their own performance, than rather how to help the team as a whole. This sentiment was also echoed by Laser Tornado:

> A lot of people, there's different ways its expressed but some people are very selfish in that they don't try to do what's best for the team, they just try to do whatever is going to help them score the most…

Later in his interview, Laser Tornado continues to highlight the tension between team and individual:

> I think there's a lot of…people [who] are very concerned with themselves, even though there is so much of a team element to the game.

Even in my own journaling, I took note of when players were seemingly selfish, as shown in an entry on 1/18/2012: "It was like he was playing for just himself and not for his teammates." This instance described a game in which another player harassed our team, refusing to work with us. This combined aggression and lack of teamwork obviously resulted in a loss for our team. The idea of solo play seems strangely out of place in a team-based game.

Teamwork is a crucial element to playing *League of Legends*, since two teams competing against each other for victory. Despite this structure, teamwork rarely goes perfectly for players. In my interviews, participants offered some reasons they believed players of *League of Legends* avoid cooperating with teams. The common belief was that players are not used to working with a team; that players are used to being by themselves. Raael suggests that these players cannot succeed with this attitude, saying "When you come into League of Legends you can't be the whole team, you can't do everything by yourself." Players may have the idea that playing a game is a solitary experience, forgoing interactions that could benefit the team as a whole. Perhaps this stems from other games that players have experienced. While this could be one reason for players' aversion to teamwork, this aversion may also arise from feelings of reliance. That is to

say, in a team game where players must cooperate with strangers, the only person players can truly rely on is themselves. It is a strange blend of solitary and team play, as Habber Dasher puts it "…you're responsible for your own performance, yet the team has to mesh together as a team to work out." This is a difficult area to traverse for players, being presented with a team game in which individual mastery is expected. My journal entries detailed several games in which I had to rely on other teammates. In these instances, my frustration focused on another specific teammate. Entries related to this theme include one from 1/9/2012: "Again, the fate of my happiness is in the hands of one, sole individual." In another entry from 1/20/2012, I complain about the disconnected nature of teamwork: "We had a guy telling us what to do all game and then refused to help the team."

The reasons for the negative emphasis of teamwork are varied and are usually a source of frustration for players. Participants believe that teamwork is essential to success in the game, yet players rarely cooperate. It is possible that this is due to player perceptions of themselves, players not wanting to rely on others, or even simply the standard of aggression that has been created in the game. It could also be possible that relying on other players is frustrating because of the game's competitive nature. The end goal of each match is to win, or at least not to lose. Having an incompetent player, whether oneself or another, leads the team to defeat. Therefore, personal individual skill may seem more important to players than teamwork, as it is possible that individuals on the team will not possess the competency to achieve victory. As a ludic structure, teamwork in *League of Legends* emphasizes mastery and victory; cooperation seems to

be an optional by-product of teamwork instead of its core. Instead of trying to correct these situations with teammates, the atmosphere of the game leads to in-fighting and aggressive communication. Next I describe the data references of my final *League of Legends* theme, the meta-game.

Meta-game. The purpose of the *League of Legends* is to destroy the enemy nexus. However, players believe that the selection of characters and how the game is played is just as important as the end objective. The strategy behind choosing character roles and how to play these characters is called the meta-game. Raael provides a definition in an interview, saying "Oh, meta-game in general is basically what everyone has conformed to be the most effective [strategies] in [the] game." Given the different structures of the game, players theorized what character combinations and roles most likely win games. Again, this implies that winning is the most important aspect of the game; defeating other players in a competitive environment is a driving factor for players. This system of optimization was described by in detail by interview participants, especially Habber Dasher.

Habber Dasher believes that champions scale differently between gold and experience. Champions gain experience by being present when an enemy minion dies. Gold is slowly generated by each champion over time, as well as being earned when a champion scores the killing blow on a minion or another champion. As champions earn gold, they have the ability to purchase more items, which increase their attack and defense statistics. As champions earn experience, they gain levels which increase the

power of their personal abilities. Habber Dasher explains in detail the ways that different characters work as they progress through the game, noting that:

> There's usually a mage on the team which…They're fairly reliant on both gold and experience, so they're put in a lane by themselves… There's usually a fighter, which is good at, a little good at defense and good at damaging too, which is placed in the top [lane] because they are also equally dependent on experience and gold. There's a jungler...they kind of get their own gold and experience that way. Then there's a bottom lane. And the bottom lane you have to split your experience and gold. So the two people there won't get as much experience as either of the solo lanes and if they divide the gold equally they wouldn't get as much gold as the solo lanes or the jungler.

He then continues to explain that the support character exists to let the bottom lane fighter champion get as much gold as possible by never hitting the minions. This technique is known as "farming," and is useful because fighter character scale very well with gold, and not as well with experience. The support, on the other hand, scales well with experience, and usually does not need as many items to perform optimally. What this demonstrates is a breakdown of very specific roles, further broken down into very specific ways to play these roles. *League of Legends* was praised by participants for its variety of characters and game styles. Despite this variance, the meta-game ensures that the game is boiled down into a set structure to ensure optimal game play. Regardless of the 95 characters that can be played in dozens of different ways with countless items, players feel forced to play the "optimized" meta-game structure

Raael, in an interview, discussed his distress at the current state of the meta-game, saying that if possible, he would like to try more interesting team compositions because playing the same setup becomes very stale. He states:

> Personally, I think the meta-game for *League* has gotten really shitty. It used to be a lot of fun having AD [attack damage] mids and stuff like that, but now it's not

> as loose as it was before, so people get mad before the game even starts because of that. I think that's one of the biggest reasons why I don't like it, because I think people just get mad if you don't do the normal.

The meta-game is an obvious source of anger for Raael, as well as the other players he describes, potentially leading to aggression. Other *League of Legends* players who were interviewed also expressed concern at the seemingly stagnant meta-game. Habber Dasher explained how players constantly express frustration at not having a perfect meta-game team composition. He even explained that though he tries to switch things up, he finds himself being frustrated with teammates when *they* do not follow the meta-game either:

> I don't like how rigid the meta is, on one hand, but on the other hand, I feel like it is rigid for a reason, and sometimes when people don't follow it that also frustrates me.

Habber Dasher feels as if he has been conditioned to abide by the meta-game; he expects each game to be played in a certain manner. Though the meta-game dictates what should be a source of success, players are frustrated at its implementation. This frustration may lead to anger, and therefore, could be a source of aggression for players in the game.

The meta-game is a very interesting ludic structure component of *League of Legends* that seems to be a source of frustration for game players. It is a concept rooted solely in the way each team is structured, and the arbitrary requirements are fulfilled in a variety of ways, suggesting that the meta-game is not directly related to content. While it could be argued that the champions are indeed an aspect of game content, the roles that are assigned to each character are not, as players are not required to play champions as the roles they were designated. I have personally seen a support champion played as a fighter, a tank played as a mage, a mage played as a jungler, and countless other non-

meta combinations. What makes the meta-game so intriguing as a structure is the root of the concept. Raael and Laser Tornado suggest that the meta-game is derived from high ranked players. Yet the game developers continue creating characters that fulfill the meta-game roles; they create new tanks, supports, and fighters, and explain how to play these champions in accordance to the meta-game. Because the structure is so embedded in the game at this point, it is difficult to determine how this structure was created in the first place. Raael suggests that it starts with the developers of the game, who then adjust their vision based on the reaction of the community:

> Initially, I feel like it's the developers that have…the initial decision that they're going to make this game a certain way, and then people react, and then the company reacts after the people react… So I'd say that it goes both way, but its obviously more on the people or the community, just because they're the ones, they're the buyers.

Laser Tornado believes that it is players who establish the most effective way to play the game, and then the developers tailor to these players. Laser Tornado believes that the meta-game is community based:

> …a lot of what you see is developers talking about, and players in the game talking about is "Hey, this is what high ranked, high ELO players do. This is what pros do. I follow this pro's guide." So that actually has a lot to do with community…

In an interesting twist, the community actually may be the driving factor of the meta-game structure of the game. Competitive, highly-skilled players developed a ludic structure to increase the chance of victory. This meta-game structure is reified by players, though it may have been started by the game developers. Regardless of its origins, the meta-game has a significant influence on players of *League of Legends*. There is undoubtedly a connection between the community and the structures of the game on

some level, even though the same structure is a source of frustration for the very community that created it.

The meta-game and the concept of teamwork are some of the ludic structures discovered during interviews and personal game play that affect the game community, though there are more. The meta-game is a ludic structure because it dictates the way the game is played; who teams best with whom, what character is best, and how those characters should be played. As a ludic structure, the meta-game forces players to stifle their creativity in an effort to produce optimized game play; players are seemingly sacrificing fun for victory. Working on teams is also a ludic structure of the game. The structure of the game forces players to be on teams; it is impossible to play without other champions. Therefore, teamwork can be considered a ludic structure. Aggression may be the result of these ludic structures, in turn creating an angry and aggressive community. This aggression may have an opportunity to manifest itself in the competitive environment of *League of Legends*, such as blaming other players for their mistakes. I believe that these ludic structures are rooted in the overarching concept of the game as competitive. The meta-game serves to optimize victory, and teamwork issues are usually problematic as players blame each other for mistakes that lead to defeat.

I have given an extensive overview of *League of Legends*, its guiding plot, game mechanics, and basic game play elements. In the following section, I will explore other issues that became apparent in my interviews, as well as my own observations while playing. Topics include differing approaches to the issues of aggression, teamwork, and punishment structures in the game. These will be presented in a narrative, as I believe the

emotions associated with these topics are best expressed through personal reflection. Ellingson (2011) believes that richer analysis and insight can be gained through various modes of expression. This includes reporting on data in different writing styles. By writing a narrative, I am engaging my data from a more artistic point of view. The story that follows is a stylized representation of the ways I felt while playing *League of Legends*.

***League of Legends*: Into the Belly of the Beast**

"It is easy to go down to Hell; night and day the gates of dark Death stand wide; but to climb back up again, to retrace one's steps to the open air—there's the rub, the task."

-Virgil, *The Aeneid*

Generally, I consider myself a generous, courteous human being. I open doors for people, I say thank you, I try to help out when people look like they need assistance, maybe carry a bag or something. Sometimes I play *League of Legends* though, and I get a little angry. I knew this going into my thesis. I mentally prepped myself for the task. "Remember Leland," I tell my game self, "you get angry when you play this. But you are a researcher today dammit! So go in there and do good work!" Easy enough. Play some *League*, write some notes, be done. I can handle this. I think I know what I'm going to see, it shouldn't be too difficult.

Barbarians are present, as usual, when I played. The second time I played and journaled I received the following encouraging message: "ALL ABOARD THE RAPE TRAIN! TOOOT TOOOOT!!" These childish idiots, oh well. At least they're not on my team. As a researcher, I would never be that vulgar. I mean these are complete strangers we're dealing with here! It's a bit absurd what people in this game will say, and they

don't know the history of a single person in here. Of course I can't just stand and let people harass me like this, I'm a adult and can take care of my own problems. Everyone in the game is whipped into some sort of frothing frenzy, so I jump in and inform an offensive player, letting him know how sorry I was for him, because he didn't have any friends to play with. I mean obviously a person so rude and negative has personal issues. Honestly I was sort of expecting this. I cannot stand this kind of insulting behavior, but it's important to my research. I suppose I can simply turn on the in-game swear filter and block out most of the nasty comments hurled my way. It even standardizes every word to **** regardless of the original word length. I feel there's no fun in that, because then I can't know what people are saying about me. At least in some game swear filters you can guess. But putting up with this stuff is really all part of it. You put up with the crap to reap the benefits.

Personally, as a gamer, I get a rush out of defeating other players. Something about proving your dominance against a real, live human being gets me going. I firmly believe that computers are just programs that are run, and if you spend enough time with those programs, you can figure them out and win them every time. Some of my compatriots, like Habber Dasher agrees. He says it wouldn't be as rewarding defeating artificial intelligence. Playing against the computer would be worthless. Laser Tornado said he wouldn't even touch the game if it weren't for its competitive play. There is no glory in beating up a computer, anyone who has played hearts on a PC can tell you that. Going against real, breathing, *thinking* people is where the challenge lies. People can be witty and smart and adaptive, it's wonderful. On the other hand, people can also be

assholes, but that comes with the territory. Why wouldn't they be assholes? When you're beating them in a game, I could see them getting a little sore. But that only encourages them to play harder, right? At its core, competition is what drives *League of Legends*. It is an online arena. And in competition, someone has to lose. It's not my fault if someone gets mad when things don't go their way.

Well shit ok, some of the games I played were my fault. But hey, the first time it happened the team was nice about it, I simply got outplayed, that's all there is to it. This community really isn't that bad. I have personally been verbally assaulted for doing much better than I did that game. But sometimes you can't help it, you know exactly who to blame. Like I said before, the game is about competition. Part of competition is making sure your team is working well. If you're going to win, you cannot have weak links. A weak link in this game is death. Laser Tornado was that link in a game we recently played. No denying it either. Honestly, he played like a straight up moron. I mean if he had just played better, the whole thing would have been fine, and we wouldn't have ended the night on a loss, and we wouldn't have left without saying a word to each other, despite being friends. Wait no. He may have played badly, but I'm a good, courteous person. So I contacted him. We chat about stuff, apologies are given. See, I take care of stuff like that, I'm not a negative person. He told me a story though when we were done talking. Apparently there is an old Indian tale about wolves. A boy was talking to his father about the nature of people. His father responded by telling him that each of us has two wolves constantly fighting each other inside ourselves. One represents good, the other evil. These wolves are in a struggle within each person. The boy asked his father

which wolf will win. The father simply replied "The one that you feed." I get the message. We were being mean to each other. I mean I was definitely more justified, he was playing poorly, but still, I see his point. I'm not really worried though, my good wolf is very well fed and good to go.

After playing some more games, I notice I'm getting a little angrier. Guess my bad wolf got a few steaks. If I could ironically chuckle in a paper, I would do that right now. Also, playing 20 hours of this game is taking more time than I thought it would. Some of the things people say in here are rough, I feel dirty sometimes. I think I'm making a breakthrough though. I only have a negative time when I'm playing with incompetent people. Looking back at a lot of the games I played, my team had an important role, the jungler, screw up every time. So naturally, when you have a person roaming around, whose job is to assassinate people, and they never actually *do their job*, I get frustrated. The first step in fixing any anger issues I may have is recognizing the problem, and I found it. I mean I saw some serious morons. I mean morons in the nicest possible way here, but I'm talking about people who would stay in the bushes, sitting and doing nothing. Absolutely nothing! At that point, the game becomes five versus four, and we're down a player. That's the same as having a player quit the game on you. Thankfully, there is a remedy for people like this. When I run into these players, I report them for disciplining after the game. I even try to get other people to help me in hopes that they will be punished by the game. I like to believe that they will get a little slice of justice for ruining my game. I really hate it when people ruin my game. In one of my interviews, Thomas actually laid it out for me formulaically. If one person on the team of

five does a bad job, they directly help the enemy team do a good job. Therefore, while your one person keeps doing worse, they single-handedly make the other team better. This makes it difficult for the other four players to do anything. And yes, we all have bad days and off days where we aren't our best. But when that happens, he explains that one bad person causes a total of five people to lose one hour of fun, or as he added, a net loss of five hours from people's live that they could be enjoying. It seriously only takes that one person to ~~fuck~~ screw it up for everyone else. So I report them. They wasted my time, they ruined my fun. They have to be taught a lesson somehow and if they won't listen to me yelling at them to be better in the game, they will damn well listen to a Tribunal ruling.

This is a wickedly beautiful game structure; the Tribunal. The Tribunal is the way *League of Legends* deals with bad players, bad meaning verbally abusive, racist, vulgar, unsportsmanlike, aiding the enemy, unskilled, the list goes on. All of these are reportable offenses. With a community of over 15 million players, it's hard for *League of Legends* to police itself at times. So they developed a brilliant system that lets them automate this process. Players can report others at the end of games from a list of offenses. If that player receives enough reports, the case is put under review. This case in review gets sent to the Tribunal, which is—here's the brilliant part—a body of the reported players *peers*. Anyone who plays *League of Legends* can log on and vote on cases in the Tribunal. The game makes it easy enough to judge, they give you access to the chat logs of the games in which the player was reported and then gives you two options: punish or pardon. If a player receives enough votes, the case gets sent to a higher power, who rules on the

judging. It's like democracy incarnate, where the people are judge and jury, while execution still remains in the hands of an actual employee of the company. These punishments range from a warning, to a temporary suspension of the player's gaming account, to a permanent ban in which the account is deleted. Raael agrees with me, and believes it's an incredibly positive step forward in punishment procedures. So in cases like I described before, where I report shitty jungle players for being bad (or sometimes I just pick an offense I feel could go through, maybe negative attitude), the cases are reviewed by other players. To stack the deck, after a particularly foul game where I want to ban some of the idiots I've seen playing this game, I will log on the Tribunal in hopes of getting a case where I can punish someone I played with. What a thrill that would be! Making sure I never encounter the people that make me lose games again. Keep those assholes out of my game.

Ok, I actually really like this game. I just despise the people that play it. No matter how much I tell these ass-hats what they're doing wrong, no one does a damn thing to fix it. The people that play it can be so rude and inconsiderate, it drives me nuts sometimes. I'm not alone either in this assessment. Everyone I've interviewed agrees, the people that play *League of Legends* are assholes, most of them even describing the negativity of the community as their least favorite aspect of the game. At least I can justify putting up with all the bullshit when I win, which is more than Thomas can say. During his interview he actually threw me for quite a loop. When I asked him what his least favorite part of the game was, he simply replied:

> Honestly, I almost feel, in a strange sense, actually just playing the game. The game itself I find rather tedious, the community I can't really stand. Typically

> either, you know, playing as a result isn't satisfactory one way or the other. I actually don't even like playing it to be completely honest.

The community of the game can so intolerable that to some, playing the game is actually the worst part of playing the game. Sometimes, I honestly don't blame him. I'm hard pressed to find positive people in the game. Just assholes spouting their mouths about how good they are and how everyone else sucks. I can't even count the number of players who think they are gods that have lost games for me. It's actually pretty baffling, that a game designed to be so teamwork oriented can be so hostile. You'd think that in a competitive environment the ribbing and bullying would happen between the two teams instead of with your own team. I actually agree with Raael's argument explaining that:

> …people get mad so easily because they can't, they don't have that control that they want, they want, they need to have that control in their video game, they don't have that in League of Legends, and so people get really mad because of it, are those people who aren't used to working as a team.

This is why I'm really glad I'm in the communication field. I know how to work with a team. It's the fuckers that can't cooperate that bring me down. The number of times I have maintained my lane, the amount of times I have done my fucking best in my lane, while my teammates are getting their assholes stomped in is preposterous. I am doing a fucking good job and then these idiots fuck everything up. If they had been good teammates and just done their job in their solo lanes, I would win a lot more. Laser Tornado even backs me up on this,

> …some people are very selfish in that they don't try to do what's best for the team, they just try to do whatever is going to help them score the most and they don't think about it, how [intelligent] it is they play.

If other players knew that winning their lanes and being good is actually beneficial for

the *whole team*, maybe they would be more successful, instead of sucking at the game and ruining it for everybody. People need to learn how the fuck to play and get their shit together. This whole damn community needs to learn that their individual performances affect the team. Sometimes going for that sweet kill that makes you feel like a fucking hero actually turns into harder work for the rest of us because *you didn't help the team*. And don't get me on junglers again and how they get their personal scores involved when playing. These junglers that fucking piss me off, they roam around and complain about how *they* are having trouble, or how *they* are being caught by the other team, or how *I* have to hold on until they can help me are bad at their jobs. They should see when I'm struggling and be there to help *me*. If a jungler can't see when I am struggling because they got in a bad spot, they are fucking bad. I think Laser Tornado again put it best:

> …there are certain situations, there are often situations where one player on a team will not be doing well and if the other players would do different things, they could help them do that, they could help them catch back up to where they're supposed to because the game snowballs in a lot of different ways, in a lot of different senses.

Sometimes I feel like I'm alone in this fucking game, even with four mouth-breathing excuses for teammates. Either I'm doing awesome and I have to always fucking help them because they're doing poorly, or I'm doing badly and they are somehow *doing worse*. I can't be a whole fucking team, that's not how the game works.

No one gives a fuck about you when you play. I mean truly, no one gives a flying FUCK about you. That's how I would describe it. Well I mean I care. I'm a fucking nice person; I'm courteous as shit. I care because "you," the entity of your person, the bag of meat you occupy at this current moment in time, the sad sack of shit your soul rides

around in, is in a game with me. And in this game you are required to play with others. This sucks for me, because I know that you will be awful, and you won't help me, so I sure as FUCK won't help you. Unfortunately, it's the rules. If I could edit you fuckers out of my game I would, but that wouldn't be much of a challenge. I play so I can prove to myself that I am better than my opponents, and I sure as FUCK can prove I'm better than you. So fuck you, but don't you dare make the team lose. If we lose because of you, then God help you, I will see to it that you are banned and never play this game again. And if we lose, it *will* be your fault. You can be fucking sure of that. Noob.

Conclusion

This story was meant to show the devolution of myself as a player in *League of Legends*. I begin hopeful and optimistic, but not without reservations about the games and its flaws. As the narrative unfolds, I try to restrain myself and keep my anger inside. This eventually results in an explosion of emotions, resulting in me attempting to justify my own actions by blaming others, not owning up to mistakes, and finally, misrepresenting information. The quotations from interviews reflect my obliviousness. I am actually trying to be a representation of the kind of player my interview participants believed to be the root of the problem in *League of Legends*. This representation serves as a reminder that these negative, aggressive players are also the ones complaining about negative aggressive players. To borrow a famous quotation from Walt Kelly's Pogo: "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

This chapter also provided an overview of the plot and game mechanics of *League of Legends*. This section was followed by an analysis of the themes found in my

data. These themes included aggression, teamwork issues, and the meta-game. The analysis revealed that aggression could be a result of ludic structures. Both the concept of teams and the meta-game are causes of frustration for players. This frustration then manifests itself as aggression, creating a self-reifying community of aggression in *League of Legends*. In the next chapter, I analyze *Puzzle Pirates* in a similar manner. This includes a description of the game, a thematic analysis of my data set, and a narrative describing my feelings about the game.

CHAPTER FIVE

CLOSE ANALYSIS OF *PUZZLE PIRATES*

This chapter takes an in depth look at the inner workings and game play of *Puzzle Pirates*. Like the previous chapter, I describe the game and some of its more important structural features. This includes the origins of the game *Puzzle Pirates*, how the game is structured, the various puzzles available in the game and their purposes, and an examination of what is generally considered "end game" play in *Puzzle Pirates*. However, because *Puzzle Pirates* lacks a central narrative, the close analysis focuses more on game layout and is shorter in length than the previous chapter. Next, I detail the themes that emerged in my data set for the game, which includes interviews and my own personal journal reflections. These themes are Relationships, Blockading, and Politics. In the last section, I share my personal experiences with the game in an autobiographical narrative style, providing a more performative analysis of my data. This narrative includes topics about cooperation, friendliness, and a sense of belonging.

Puzzle Pirates: A Close Analysis

Puzzle Pirates was created in 2004, existing five years before *League of Legends*, which was created in 2009. One of the defining features of the game is its approach to player immersion. The game tries to turn every seemingly technical aspects of the game into a pirate-like function. This includes referring to players as pirates and referring to

computer players as "non-player pirates" rather than the industry standard "non-player character." *Puzzle Pirates* is divided into different servers[2] to accommodate large amounts of players at the same time. To maintain a sense of immersion, the developers simply named these servers "oceans," giving each one a name associated with a color. The colors represent different types of servers. Green names (Emerald, Malachite) represent servers that are free to play, or "doubloon" servers. Blue names (Cerulean, Midnight) represent servers that are subscription based; a monthly fee is paid to play on these servers. There is also one server called "Crimson," which represents a family friendly server in which the game player has been modified to remove elements not suitable for young children. *Puzzle Pirates* has also included two international servers, "Opal" for German language speakers and "Jade" for Spanish language speakers.

The separation between subscription and doubloon oceans was a major change for *Puzzle Pirates*, as it marked the game's transition into the realm of free-to-play games. On a subscription server, players paid a monthly fee to have access to all game content. The doubloon servers gave all players access to basic parts of the game, while offering different free content each day. For example, being able to play the blacksmithing game is free on Mondays, while playing poker is available for all players on Fridays and Sundays. Players can then acquire doubloons to gain access to these games for one-month increments. Doubloons can be purchased with real money, or exchanged for in game money in a player-controlled market. This meant two things for players. First, it became

[2] A server is where an online game is hosted by the game company; it is the place players connect to in order to access the game. Typically this is done to reduce traffic to the game, giving players a smoother gaming experience. In *Puzzle Pirates*, servers also serve as a delineation of different paying methods, if a player chooses to pay.

possible for players to only pay for the parts of the game they wanted to play, spending potentially only $3 a month instead of $10. Second, it allowed players to earn doubloons by spending their hard earned game money, potentially allowing players to not pay any real-world money at all. This new, more accommodating game style was one of several moves *Puzzle Pirates* would make in creating a friendly and supportive atmosphere for their players.

Puzzle Pirates invites players to enter into a pirate-themed MMO world, which varies from more traditional fantasy setting seen in games like *League of Legends*. There is no final boss to kill, there is no great evil to defeat, and there is no impetus for mortal combat. The game is designed to create an immersive and free environment for players. The level of detail to create an immersive environment in *Puzzle Pirates* is astonishing. It even extends to the swear filter of the game, which gives players the option to see curse words translated into pirate phrases. If a player types in "wtf," the game instead writes "what in the seven seas." Harsh swear words become pirate-like, including words like "barnacle" and "scupper." This level of immersion is a refreshing break from the stereotypical medieval fantasy settings of other MMOs. *Puzzle Pirates* is intentionally created in an open and immersive style so that players have the option to play the game any way they choose. This openness seems to come at the cost of narrative structure in *Puzzle Pirates*. There is no overarching story to the game like *League of Legends*. Three Rings, the developers of the game, included some recurring characters called Brigand Kings. These are non-player characters that roam the sea, sometimes taking over islands or commanding small outposts. The game will occasionally use these Brigand Kings as a

means to explain new in-game content, but their existence is inconsequential for the average player. The game is truly an open world in which players create their own story instead of becoming a part of the game's story. It is a unique approach, but can also be overwhelming to new players. Thankfully, the game has developed a core set of activities for players.

Amid the variety and openness of the game, one of the most common activities is known as pillaging. This is where a group of players will board a player's boat and sail the seas in search of computer generated brigands. Winning sea battles against brigands results in gold pieces for the crew and supplies for the ship. Losing sea battles results in losing ship supplies, and a percentage of any money the players gained from a previous victory. Pillaging is the most common way of making money in the game, as it is impossible for a player to lose money while out sailing. Other activities in the game include more advanced pillages known as sea monster hunts. These missions are focused on naval combat in which boats can be sunk, creating a higher risk situation for players. However, the reward is vastly greater than normal pillages, as treasure is awarded in greater sums and rare items can be found in chests hauled up from sunken enemy vessels.

The most significant element of *Puzzle Pirates* is obviously, the puzzle games involved. Puzzles are split into different categories depending on the end goal of the puzzle. There are crafting puzzles, duty puzzles, battle puzzles, and carousing puzzles. Crafting puzzles are puzzles associated with labor. These puzzles include blacksmithing (producing swords and cannonballs), alchemistry (paints and potions), distilling (rum), weaving (clothing), ship-wrightery (ships and bludgeons), and foraging. When a player

engages in one of these activities, their level of skill directly translates into either basic, skilled, or expert labor for a shop owner. This labor, in combination with raw materials, is how most products are made in the game. For instance, if a ship needs cannonballs, they place an order at a blacksmith shop. Players then offer money to other players in return for playing the puzzle, which in turn will provide labor on the order of cannonballs. The only puzzle not directly associated with labor in a shop is the foraging puzzle. In this activity, players search for goods in a forest, with their labor and skill at the puzzle being converted into raw goods. Instead of labor, players foraging produce fruits like carambolas, bananas, and sometimes rare gems.

Players can also enjoy various types of board and card based games when they are not working at shops called carousing puzzles. Carousing puzzles are games players can play with other pirates in common areas, such as the inn of an island. These games include hearts, spades, poker, drinking, and treasure drop. They are designed in a way to pit players against one another; there is no artificial intelligence involved. Hearts, spades, and poker are played like their real-world counterparts. The exception though is that players can wager their in-game money against each other, with the winner taking it all. Treasure drop is a game similar to Plinko or pachinko, in which a coin is dropped from the top of a board in slots denoting various point values at the bottom. The objective is to score the most points, as players take turns dropping coins. Drinking is an interesting variation on Othello, where players place alcohol-themed pieces on a board, changing the board's color. Points are awarded for staining board tiles and creating complete rows, similar to bingo. Drinking is a game unique to *Puzzle Pirates*, and it is hard to compare it

to a traditional game, as one aspect of the puzzle includes the ability to "drink" a token to hinder your opponent. These games represent the more common competitive activities available in *Puzzle Pirates*, as the money earned in these games comes directly from another player, not from the game itself.

Duty and battle puzzles go hand in hand. Duty puzzles are the puzzles performed on a ship when a crew is out sailing. The basic puzzles associated with running a boat are duty-navigation, battle-navigation, sailing or rigging, carpentry, bilging, and gunning. On board these puzzles are referred to as stations, and each of these puzzles is associated with a specific task aboard the ship. Sailing and rigging generates speed for the boat, allowing it to travel faster. Carpentry repairs holes in the ship to prevent water buildup, or to fix any damage sustained from combat with another ship. Bilging reduces the amount of water in a ship, as water slows down the vessel. Carpentry and bilging are symbiotic puzzles, as the more damage a ship has taken, the more water floods into a ship. These three roles are vital to traveling or pillaging in *Puzzle Pirates*. Duty-navigation acts as a boost to all other puzzles. Though not required, if a person takes the helm of a ship and plays the puzzle, it will increase the output of all the other stations onboard. Gunning is the puzzle necessary for loading the guns, if the ship wishes to engage in combat. Battle-navigation is simply the act of moving the boat on the grid during naval combat, and ordering when to shoot guns or attempt to grapple another ship.

Grappling occurs when a vessel ropes another adjacent vessel; this initiates the final stages of combat. This activates one of two battle puzzles: sword fighting or rumbling. Each of these puzzles pits players on one ship against the players of another

ship. Normally, players fight against computer-generated pirates. Though this may seem peculiar, during an interview LJAmethyst joked to me "And you know how often PVP [player versus player] happens in the game," because of its status as a rare oddity. When the players are engaged with their opponents in combat, the games play like a variation of Tetris. Whenever a player clears a pattern, that pattern is dropped on their opponents screen. The crew that lasts longer wins the fight, and takes money and raw materials from the losing ship. Treasure haul is also a viable battle puzzle, solely for the fact that it is only available when a ship has been sunk, and players must frantically attempt to haul up as much treasure from the downed vessel as possible. Even though these puzzles seem to have the most competitive edge, because they are seldom played against other players, they are actually the more cooperative puzzles. This is because players are encouraged to strategize and work together when taking on another crew. Players are also very cooperative with the rest of their ship because they realize that if they lose, they will not be paid as much for their services and they will lose valuable loot.

Puzzle Pirates implemented a series of hierarchies to which players can belong. This is meant to aid in organizing players, and also makes events such as pillages or sea monster hunts easier to manage. These hierarchies are known as "crews" and "flags." A crew is a group of pirates ruled over by a captain. The captain can choose to lead the crew democratically or autocratically and decides the division of loot each pirate receives when on pillages. Captains can also assign a variety of officer positions to divide the responsibilities of running a crew. Several crews can band together under a common flag. Flags are governed by royalty members, with a monarch controlling the entire group. The

flag can create and dissolve alliances with other flags, as well as declare war on other flags. This ludic structure emphasizes the important role of teamwork in *Puzzle Pirates*. Without a way to organize and work with a large group of people, it would be almost impossible to organize large scale events, such as a grand frigate pillage, which requires 159 players to be successful. The game encourages cooperation via the existence of these hierarchical structures.

Players also have the opportunity to own property in the game. All goods in the game are player generated, and therefore, players must own shops in order to produce goods. It's a wonderful system of reciprocity, as players invest their pillaged money into shops to produce the materials needed to go on more pillages. Players can own entire shops on islands, or simply a small stall in the island bazaar. There are also several housing options available to pirates, from humble shacks to grandiose mansions. All these buildings are customizable; players can purchase or find furniture on their travels and place it in their homes and shops to give them a unique place to call home. Even the actual islands on which properties are located are fair game for conquest. Players have the opportunity to challenge the flag that owns an island. If this happens, a blockade occurs in the game. The blockade is a large scale player versus player sea battle at the site of the island. If the defender wins, the island remains under the defender's control. If the challenger wins, control of the island is given to the challenger. Controlling islands is very beneficial to flags, as they can adjust tax rates of all labor and goods produced on the island as well as establish new buildings on the island.

Because *Puzzle Pirates* is generally a friendly and cooperative game, blockading can be a source of stress and negativity. This is not surprising, as player versus player interactions are largely absent from the game. Players mostly cooperate together to achieve common goals; if the ship wins, every person on board wins. Cooperation directly equals personal gain on pillages. However, in a blockade, the fruits of a player's personal labor is at stake. If a group of players invested their time and in-game money maintaining an island, having the island taken away could be devastating for them. The concept of blockading is fascinating, as nothing is unavailable to players except for uninhabitable islands. It gives players a chance to earn a tangible reward for their achievements in the game.

Overall, the game is so open-ended that players must work together to accomplish anything. Players are encouraged to work together to produce goods, they are rewarded for cooperating on pillages, and they are discouraged from actions like swearing at each other, as it quickly loses its effectiveness due to the in-game chat filter. The game has structures in place to simplify the process of working together by creating crews, flags, and alliances. However, there are some causes for frustration and aggression when it comes to issues of high level politics. Feelings can be hurt and friendships can dissolve. While aggression is commonplace in *League of Legends*, in *Puzzle Pirates*, acts of such aggression are taken personally by the players. Their emotions are seated in the trust they have for other players, or even the amount of investment they put into creating the perfect island. Next, I analyze the important themes present in the data I collected for *Puzzle Pirates*. These themes are relationships, blockading, and politics.

Thematic Analysis

The themes I found emerging from the data were relationships, blockading, and politics. Relationships, or friendships, were instances in which players discussed people they played with for extended periods of time. There are key differences from the similarly structured *League of Legends* theme of team work issues, as these relationships were represented as being long term instead of the short term team interactions present in *League*. Blockading is the act of taking over an island, viewed by players as the ultimate end-game activity. Any references to blockading, both positive and negative were coded under this theme. Politics is analyzed in conjunction with blockading, as the two themes are very closely related. Instances of politics were coded when players referenced the political structure of the game, including crew and flag management, as well as alliances between flags. These themes represent the general attitude of the players of *Puzzle Pirates* in interviews, even though they were not necessarily the most commonly referenced themes as described in Chapter Three. This may be because one of my *Puzzle Pirates* participants rarely played with other people, preferring to only play games by herself. Her lack of involvement with the community of the game may have skewed the number of references involving the very interactive themes present in other interviews.

Relationships. The fact that the game structure encourages cooperation is obvious in the answers participants provided in interviews. Relationships between players seemed to be a very central theme for players of *Puzzle Pirates*. While players did not necessarily constantly talk about their relationships, the atmosphere they created in their interviews suggested that the game is played with close friends. Almoner, the least

experienced *Puzzle Pirates* player, even recognized this aspect when she said "…the fact that I knew people who played…was another plus." Even though she rarely interacted with the community, Almoner chose to play the game in the first place because she was friends with people who also played. Even my own journals alluded to a personal assumption of how the game should be played, as shown by this entry from 2/13/2012:

> What's the point of playing with people if you're by yourself? That interaction with people is good for me in MMOs; it's nice having someone on your side.

Though I describe the aspects of playing with others as an attribute of all MMOs, my journal entries from *League of Legends* rarely described working with others as a positive experience. Players think that playing with others is a positive experience, and one that is important to the game. As Tilinka described, the people are one of her favorite parts of the game:

> Hmm. It has two hooks in me. First, I really do enjoy puzzle games, and it's a nice place to get a fix for those. But mostly, I've always enjoyed the community.

The amount of times participants referred to the great people in *Puzzle Pirates* was really amazing, and very easy to see when playing as well.

These relationships, aside from being referenced in a much more positive light than references to teamwork in *League*, also seem to be of a different nature. Players in *Puzzle Pirates* use the game to connect with one another, and create friendships. LJAmethyst explains in an interview "I probably have more friends on *Puzzle Pirates* than I do anywhere else. So I get to see people every day." LJAmethyst describes the people he has met and the friendships he has created as one of his favorite aspects of *Puzzle Pirates*. The friendships he has created are far from superficial. LJAmethyst has

used his *Puzzle Pirates* connections for an opportunity to travel to Spain for a month to visit one of his closest *Puzzle Pirates* friends. This kind of connection between players in the game does not seem uncommon. Avienda described some of the close relationships she had made in the game:

> …The ones I spend time with are, in my eyes, good people of course, loyal friends. Someone you can turn to with [real life] problems, with silly concerns, or when you just need someone to talk to. People who will stand up for you, no matter what, and walk through fire for you if they need. This Christmas, I sent cards to the royals of my flag…and one of them…sent us T-shirts with the flag name on them and a hand-written letter, telling us how much we mean to her…another friend is trying to get a visa to come visit us this summer, and he lives in India, we live in Sweden

The relationships formed in *Puzzle Pirates* seem to be very deep, meaningful, and interesting to this analysis, as shown by the ludic structures such as the hierarchies of the game. Players do not simply log in and play with strangers, they get to know each other on a personal level. Players meet each other through crews, and these crews band together to form flags, creating collectives of several players, akin to miniature communities. Without these organizations in place, the close relationships described by Avienda may have never flourished. However, Avienda explains why she believes this is the case, saying "But, [of course], that's my flag, my friends. It's not representative for what I see in the game as a whole." It appears as though the ability for these people to come together is a very defining characteristic of forming these deep and lasting relationships. While players may not be incredibly close with every person with whom they interact, they do form closely knit relationships with their own crew and flag members. As described previously, crews and flags are a structure of the game that allow players to band together to take on larger goals. Pragmatically, the ability to organize a

large group has obvious benefits, as some ships can have up to 159 players simultaneously. However, it seems as though the ludic structure of crews and flags is also a catalyst for the formation of the lasting relationships described by some players.

Because the game encourages cooperation, the *Puzzle Pirates* players form close relationships. In the next section, elements of cooperation, both positive and negative, can be seen in two closely related themes: blockading and politics.

Blockading and politics. I have combined blockading and politics into one theme for this section because of their interconnectedness. Blockading is the act of a flag taking over an island that is controlled by another flag. Because of the magnitude of this exchange, alliances can be formed to help attack or defend the island. Thus, a blockade could involve multiple flags consisting of several crews, and possibly hundreds of pirates. This leads directly into politics, as players attempt to secure alliances with powerful flags for their own benefit, while declaring war or weaker flags to take their resources. Players believe blockading and politics to be the sort of meta-game, to borrow a term, of *Puzzle Pirates*, as it is another strategic layer of the game that dictates otherwise "normal" play.

Blockading was referenced by players as a positive experience as well as potentially negative one. Players who focused on the positive aspects of blockading were quick to mention the massive amount of coordination a blockade required, and how they enjoyed working together. Avienda provided a wonderful description of how blockades are her favorite aspect of the game:

> [My favorite thing is] A small, non-sinking blockade, tight on jobbers, preferably a bit out-jobbed and every turn a nail biter. The teamwork, the laughing on Ventrillo, the nav, the joking around with friends…Win or lose, it's fun.

Avienda references friends and teamwork twice, as well as how she prefers a disadvantage in crew numbers. Another interesting part about this quotation is the idea that she enjoys non-sinking blockades. This is opposed to blockades in which players risk losing their ships in battle. This could be interpreted as Avienda enjoying blockades for their cooperative nature as opposed to their competitive nature. The risks are low, the challenge is high, and she enjoys the conflict regardless of outcome. This is in stark comparison to *League*, in which winning seems to be everything. Avienda's sentiments on blockading are not isolated. LJAmethyst echoes the idea that blockading is both fun and cooperative:

> Another good thing is when we get together for blockades and stuff, we can have really good teamwork. You know a lot of the activities on puzzle pirates involve large scale cooperation. You know you've got, you can have 75-150 people on one ship and they're all basically playing solo games but they're all basically cooperating…in a blockade you have true cooperation between navigators and blockade staff such as the admiral and the jobbing contacts and…we get together on Ventrillo or something like that and there's a lot of camaraderie that goes on there.

Here, LJAmethyst notes how blockading is a positive experience, again, focusing on massive amounts of teamwork, coordination, and cooperation. In his interview, he never mentions the ramifications of blockading, he does not mention taking over islands or even how successful his flag is. The activity of blockading is truly for the bonding experience between crews and flags. Camaraderie is of greater importance than conquest for these players. However, this view is not shared by all players, as some participants believe that there are negative sides to blockading.

Tilinka shared her opinions of blockading in an interview, which are decidedly more negative than other participants:

> The only parts of the game I haven't played much are the ones I don't have a lot of interest in playing in the first place - the blockade scene. (Too much stress in that for my concept of casual fun).

It is understandable how blockading could be viewed as stressful. It is a system of the game in which players can forcefully take resources from each other. If a group of players spend a lot of time developing an island, they might care more about the conquest than the cooperation. However, when asked if the game was more cooperative than competitive on the whole, Tilinka did believe that cooperation was much more prevalent, responding:

> In most arenas, definitely. It's made to be that way. Even in the competitive areas like PvP and blockading, you have the co-op aspect in order to simply run the ship.

Even though Tilinka thinks that blockading is a competitive activity, she references how the ludic structure of blockading is meant to be more cooperative than competitive. In fact, most participants agreed that the negative aspects of blockading stem directly from the political machinations of crews and flags.

At first, the connection was not quite clear to me, as I had no experience in blockading or *Puzzle Pirates* politics, having only played the game for 20 hours for my research. Tilinka explained how blockading could become negative for me:

> Blockading is one of the areas of the game were [sic] people can go in to win, and so you get more active competition there, which means more ruthlessness. I'm generally okay with that, but I find it stressful...and dishonesty really irks me.

The political aspects of blockading were more sinister than I had imagined, as players will do almost anything to gain an edge if it means they have the opportunity to win. It is important to note, however, that Tilinka explained that blockading was a place where

players “can go to win,” perhaps implying that winning is not always the goal, as described by Avienda and LJAmethyst. This does not mean that they were not familiar with the political side of the game. Avienda told me about some of the things she had seen in the *Puzzle Pirates* community throughout her five years playing the game:

> Many flagleaders put political advantages over real friendship…If you ally them, they're your best friend until it suits them better to ally someone else…And if you blockade them, you're their mortal enemy. And flags break, alliances break, crews break, leaving people bitter, trash-talking their former friends and so, politics is dirty.

Avienda goes on to explain how her flag leader never engaged in such politics, but still held firm to the idea that politics was definitely a prominent factor in blockading. These potentially hurtful kinds of politicking, as Tilinka referred to it, can manifest in many different ways. She explained that:

> There can be a lot of sneakiness going on with really competitive flags - even outside of bannable things like move spying - you have pay wars that are intended to force people not to play, attempt to mess up alliance rings. It's too easy for it to get personal and nasty if both sides don't go in from the start with a "this is for fun" concept. And you get lip service to that concept with no real intention of following through.

“Move spying” is the practice of placing a spy on an enemy vessel who relays the captains maneuvers to the opposing side. This places the spying team at a very heavy advantage, as they will always know where the opposing vessel is going. “Pay wars” involve paying other players incredibly high wages to work for them in a blockade, to the point where the opposition cannot afford to hire extra help. Two important points about this excerpt are in line with other participants views. Tilinka begins by stating that this kind of deceptive politicking is usually present in “really competitive flags,” and that it usually arises when both sides do not enter a blockade for fun. The emphasis hangs on

the fact that more competitive flags have a tendency to create a negative environment for the other players that simply want to have fun. Therefore, competitive players may be a minority, as participants acknowledged the positive aspects of blockading. Politics seems to make players uneasy and overly competitive. Avienda made a startling remark as we closed our interview: "…putting it simple there, the political structure of [Puzzle Pirates] makes people lie and intrigue [sic]."

This last comment suggests that politics is a possible ludic structure of the game. Avienda reveals that she believes that the ability for pirates to engage in politics is a structural reality of the game which influences the way players interact with one another. This sentiment was echoed by Tilinka as well, when she explained how politics can make players dishonest and ruthless, changing their interactions with others. Combined with blockading, these two themes are comparable to the meta-game of *League of Legends*. While the game was designed to allow players to blockade, the players created their own ludic structure to optimize their blockading experience. Engaging in political intrigue is a source of stress and negativity, therefore, my participants seemed to avoid politics even if they enjoyed blockading. The notion of such a competitive structure in a cooperative game seems odd, but players have made blockading work and immensely enjoy it as an activity in *Puzzle Pirates*. Perhaps the dissociation from competition makes the game enjoyable. This dissociation from competition is probably also made easier by *Puzzle Pirate's* structural disconnect from competition. Overall, these themes have shown a very different game than *League of Legends*, detailing the ways in which players form relationships and cooperate to achieve common goals for the sake of having fun. Next, I

detail my own personal experience with the game in the form of a narrative, explaining my desire to connect with the *Puzzle Pirate* community. This narrative, again, is in accordance with my guiding theory of crystallization, similar to the type of narrative seen in Chapter Four.

***Puzzle Pirates*: A Pirate's Life for Me**

"The fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but they have never found these dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore."

-Vincent van Gogh

When I play *Puzzle Pirates*, I feel…*different*. I don't feel like I've literally been transformed into a pirate, but there is something different. I feel much more relaxed than other games I play. This may be because I played *Puzzle Pirates* after I played *League*. Everything seems so calm. It may be the stereotypical sea sounds and bird calls I hear when I'm standing on the docks, or merely the fact that people aren't calling me a f**kwad every few minutes. Plus, if they did in *Puzzle Pirates* it would come out as "scupperwad," and I honestly cannot get mad about that. Logging into *Puzzle Pirates* and seeing the vast ocean before me, I realize that I haven't seen most of the islands the game has to offer. I wouldn't say that the possibilities are dizzying, but not having a set goal is a bit overwhelming. At least in *League* I try to win. I don't think a person can actually "win" *Puzzle Pirates*, they can just continue to improve. When I first logged in to begin my journaling, I could choose from so many different things to do I honestly did nothing. I went to the inn to see what was going on.

I made my residence a very large island called Aimuari, so the inn is always crowded. I actually set it as my home, seeing as the tiny shack the game gave me when I first started was on a very low population islands. I wanted to move to where the action was. The place was packed as usual when I walked inside. Little pirate avatars everywhere in gaudy pirate gear. One of the fun features of the game is the ability to buy clothing. It makes you more recognizable. I have currently opted for a turban and swashbuckler jacket motif, all white with a maroon sash. Presently, being a gaudy pirate is the only thing I really remember how to do. People were talking about items and trinkets and using acronyms I was very unfamiliar with. I feel a bit lost and don't know where to start. Everyone else also seemed confused, something about a big server merger and pirates being lost in limbo, all very ominous sounding. Trying to figure out where to start, I asked some questions. I know I shouldn't have been freaked out, but several people answered me. Even weirder, they gave me helpful advice. I have been playing *League* way too long. After some brief chatting with nice strangers, which I had forgotten was possible, I realized I didn't have any money. Only one thing to do to get my pockets heavier: pillage!

There's a notice board when you log in letting players know about current events. There is also a nice list of people hiring for pillages. I found a big one. The ship was a grand frigate, meaning we had a group of about 150. That's an incredibly large number of people when I thought about it. I was just thankful I could blend into the crowd; if I happened to suck at puzzling coming back fresh to the game, it probably wouldn't negatively affect the ship. That's another part about *Puzzle Pirates*, you feel good when

you're playing well. Every move you make in a puzzle is directly affecting the ship and indirectly affecting everyone's performance. When I hunkered down to do some bilging, I was actually keeping water out of our boat. Almoner told me about her same experience, there's something very rewarding about having your actions matter in an important way. This also means if a crew is doing poorly, the boat could be in peril. Again, this is why I was glad I found such a large boat. I really didn't want to get yelled at for doing poorly, especially since some of the puzzles are so easy.

Surprisingly, no one yelled. Not even a little bit. We had 150 on board, some newer to the game than I was, and no one yelled. People were asking dumb questions and some stations were failing at their jobs. I really wanted to call them out, tell them they were bad and see if we could get better people. This is probably why I wasn't in charge of the boat. Instead, the captain answered all questions politely, encouraged people to try their best, and at all costs, wanted to make sure people were having a good time. I almost forgot that's why normal people play games sometimes. It's not about beating someone to a pulp or proving dominance. I can have fun just playing this Bejeweled knockoff that dumps water out of the boat. The crew of the boat made sure all of their hired pirates kept a high morale, even to the point where they were raffling prizes for the top workers. I could hardly believe it, everyone was having a blast! It was like a party, except we were hunting brigands in a boat powered by puzzles! We defeated about five large ships and made a hefty profit, over 700,000 gold pieces for the whole boat. It was an incredibly successful trip overall, I made a lot of money, and I remembered why I liked *Puzzle*

Pirates in the first place. These pirates are some of the nicest people I've gamed with. I think I have a goal now in this game. I want to be a part of this community.

I started out doing the only thing I could to try and contribute, I dusted off my old boat, The Saucy Gar, and took her out for a spin. Normally I sail alone, but I decided to invite others to come and join me. I wanted to be like the friendly captain I had seen, I wanted to get people lots of money and just be a generally awesome player, giving back to the community. I actually got three people to board my little sloop, and we set sail. I chased down some brigands, my best pirate-smile beaming, silently thinking to myself "fear not sailors! We shall become rich this day! Haha!" The battle began. I quickly steered us into some rocks and we got shot to pieces. The computer driven boat quickly grappled us and dispatched us all. Scupper. I was embarrassed. I knew everyone was going to leave, I apologized to the crew. No one wants to play with a sucky captain, especially a gaudily turbaned one like me. However, another strange thing happened. One of the pirates told me to chin up and wanted us to try again. This time, she wanted to drive the boat. I told her to be my guest. The rest all agreed to stay and keep trying. I was stunned. The pirate that encouraged us to not stop, Judochop-East was brilliant. She manned the wheel and the guns simultaneously, it was like a miracle. I did my best to do whatever she told me, letting her have free reign of my boat. We had four victories at sea with her. Damnedest thing I've seen. She gave me some advice on how to improve my battle navigation skills, and told me the only thing I can do is keep practicing. She also noticed that I had a bedroll laid out on deck, to which I sheepishly admitted that I liked to think I slept on my boat. Judochop-East proceeded to tell me it was ugly and gave me a

new, better looking bed for free. I was floored. We became each other's hearties (friends) so we could talk in the future, and she has been helping me since. Holy barnacle.

The people on this game amaze me. They want to teach people how to play, they want to make people better. This became apparent in some of my interviews. LJAmethyst described at length his position as a greeter. Greeters are pirates who privately answer questions for new players, and even host greeter pillages to get players accustomed to the game. Because the game relies so much on teamwork and cooperation, there is never a benefit to hiding information from a player. If you can help a player become a better pirate, that's one more better pirate on your boat, helping you make money. Even if being courteous and helpful to players has practical advantages, I like to think that the *Puzzle Pirates* community is just a nice group of people. One thing is for sure though: if I am going to contribute something to this community, it is *not* going to be as the captain of a boat.

I started exploring other options. I decided to lay low, just help by being a good pillager, helping people get money while making a fair amount myself. After amassing a bit of coin throughout my time playing, I decided to play the other part of the game, the laboring part. So I bought a blacksmithing stall in the Aimuari bazaar. If I only led people to watery doom in the oceans, I would instead help them by making cannonballs and swords. Every ship needs cannonballs, every pirate needs a sword. I also found my calling for the blacksmithing puzzle. After a few rounds creating labor in my own shop, I managed to score the highest possible rank of "incredible." I felt confident about the store. So confident in fact, that I geeked out a little bit and actually made a spreadsheet

calculating all of my costs and labor plus tax rates to figure out the optimal prices for selling all my goods. If *League of Legends* has a meta-game based on team composition, I created my own meta-game for running a shop in *Puzzle Pirates*. I had a lot of fun figuring everything out.

Now that I had found my niche and had prices that were low enough to be affordable and still net me a profit, I needed workers. Suddenly, the notice board made sense. I discovered I could host parties at my blacksmith shop, inviting people to work for me. After a bit of research, I decided to hire people on for about double the rate other shops were hiring. I decided that if I was going to be helpful to some people, I might as well be helpful to everyone! Sure enough, people starting visiting my shop looking for a job. I hired on some permanent employees willing to take the boosted wages. It was all very surreal, talking to employees in a game about piracy, telling them how I appreciated their help. I felt like an actual business. Hell, it *is* an actual business! I have cleared my costs and have regular customers purchasing cannonballs from me almost every day. I provide more than fair wages for my employees, as well as fair prices on swords and cannonballs. I actually came up with a system in which everyone wins, which I believe is the true spirit of *Puzzle Pirates*. Finally, after searching for so long, I felt I had finally arrived, securing a place as a modest yet trustworthy blacksmith. I have a place in the community, I am content; it feels good.

My interviews, however, reveal a sadder side of *Puzzle Pirates*. Apparently there is more to the game than running a shop and making swords. I heard stories of hostile takeovers of islands, friends betraying each other for political control, plots to plant spies

aboard enemy vessels in wartime, players installing artificial intelligences on their computers to play for them, bizarre stuff. I had a hard time believing it was the same game. “Oh, happy days of ignorance!” Avienda exclaimed to me in an interview. She thought my naivety was cute. She also told me about the hate tells she and her husband received from players all the time. You see she was a part of a very notorious flag, with one overarching rule: befriend no one. The flag refused to make alliances to avoid any sort of political debacles. If they wanted something, they simply took it, no hard feelings. They scared a lot of people, because you could never tell who they would strike next. Unsurprisingly, that made them a lot of enemies as well. And here I am, I didn’t even realize that islands were run by actual players. I had no idea the politics and power plays that went on around me. I was just trying to run a humble little shop. Looking back it’s a bit frightening how much *Puzzle Pirates* sort of imitates the real world. You create an open game and let people be themselves. You can dive deep into the politics and see how messy people can really be, or you can ignore it all and simply do what you want.

Even the people involved in the end-game, as they call it, don’t think it’s so bad. It’s just another layer of the game. If done in a civil manner, where things don’t become centered around political intrigue and deception, the end-game can be very fun apparently. So despite the fact that the game can be a bit aggressive, that doesn’t take away from my experience. I had a great time interacting with people who just want to haul a bunch of booty and say “ARRrrrrr!!” all the time. Those are the sort of people that I want to hang out with. Those are the people that know how to have a good time. The game is already set up in a way that forces people to work together constantly. Every

time a player does something, they have to rely on another player. Shops need customers, customers need supplies, captains need crews, and pirates need captains. Everything is intertwined, and it's much easier to catch flies with honey than vinegar. It behooves players to be nice and respectful to each other, and overall it makes the game a much more pleasant experience. Though the waters can be dark and the storms fierce, the good outweighs the bad, and we leave the shores to seek out adventure despite the costs.

Conclusion

This story was meant to show the stark differences as I transitioned between the two games I study in this thesis. I was honestly shocked and amazed at how nice players were to me, and the emphasis they all had on cooperation and camaraderie. Wanting to give back to this great community, I did what I could to both benefit me and my fellow players who had welcomed me with open arms. Similar to some logic puzzles and game theory, the best outcomes for all parties usually occurs when a player works not for themselves, but for the group. This was a vastly different experience for me compared to playing *League of Legends*. I was less angry at other players, and after seeing how other players interacted with each other, I felt compelled to hold back my harsh words and comments. It was a more pleasant experience. Transitioning from a community that would call me names that made me cringe to a community that offered to teach me how to become a better player was like night and day. The cooperative environment of *Puzzle Pirates* was incredibly more enjoyable than the constant aggressive competition of *League of Legends*.

This chapter has also provided an overview of the key elements of *Puzzle Pirates*.

This included basic information about the game, a description of the activities and puzzle available, and how the game is truly player-driven. This was followed by a thematic analysis, which revealed that the game is ludically structured in a very cooperative manner. Though competition does exist in *Puzzle Pirates* and can be quite negative, it seems to be counteracted by the general cooperative environment of the game. In the next chapter, I present my conclusions regarding both *League of Legends* and *Puzzle Pirates*, a discussion about the way future games could be designed, limitations of my study, and future paths this research could illuminate.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS, FLAWS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Throughout the course of this thesis, I have attempted to answer my two research questions: *how does the ludic structure of a video game influence the community playing that game* and *how do player perceptions of the community of a video game influence players of that community?* After extensive research, I have determined that video games do contain ludic structures, such as teamwork structures and in-game hierarchies, that influence game communities, and these game communities in turn influence players. This thesis began with a justification of the study of video games in regards to structure, as well as definitions for the key terms of my study. This was followed by a history of video games and their impact on United State's culture. Next, I reviewed literature involving video games on a variety of topics including content, race, gender, and culture. I also compared video games to McLuhan's idea of medium theory, justifying the study of video game structure. Using crystallization as a guiding approach, I collected data for two games: *League of Legends* and *Puzzle Pirates*. This included both interviewing participants that played the games, as well as my personal journals from playing the games myself. After I collected data, I conducted a thematic analysis of the emergent themes in my interviews and journals. A personal narrative detailing my personal feelings about my experiences in each game followed each thematic analysis. In this chapter, I

revisit and summarize the findings of my analysis chapters and compare the themes and ideas found in both. After this section, I discuss the limitations of this study, which focuses on the idea of wondering how these themes begin. Finally, I discuss the potential for future research and applications of this study.

League of Legends vs. *Puzzle Pirates*: Competition vs. Cooperation

The difference in player interactions in *League of Legends* and in *Puzzle Pirates* is staggering. Based on my observations and personal experiences, it seems that the *League of Legends* community is incredibly aggressive. Though the game is rooted in teamwork, through interviews and personal experience I discovered that teammates constantly negatively criticize each other, yell at each other, call each other names, and blame each other for mistakes. Participants recognized that working together was the key to success, yet these acts of aggression on an individual level still occur. Players of *League of Legends* may be aggressive because they experience frustration while playing the game. My analysis revealed that two major issues of anger and frustration for players were the meta-game of *League of Legends* and working with their team. Participants expressed both of these concepts negatively in interviews. Issues of teamwork caused frustration because players placed a heavy investment on individual skill levels. As evidenced by textual examples, participants believed that a team cannot truly succeed if there is a weak link in the group, going so far as to chastise inadequate players in some situations. The weakness can manifest itself as an inexperienced player or even a selfish player who is not willing to cooperate with the group. The meta-game frustrated players because even though *League* has a wide variety of characters and playing styles to choose

from, the community and game developers have developed an optimal way to play the game, thus limiting player choices. These two structures are rooted in the overall competitive structure of the game.

While players may struggle to destroy an enemy base via gladiatorial combat, after stripping away terms such as "nexus," "champion," and "inhibitor," it is clear to me that the objective of *League of Legends* is to win. Players go into matches trying their hardest to defeat the opposing team. In fact, playing with the intention of losing is considered a reportable offense in the game that can merit being banned from playing ever again. Winning is the only acceptable goal for players. The largest overarching ludic structure of *League of Legends* is the simple concept that when people play the game, there will be one team of winners and one team of losers; the teams compete until one is victorious. This idea of competition is then reified by teamwork and the meta-game. Success is dependent on successful interactions with the team; a team that works well together is more likely to win the game, thus fulfilling player goals. The opposite seems to also be true: teams that do not work well together will lose. Participants explained that though the game does center on teamwork, in actuality players must excel at their individual roles. If a player is not fulfilling their role, the team loses. The concept of the meta-game also encourages players to strive for excellence in their chosen roles. Players feel forced to play specific champions and to play those champions in an optimal style. This includes picking champions that compliment the play styles of their teammates. Participants described frustration at both feeling forced to play certain roles, as well as being frustrated when other players did not conform to the meta-game. This frustration

leads to anger, which then manifests itself as aggression. Players then become aggressive towards each other. This aggression is seen by other players, as described by Laser Tornado in Chapter Four, and sets a standard for others to follow. *League of Legends* is ludically structured to be competitive. This structure is reinforced by the meta-game, a community created structure reinforced by the game developers. Competition is also reinforced by the teamwork element of the game; the game was designed in a way so that players could not be entirely self-reliant. These structures influenced *League* players' opinions of their game community, and their opinion of other players.

Puzzle Pirates demonstrated a much more cooperative environment. Players were seen as supportive, encouraging, and trying to help each other whenever possible. Though the game is not without its flaws and aggressive times, overall, the community seemed amicable. The themes revealed in *Puzzle Pirates* were relationships, blockading, and politics. These themes were comparable to the themes found in *League of Legends*. Relationships paralleled issues of teamwork, blockading paralleled the meta-game, and aggression paralleled politics. In the world of *Puzzle Pirates* though, these themes seemed much more positive despite their similarities to *League of Legends*. Relationships in *Puzzle Pirates* were seen as long-term, lasting friendships developed over a long period of time. As seen in the interviews with LJAmethyst, Tilinka, and Avienda, players value their fellow pirates, enjoying their company as well as being able to play the game together. They choose to work together because they have grown close through playing the game, as opposed to the forced short-term cooperation present in *League of Legends*. These relationships are possibly the result of the ludic structure of crew and flag

organization in *Puzzle Pirates*. Because players are able to create massive groups of allies and crewmates in the game, these relationships have the potential to blossom.

Players viewed blockading as the game that influenced the rest of the game; people who control islands are in control of the game. This compares to the meta-game as discussed in *League of Legends*, as blockading also defines the way people play the game. In *Puzzle Pirates,* blockading is mostly described as a cooperative event where crews and flags would band together in a display of fantastic coordination. Players thought of blockading as a great way to bond with their fellow pirates and have some large scale sea battles for fun. Though the end result of blockading is the takeover of another player's property, players—such as Tilinka—described that it was still more cooperative than competitive. This is a telling feature of the game, that an activity that can result in the loss of so much for one group is still seen as a fun cooperative exercise; the end goal for my participants was not conquest, they just wanted to have fun. The trouble associated with blockading stems from the political nature of the game. The politicking involved in the game is what allows blockades to exist and for flags to form alliances and declare war. While blockading was seen as a cooperative and enjoyable activity, players condemned politics. Players went as far as to say that the political structure of *Puzzle Pirates* is what creates the negative moments in the game. Whenever describing politics negatively, players referenced an ambiguous other or them, making sure to explain how their own crews do not behave in a deceitful manner. Overall, the structures of *Puzzle Pirates*—mainly the ability to organize within the game, whether through crews, flags, or politics—influences the way players view their game

community, and also how they view other players. In regards to my research question, *how does the ludic structure of a video game influence the community playing that game*, it becomes clear that the hierarchies of *Puzzle Pirates* influence the game community.

Both *League of Legends* and *Puzzle Pirates* seemed to have ludic structures that influenced players and communities. Participants rarely discussed content, and in some instances directly referenced the impact structure had on their respective games, as seen by Avienda in Chapter Five. When informed of the purpose of my study to see if structure influences players and communities in games, *League of Legends* player Raael simply responded "Oh, it's definitely the structure." This study has been an insight into a rarely studied aspect of video games' influence on their player bases. However, there is a greater observation at hand. Looking at how similar—yet different—the data of the two games were, I began noticing the larger overall concepts of cooperation and competition.

In *League of Legends*, it seemed that every facet of the game involves competition. At its core, this did not seem odd, as the game has a set of conditions required for victory; success is attained through these conditions. On further inspection, the game is also centered around teamwork; players must work in teams to achieve victory. This structure of teamwork never rings true to players. The game was originally designed to be a place for players to battle, even the style of game is described as an online arena. Therefore, even acts of cooperation in *League of Legends* are only meant to serve the greater purpose of competition. The game attempts to foster a sense of cooperation by having players work in teams, but this is merely a tool to defeat opponents. Emphasis is placed on competition even in official capacities, as *League of*

Legends markets itself as a growing electronic sport. The *League of Legends* website constantly reminds players of tournaments they can watch with some of the top players around the world and post links to videos of professional players in matches. The game also hosts huge cash pools for tournaments, the largest valued at five million dollars. From its creation, *League of Legends* was meant to be competitive, and my data supports this claim. *Puzzle Pirates* could not be more different in its structure, as it revolves around cooperation. Even in instances of competition, as seen in blockades, players think that cooperation is more crucial to having fun than trying to win. *Puzzle Pirates* is ludically structured in a way to reward cooperation, and seems to have been designed in this way from the start. The relationships interview participants discussed are evidence of this cooperation. *Puzzle Pirates* did not intend to become a competitive "e-sport;" rather, it created a place for players to express themselves and make close relationships while playing an engaging game.

These two games, while similar in aspects, are indeed worlds apart. Both games exhibit elements of cooperation and competition; however, these additions do not sway the general attitude of each games' community. A competitive game can be cooperative and vice versa. I believe this delineation of cooperation and competition creates a unique space for game developers, and one that should encourage the creation of cooperatively structured games. While my research cannot directly change how *League of Legends* and *Puzzle Pirates* are structured, it does reveal the idea that games can possibly be structured to achieve different goals. The end goal of both games is very different. I argue that the creation of these game communities was due to the overarching ludic structure of each

game. A competitively structured game will foster an aggressive, competitive community, while a cooperatively structured game will foster a welcoming, positive community. I contend that game developers need to be aware of overall ludic structure when creating games. If developers wish to create caring and positive communities that help players foster lasting relationships, they need to structure games to be cooperative at their core.

The powerful changes that gamer communities can create as described by McGonigal's (2011) work in Chapter One cannot be realized in a negative community. McGonigal (2011) describes how video game players can change the world by working together and utilizing their combined skill sets. If gamers want to realize their full potential as agents of positive change, the journey must begin with games being designed to allow for such great acts. Games need to be mindfully constructed, not just in their content or narrative, but in the way players are allowed and expected to interact with one another. Video games need to be constructed with ludic structures in mind. Communities are dependent on communication and interaction between players. If a game is designed to inherently pit players against one another, the players as a collective community are destined to self-destruct. Though my ideas may not be directly enacted by game players, I hope this study serves as a catalyst to encourage game developers to design games that harness the great potential gamers have to change the world; the potential that Jane McGonigal believes can move mountains.

This thesis posed two questions: *how does the ludic structure of a video game influence the community playing that game* and *how do player perceptions of the*

community of a video game influence players of that community? I argue that ludic structures, do in fact, influence players and communities. In *League of Legends*, teamwork is a ludic structure implemented by the game developers. Players are forced to play with each other and become frustrated with their teammates; their frustration stems from teamwork as seen in my data. This frustration turns into aggression directed at other players, a standard that is adopted by the game community. Players within the community then meet this standard and act aggressively. The influence of the aggressive community on players was mirrored in my own playing, as I was surprised by how aggressive and angry I became at other players. The meta-game, also a ludic structure, was another source of frustration culminating in aggression, similar to teamwork. The meta-game is different in the fact that it is a structure reinforced by both the game developers and the players themselves, meaning game communities may possess a higher level of agency in the development of game structures. This is an idea I discuss further in the following section. In *Puzzle Pirates*, the ludic structure of hierarchies in the game influenced the community. This was displayed through the themes of blockading and politics, which are activities made possible by crews and flags. These hierarchies in turn create a community for players to feel open and welcome in the game. Even in my own playing, I wanted to contribute to the community in a positive way. Thus, in both games, I discovered ways that ludic structures affect players and gaming communities. While structure affects players and game communities, it is not clear whether communities affect players or vice versa, a concept I address in my limitations section.

Flaws; the Future

Literature surrounding the topic of structure in games is very sparse. My research was simply a drop in a vast ocean that needs to be further explored. An illuminating aspect of this project revealed to me would be the lack of theory and precedent available for comparison. Without a specific or comparable body of knowledge to draw from, making generalized conclusions about games could become difficult. I have no way of knowing if the results I found in my data were applicable for all kinds of games or specific to only the games I played. My research also revealed the amount of depth that could be found in each of these games. My entire study could have been devoted to one game and still not uncover all the nuances of how players feel and interact with one another. Because I had to consider the scope of this project, only six themes could be analyzed of a potential 40. I did not know that my interviews would provide such rich insights into the gaming world with minimal mention of video game content. Also in regards to scope, another limitation of my study was the number of participants interviewed. Given the time frame I had to complete the project, I was only able to obtain eight interviews and 40 hours of total game play. Given more time, I would be able to interview far more people, creating a more complete representation of structure in each game. If anything, this project has shown me how vast and complicated video games truly are from a structural perspective.

I believe the richness of the data in this type of study is imperative. Ellingson's (2009) theoretical approach of crystallization was an excellent fit for my data analysis and would benefit future video game scholars. Interviewing individuals provided a wealth

of data, and this project encouraged me to explore some of the other themes that were revealed in my analysis. However, combined with personal playing, I felt as a researcher I more fully understood the positions of my participants. Being able to both relate and understand some of the finer intricacies of the game served my purposes well. I was able to access the terminology of the games, which possibly made participants more comfortable in interviews. If I had not had some sort of shared experiences with these players, I do not think they would have been as candid with me. Crystallization as a guiding approach seems to be very appropriate for studies of video games. Players may have apprehensions about discussing their recreational gaming, which can be assuaged if researchers immerse themselves in the game. While this is not the sole means of approaching the data, utilizing crystallization presented the option to analyze games as both a researcher and player. Because the study of structure in games is relatively new, it seems logical to also approach the data in a relatively new style to create the most in-depth pool of data for future scholars; crystallization makes this depth possible.

While not a guiding theory, McLuhan's (1964/2002) medium theory also presented an interesting analysis of video games. I have attempted to make the connection of video game structure to medium theory, comparing structure to mediums and content to messages. Game structure impacts game content the same way that a medium's structure impacts the message being sent by the medium. Though the comparison is loose fitting, it does raise the interesting issue of video games' place on the spectrum of mediums. Given time, I would attempt to prove video games as a standalone medium, with games being their message. However, this brings into question whether

video game consoles or the concept of video games is a medium and whether video games' reliance on other mediums—telephones, televisions, the Internet—impacts their status as a new medium. It is also possible to argue that the structure of video games is the medium of the game; however, there are so many unexplored facets of video games that such a distinction would be difficult to make. McLuhan's (1964/2002) medium theory is an interesting starting point for these questions, but much work is still needed. The link between structure and mediums is still tenuous—further so in video games—and additional study beyond the scope of this project is required to shed light on the subject.

Theories aside, there may have been other limiting factors to this thesis. Both *Puzzle Pirates and League of Legends* are unique games. Their main connecting factors are the fact that the games were both considered MMOs, both games featured role-playing elements, and both games were free-to-play. When I began my study, I concluded that neither game contained graphic violent content. *League of Legends* features stylized, yet non-graphic combat, while *Puzzle Pirates* has combative elements, represented by stylized puzzles. One of the main motivations for my study was playing two very accessible games with such different communities. Both of these games will appeal to different types of game players; as noted in my research, players of *Puzzle Pirates* rarely play other MMO-type games. It is possible that comparing two games may be an ineffective way to approach this research because of how unique each video game is. This is not limited to *Puzzle Pirates* and *League of Legends*, but between any two games. If future research features a comparison of games, it may be beneficial to use two games that are clones of the same genre, for instance, *Torchlight* and *Diablo*. However, this may

limit the amount of structural insight, as both games would be structured in the similar way. Finding a comparative balance between games that are too similar and games that are too different may prove difficult for future research, and a complication in my own study that I still struggle to solve.

Recruiting participants was another complication in this study. I assumed that after playing the games for so long, players would want to sign up and help with little effort. This study showed that vast communities, like *League of Legends* with over 15,000,000 players, are posting issues on their forums at such a frenzied rate that some topics are rarely given a second glance. This large amount of players was coupled with the general aggressive nature of the community, who at one point labeled me as a fraud and a hacker. Even when recruiting from in game, if the person interested in helping was on the losing team after the game was finished, they would rarely speak to me again. It may be more beneficial to first build relationships and trust with players and then ask them, as opposed to general call-outs in such a community. While this is eventually the method I chose, I could have saved time by engaging in the method from the beginning with my *League of Legends* participants. In *Puzzle Pirates*, it is possible that the formality of the consent form intimidated participants, limiting my respondents to more experienced players. Perhaps by making a less official form, while still conforming to IRB regulations, could encourage participants to follow through with interviews.

Another interesting factor, but possibly not a limitation to my study, was the order of my research questions. For this study, I proposed that influence would occur from a top down perspective; game structure would influence communities, communities then

influence players. However, as my data began to unfold, I noticed a very high amount of player agency. As seen in *League of Legends*, it seems that individual players are influenced by structure, which then leads to aggression amongst the team, which then creates an atmosphere of aggression in the overall community. In *Puzzle Pirates*, players formed crews and built relationships with others; they did not simply latch on to existing relationships. After completing my data analysis, I realized it is possible that game structure influences players and players then form and influence game communities; the reverse of what my research questions originally posited. Unfortunately, I could not know this connection until after analyzing my data, but this revelation could have shaped my interview questions to ask more insightful questions about the connections between players and communities. Perhaps both of these possibilities are occurring concurrently, demonstrating the fluid nature of the relationship between players and games. However, this was not the only instance of reordering that intrigued me in this study.

While this project revealed the depth of knowledge regarding these two games, a question arose that still remains unanswered: where does game structure begin? In *League of Legends*, players took control and formed the concept of the meta-game, creating a structure for other players to follow. This structure is then reinforced when the game developers release champions that fulfill these meta-game roles. But did the players truly create the meta-game, or were they simply using the tools available to them by the developers to optimize their play? Raael shared his confusion about who controls structure in his interview:

> Initially, I feel like it's the developers…they have the push, they have the initial decision that they're going to make this game a certain way, and then people

react, and then the company reacts after the people react.

The cycle of control and agency is difficult to follow in games. The same situation occurs in *Puzzle Pirates*. Players developed elaborate ways to play the political side of the game, going as far as using in-game spies on their enemies; however, they were simply using the tools available to them in the game. In my research, it was difficult to discern where the cycle of ludic structure begins or ends, and not knowing where to enter the conversation may have limited the kind of data I gathered. I was only able to approach ludic structure from one angle in this project, and only through the eyes of eight players and myself. It is an interesting cycle in both games, wondering who is truly at the root of changing and creating the structures within the game. This could be a very interesting direction for future research. It could discover the nature of video game structure, how rigid or fluid these structures are, if player-made or developer-made structures have more impact on player interactions, and how ideas of ludic structure are reified by both game designers and game players.

This thesis has been an exploration into the new directions scholars can study video games and their structures. I have also introduced and define a new term for the field of video game study I call *ludic structure*. This term represents various elements of a game structure such as its rules, winning conditions, how the game is played, and other structural game concepts that do not include content. I believe ludic structure becomes apparent when a game is stripped away of its polish and all that remains is the skeleton that represents the core features of the game. This term will give future scholars a place to start when attempting to define structures of a video game as well as an opportunity to

further define structure into more specific categories, helping to create precedent in the literature. My thesis also serves as a starting point for future communication studies in video games, as the current literature is sparse. The connection between video games and communication seems obvious. Games serve as texts that communicate with audiences, and game communities cannot exist without communication. The players I interviewed would not have had such fascinating examples if they had been playing in isolation. Their interactions, by nature, revolve around communicating. While the study of video games remains a young field, it has a wealth of information to offer to scholars of all disciplines.

Video games are a very real part of culture. They affect players and their interactions through both structure, content, and possibly countless other features. Treating games as a fad that poisons players with violent imagery will never unearth the true causes of player aggression. Treating games as an escape from "reality" will never fully reveal the close relationships real people form in games. Games can change the world, it is now the job of scholars to discover why and how.

APPENDICES

Appendix A.

Participant Interview Information

Pseudonym	**Video Game**	**Type of Interview**	**Length of Interview (mm/ss)**
Laser Tornado	*League of Legends*	Phone	46:44
Thomas	*League of Legends*	Ventrillo	44:54
Habber Dasher	*League of Legends*	Ventrillo	51:49
Raael	*League of Legends*	Ventrillo	42:48
Avienda	*Puzzle Pirates*	In-game chat	78:36
LJAmethyst	*Puzzle Pirates*	Skype: Video chat	65:37
Almoner	*Puzzle Pirates*	Ventrillo	36:44
Tilinka	*Puzzle Pirates*	Skype: Text chat	106:02

Appendix B.

Interview Protocol, Guiding Questions

1. How long have you been playing [*League of Legends/Puzzle Pirates*]?
2. How often do you play [*League of Legends/Puzzle Pirates*]?
3. What do you find most enjoyable about the game?
4. What do you find least enjoyable about the game?
5. What do you find most enjoyable about the community of the game?
6. What do you find least enjoyable about the community of the game?
7. Do you tend to enjoy interactions in [*League of Legends/Puzzle Pirates*]?
8. How would you describe the majority of your interactions in [*League of Legends/Puzzle Pirates*]? If the participant is having trouble thinking of some, some suggestive prompts include Positive? Negative? Friendly? Hostile?
9. Please describe an instance in the game where you positively interacted with another player.
10. Please describe an instance in the game where you negatively interacted with another player.
11. How would you describe the game community of [*League of Legends/Puzzle Pirates*]?
12. How would you describe the in-game players of [*League of Legends/Puzzle Pirates*]?

13. Do you think interacting with other players in [*League of Legends/Puzzle Pirates*] is easy or difficult and why?
14. What, if anything, would you change about the chat interface of the game?
15. Please describe an instance in the game where you felt good during an interaction.
16. Please describe an instance in the game where you felt bad during an interaction.
17. What encouraged you play [*League of Legends/Puzzle Pirates*] in the first place?
18. Why do you play [*League of Legends/Puzzle Pirates*] instead of a different game? Why?
19. What rules of the game would you change if you had the ability and why?
20. Do you think that players that break the rules are treated fairly?
21. What makes [*League of Legends/Puzzle Pirates*] unique as an MMO?

Appendix C.

Recruitment Scripts

[Forum recruitment script]

Greetings!

I am conducting a study that is observing how people interact with one another in video games, in particular, League of Legends/Puzzle Pirates. The purpose of the study is to see, from the perspective of players, how interactions work within the game, and if these interactions are shaped by the rules and structure of the game. This includes interactions with players, and the game community. I need volunteers that are at least 18 years old I can interview and ask questions about the game, its rules, and interactions you have with other players. The interview will last 45-90 minutes and be tape recorded via Skype/Vent/Phone call. If the prospect of an audio interview bothers you, we can also use the game's chat service to do a live chat interview as well. The interviews will also be open ended, meaning if you want to talk about something I didn't bring up, feel free to talk to me about it!

If you are interested or have any questions for me, please post a reply in this thread or send me a private message through the forum services. I look forward to discussing this game with you!

Thanks,

Leland

[In game recruitment script]

Hey, I'm conducting a study and need volunteers. The study is about how game structure and rules influence player interactions. If you're interested, please let me know and I will get you more information about the study. Thanks!

[if participant responds with interest to this request]

I am conducting a study that is observing how people interact with one another in video games. The purpose of the study is to see, from the perspective of players, how interactions work within the game, and if these interactions are shaped by the rules and structure of the game. This includes interactions with players, and the game community. I need volunteers that I can interview and ask questions about the game, its rules, and interactions you have with other players. The interview will last 45-90 minutes and be

tape recorded via Skype/Vent/Phone call. If the prospect of an audio interview bothers you, we can also use the game's chat service to do a live chat interview as well. The interviews will also be open ended, meaning if you want to talk about something I didn't bring up, feel free to talk to me about it! If you have any other questions please feel free to ask me or message me and I will answer them as soon as possible. Thanks!

Appendix D.

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form
Ball State University

Study Title Looking Past the Action: A Study of the Effects of Structure on Video Game Communities

Study Purpose and Rationale
The purpose of this research project is to examine how the structure and rules of a game influence the interactions of players.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria
You are being asked to participate because you are a player of either the MMO *League of Legends* or *Puzzle Pirates*. In order to participate, you must be 18 years or older in age.

Participation Procedures and Duration

For this project, you will be asked to participate in an audio taped interview to answer questions about your interactions within the community of the game you play, as well as your perception of the rules and structure of the game. If you are uncomfortable with having the interview recorded, you may request to have an interview using the game's own chat service. The interview questions will be open-ended in nature, meaning you can answer them in any manner using your own words. Once the interview has concluded I will turn the tape recorder off. The interview will take approximately 45 to 90 minutes to complete.

Audio or Video Tapes
For purposes of accuracy, with your permission, the interview will be audio taped. Any names used on the audiotape and will be changed to pseudonyms, or to your in-game pseudonym if you prefer, when the tapes are transcribed. The tapes will be digitally stored on a password protected computer accessible only by the principal investigator.

Data Confidentiality or Anonymity
All data will be maintained as confidential and no identifying information such as names will appear in any publication or presentation of the data.

Storage of Data
Electronic data, including interview audio files and typed transcriptions of these files, will be stored on the principal investigator's password protected computer. Only the principal investigator will have access to the data. Data will be kept for 2 years in its digital and physical form. After the two year period has ended, the digital data will be deleted from all devices including the computer on which data was stored and any digital recorders used for interviews, as well as any copies of this data. Physical data, such as printed transcripts, will be shredded until rendered unusable.

Risks or Discomforts

The only anticipated risk from participating in this study is there is a possibility that you may not feel comfortable answering some of the questions. You may choose not to answer any question and you may quit the study at any time.

Who to Contact Should You Experience Any Negative Effects from Participating in this Study

Should you experience any feelings of anxiety, please contact the Ball State Counseling Center at Lucina Hall, Room 320, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 286-1736 from 8am-5pm, (765) 747-7330 for after hours emergencies.

Benefits

By participating in this study you will help advance the study of video games and their communities, contributing to a broader body of literature on the subject of video games and communication.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your permission at anytime for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing this form and at any time during the study.

IRB Contact Information

For one's rights as a research subject, you may contact the following: Research Compliance, Research Integrity, Ball State University, 2000 West University Avenue, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070, irb@bsu.edu.

Study Title Looking Past the Action: A Study of the Effects of Structure on Video Game Communities

****

Consent

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project entitled, "Looking Past the Action: A Study of the Effects of Structure on Video Game Communities." I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation (described on the previous page) in this study.

_____ _____

Participant's Signature Date

Researcher Contact Information

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