A medley of meanings: Insights from an instance of gameplay in *League of Legends*

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Abstract

This article engages with the notion of insightful gameplay. It recounts debates about what, if anything, makes play meaningful. Through these, it contends that while some games are explicitly designed to foster insightful gameplay, most are not and many might even be considered utterly meaningless. It notes how discussions about what makes playing games meaningful raise concomitant questions about what playing means. It then strives to reconcile these two interrelated questions by offering the notion of a medley of meanings. A medley of meanings is the notion that each player brings their own subjective disposition to playing to a particular instance of gameplay; no participant to gameplay should be considered as in a state that is "not playing". Because these subjective dispositions to playing can be quite divergent, players can and often do clash in instances of gameplay. This article then contends that these clashes can in turn render the most seemingly meaningless games potential hotbeds of insightful gameplay. The second half of this article discusses the ethnographic example of an instance of gameplay in the digital game League of Legends in order to explicate the notion of a medley of meanings.

Keywords
Games, play, meaning, insightful gameplay

Introduction

In this article I engage with the notion of insightful gameplay. In the first half of this article, I introduce some of the general approaches that scholars have taken to discussing what, if anything, makes play meaningful. Through this discussion, I illustrate how some games are explicitly designed to foster insightful gameplay, though most are

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not and many are considered by some as downright meaningless. I conduct this discussion keeping in mind that the more one discusses how playing games can be meaningful, the more one raises the question of what playing means. I then strive to reconcile these two interrelated questions with the notion of *a medley of meanings*. What I mean by a medley of meanings is that each player brings their own subjective disposition to playing to a particular instance of gameplay; no participant to gameplay should be considered as in a state that is "not playing". Because these subjective dispositions to playing can be quite divergent, players can and often do clash in instances of gameplay. I then contend that these clashes can in turn render the most seemingly meaningless games potential hotbeds of insightful gameplay.

In the second half of this article, I turn to an ethnographic example of gameplay in *League of Legends*. I do this to both illustrate one of the many instances that gave rise to my notion of a medley of meanings, and also to show how a medley of meanings can be a useful tool for analysing gameplay. I ultimately conclude with a summary of the potential limits of a medley of meanings as an analytic tool.

Before proceeding, it is worth more specifically noting the intentions and scope of this article. I want to render clear that by no means do I intend the notion of a medley of meanings to supplant much if any of the very good work on play theory that has been done and which I will shortly recount. Quite the opposite, I intend it as a tool that can help render clear how, in practice through gameplay, ostensibly divergent theories of play are bridged. In this framing, it is a notion that I have found useful for comparing and understanding the often starkly different dispositions to gameplay that I have witnessed amongst gamers in my broader and more longitudinal research. While I have found it a useful notion for structuring my broader longitudinal work, it is worth noting that the instance of gameplay on which this article's second section is based occurred in 2013 during a year-long period of online fieldwork that I conducted. For reasons of brevity, I have herein opted to focus on this one particular instance, eschewing both longitudinal and quantitative analysis in favour of what I hope is a finer grained reading of a particular instance than I could otherwise provide. Thus while in this article I contend that this notion has broader relevance than to the particular ethnographic example around which I frame it, I recognize that the extent of this will be borne out in further research. Part of this will be my own, but I also hope that other scholars doing longitudinal work on digital games and play, as well as those deploying more quantitatively oriented methodologies to studying gameplay, will test its usefulness and probe its limitations.

Different approaches to meaningful play

Is playing games meaningful? Perhaps unsurprisingly, if one turns to classical theorists of play like Johan Huizinga, the answer is a resounding "yes". In *Homo Ludens,* Huizinga argues not simply that play is a crucial element of human culture, but takes the thinking one step further and posits that human culture emerged from the fount of primordial play (Huizinga 1949, 1, 2). Thus in Huizinga's schema all kinds of forums for play, from games, to music, to even war, are intensely meaningful. Meaningful in the sense that

playing games is a significant and important activity for people, but also that it can be and often is, in its most heightened forms, serious. In this articulation, Huizinga's insight offers a stark departure from some of the pre-existing and more skeptical approaches to the question of meaningful gameplay; stances that, as Roger Caillois has described them, view games as "a kind of degradation of adult activities that are transformed into meaningless distractions when they are no longer taken seriously" (Caillois 1961, 58).

For Huizinga, far from a meaningless distraction, play is a deeply social endeavour which can help people to form lasting bonds. As he wrote "A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over. Of course not every game of marbles or every bridge-party leads to the founding of a club. But the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game" (Huizinga 1949, 12). This is why Huizinga took aim at the "spoilsport", a player whose incorrigibly flippant disposition cheapens the experience of the whole group by not treating play with the earnestness it deserves, and in so doing "breaks the magic world" of play (Huizinga 1949, 11, 12). Huizinga's emphasis on interpersonal sociality as a key element of play was also why he was deeply skeptical of how meaningful single-player games or "solitary play" could be (Huizinga 1949, 47).[2]

Huizinga's writings influenced the work of other prominent mid- to late-century theorists of games and play (Elias and Dunning 2008; Morgan and Meier 1995; Suits 2005; Suits 1995), as well as more recent specialists on digital games[3] (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Juul 2003; Juul 2002). It is on meaningful play in digital games that this article focuses. Though Huizinga obviously did not have the chance to comment on digital games themselves, I, like those listed above, think that his work can be relevant to understanding this newest form of games in interesting ways.

Fostering insightful gameplay

There have been a growing number of games produced in recent years which are particularly well designed to foster insightful gameplay, digital games which engage with and raise awareness for important real-world issues by being played. Titles like *Among the Sleep* and *Papo & Yo* deal in an emotive way with the weighty issues of domestic abuse from alcoholic parents (Caballero 2012; Ugland and Jordet 2014). In *Among the Sleep,* players see through the eyes of a two year old boy as he flees from a dark monster who turns out to be his mother when she drinks; in *Papo & Yo* the protagonist flees his abusive father into an imaginary, magical favela where he solves puzzles with the help of a monster. In *This War of Mine* players control a ragged group of civilians clinging to life in a war-torn city, needing to manage scarce resources and make difficult ethical decisions,

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[2] A sentiment echoed by Caillois (Henricks 2010, 169, 170).

[3] I prefer the prefix "digital" to more clearly define these games in media terms from their analogue counterpart, but for all practical purposes I mean the same thing as the more colloquial "video games" or "computer games".

like whether to steal food from the needy to feed one's own starving group (11 bit studios 2014). The game is inspired by the Yugoslav wars and is a departure from the far more commonly seen perspective of the soldier in war games. In *Don't Look Back* players are exposed to the emotions of loss and grieving, playing through a game inspired by the Greek tale of Orpheus and Eurydice (Cavanagh 2009).

A particularly prominent group of explicitly meaningful games focuses on mental health issues. *The Company of Myself* deals with regaining memory after a mental breakdown and issues with dissociative disorder (Piilonen, Marcetic, and Carney 2009). In *Elude* players navigate between three emotional landscapes, normal, happy, and depressed, striving for the ever ephemeral happiness and being habitually dragged into all-consuming depression. The gameplay offers players an emotive window into what living with depression can be like. As the developers note, "It is specifically intended to be used in a clinical context as part of a psycho-education package to enhance friends' and relatives' understanding of people suffering from depression about what their loved ones are going through" (Rusch, Ing, and Eberhardt 2010). *Depression Quest* follows a bleak choose-your-own-adventure style of gameplay, as the player navigates the life of a mid-twenties person with depression (Quinn, Lindsey, and Schankler 2013). And the conglomeration of games *For the Records* deals with an array of mental health issues, from eating disorders to depression (Rusch and Rana 2014).

These are but a sampling of the many games which significantly incorporate real world issues into gameplay. Though many of these games deal with disparate topics, they all share in that they add another layer overtop Huizinga's intrinsically meaningful play by making games which explicitly strive for directed, issue-specific insightful gameplay. These two forms of play need not necessarily be in conflict and can often even synergize. Indeed, none of the games listed above broach their subjects in sterile, didactic terms. Rather, they harness the interplay between player and game as an open-ended, heuristic device which gives players the tools to come to their insights on their own and in their own way (Rusch 2009). Some, like *Depression Quest* or the penultimate decision in *Elude,* even deploy what Miguel Sicart has argued for in the notion of "wicked problems", which present "players with ill-defined problems that require moral skills to be solved" (Sicart 2010, 101). If such games do present an implicit critique of Huizinga's work, it is in regard to his skepticism of the social import of solitary gameplay: many of the games above are single-player but nonetheless, at least in my opinion, deeply insightful. Moreover, as other scholars have well shown, instances of such solitary gameplay can and often do spur interpersonal dialogue, both online and offline, further undermining notions that solitary gameplay is inherently vacuous or socially alienating (Rughiniş and Nenciu 2015).

It is worth noting, however, that while heavily issue-driven games like those discussed above are growing in prominence, they are still in the minority, and are generally produced by smaller-scale, indie developers—though bigger budget titles exist as well: for example the third-person shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* prominently engages with post-traumatic stress disorder (Yager 2012). And while at best this explicitly meaningful approach to game design harnesses the power of play that Huizinga

discusses and uses it to help players to specific real world insights, at times in striving to make these games meaningful, developers create gameplay that may not be as "fun" as is found in commercially-successful, mainstream games. This is something of which their developers are often acutely aware and even accept based on propriety. For example, the developers of *Depression Quest* explicitly state that "This game is not meant to be a fun or lighthearted experience." And that they "realize it may not be the most enjoyable game…" They even thank the player "for being willing to play games that are meant to be something other than simply 'fun'" (Quinn, Lindsey, and Schankler 2013).

Meaningless games?

For many, the real wicked problem in gaming is that most players choose to play games which are ostensibly devoid of the insightful gameplay found in those games listed above.[4] Here Huizinga's calls for the intrinsic importance of play can fade in favour of new takes on the old arguments from which he was trying to escape. One need not talk to very many people to hear the widely held view that digital games are a waste of time, a stance which places them as the latest iteration in games' previously described role as "meaningless distractions". In this view, digital games are not inherently bad, but can serve as a distraction from ostensibly more meaningful activities.

Others argue that even such mainstream games are meaningful, albeit worryingly so. In this interpretation, while the content and gameplay of most mainstream games may be trivial or meaningless to observers, its effects certainly are not. Some posit that it is part of a broader problem with the widespread and increasing use of digital media in general, which can have detrimental effects on our very brains (Carr 2010). Others put forth normative arguments about how digital games can warp players' minds, obfuscating their view of the real world and causing them to withdraw from it. Perhaps the most prominent of these have centred on digital games' potential to cause real world violence (Anderson and Dill 2000). Governments have joined the fray, demonstrating through legislation their worry about what effects playing digital games might have. China has banned soccer games that list Taiwan as a country (Krotoski 2004), Germany has prohibited games which depict Nazi symbols (Rawlinson 2014), Iran banned Battlefield 3 for depicting an invasion of Iran (Stuart 2011), and Venezuela issued a moratorium on violent games altogether (McWhertor 2010). Meanwhile, the effects on minors of violence and nudity in digital games has been debated at the U.S. Supreme Court (Supreme Court of the United States 2011).

The strongest recent articulation of digital games' potential to inculcate worrisome real-world viewpoints came with the Gamergate controversy. The controversy was complex and involved, and I cannot sketch it fully here—for a good chronological summary see Stuart 2014—but one undeniably salient part of it was a

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[4] For a more detailed summary of those who are concerned by the effects of digital games, see (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). For a counterpoint which sees gameplay in general in a far more positive light, see (McGonigal 2011).

strong thrust of misogyny amongst some proponents of the Gamergate movement.[5] These were often disguised as a rejection of what they labelled "social justice warriors'" purported incursions into the world of digital games, which brought with them an overemphasis on socially themed gameplay like that found in the abovementioned insightful games. Indeed, Zoey Quinn, the main creator of *Depression Quest,* was a central target of the Gamergate attacks. Many drew links with these views and the negative, often objectifying depictions of women in mainstream games (Sarkeesian 2013), and pointed to the new influx of women playing games caused by the emergence of casual, mobile-based games as a demographic shift that challenged the status quo (Ernst 2014). For some scholars, the vitriol exhibited by some members of the Gamergate movement marked a challenge to the distinct identity of the "gamer" (Chess and Shaw 2015). Dan Golding summed up this sentiment well in a piece titled "The End of Gamers" in which he wrote "From now on, there are no more gamers—only players" (Golding 2014). Golding and others have depicted gamers as an exclusive, predominantly male group weaned on mainstream games that are low on insight and high on violence and misogyny. This is distinct from the more heterogeneous group of "players" who are open to a broader and perhaps more insightful array of gameplay experiences. Thus, in a sense, Gamergate became an insightful event in and of itself by casting light on how various groups of people saw games as meaningful.

This distinction between gamers and players has parallels with early play theory. It could be argued, for example, that the hardcore approach that gamers take to digital games separates them from players in a similar way that is described by Caillois of professional "players'" disposition: "As for the professionals...it is clear that they are not players but workers. When they play, it is at some other game." (Caillois 1961, 6).

These critiques of mainstream games and "gamer culture" also mesh well with more recent theoretical moves that involve separating games from play. These are often explicit moves away from Huizinga's framework, as Thomas Malaby writes to "decouple playful experience from a determinate relationship with games...[in order to situate] them amid institutional interests and projects without stumbling over, or getting fixated on, any particular game's ability to bring about play" (Malaby 2009, 214). In a similar vein, Angela Schneider has argued that play is a subjective approach to games and sport, but not an intrinsic or even necessary component of either (Schneider 2001).

And yet, as theoretically compelling as this separation of games and play might be, ethnographically, at least in my experience amongst largely English speaking games players, these distinctions do not work so cleanly in practice. I have seen people, running the gamut from diehard to casual, refer to themselves in one sentence as gamers, and in the next as players, to what they are doing as gaming, and then describing it as playing. There is even the frequently used and problematic, for those who seek to decouple games and play, word "gameplay".

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[5] Interestingly, considering the topic of this article, another key component was many Gamergaters claiming to be defending "ethics" for their stance on purported unethical collusion between games journalists and developers.

Thinking of gameplay as a medley of meanings

We have thus moved from a discussion about meaningful gameplay to one about what play means. But as I mentioned at the beginning of this article, I think the two discussions are deeply interrelated. In putting forth these various approaches to meaningful play, I have also sketched the degree to which opinions and emphases on the subject can overlap and differ: from Huizinga's stance that play is intrinsically meaningful; to developers who have established games as sites for insightful gameplay; to those who see digital games as a meaningless, though largely harmless, distraction; to others who view them as worrying, dangerous, and potentially corrupting; and finally to those who think games and play should be analytically separated. I now posit that these different, oftentimes contesting views amongst scholars on the interrelationship between games, play, and meaning is not just telling of how play means different things to different scholars, but also reflects the very sociality of play's inherently subjective nature.

Thinking of it this way, classic theorists like Huizinga and newer critiques like those put forth by Schneider and Malaby are not so disparate after all. Think of Schneider's reminder that play is subjective, that if two people are participating in a game it is possible that one is playing while the other is not. Then recall Huizinga's issue with the clash of dispositions that arises in gameplay between the earnest player and the spoilsport. In both framings, one player is "really" playing, while the other is not. I propose instead that no participant in gameplay be considered as "not playing". While players may well have drastically different subjective dispositions to playing, no one player's disposition reflects a play/not play binary. Instead, what if gameplay is an instance in which questions of play/not play are suspended, and where players with different subjective dispositions toward and experiences of playing find themselves intermingling, clashing, and coexisting.

If gameplay is conceptualized as such, then even games ostensibly devoid of deep ethical questions and real world insights can potentially generate these from the medley of meanings found in players' subjective interplay. A medley in the musical sense—taking a cue from another one of Huizinga's play spheres—of "a group or collection of songs, instrumental pieces, or musical extracts performed together as a continuous whole" (OED Online 2015). Like various pieces of music coming together to form a more complex, though perhaps also more dissonant, piece of music, these different, subjective dispositions to play are thrust together and forced to coexist in particular instances of gameplay. However brief and jarring such a medley might be, it also has the potential to challenge respective players' subjective dispositions to play and through this perhaps even provide a route to insightful gameplay.

At the risk of taking this already tenuous argument to too meta a level, what I am describing here as a medley of meanings might already be partly grasped by all of the disparate abovementioned scholarly approaches to meaningful play and what play means. In other words, perhaps instead of seeing them as clashing, contrasting, and mutually exclusive approaches to play, we might treat these various scholarly

approaches to meaningful play and what play means as various pieces in the ever-incomplete medley of play theory.

But I digress. In this article's second half, to which I will presently turn, I take this notion of a medley of meanings from its current highly theoretical and perhaps still somewhat opaque enunciation and ground and articulate it through an ethnographic recounting of an instance of gameplay in the mainstream, ostensibly meaning-light game *League of Legends*.

League of Legends

Before delving into the particular instance of gameplay I want to discuss, allow me first to give some background on *League of Legends* (*LoL*) as a game. *LoL* is a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game that was released in 2009 (Riot Games 2009). It has grown to become one of the most popular games in the genre, with tens of millions of players playing daily. MOBA games came to prominence with the Warcraft III mod DOTA, which melded aspects of role-playing games (RPG)—most notable for gameplay centered around characters with strong backstories who acquire skills, experience, and items as the game progresses—and real-time strategy games (RTS)—known for their isometric, or "top down", viewpoint and tactical control over multiple units in real-time. In *LoL*, elements of these genres are evident to varying degrees in the game's two primary spheres. The first sphere is the client interface, which players open from their computers and from which they enter the lobbies where they group up with other players prior to entering the second sphere: the matches where gameplay itself takes place.

LoL's client interface draws heavily from the RPG genre. Though each client interface is organized in a more or less identical fashion from one player to the next, they are distinct in that individual players sign on to their client through their respective accounts. These accounts and the players with whom they are associated are referred to as "summoners" in *LoL* lore, the backstory being that *LoL* players are powerful summoners who summon, control, and fight champions—*LoL*'s player-controlled avatars during gameplay—in "Summoner's Rift", the main gameplay area of *LoL*. Players' summoners have levels assigned to them, a hallmark of the RPG genre. As players play more matches in *LoL*, they gain more experience and increase their summoner level in the client screen, up to the maximum level of 30. As players increase in summoner level, they are able to select specific skill enhancements which will improve their play in matches. They are also able to purchase and equip runes and spells, which also provide in-game bonuses and abilities.

It is the second sphere, that of gameplay, where the RPG and RTS styles are melded most closely together. Gameplay itself unfolds on one of several maps, the most common being the aforementioned Summoner's Rift. Summoner's Rift pits teams of five against one another. In a style common of the MOBA genre, the map consists of three primary "lanes" leading directly from each team's central home base, or "nexus" to the others. In between the lanes is the "jungle" a forested area where other stationary mobs

are found. Bifurcating the map is the "river", which as the name implies is a river into or out of which players can travel from the jungle or one of the lanes. Each players screen is zoomed in to a particular section of the map, and each player has a small "minimap" in the corner of the screen which allows them to see the entire gameplay area at a glance. Players can "ping" specific areas on the minimap, which gives a visual and auditory cue on their teammates' minimaps. Pings can be used for various reasons, such as warning teammates of threats or organizing coordinated attacks.

Shortly after the match begins, "creep waves" begin emerging from each team's nexus and marching down each of the lanes. Opposing teams' champions can kill these creeps, neutral monsters found in the jungle, and opposing teams' champions to gain experience and gold. All of these have health bars, which if they reach zero cause death. After a champion or neutral monster is killed, a period of time must pass before it can respawn and rejoin the game. The lanes on each team's side of the river are protected by towers, which shoot at enemy champions and creep waves alike. The goal of the game is to push forward down these lanes, destroying the towers and eventually the nexus that they protect. The map and timing of creep waves are always the same, the only variation on the players' side is on which end they start: the purple/red team to the top right of the map, or the blue team to the bottom left.

Similar to an RTS, players control the action from an isometric perspective, however, instead of controlling multiple units, each player only controls a single champion. There are over 100 different champions to choose from, each with its unique backstory and in-game abilities. Champions are broadly sub-divided into main "roles", like in RPGs. In mid-2013, the time period from which the following section's anecdote comes, the "metagame", or more commonly "meta"—which is essentially the generally accepted view by players of the standard optimal strategy for gameplay—for a five person team on the Summoner's Rift map was that one player would go top lane, one middle lane, one jungle, and two bottom. Moreover, different champions are better suited to different positions. The two bottom players, for example, generally comprise a support and an ADC champion. Supports do what the name implies, support their ADC lane-mate through things like healing spells. ADC stands for attack-damage carry, champions which are weak at the beginning of the game but if adequately protected can eventually "carry" a team to victory almost single-handedly.

Also like in RPGs, and in many ways mirroring what takes place for summoners in the client screen, players level up their champions during gameplay, acquiring experience and gold to spend on skills and items, respectively. However, while summoner levels remain persistent, all champion experience, gold, and items are lost after an individual match is over; only the experience from winning the game itself, which goes to the summoner, remains. In my experience, games normally take 30-40 minutes, after which players are placed in an end-game screen back in the client interface. Running counter to Huizinga's abovementioned notion that people who play together often form lasting social bonds, in *LoL* players go their own ways after a match more often than not.

Prominent game developer Sid Meier has described games which are fun to play as "a series of interesting decisions" (Meier 2012),[6] and in both the client and match aspects of *LoL*, the player is certainly presented with a dazzling array of just that. Choosing what runes to equip, what spells to have, which position to play, whether to choose a champion that best counters the enemy team's champions or select one the player is most confident in using, what way to progress in terms of skills and items, not to mention what actions to take during the game, such as attacking a tower or going to support a teammate, all comprise interesting decisions for players. Yet at the same time, few if any of these decisions present the ethical wicked problems argued for by Sicart, one of the reasons Sicart has explicitly distanced his formulation from Meier's (Sicart 2010, 106). Moreover, *LoL*'s content and gameplay lack the emotive force and strong ties to real-world issues found in the insightful games discussed in the previous section. Nor is there any overt social or political message. True to its RPG influences, *LoL* does of course have a lore, but it recounts a fantastical alternate world which can often descend into hackneyed good and evil terms. Moreover, many players do not pay a great deal of attention to the lore in the first place, focusing instead on the gameplay itself and especially the best strategies for winning.

Indeed, regardless of intentionality, the truncated title "*LoL*" by which most players refer to the game seems to further set it off in tone from both the insightful games listed above, and Huizinga's notion of play being generally serious. As everyone familiar with online discourse knows, "lol" is an ubiquitous acronym for "laugh out loud". Laughter was something that Huizinga saw as explicitly separate from serious games and distinct from play (Huizinga 1949, 6);[7] and though laugh out loud moments may be an aspect of some of the insightful games listed above, it is certainly not the central factor.

Of course I do not mean to go so far as to say that *LoL* is never taken seriously; as I will soon show some players take it with a great deal of earnestness. But often this seriousness seems almost entirely self-referential, unconnected to anything but the game itself. *LoL* is arguably the epitome of a fun game, though not one which seems well placed to lead its players to many real world insights. Ostensibly, it is one of the mindless distractions about which Caillois speaks; to paraphrase the *Developers of Depression* quest, it is "just fun".

I want to recount now one of many quotidian instances of gameplay in *LoL* that took place during my fieldwork to better illustrate what I mean by a medley of meanings, and help show how the notion can uncover meaningful experiences in a seemingly meaningless game.

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[6] The full quote is "A game is a series of interesting decisions", yet as several authors have argued, including Meier himself, more so than a totalizing definition of games, Meier meant it as his recipe for how to make games fun (Meier 2012).
[7] Though not mutually exclusive from it (Huizinga 1949, 86).

An instance of gameplay in LoL

In September 2013, I joined a public, unranked game of *LoL* on the Summoner's Rift map. Though for the past few months I had normally been doing this grouped together with some of the many players whom I had met and got to know, this time I was alone and meeting all my teammates for the first time. In addition to myself, our team comprised Morgan, Robin, Alex, and Terry.[8] While in the lobby, most of us "called" our positions and chose our champions accordingly. Though players who are in groups, and especially those who know one another in real life (IRL) often communicate through third-party voice software like Skype, *LoL* itself does not host voice communication. Thus the main method of communication, and that used in this case, is *LoL*'s internal text messaging system. Robin called jungle and picked the Nocturne champion; Alex called ADC and chose the Ezreal champion, saying in advance "sorry I'm a noob"; Terry called support and chose the Sona champion; I called middle and chose the Brand champion. Morgan did not say anything but eventually chose the Wukong champion, one suited to going top.

As the game began, we quickly purchased our initial items and headed out to our respective positions. Following the meta as a mid player, I took my position in the jungle where I could help the jungler kill a powerful neutral monster before returning to the middle lane. As expected, Robin was next to me, and so was Morgan. This too was not unusual as top players also often help the jungler at this stage of the game. The monster spawned, and we worked together to whittle down its health. As the monster was near death, I stopped my attacks and moved to the middle; it is important to let the jungler strike the final blow so that they can reap the powerful, temporary buff it bequeaths which can greatly facilitate in jungling.

Yet even as I pulled away, Morgan kept on attacking and managed to strike the final blow. "WTF, I called jungle" Robin wrote. "Do you expect monkeys to do anything but steal?" Morgan said, referencing his character Wukong's appearance as an anthropomorphic monkey. "Wow nice racism" Robin responded, clearly reading Morgan's statement as a double reference to the slur that black people are "monkeys" and the stereotype that they steal. "Deal with it", Morgan replied, seemingly confirming Robin's statement. While they bickered, Terry wrote, matter-of-fact "We need somebody to go top". And so Robin dealt with it, going top to fill the vacant position even though Nocturne was not an ideal champion for the role. Yet adopting this new role in the game did not stop Robin from habitually lambasting both Morgan's poor form in "stealing" a claimed position and impropriety for making a racist remark. "Seriously, people like you ruin this game" Robin proclaimed. Even at this early stage of the game, inter-player tension had emerged.

Meanwhile Terry, who was busy on the bottom lane with Alex, chimed in. "Thanks Robin for going top. Just try your best to hold the lane, and we'll do our best to win

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[8] I use my own gender-neutral pseudonyms in lieu of their actual screennames to protect their anonymity as was promised. Direct quotes have been altered slightly for content—but not meaning—to avoid the unlikely breach of anonymity through word searches.

ours". Terry recognized that Robin was at a disadvantage not having anticipated playing the top lane, and so the comment was a promise that so long as Robin managed to hold the opposing team off, Terry, Alex, and I would do our best to put pressure on the other team from our respective lanes. Sure enough, Alex soon got a kill on the bottom lane, followed shortly thereafter by me dispatching my opponent in the middle lane.

As this took place, Robin and Morgan continued their feud. "Are you going to gank or just stand there?" wrote Robin. Morgan had ceased killing monsters in the jungle and was standing at the confluence of the river and top lane. Robin's reference to "gank" in the *LoL* context refers to a player moving from their respective place in the jungle or another lane to gang up on the opposing team in another area. In *LoL* it is essentially an ambush and if done right is one of the best ways to assure a kill. Morgan had moved into prime position to gank, but was not entering the lane to help Robin. "Seriously, learn to play the game" Robin wrote, clearly annoyed. "Whatever, I'm better than you" shot back Morgan. "If you're not going to gank, keep jungling" Terry wrote. Morgan responded by navigating Wukong across the river to the bottom, in good position to gank Terry and Alex's lane, but again just stood there.

Terry ignored Morgan's provocations and kept communicating with the team as the game progressed, talking in detail to Alex but also encouraging the team as a whole and actively pinging to warn of potential attacks. Upon my first death, having myself fallen victim to a gank by the opposing team about 15 minutes into the game, Terry wrote encouragingly "I should have pinged the bushes; you'll get them next time :)". I wrote back "Not your fault, I was being careless." Then, noticing that Terry and Alex were the only players not to have yet died, I wrote "You're so organized", referencing their good teamwork and situational awareness. "I'm practicing, want to go pro one day :)" Terry responded. *LoL* has a robust professional scene, with the best players pulling in hundreds of thousands worth of U.S. Dollars from sponsorships and prizes. "Ah, that must be intense competition!" I noted. "I know it's a long shot, but I can still dream" Terry responded. "HA! It'll never happen" Morgan wrote. "Says you, Terry's good" Alex wrote back, breaking a long silence. "Ya shut up Morgan, you'll never go pro, that's for sure." Added Robin. "Look at me, I'm pro" Morgan said, and proceeded to ping randomly and numerously all around the minimap, a distracting and irritating sensation for most players. "That's not helping" wrote Terry. "Ya that's really annoying" I added.

 "We have an afk :(" came a message from an opposing player, referring to one of their players being "away from keyboard", meaning in a quite literal sense not participating in the game. "HA!" Morgan replied in general chat. This was the first time our two teams had communicated via text, all previous communications had been solely amongst the team in team chat. Terry wrote the opposing team apologizing for Morgan, which in turn led Morgan to criticize Terry in team chat. Then Robin wrote to the other team "Don't worry, we have something worse than AFK in Wukong", referencing Morgan's champion, which led into an expletive laden tirade by Morgan against Robin in team chat.

As the game progressed further, our team began to bunch up more, pushing for odd-numbers advantages in certain lanes to land some decisive blows against the

opposing team. This was soon successful when Morgan, Terry, Alex, and I converged on two of the opposing team's players. The first champion died almost instantly, and the second one fled with low health. Morgan pursued and was about to land the killing blow, but was beaten to it by Alex, who used a projectile to hit and kill the champion from an impressive distance. "KS" wrote Morgan, KS being an acronym for "kill steal", a gamer's idiom for swooping in at the last moment and killing an enemy that another player had done more work to bring down or had more right to slay, a phenomenon to which other anthropologists have turned their attention (Long 2012, 87). "ADC can't KS" wrote Terry, referencing the ADC's role as the team's primary damage-dealer. "KS coming from you is rich." Robin added from his place in the top lane. Shortly after these two kills, roughly 30 minutes into the game, things ground to an abrupt halt: the other team had surrendered.

We were whisked into the post-match lobby, where Morgan insulted the opposing team and then quickly left. "Ugh. Report that guy." Robin wrote. Alex, who had been quite quiet during the match, noted "Ya I reported too, what a jerk". They were reporting Morgan to *LoL*'s disciplinary body, the Tribunal, a system through which toxic players are penalized.[9] And that was that, soon after we all went our separate ways.

A medley of meanings in action

Extrapolating anything from this mere 30 minutes of gameplay alone might seem a far cry from the ethnographic depth found in other approaches to meaning-making in digital games and virtual worlds (Boellstorff 2008; Boellstorff et al. 2012; Horst and Miller 2012; Miller 2011; Nardi 2010; Pearce 2010; Pearce 2007; Pearce 2006). And to be fair, part of my confidence in using this instance is that it is informed by being but one of hundreds more that took place in my more than year-long period of fieldwork. Indeed, for those who have played *LoL*, this snapshot of a single game likely reads as an utterly unexceptional instance of gameplay. And its quotidian nature is precisely why I think it makes such a good example for fleshing out what I am trying to articulate with the notion of a medley of meanings: that in practice gameplay can be a clash of subjective dispositions to playing that can appear innocuous, fragmented, and partial, but from which a different type of meaning-making is possible.

Allow me to start with Morgan. It would be easy and I think fair to classify Morgan as an anti-social player of the type recounted by other anthropologists (Kou and Nardi 2013); akin to the antagonist in conflicts found in the foundational texts of New Games Journalism between players who sought propriety and respect and those who thrived on slurs and hurt feelings (Dibbell 1993; Gillen 2004; Shanahan 2004). Or, for those who prefer the more classical categorizations recounted near the beginning of this article, Morgan was very much being a spoilsport in Huizinga's sense.

While these might all be true, there is, I think, more at stake in Morgan's disposition. I have in mind something similar to what Judith Donath was getting at in her writing on the phenomenon of trolling as "a game about identity deception, albeit one

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[9] Though I do not have the space to render a detailed account of the Tribunal, for an engaging discussion see (Kou and Nardi 2014).

that is played without the consent of most of the players" (Donath 1999, 45). While in this instance it is unclear to what extent, if at all, identity deception was at play, I think it is worth emphasizing how Morgan's behavior posed an unsolicited problem to other players, including myself. Should we challenge Morgan's racist remarks, not knowing whether it would stop them or encourage more? Hold fast in the pre-agreed positions or acquiesce to Morgan's insistence on taking the jungle? Encourage team-play or treat Morgan as a lost cause? And equally importantly, how would each decision play out? Thus in a sense, to use Sicart's terminology, Morgan posed a wicked problem for the other players. This was a problem that struck to the very heart of each particular player's subjective gameplay experience, and, with Donath in mind, I would venture to say that the posing these uncomfortable questions, witnessing the reactions to them, and then responding in turn was more integral to Morgan's own subjective play experience in *LoL* than the technical gameplay itself.

In turn, how other players did ultimately react to Morgan can I think help tell us about their subjective approaches to play. For example, Robin reacted in a similar way to how most experienced *LoL* players reacted to players like Morgan. Robin was more than willing to make it known that Morgan's actions were unwelcome, continuing to verbally challenge Morgan throughout the game. Nonetheless, Robin did bend and played the top lane, rather than allowing Morgan's actions to drag the whole team to a defeat from an undefended flank. I propose that Robin's approach to playing is quite similar to what Huizinga had in mind with the ideal player: Robin plays the game for fun, and reacts in a strong and negative way to spoilsports like Morgan.

Terry explicitly stated a desire to be a professional gamer, but it was the cool patience of Terry's reactions to Morgan's insults and incorrigibility that truly reflected somebody striving to imbue their gameplay with a strong degree of professionalism. This is not to say that adopting such a disposition made Terry somehow less of a player than the rest of us. Terry was obviously neither the snarling, exclusive, and victory-obsessed "gamer" brought forth by Gamergate, nor Caillois' working professional devoid of the play spirit mentioned in the previous section. Rather, a part of Terry's professional attitude to play was being able to weather with a cool head the wicked problems put forth by fellow players, in order to make the decisions which would maximize our team's chances of winning the match, something Morgan's actions drew out rather than suppressed.

It is harder to speculate about the largely silent Alex. One might take Alex's initial claims to being a novice at face value: that in learning a new game Alex was focusing mostly on the technical rather than social aspects of gameplay. However, skilled moves like Alex beating Morgan to a kill seem to imply a greater deal of experience than was being admitted. It could be that Alex's self-referral as a novice was simply a way of tempering the team's expectations. If Alex was that experienced and cunning, then perhaps staying largely quiet and outside of team's arguments was part of a broader strategy to rob players like Morgan of the validation and satisfaction that angry responses to impropriety can bring, a sentiment grasped in the gaming maxim "don't feed the trolls". Or the answer could be far simpler: Alex might just be a quiet person.

Finally, I brought my own particular disposition to gameplay into the medley. I was in part reacting in my normal way as a player to Morgan's actions, which I viewed negatively. Conversely, I was also holding my tongue more than I might otherwise, remembering my role as a researcher and attempting to observe as thoroughly as I participated. And all the while, I was trying not to let the team down by performing poorly in the technical side of gameplay.

Thus each player quite evidently brought to the game a different disposition to gameplay, and, in turn, a view onto what play meant to them. The unique medley of meanings this formed created problems and resolutions that transcended technical gameplay alone, such as how far, if at all, to support Robin vis-à-vis Morgan, or vice versa. But did this medley of meanings actually effect any lasting impact on the players? In other words, was it truly an instance of insightful gameplay? I think the answer to such a question is contingent, like all insights at the end of the day, on each individual player. I can thus but speculate for the others. For example, perhaps Robin learned from Terry a better way of dealing with dispositions like Morgan's, both in *LoL* and life more generally.

But perhaps more important than this instance of gameplay having the potential to produce a sudden, clear insight or epiphany is the longer term effect this medley of meanings can have. As I noted earlier, the instance of gameplay just recounted was but one of myriad similar gameplay experiences that gave rise to the ideas I have put forth in this article. As players finish a match and move onto another, or switch from on game to another, they are placed into instances of gameplay where other players' views of what play means might be subtly, or starkly different. Over time, undergoing enough iterations of gameplay can make this point clearer, offering players the potential insight of not just recognition that different people can turn to the same gameplay spaces for starkly different reasons, but that such a phenomenon holds for social life more generally. This might seem a banal point, a simple restating of the core principles of subjectivity. And indeed, this type of interaction is not unique to digital games; it can be seen in other online forums like chatrooms (Rughiniş and Nenciu 2015). Yet this instance of gameplay shows how digital games might be particularly lush sites for it. This is because unlike in many forums and chatrooms, multiplayer gameplay is a space where social interaction through verbal or text-based communication is arguably secondary to playing itself. Furthermore, friction from gameplay experiences like those listed above indicates that it is not an insight that is immediately and explicitly recognized by all players.

Through many years of playing digital games casually, and one spent intensively playing with and observing gamers, understanding gameplay as a medley of meanings has been indispensable in my dual roles as player and researcher. As a player, recognizing that other players come to the same games for starkly different reasons has diminished—though not altogether eroded—the frustrations which can emerge when other players act abrasively. As a researcher it has allowed me to appreciate and reconcile the merits of heterogeneous theories of play, in so doing giving me a deeper insight into both what play means and what makes play meaningful.

Ultimately, whether and to what extent my proposed notion of a medley of meanings is insightful to others, is up to you, the reader.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to provide an overview of some of the main approaches to insightful gameplay. In reference to these, I have proposed that divergent, subjective dispositions to play are, through gameplay, turned into a medley of meanings. In so doing, I have argued that even the most seemingly meaningless games become potential crucibles for insightful gameplay. I have in turn illustrated how this argument works in practice, through the specific example of an instance of gameplay in *LoL*.

In making this argument, however, I by no means mean to imply that such a potential form of meaning-making in any way supersedes that found in the insightful gameplay of single-player games like *Elude*. Quite to the contrary. For scholar and player alike I consider such games an exciting, thick thread in the rich tapestry of gaming. What I have attempted to do here is broaden the scope of what might potentially be considered insightful gameplay and to bring together different strands of play theory.

Doubtless, questions still remain as to how far this notion of a medley of meanings can reach. What happens, for example, in the rare instances when people are brought into gameplay entirely against their will (Moore 2011)? Or in metagaming, where single-player achievements are compared and ranked after an instance of gameplay ends? The answers to these questions lie in the mining of different ethnographic material than I have presented here. Such research will also likely produce more subtle but also more interesting engagements with, and perhaps critiques of, the notion of a medley of meanings that I have put forth in this article.

Such distinctions in and of themselves will I think be helpful in further assessing what makes gameplay meaningful. For now, all I truly hope is that, after reading this article, the reader finds themselves able to see a medley of meanings and the potential for insightful gameplay somewhere they might not have otherwise anticipated.

Acknowledgement

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